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## Interpreting Artworks: Prolegomenon to a Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic

*Hermeneutics operates whenever what is  
said is not immediately intelligible.*

(H.G. Gadamer)

A great deal has been accomplished in recent times by philosophical hermeneutics in developing our understanding of what it means to interpret a "text", but very little substantive work, it seems, has been carried out to develop a cross-cultural or, in keeping with the terminology of this conference, "transcultural" hermeneutic. This is especially unfortunate insofar as when westerners engage artworks from nonwestern cultures the "unintelligible" does indeed seem to make its strong appearance. It is my intention in this paper to explore in quite general terms (the time constraints being what they are) how interpretation of nonwestern artworks, mainly visual, and primarily from the Indian tradition, may take place through our understanding the distinctive creative process of artmaking in different traditions and the participant-observer's expectations of, and realizations of, meaning in the artwork.

In his essay *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*, Gadamer has written that: "The reality of the work of art and its expressive power cannot be restricted to its original historical horizon, in which the beholder was actually the contemporary of the creator. It seems instead to belong to the experience of art that the work always has its own present".<sup>1</sup> How, then, in our engagement with artworks from traditions quite different from our own, do we make - or allow - these works to be *present* for us?

It is a fundamental principle of philosophical hermeneutics that we inevitably bring our own "prejudices", prejudgments or presuppositions, as these are informed by our cultural and personal experience, to interpret and judge what is initially alien to us, and then, through letting as far as we can the other tradition speak to us in its own terms, develop a negotiating process, as it were, between our prejudgmental forms and patterns and the content of what we experience in that other tradition. We then aim, or should aim, to alter our prejudices in the light of that negotiation or encounter. Most of us who dwell in western cultures presuppose - as derived philosophically from Kant and artistically from the practices of romanticism, and of modern and contemporary (even some "post-modern") art - that the artist is an *exceptional individual*, genius or not, who creatively expresses himself in vivid ways and brings forth an original work for the apprehension and appreciation of other persons.

One of the most distinctive features regarding the creative process which is shared by many Asian cultures has to do with an achieved "impersonality" of the artist. It has been a long-standing ideal in the Chinese, Japanese, and Indian traditions, albeit articulated in quite different ways, that the artist should achieve a certain selflessness and disciplined spontaneity that, somewhat paradoxically, allows for work to be revelatory of his own being and of that which is represented in the work. Concentrating on the Indian aesthetic tradition, whether in its central *rasa-theory* or in its somewhat more popular notions of creativity as a form of play (*lila*), it is affirmed, as M. Hiriyanna puts it, that "the poet's [or artist's] own feeling [ ... ] is never the theme of poetry" and consequently that "As a result of their idealised character, art objects lose their appeal to the egoistic or practical self [ ... ] and become impersonal in their appeal..."<sup>2</sup> As I pointed out in an essay *Reflections on the Theory of Rasa*, it is precisely this impersonality (*sadharanikarana*) or trans-personality of aesthetic content which enables the artwork to serve as a bearer of meaning. And indeed a meaning of a special kind. When artistic creativity is understood, as it is in India as a rigorous discipline where, as Coomaraswamy notes, "a craftsman goes through the whole

process of self-purification and worship, mental idealization and identification of consciousness with the form evoked'? the artist becomes one who performs his work as a kind of sacrifice (*yajna*), a selfless offering to perform an act with skill, not for the sake of what it will yield him, but solely for the sake of the act itself. One of the most interesting concepts in Indian thought and experience that might happily be evoked here (and which gained prominence in Tantric traditions) is that of *sakti* - translated into English usually as "energy". *Sakti* is a complex notion, for it is said to be at once physical energy, sexual energy, mental energy and, when these are properly integrated, spiritual power. It is not quantitative, insofar as it cannot be reduced to measurable terms; not is it strictly non-quantitative, in that it does enable a being to be a dynamic, vital being. According to the medieval Hindu conception, *sakti* is that which motivates, is the moving force behind, all action. In cosmic terms, *sakti* is that which informs the creation of the world; it is the energy whose creative release gives rise to the manifold things of the world. In naturalistic terms, *sakti* is that which informs the psychophysical organization of an organism; it is that energy which underlies as essence, and constitutes as form, the life-force or breath (*prana*) which sustains an individual's existence. "Once manifestation has taken place", writes Alain Daniélou, "it appears as the substance of everything, pervading everything".<sup>4</sup> And it has, for Indian thought, a central role in artistic creativity.

The creative act as such takes place when the physical-mental *sakti* of the artist becomes concentrated, integrated and fused with that which is to be represented or expressed; when, that is to say, the artist's *sakti* reaches that spiritual intensity from which it naturally seeks expression. The creative act is to be understood, then, in the Indian context, as a natural extension of a spiritual process, and not as a fortuitous happening. By itself *sakti* is formless; it is given form, which is embodied in the work itself, through the presence of an image, sanctioned by tradition, in the artist's mind. *sakti* is thus brought to a creative intensification through the artist's meditation and concentration (*dhyana*) on the image. When the meditation is complete, when everything but the

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image has been removed from consciousness, the image and *sakti* join together and become inseparable in the act which externalizes the image, which gives it a concrete embodiment. "It is true", writes Coomaraswamy, "that if the artist has not conformed himself to the pattern of thing to be made he has not really known it and cannot work originally. But if he has thus conformed himself he will in fact be expressing himself in bringing it forth. Not indeed expressing his 'personality' [ ... ] but himself *sub species aeternitatis*. [ ... ] The idea of the thing to be made is brought to life in him, and it will be from the superindividual life of the artist himself that the vitality of the finished work will be derived"<sup>5</sup> - and, one might add, be interpreted and thereby understood. Susan Sontag, in her well-known essay *Against Interpretation* published in 1964, inveighed against interpreting artworks, by which she meant translating its formal achievement into some kind of discursive aboutness, "plucking", as she puts it, "a set of [cognitive] elements from the whole work".<sup>6</sup> What was required, she believed, was that we concentrate on those surface relationships between the given elements of the work that revealed its purely aesthetic value. But she neglected thereby the hermeneutic insight, shared widely today, that all experience is informed with cognitive interpretations of various kinds. We come to an artwork with the awareness that an interpretive task is central to the experience of it; we *anticipate* the need to have a mode of attention that is throughout interpretative in character. By its very nature, art calls out to be understood for what - in the language of hermeneutics - it is "saying". "The work of art that says something", Gadamer notes, "confronts us itself. That is, it expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed".<sup>7</sup> Following Heidegger, philosophical hermeneutics finds the meaning of an artwork to be located in the "world" that it opens-up for the beholder's appropriation.

In an earlier essay entitled *Breugel and Ma Yuan: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Possibilities of Comparative Criticism*<sup>117/</sup> I suggested that we distinguish four "strata of meaning", the con-

crete apprehension of which, in varying degrees with respect to the requirements of different individual works of art, is necessary for understanding and appreciating aesthetically the artwork. I would like to apply this classification to one's experience of works of art from traditions very different from one's own, with the understanding, of course, that it works in both directions - West to East and East to West, or to whatever other geographical directions would be appropriate.

### *1. Cultural-Authorial Weltanschauung*

To speak of an artist expressing a *Weltanschauung* or "world view", is not to suggest that the artist is expressing an independently thought-out, consistent philosophical perspective or argument. It is not that an artist has a separate philosophical understanding which she then strives to express in her art, rather the artist's vision and her work are created and presented as one. But because an artist is not self-consciously aware of a developed philosophy does not mean, on the other hand, that underlying attitudes and principles of a philosophical character are absent from her work. On the contrary, they are there at the most comprehensive level of the work's meaning. And for one to experience the work as it is, as it has its being in its cultural-authorial matrix requires that one have some considerable knowledge of (but not necessarily agreement with) this *Weltanschauung*.

The first images I remember being shown in a course in Indian art at the University of Chicago some many years ago were those of rather sumptuous *yaksi-s*, or female nature-spirits, organically entwined with flowering trees; images which, as I learned, in their quiet rapture and sensuous embrace set a particular standard for female beauty that persisted in the culture as it developed over many hundred of years. A deep connectedness of the human with the natural world, and with what was beyond it, that was exhibited so often in Indian art, and the extraordinary joy (*ananda*) expressed consequent upon the realization of this intimate connectedness, presupposed, I learned, a multi-leveled metaphysical and philosophical anthropological view that was at once alluring, fantastic, and profound. We are called to know ourselves, accord-

ing to this view, to the degree to which we attain a state of concentrated consciousness that is the very essence of human freedom or spiritual liberation.

Well, it would take many hours to set forth philosophically in detail this general *Weltanschauung*, but suffice it to say that it is indeed quite different from that of any other culture we are likely to be familiar with - and one which, I think we can agree, quite clearly needs to be understood *in its own terms* as a prerequisite for a meaningful transcultural engagement with the arts which are so thoroughly informed by it.

## 2. *Cultural-Authorial Aesthetic Preferences*

Closely related to this first strata of meaning or "dimension of aesthetic relevance", yet separate from it, is the fundamental or most general choices of an aesthetic character that are made by the artist in intimate relation to his culture and which go to inform the aesthetic needs and expectations of the experiencer within the culture. The Japanese fondness for "suggestion", "irregularity", "simplicity", and "perishability", as articulated by Donald Keene and others, that is expressed in countless works by different artists, stands in sharp contrast to the Indian preference for the highly explicit, the energy-embodied, the symbol-laden complexity that informs individual works and becomes for the experiencer of the works a mode of organizing his or her aesthetic perception. The "aesthetic preference" of a culture, in short, belongs both to the artist and to the art-object as it forms the criterial basis of aesthetic expectations and needs. And transculturally, it would be rather ludicrous, would it not, for one to apply mechanically and without qualification one's own culturally-informed aesthetic preference to works from another culture with a different preference: one must be prepared to alter, set-aside, transform or whatever precisely those aesthetic presuppositions which so deeply become constitutive of one's expectations of meaning by which we approach art that is familiar to us in our experience of works from other traditions.

### 3. Formal Content

By "formal content" I mean the realized composition or design, the resolution of contrasts and tensions, which is the primary carrier of the aesthetic value of the work. Referring to traditional Chinese art, Roger Fry noted that:

The first thing, I think, that strikes one is the immense part played in Chinese art by linear rhythm. The contour is always the most important feature of the form.

Next we note that rhythm is almost always of a flowing, continuous character. [ ... ] A painting was always conceived as the visual record of a rhythmic gesture.<sup>9</sup>

Well, we could go on in some considerable length in talking about the special formal features of the arts in different Asian cultures - with regard, say, to their use of space, of color or lack thereof, of modes of perspective, of special materials used, and so on - but let us turn to a crucial problem that has a long history in western aesthetics (and one which may perhaps be given its clearest formulation in the context of a transcultural hermeneutic), which is: are formal principles in art primarily culture-bound or are there universal principles of aesthetic rightness normative for all artistic achievement? It is often asked, for example, Are there "structural markers" in music that are so rooted in our organic being that they determine patterns of expectation, tension, fulfillment that serve as universal conditions for aesthetically pleasing musical form?, or are there proportions in architecture, the presence of which in buildings, are universally perceivable as aesthetically right? These questions are, to a considerable extent, strictly empirical, with affirmative answers not easy to come by. The questions, however, in any event, are not, it seems to me, the best way to raise the issue for aesthetics in general or for cross-cultural studies in particular; for whether or not there are general principles (or even "laws") which may be said to govern formal contents - "symmetry" being among the favorite for many - there are assuredly no specifiable qualities or principles which *taken by themselves* will make the artwork attractive or "beautiful". This is so because it is never the case that the presence of any single



quality or factor is sufficient for aesthetic rightness or validity. The mere presence of a pleasing color harmony or proportion hardly insures, when present in a particular work, anything of compelling aesthetic interest as such. Indeed a color scheme or proportion that is quite "correct" in itself could be entirely inappropriate in, say, an expressionistic painting. A "distorted" proportion or disharmonious color arrangement may quite obviously function rightly in a given work and contribute significantly to its validity.

In the end, then, it makes no sense to assume that anyone criteria of appropriateness for formal content is normative for humankind. Let indeed a thousand flowers bloom, and of many different colors and shapes.

#### *4. Symbolic Values*

We turn now to the last, and perhaps most central for our purpose, "strata of meaning", which is that of various levels of symbolic meaning in an artwork that, in the manner of its "saying", calls specifically for interpretation. Now, there are many possible classifications of symbols in art or ways of distinguishing between them, but I will focus on what might be called "conventional symbols", by which I mean a symbol or symbolic expression that is not derived from any observed natural relationship or regularity in nature (e.g., the use of the "sun" standing for "heat") or for any presumed archetypal predisposition grounded in unconscious associations (e.g., "bright light" standing for "spiritual illumination"). "Conventional symbols", unlike natural ones, are essentially arbitrary: they are learned rather than, as it were, given.

There are many grades that may be distinguished in this category, from those which border on the natural ("cow" for "fertility") to those that appear to be purely cultural ("the Cross" for "Christianity") or specifically personal (of the sort to be found, say, in some of the poetry of Rilke and Yeats). I will concentrate on the "cultural", for it is often thought that these symbolic values, more than anything else, set up barriers between the artwork of X-culture and the observer from Y-culture in virtue of their dependence upon culture-bound experiences and associations

which narrows their understanding only to those for whom these experiences and associations are, as it were, second-nature.

Now it must be acknowledged, I believe, that most of the time most of us do indeed miss a good deal of what is potentially there symbol-wise in our experience of works from other traditions. This is not to suggest, however, that the alien work must remain for us as something irreducibly strange and inscrutable, rather it is to suggest that one simply must learn enough about the cultural symbols and symbolic expressions from another culture to acquire a generally correct idea of what is going on in a given work (which often means actually no more than not having an erroneous idea); but - and this is the crucial point - unless the aesthetic meaning rests entirely upon the associations themselves (in which case we might reasonably suspect that there is something lacking in the work, it being overly didactic or propagandistic), this learning should in most cases be sufficient to take one a long way. There is nothing to preclude one, for example, of learning the *mudra-s* or stylized conventional gestures as presented for example in the ever-popular Dance of *Siva*. It is also, I think, interesting to note that in terms of aesthetic judgment, hermeneutically the outsider might actually have something of an advantage, for it is often the case that one knows too much in experiencing a work from one's own culture - the conventional, cultural symbols have so rich an association-complex for one that it is difficult to get beyond the literal or representational meaning to what is being said aesthetically.

It must also be noted that interpreting an artwork, especially of the kind that we have been discussing, is not a matter of disambiguating the image, symbol or metaphor so that it may be rendered transparently "literal" in another discourse, but of preserving its meaning as it is intended and intimated so that it may show itself as precisely embedded in the aesthetic content of the work. Nevertheless, interpretation, by its very nature, is always a kind of translation from one domain of meaning to another; and, therefore, it does not make sense to hold to the possibility of a single, correct reading or articulation. Artwork interpretation is never properly guided by the two-valued language of "true" and

"false", but only by degrees of "adequate" or "inadequate", "better" or worse", "rich" or "impoverished".

Another way of putting this would be say that if all genuine understanding involves an appropriation, a making of one's own, of that which is sought to be understood (a "fusion of horizons" as hermeneutics rather dramatically, and sometimes obscurely, puts it), then artwork understanding requires the assimilation of the full intentionality of the work in its complex multivalent character. It is then that artwork interpretation becomes a mode of enhanced self-understanding as well as an understanding of a work.

In conclusion: I subtitled my paper "Prolegomenon to a Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic", for there is much careful and detailed work yet to be done, not only on the topics which I have sketched-out, but on important themes (such as the social and political dimensions of art) not touched upon at all in my presentation. Let me say only that I firmly believe that the future of philosophical aesthetics as a vital and important discipline will depend to a considerable extent upon its becoming a genuine global undertaking (but not one that involves an imperialistic "globalization"). While seeking valid general principles, this aesthetics will always recognize fully the rich plurality not only of the arts themselves but of ways of thinking about the arts that may enhance the understanding of all of us.

## Notes

1 H.G. GADAMER, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976, p. 95.

2 M. HIRIYANNA, *Art Experience*, Mysore, Kavyalaya Publishers, 1954, p. 34.

3 A.K. COOMARASWAMY, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, New York, Dover Publications, 1934, p. 166.

4 A. DANIELOU, *Hindu Polytheism*, New York, Bollingen Series, LXXIII, 1964, p. 253.

- 5 A.K. COOMARASWAMY, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, New York, Dover Publications, 1956,
- 6 S. SONTAG, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964, p. 13.
- 1 H.G. GADAMER, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, cit., p. 101.
- 8 E. DEUTSCH, *Studies in Comparative Aesthetics*, Honolulu, The University Press of Hawaii, 1975.
- 9 R. FRY, *Chinese Art*, p. 2.