

Summary: Clive Bell, “Art and Significant Form”

I. Essentialism

Bell claims that “[t]he starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion”. (2)¹ In other words, he begins with the assumption, which he believes is derived from common sense, that aesthetic experience is essentially private (i.e. personal). And furthermore, “[t]he objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art”. (2) This is a fact, he says, acknowledged by “all sensitive people”.

If this is true, then the job of aesthetics is to find the quality common to all objects that produce this aesthetic emotion. This sort of project is not unlike Plato’s attempts to discover the essences of certain concepts such as beauty, justice, knowledge, truth, etc. For example, Plato asks the following sort of question: “Given that there are many different kinds of things that we call beautiful, e.g. beautiful songs, beautiful people, beautiful buildings, beautiful sunsets, etc., what is it that makes all these beautiful things beautiful? What is it in these things that would justify our calling them beautiful?”

My point is that Bell can be thought of as following Plato’s lead here in what is called the search for the **essence** of a thing, in Bell’s case, the essence of Art. Thus, it is fair to say that Bell holds an essentialist view of Art, i.e. he believes Art has an essence. This claim, however, is not obviously true and is, in fact, highly controversial. It could just as easily be true that, while many things are called “Art”, only some of them share a common property. Ask yourself, for example, what it is that all games have in common. Is there some one thing that any activity must have in order to be called a game? Perhaps there is, but it is notoriously difficult to get a group of intelligent people to agree on what it is. This difficulty has made many people skeptical about the existence of such a common property. These same problems apply with equal force to the concept of Art.

II. Significant Form

According to Bell, there must be **one quality** which is the essence of Art and without which an object cannot truly be called a work of art. That essential quality he refers to as **significant form**. Now, what does he mean by “significant form”? How do we know this quality? “Lines and colors combined in a particular way” and “certain forms and relations of forms” that produce the **aesthetic emotion** are the features of significant form. This is the account that Bell gives.

Notice that Bell does not say anything about the specific nature of the lines, colors, and relations of form. He has told us next to nothing about the particular visual nature of these forms. In fact, according to Bell, the way that we detect them is not by means of description but by feeling alone, i.e. the particular kind of feeling referred to as aesthetic emotion.

But then how do we know that a particular emotion is the aesthetic emotion and not some other kind of feeling that we are confusing with the aesthetic emotion?

III. The Subjectivity of Aesthetic Experience

Bell claims that aesthetic emotion is produced by significant form. Significant form is the quality that makes a thing a work of art. Thus, it follows that all works of art produce aesthetic emotion (in the “sensitive” observer, that is.) It also follows from what Bell has said that there are no **objective criteria** by means of which one could distinguish works

¹ Page numbers refer to the typescript version of “Art and Significant Form”.

of art from other kinds of objects. “We have no other means of recognizing a work of art than our feeling for it.”² The appreciation of art is a matter of **taste**. This is a view that goes back to the empiricist tradition associated with Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume.

Given that the appreciation of art is a matter of taste and depends upon a sensitive (and properly trained) observer, the function of the critic must be to help us apprehend significant form and, thus, experience aesthetic emotion. Thus, aesthetic experience is not **cognitive**, i.e. it is not a judgment involving concepts. (Cf. Kant’s distinction between logical judgments and judgments of taste.)

But even though aesthetic judgments about whether something is or is not a work of art are entirely **subjective** and based on feeling and taste, it doesn’t follow that the theory of significant form lacks **general validity**. We may disagree about whether a given object has significant form (based on the differences in our feelings when looking at the object), but we can still agree that a thing must have significant form in order to be a work of art. This is an important difference: To ask whether this particular painting **has** significant form or not is very different from asking whether this painting **needs** significant form in order to be a work of art.

IV. Beauty and Aesthetic Experience

Bell claims that beauty is a more general concept than significant form. Natural objects can be beautiful, but they are not works of art.

One must also be careful to distinguish between an appreciation of beauty (or form) and the desire that one might have to possess the form or the thing that embodies the form. This is a distinction that goes back to Kant and lies at the heart of our modern concept of the aesthetic. To appreciate a thing aesthetically is to take pleasure in the mere appearance of the thing, with no thought or interest in owning it, preserving it, etc., i.e. with no attachment to it.

V. The Autonomy of Art

Because art is defined by Bell as the embodiment of significant form, irrespective of content, representational features or information conveyed by the work of art to the viewer, it follows that art is independent of life and our social relations. To the extent that we treat an object as art, we must necessarily bracket all concerns relative to everyday mundane life. “Art transports us from the world of man’s activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation...[I]t lifts us above the stream of life [to] a world with emotions of its own.” (9) Art carries us “out of life into ecstasy”. (10)

This thesis of the autonomy of art—its freedom from the social, political and economic aspects of life—is one of the central and most controversial aspects of Bell’s formalism. It deserves close scrutiny and careful consideration.

Timothy Quigley, 2005

² Francis Francina, et. al., *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, 68.