

Part II, Paper 11, Aesthetics

4. "The key to the meaning of a work of art is the artist's intention". Discuss

Setting up the problem

By the meaning of a work of art, I shall here refer to the function that work performs or the message and ideas it conveys and expresses.

Whether and to what degree the conscious intentions of the actual artist are relevant to or determine the meaning of a work of art is the point of discussion. On the one hand, it seems that some kind of authorial intention must be relevant to the meaning of a work of art, because in the absence of any reason to think the work was created intentionally, the audience will not think to wonder about the meaning of a work. For instance, we think that artworks have meaning whereas natural objects arguably do not, in virtue of a lack of intentional creation.

On the other hand, there seems to be a problem with taking the actual artist's conscious, explicitly-stated intentions to be key to the meaning of a work of art in the sense of fully determining the meaning, regardless of other factors. Beardsley suggests that this view is the "Intentional Fallacy" and cannot be correct, because were it correct, an artwork could have any meaning just in virtue of the author intending it and there would be no room for more or less success at realizing that intention. We think that artworks can be better or worse, at conveying meaning. For example, a painting of a man holding a pocket watch would arguably better convey the idea that every man is master of his own time rather than the idea that cats enjoy eating fish. So the actual author's intention cannot seem to be the key in the sense of fully determining the meaning of a work of art.

Aims of this essay

In this essay, I aim to argue that the actual artist's intentions can be the key to the meaning of a work of art. Given the above problem presented by Beardsley, I will not propose that the actual author's intentions are the only relevant factor to the meaning of a work of art. But I will argue that they are the key in a different sense to fully determine – the sense I will argue for is that, given that the artwork can plausibly be seen as successfully rather than unsuccessfully conveying that intention, the artwork does mean what the actual author intended it to.

In section I, I will present Levinson's argument against taking the conscious explicit stated intentions of the artist into account when understanding the meaning of a work of art. In section II, I will argue that we can take into account the actual author's intentions without falling foul of Beardsley's Intentional Fallacy. In section III, I will present a rebuttal that Levinson might make, that we must distinguish between Utterer's meaning and utterance meaning, and therefore the explicit intentions would not be key. In section IV I respond to this objection, arguing that the activity of artistic endeavours tells against it. I will therefore conclude that the actual artist's intentions can plausibly be the key to the meaning of a work of art, if the artwork can be seen as successfully conveying that meaning.

I: Levinson's Hypothetical Intentionalism

Levinson argues that the conscious, explicitly-stated intentions of the artist should not be thought key, or indeed at all relevant, to the meaning of a work of art.

Rather, Levinson suggests that the meaning of a work of art is constituted by whatever our best hypothesis is of what the hypothetical author of that work could have meant. For instance, take the painting of the man holding a clock: if we know

that the painting was created at the time when mechanical clocks were first being invented, and we also know that the painter was a seaman as well, then our best guess about what the author might have intended may be the idea that man is making great progress in both exploring and inventing, and that the two types of progress go hand in hand.

Levinson's theory seems to avoid the Beardsley's Intentional Fallacy, because the meaning of a work of art for Levinson is now not even affected by the actual author's explicit intentions, let alone fully determined by it.

II: Avoiding Levinson AND Beardsley

However, I suggest that we need not think of the relevance of the actual artists' explicit intentions as only either fully key or not relevant at all to the artwork's meaning, contrary to the apparent assumptions of Levinson and Beardsley.

Following Hans Maes, I suggest that we can take the actual artists' explicit intentions into account in so far as, if there are more or less plausible hypothetical interpretations of the meaning of a work of art, the fact that the actual author intended one of those meanings rather than the others is key to the meaning of the work and settles the matter.

This avoids Beardsley's Intentional Fallacy, since it does not suppose that the intentions of the actual artist fully determine the meaning of a work of art. The actual author's intended meaning has to be an at least minimally plausible reading of the work of art. In other words, the artist has to be at least minimally successful in conveying her intended meaning in order for us to view her as successful.

III: Levinson's possible rebuttal

Levinson might respond by objecting that the actual author's intentions cannot be key in this sense. For if our best hypothesis of the hypothetical author's intentions does not correspond with the actual author's intentions, that is evidence that the actual author has failed to convey their intended meaning, rather than evidence that we should alter our hypothesis. Levinson might emphasize a distinction between Utterer's meaning and utterance meaning, and reaffirm that the latter can come apart from the former.

IV: Response: Art is creative

However, I suggest that this has the implausible implication that art should therefore try and be as uncreative as possible, in order to ensure successful conveyance of meaning. If the author's actual explicit intentions should not be taken as at all relevant to the meaning of a work of art, then surely the artist should try to stick to tried and tested successful communication methods to convey their ideas? But this is not the enterprise of art. The artist can make new connections and find creative ways of conveying ideas. This would seem to require that the artist can explain to people her intended meaning, so that the audience can come to make new connections between familiar concepts as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that, while the actual author's intentions about the message conveyed by a work of art cannot fully determine that work's meaning, they are key to the meaning in the sense of setting the meaning, given that the artwork can be understood by the audience as conveying that meaning, even if that meaning is not the most successful meaning the artwork could be understood as conveying or an alternative, safer method could have been used to convey the same meaning.

The answer is clearly structured and shows good understanding of the important issues. It is fairly sophisticated and is also relevant throughout. A very good 2i.