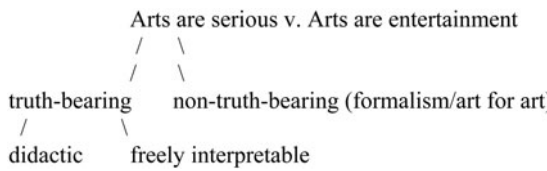
# Artistic Truth

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According to Wittgenstein, in the remarks collected as *Culture and Value*, 'People nowadays think, scientists are there to instruct them, poets, musicians etc. to entertain them. That the latter have something to teach them; that never occurs to them.' 18th and early 19th century art-lovers would have taken a very different view. Dr. Johnson assumed that the poets had truths to impart, while Hegel insisted that 'In art we have to do not with any agreeable or useful child's play, but with an unfolding of the truth.' Though it still exerts a submerged influence, the concept of artistic truth has since sustained hammer-blows both from modernist aestheticism, which divorces art from reality, and from postmodern subjectivism about truth. This article aims to resurrect it, seeking a middle way between Dr. Johnson's *didactic concept of art*, and the modernist and postmodernist divorce of art from reality.

It argues that *high art aims at truth*, in something like the way that beliefs are said to aim at truth, that is, it asserts an internal connection with truth. *Each artform aims at truth in its own way or ways*. This relatively modest claim contrasts high art with *art with a small 'a' that aims merely to please*, such as sentimental or sensationalist art. The claim is developed by appealing to a *post-Romantic conception of art*, which says that art is autonomous, and so is its audience in responding to it; artworks present truth-assessable possibilities that should be *freely interpretable*. On this conception, the most valuable art leaves open to the audience how it should be interpreted, and does not preach or broadcast messages, whether religious or political. In contrast, *committed or didactic art* with its fixed, often quite simple meaning – medieval wall-paintings in churches, socialist realism, agitprop cinema – leaves no such freedom.

These then are the options under consideration:




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Given a *non-didactic* conception of artistic truth, art can be autonomous. A broad concept of aestheticism or art for art's sake is compatible with artistic truth, and holds that art is valuable in itself, non-instrumentally. On this view, truth is not a merely useful product of art, but is intrinsic to it.

## 1. The role of truth in art

Lady Gaga proclaims in her concerts 'I hate the truth!', adding in an interview that 'in fact I hate the truth so much I prefer a giant dose of bullshit any day over the truth'.[1] With less chutzpah but more philosophical sophistication, both Marxists and postmodernists debunk the suggestion that art aims at truth – on the grounds that art is ideological and, perhaps, that truth does not exist. Analytic philosophers are more cautious but equally sceptical, though artistic cognitivism has defenders among them. Gordon Graham, for instance, argues that we value art according to its ability to illuminate human experience, and that beauty and pleasure alone 'cannot explain the value of art at its finest'.[2] Even he does not defend artistic truth, however.

There is an obvious connection between cognitivism and artistic truth. However, except concerning the particular questions of the semantics of fictional discourse, and the impact of factual error on artistic value, truth has been little-debated in Anglo-American philosophical aesthetics. In asking whether the historical inaccuracy of an historical novel affects its aesthetic or artistic value, for instance, it is assumed too hastily that art is defined independent of truth. The focus is on how falsehood detracts from artistic value, not on how truth contributes to it.[3] Against dominant anti-definition or sociological accounts of art, I believe, one can talk at least of salient features, and among these is the property that *high art aims at truth*.

Artists often suggest that this is their intention. James Joyce said that in *Dubliners* his aim was to tell the truth; Picasso, it is said,

[1] Reported for instance at http://www.cleveland.com/ministerofculture/index.ssf/2011/05/lady_gaga_wasnt_born_this_way.html

[2] Graham (2007), 64. Rowe (2009) considers artistic truth, but mainly in the context of artistic cognitivism; see also Price (1949), Hospers (1970), John (2007).

[3] For example, Keats's sonnet 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' describes Cortez first sighting the Pacific from a peak in Darien. This is erroneous both historically and geographically, but many would argue that its value as poetry is unaffected by the error.



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commented that 'Art is a lie that tells the truth'. As Danto argues, art – by which he means high or fine art, 'Art' with a capital 'A' – must be *about* something.[4] Presumably it says, suggests or hints things about that something – and therefore one can ask whether what it says or suggests is true.

A rare philosophical proponent of artistic truth is Iris Murdoch, who argues that art presents us with 'a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated', 'the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all'.[5] However, her claim that practices of looking are educated by engaging with art rests on unacceptably Platonist assumptions. This article's more modest thesis carries no suggestion that art is privileged as a way of knowing; it implies no Romantic conception of poet as seer, and does not assume a metaphysical or absolute conception of truth, as those in the humanities who reject artistic truth often seem to assume. Rather, it advocates a deflationary, anti-metaphysical conception, and elucidates 'Art aims at truth' in terms of raising or addressing issues which an audience would discuss. Even this modest conception of artistic truth erodes the dominant philosophical paradigm of art, however.

That art aims at truth does not imply an intellectualist view of art; unconscious influences are vital in its creation, and art can aim at truths which the artist does not consciously intend. To say that it aims at truth is not to appeal only to the author's avowed or conscious intentions; intentions are manifested primarily through the work. But there is an essential reference to intentionality; mere illustration of truths is not sufficient. Artworks can illustrate a truth just as anything else can – a novel, a newspaper article and a radio interview can all show that racism was endemic in 1930s Britain, for instance – but that is not what is meant by art's aiming at truth.

Artworks can show how things might be, presenting possibilities for the audience's consideration. David Harrower's one-act play *Blackbird*, for instances, forces us to reconsider our definition of, and attitude, towards paedophilia – without, as didactic art would, prescribing some particular response.[6] It challenges us to consider the question whether a relationship between a man and an underage girl could ever have value. In virtue of its form, the play slowly

[4] Danto (1981).

[5] Murdoch (1990), 87.

[6] *Blackbird* is discussed further below; a similar case could be made for David Mamet's *Oleanna* and the issue of violence against women (Mamet (1993)).



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introduces its audience to the past relationship between the protagonists. There is a compelling dramatic rhythm to the gradual emergence of this information, that concludes with a revelation of the protagonists' continuing feelings for each other. To fail to consider the issues concerning paedophilia that the play raises, is to reveal a very inadequate understanding of it.

To argue that art aims at truth, in the way that I propose, is to offer a humanistic treatment of art as continuous with other human activities. It implies a division between art that aims at entertainment, art that aims at usefulness, and art that aims at truth; and within the latter category, between art that aims at truth and fails, and art that aims at truth and succeeds. My claim is not that there is a special notion of 'artistic truth', but rather that high art aims at truth in the ordinary sense of that term. *High art* is not a purely social category, but it is an historically-conditioned one; it is a possibility fully manifested at a certain stage of art's historical development, though it may be present in earlier eras.[7] It is *autonomous art*, created not simply to satisfy a patron, but to capture authentic aims of the artist. The modernist picture is that such a possibility, though perhaps standing only a remote prospect of realisation, opens up when art enters the market-place; it becomes potentially autonomous at the same time as it becomes a commodity. Autonomous artworks have ceased to be products for an occasion, and are liberated from direct social function in service of court, aristocracy or church; a liberation that music, most socially retarded of the arts, finally gained only from the later 18th century.

For both modernists and conservatives, autonomous art is consolation for the loss of common culture in an urban, industrialised age. Scruton for instance argues that high art, far from being an instrument of class oppression, emancipated people from the traditional common culture: 'high culture…is the most reliable cure for the resulting loneliness. Bourgeois civilisation frees us from the bonds of common culture, and offers the consolation prize of art'.[8] However, although Scruton's treatment of art can hardly be described as 'functionalist', he neglects the defining characteristic of autonomous art, its purposiveness without a purpose – a concept that Adorno borrowed from Kant, transforming it to capture the unique, indirect social functions that autonomous art has in virtue of its lack of direct social function.[9] Autonomy, and classic status, involve

[7] A claim defended in Hamilton (2008).

[8] Scruton (1997), 110.

[9] These issues are discussed in Hamilton (2007), Ch. 6, and Hamilton (2008).



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separation of artworks from the original social circumstances of their production and consumption.[10]

Art that aims only at gratification is art with a small 'a' – diversion or entertainment. Higher art is not merely pleasurable, though it can also entertain, as some works of Dickens and Shakespeare show; the contrast is with *mere* entertainment. The latter description is rather misleading when applied to an important borderline category, even so. To say that *The Artist*, Michel Hazanavicius' recent acclaimed silent film, 'aims at truth', is to overstate its aims; it does not, for instance, show us much about the demise of the silent movie industry that we did not know already. The film is 'knowing' in a postmodern way, cleverly structured and with marvellous set-pieces, but essentially a wonderful entertainment. One could argue the same for Howard Hawks' classic Chandler adaptation *The Big Sleep*, or his comedy *Bringing Up Baby*, though the boundary between high and popular arts is essentially vague. A diet of both high and popular art is ideal, and one that lacks higher art can be argued to be impoverished.

My central claim, therefore, is that high art aims at truth, while other kinds of art aim merely at pleasure, entertainment, fantasy or utility. The claim that high art aims at truth in some way parallels the familiar claim that belief aims at truth. Not all beliefs are true, and not all artworks have truth-content; the claim is normative. Truth is the fundamental dimension of assessment of beliefs, informing our epistemic norms and principles as a goal or theoretical value.[11] For art, truth is *one* fundamental mode of assessingment; one can argue that an artwork fails to achieve truth despite the best efforts of the artist, for instance because their vision is distorted or incomplete.

In each case the claim can be contested; those who treat belief as an informational-state or disposition tend to deny that it aims at truth, while those who regard high art as an essentially self-reflexive or hermetic activity may deny the analogous claim.[12] These alternative pictures should be resisted. There are duplicitous or lying assertions, but not lying beliefs; so belief cannot aim at falsehood. Art is more like the assertion than the belief; even so, if it fails to aim at truth, it is not high art. One could perhaps argue that art, in contrast, can aim at falsehood; perhaps inauthentic or insincere art does this. But

[10] Hamilton (2009) argues that the concept of 'high culture', despite the intentions of its proponents, seems to draw attention to these circumstances.

[11] Postmodernists and some pragmatists disagree; see for instance Engel (2005).

[12] The example of belief is examined in Hamilton (2000).



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I would prefer to argue that the main contrast is with art as entertainment, that aims at neither truth nor falsity.

An essential supplementary claim is that *each artform aims at truth in its own way or ways*. This claim is consistent with the possibility of syntheses between artforms, as it is with Greenbergian purism. Painting can aim at truth through lifelikeness or mimesis, while fiction can do so through didacticism; but in both cases, a higher and more sophisticated approach is possible. Art can be said to aim at truth in the following ways:

1. Expression, presentation or consideration of truth or truths
2. Truthful representation
3. Truth to material or materials
4. Authenticity, including authentic performance
5. Historical truth

My focus here is on 1, and to a lesser extent 2 and 3.

The claim of artistic truth should be understood within the context of the historical development of the concept of art. Plato conceived of the aesthetic as sensual – and therefore objectionable – because he seemingly had no conception of art as other than the merely pleasurable, or the instrumentally didactic.[13] By *instrumentally didactic*, I mean art for religion's or politics' sake, where the artwork is treated primarily as a vehicle for the transmission of truth. In such art, there is no *internal relation to truth*, that 'aiming at truth' which is consistent with art for art's sake in its broadest sense, the sense in which art becomes an end in itself.

In fact, in ancient Greek writings concerning activities now regarded as artistic, there is little alternative to the instrumental or diversion model, or the social function model, such as flute-playing at a symposium. I say 'activities now regarded as artistic', because the Greeks had no model of *art* as such, conceived of as manifested across different genres; that is, they had no *system of the arts*. The widely-accepted Kristeller thesis argues that the Western system of the five major arts – painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry – did not assume definite shape till the 18th century, even though its ingredients went back to classical times.[14] It is generally agreed that the Greek

[13] Plato (1996). The art of the 'rhapsode' is neither didactic nor aims at pleasure; he is nobly inspired.

[14] '…classical antiquity left no systems of elaborate concepts of an aesthetic nature, but merely a number of scattered notions and suggestions that exercised a lasting influence' (Kristeller (1990), 172; discussed in Hamilton (2007), Ch. 1). By 'aesthetic', he must mean 'artistic'.



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term *techne* (Latin *ars*) does not distinguish between art and craft, in the modern senses of these terms, but embraced all kinds of human activities which would now be called arts, crafts or sciences.

The evolution of the modern system of the arts accompanied Kant's development of the concept of the aesthetic as a synthesis of the sensory and the intellectual. Other revolutionary developments in the world of the arts during the 18th century included the separation of the value-spheres of ethical and aesthetic, art's growing commodification linked with a developing bourgeois public sphere of taste, and the rise of Romantic ideals of genius and self-expression that helps to constitute a post-Romantic conception of art. I would like to argue that another development of the time was that artistic truth no longer had to be treated in an instrumentally didactic way.

This latter change is important because the account of artistic truth offered here essentially requires freedom of interpretation; that is, that the highest art is *non-didactic*. *Didactic* refers, for instance, to the way that a poem might be 'instructive' in the moralising sense. As Dr. Johnson wrote of Milton: 'Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason. Epic poetry undertakes to teach the most important truths by the most pleasing precepts, and therefore relates some great event in the most affecting manner.'[15] Johnson did recognise that poetry is an imaginative presentation of truth, differing from direct moral instruction such as a church sermon. Poetry of a lower status could be regarded merely as pleasurable diversion.[16]

The Johnsonian model is applicable to wall-paintings in medieval churches, intended to instruct the unlettered peasantry in Gospel stories; and to socialist realist art or the agitprop films of Michael Moore. A more sophisticated cognitivism underlies the *post-Romantic conception of art*, with its requirement of *free interpretation* by the audience, involving critical debate. According to this conception, high or classic art is neither didactic nor pleasurable diversion; its truth is not reducible to anything as crude as a 'message', and artworks are

[15] From Samuel Johnson (1781). In the 'Preface' to his edition of Shakespeare, he writes: 'The end of all writing is to instruct; the end of all poetry is to instruct by pleasing.'

[16] Adam Smith comments that poetical licence is allowed, because its purpose is to amuse; the manners of poets 'plainly [show] that it is not their design to be believed', 'Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres', Lecture XXI, in Smith (1985). For Coleridge, 'A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth' (Coleridge (1985), Ch. 14); note his stress on 'immediate', however. Wordsworth seemed to place a different emphasis.



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concerned, rather, to raise possibilities for consideration. Art is autonomous, and so is its audience in their response.

'Didactic' suggests the settled world-view of Augustan writers such as Samuel Johnson; 'message' implies ideology and persuasion, a battle of ideas characteristic of less consensual times. There is a tendency for proponents of didactic art to deny that art has intrinsic value, and to treat it merely as a vehicle for truth – though Dr. Johnson would not have done so. Oscar Wilde's remark that 'No work of art ever puts forward a view of any kind' can be regarded either as narrow aestheticism, or as a salutary rejection of crudely didactic art in favour of a broader aestheticism that regards art as valuable in itself.[17] Art for art's sake can be interpreted as compatible with art's aiming at truth – if it is regarded as saying that art is valuable in itself, and not merely instrumentally. This is a broad aestheticism, as opposed to the narrow aestheticism of art for art as traditionally conceived. Indeed art for art in the broad sense, and art's aiming at truth, go together; art is not merely the means for projecting a truth, and is valuable in itself. Instrumentally didactic art is not high art, because it is merely a vehicle for transmission of truth; art that does not want to say anything is not high art either, but entertainment or some other variety of lower art.

We must now explore the assumptions of those who reject artistic truth.

## 2. The rejection of artistic truth

The contemporary separation of art and truth rests on several developments. Later 19th century aestheticism, and the modernism that arose from it, scorned the concept of artistic truth. On this view, an artwork creates its own world, and refers to nothing beyond itself – suggested by Nietzsche's declaration that 'We have art in order not to die of the truth'.[18] But while modernism's tendency was to abolish artistic truth, not all modernists wished to do so – we have

[17] It could also be regarded as flippancy, or as an attempt to avoid implication in illegal activity; Wilde made the remark at his first trial, replying to questioning about a book that allegedly put forward 'sodomitical views'.

[18] Nietzsche (1973), §. 822. On one interpretation, he is arguing that art is a response to the discovery that the world has no truth; beauty is not a reflection of a transcendental realm but a reaction to it. See also Rapaport (1997), 11; Paddison (1993) discusses the modernist introversion of art.



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already noted remarks by Joyce and Picasso, and Adorno is a notable exception among art theorists.

However, with postmodernism's incoherent attempt to abolish truth, influenced by Nietzsche and developed by Derrida, artistic truth came under further attack.[19] More interestingly, the Marxist *ideological objection* regards artists as subject to the dominant ideology, and so unable to see the truth about their own society. It undermines truth in all spheres of human activity, and we return to it later.

20th-century Anglo-American philosophy, while rejecting the postmodern onslaught on truth, tends to deny artistic truth, for one or more of the following reasons:

(1) *Truth is essentially propositional*. Zuidervaart describes a 'tunnel vision imposed by a propositionally inflected theory of truth', but it is an understandable visual impairment.[20] Horwich for instance, in considering the entities to which truth may be attributed, cites utterances, statements and beliefs, and propositions; but not novels, paintings or love.[21] Goodman hesitates to attribute truth to art because its 'carriers…are literal and linguistic', and talks instead of the 'appropriateness' or 'propriety' of a work.[22] Finally, Beardsley holds that, in order to have a truth-value – his interpretation of the claim of artistic truth – an artwork must either contain propositions or suggest and confirm hypotheses about reality, and it does neither.[23]

(2) *Art is essentially 'aesthetic', emotive or formal in its appeal*. I.A. Richards, for instance, considered art to be a non-propositional language of emotions, a view very commonly applied to music, most notoriously by Deryck Cooke.

(3) *Artistic truth implies artistic knowledge*, yet the latter is preponderantly banal; literature is replete with 'epigrammatic observations hardly distinguishable from folk sayings'.[24]

This last formulation rests on a key error diagnosed by Adorno – that art says what its words say. It is true that when appreciating autonomous art, we do not simply regard it as a source of useful

[19] Derrida wrote on the question in his (1987); see also Rapaport (1997).
[20] Zuidervaart (2004), 151.
[21] Horwich (1990), 17.
[22] Zuidervaart (2004), 172, 175.
[23] Beardsley (1981). See also Young (2001), 70, on the 'propositional' theory of art.
[24] Stolnitz (1992), 200.



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knowledge, nor as a way of stimulating the audience to a course of action, nor to assure them of the soundness of their own beliefs and actions.[25] But this is not sufficient reason to reject artistic cognitivism or the concept of artistic truth; nor is the naive argument (2). Argument (1), as we will see, provides the most fundamental questioning of the concept of artistic truth.

Although the assumption of artistic truth is against the spirit of the age, it residually informs modern responses to literature, for instance; and so Wittgenstein exaggerates when he writes that 'People nowadays think, scientists are there to instruct them, poets, musicians etc. to entertain them'.[26] Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, which describes an incestuous relationship within an African-American family, was criticised for undermining communal solidarity – a response that treats her novel as didactic art with the wrong message, rather than art that yields imaginative or experiential truth. Similarly, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, which concerns an attack by a black criminal gang on a white father and daughter, has been criticised as racist – presumably for expressing the racist view that most violent crime in South Africa is by blacks on whites. Given that the mere fact of the assault rather than its treatment seems to be what is objected to, the criticism is justified only if black on white violence were a recurrent theme in Coetzee's novels, which it is not.

These examples are instructive, since the criticisms of Morrison or Coetzee assume that art aims at truth didactically, and that it must broadcast the right message – which, it is argued, Coetzee does not do. (I am not saying that a racist novel fails to aim at truth, though that might be argued; just that the objection assumes a didactic model.) That such objections are commonplace, shows that the postmodern questioning of truth has not been fully absorbed – unsurprisingly, given its incoherence - and the very same critics who allege racism would most likely deny truth. This objection is opposed by embattled proponents of artistic freedom, a value integral to the post-Romantic conception of art, that includes the freedom of the artist to shock and outrage.

## 3. A 'grand narrative' historicist conception of artistic truth

The view of art that I wish to defend, and which contrasts with accounts that reject artistic truth, may be labelled *cognitivist*. Cognitivism about art recognises that it is more than pleasurable

[25] See Schiller (1964), and Young (2001).
[26] Wittgenstein (1998), 42.



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diversion, and that its meaning transcends didactic utility; high art aims not just to give pleasure but to develop understanding – indeed to develop understanding through pleasure. To reiterate, cognitivism *is* represented in Anglo-American aesthetics; but the particular version of cognitivism advocated here, one that finds place for artistic truth, seems not to be.

Cognitivism involving a concept of artistic truth is most readily associated with German Idealist aesthetics. Despite the still common attribution to Kant of an exclusively 'taste' aesthetic, he did recognise broader functions of art, and his formalism does not extend to art itself.[27] But Hegel is the most thoroughgoing artistic cognitivist, arguing emphatically that art's primary role is the disclosure of truth. He held that art is a way of discovering ourselves and the world, not merely a way of beautifying what has already been discovered: 'In art we have to do not with any agreeable or useful child's play, but with an unfolding of the truth.'[28] For Hegel, the content of art is not abstract, but is 'the sensuous appearance [*Scheinen*] of the Idea', that appeals through the senses to the mind or spirit.[29] Hegel's pervasive philosophical impulse is to elevate purely conceptual modes of expression above sensory ones, and since art embodies metaphysical truth through a sensory medium, he is deeply ambivalent towards it. But he allows that as well as being understood conceptually, truth must be experienced sensuously through art, as well as felt and loved through religion.[30]

Hegel's discussion suggests that the concept of high art can be defined in terms other than those social ones – viz., the art of the socially dominant classes – assumed by Marxist critics; high art is autonomous art that aims at, or discloses, truth. However, while orthodox Marxism offers an ideological *critique* of artistic truth, members of the Frankfurt School, notably Adorno, were as much indebted to Hegel's cognitivist affirmation as to the Marxist critique of art. Adorno links truth-content with the 'language-character' that he attributes to all artworks, not just those whose medium is language. Even when its medium is linguistic, what the artwork says is not what its words say, and so music and literature are not so distinct: 'No art can be pinned down as to what it says,

[27] His discussion of *aesthetic ideas* illuminates what I term *imaginative truth*.

[28] Hegel (1975), Vol. II, 1236; see also Adorno (2006), 7.

[29] Hegel (1975), Vol I, 111, and 71.

[30] '…for in inwardness as such, in pure thought, in the world of laws and their universality man cannot endure; he also needs sensuous existence, feeling, the heart, emotion…' (Hegel (1975), Vol I, 97–8).



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and yet it speaks'.[31] Progressive art embodies an essential critical function within bourgeois culture, and 'truth-content [is] the task of critique'.[32] For Adorno, artists control only the material, not the content of their work. Austen may have intended her novels as guidance to young women concerning matrimony, but for Adorno, the truth-content of *Pride and Prejudice* is a social truth of which its author may be unaware.

For him, the truth-content of artworks is neither factual nor propositional, but perceptible and structural. He assesses the integration and fracture of its form and content, considering the artwork in its own terms:

> The ceaselessly recurring question that every work incites in whoever traverses it – the "What is it all about?" – goes over into "Is it true?" – the question of the absolute, to which every artwork responds by wresting itself free from the discursive form of answer.[33]

The 'discursive form of answer' is the conceptual or linguistic paraphrase that audiences are always tempted to derive from an artwork, and which Adorno rejects because what the artwork says is not what its words – if it has any – say.

Despite its insights concerning 'what art says', Adornian historicism is a contestable basis on which to defend artistic truth.[34] The more modest, pluralistic conception that I wish to present is consistent with the modernist understanding of art's increasing social autonomy from the 18th century onwards. Unlike Adorno's, however, it does not privilege socially critical art.[35]

## 4. A more modest conception of artistic truth

A pluralistic conception of artistic truth is found in Gadamer's critique of Hegel – a critique that I think applies also to Adorno's

[31] Adorno, 'Music and Language: A Fragment', in his (1992), 1.
[32] Adorno (1997), 194.
[33] Adorno (1997), 168.
[34] The most substantive recent Adornian treatment is Zuidervaart (2004), who combines it with Heidegger's notion that art discloses truth. He holds that art can be true with respect to the artist's intentions or vision (authenticity); to the audience's interpretative needs (significance); and to the work's internal demands (integrity). ((Zuidervaart (2004), 127–30.)
[35] A version of modernist theory is defended in Hamilton (2007), (2008) and (2009).



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negative, pessimistic development of Hegelian dialectics. Though Hegel recognised 'the truth that lies in every artistic experience [and] is…at the same time mediated with historical consciousness', Gadamer writes, he denied art's historical multiplicity, mistakenly holding that it progresses towards the one, true art:

> Hegel was able to recognise the truth of art only by subordinating it to philosophy's comprehensive knowledge… from the viewpoint of the present's complete self-consciousness…[In making] conceptual truth omnipotent, since the concept supersedes all experience, Hegel's philosophy…disavows the way of truth it has recognised in the experience of art.[36]

For Gadamer, there is knowledge in art, and experience of art contains a claim to truth that is not inferior, but simply different, to that of science: to do justice to 'the truth of aesthetic experience [is to] overcome the radical subjectivisation of the aesthetic that began with Kant'.[37] Gadamer rejects Adorno's view that the highest art is essentially critical – for him, it can be affirmative also – and thus the grand narrative historicism of which that view is a residue.

Like Gadamer, Theodore Meyer Greene regards artistic truth as non-conceptual, though confusingly he also seems to hold that one can regard a work of art as a judgment or assertion – an interpretation of reality – by the artist. He denies that truth is expressed adequately only through a conceptual medium: 'certain aspects of reality can be apprehended and expressed…in and through the artistic media, and…what is thus apprehended and expressed *cannot* be translated into a conceptual medium without vital loss'.[38] He continues:

> The artist expresses his insights and interpretations in the warm and vital language of art, which is as perfectly adapted to the mediation of his normative apprehensions as are scientific prose and mathematics to the formulation of the scientist's impersonalised apprehension of the quantitative aspects of nature's skeletal structure.

[36] Gadamer (1975), 85, 87.

[37] Again we see the attribution of an exclusively taste aesthetic to Kant; although he discusses the contrast between free and dependent beauty, Gadamer seems to belong with those who ignore all of the *Critique of Judgment* after the Four Moments. He argues, I think unfairly, that Kant assumes a scientific concept of knowledge that cannot acknowledge artistic truth.

[38] Greene (1940), 427.



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Although artists can express propositions whose truth they neither deny nor assert, he holds, 'serious' art is the expression of the artist's sincere convictions.

Greene contrasts the enduring nature of artistic truth with that of science:

> The best of scientific theories are subject to revision as the best artistic insights are not. A great work of art can be true for all time in a way in which no scientific theory can be [because] an individual approach to a given subject-matter is not as subject to correction by other individual approaches…

For Greene, 'Artistic intuitions enjoy a degree of autonomy unrivalled in the scientific enterprise'. The artist's language can be 'as perfectly adapted' as the scientist's – artistic truth is not vague or imprecise by the standards of scientific truth, but aims at a perfect matching of precision and subject-matter.[39]

This last claim seems correct. The poet's or novelist's observation of nature or human psychology on which their work is based, and their search for the right phrase or word, is as exacting as the scientist's precise recording of observations and testing of hypotheses. However, Greene still does not sufficiently separate art from empirical inquiry. He is right that 'a great work of art can be true for all time in a way in which no scientific theory can'. But it is misleading to say that 'a given subject-matter is not as subject to correction by other individual approaches' – for it is not subject at all. A later artwork cannot correct the artistic truths expressed by an earlier one, because – according to a post-Romantic conception - the pursuit of truth in art is an individual and not collective endeavour; indeed it is an endeavour bounded by the work in question. Art does not progress in the same way as science. One can talk of the development of a tradition, and of an artist achieving more fully what they were intending in an earlier work. But while Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a fully-realised artistic vision that transforms the stock devices of his earlier exotic romances, it is not a 'correction' of those earlier efforts, which still stand independently.

[39] Mortensen, less satisfactorily, refers to 'expression of subjective truth' as one of four features defining the modern system of the arts: 'science or other forms of systematic enquiry…deal with objective facts… We can only get at what a work of art expresses if we actually experience it. It is not possible to repeat or replicate [as it is] possible to substitute one account of the Russian Revolution with another, equally good, account' (Mortensen (1997), 1).



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However, it is unusual for an artist to refine their a work through response to the judgments of critics – the collaboration of artist-photographer Jeff Wall and critic Michael Fried is a rare example. When an artwork is released into the world, in the form of publication or exhibition, it acquires a life of its own and cannot normally be retrieved by its creator – though obsessive revisers such as Bruckner have tried to do so. While a scientific theory can be discredited – indeed that is its normal fate – and becomes of purely historical interest, artworks are not discredited unless revealed as fakes; tastes change, and popularity is recognised as ephemeral, but classics endure. The artist has greater creative autonomy than the scientist, though to deny it to the latter entirely, is to subscribe to the unacceptably negative characterisation of scientific culture found in Kant.[40]

Reference has been made to Hegel's elevation of 'conceptual truth' over other modes, and to the suggestion, shared by Gadamer and Greene, that artistic truth is not 'conceptual'. Because 'conceptual' has so many meanings, one could refer instead to 'linguistic' or 'propositional', which are slightly less broad in scope – while recognising that these terms are still badly in need of refinement. "Scientific truth" is often contrasted with artistic truth, but *truth of inquiry* is preferable, since it embraces the humanities as well as the sciences, and this description may also serve in place of 'conceptual'. Critical discourse is 'conceptual', and the role of criticism includes interpreting and assessing the truth that a work aims at. But it is an aid to or expression of our understanding, not a paraphrase of what an artwork says. The truth expressed by an artwork is not a scientific, historical or philosophical truth, but rather, an *experiential or imaginative truth* – art makes truth real to the imagination. Imagination is essential to empirical inquiry too, and art is not the only activity that can express such truths; truths can be conveyed imaginatively through role-playing, psychotherapy and other means.

## 5. The most persuasive cases: literature, film and drama

We noted earlier Iris Murdoch's persuasive statement of artistic cognitivism:

> [in art] we are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated and indeed it

[40] Kant denies that genius applies to science; Scruton denies that science is part of culture (Scruton (1998)). A useful discussion is Meyer (1974).



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> is the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all…Art transcends the selfish obsessive limitations of the personality and can enlarge the sensibility of the consumer.[41]

Murdoch holds that we learn from the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velásquez or Titian

> …about the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged, in the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life. [The] greatest art … shows us the world … with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all.[42]

These claims are illustrated by David Harrower's one-act play *Blackbird* cited earlier. To reiterate, the play forces us to reconsider our attitude towards paedophilia, but it does not, as didactic art would, prescribe a particular response. It poses the question whether a relationship between a man and an under-age girl could ever have value. In virtue of its form, the play achieves a persuasive effect on its audience, who are slowly initiated into the existence of a past relationship between the protagonists, and into its social unacceptability. There is a compelling dramatic rhythm in the emergence of this information, involving an intense revelation of the protagonists' continuing feelings for each other.

The highest art, such as *Blackbird*, that aims non-didactically at truth, exists at the opposite end of the continuum to didactic art, whether religious or political. One might attempt to elucidate the distinction in terms of Wayne Booth's contrast in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* between showing and telling. Booth argues that authors should not be forbidden from telling, and that it is easy to distinguish those who profess to be showing but are in fact telling.[43] However, showing can be as didactic as telling; there is a continuum in art from didactic to non-didactic, from telling via showing to *presenting possibilities and*

[41] Murdoch (1990), 87.

[42] Murdoch (1990), discussed and developed in Lamarque (2009), 240, and Lamarque and Haugom Olsen (1994), 154. Note also Wellmer: 'Art does not merely disclose reality, it also opens our eyes. This…transformation of perception is the healing…of an incapacity to perceive and experience reality in the way that we learn to [do] through the medium of aesthetic experience' (Wellmer (1991), 26).

[43] Booth (1983). Passmore argues that the distinction is vital, and that telling, even in literature, is very confined in its range and only loosely related to seriousness (Passmore (1991), 129).



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*raising questions*.[44] It is the last of these that Harrower's play exemplifies.

The aesthete, narrowly defined, is someone who when asked 'Did this play make you think about attitudes to paedophilia?', might reply 'I hadn't thought about that, I was just marvelling at its compelling formal construction'. Insofar as such an exclusive concern is possible, it amounts to a failure of artistic understanding. (To reiterate, aestheticism or art for art's sake, in the broader sense, regards the aesthetic as an end in itself, without assuming, with Wildean aesthetes, that it is the most valuable end.) Conversely, someone who concerned themselves only with what the play said about paedophilia, treating these as truths of inquiry, would also have an impoverished artistic understanding. To do so would not be a response to the play as art; but to ignore such issues is artistically inadequate also. It could be argued that I have shown not that art aims at truth, but that it aims at critical engagement. However, critical engagement involves a reaction to truth, and asks questions such as 'Is it true that the relationship between an older man and an under-age girl could have value?'

Harrower does not need to have the expertise of the psychiatrist, psychologist or criminologist in this area. He may in fact belong to any one of those professions, but writing a play that focusses on the issue does not require access to any body of disciplinary knowledge. The playwright's knowledge of human motivation is not a disciplinary knowledge like the psychiatrist's or psychologist's (or historian's or philosopher's), but more like an ordinary person's, intensified or magnified.

These areas of expertise concern what I termed *truths of inquiry*. The playwright presents and explores human knowledge of the phenomenon – in *Blackbird*'s case, paedophilia – in an imaginative way. The play makes vivid some of our misapprehensions, in a highly-charged way through its formal presentation. I may emerge from the very intense experience that it affords, wanting to read what the experts have to say, in that way deepening my understanding of paedophilia and social attitudes towards it. The play would not be cited as evidence in a government report, but members of a government commission might be recommended to see it as background to their official responsibility.

[44] For instance, critic Echo Eshun commented on BBC Radio 4's 'Today' programme, on 31/10/11, that video games are not art – by which he meant 'Art' with a capital 'A' – because art 'asks deep questions'. This issue is pursued in the final section.



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It is not even clear that the author requires direct acquaintance with their subject-matter. There is a tradition in literature of writing on subjects about which one has no direct experience. *The Lime Twig*, by American writer John Hawkes, a novel about gangsterism on the periphery of English horse-racing and betting, shows no acquaintance with English life, but is higher art than the novels of Dick Francis, who knew a great deal about these subjects. In *The Remains of The Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro recreates English country-house life of the 1930s; Conrad seems to have created the world of *Nostromo* mostly from his reading about Latin America.[45]

However, writers are often advised to write from what they know, and novels written from experience can be especially effective illustrations of Murdoch's claim that '[in art] we are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated'. The *memoir-novel*, or what is sometimes called 'auto-fiction', draws most directly on the author's experience. Solzhenitsyn's *One Day In The Life of Ivan Denisovich* had an explosive impact on Soviet society when it appeared in 1964, during the Khrushchev thaw, because in contrast to Stalin's favoured Socialist Realist morality tales, its genuine realism and truth relayed corroborated facts about the Gulag: 'The sufferings of its heroes were pointless…The Party did not triumph in the end, and communism did not emerge the victor…[Its publisher Tvardovsky said] that the story had "not a drop of falsehood in it"'. Readers who were or had been in the Gulag 'were overjoyed to read something which actually reflected their own feelings and experience. People afraid to breathe a word of their experiences to their closest friends suddenly felt a sense of release'.[46]

One reader wrote to Solzhenitsyn: 'I wept as I read – they were all familiar characters, as if from my own brigade!' The prisoners or 'zeks' in Dubravalag held a group reading, listening 'without breathing':

> After they read the last word, there was a deathly silence. Then, after two, three minutes, the room detonated. Everyone had lived the story in his own, painful way…in the cloud of tobacco smoke, they discussed endlessly… And frequently, more and more frequently, they asked: "Why did they publish it?"[47]

[45] Baines (1971), 354–58, discusses the likely sources of his knowledge of South America and its politics. One cannot say that *Heart of Darkness* is a greater work than *The Secret Agent*, even though the former is based on direct experience and therefore is arguably more 'realistic' than the latter.

[46] Applebaum (2004), 468, 469.

[47] Leonid Sitko, quoted in Applebaum (2004), 469.



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Many Gulag survivors, interviewed in the 1990s, insisted that they had witnessed scenes in books by Solzhenitsyn, Ginzburg or Shalamov, or recognised guards and NKVD interrogators represented there – though records show that this could not have happened:

> …many victims of Stalinist repression identified so strongly with [these books'] ideological position, which they took to be the key to understanding the truth about the camps, that they suspended their own independent memories and allowed these books to speak for them. [They] frequently lacked a clear conceptual grasp of their own experience [and so substituted] these writers' coherent and clear memories for their own confused and fragmentary recollections.[48]

Figes' final comment is important; art can supply a conceptual framework for their own experience that the individual lacks, something that helps them make sense of it in the way that Murdoch suggests.

There can be misidentification too, however. 'Daddy', the most notorious of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* lyrics, is a shocking *Grand Guignol* outburst that portrays the writer's seemingly mild-mannered if foolishly obstinate father as a surreal monster. Anne Stevenson comments: 'This distorting wilfulness…became for her poetic truth…The voice [in this poem] is finally that of a revengeful, bitterly hurt child storming against a beloved parent', cursing him for dying.[49] However, the result could be regarded as overwrought or out of control, self-absorbed, striking but not psychologically deep, with little reflection of the universal – even though some teenage readers may identify with it.

Literature's concern with truth therefore exists on a continuum, from the didacticism of Johnson's 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', through the residual moralising of Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb' with its hint at an 'almost-instinct almost true', to Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* lyrics that seem to have nothing to do with truth. Revelation of the 'child' that Plath remained is not artistic truth in the relevant sense. As we saw, artworks do reveal truth in this way, and it is the task of what Danto called 'deep interpretation' to consider how they do. But this is not the 'aiming at truth' that this article is concerned with, since anything at all – commodified pop music,

[48] Figes (2007), 635.

[49] Stevenson (1990), 259, 264. Plath biography is a minefield, and Stevenson is regarded as being on the Ted Hughes side of the debate.



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pornography, home movies – can be a source of truth in the sense that by reflecting on it, we arrive at truths otherwise inaccessible.

One could distinguish art concerned with a *common reality* – Johnson, Larkin, Levi, Conrad, Raymond Carver – from art that creates an *alternative reality* that beguiles us: Milton's 'Lycidas', Plath, Peake, Hesse, Woolf, Brian Marley. Larkin and Dickens created works that mirrored our social reality and understanding of it, in a highly personalised way that filters reality through their consciousness and heightens it by their craft. Theirs is not, strictly, an alternative to our social reality; although they present aspects of it that we may deny, or had hitherto failed to understand or recognise, nonetheless their works are strongly rooted in something we all share. Talk of a 'common reality' hopefully allows one to sidestep some of the pitfalls of the debate over literary realism.

In contrast, an alternative reality is presented in the Pastoral tradition in poetry that inspired Milton's 'Lycidas'. This lyrical lament delineates the poet's grief, while portraying Milton and his late friend 'untruthfully' as shepherds. Dr. Johnson condemned its artificiality, complaining that 'in this poem there is no nature, for there is no truth; there is no art, for there is nothing new', its pastoral images 'long ago exhausted'.[50] Later audiences took a different view, holding that the poet's grief is persuasively expressed through pastoral convention. The reality in high art cannot be entirely alternative, however, as in science-fiction – though occasionally, as in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, or Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, science-fiction is high art.

The analogous issue in painting, to which artform we now turn, is illustrated by Watteau's more evanescent Arcadia. As John Golding writes, 'Watteau lived in a world of his own, a dreamworld, one that could exist only in his eye and mind but one that he invites his audience to enjoy, to embrace. *Et in arcadia ego*'.[51] Watteau's rococo *fêtes galantes* express a human reality, otherwise we would have little interest in them; explorers of common and alternative realities can both aim at truth, whilst having different conceptions of its boundaries. Even so, Golding's suggestion that he was the greatest French artist of his century suggests that this was a silver age for French painting. We pursue the implications of this opposition between realism and idealism by considering how the visual arts aim at truth.

[50] 'Life of Milton' in Johnson (1781).
[51] Golding (2011), 72.



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## 7. Truth in the visual arts, and the ideological objection to artistic truth

Religious art seems to be a paradigm of didactic art. However, in the Middle Ages, church paintings were not just art for religion's as opposed to art's sake. They were religious as much as artistic *artefacts*: 'all images were…understood to be more than representations or commemorations, bringing the holder into spiritual contact and the semi-presence of the person depicted'.[52] Perhaps something like this is still believed in the modern era – for instance by Mondrian and metaphysical artists – and not just in more traditionalist cultures. Images of saints and the Virgin in particular became more common in medieval churches after the doctrine of Purgatory was confirmed in 1274; masses for the dead required saintly intercession.

The enduring sense that images bring us into contact with their subject meant that the didactic function of religious art always had an explicit personal dimension. This dimension became amplified, as Clifford Geertz explains:

> Most fifteenth-century Italian paintings were religious paintings, and not just in subject matter but in the ends they were designed to serve. Pictures were meant to deepen human awareness of the spiritual dimensions of existence…Faced with an arresting image of the Annunciation…the beholder was to [reflect] on the event as he knew it and on his personal relationship to the mysteries it recorded. "For it is one thing to adore a painting", as a Dominican preacher defending the virtuousness of art put it, "but it is quite another to learn from a painted narrative what to adore".

Geertz argues that the relation between religious ideas and painted images was not simply expositive: '…they were not Sunday school illustrations…the religious painter was concerned with inviting his public to concern themselves with first things and last, not with providing them with a recipe or a surrogate for such concern…the relations of his painting to the wider culture was interactive'.[53] Such a model construes artistic truth as inviting contemplation or understanding – as Iris Murdoch's discussion suggests – rather than as the presentation of a choice, or forcing the audience to take a view, as modernists often assume.

[52] Barnwell (2011), 43. See Belting (1994), 308, 351, 362, 410–19.
[53] Geertz (1983), Ch. 5, 104.



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Religious art could be more primitively didactic, however, excluding a personal response. The high art of the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance, where the viewer is already assumed to have received religious teaching or training, contrasts with the often rather crude representations that were once ubiquitous on English medieval church walls – didactic in a way that called for little individual contribution from the viewer. Minimally contributory didacticism is a minor genre in painting, illustrated by Jan Steen's 'The Effects of Intemperance' (1663–5, National Gallery, London) – portraying the ill-effects of alcoholic inebriation – or Holman Hunt's irretrievably moralistic 'The Awakening Conscience' (1853, Tate Britain, London).

Didactic aiming at truth contrasts with the representational truthfulness that art is often assumed to aim at. This is the sense in which paintings and drawings may be true to life; the subject may be more or less accurately represented. Although we admire 'realistic' pictures, we are now inclined to regard them as art with a small 'a', products of skill and craft, employing hard-earned techniques and materials. A true portrayal, in this sense, is no guarantee of artistic value and in some cases – Canaletto for instance – may substitute for insight and imagination. Conversely, portraits and landscapes of great merit may be anything but a true likeness. Among these, clearly, would be the portraits of Francis Bacon, yet he claimed that his paintings 'tell us something true about the world we live in…art is recording… reporting'.[54] Some artists even found a contradiction between didactic and representational truth, however. Burne-Jones commented that his paintings were 'so different to landscape paintings. I don't want to copy *objects*; I want to tell people something'.[55] With modernism's rejection of artistic truth, such didacticism appeared hopelessly conservative.

Although Geertz's richer notion of didactic art allows for a contribution from the audience, who are not merely passive recipients of the truths expressed, the post-Romantic conception of art has the stronger requirement of free interpretation by the audience. That development seems in tension with the patronage system's restriction of artistic autonomy. For instance, Titian in his portrait *Pope Paul III and his Grandsons* is not merely 'reporting' or 'recording', but presenting an artistic vision of the Pope's character. The audience are free, within limits, to interpret the portrait – to judge what kind of

[54] Quoted Passmore (1991), 105. Even – indeed, especially – abstract painters such as Mondrian believed that their work conveyed metaphysical truths.

[55] Quoted in Dorment (2012), 14.



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person or character the Pope is. But in an era of patronage, freedom of both artist and audience are constrained; portraitists could suffer the patron's wrath if they made the subject too fallible-looking.

Modernists such as Attali suggest that, with the decline of the patronage model, the artist becomes free at the same time as their work goes on sale in the capitalist market-place. Proponents of the *ideological objection* to artistic truth, noted earlier, maintain nonetheless that art consistently fails to locate truth. They hold that John Constable's landscapes, whose subjects are the estates of his wealthy friends, unaccountably rather devoid of peasants, are to that extent, 'false'.[56] An analogous and familiar criticism is that Jane Austen's novels neglect the effects of the Industrial Revolution; she herself referred to the 'two inches of ivory' – the very circumscribed social subject-matter – on which she worked.

John Barrell's work on landscape painting and poetry, from the period of transition between patronage and market systems, illustrates the ideological objection. Barrell argues that as the aristocracy became more committed to the economic exploitation of its estates, aristocratic taste developed an interest in more workaday – if not totally realistic – images of rural life.[57] However, he recognises that there were constraints on how the labouring, vagrant and mendicant poor could be portrayed, to be acceptable *décor* for polite drawing rooms; it was only 'discreet hints of actuality provided by tattered clothes, heavy boots and agricultural implements' that marked the English tradition of Gainsborough and Constable from the more artificial Italianate tradition.[58] As a periodical of the time put it:

> …truth well painted will certainly please the imagination; but it is sometimes convenient not to discover the whole truth, but that part which only is delightful…Thus in writing Pastorals, let the tranquillity of that life appear full and plain, but hide the meanness of it…[59]

[56] Gerhard Richter, no doubt aware of such debates, described his mid-1980s landscapes as 'untruthful' because they glorify nature, whereas nature is 'always against us', and 'knows no meaning, no pity, no sympathy' (Richter (2009), 158).

[57] For a sharper realism concerning peasant life, one generally has to look to the later 19th century, and the work of Courbet and Millet; however, William Beechey's 'Sir Frances Fordes' Children Giving a Coin to a Beggar Boy' (1793, Tate Britain) portrays a young beggar in very evident poverty and distress.

[58] Barrell (1980), 6.

[59] *The Guardian*, no. 22, 6 April 1713, quoted Barrell (1980), 1.



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Thus when Gainsborough 'brought together in his landscapes of the 1750s the tradition of French rococo pastoral painting, and the more sternly georgic tradition of the Netherlands painters, this may not have been simply a happy eclecticism, but a combination that enabled him to compose [a reassuring] image of Happy Britannia', a blend of French play and Netherlandish work in rural life.[60]

The implication, based not on direct evidence but rather on a brilliant series of critical intepretations, is that Gainsborough constructs an ideologically-driven image rather than pursuing truth. Marxist critics infer that so-called high art often aims not at truth, but at satisfying the self-image and taste of its patrons or consumers. On this view, art is essentially ideological, having the function of concealing rather than expressing truth.

Such interpretations express what Ricoeur called 'the hermeneutics of suspicion', that interprets all social phenomena by invoking unconscious motivation whether Freudian or Marxist – a 'suspicion' that Ricoeur himself endorses.[61] Barrell's claim is not that Gainsborough composed his 'reassuring image of Happy Britannia' fully intentionally, but rather that he did so in that not fully intentional but still meaningful way in which one is said to act on Freudian unconscious desires. A humanistic as opposed to deterministic Marxism – Lukács rather than Althusser, for instance – would allow that in some sense Gainsborough owned deep-seated commitments to the established order – commitments that could perhaps be avowed after the event – and that this prevented him from aiming at truth in his art.[62]

However, such interpretations are hard to prove, and tend to be as speculative as those of Freudian dream therapy. Maybe Gainsborough just saw rural life as a blend of work and play. His art is affirmative, but still high art, since we judge that although he may make concessions to patrons, he is not aiming simply to be acceptable to them. (One could also argue that since Gainsborough supported progressive bourgeois forces, in ideological terms his art may not be 'false'.) Art that lacked such integrity clearly could not

[60] Barrell (1980), 41.
[61] Ricoeur (1970).
[62] Althusser would deny an avowability requirement on the unconscious – see for instance 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus' in Althusser (2006); Lukács (1975).



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aim at truth, but whether it did lack it would be a matter of critical debate.[63]

In Constable's time, the 'higher styles of landscape' remained those more artificial or idealised ones by Claude or Poussin.[64] That Italianate tradition, like the Pastoral tradition of Virgil in poetry, did not pretend to realism; the kind of truth it aimed at concerned not the everyday world, but an Arcadian realm. Constable or Austen did focus on that everyday world, however, and the most that one could infer from the ideological objection is that they present a partial or parochial truth. They did not aspire to a complete social picture of their society, as does a social scientist, or a realist novelist like Zola. Their concern is psychological depth, not social comprehensiveness, and in that respect their art does aim at truth. High art does not have to aim at 'total' truth.

## 8. Truth in architecture and music

The most problematic artforms for artistic truth are music and architecture. We noted, and qualified, Greene's comment that what is apprehended and expressed in art '*cannot* be translated into a conceptual medium without vital loss'. This may be felt to be especially true for music and architecture, commonly regarded as non-representational, essentially abstract arts. On this received view, literature and drama are representational and conceptual (or linguistic); painting and sculpture are representational but non-conceptual (non-linguistic); and music and architecture are neither. Some artforms have the capacity to be – or are normally – representational even if they are not always so. Hence abstract painting is non-representational, as perhaps is avantgarde modernist literature such as Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

While artistic truth in imaginative literature might be accepted, its presence in music seems quite obscure. But Adorno suggests how it might be understood. To reiterate, he holds that all artworks, and not just those whose medium is language, possess a 'language-character', which he links with truth-content. By this he means that elements not meaningful in themselves are organised into a meaningful structure:

[63] Much more needs to be said concerning the ideological objection, one that takes account of the critique of ideological explanation found for instance in Graham (1986); see also Geuss (1981).

[64] Barrell (1980), 19.



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> Music resembles language in that it is a temporal sequence of articulated sounds which are more than just sounds. They say something, often something human. The better the music, the more forcefully they say it. The succession of sounds is like logic: it can be right or wrong. But what has been said cannot be detached from the music. Music creates no semiotic system.[65]

For Adorno, the truth-content of a Mahler symphony is not captured in literalist programmatic interpretations; nor are Wagner's music-dramas decoded by a process of motif-identification. In contrast, he gives the example of musical affirmation, 'the judicious, even judging affirmation of something that is, however, not expressly stated', such as the first movement recapitulation in Beethoven's 9th Symphony. As we saw, Adorno believes that on the strength of its similarity to language, music constantly poses a riddle, which it never answers – but then, he insists, all art does so.

Before the 18th century, a literary model of music was dominant, and non-vocal music was neglected by theorists. During the 19th century, the non-representational and non-conceptual nature of music became regarded as a sign of its superiority, as it ascended from the lowest to the highest of the arts. (This was not so for architecture). The view that music does not mean anything because it is not about anything – that it is non-conceptual and non-representational and does not even point to any truth – became, and remains, commonplace.

The more humanistic view that connects music and life has always had representatives, however. When Mahler visited Sibelius in 1907, they debated the nature of the symphony:

> I said that I admired its severity of style and the profound logic that created an inner connection between all the motifs… Mahler's opinion was just the reverse. "No, a symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything".[66]

In seeking extra-musical reference, Mahler belongs with Ives and a few other modernists, in their ambitious attempt to make music reach beyond its apparent muteness, and 'speak'. Sibelius, in contrast, belongs to the tradition of absolute music according to which the form of a work is the working-out of its musical idea, a tradition which achieved its apotheosis in the work of the first and second Viennese Schools, and Brahms, with Schoenberg its most articulate theorist. Yet even that tradition can recognise that music aims at

[65] Adorno (1992), 1.
[66] Quoted in Goss (2009), 346.



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truth, construed as the Adornian idea of 'truth to materials' – while like all performing arts, truth in the sense of authenticity to the work is essential.

Architecture is less abstract than music in its expression of function, and more abstract in not being a performing art. The idea of truth to materials is expressed here most famously by Ruskin, who writes that

> The violations of truth, which dishonour poetry and painting, are [mostly] confined to the treatment of their subjects. But in architecture…a less subtle, more contemptible violation of truth is possible; a direct falsity of assertion respecting the nature of material, or the quantity of labour.[67]

He argues that an honest architecture avoids deception, that is, it avoids suggesting 'a mode of structure or support, other than the true one; [such as] pendants of late Gothic roofs'; 'painting of surfaces to represent some other material than that of which they actually consist (as in the marbling of wood), or the deceptive representation of sculptured ornament upon them'; or 'use of cast or machine-made ornaments'.[68] This vocabulary of truth pervaded Victorian attitudes to architecture; for instance, Richard Redgrave wrote that Pugin's works 'deserve commendation for their illustration of truth, and as showing what one man, by earnest and well-directed attention, can achieve in the reformation of taste, and in the training …of other minds to assist in his truthful labours'.[69]

While Ruskin understands truth to materials as 'truth to physical stuff', Adorno regards it as truth to material that is pre-formed and shaped by history. In architecture, 'material' in this historical sense would include the accumulated vocabulary of Georgian door, sash window, pitched roof, or in grander buildings, Doric and Ionic columns, cornices, corbels and turrets. 'Untruth to materials' here would include the steeple that Sir William Chambers provided above the portico of St Martin's-in-the-Fields, ignoring the fact that steeples were never found on Greek temples.

Even in those arts that are least 'language-like', therefore, a case can still be made that high art aims at truth, in the form appropriate to the artistic medium. More work needs to be done, to convince those

[67] Ruskin (1980), 124; the quotation is from the opening of 'The Lamp of Truth' in *Seven Lamps of Architecture*.

[68] Ruskin concedes that in some cases, these processes have lost the nature of deceit – for instance, gilding in architecture, as opposed to jewellery, is understood not to be gold.

[69] Quoted in Hill (2007), 473.



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expecting something more like propositional truth, that this is indeed artistic truth in an interesting sense – a task that must remain a subject for another occasion.

## 9. The audience's freedom of interpretation

In this article I have been attempting to develop a more liberal concept of artistic truth than that found in didactic art – one that allows freedom of interpretation by the audience, bestowing on them an autonomy equivalent to that of the artist. This account does not naively ignore the social and historical situation of art, and is consistent with Adorno's stress on the *inexhaustibility of interpretation of high art* – how such art seems continually to invite new interpretation, as each generation understands it in light of its own concerns.

The idea of free interpretation has not been much-explored in the philosophical literature, and an account of it could begin by looking at those genres that undermine or deny it, such as the sentimental or sensationalist. 'Guernica' and *Wozzeck* are intended to shock, but are not merely sensationalist; violent crime fiction such as the novels of Val McDermid, or Hollywood schlock horror, in contrast, exploit a visceral reaction that gives the audience little freedom of response. An instinctive reaction to blood and gore overwhelms critical freedom; as, in a milder way, does the sentimentality indulged by romantic comedy. There is a continuum of cases. Frank Capra's popular classic 'It's a Wonderful Life' elevates a homely didacticism into a paean to the American dream, and is neither kitsch nor the highest cinematic art. Stephen Soderbergh's recent film *Contagion*, in contrast, is slick entertainment that compels attention by trading on hysteria about the danger of an international pandemic; unlike classic art, its impact dissipates with subsequent reflection.

There is political high art that does leave freedom for interpretation – examples are Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Heinrich Böll's *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*. In Böll's novel, unlike the film based on it by Schlöndorff and von Trotta – still a very impressive interpretation – the message is not driven home, yet is still explicit.[70] It is clear how the author regards, and wants us to regard, the so-called free press, but he shows rather than tells us. Political art like

[70] The film, extends the novel's action by including the journalist Tötges' funeral, where his publisher delivers a hypocritical homily condemning his murder as an attack on the freedom of the press.



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Böll's does not *force* me to believe that the press is evil – a forthright expression of a view need not be constraining. Didacticism need not imply propaganda art. In the case of Conrad, interpretational freedom – or the novel's range of concern – may lead us to say that it is not *just* political art. It is an artistic decision or capacity, and not a product of confusion, to make a work rich enough to be freely interpretable – although the subject-matter that the artist is tackling may itself be complex and confusing.[71]

Modernist art developed increasingly sophisticated non-didactic strategies for making audiences confront issues. Implicit ambiguities or contradictions force the audience to form a view on the subject, or at least to consider possibilities. For instance, Brecht's plays ask how one can confront a corrupt system in which one is implicated. Even in works that are not music-theatre like *Threepenny Opera*, songs serve to undercut the spoken word. A literal-minded political interpretation – whether by the director or audience – ignores how the playwright presents and simultaneously undermines a view.

Art does many things, apart from aiming at truth. It can fail to achieve truth in many ways; by being false, or by being nonsensical, a category that can include the phenomenon described by Frankfurt as 'bullshit', and embraced by Lady Gaga, as noted earlier.[72] While high art aims at truth, and lesser art aims at entertainment – the latter, though easier to achieve than truth, is not guaranteed – perhaps art can aim at bullshit too. Certainly some artists – Salvador Dalí, Peter Greenaway, Michael Nyman, Lars von Trier, Damien Hirst – aim to impress without caring whether they say anything true, and that is one kind of bullshit.

What I am arguing may seem quite ambitious, indeed over-ambitious. It challenges the deflationary conception which regards artistic truth as referring to a varied collection of virtues partly illuminated by a contrast with narrative or representational truth. On that view, 'artistic truth' is like 'moral victory', a concept parasitic on that of ordinary types of victory; one could not explain it to someone who lacked a grasp of ordinary winning and losing, yet it differs from standard types of winning in that the moral victor loses. This is a picture that I am attempting to undermine. One should question the

[71] Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, with its confused narrator, is an interesting example. Powell and Pressburger's *The Life And Death of Colonel Blimp* is another example of political high art; Edgerton (2011) may be simplistic in claiming that it has 'a powerful and clear message', that to fight the Nazis, one must play dirty (156–7).

[72] Frankfurt (2005); see also Cohen (accessed 2012).



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common assumption that there is a 'standard' type of truth, propositional truth.

This article leaves many ends untied, and only gestures at responses to intractable problems such as how music and architecture aim at the truth. Much further work is needed to explain the connection between truth as intended by the artist, and truth as interpreted by the audience; and I have barely scratched the surface of the ideological objection, which may turn out to be several objections. The concept of high art has been left rather open, as has the question of the extent to which its precursors aimed at truth. But I hope at least to have shown that the concept of artistic truth is a richer one than is often supposed, thereby suggesting that the very practice of artistic creation is essentially truth-directed.

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