



RESEARCH PAPER

Objectivist Theory of Art: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to understand the difference between Expressionist Theory and Objectivist Theory of Art and critically evaluate the importance of both of them. There have been many theories in Art. The Expressionist Theory can be considered as the most popular one. Croce and Collingwood are two major representatives of this theory. According to this theory, Art is basically the self-expression of the artist shared by others. In 20th Century Karl R. Popper raised some serious objections against the Expressionist Theory and presented his own theory of Art called the Objectivist Theory. The study is fundamentally theoretical and qualitative in nature and the original writings of Collingwood, Kant and Popper are used. Finally, it has been concluded that this theory is outstanding from the point of view of an artist but has certain limitations, if we analyze it from the point of view of a philosopher and a metaphysician.

KEYWORDS Collingwood, Croce, Expressionist Theory of Art, Karl Popper, Objectivist Theory of Art

Introduction

Art (any form of it) has at least three aspects.

- Technical Aspect
- Grammatical Aspect
- Philosophical Aspect

For example, in Music, the technical aspect contains the breathing exercise, voice culturing and practice to be in harmony with the sound and beat. Grammatical aspect contains the theory behind this practice and the classification of different combinations of notes and different categories of beat etc. The Philosophical aspect of Art is quite different from the technical and grammatical ones. The Philosophical question of Art is basically the 'what' question – What Art is? There have been many answers to this single soul question. According to Plato, *Art is the imitation of the imitation doubly removed from reality, lesser than truth* (Plato, 1908, 46). According to Aristotle, Art is (like anything) the combination of matter and form (Stace, 2010). For Marxist thinkers, Art is a tool to develop and nurture the society. For Kant, it is a disinterested interest, a free play of imagination, and a Subjective Universal (Kant, 1973). For Croce and Collingwood, Art is the expression of the artist shared by others (Collingwood, 37). For Sigmund Freud, Art is the process of sublimation (Freud, 1913).

Karl R. Popper challenged the Expressionist Theory of Art and presented his own views according to which the personal self of the artist, his or her biography, his or her personal and self-expression are not that important (Popper, 1992). According to Popper, Expressionist Theory always exaggerated the role of subjectivity and the personality of the artist. For him it is not the subjective moods or emotions that create Art but Art itself is responsible for the changing mood, emotions and the expression of the artist. Now it is appropriate to understand in details the above-mentioned two theories and their strengths and weaknesses.

Literature Review

For the proper understanding of the Expressionist Theory in Art, the views of many philosophers and artists have been studied, especially the book of R. G. Collingwood named *The Principles of Art* has been studied carefully. The book of Leo Tolstoy *What is Art* has also been studied. For Objectivist Theory of Karl Popper, the views of David Miller, Ian Jarvie and Gombrich have been studied carefully.

Significance of the Objectivist Theory

According to Hegel, the Absolute Spirit is responsible for the Aesthetic Ideas and artistic creations (Russell, 2003). Since Absolute Spirit is divine in nature, Man cannot be held responsible for creating great works of Art. It is from some sort of a Divinity, which is responsible for their creations and the great artists in their most creative and productive moments serve as a tool for the Spirit. For many years in the history of Mankind great works of Art are considered as the outcome of the inspiration from God, Nature, or some Cosmic forces. Popper is of the opinion that with the passage of time, artists replaced God with their selves and took inspiration from their own selves. That is why in his intellectual autobiography *Unended Quest* he considered the Expressionist Theory as a Theology without God (Popper, 1992). In Romantic movement of Art, we come across the same tendency. William Wordsworth presented a definition of poetry that is "*Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility*" (Wordsworth, 1800, 33). The Objectivist Theory neither affirms the Absolute Spirit of Hegel nor the Expressionist Theory of Croce and Collingwood.

For the proper understanding of the Objectivist theory, one has to understand the concept of 'World 3' of Karl Popper. According to Karl Popper there are three worlds (Popper, 1960).

- The material world.
- The world of mental states (perception, conception and a disposition to act or react).
- World of all possible human creations ('World 3').

Now take the example of a sculpture. The material aspect of the sculpture is the 'World 1.' The form of the sculpture is the idea of the artist and it belongs to 'World 2.' Sculpture is the result of the interaction between the 'World 1' and the 'World 2' and the complete form of the sculpture has also a feedback effect on the previous two worlds. In this way he tries to prove that an outstanding sculpture is neither an idea (as Croce and Collingwood thinks of it), nor it is only a combination of matter and form (as Aristotle thinks of it). It is the result of the interaction between 'World 1' and 'World 2' and it has also a great feedback effect on them. In other words, Popper and his followers are much more interested in the products of Art rather in the psychological process behind (Miller, 1983).

Take another example. A great symphony of Music is also the result of these three worlds. The material forms of the instruments and their resonance is the 'World 1', the ideas or expression belong to 'World 2' but the symphony cannot be considered as only the self-expression of the musician. The combinations of all the instruments and their playing together would be a great feedback effect on the previous two worlds.

Keeping in view the above discussion, we can infer the following conclusive points

- The Expressionist Theory exaggerated the role of the self-expression of the artist.
- Before Romanticism as an Art movement and before the emergence of the Expressionist Theory, artists took inspiration from God, Nature or Divinity etc.

- The Absolute Spirit of Hegel is a great example of the role of Divinity in Art.

Historical Perspective

Plato considers Art as Imitation of the imitation doubly removed from reality, lesser than truth (as mentioned above). In Plato's view of Art, one can find two pre-suppositions.

- The material world is nothing but the copy of the ideal world (Stace, 2010).
- All Art is a process of imitation.

The first pre-supposition comes from his Objective Idealism. He studies Art through his Metaphysics and not through the phenomenology of it. His method is indirect and not direct and practical. According to his World of Ideas or World of Forms which is also called Objective Idealism, the ultimate reality of this universe is idea and not matter and divine ideas are many and not one (Stace, 2010). This metaphysics can also be called Pluralistic Idealism (because every idea is perfect, every idea is substance and every idea is beyond time and space). He studies Art through his metaphysics.

The second pre-supposition is simply incorrect. There are many forms of Art and every form of Art is not imitative in nature. A landscape or portrait can be a bit imitative but not the abstract painting. A poetry or a film song can be a little imitative but not the pure music in the form of simple orchestra, without the use of human language and human vocal cords. Unlike Plato, Aristotle tried to understand and grasp the reality of Art in a direct method. He observed comedies and tragedies of the then great writers and inferred some loss about tragic and comic plays. Aristotle disagrees with Plato on the point that Art is the process of imitation. He is of the opinion that Art does not only tell what is in outside world but Art also tells what ought to be in the world. In this way, Aristotle highlights the suggestive character of Art (Ackrill, 1981). For Aristotle Art is the combination of matter and form but the Expressionist Theory of Croce and Collingwood on one hand and Romanticism on the other ignore the material concept and emphasize the mental, subjective and abstract aspects of Art. Collingwood in his book *Principles of Art* criticizes Aristotle and takes him as a person who confuses Art and craft (Collingwood, 1937). In Medieval Age and also in Modern Philosophy, artists are supposed to be a particular group of people who take inspiration from God, Nature or Universe etc. In the Philosophy of Hegel (as mentioned above) this seems quite clear.

On the other hand, Art Movements start from Classicism, the school of thought which values technique, craft or medium more than the idea behind. Romanticism is basically a revolt against Classicism (Bailey, 2014). In Romanticism, the idea, the imagination and the feelings are much more important than craft, medium or technique. The influence of Romanticism can easily be seen on Kant (Kant, 1973). Kant considers Art and the Aesthetic Experience as

- A disinterested interest.
- A free play of imagination.
- A Subjective Universal.

And the influence of Kant's Aesthetics can easily be seen on Croce and Collingwood. In the point of view of them again we notice the preference for the abstract and the ignorance for the craft. For Collingwood, 'Art Proper' is the idea within the mind of the artist (Collingwood, 1937) and for Croce it is the intuition of the artists (Sheppard, 1987). The remaining things for them are nothing but the externalization of that particular 'idea' or 'intuition.'

The Objectivist Theory of Art as a unique idea

Being a unique concept, the Objectivist Theory does not ignore the material elements of Art (like Croce, Collingwood, Kant, Wordsworth and other Romanticists), this theory does not undermine the importance of idea or intuition (like most of the Classicists). This theory does not see Art in directly (as Plato did). The Objectivist Theory of Karl Popper does not undermine the exaggerated importance of the personalities of the artists and their personal biographies. Karl Popper seems outstanding when he explains that Art products should be considered more important than the Subjective and Psychological process behind. He seems outstanding preferring logic over psychology (Miller, 1983). He seems unique with his explanation that Art products are not the containers of the self-expression of the artists but Art products in themselves are responsible for the changing moods and emotions of the artists. In this way, he successfully proves that boot is on the other leg.

A Critical study of the Objectivist Theory of Art

In spite of its being very outstanding in many respects, the Objectivist Theory has also some limitations. They are as follows

- The Objectivist Theory of Art has no strong metaphysics behind. Behind the views of Plato about Art, there exists a sound metaphysics called World or Ideas or World of Forms (also called Objective Idealism). For Plato, every material thing in this universe is nothing but an imperfect copy of the ideal world. For materialists the ultimate reality of this universe is basically material and ideas are nothing but a function of the material. When Aristotle comments about Art, one can easily notice his own Metaphysical Dualism according to which everything in this universe is composed of matter and form.
- Behind the Objectivist Theory of Karl R. Popper, we do find his concept of 'World 3.' In my humble opinion 'World 3' is a common-sense realism and lacks sound metaphysics behind.
- For Idealist (Monist or Pluralist) the real thing is only idea and not the matter. For materialists (Monist, Dualist or Pluralist) the real thing is only the matter. Popper in his concept of 'World 3' accepts material and ideal element at the same time. Apparently, he gives the world a Pluralistic Cosmology but in the field of Epistemology does not prove consistently that in spite of being a human product, how 'World 3' can become completely objective and self-autonomous.
- If the personalities of the artists and their biographies are of meagre importance in the production and appreciation of Art and the products of Art do have a feedback effect of them, then who is responsible for that feedback? Karl Popper does not want to admit any divine element and without accepting it (it should be remembered that Plato and Hegel both admit it) he seems less consistent and convincing.

Conclusion

Art can be approached from two different angles. One can basically be an artist leaning towards Philosophy (especially Philosophy of Art) and one can be a philosopher having a great interest in Aesthetics and related areas. The famous Art movements i.e., Classicism, Romanticism, Impressionism, Expressionism, Dadaism etc are the great movements originated by the artists who had an intellectual flavor in their personalities. Philosopher's views about Art (Plato's, Aristotle's, Hegel's, Croce's and Collingwood's etc)

are the product of the outstanding views of the philosophers interested in the phenomenon called Art.

Objectivist Theory of Karl R. Popper is basically a revolt against the Expressionist Theory of R. G. Collingwood. Karl R. Popper was a great philosopher of 20th Century, who had a great interest in Art (especially in Music). In this article it has been attempted to understand and share the uniqueness of this theory and also to share and comprehend the limitations or short comings of it. In the humble opinion of the writer, this theory is outstanding from the point of view of an artist but has certain limitations, if we analyze it from the point of view of a philosopher and a metaphysician.

Recommendations

The humble recommendations of the writer are as follows

- Art should be understood or comprehended through its movements because these movements are the result of the combination of artistic genius with its intellectual capability.
- The philosopher's views about Art should be taken as an outstanding theory coming from the great observation of the philosopher.
- For a proper evaluation of the Objectivist theory of Karl R. Popper, one has to view it from both of the angles.

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