

Aesthetic Investigations

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Research as Scrutiny: Our Most Demanding Issues are Aesthetic Issues.

Author

ROB VAN GERWEN

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY UTRECHT

Abstract: Certain art theorists think of what artists do as artistic research. But research is fact- and theory-driven, whereas when a film is being made what directors do is *scrutinise* what they see happening before their eyes. This scrutiny is guided by aesthetic judgement, individual style, and subjective intuition. It makes good sense to investigate the research that went on before a work was made, and to look at the theoretical implications of that work. But the most important work to be done is our paying attention to the scrutiny that went on during the work's actual creation. The importance and meaning of art are in the artist's scrutiny.

1. With representations we structure, report, and comment on the nature of events and objects in the world. Art is the discipline that deals with the phenomenology, aesthetics, and/or rhetoric of our representations – art is somehow beyond representation, beyond the physiology of the represented, it is not truth evaluable. Art can therefore best be understood as our metaphysics. This is one way of appreciating, I propose, Aristotle's notion of metaphysics as regarding the view, or views, that show the place of everything in the cosmos.¹ It also tallies with Aristotle's view of art as opposed to history:

poetry is concerned with universal truths . . . , the kinds of thing a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation.²

A narrative work of art unfolds how in given circumstances someone with certain character traits is going to respond to events. A work also provides evidence for the fact that any such unfolding can be represented in this particular way. Thus, when a spectator watches, say, *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013) they come to see what an alien might do when they visited earth with the task of harvesting people for food. Though we sometimes watch films as if they were reporting events, indeed we often do so, the film also generates a view of the nature of empathy.³ The film does not report this view, but makes us experience it – the film is not journalism. It is a work of art.

2. People working in art education sometimes refer to what artists do as artistic research, but I point out that term is chosen for the wrong reasons. Art educators aim at establishing a way of equating the work of artists and the work of academic researchers in order to put the achievements of both on a par. The comparison is misguided. If we look at what artists do from two distinct perspectives, of research and scrutiny, I think we may get a better grip on the nature of their activities and the importance of art, viewed as a way of doing metaphysics. Artists may do *research* to better understand the nature of the materials they work with. Thus, a film director can learn what the camera operator does, how cameras have a presence within the scenes they record and what camera movements mean for the end result; how editing works, how actors act, how to tell a good story in Aristotle's sense, what are the effects of lighting, props, and so on. All of this counts as preparatory *research*. But when the film is being made what directors do, mostly, is *scrutinise* what they see happening before their eyes.⁴ Research is fact- and theory-driven, while scrutiny is guided by aesthetic judgement, individual style, and subjective intuition.

It is through this concrete, particularist and relational scrutiny that art attains its highest goals – Aristotle's 'universal truths'. A dear friend of mine, Dutch artist Anno Dijkstra, turns famous images from iconic photographs into sculptures, placing these in everyday circumstances so as to confront people with their own glorification of the pictures. Dijkstra's aim is to turn the people in these iconic photographs back into the normal people they were before the photographs turned their lives around. A life-size sculpture of Kim Phuc, from the famous Viet Nam photograph of Nick Ut, he places on a pedestal aside a main road, near a traffic light for all to see (see figure 1). And the situation photographed by Kevin Carter of a vulture sitting behind a starving child in Africa, ready to attack and eat it, Dijkstra turned into a performance where he takes sculptures he hand-made from the two figures, the vulture and the child, from caskets, placing them on a stage explaining the nature and condition of the figures, so that after a while the situation depicted in the photograph surfaces in front of the spectators' eyes, more or less as they did for Carter.⁵ Crucially important to what artists do is the way they scrutinise their material, and the world, in making their works. It

is in doing this that they develop their individual style as well as the artistic expression and merit of their works.⁶



Figure 1: Anno Dijkstra: *Kim Phuc*, Hoorn, 2007/08. © Anno Dijkstra.

3. How should academics, like us aestheticians, or art historians, analyse works of art? It makes good sense to investigate the research that went on before a work was made, and to look at the theoretical implications of that work. But the most important work to be done is our paying attention to the scrutiny that went on during the work's actual creation. A theoretical approach may bring us certain insights about possible necessary conditions for certain traits in works, but it may lead us away from the intuitive and aesthetic judgements the artist made while making the work – their scrutiny.⁷

4. One further justification for my thesis that art is a way of doing metaphysics for both artists and the viewers and critics of works of art, is that our most demanding issues really are aesthetic issues. Climate change, first: why does it occur? Why do people consume beyond what is reasonable; why do we want bigger houses, flashier cars, make farther trips, wear fancier clothes if not for aesthetic reasons to do with local and relational circumstances? Next, internet 'cancel culture': how did we come to return to good old radical moralist censorship, taking certain, sometimes even unproven, immoral details to try to justify inhibiting the whole corpus of works of artists? Imagine tweeting a thought about something you disagree with on the internet, in a forum of like-minded people who are 'following' you, and seeing how they all respond in agreement with your initially rather inexact complaint while adding more and more far-stretching claims to it, finding that after a few hours your tweet has gone 'trending' and that real-life consequences are

arising?⁸ What happens in these processes is: it is easy, sitting far away from the events at stake, behind your terminal, to agree with a short statement venting a particular complaint. You do not just want to repeat it, but want also to make clear that you are an autonomous free agent, thinking along with the complaint: it is because of your own *imago* that you *add* to the initial complaint, again with an unbalanced tweet. And all these tweets – formulated for aesthetic reasons pertaining to your own ethos – lead to further expressive ‘arguments’, pathos, irrespective of their truth, their logos. Each of these tweets is made for reasons of personal expression, often sentimental.⁹ Yet, together they lead to the radical moralism that we seem unable to put back into the coffin that we (thought) had buried it in during the last century. What explains the success of certain presidents, other than the way in which they intently present their ethos for the goal of mobilising the public’s emotions (pathos) and certainly not for the truth of the claims (logos)? The aesthetics of our challenges is where we should look to resolve them.

5. I guess the reader understands why I am glad that *Aesthetic Investigations* is hosting a special issue devoted to Philosophy of film *without theory*. I want to thank our two guest editors, Britt Harrison and Craig Fox for bringing it to us, and the authors for the interesting ways they deal with these challenges and distinctions at the intersection of film and philosophy. It is an aesthetic move to do Philosophy of film *without theory*: to stop looking everywhere *but* at your subject matter itself for the sake of developing traditional theoretical research agendas, and to look closely at the films themselves, i.e., to scrutinise the scrutiny that went into creating the work. And how important that is.

editor@aestheticinvestigations.eu

NOTES

¹This notion has been restricted – unduly – by the rise of the modern view of science as the sole arbiter of what there is, and the idea that the universe can only be described adequately in terms of positive facts: objectivistically. As Edmund Husserl 1970 remarked, this excludes all issues to do with how people live their lives in society, and the pertinence and relevance of ethical and aesthetic values.

²Aristotle 1965, 43-44

³See Matravers 1997 for the report model, and Colin Heber-Percy, ‘The Flesh is Weak. Empathy and Becoming Human in Jonathan Glazer’s *Under the Skin*’, this issue, 347-364.

⁴The distinction between research and

scrutiny is fruitful for artists working in all art forms. A painter, for instance, will have to know how their paints work on the surface material of their choice – paper, canvas, or whatever. But when they make a painting they must look and see what happens when they place paint on the canvas, etc. To express this, Picasso famously said: ‘I do not make a painting, I find it’, meaning that he would put some paint on a canvas and then look where to put the next bit, in which colour, and to which avail. Picasso’s remark is not to be understood in a platonist sense, as though the work already exists in eternity, but in the aesthetic sense I am talking about here.

⁵Something similar Carter must have experienced while making the picture. He

had to wait more than twenty minutes to get the shot he took. Dijkstra brought that experience to live. Carter won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize with this photo. Two months later he committed suicide, worn out by the amount of misery he had experienced in the years before as a war photographer. See Van Gerwen 2013.

⁶See Richard Wollheim 1993 for a generative conception of individual style.

⁷Pierre Bourdieu 1990 remarked similarly about the study of practices: ‘Practice has a logic which is not that of the logician. This has to be acknowledged in order

to avoid asking of it more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself either to wring incoherences out of it or to thrust a forced coherence upon it.’ (p. 86). Also: ‘Practice is inseparable from temporality, not only because it is played out in time, but also because it plays strategically with time and especially with tempo.’ (81) Art is a practice, and scrutiny is how artists partake in it.

⁸See Van Gerwen 2018, 15-41 for more on these types of events and their algorithmic causes and societal consequences.

⁹See Anthony Savile 1982.

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