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ART AND SENSE OF LIFE

By Ayn Rand

If one saw, in real life, a beautiful woman wearing an exquisite evening gown, with a cold sore on her lips, the blemish would mean nothing but a minor affliction, and one would ignore it.

But a painting of such a woman would be a corrupt, obscenely vicious attack on man, on beauty, on all values—and one would experience a feeling of immense disgust and indignation at the artist. (There are also those who would feel something like approval and who would belong to the same moral category as the artist.)

The emotional response to that painting would be instantaneous, much faster than the viewer's mind could identify all the reasons involved. The psychological mechanism which produces that response (and which produced the painting) is a man's sense of life.

A sense of life is a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man's relationship to existence.

Two of my earlier articles are the necessary base or introduction to this subject. For a discussion of the development of a sense of life, see "Philosophy and Sense of Life" (THE OBJECTIVIST, February 1966). For a discussion of the nature of art and its relation to man's cognitive faculty, see "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art" (THE OBJECTIVIST NEWSLETTER, April 1965).

To quote from the latter: "*Art is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgments.* By a selective re-creation, art isolates and integrates those aspects of reality which represent man's fundamental view of himself and of his relationship to existence. . . . Just as language converts abstractions into the psycho-epistemological equivalent of concretes, into a manageable number of specific units—so art converts man's metaphysical abstractions into the equivalent of concretes, into specific entities open to man's direct perception. . . . *Art brings man's concepts to the perceptual level of his consciousness and allows him to grasp them directly, as if they were percepts.*"

It is the artist's sense of life that controls and integrates his work, directing the innumerable choices he has to make, from the choice of subject to the subtlest details of style. It is the viewer's or reader's sense of life that responds to a work of art by a complex, yet automatic reaction of acceptance and approval, or rejection and condemnation.

This does not mean that a sense of life is a valid criterion of esthetic merit, either for the artist or the viewer. A sense of life is *not* infallible. But a sense of life is the source of art, the psychological mechanism which enables man to create a realm such as art.

The emotion involved in art is not an emotion in the ordinary meaning of the term. It is experienced more as a "sense" or a "feel," but it has two characteristics pertaining to emotions: it is automatically immediate and it has an intense, profoundly personal (yet undefined) value-meaning to the individual experiencing it. The value involved is life, and the words naming the emotion are: "This is what life means to me."

Regardless of the nature or content of an artist's metaphysical views, what an art work expresses, fundamentally, under all of its lesser aspects is: "This is life as I see it." The essential meaning of a viewer's or reader's response, under all of its lesser elements, is: "This is (or is not) life as I see it."

The psycho-epistemological process of communication between an artist and a viewer or reader goes as follows: the artist starts with a broad abstraction which he has to concretize, to bring into reality by means of the appropriate particulars; the viewer perceives the particulars, integrates them and grasps the abstraction from which they came, thus completing the circle. Speaking metaphorically, the creative process resembles a process of deduction; the viewing process resembles a process of induction.

This does not mean that communication is the primary purpose of an artist: his primary purpose is to bring his view of man and of existence into reality; but to be brought into reality, it has to be translated into objective (therefore, communicable) terms.

In "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art," I discussed why man needs art—why, as a being guided by *conceptual* knowledge, he needs the power to summon the long chain and complex total of his metaphysical concepts into his immediate conscious awareness. "He needs a comprehensive view of existence to integrate his values, to choose his goals, to plan his future, to maintain the unity and coherence of his life." Man's sense of life provides him with the integrated sum of his metaphysical abstractions; art concretizes them and allows him to perceive—to *experience*—their immediate reality.

The function of psychological integrations is to make certain connections automatic, so that they work as a unit and do not require a conscious process of thought every time they are evoked. (All learning consists of automatizing one's knowledge in order to leave one's mind free to pursue further knowledge.) There are many special or "cross-filed" chains of abstractions (of interconnected concepts) in man's mind. Cognitive abstractions are the fundamental chain, on which all the others depend. Such chains are mental integrations, serving a special purpose and formed accordingly by a special criterion.

Cognitive abstractions are formed by the criterion of: What is *essential*? (epistemologically essential to distinguish one class of existents from all others). *Normative* abstractions are formed by the criterion of: What is *good*? *Esthetic* abstractions are formed by the criterion of: What

is *important*?

An artist does not fake reality—he *stylizes* it. He selects those aspects of existence which he regards as metaphysically significant—and by isolating and stressing them, by omitting the insignificant and accidental, he presents *his* view of existence. His concepts are not divorced from the facts of reality—they are concepts which integrate the facts *and* his metaphysical evaluation of the facts. His selection constitutes his evaluation: everything included in a work of art—from theme to subject to brush-stroke or adjective—acquires metaphysical significance by the mere fact of being included, of being *important* enough to include.

An artist (as, for instance, the sculptors of Ancient Greece) who presents man as a god-like figure, is aware of the fact that men may be crippled or diseased or helpless; but he regards these conditions as accidental, as irrelevant to the essential nature of man—and he presents a figure embodying strength, beauty, intelligence, self-confidence, as man's proper, natural state.

An artist (as, for instance, the sculptors of the Middle Ages) who presents man as a deformed monstrosity, is aware of the fact that there are men who are healthy, happy or confident; but he regards *these* conditions as accidental or illusory, as irrelevant to man's essential nature—and he presents a tortured figure embodying pain, ugliness, terror, as man's proper, natural state.

Now consider the painting described at the start of this discussion. The cold sore on the lips of a beautiful woman, which would be insignificant in real life, acquires a monstrous metaphysical significance by virtue of being included in a painting. It declares that a woman's beauty and her efforts to achieve glamor (the beautiful evening gown) are a futile illusion undercut by a seed of corruption which can mar and destroy them at any moment—that this is reality's mockery of man—that all of man's values and efforts are impotent against the power, not even of some great cataclysm, but of a miserable little physical infection.

The Naturalistic type of argument—to the effect that, in real life, a beautiful woman *might* get a cold sore—is, of course, irrelevant esthetically. Art is not concerned with actual occurrences or events as such, but with their significance to man.

An indication of the *metaphysical slant* of art can be seen in the popular notion that a reader of fiction "identifies himself with" some character or characters of the story. "To identify with" is a colloquial designation for a process of abstraction: it means to observe a common element between the character and oneself, to draw an abstraction from the character's problems and apply it to one's own life. Subconsciously, without any knowledge of esthetic theory, but by virtue of the implicit nature of art, this *is* the way in which most people react to fiction and to all other forms of art.

This illustrates one important aspect of the difference between a real-

life news story and a fiction story: a news story is a concrete from which one may or may not draw an abstraction, which one may or may not find relevant to one's own life; a fiction story is an abstraction that claims universality, *i.e.*, application to every human life, including one's own. Hence one may be impersonal and indifferent about a news story, even though it is real; and one feels an intensely personal emotion about a fiction story, even though it is invented. This emotion may be positive, when one finds the abstraction applicable to oneself—or resentfully negative, when one finds it inapplicable and inimical.

It is not journalistic information or scientific education or moral guidance that man seeks from a work of art (though these may be involved as secondary consequences), but the fulfillment of a more profound need: a confirmation of his view of existence—a confirmation, not in the sense of resolving cognitive doubts, but in the sense of permitting him to contemplate his abstractions outside his own mind, in the form of existential concretes.

"Abstractions as such do not exist: they are merely man's epistemological method of perceiving that which exists—and that which exists is concrete. To acquire the full, persuasive, irresistible power of reality, man's metaphysical abstractions have to confront him in the form of concretes—*i.e.*, in the form of art." ("The Psycho-Epistemology of Art.")

Since man lives by re-shaping his physical background to serve his purpose, since he must first define and then create his values—a rational man needs a concretized projection of these values, an image in whose likeness he will re-shape the world and himself. Art gives him that image; it gives him the experience of seeing the full, immediate, concrete reality of his distant goals.

Since a rational man's ambition is unlimited, since his pursuit and achievement of values is a life-long process—and the higher the values, the harder the struggle—he needs a moment, an hour or some period of time in which he can experience the sense of his completed task, the sense of living in a universe where his values have been successfully achieved. It is like a moment of rest, a moment to gain fuel to move farther. Art gives him that fuel; the pleasure of contemplating the objectified reality of one's own sense of life is the pleasure of feeling what it would be like to live in one's ideal world.

"The importance of that experience is not in *what* man learns from it, but in *that* he experiences it. The fuel is not a theoretical principle, not a didactic 'message,' but the life-giving fact of experiencing a moment of *metaphysical* joy—a moment of love for existence." ("The Goal of My Writing," THE OBJECTIVIST NEWSLETTER, October and November 1963.)

The same principle applies to an irrational man, though in different terms, according to his different views and responses. For an irrational man, the concretized projection of his malevolent sense of life serves, not as fuel and inspiration to move forward, but as permission to stand

still: it declares that values are unattainable, that the struggle is futile, that fear, guilt, pain and failure are mankind's predestined end—and that *he* couldn't help it. Or, on a lower level of irrationality, the concretized projection of a malignant sense of life provides a man with an image of triumphant malice, of hatred for existence, of vengeance against life's best exponents, of the defeat and destruction of all human values; his kind of art gives him a moment's illusion that *he* is right—that evil is metaphysically potent.

Art is man's metaphysical mirror; what a rational man seeks to see in that mirror is a salute; what an irrational man seeks to see is a justification—even if only a justification of his depravity, as a last convulsion of his betrayed self-esteem.

Between these two extremes, there lies the immense continuum of men of mixed premises—whose sense of life holds unresolved, precariously balanced or openly contradictory elements of reason and unreason, of love and fear—and works of art that reflect these mixtures. Since art is the product of philosophy (and mankind's philosophy is tragically mixed), most of the world's art, including some of its greatest examples, falls into this category.

The truth or falsehood of a given artist's philosophy as such, is not an esthetic matter; it may affect a given viewer's enjoyment of his work, but it does not negate its esthetic merit. Some sort of philosophical meaning, however, some *implicit* view of life, is a necessary element of a work of art. The absence of any metaphysical values whatever, *i.e.*, a gray, uncommitted, passively indeterminate sense of life, results in a soul without fuel, motor or voice and renders a man impotent in the field of art. Bad art is, predominantly, the product of social metaphysical imitation, not of creative expression.

Two distinct, but interrelated, elements of a work of art are the crucial means of projecting its sense of life: the *subject* and the *style*—*what* an artist chooses to present and *how* he presents it.

The subject of an art work expresses a view of man's existence, while the style expresses a view of man's consciousness. The subject reveals an artist's *metaphysics*, the style reveals his *psycho-epistemology*.

The choice of subject declares what aspects of existence the artist regards as important—as worthy of being re-created and contemplated. He may choose to present heroic figures, as exponents of man's nature—or he may choose statistical composites of the average, the undistinguished, the mediocre—or he may choose crawling specimens of depravity. He may present the triumph of heroes, in fact or in spirit (Victor Hugo), or their struggle (Michelangelo), or their defeat (Shakespeare). He may present the folks next door: next door to palaces (Tolstoy), or to drugstores (Sinclair Lewis), or to kitchens (Vermeer), or to sewers (Zola). He may present monsters as objects of moral denunciation (Dostoevsky), or as objects of terror (Goya)—or he may demand sym-

pathy for his monsters, and thus crawl outside the limits of the realm of values, including esthetic ones.

Whatever the case may be, it is the subject (qualified by the theme) that projects an art work's view of man's place in the universe.

The theme of an art work is the link uniting its subject and its style. "Style" is a particular, distinctive or characteristic mode of execution. An artist's style is the product of his own psycho-epistemology—and, by implication, a projection of his view of man's consciousness, of its efficacy or impotence, of its proper method or level of functioning.

Predominantly (though not exclusively), a man whose normal mental state is a state of full focus, will create and respond to a style of radiant clarity and ruthless precision—a style that projects sharp outlines, cleanliness, purpose, an intransigent commitment to full awareness and clear-cut identity—a level of awareness appropriate to a universe where A is A, where everything is open to man's consciousness and demands its constant functioning.

A man who is moved by the fog of his feelings and spends most of his time out of focus, will create and respond to a style of blurred, "mysterious" murk, where outlines dissolve and entities flow into one another, where words connote anything and denote nothing, where colors float without objects, and objects float without weight—a level of awareness appropriate to a universe where A can be any non-A one chooses, where nothing can be known with certainty and nothing much is demanded of one's consciousness.

Style is the most complex element of art, the most revealing and, often, the most baffling psychologically. The terrible inner conflicts from which artists suffer as much as (or, perhaps, more than) other men, are magnified to catastrophic proportions in their work. As an example: Salvador Dali, whose style projects the luminous clarity of a rational psycho-epistemology, while most (though not all) of his subjects project an irrational and revoltingly evil metaphysics. A similar, but less offensive, conflict may be seen in the paintings of Vermeer, who combines a brilliant clarity of style with the bleak metaphysics of photographic Naturalism. At the other extreme of the stylistic continuum, observe the deliberate blurring and visual distortions of the so-called "painterly" school, from Rembrandt on down—down to the rebellion against consciousness, expressed by a phenomenon such as "Cubism" which seeks specifically to disintegrate man's consciousness by painting objects as man *does not* perceive them (from several perspectives at once).

A writer's style may project a blend of reason and passionate emotion (Victor Hugo)—or a chaos of floating abstractions, of emotions cut off from reality (Thomas Wolfe)—or the dry, bare, concrete-bound, humor-tinted raucousness of an intelligent reporter (Sinclair Lewis)—or the disciplined, perceptive, lucid, yet muted understatement of a represser (John O'Hara)—or the carefully superficial, over-detailed precision of an

amoralist (Flaubert)—or the mannered artificiality of a social metaphysician (several moderns not worthy of mention).

Style conveys what may be called a "psycho-epistemological sense of life," *i.e.*, an expression of that level of mental functioning on which the artist feels most at home. This is the reason why style is crucially important in art—both to the artist and to the reader or viewer—and why its importance is experienced as a profoundly *personal* matter. To the artist, it is an expression, to the reader or viewer a confirmation, of his own consciousness—which means: of his efficacy—which means: of his self-esteem (or pseudo-self-esteem).

Now a word of warning about the criteria of esthetic judgment. A sense of life is the source of art, but it is *not* the sole qualification of an artist or of an esthetician, and it is *not* a criterion of esthetic judgment. Emotions are not tools of cognition. Esthetics is a branch of philosophy—and just as a philosopher does not approach any other branch of his science with his feelings or emotions as his criterion of judgment, so he cannot do it in the field of esthetics. A sense of life is not sufficient professional equipment. An esthetician—as well as any man who attempts to evaluate art works—must be guided by more than an emotion.

The fact that one agrees or disagrees with an artist's philosophy is irrelevant to an *esthetic* appraisal of his work *qua* art. One does not have to agree with an artist (nor even to enjoy him) in order to evaluate his work. In essence, an objective evaluation requires that one identify the artist's theme, the abstract meaning of his work (exclusively by identifying the evidence contained in the work and allowing no other, outside considerations), then evaluate the means by which he conveys it—*i.e.*, taking *his* theme as criterion, evaluate the purely esthetic elements of the work, the technical mastery (or lack of it) with which he projects (or fails to project) *his* view of life.

(The esthetic principles which apply to all art, regardless of an individual artist's philosophy, and which must guide an objective evaluation, are outside the scope of this article. I will mention only that such principles are defined by the science of esthetics—a task at which modern philosophy has failed dismally.)

Since art is a philosophical composite, it is not a contradiction to say: "This is a great work of art, but I don't like it,"—provided one defines the exact meaning of that statement: the first part refers to a purely esthetic appraisal, the second to a deeper philosophical level which includes more than esthetic values.

Even in the realm of personal choices, there are many different aspects from which one may enjoy a work of art—other than sense-of-life affinity. One's sense of life is fully involved only when one feels a profoundly *personal* emotion about a work of art. But there are many other levels or degrees of liking; the differences are similar to the difference between romantic love and affection or friendship.

For instance: I love the work of Victor Hugo, in a deeper sense than admiration for his superlative literary genius, and I find great similarities between his sense of life and mine, although I disagree with virtually all of his explicit philosophy—I like Dostoevsky, for his superb mastery of plot-structure and for his merciless dissection of the psychology of evil, even though his philosophy *and* his sense of life are almost diametrically opposed to mine—I like the early novels of Mickey Spillane, for his plot ingenuity and moralistic style, even though his sense of life clashes with mine, and no explicit philosophical element is involved in his work—I cannot stand Tolstoy, and reading him was the most boring literary duty I ever had to perform, his philosophy and his sense of life are not merely mistaken, but evil, and yet, from a purely literary viewpoint, on his own terms, I have to evaluate him as a good writer.

Now (to demonstrate the difference between an intellectual approach and a sense of life), I will restate the preceding paragraph in sense-of-life terms: Hugo gives me the feeling of entering a cathedral—Dostoevsky gives me the feeling of entering a chamber of horrors, but with a powerful guide—Spillane gives me the feeling of hearing a military band in a public park—Tolstoy gives me the feeling of an unsanitary backyard which I do not care to enter.

When one learns to translate the meaning of an art work into objective terms, one discovers that nothing is as potent as art in exposing the essence of a man's character. An artist reveals his naked soul in his work—and so, gentle reader, do you when you respond to it.

VOLITION AND THE LAW OF CAUSALITY

By Nathaniel Branden

“Free will”—in the widest meaning of the term—is the doctrine that man is capable of performing actions which are not determined by forces outside his control; that man is capable of making choices which are *first causes* within his consciousness, *i.e.*, not necessitated by antecedent factors. The nature of these choices, to what human faculty they pertain, how they operate and what are their limits—are questions on which various theories of free will differ.

As I discussed in my preceding article “The Objectivist Concept of Volition,” Objectivism locates man's free will in a single action, in a single basic choice: to think or not to think. This choice—given the context of his knowledge and of the existential possibilities confronting him—controls all of man's other choices, and directs the course of his actions.

The concept of man as a being of volitional consciousness stands in sharp opposition to the view that dominates our culture in general and the

“social sciences” in particular: the doctrine of psychological determinism.

Psychological determinism denies the existence of any element of freedom or volition in man's consciousness. It holds that, in relation to his actions, decisions, values and conclusions, man is ultimately and essentially *passive*; that man is merely a *reactor* to internal and external pressures; that those pressures determine the course of man's actions and the content of his convictions, just as physical forces determine the course of every particle of dust in the universe. It holds that, in any given situation or moment, only one “choice” is psychologically possible to man, the inevitable result of all the antecedent determining forces impinging on him, just as only one action is possible to the speck of dust; that man has no *actual* power of choice, no *actual* freedom or self-responsibility. Man, according to this view, has no more volition than a stone: he is merely confronted with more complex alternatives and is manipulated by more complex forces.

This is the view of man's nature that most contemporary psychologists accept. They accept it, many of them candidly admit, as “an article of faith.” That is, the majority do not claim that this view has been proven, has been logically demonstrated. They profess a belief in psychological determinism because they regard it as “scientific.” This is the single most prevalent and destructive myth in the field of psychology today.

In “The Contradiction of Determinism” (THE OBJECTIVIST NEWSLETTER, May 1963), I discussed why the determinist thesis is incompatible with the possibility of any knowledge whatever, and why, therefore, the thesis is inherently self-refuting and contradictory. I shall not cover the same ground here. In the present article, I shall discuss the two notions—both mistaken—which are most influential in propagating the mystique of psychological determinism. The first is the claim that psychological determinism is logically entailed by the law of causality, that volition contradicts causality. The second is the claim that, without determinism, no science of psychology would be possible, there could be no psychological laws and no way to predict human behavior.

What is involved, in the first of these claims, is a gross misapprehension of the nature of the law of causality. Let us begin, therefore, by considering the exact meaning of this law.

As Ayn Rand writes in *Atlas Shrugged*: “The law of causality is the law of identity applied to action. All actions are caused by entities. The nature of an action is caused and determined by the nature of the entity that acts; a thing cannot act in contradiction to its nature.”

This is the first point that must be stressed: all actions are actions of *entities*. The notion that there can be actions without entities that act, which some philosophers have permitted themselves to advance, is a prime example of the fallacy of “the stolen concept,” *i.e.*, the fallacy of ignoring, contradicting or denying the genetic roots of one's concepts. The concept of “action” logically requires and presupposes *that which* acts, and would