

2018

Does Art Have A Truth-Seeking Project?

Soren Schlassa

Carleton University, schlassas@carleton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.pacificu.edu/rescogitans>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schlassa, Soren (2018) "Does Art Have A Truth-Seeking Project?," *Res Cogitans*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.7710/2155-4838.1174>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Res Cogitans by an authorized editor of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu.

Res Cogitans

ISSN 2155-4838 | Res Cogitans is published by the Pacific University Libraries

Volume 9, Issue 1 (2018)

Does Art Have A Truth-Seeking Project?

Soren Schlassa

Carleton College

schlassas@carleton.edu

<https://doi.org/10.7710/2155-4838.1174>

Erratum: Corrected author affiliation 6/14/18



© 2018 Schlassa. This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

We very often praise individual works of literature, poetry, or film for yielding insight into something important, works of visual art for showing us new ways to see their subjects, or conceptual artworks for challenging unconsidered assumptions. What's more, when doling out praise like this, we mean to praise the works *as art*. The artistic value of Duchamp's *Fountain* must be related to the value of its cognitive effects on the beholder – a provocative statement about art presented for consideration, an attitude expressed toward convention – and not just the *way* in which it creates those effects. Any assessment of the artistic value of Kafka's work that leaves out his attitudes toward bureaucracy and alienation, and the importance and value of those attitudes, is woefully incomplete. The point here is that an artwork's cognitive virtues seem to bear on its goodness as art. The project of this paper is to give an account of this relationship between cognitive and artistic value: which cognitive values count toward artistic value, and when?

By the *cognitive values* of a work, I mean contributions of that work to the viewer's understanding of anything and everything, whether these work directly or indirectly, immediately or slowly. Thus ideas, facts, phrases, thematic contents, exemplars, and so on can be cognitive values so long as they have some cognitive use. By an artwork's artistic value, I mean how much that work is valued, or held good, as art. The parallel between these terms, and the cases mentioned above, invites a quick answer: the greater a work's total cognitive value, the better it is as art! But this cannot be right. First, we never take the historical or scientific facts contained in a novel, for example, to contribute to its artistic value, though these are certainly cognitive values. We will need to be more careful than this about which cognitive values carry artistic value. Second, such a view also seems to commit us to saying that artworks are worse (artistically) if they have cognitive disvalue. But this runs afoul of common practice more often than not. Shakespeare's plays are not made worse no matter how many times they reference the mistaken medical and scientific theories of the day, nor does one see an artistic flaw in the *Odyssey* because it advocates a view of justice with which one disagrees. Therefore, in giving an alternate account, we should be careful about what undesired sorts of artistic flaws we are letting in along with our cognitive-artistic virtues.

The account I endorse addresses these problems by holding that the cognitive-artistic value of a work depends *not* on the propositional content the work contains, but on the cognitive tools that beholding the work affords us. Contra many artistic cognitivists, it seems to me that we do not value artworks because they give us knowledge, which is argued in section 1. To give an alternative to factual cognitive values, I borrow Elgin's notion of reconfigurations, but argue in section 2 for a less pragmatic

stance than Elgin, so as to avoid the second problem described above. In section 3 I give an intentional account of when cognitive values count for artistic value, and how much. Finally, section 4 addresses some loose ends and objections to the view.

1. Problems with Truth-Oriented Cognitivism

Peter Lamarque has sharply criticized views that make truth an artistic value; I mostly concur with his criticisms.¹ These cognitivist views range from the very strong – “Truth is always a virtue and falsehood always a vice,” as per Rowe quoted by Lamarque (138) – to the moderate, such as those which revise the meaning of “truth” away from propositional truth (Lamarque 129). Lamarque’s choicest arguments are for those who hold truth proper to be an artistic value; this, he says, is the “high ground” of cognitivism. Focusing on literature, his first line of attack is that “it is not part of literary appreciation to pursue debates about the extraliterary truth of literary themes” (134). He illustrates this point (which he says is meant both descriptively and normatively) with an argument worth reproducing about Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”:

1. There is near universal agreement that the ode “On a Grecian Urn” is one of the finest poems in the English language.
2. There is no general agreement about the truth of the line “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”... therefore:
3. The literary value of the poem cannot reside, even in part, in the literal truth of its most famous line (Lamarque 136).

This general strategy is forceful – and looks decisive against the more extreme versions of truth-oriented cognitivism – yet in tension with the fact that we very often speak about literature as saying something, containing insight, or otherwise teaching us. Lamarque wants to resolve this tension by admitting these things as values, but not literary values. His treatment of literary theme gives him an opening: themes, though commonly taken as containing a work’s cognitive virtues, are really just “organizing principles” for the work (136). Sometimes themes cannot be stated as propositions at all; some that can, cannot be assessed for truth; for those with truth-conditions he has ready similar lines of argument to the one above about “Grecian Urn.” I endorse these anti-cognitivist arguments, but not the sophisticated formalism

¹ Lamarque, P., “Cognitive Values in the Arts: Marking the Boundaries,” in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, Matthew Kieran, ed. (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2006), 127-139.

Lamarque apparently takes them to lead to: “In the end what matters ... is not the themes themselves ... but their relation to the particularities on display” (139).²

Recalling the case of Kafka, this is where I think we should get off the sophisticated formalist bus. How can we vindicate the belief that a great part of Kafka’s artistic merit is to have communicated to us a useful and valuable way of conceiving the individual’s relationship to society – and not just *how* he articulates that theme – if we are committed to thinking the theme itself is not what matters? I think we ought to take an intermediate path between truth-oriented cognitivism and sophisticated formalism: a cognitivism which emphasizes cognitive enrichment over knowledge-transfer.

2. Elgin and Cognitive Tools

To say what exactly this “cognitive enrichment” consists in, I will borrow from Catharine Elgin’s “Art in the Advancement of the Understanding.”³ Elgin starts by considering cognitive progress, of which the dominant view, she says, is a sort of fact-gathering model: that we advance understanding by learning new information. But, she points out, this misses progress by *reconfiguration*: “Reorganizing a domain so that hitherto overlooked or underemphasized features, patterns, opportunities, and resources come to light” (1). The rest of her project is to describe reconfigurations as they function in the arts, with the aim of showing how art operates “at the cutting edge of inquiry,” apparently playing an important role for all sorts of cognitive pursuits (12). I want to draw on her examples of reconfiguration, leaving aside for the moment claims about whatever instrumental role art might have in inquiry in general.

Here are some of Elgin’s examples:

By painting a picture of [Gertrude] Stein that highlights certain hitherto

² I don’t want to misrepresent Lamarque: it is possible he will countenance such a feeling. He gives a few suggestive phrases in his (2006), such as acknowledging that literary works can provide “fresh perspectives” on old themes (139). But he does not say if this counts toward artistic or literary value, and judging by his (2010), he will want to reject cognitive uses for art as artistic virtues. In case his view, as elucidated elsewhere, really does allow for valuable themes to enhance artistic value, let’s instead speak of a generic sophisticated formalist, who takes themes as *only* organizing principles and concerns herself only with *how* those themes are realized. See Lamarque, P., “The Uselessness of Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 68(3), 2010, 214.

³ Elgin, C., “Art in the Advancement of Understanding,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 39(1), 2002, 1-12.

unnoticed or underemphasized features, Picasso enables us to see her differently ... To call [a bribe] a cancer is to classify the act as not just objectionable in itself, but as a source of endless corruption with the potential to destroy the political institutions it affects ... Painters like Courbet and writers like Balzac shift our gaze, showing how portrayals of people whom 'high art' had ignored yield a more richly textured understanding of the human condition. (Elgin, 2-7)

What we can take from Elgin is a picture on which art enriches us cognitively by showing us exemplars, patterns, attitudes, and so forth, all of which we can then use as tools for thought by reconceptualizing, juxtaposing, comparing, recalling, and so on. Though not new facts, reconfigurations like these are rightly called cognitive values because they are useful tools for the productive operation of our cognitive faculties. Further, it can hardly be denied that they are afforded by artworks. To return to the case of the cognitive value of Kafka's work: some of it, we have said, resides in the attitude toward the individual and society which he forwards. The emphasis on bureaucracy, the surreal and inexplicable impositions on the individual, and the individual's isolation together form a cognitively useful rubric. We do not have to adopt it across the board, or even adopt it at all, for it to help us recognize and classify situations, consider social questions, or interrogate our own assumptions. The very word "Kafkaesque" is proof that we use Kafka's outlook as a cognitive tool or shortcut.⁴

Duchamp's *Fountain* operates by a different sort of reconfigurative technique. Its cognitive value seems to lie in the reconceptualization of art which it suggests: art is not sacred or beautiful, the artist is not foremost a creator, "ready-mades" can be art, and so on. Notice that I have summarized these cognitive values as propositions, despite arguing against a propositional account of cognitive value in section 1. This is an opportunity to make an important point. Though the cognitive-artistic value of art cannot be propositional, this does not mean artworks do not or should not try to state propositions. The propositional content of *Fountain*, however, serves not to add to our store of true propositions, but rather to provoke thought and, by exemplifying the point of its propositions, to serve as an example that is useful in thinking about art. We note what *Fountain* says, and later use it as a tool for reflection, a tool for destabilizing and opposing more traditional assumptions about art, or a foil to the Romantic poets' view of art in our debates with ourselves. Thus the cognitive value of the work *operates* by reconfiguration, not propositionally; that is, it has uses

⁴ This point is from Goodman by way of Davies, D., "Learning Through Fictional Narratives in Art and Science" in *Beyond Mimesis and Convention*, Frigg, R., and Roman, M., eds (Springer: 2010), 51-69.

regardless of whether it is endorsed or rejected.

Classic works of literature that are taken to afford insight into deep truths about human nature are perhaps the paradigm case of learning from art, so let's consider *Anna Karenina*. As with in *Fountain*, the common notion that by reading such a work we find out something profound (and true) seems to demand a propositional account. But this is a simplified description of a process which fits far better under Elgin's conceptual scheme. First, ask: how could such literature afford us knowledge? We must admit that it cannot support or confirm our beliefs in the propositions we take it to advocate, except to the smallest degree. It is, after all, fiction, and in many cases has been "gerrymandered" to illustrate these propositions!⁵ It cannot be that *Anna Karenina* gives us reason to believe the things which it is saying, even if we could identify those things. Instead, it must be that the novel suggests points for consideration: ways of thinking about love, ways of thinking about meaning in life. But why stop at hypotheses? The cognitive value of great novels lies in their cognitive fertility and usefulness: their narrative and descriptive elements suggest attitude which we ourselves can adopt or discard, our insight into their characters' thoughts is useful in reflecting on ourselves, and their thematic organization suggests patterns which we can apply to experience. All these things, being cognitive values which operate non-propositionally, I bring under the heading of "reconfigurations," or "cognitive tools."

Here is where I want to differ from Elgin and Goodman. They mean to make the more pragmatic point that art, being a way of "worldmaking," has a role in cognitive progress on a par with science.⁶ Thus a proposed reconfiguration will be valuable only so long as it really does move us forward, and perhaps pointless if we do not adopt it. A metaphor for this view: if the conceptual landscape in need of organizing is my living room furniture, then some reconfigurations are good for my purposes of comfort and utility, some are neutral, and some, like putting the chairs in the fireplace and flipping the tables upside-down, are just bad.⁷ Art advances understanding by proposing improvements to our conceptual landscapes. I would rather use the metaphor of a toolbox. Every reconfigurative cognitive value is added to the toolbox, to be used when appropriate. Some tools are better for some problems, some are more useful

⁵ This is Stolnitz's "no-evidence" argument, as presented in Davies, "Learning Through Fictional Narratives," 59-60.

⁶ See Elgin: art "leads us into terra incognita," in "Art in the Advancement of Understanding," 12. Also Goodman, N., *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978). (I make this claim about Goodman's intent based on personal correspondence with D. Davies, 5/31/17.)

⁷ This metaphor also due to D. Davies, 5/31/17.

overall than others, and all can be misused to ill effect or even harm. This metaphor better captures three properties of cognitive values in art. First, reconfigurations in art are almost never so thoroughgoing as to redraw entire conceptual frameworks. Second, we are able to switch among ways of seeing fairly easily and consciously. Third, there is no such thing as a purely harmful reconfiguration, just as no tool is bad except as it is used inadvertently, to hammer a thumb or splinter a two-by-four. Even more so with cognitive tools: perhaps we are never done any good by *adopting* Céline’s conceptual schema in *Journey to the End of the Night*, which would have us believing that “love does not exist,”⁸ it is still valuable as an object of fruitful consideration. We can put it up against our own view, for example, and perhaps make some cognitive gains. What’s more, only very confused conceptual schemes indeed contain no kernel of cognitive usefulness whatsoever.

3. Intended and Unintended Cognitive Values

I have argued that there is a class of cognitive values – reconfigurations – which are valued for how they enrich our cognitive repertoire and that these cognitive tools are the cognitive values commonly taken bear on a work’s *artistic* value, not any propositional content it may be thought to have. Put another way, an artwork is better to the extent it enriches our cognition. But this is not yet the whole picture; for one thing, we ought to take intention into account. The role of intention is a puzzle. On the one hand, it seems misguided to praise a work for yielding unintended cognitive value, whether via unintended features or interpretations.⁹ But on the other hand, we can hardly require that the artist anticipate *all* the responses to and cognitive uses of her work before its affordance of them counts toward its artistic value. What to do? I suggest an answer based on the concept of cognitive fruitfulness.

We need to be able to say where in a work the cognitively valuable aspects are located, so let’s suppose, with Goodman, that artworks function as hierarchically or-

⁸ Putnam’s example, quoted in D. Davies, “Learning Through Fictional Narratives” (58).

⁹ Regarding unintended features, I mean: maybe the spreading cracks in the *Mona Lisa* provoke me into profound meditations about mortality. This is cognitively valuable as a metaphor which says that even venerated things fall apart, but hardly makes the painting a better artwork. As for unintended interpretations, consider D. Davies’ criticism of Ellis’s interpretation of Hirst’s *Physical Impossibility of Death*. Ellis takes the piece as exemplifying “masculine vitality,” counter to Hirst’s apparent intentions given the title and other details of the work – she has taken it to be a symbol which it is not, and so is wrong to praise the work for the cognitive value of that symbol. See Davies, D., “Telling Pictures: The Place of Narrative in Late Modern ‘Visual Art,’” in Peter Goldie & Elisabeth Schellekens, eds., *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (Oxford University Press), 144-145.

ganized systems of symbols.¹⁰ Some of these symbols are *cognitively fruitful*: they have the potential be useful cognitive tools, or to be rewarding when approached cognitively. Some of these symbols are intended for a cognitive approach or use. The proposal is that *only those symbols intended for a cognitive approach count toward the work's artistic value, and that the more fruitful they are, the more they count*. Note that because on this view symbols can be intended for cognitive use without being fruitful, and the converse, we can also make sense of symbols failing to perform their intended functions as cognitive tools.

Let's illustrate this with *Fountain* again. It seems safe to suppose that while Duchamp intended us to think about the artist as creator (or not), he did not intend us to think about the beauty of manufactured and quotidian objects. Either way of using *Fountain* as a cognitive tool is quite possibly fruitful, but since only the first was intended, only the first adds to the work's cognitive value. Those who praise it for cognitive value derived from the second way, this view says, are mistaken. Moreover, the view also commits us to saying that the artistic-cognitive value of *Fountain* has to do not with the importance or profundity of "what it says," but the fact that the relevant symbol – the performative act of claiming a urinal as art – has proved very cognitively useful, and likely in ways that Duchamp never considered.¹¹ I think these conclusions are exactly what we should want from an account of artistic-cognitive values. To return to the tool metaphor: the work furnishes us with a symbol to be used as a tool for cognitive ends, and we, in turn, praise the work in proportion to the usefulness of that tool.

4. Objections and Loose Ends

It might be objected that we have let in too many instances of cognitive value. Shouldn't we, for example, explicitly exclude those cognitive values that are unconnected with the "point" of an artwork? I don't think so. If these do not contribute to artistic value, it is because of a broader preference for unity which influences evaluation of the noncognitive aspects of art as well. Aren't there some topics of which treating fruitfully is never artistically valuable? Again, no, but there are topics with which artists are not usually concerned, and topics which are less friendly to rich re-

¹⁰ In the case of literature, this hierarchy of symbols could roughly be: words, then imagery, then characters and plot events, then themes, and finally the work as a whole.

¹¹ Here is an interesting consequence. It is common critical practice to report on what sort of reflections a work seems to demand. On this view, we can interpret such reports as functioning as a kind of evidence that the work's cognitively relevant symbols are indeed fruitful.

configurative cognitive progress. Simple mathematics and science are hardly open to reconfiguration, and reconfiguration in advanced mathematics and science (contra Elgin) is more effectively carried out within those disciplines than by the vague, indistinct, and non-propositional methods of art. Contrast these areas with inquiry relating to “the human condition” or general moral truths: everybody has abundant cognitive material concerning these which supports reconfiguration, and is personally invested in such questions to boot. It is no wonder that these topics are more strongly associated with art’s cognitive value.

Let me address two more loose ends. I said at the beginning of this paper that there was a problem involving cognitive disvalue. Specifically, we sometimes do not want to say that cognitive disvalues are flaws of artworks, and we certainly do not want the result that we must think less of an artwork if we disagree with something we take it to say. A virtue of the cognitive tool account is that it banishes a work’s propositional content as irrelevant, thus avoiding the problem. So if not falsehoods, what kind of cognitive features of a work *can* diminish its artistic value? The answer falls out naturally: a work is worse if it fails to be cognitively fruitful where it is intended to be. This principle is the ground of many common criticisms; to say a work is (thematically) trite, shallow, banal, or uninteresting is to comment that its relevant parts have failed to be fruitful, with a background assumption being that at least a work’s themes are generally hoped by the artist to be edifying or useful. Lastly, I have used the notion of fruitfulness as though it is a simple one, but really it is not. However, to judge the fruitfulness of a cognitive tool, we must have some way of valuing its products. While there is agreement on how to do this in many cases – that is, we are likely to agree on what is profound, important, interesting, stimulating, and so on – there is at least room for disagreement. I think this is room we should leave open; it is one source of subjectivity that helps to explain the disagreement over artistic-cognitive value that we sometimes observe (though a larger source is the difficulty of discerning the artist’s intentions so as to glean the correct cognitive tool from the work).

I will finish by returning to the motivation for this account. We wanted a way of vindicating, against various sorts of formalist views, the common belief that art teaches us (and that this is proper to a value it has as art!) without the problems which accompany truth-oriented cognitivism. We found a candidate mechanism by which this happens in Elgin’s “reconfigurations,” but reimagined these as tools which enrich thought. The last piece of the argument was to show how the artist’s intention makes such cognitive tools relevant to artistic value. The upshot of all this, I think, is that art has (among other projects) a fundamentally cognitive project: cognitive

aims and methods that are proper to it, and a particular mode of artistic-cognitive evaluation that bears, sometimes strongly, upon its value as art.

Bibliography

Davies, D., "Telling Pictures: The Place of Narrative in Late Modern 'Visual Art,'" in Peter Goldie & Elisabeth Schellekens, eds., *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 138-156.

Davies, D., "Learning Through Fictional Narratives in Art and Science" in *Beyond Mimesis and Convention*, Frigg, R., and Roman, M., eds (Springer: 2010), 51-69. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-3851-7_4

Elgin, C., "Art in the Advancement of Understanding," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 39(1), 2002, 1-12.

Goodman, N., *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

Lamarque, P., "Cognitive Values in the Arts: Marking the Boundaries," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, Matthew Kieran, ed. (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2006), 127-139.

Lamarque, P., "The Uselessness of Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 68(3), 2010.