**----** Art and Emotion **----**

A Missing Person Problem?

1. **Introduction**

It seems perfectly natural to describe our favourite works of art (songs, films, photographs, paintings) as emotional or expressive. Why be puzzled by the claim that a painting is sad? Sceptics worry about the claim because paintings are not sentient (they have no psychological life) - therefore how can they be sad? This is the puzzle of expression.

A related but distinct problem involves the classification of ‘fiction-directed’ emotions. That is, our sense of emotional intimacy, empathy, and sympathetic response to favourite characters, musical compositions, or pictures. For example, our pity for Sethe in Toni Morrison’s Beloved, or admiration for Carrie Mathison in Homeland. This related puzzle is called ‘The Paradox of Fiction’ (PoF). Today, however, we are focusing on the puzzle of *expression*.

Can we reconcile the pre-theoretical intuition (the painting is sad) with philosophical thinking (paintings can’t be sad)?

A mooted distinction:

1. **the expression of emotion** is the manifestation of a psychological state of persons
2. **expressiveness** is merely a presentation of outward behaviours associated with (1)

Are our ways of speaking conflating the two (and confusing us)?

1. **A Whodunit**

Even if we accept the mooted distinction, how does this explain the variety of ways in which pictures express? Lopes suggests simplifying the ways into 3 broad types:

1. Figure expression e.g. Hogarth *A Rakes Progress*
2. Scene expression e.g. Friedrich *Solitary Tree*
3. Design expression e.g. Munch *The Scream*

How might these help us work out how it is that pictures come to be **expressive** of emotions? Three possibilities:

1. Deny (II) that there is scene expression in pictures
2. Attribute the emotion to some person who is *not depicted* but *Whodunit*.
3. Deny the necessity of expressive qualities arising from *someone’s* expression (*Nobodydunit*)

(1) seems untenable. We’ll consider (2) and (3).

**(2) The Whodunit Enquiry**

**(2.1) The Artist**

Art as *essentially* a vehicle of expression.

**Leo Tolstoy *What Is Art?***

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and... then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling so that others experience the same feeling—this is the activity of art... Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them... Art is [thus] a means of union among men joining them together in the same feelings ... (Tolstoy 1996: 51)

Worries: Construes the relation between the artwork and the feeling it expresses in far too extrinsic and contingent a manner – experience is more complex.

**Collingwood *The Principles of Art* (1938).**

all he is conscious of is a perturbation or excitement, which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he can say about his emotion is ‘I feel... I don't know what I feel.’ From this helpless and oppressed condition he extricates himself by doing something which we call expressing himself. (Collingwood 1938: 109)

Worries: There really is no reason to think that artists have to be in a dreadful state of neurotic panic to paint something that seems neurotic or panicky. E.g. Van Gogh. There is even more reason to dispute that artists could even produce work in some of the states their pictures ‘articulate’.

**Robinson *Deeper than Reason* (2005) and *The Missing Person Found(2018)***

Robinson’s particular strategy exploits the concept of an implied persona who ‘unifies’ and ‘specifies’ what is expressed. Two-step theory: a picture expresses only if the artist expresses, by articulating her mental states (M) through the work. For the sufficient conditions of expression to be met, a competent viewer must be able to pick up the expression by way of the expressive properties. The artist articulates (M) through an implied persona, whose

1. expression is picked up by viewers and
2. who is a psychological extension of the actual artist.

Weaker than transmission theories. In a discussion of Spiegelman’s ‘Maus’, Robinson says:

Barring any reasons for scepticism about Spiegelman’s sympathies, it seems clear that the horror and dread expressed by the implied author of the picture reflect traits of compassion and distress that can safely be attributed to the artist himself. (Rob REF)

A psychological link ties implied artist to actual artists. Because implied artists are a construct of the actual artist’s mind, they are constrained by the actual artist’s own psychological profile and so contain “traces” of them when extended into the pictorial world.

Worry - the claim that viewers can infer facts about the artist’s psychology on the basis of a construct, the implied persona. Robinson relies on this psychological link to make this move but this is tendentious as it implies painters cannot create implied personas that are psychologically distinct from themselves. The problem (put in the counterfactual mood), is that the viewer would understand the picture even if they did not make the identification. So, the link between implied and actual artists is not conceptual and, as we have noted, we do not have grounds to allow that it is psychological. For these reasons, one cannot accept that the expression of an implied persona is also the actual expression of the artist.

**Matravers *Art and Emotion (1994)***

Develops a greater reliance on the function of evocation and empathy. The so-called “arousal theory” can be stated in plausible and implausible versions. Plausible versions allow that the emotional status of the spectator can differ from the emotional state attributed to the work.

when you hear music as being expressive of emotion E – when you hear E in the music – you hear the music as sounding like the way E feels; the music is expressive of E if it is correct to hear it in this fashion or a full appreciation of the music requires the listener to hear it in this way. So, the sense in which you hear the emotion in the music – the sense in which it is an audible property of the music – is that you perceive a likeness between the music and the experience of the emotion. (Budd 1995: 137)

Worries: Dry Eyed v Misty-Eyed Appreciators - problem of Sentimentalism/Relativism (recall Hume). A further note: Robinson thinks that empathic responses are crucial to fully understanding a work. She opts for a weak arousal theory – understanding is incomplete (but still attainable at some level) without evocation.

**(3) Nobodydunit after all**

**Stephen Davies** ***Musical Meaning and Expression* (1994) – ‘**resemblance’

the expressiveness of music depends mainly on a resemblance we perceive between the dynamic character of music and human movement, gait, bearing, or carriage” (Davies 1994: 229).

Worry: his account explains resemblances in terms of perceived motor intentions. Seems suspiciously ‘person-y’.

**Dominic Lopes *Sight and Sensibility Evaluating Pictures* (2005) - ‘**natural meaning’

contour theory of natural expression: a physical configuration expresses E if and only if (1) it is an expression-look that (2) has the function, in the circumstances, of indicating E. (Lopes, 2005:57).

Worry: his account undertheorizes what is meant by indicated. Seems suspiciously nebulous.

**Mitch Green *Self-Expression* (2009) –** ‘synesthetic experienced resemblance’

the major triad C–E–G is congruent…with confidence or cheerfulness, for both are intense, pleasant, and relatively static. The colour yellow is congruent with exuberance, for both are intense, pleasant, and dynamic. (Green, 2007:183)

Worry: his account involves some complex intermodal mapping with a biological twist. Plus, he struggles to show how we connect into this synesthetic network and introduces a soft evocation rider (empathy) which he struggles to integrate.