

## FORMALISM

CLIVE BELL

“The starting point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art. . . . This emotion is called the aesthetic emotion; and if we can discover some quality common and peculiar to all the objects that provoke it, we shall have solved what I take to be the central problem of aesthetics. We shall have discovered the essential quality in a work of art, the quality that distinguishes works of art from all other classes of objects” (186).

Bell’s agenda as stated here at the outset of this work first published in 1914 sets the agenda for much of the subsequent development of analytic aesthetics which focuses on trying to answer the Socratic question of art to provide a definition of art a definition that would enable one to distinguish works of art from everything that is not art

as Bell puts it, if we don’t have this definition of art then “we gibber” he means that all discussion about art, whether something is a work of art or not, or whether any particular work of art is any good, are meaningless gibberish unless we start with some definition

for Bell, that quality that distinguishes a work of art is *significant form*:

“What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto’s frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cezanne? Only one answer seems possible—significant form” (187)

takes up objection that he is making aesthetics purely subjective  
ridicules attempts to found aesthetics on objective truth  
aesthetic judgments are matters of taste  
[here the influence of Hume]  
all systems of aesthetics must be based on personal experience and thus are subjective

it does not follow that no theory of aesthetics has general validity  
[here we can clearly see the influence of Kant]  
we may disagree about works of art and still agree about what the common quality of works of art is—significant form  
we may agree about aesthetics but differ in applying theory to particular works of art

against expression theory—no need to pry behind the object to the state of mind of the artist

“For a discussion of aesthetics, it need only be agreed that forms arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws do move us in a particular way, and that it is the business of an artist so to combine and arrange them that they shall move us” (188).

Takes up the objection that this leaves out color  
 he includes in his concept of ‘significant form’ combinations of lines and colors  
 [here one may consider the paintings of Cezanne]

then responds to why he doesn’t use the term ‘beauty’  
 wants a term that distinguishes art from nature

thinks that significant form hypothesis at least has the merit of explaining things about art  
 works that are merely descriptive, works in which forms are used not as objects of emotion  
 but only as a means of suggesting emotion or conveying information. . .

“According to my hypothesis they are not works of art. They leave untouched our aesthetic  
 emotions because it is not their forms but the ideas or information suggested or conveyed by their  
 forms that affect us” (190).

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The following notes are from Noël Carroll’s essay on “Formalism” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*:

the term ‘formalism’ can refer to many things  
 in art criticism associated with writings of Clement Greenberg  
 in literary history associated with the school of Russian Formalism  
 in art history refers to writings of Alois Riegel and Heinrich Wölfflin  
 this essay focuses on its usage in philosophical aesthetics  
 denotes a position on the nature of art that has important implications for the limits of artistic  
 appreciation

historically traced back to Eduard Hanslick’s *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854)  
 and Clive Bell’s *Art* (1914)  
 in both cases formalism can be seen as a historically situated response to significant art world  
 developments  
 the triumph of absolute or pure orchestral music  
 the emergence of modern painting  
 both books signaled a revolution in taste  
 Hanslick argued that the proper object of musical attention should be musical structure  
 Bell rejected idea of painting as representation  
 or of emotions associated with representations of events, places, people  
 maintained the real subject of painting was *significant form*  
 the play or arrangements of lines, colors, shapes, volumes, vectors and space

Bell’s theory significant for development of aesthetics  
 perhaps because he connected his version of formalism  
 with the project of advancing a definition of art  
 a major forerunner of 20<sup>th</sup> century obsession with discovering an essential definition of art

for Bell we need an explicit definition of art in order to talk about art at all  
otherwise we ‘gibber’  
unless we establish what art is, what we say about art, what we think we should attend to  
will be wildly off the mark

Bell is straightforward about what he takes art to be—*significant form*  
if a painting is a genuine art work it addresses the imagination like the figure of Gestalt  
psychology, prompting the viewer to attend to it as an organized configuration of lines, colors,  
shapes, spaces, vectors  
rejects the traditional view of painting as imitation of nature  
that the evaluation of art is tied to verisimilitude  
the production of recognizable depictions of persons, places, actions, events  
Bell doesn’t deny that some paintings are representational  
its just that what qualifies them as art is something other than representational content

for Bell the question of whether a painting possesses representational content is irrelevant to its  
status as work of art

also contrasts with expression theories of art—the notion that art is the expression of the  
emotions of its creator  
a painting by Cezanne is remarkable for its invention of an arresting formal design  
not for expressing emotions

with Bell, formalism found its natural home in the realm of painting  
yet it is easy to extend his analysis to other arts  
this was not so easy for philosophers in line from Plato and Aristotle that focused on art as  
representation—especially for pure orchestral music  
or dance. . . or architecture  
literature. . . seems difficult to explicate exclusively in terms of form  
can point to centrality of features in poetry like meter, rhyme, and structures like the sonnet form  
stories possess formal features, such as narrative structures  
cannot deny that most literature possesses representational content  
but formalists argue that such content only serves to motivate literary devices  
and that ultimately it is the play of literary devices that accounts for the artistic status of poems,  
novels, dramas, etc

thus the kind of formalism Bell introduces can be turned into a comprehensive theory of art  
answers the Socratic question put to art:  
 $x$  is an art work if and only if  $x$  possesses significant form  
significant form is a necessary condition—only if it possesses significant form is it a work of art  
and it is also a sufficient condition—if something possesses significant form it is a work of art

**Necessary Conditions**

If we say that "x is a necessary condition for y," we mean that if we don't have x, then we won't have y. Or put differently, without x, you won't have y. To say that x is a necessary condition for y does not mean that x guarantees y.

Some examples:

Having gasoline in my car (I have a gasoline engine) is a necessary condition for my car to start. Without gasoline (x) my car (y) will not start. Of course, having gasoline in the car does not guarantee that my car will start. There are many other conditions needed for my car to start.

Having oxygen in the earth's atmosphere is a necessary condition for human life. Certainly, having oxygen will not guarantee human life. There are many other conditions needed for human life other than oxygen in the atmosphere.

some arguments in support of formalism:  
why is significant form a necessary condition?

A necessary condition would be something that all artworks share. Thus, if we don't have X, then we don't have a work of art.

a necessary condition must be a property possessed by every work of art

what are the alternatives to significant form as a necessary condition?  
representation and expression

clearly not all art works are representational

examples of works that are undeniably art but not representational:

bejeweled patterns on Islamic funeral monuments

Bach's fugues

Ellsworth Kelly's wall sculptures

thus, representation is not a necessary condition

similarly, not all art is expressive of the emotions of its creator

some artists, like John Cage, specifically adopts methods of composition to remove any trace of authorial expression

many of Balanchine's abstract ballets also are attempts to erase expressive qualities

thus expression is not a necessary condition

form is thus the most viable candidate

since all art works seem at the very least to possess form

formalism seems to make the most promising proposal, especially in contrast to rival theories of representation and expression

this is the *common denominator* argument

1) a necessary condition for something being a work of art is something all works of art share

2) the only alternative to *significant form* are *representation* and *expression*

3) not all art works are representational and not all artworks involve expression

therefore: the only necessary condition is *significant form*

That a work possess form might thus have the necessary condition but not yet a sufficient condition to be a work of art

many things other than art possess form

the significant condition for something being a work of art is thus something which *only* works of art possess

thus the notion of *significant* form

but even this is not yet a sufficient condition as other things, say political speeches or theorems in logic may possess significant form

here the formalist brings in an hypothesis about the function of art works

political speeches and theorems in logic do not exist primarily to display their form art, so the formalist argues, is uniquely concerned with displaying significant form

art works may be concerned with religious or political themes, moral education, philosophical world-views, or expression of emotion

but so do many other things

what is special about art, according to the formalist, is

“its concern with discovering formal structures that are designed to encourage our imaginative interplay with art works” (91).

the *function* argument thus is designed to establish significant form as a sufficient condition

1) only if x is a primary function that is unique to art can it be a sufficient condition for status as an art work

2) neither representation nor expression are unique functions of art works as other activities also share these functions

3) the exhibition of significant form is a primary function unique to art therefore it is a sufficient criterion for art status

along with the function argument and the common denominator argument

formalism also gains credibility from its apparent capacity to explain certain of our institutions about art

we often criticize certain films for being too message oriented

the formalist answer: a dumb amoral film may be formally interesting

it may employ its formal devices in compelling ways

in many such films the thematic content is negligible, or even silly

but its formal organization is riveting

#### Sufficient Conditions

If we say that "x is a sufficient condition for y," then we mean that if we have x, we know that y must follow. In other words, x guarantees y.

Consider the following examples.

Pouring a gallon of freezing water on my sleeping daughter is sufficient to wake her up. If I pour the gallon of freezing water on her then its guaranteed that she will wake up.

Rain pouring from the sky is a sufficient condition for the ground to be wet.

Please note that in none of these example is the sufficient condition also a necessary condition.

in contrast, a film with a big idea, important and earnestly expressed,  
may turn out to be a poor film  
formalism makes sense out of such judgments  
formalism also explains why we regard much of the art of the past as worthwhile  
despite the fact that its sentiments and ideas might be obsolete

formalism has important implications about art appreciation  
the pertinent object of our attention to an art work as art is significant form  
art works may contain other features but these are incidental and strictly irrelevant  
when it comes to appreciating art works attention should focus exclusively on formal properties

Formalism has been an influential doctrine  
for decades schoolchildren taught to not let their attention wander from the text  
not get caught up in story's relation to real life  
and instead savor its formal features

### *Criticism of Formalism*

according to formalism the primary function of art works is to exhibit significant form  
to challenge the formalist theory one could point to something that is regarded as a work of art  
but does not possess significant form  
are there any works of art that do not possess form?  
at least many of our greatest works of art were produced with very different primary intentions

modern art full of examples of found objects or ready-mades  
such as Duchamp's *Why not Sneeze?*  
They are put forward as art works in order to provoke conceptual insights  
such objects are typically chosen precisely because they lack significant form  
if these works are art works then significant form cannot be a necessary condition

counter examples can also be located in traditional art  
statues of demon figures whose function is to frighten intruders into forbidden places  
it is unimaginable that their creators could have intended them as vehicles for the exhibition of  
significant form  
thus, again, significant form cannot be a necessary condition

is it a sufficient condition however?  
Uses example from theorems from symbolic logic  
some theorems may be preferred because of their elegance over more cumbersome theorems  
this is clearly a formal property, but theorems are not art  
thus significant form cannot be a sufficient condition

both the common denominator argument and the function argument are valid  
but not convincing because they contain false or misleading premises  
the common denominator argument assumes only three choices for a necessary condition:

representation, expression, or significant form  
there are other candidates such as historical properties (Danto) or institutional properties (Dickie)  
these possibilities may be even more comprehensive

a second objection to the common denominator argument  
it presupposes that there must be a necessary feature shared by all art works  
Wittgenstein's theory of language game extended to aesthetics by Weitz  
there is no essential feature that all artworks possess  
notion of an open concept  
thus there is the possibility that art has no necessary conditions

similar problems beset the function argument  
it too ignores that there may be no primary function unique to art  
as well as the possibility that the function may not be limited to the traditional three options  
thus it does not succeed in convincing us that significant form is a sufficient condition

another major problem with formalist definition  
ambiguity or vagueness of the notion of *significant* form  
what exactly is significant form?  
Formalism gives no way to distinguish significant from insignificant form  
obscurity lies at the heart of formalism  
theory turns out to be useless because its central term is undefined

possible answers to the question of what significant form is:  
a work has significant form if it is arresting  
but how do we know that it is arresting because it possesses significant form if we are not even  
clear what significant form is?

form is significant if it causes special mental state in mind of the viewer  
but this is not helpful unless one can define the state of mind  
there have been many attempts by formalist to describe this state of mind  
to date none has been less than controversial  
seems thus likely that there is not a distinctive state of mind elicited by all and only art works  
is there really some uniform aesthetic experience elicited by all artworks?

Perhaps the most incendiary corollary of formalism  
is the notion that representational properties are strictly irrelevant to their status as art works  
formalism may be useful as a heuristic device from a pedagogical standpoint  
reminds us not to overlook formal properties  
attending to the formal design may be a rewarding experience  
but transforming this near-truism into a philosophy of art  
impoverishes rather than enriches our understanding of art