

## Konsten och Livet

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Yet another book found among the salvaged remnants of my parents library. It must have been bought and read by my father at the time of my birth when he was still a young man far closer to the age of my son than to myself now . It is a translation and a selection of some of Roger Frys essays on art. Reading it is an act of homage to my father and more to the point, the sharing of one of his guiding interests in life. That it was read is testified by the pages of the book having been cut open (occasionally with the telltale sign of ripping) and no doubt it might have had some influence on my father, or maybe rather struck a sympathetic chord, because I suspect that he had no need to be instructed on what he no doubt instinctively had understood. The main thesis of Fry is that art is the exploration of forms and their relations to each other. As such art has more in common with science and mathematics, than with the often flamboyant exhibitionism with which much of art is usually connected in the mind of the public. Fry makes a distinction between pure and impure art, only the former has any permanence. While the true and pure artists are few, the world is inundated by the make-believe and impure. What is impure art?

Impure art is applied art. Art which has been made to serve some extraneous purposes, it does not need to be as vulgar as commercial advertisement and political propaganda, it could serve more or less worthy motives such as provoking our indignation, illustrate some ethical points, or depict a dramatic situation, or exhibit some psychological reality, evoke nostalgia, or incite carnal excitement. Fry takes exception to the idea suggested by Freud, and taken up uncritically by most psycho-analysts of the day, that art is there to give pleasure of a compensational nature. That we all seek solace in daydreams, and that the artist is only more successful in creating daydreams, by dint of a greater imagination and a capacity to shed his daydreams of the personal and make it universal, and thereby engender in the audience a deep pleasure. Only cheap literature caters to such needs, Fry remarks, truly great novels have nothing of the ambition to vicariously fulfill frustrated wishes. Dreams have as little to do with art as it has to do with science and mathematics. No people are more disparaging of symbols than scientists and true artists. For a true artist, his work does not symbolize anything, it is its own symbol, referring to nothing but itself.

The public idea of the artist is a very romantic one. The artist is somehow outside of society, a bohemian sanctioned to follow his whims and only to work when feeling in the mood for it. Many are attracted to the idea of being the free artist, but Fry claims that few of those flamboyant characters are artists, and none anything but a minor one. The true artist often leads an unexciting and bourgeois existence, being too engrossed in his work, to bother with a free and exciting life. This is of course an over-simplified generalization, as most generalizations tend to be; but in the context no doubt a useful and provocative one, pointing at least to the fact that the Bohemian nature of an artistic life is most often just an incidental consequence, not a prerequisite, and far often more of an impediment

than an inspiration, let alone an intrinsic necessity. In an essay on the relationship between socialism and art, a most topical subject at the turn of the last century, Fry argues that art should perhaps be illegal, in order only to attract those with a true passion for it<sup>1</sup>, now in a rich society there are too many opportunities for the lazy and the charlatans to play at being artists.

Any piece of art engenders associations that has really nothing to do with the piece of art itself but are only being triggered by it, just as a certain taste or smell, can, as in the novels of a Proust, set in motion a whole train of linked associations. There is of course nothing wrong with such extraneous aspects, and for most people they may constitute the main, and perhaps only aspect of the perceived enjoyment of art, but with art itself it has nothing to do. Just as the strong pungency of a smell wears off after a while, the rich tapestry of linked associations will with time wear off, and only the pure and intrinsic qualities of the painting will remain. And linked associations are of course very subjective, and not necessarily to be shared with other people, and if so done, likely to be forgotten by the people of future times. Thus the hackneyed word - classical, for those qualities that endure across generations. Fry is obviously aiming at a truly objective nature of beauty, putting it on par with truth, as the two truly transcendent qualities of man, going beyond the mere instinctual preservation of life and pursued disinterestedly by the scientist or the artist. Their historical origin may well be traced to the demands of a biological existence manifested by the drives of the libido, but at their present stage of development, such explanations supply by the psychologists, are wide off the mark.

The esthetic satisfaction we derive is through relations of sensual impressions, not through the sensual impressions themselves. The sensual data in isolation may be pleasant or unpleasant, the distinction is irrelevant as to the pleasure of the integrated impression. What matters is their relations between themselves<sup>2</sup>. Smells could be very pleasant (and as noted above quite suggestive) but they do not make up art, because smells are very direct and very primitive and exist only by themselves and cannot be used in setting up more abstract relations with other smells. This ties up with the philosophy of perception. We are unable to perceive directly of other peoples sensory impressions, those quale of experience are simply non-comparable and thus non-communicable. But what we can more directly compare are more abstract aspects of our sensory universe, namely relations between them.

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<sup>1</sup> The same kind of argument could be applied to industry and commerce, when bloated salaries are often rationalized that they are needed to attract the best and the brightest and spur them on; when one could as well argue that low salaries would weed out those to whom greed is the only motivation and retain only those to whom a true passion for the work is raging. But it could of course be that the work of a captain of industry is so boring and devoid of any intrinsic interest that only ample material reward can provide an allure.

<sup>2</sup> By the time of writing film was a new medium, and Fry is rather taken by it. He recalls a particular scene in a film he had recently seen, pertaining to a shipwreck and the salvaging of human bodies. It was done very skillfully and Fry admits being very moved. More moved in fact than that he is by a classical tragedy. Still this is not art. It is not the particular emotion that is important, it is the relationships between them. What is exciting about a tragedy is not the sorrow by itself (that can be surpassed by rather low melodrama), but the logical sequence of events with its sense of inevitability (as in a mathematical proof?) that moves the spectator.

That two colors are different is not a direct sensory impression, although derived from a variety of impressions, but can be conveyed and shared. Thus what we share are not our direct sensual experiences of the world, but the relations. It does not make sense to say that two sensual experiences are the same, only that they are, what the mathematician call, 'isomorphic'. Art is not made up of pleasant impressions, it is made up of relations between impressions, pleasurable or not. This is of course a very Platonic conception of the world, one in which the abstract becomes more enduring and more real, than the concrete and palpable. And also a very natural conception if your aim is to prove the permanence and objectivity of art, which to our minds strikes us a bit naive and impossible than it would have done at the time of Fry writing in the 1920's. The Platonic connection becomes even more pronounced when Fry speculates that the emotions engendered by pure form belong to a deep strata of fundamental emotions, which are the kind of Ur-emotions to those concrete ones embedded in space and time and personal experience, that constitute the extraneous associations we referred to above. Those Ur-emotions are universal and objective, and the pleasure we find in the contemplation of beauty, is rooted in a kind of remembrance<sup>3</sup>. On a less exalted level, this is of course also very reminiscent of Jungs ideas of a collective unconsciousness consisting of archetypes. The Jungian speculative kind of psycho-analysis has also been rather congenial to artists, although Fry professes that he does not understand a word of what Jung writes.

Thus in a painting, which is closest to Fry's concern, there is a tension between the purely plastic features of it, and the story it may or may not tell. To Fry a story, however charming, is a distraction from the main point of a painting namely its plastic form. The story a painting tells is dependent on knowledge exterior to the painting. To appreciate the illustrative aspects of a painting a viewer has to be instructed on matters having nothing to do with visual appreciation. Of course such things could be useful and interesting, not to say charming, but it has nothing to do with visual appreciation per se<sup>4</sup> People who think that they have a painting and its meaning explained to them by such information are of course deluding themselves. What is the point of a painting if it is going to be a simple 'rebus' or if its meaning can be explained verbally? The plastic parts of a painting are intrinsic to it and needs no outside reinforcement. The problem as to the relation between the plasticity of a painting, and the story it is about to tell, is a hard and interesting one, if ultimately maybe irrelevant. At the end of the central essay in the collection<sup>5</sup>, he discusses works by Daumier, Poussin, Courbet and Rembrandt from this perspective. A painting of Daumier is always interesting from a dramatic and psychological point of view, but Fry admits that he is first struck by the compositional aspects of such a painting, before he starts to get engaged in the psychological story the painting is meant to exhibit. He discusses to what extent the purely formal plastic structure of the painting actually

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<sup>3</sup> Cf the very poetic and Platonic notion that all learning is really a kind of recalling of a lost memory.

<sup>4</sup> Old genre paintings of the Old Dutch Masters are filled with symbols. If you look at those paintings because of the stories they tell, and for most people that is what constitute their charm and appeal, such information as to the meaning of the symbols is of course invaluable. But then we are not concerned with visual exploration, but with historical and anthropological, often with a strong nostalgic and antiquarian bent.

<sup>5</sup> a slightly abridged version of 'some problems in esthetics' from 1926.

abets and sharpens the psychology of the story, concluding that it might, but that the two aspects seem to get in each others way and need to be held separate, with one aspect always being the dominant. With Poussin the story of a painting is but an excuse to engage in a composition, and with Courbet, his paintings had this spiritual essence only when he was unconcerned with it, concentrating on mundane reality, which he somehow managed to plastically exalt. Once he intentionally tried to bring something that transcended the mere realism, he lost himself in sentimentality and received opinion. But with Rembrandt it is different. Rembrandt was one of the few men in history who managed both to be an excellent story-teller and psychologist, as well as being a plastic artist with a true artist sense of the formality of visual beauty. In his paintings, etchings and drawings, those two aspects of a picture were masterfully combined. Yet, Fry laments that Rembrandt did not keep those two strains of his genius separate. That he did not on one hand pursue his gift for story-telling and psychological instinct as a dramatist and a novelist, and reserved his visual gift for pure art. From Fry one gets the impression, that had he done so, we would have had a Dutch Shakespeare, as well as an even more refined visual artist.

This book must have appealed to my fathers visual sensitivities, because as I recall his interest in painting was particularly pure. I remember me and my mother being quite indifferent to his praise of a to us rather unremarkable abstract painting at an exhibition in the Danish gallery of Louisiana back in 1976, a painting which he explained induced such a sense of harmony and peace. We preferred more disturbing and exciting paintings. It has taken me many years to fully appreciate his sensitivity, because for so many years, and still to a large extent, much of the paintings I have seen throughout the world, have been appreciated for the additional non-visual charm they have exuded, be it of the stories they may have conveyed, or the sense of being windows into the past. Yet of course as a photographer I have, much to the consternation of my family, been far more intrigued by the visual appeal of a photo than its ostensible subject. An attitude my father would have understood too well, even if not necessarily morally approved of. Beauty and morals are indeed two different things, not always corroborating each other, neither always being in opposition, but most of the time being perpendicular.

Finally Art and Life are separate according to Fry. But his definition of Art may be too restrictive, after all there is more to plasticity in visual art. On the other hand by making a strict definition of Art Fry exhibits its essential character more clearly. And besides what Fry is really doing is to single out painting in particular, and it does clarify the issue to emphasize that painting properly is about visual forms, and that anything that goes beyond that is not painting. It could still be Art of course, but then it is no longer visual Art, but some other kind of Art that requires other kinds of analysis and sensibilities.

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