

**Justifying the arts: the value of illuminating failures**

**by**

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*The fox fares best when he is cursed.*  
- 17<sup>th</sup> cent.

## I. Introduction

An article in a local paper attests to the fact that *plus ça change, plus ça la même chose*. The executive director of the Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents adds to the countless efforts to justify the arts and humanities as equal partners with the sciences in the academy. In response to a recent critic from the corporate sector who had been waxing rhetorical on the time universities waste on “the namby-pamby stuff” of “creating theoretical thinkers and analysers”, the Council’s director, Peter Halpin (2008), takes umbrage and quotes a study from the year 2000 of the top Canadian high-technology CEOs:

A liberal arts and science education nurtures skills and talents increasingly valued by modern corporations. Our companies function in a state of constant flux. To prosper we need creative thinkers at all levels of the enterprise who are comfortable dealing with decisions in the bigger context. They must be able to communicate, to reason, create, write and speak for shared purposes: for hiring, training, managing, marketing and policy-making. In short, they provide leadership.

Halpin concludes that what we need is more not less of “the namby-pamby stuff” (C6). The term ‘namby-pamby’ is a euphemism for sentimentality and lack of vigour and derives from a mockery of the English pastoral writer Ambrose Philips, being an assonant play on the first syllable of his name (OED). One need hardly dig deep to infer that Philips was maligned for writing that which was, at the very least, considered less than manly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This homophobic connotation still holds sway in the popular imagination and, as applied to the liberal arts, takes its place with the other derogatory descriptor ‘soft’ as opposed to the ‘hard’ or ‘rigorous’

academic pursuits. Though Halpern defends the arts and humanities for their effectiveness in preparing leaders, he plays into the common stereotype of their being less than rigorous.

What Halpin's guest editorial also brings to light is the fact, well-known to those in the arts, that a widely popular justification for the liberal arts is one based upon extra-artistic considerations; i.e., an instrumental justification. Halpin gives his audience what he knows they understand: a justification backed by a survey of corporate executive officers. Rather than appeal to experts in the liberal arts for their justifications, he looks to business leaders. What better approach for a guest editor in the business section of a daily paper?

The purpose of this paper is to revisit how late twentieth century attempts to account for conceptual and other difficult artwork by defining the concept 'art' have failed to offer a useful strategy for educators seeking a non-instrumental justification. It is suggested that, nonetheless, this theoretical ground is instructive for teachers in teaching the arts and in finding a viable approach to the question of justification. Though definition may fail and grand theories not coalesce, one is wise to follow the example of John Passmore who has argued that to justify the arts one must start from the work itself. The paper concludes by taking its own advice and beginning the work of justification from a recent art work and a consideration of its possible effects.

## *II. Justification and the problem of defining 'art'*

In the arts we are always called upon to justify our activities and our values by means of reasons that have little if anything to do with those characteristics that make

the arts distinctive.<sup>1</sup> The problem with such justifications is that, regardless of their efficacy in convincing people that the arts are useful, they could as well pertain to things or processes other than artworks and the arts and, as a result, we are left with nothing that justifies those products and activities called ‘the arts’. Koopman (2005) states the problem succinctly:

[A]s long as we rely only on instrumental values, on the ways the arts are beneficial to non-artistic aspects of life, our justification remains vulnerable; for it can always be questioned whether the benefits are really significant and durable, and whether the arts are the most efficient way of bringing about the results (96).

In the justification offered above from Halpin (2008), one could argue that things and activities other than the liberal arts, the social sciences for example, also teach people “to communicate, to reason, create, write and speak for shared purposes”. How, then, do we provide a justification that does not leave the arts vulnerable, yet rests upon artistic aspects of life?

Fleming (2006) offers a useful overview of the various kinds of justifications: the instrumental in the form of lists of reasons for teaching the arts, looking for broader categories of justification within possible lists, arguing in favour of the intrinsic value of the arts, setting aside the arts as a generic concept in favour of beginning from individual art forms, and abandoning *a priori* enquiry in favour of beginning from teachers’ actual reasons for teaching the arts (54-55). Fleming’s view is that the various approaches to justification need not be seen as competing claims and that we would do well to draw from different approaches.

Broad categories can help us see beneath justification statements; examination of particular arts forms may reveal important differences without denying the value of considering more general claims. In fact focusing on the particular can be helpful in illuminating universal justification claims (59).

Fleming suggests that what is often missing in justifications is the connection between the arts and our ethical lives, a connection he claims is evident when drama is used as a vehicle for intercultural education (62). This connection to ethics will be discussed in the fourth section of this paper.

Though, as Fleming (2006) points out, justifying the value of arts subjects is as tiresome for arts teachers as defining art is for aestheticians (54), it is an endeavour teachers eschew at some cost. To simply take for granted the value of the art form one teaches is to be unprepared for a common question such as ‘Why do we have to study Shakespeare?’ To answer in a way that draws upon what makes literature distinctive as a human endeavour, as a school subject, and as an art form a teacher needs some knowledge of literary theory and aesthetics. Without such knowledge she is at risk of unwittingly reinforcing a definition or theory of literature that may be unsupportable. Though the process of justifying the arts may offer no clear combination of reasons and warrants, it is in students’ best interests to have arts teacher who are familiar with historical and contemporary efforts at justification.

The approach to justifying the arts upon artistic grounds has begun most famously and contentiously from definition. Defining what art is has been seen as the first logical step to determining its value. As is well known, the project of beginning from definition reached an impasse with Duchamps’ readymades and other adventures of the historical avant-garde such as conceptualism and performance art. In the face of works of art requiring no intentional crafting of product or, in the case of conceptualism, any artifact at all, formalist definitions flounder and resorting to

aesthetic explanations can end in psychological theory.<sup>2</sup> An important moment in the philosophy of art was Morris Weitz's (1956) use of Wittgenstein to escape essentialist definitions of art (e.g., formalism, intuitionism, emotionalism, organicism, voluntarism) by claiming that we misconstrue the logic of the concept of art by thinking it closed. Weitz helped to propel the philosophy of art beyond its roots in Enlightenment Europe, a move that had to be made in order to account for the innovations of the historical avant-garde and to avoid the long-held assumption that all art ought to be judged according to a Western-European definition of the nature of art. Each of the theories he critiques "purports to be a complete statement about the defining features of all works of art and yet each of them leaves out something which others take to be central". Weitz accuses the Bell-Fry theory of being circular by construing its case for art as significant form in terms of our response to significant form. Others he accuses of being so general as to cover objects that are not works of art (29). Weitz's solution to the impasse is to ask what sort of concept 'art' is. His response is that 'art' is an open concept; i.e., one for which necessary and sufficient conditions for its application cannot be stated. Concepts can be completely defined in logic and in mathematics but "[i]t cannot occur with empirically-descriptive and normative concepts unless we arbitrarily close them by stipulating the ranges of their uses" (31).<sup>3</sup> Weitz contends that the very use of the concept 'art' "reveals and demands its openness" (30). He concludes that

[i]f we actually look and see what it is that we call 'art', we will also find no common properties – only strands of similarities. Knowing what art is is not apprehending some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe, and explain those things we call 'art' in virtue of these similarities (31).

As the history of the arts demonstrates, new conditions continually arise, new works, new movements, which find interested parties, usually professional critics, deciding whether the concept 'art' should be extended to include them. According to Weitz, that which is "supremely valuable" in attempts to name a thing 'art' is the debates that ensue over the "reasons given for the chosen or preferred criterion of excellence and evaluation" (35). This, in Weitz's view, is what makes the history of aesthetic value important. The proper role of aesthetic theory, then, is not to define anything "but to use the definitional form, almost epigrammatically, to pin-point a crucial recommendation to turn our attention" to a specific element in the art form in question (35). To take an example, theorizing elements from short stories that contain plot development, one cannot always easily apply these elements to naturalistic or impressionistic stories. A poignant and/or puzzling story by Chekhov will resist categorization. And so, literary theory pin-points an important distinction for readers' attention by suggesting a new sub-category: the 'slice of life' story.<sup>4</sup>

Weitz's theory of 'art' as an open concept along with his subsequent work on different categories of openness have been the subjects of considerable criticism. According to Richard Kamber (1998), Weitz's view about the function and logical grammar of concepts is hard to assess since he does not address basic questions about what concepts are and what it is to have concepts (39).<sup>5</sup> Kamber agrees that the function a concept serves at a given time may require it to be open instead of closed, but he rejects Weitz's claim that any concept is always open because "the function and use-patterns of concepts can and often do change over time" (39). In short Kamber concludes that "Weitz rests his case against essentialist theories and

definitions of art on an essentialist theory about the concept of art” (40). Kamber shares Weitz’s scepticism about the possibility that any theory of art could successfully argue “for the continuing unity of the concept of art over time” (44). He attributes this failure to the hypothesis that, despite on-going innovative efforts to make such an argument, “there is no deep-structure connection – nothing invariable, self-replicating, recurrent, or otherwise persistent through time – to sustain the continuing unity of the concept art” (45). Kamber points out that, though historical/intentional theories do have relevance by accounting for the continuous and changing path that art and the concept of art have travelled over time, “describing the continuity of conceptual *change* over time is not the same thing as making a case for the continuing *unity* of a concept over time” (46).

The idea that art is an open concept, whether this be variable or not, is instructive for teachers in the arts. Instead of teaching literary critical terminology as if these terms were inflexible, clearly definable, closed logical concepts (e.g., the elements of the short story), a teacher with knowledge of the contentious history of aesthetic theory would be able to present any list of elements as one or a combination of theories about the characteristic features of the genre in question. If a short story, for example, did not neatly fit into a schema of elements, the teacher so informed could present students with the problem of determining if said story were presenting new conditions for which the concept ‘short story’ would have to expand or if said artifact required a different or new literary concept. One of the values of the controversy over what kind of concept ‘art’ is is, as Weitz indicates, the debates that ensue. To offer interpretive questions about an art work as questions still open to

vigorous debate is not only to remain true to the history of aesthetic theory, but also to act in students' best interests. In-class debate over the appropriate attribution of concepts to particulars serves to hone students' interpretive skills, refine their judging capacities, and make the point that concepts are rarely, if ever, invariable, regardless how permanent they may appear in school curricula.

That the philosophy of art in the mid-twentieth century ran head-first into anti-essentialism and is still grappling with its repercussions leaves educators with the following dilemma: to justify the arts according to their distinctive properties requires defining what these are, which is the very sticking point upon which the philosophy of art still wriggles. And yet, to take the pragmatist strategy and justify the arts on the basis of what they do, leads one to the instrumental argument that leaves the arts vulnerable. What to do?

As mentioned above, the instrumental arguments for the arts, convincing though they may be, could as well be used to justify other human endeavours. For example, a recent argument by Koopman (2005) rests upon the articulation of something that the arts do distinctively well; namely, offer fulfillment. It can be argued, however, that other pursuits also offer fulfillment – prayer, shooting the rapids, having a baby – which leaves his justification vulnerable to the question of “whether the arts are the most efficient way of bringing about the results” (96). Another problem with Koopman's case is that it rests on an aesthetic functionalist definition of art. He assumes that art is to be defined according to its function of delivering an aesthetic experience. Stephen Davies (2006) points out three difficulties with aesthetic functionalism. It is difficult to avoid circularity, since

defining art in terms of the experience it evokes requires characterising that experience independently of describing it as the result of successful art-making. Aesthetic functionalism also has problems accounting for art works that lack or reject aesthetic properties - for example, conceptual art – and for those which are simply bad art.

Instrumental justifications for the arts are hard pressed to avoid the slide into definition since any use of art's characteristic features implies definition. Although Koopman's stated purpose is to "develop a new account of artistic value", this account rests upon numerous claims regarding the properties of art; therefore, his project is, by extension, one of definition. By referring to art in various ways such as possessing a "self-contained character" and being "an internally structured unity" (91), he undermines his argument. As we have seen from Weitz (1956) and Kamber (1998), formalist definitions of art are inadequate as are all theories purporting to be complete statements about the defining features of all works of art. Each of the traditional/essentialist theories leaves out something that another theory takes to be central.

### III. *Passmore's illuminating failures*

John Passmore took a stab at the questions regarding art's definition and justification in his notorious 1954 essay "The Dreariness of Aesthetics" in which he suggests that "the dullness of aesthetics arises from the attempt to construct a subject where there isn't one" (50). Although his doubt about the possibility of identifying aesthetic properties suggests that aesthetics is futile, he does grant it some value.

[A]lthough there are not 'aesthetic properties' common to all good works of art, there is what we may call an aesthetic approach to works of art, just

as there is a scientific way of considering a thing, without it being the case that things have scientific characters; or again, there are not technical properties but there is a technical approach (52).

What he describes by way of an aesthetic approach is the identification of categories, rather than properties, that would suggest the kinds of question that are to be asked about an art work. This is similar to Fleming's (2006) suggestion that broad categories can help us see beneath justification statements (59).

In his 1990 book, *Serious Art*, Passmore takes up his earlier injunction (1954) to be "ruthless in making distinctions" about works of art (45), but runs into the full force of specialists in aesthetics who critique him for not defining what he means by serious art (Sankowski 1994), for dismissing Conceptual Art as non-serious (Lord 1994), and for having written "an amateur's book", an epithet Passmore himself gave the work (Godlovitch 1994). Passmore's response to these critics is instructive. In his words,

the book emerged as a record of failures. That did not lead me to conclude that it should be thrown away. For the failures, I believed, did not derive from personal weaknesses; they were illuminating failures, of more consequence than the successes I could have achieved by the repression of counterexamples (47).

In his review of *Serious Art*, Perricone (1997) uses a distinction from Isaiah Berlin to describe Passmore. Berlin claimed that there are two kinds of writers and thinkers: hedgehogs and foxes. The hedgehog knows one big thing and relates everything to a single vision; while the fox knows many things and pursues many ends. Passmore is the fox who "seizes upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves". Says Perricone, "Plato, Dante, Hegel are hedgehogs. Aristotle, Shakespeare, Joyce are

foxes. John Passmore is also a fox under the influence of Wittgenstein and Austin". He goes on to say that the danger in reviewing work by foxes is that one "runs the risk of oversimplifying what the fox is up to". In *Serious Art*, as Perricone contends, Passmore is not trying to sell us one theory; rather he "deals in problems which, rather than becoming simple through explanation, become more complex through analysis" (127).

The calm and humility with which Passmore (1994) replies to his, at times, less-than-generous critics is of course instructive in its own right. But, for our purposes in questioning how art is to be justified, it is worth considering that Passmore sets an appropriate example with what he calls his aesthetic approach and what Perricone describes as his generation of complexity through analysis. To attempt to define art and justify it from the basis of an invariable definition is to proceed like the hedgehog; whereas, beginning from the essence of an experience one has with an art work and attempting to describe what it appears to be in itself is to proceed like the fox. Though, from the perspective of the hedgehog, this latter strategy may appear nothing but a series of failures, it may open up complexities that are illuminating.

#### IV. *The fox fares best*

Let us return to the question of justification. It is clear that to define something is not necessarily to account for its value. Davies (2006) offers the example of defining truth. One can say that "a proposition is true if and only if what it asserts is the case", but this does not account for why people value truth to the point of sacrificing their lives for it (46). Even if a generally agreed-upon

definition of art were forthcoming, which it is not, a definition will not necessarily account for the value of the arts in education. And what if we do as Koopman has: justify art on the basis of what it does for us? We have seen that to do this without reference to or assumption regarding art's defining properties is not so simple. What I would like to suggest is that we follow the example Passmore sets by creating complexity through analysis. To do so is to act like the fox, miming Passmore's aesthetic approach by ruthlessly making distinctions that can become categories for the kinds of question one might ask about art. What would our support for the arts in education look like were we to take this tack in our attempts at justification? I imagine one might describe an art work and allow it to do what T. S. Eliot (1957) most admired in a critic: being one who

can make me look at something I have never looked at before, or looked at only with eyes clouded with prejudice, set me face to face with it and then leave me alone with it. From that point, I must rely upon my own sensibility, intelligence, and capacity for wisdom" (117).

The strategy of the fox is that of Eliot's good critic: faced with a downturn in the economy and the cuts to arts education this will bring, the fox would present an astonishing work of art and allow it to work its effects upon those holding the purse strings. For example . . .

Vedran Smailovic, a renowned cellist in the Sarejevo Opera, Philharmonic Orchestra, and National Theatre, endured the Siege of Sarajevo along with hundreds of thousands of other residents. In 1992, having witnessed the killing of 22 people who were queuing for bread, Smailovic played Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor every day for 22 days in the bombed

out shell of the National Library. His choice of Albinoni's Adagio was significant as it is a work reconstructed by Italian musicologist, Remo Giazotto, from a four bar fragment found in 1945 in the ruins of the Dresden Music Library after it had been firebombed by Allied Forces (Galloway 2008, 1). Smailovic dressed in his formal concert attire and played the Adagio each day at 4pm, the precise time at which mortar shells struck and killed his fellow citizens. These acts of bravery and commemoration have inspired numerous other artists.<sup>6</sup>

To simply read about Smailovic's action, his understanding of the history of Albinoni's Adagio, which had risen from the ashes of Dresden, and to imagine the cellist in full concert dress, playing amidst the rubble while gunshots and mortar fire continued to ring out, is to be brought face to face with a work of art. To listen to Albinoni's Adagio is to be moved by expansiveness arising from sheer simplicity. This is mirrored in Smailovic's simple yet profound act of tribute and sacrifice. The question of what art is fades in the face of this sublime and defiant response to human tragedy. It is amazing to think what "the namby-pamby stuff" can do. To engage in reflecting upon the complexities of art and its effects on human kind, even though such reflection may fail to find an invariable concept or set of features to justify itself, is bound to be illuminating. Fleming (2006) cites Wittgenstein on the compelling nature of a work of art. It compels us "to see it in its right perspective" (62). Herein lies the ethical connection. We can do none other than stand in awe of Smailovic's action as an artist. It would seem

that this artwork itself supports Fleming's suggestion that we return in our justifications to the tradition of linking the arts with our ethical lives.

#### V. Conclusion

In his 2007 presidential address to the American Society for Aesthetics, Kendall Walton concludes that: "It's that darn concept of art that has made it so hard to understand art – and lots of other things as well" (160). Walton personifies aesthetics as an adolescent in the family of elder philosophies who is still trying to find itself and wondering what to do when it grows up. "Aesthetics must figure out for itself what exactly it is" (147).<sup>7</sup> Unlike other branches of philosophy, aesthetics has no "grand basic question", says Walton. Though ethics asks *how to live*, aesthetics has yet to identify such a unifying question (147). This lack of a grand basic question suggests to Walton that the identity of aesthetics is "fixed by marking its boundaries, rather than identifying its center" (149). Walton's advice to his colleagues is to start from the ground up and he adds: "the shape our theory or theories take in the end, as well as their size, what they end up being theories of, must not be decided in advance" (159-160). It is instructive to recall Perricone's (1997) advice not to oversimplify what the fox is up to. Though a grand theory or question may not be forthcoming, this is not a good reason for failing to consider things in themselves. When the votes are cast over funding for the arts in education, the fox may be cursed for failing to provide the one big thing, but let us hope that the astonishing nature of the artwork s/he presents will effect the necessary work of justification.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Smithrim and Upitis (2005) report on a three-year study of over 6000 students, parents, teachers and principals in which they assess the non-arts effects on student achievement and attitudes of a program called *Learning Through the Arts*.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Arnaud Reid (1954) contends that, though discussions of aesthetic philosophy are bound to border on psychology, it is wrong to identify aesthetics with psychology because “psychology is concerned with processes of mind, whilst the field of aesthetics contains more than this”. He enjoins the philosopher not to ignore that which can be useful from experimental aesthetics (25).

<sup>3</sup> Weitz allows, however, that there are “legitimate and closed concepts in art”, such as ‘Greek tragedy’. Although the concept ‘tragedy’ is still open to allow for the possibility of new conditions, the concept ‘Greek tragedy’ is closed because “[t]he plays it can be applied to, the conditions under which it can be correctly used are all in” (32).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that Chekhov’s stories are always or most importantly referred to by this term. This was the term I used in Grade 12 English to describe the apparent ‘plotlessness’ of Chekhov’s story “An Enigmatic Nature”. My students believed that a short story had to have a particular type of plot development and responded to the Chekhov piece by declaiming that “nothing happens”. The phrase ‘slice of life’ is from the French *tranche de vie*, a phrase attributed variously but which first appeared in print in 1892 and was used in connection with the writings of the naturalists (G. I. Dale, 1935).

<sup>5</sup> As an example, Weitz’s ‘Greek tragedy’ could require opening were an ancient Greek manuscript to be discovered which brought new conditions to the concept.

<sup>6</sup> Musical compositions “Christmas Eve/Sarajevo 12/24” by the rock group Savatage (1995), David Wilde’s (1999) *The Cellist of Sarajevo: A Lament in Rondo for Cello, Opus 12*, John McCutcheon’s (2007) song “In the Streets of Sarajevo”, and the novel *The Cellist of Sarajevo* by Steven Galloway (2008).

<sup>7</sup> If aesthetics is the adolescent, might philosophy of education be the toddler of the family? A terrible two for whom the house must be baby-proofed? The adolescent can surely watch out for its younger sibling, but not without adult instruction and supervision.