

# Art and Morality

By S.J. Chong

Shudders will surely run up and down the spine of many philosophers and artists when they hear of that prim and proper lady, Morality, being associated, once again, with that daredevil gad-about-town, Art. They fear that poor Art will be covered into subjection and reduced to a shadow of his former self. This fear is unfounded. We have only to take note of the upright character of Art through the ages and the gracious adaptability of Morality.

Art is a mode of communication. To deny this would be to deny the way we use the world. It doesn't make sense to talk of a work of art which communicates nothing at all. Furthermore what it communicates is of the highest aesthetic importance. This is where Morality rears her, sometimes, unwelcome head. A work of art necessarily conveys a message which is accepted somewhere by some people as being 'valuable', 'significant' or 'meaningful' measured according to values applicable to life as a whole.

Some philosophers have tried to argue that the meaning or content of a work of art is totally irrelevant aesthetically. They claim that certain formal arrangements or sensuous elements can bowl over an audience aesthetically without any interpretation taking place. Indeed the audience are heartedly warned to avoid, at all costs, the temptation of making any sort of inference from the work or giving it any sort of meaning. Obviously these claims must be challenged if Morality is to maintain her envied position as the constant companion of Art.

Firstly, even if we were willing to admit the possibility of finding aesthetic value in a pattern of shapes or sounds, for example, or in a single colour, without consideration of meaning, we could not confine it to those limited areas alone. Such a move would entail a criminal neglect of the many other aspects of a work of art - expressive aspects, symbolic aspects, representational aspects and all aspects relating to content. In other words, consideration of meaning is essential for a full aesthetic appreciation of a work of art.

Secondly, it seems humanly impossible to make a distinction between the properties of a work of art which are 'immediately' perceived and those which are 'inferred'.<sup>1</sup> Since we are human beings we are bound to interpret formal or sensuous elements in the light of our human experience. However abstract or unexpressive a work of art many seem to be, it will still automatically evoke associations and memories in the mind of its audience. Indeed perception itself is based largely on experience and involves interpretation.

Thirdly, it can very well be argued that sensuous elements and formal arrangements have aesthetic value only when they successfully embody an inner meaning or idea. Let's take the example of a sensuous element - colour. Frank Sibley in his article 'Aesthetics and the Looks of Things'<sup>2</sup> describes how we attribute aesthetic value to the colour blue. To say "It's so beautifully blue" may only be relevant when considering the suitability of the colour to its subject matter. To say, "Such a beautiful blue" must be further explained by an aesthetic term such as 'delicate'. It seems, at this stage, to be aesthetically valid in itself. Sibley suggests however that the reason for this lies in the fact that this particular colour is associated with, and vividly recalls some element of human experience. This would explain, too why different cultures attach varying degrees of aesthetic importance to the range of colours. The associations evoked by each colour vary from culture to culture.

1. For a fuller discussion of this point refer to sections 25 - 30 Art and its Object by R. Wollheim Harper & Row 1968.  
2. P. 321 Contemporary studies in Aesthetics: ed. F.J. Coleman. McGraw Hill 1968.

The same argument can be used to explain the aesthetic value of certain formal arrangements. They express very well a particular meaning which, I may add, has been considered significant at a certain time or by a certain society. The formal order of Greek Classical Art, for example, represents a belief in an unchanging, harmonious and ordered Reality underlying the transitory world of physical appearances. To the Greeks this had, moreover, a highly religious and moral significance. Many succeeding generations of artists, too, have found the classical format a suitable and relevant mode of expression. Such a formal arrangement, however, will have no aesthetic value if the artist is trying to express a different conflicting meaning. Paul Stern, in his article, 'On the Problem of Artistic Form'<sup>3</sup> maintains that, "Conventional 'patterns' do have great value but belong to certain inner meanings (i.e. values and ideas) tried out before and expressed in certain ways by established schools and movements. They may be a hindrance to the emergence of new inner meanings of a different type". Clive Bell attempted to give form aesthetic significance without attaching to it any conventional meaning.<sup>4</sup> He was unable, however, to explain how significant form could be recognised apart from using the particular talent of the aesthetic sense which could only be defined in terms of its ability to recognize Significant Form. The significance of Form must lie in its association with human experience as a whole.

I have attempted to establish in the previous section that the meaning of a work of art is relevant aesthetically. But in what way? Does awareness of meaning simply give us a deeper insight into the formal and sensuous qualities of a work of art? or merely help us appreciate symbolism and representation? I have already hinted that there is more to it than this. The meaning of a work of art necessarily has positive value to society. This 'positive value' ensures the moral status of Art.

If this theory is not to be discredited, however, it must be shown that the term 'positive value' (i.e. having value in a moral sense) can be applied to all the many types and styles of Art that have existed throughout the history of man. One example of an immoral or amoral 'work of art' will entirely crush our theory. At the same time we cannot allow ourselves to exclude from the class of art works anything which has, hitherto, been generally accepted as belonging to that class. Such an act would be very presumptions on our part, as if we had a personal control over definitions.

Art has been many things; initiative, expressive and formal; transcendental and materialistic. It has possessed a variety of aesthetically significant properties; sensuous elements, balance and tension of space and volumes, complex formal structure, representational aspects and many others. It has been physical and non-physical. It has possessed a variety of functions; religious, social, political and pleasurable. It has been described as functionless; pure self-indulgence and for Art's sake only. Can we claim that all these many kinds of Art have some positive value to society?

Alexander Solzhenitzyn in his Nobel Speech 1970 for Literature doesn't seem to think so. He makes, in the best Russian tradition, a distinction between the kind of Art which is socially responsible and the kind which expresses nothing but the personal experience of the artist. The latter, in his opinion, does not have positive value for society. He states that "it hurts to find (the artist) capable of a retreat into worlds of his own creation or the wastes of subjective caprice, whereby he leaves the world of reality of hirelings, or nonentities or lunatics". The term 'positive value', therefore, can only be applied to the type of art which makes a social comment inspired by the artist's sense of duty to his fellowman.

Saul Bellow, the latest novelist to win the Nobel Prize in Literature would probably agree with Solzhenitzyn on this point. To quote an article in Newsweek dated November 1, 1976, - Bellow has ranked himself among the "large-public writers" - those who voice social concerns and write for a general readership - as distinguished from such "small-public" writers as Eliot, Pound Joyce and Proust, who worked within the late nineteenth-century romantic tradition of opposing and defying the bourgeoisie.

"Every writer ought to try to reach as many people as he possibly can," he said last year. "A writer should simply assume that an enormous number of readers will understand him, just as the great nineteenth-century Russian writers weren't content to address an elite but considered themselves to be speaking to mankind, as well as to all of Russia. At this hour of civilization, we had better assume that we can speak out".

3. Reflections on Art - a source book of writings, by artists, critics and philosophers: ed. S.K. Tanger. John Mopkins 1960.  
4. Bell's Theory of Significant Form appears in his book Art. Chatto Windus 1914.

It is misleading, however, to divide Art along the lines of objective/socially responsible and subjective/socially irresponsible. All art is subjective (by virtue of the inevitably individual character of the artist) and all Art sheds light on the human predicament (by virtue of man's common qualities). This point has been very aptly put by another writer, Doris Lessing. In her younger days she was an ardent socialist and so very much committed to the idea of the artist having a moral responsibility toward society. In the Preface to her Samous Book, 'The Golden Notebook' she writes, however, that there is no way "of not being intensely subjective", but that "The way (for the artist) to deal with the problem of 'subjectivity', that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvellous possibilities, is to see him as a microcosm and this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does, transforming a private experience into something much larger".<sup>5</sup>

The artist may seem to 'ignore everything which happens in the rest of the world' by creating his own reality or delving into the subconscious but others can still find his message relevant and illuminating. The majority, of course, are not able or willing to comprehend the message. It is not fair, however, to put the entire blame for this on the artist. An appreciation of the works of Solzhenitsyn and Saul Bellow is hardly widespread among the masses either. We should, therefore, allow the work of the 'subjective' artist some measure of positive value. It is considered meaningful by those who understand its language.

I suspect, however, the Solzhenitsyn would not find the above argument very convincing. The truly moral artist, according to him, must take into account the experiences of others in order to create "a single system of evaluation for evil deeds and good deeds, for what is intolerable and what is tolerable, for how the line is to be drawn between them today." Furthermore this system of evaluation must be based on certain eternal truths and fundamental principles of morality which derive from God not Man.

This brings us to a crucial point in the argument. If Solzhenitsyn's assertion is correct then the theory that all art is moral must surely crumble to dust again. Many works of art whether 'subjective and esoteric in nature' or 'objective and communicable to a larger number of people' are conspicuously lacking in eternal truths. To prove this point we have only to take a peek at contemporary Art.

Let us take this peek in the company of Alvin Toffler of 'Future Shock' fame. He quotes McHale as saying, "Traditional canons of literary and artistic judgement.....tend to place high value on permanence, uniqueness and the enduring universal value of chosen artifacts" but these standards "in no way enable one to relate adequately to our present situation in which astronomical numbers of artifacts are mass-produced, circulated, and consumed. These may be identical or only marginally different. In varying degrees, they are expendable, replaceable and lack any unique value or intrinsic truth".<sup>6</sup>

Alvin Toffler attributes the appearance of this phenomenon to the rapid pace of industrial society. The artist, he claims, is reacting to his environment and matching the fast changes in the human condition with a "replaceable, expendable series of ikons".<sup>7</sup> The 'happening' is a typical example of the momentary nature of much Modern Art. Its impact is fleeting. It contains no enduring truths. Yet it is considered meaningful within its context and, furthermore adds a little to our understanding of life. For this reason it deserves to be called 'moral'.

Nowadays it seems futile to search for the essence or eternal meaning of morality. Due to rapid social changes and the growing awareness of the individual an enduring set of values is no longer appropriate. Traditional moral codes, for example, accepted for centuries and handed down by religion and authority appear strangely irrelevant today. Morality is seen by many as necessarily relative to a particular situation and even to a particular person.

5. P. 13 Preface to The Golden Notebook: Doris Lessing Panther 1973.

6. P. 175 Future Shock: Alvin Toffler. Strand Book Co: 1975.

7. McHale's comments are from his essay "The Plastic Parthenon" (draft version) from Lineastruthera, June 1966; and from his "The Expendable Ikon" in Architectural Design, Feb/March 1959.

Solzhenitsyn still possesses a faith in God which he feels enables him to recognise the beauty and ugliness in the world. Others have lost that through a genuine lack of conviction. They feel obliged to search in their own way for a truth, however temporary it may seem. I do not think that they can be condemned as immoral. Indeed, to claim one has discovered the eternal truths (whether through inspiration or the experience of others) may simply be a reinforcement of the prejudices of a particular man, a particular group or a particular time. All over the world there are people with conflicting values who sincerely believe that they, alone, are in possession of the eternal truths. It seems impossible either to determine which set of values (if any) is the 'right' one or to reconcile them to form a single, cohesive system of values - at least at this stage of human development. Morality must be viewed as a changing, growing concept.

Few artists, therefore, feel justified in claiming possession of the 'eternal truths'. Every artist, however, contributes a little to the growing awareness of mankind. Some may contribute more than others depending on the number of people who understand their language and the importance of their message. Some may be remembered and valued for hundreds of years. Some may be forgotten after a week. All have something valuable to say.

It is only 'non-art' which lacks 'positive value' in any context. Instead of opening our eyes it feeds our illusions, plays on our weaknesses and serves only as a form of escapism from the pressures of everyday life. Such is the nature of much modern entertainment in the form of T.V. programmes, films, pop songs, paperbacks, etc. Even so we make a distinction between that which may and that which may not be called Art. We say such-and-such a film is pure sensationalism and not a work of art. We say such-and-such a film is pure sensationalism and not a work of art. We argue about the merits of some of Picasso's late 'scribbles'. Are they meaningful? Are they works of art? Whatever the case, we do not designate anything a 'work of art' unless we feel it has some measure of 'positive value' - among other things.

I conclude, therefore, that all works of art have been considered somewhere by some people as 'valuable', 'significant' or 'meaningful', according to values applicable to life as a whole and that this fact justifies the description of Art as moral. Art, even in his most temperamental moods, has always been accompanied by Morality.

8 Discrimination and Popular Culture ed Denys Thompson Pelican 1964

*Art is man's most reliable means of expression – Herbert Read.*