

Schopenhauer's Aesthetic Ideology

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1. Introduction

Readers of this book are no doubt aware that Schopenhauer has never been a particularly popular philosopher, although he did enjoy brief popularity towards the end of his life, as well as in recent years. Schopenhauer's relative obscurity is largely due to the outsized popularity of his Idealist contemporaries. But even today, when the Idealist project is dead in the water, you'd be hard-pressed to find many ethicists or meta-ethicists, for example, who have read Schopenhauer's prize essay, let alone who teach it in their classes, or historians who assign Schopenhauer's commentaries on Kant in an early modern or nineteenth-century German philosophy course.

The situation is perhaps different in the arts, however, where his account of the value of art and music, and of the particular contributions of genius, have struck an intuitive chord with artists, especially musicians. In literature, his devotees included major authors from at least five languages, notably Borges, Conrad, Hardy, Mann, Proust, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Zola (see Magee 1997: Ch. 18), although these seem to have been most influenced by his metaphysics more generally, rather than his aesthetics in particular. But his aesthetics, too, has exerted considerable influence on art, art history, and even the development of philosophical aesthetics, where historical surveys of the subfield do at least typically include him alongside Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche. Much of his impact on aesthetics has been indirect, however, proceeding by means of his influence on the likes of Mahler and Wagner (Magee 1987: Ch. 18, Goehr 1996, and Bonds 2014: Ch. 12), whose work in turn has come to inform the conventions and discourse surrounding our musical practices. Beethoven's reputation as a musical genius, for example, owes its rationale in large part to Schopenhauer's valorization of pure instrumental music, as channeled by Wagner (Goehr 1996: 201 and 223-4).

I trust it is clear, then, that Schopenhauer was a major figure in the history of aesthetics. But what was it about his aesthetics that so captivated his illustrious readers? To what extent is it appropriate to separate his aesthetics from his metaphysics? And what role do the Platonic Ideas play in his aesthetics? Let's find out!

2. Metaphysics

Schopenhauer's aesthetics is intimately tied to his metaphysics, although—somewhat curiously—its uptake by artists and philosophers has been largely *independent* of that metaphysical underpinning.¹ Schopenhauer's reflections on aesthetics seem to speak to an experience artists have when they're creating, even if his metaphysics doesn't. Indeed, it is surprising the extent to which ideas grounded in a metaphysics predicated on a single key intuition have managed to lead a life of their own independently of that originating intuition. I shall not dwell too long on the metaphysics of Will—see Ch. 3 of this volume instead—but will simply sketch out the basics needed to have a full grasp of Schopenhauer's aesthetic project, and the role which Platonic Ideas play in its articulation.

It is no secret that the core of Schopenhauer's metaphysics is his concept of Will, the eternal striving which he thought characterized the core of reality. The roots of this belief are buried in his reading of Kant, with whom Schopenhauer found himself mostly in agreement, particularly his distinction between the phenomenal world we interact with in ordinary experience and the noumenal reality which undergirds it. For Schopenhauer, the essence of Kant's doctrine of the thing-in-itself could be boiled down to the Platonic statement that “this world that appears to the senses does not

¹ Wagner is something of an exception; he seems to have been mostly concerned with Schopenhauer's metaphysics, especially the place of the noumenal and the phenomenal, to the exclusion of much of Schopenhauer's account of music. For Wagner's own thoughts on the subject, see Allen (2014).

have true being, but is instead only an incessant becoming, it is and it is not, and apprehending it does not involve cognition so much as delusion” (WWR 1, 445).²

There is a useful parallel here to Plato’s allegory of the cave: recall that those chained in the cave can only see by the fire’s dim glow, and all they see are the shadows of reality. Accordingly, they believe that determining the order of the shadows’ succession is the key to wisdom. Here, Schopenhauer draws a parallel between phenomena (the shadows on the cave wall) and the Vedic tradition, equating phenomena with *māyā*, illusion:

because the work of *māyā* is declared to be precisely the visible world in which we exist, a magic trick, an insubstantial, intrinsically inessential semblance comparable to an optical illusion or a dream, a veil wrapped around human consciousness, something that can be said both to be and not to be with equal truth and equal falsity. (WWR 1, 446)

So: the world around us is akin to an illusion; it is not presented to us as it really is in itself. The trick, then, is to find some means of looking away from the shadows on the cave wall, past the fire, and to whatever it is that casts the shadows. But whereas Kant thought that noumenal reality is epistemically inaccessible, Schopenhauer believed he had discovered a back door to knowledge of the thing-in-itself, a way from the *inside*. Although we learn about objects in the world indirectly, through mediated perception, we have an insider’s view of our own consciousness, and so know about *ourselves* directly and immediately (WWR 2, 192). That aspect of our inner nature which we intuit in this way is what Schopenhauer calls “Will”, and he thinks it is characterized by constant striving, by a panoply of desires from which we can only ever be temporarily relieved. In particular, these are the desires essential to maintaining and propagating life—the desire to live, to feed and drink, to reproduce, etc. So, among all of the things which we perceive, our Will is the one which we know most immediately.³

² Citations of WWR 1 are to the recent Cambridge edition; of WWR 2, the Dover edition translated by E.F.J. Payne.

³ In Schopenhauer’s terms, our access to the Will is subject to the form of time but not that of space, since we have immediate access to it from within ourselves.

It is at this point that Schopenhauer invokes Platonic Ideas (also called ‘Forms’ today). Although he himself claims that his use of the term ‘Idea’ is faithful to “the divine [Plato’s]” (WWR 1, 8) original usage (WWR 1, 154), in many respects he steers closer to Kant’s ‘thing-in-itself’.⁴ According to Plato, the Idea of a thing is its timeless essence—a dog’s *dogness*, for example, or a triangle’s *triangularity*. Every individual object or entity has a measure of several different Ideas in it; Elsewhere the dilute calico, for example, has some quintessentially catlike attributes, some paradigmatically beautiful qualities, exhibits a measure of *greyness*, etc. But she isn’t *catness* personified, and she is *beautiful*, not Beauty itself; she represents a particular instance of those universal Ideas, no more and no less. She is constantly changing, whereas *catness* and Beauty are eternal. And that is why Plato thought that our epistemic access to the essence of the world is flawed: it necessarily proceeds inductively from particular instances of the Ideas, each of which paints an incomplete picture of its underlying essence.

But Schopenhauer identifies *Will* as the essence of all things, as *the* noumenal reality. Like Kant, then, and unlike Plato, he is a monist: there is only one thing-in-itself, and it is Will; but it manifests (‘objectifies’) itself in many different ways. Beauty, catness, and greyness are just *concepts* which we derive by abstracting from the information given to us in perception. Concepts are the result of our attempts to impose rational, scientific order on the world; they are a heuristic device, nothing more. The *Idea* of a thing, however, is its mind-independent essence, and he departed from Kant in thinking that it *was* epistemically accessible—through intuition, rather than by means of rational deliberation.

Will is lack, pain, and therefore suffering; it is desire, and desire is never sated, only postponed. The satiation of one desire brings only fleeting release, because the satiated desire is replaced by an infinite number of new forms, all clamouring to be heard. Otherwise, when the desires are quiet, the

⁴ See Hein (1966) and Constanzo (2020) for detailed investigations of the extent of Schopenhauer’s Platonism.

human being is afflicted with a “terrible emptiness and boredom” such that “its essence and its being itself become an intolerable burden to it” (WWR 1, 338). Boredom is an interstitial emotion, one we experience in between the satiation of one desire and the drive to satisfy another. We could ask why this is so, but the answer lies right before us: it is this striving which keeps us in motion, keeps us alive—but “when existence is secured, [we] do not know what to do” (WWR 1, 339) any more, and fall prey to boredom, which we make every effort to stave off by “killing time” (WWR 1, 339). As Martin Thomas puts it, to be bored is to “experience the ‘pressure of the will’” without also having some particular motive for it to fix on (2014: 77). But while the Will’s influence is totalizing, Schopenhauer nevertheless believed that art offers us a partial escape from its demands. During moments of aesthetic contemplation, he argues, we sometimes break free—however momentarily—from the Will’s influence. We can pursue any number of activities to relieve this boredom, but non-mental activities are typically instrumental, and thus throw us back into the clutches of the Will. Many different kinds of mental activity will work to stave off boredom, but aesthetic experiences are special insofar as they involve intense focus directed towards no particular end. The degree of mental exertion involved thus shields us from the pressure of the will.⁵ It is to such moments that we must now turn our attention.

3. Aesthetic Experiences

Some of us can rise above this lot, although so doing leaves us lonely and more susceptible to greater suffering (WWR 1, 340). We can achieve this freedom in moments of aesthetic contemplation, when the phenomenon, the veil of *māyā*, no longer deceives us, and when the “motives that had previously been so violent lose their power, and in their place, complete cognition of the essence of the world acts as a tranquilizer of the will and leads to resignation, the abandonment not only of life, but of the

⁵ On Schopenhauer’s treatment of boredom, see Fox (2022).

whole will to life” (WWR 1, 280). In this case, one objectification of Will (the artwork) mirrors another (in us), and stills it (WWR 1, 248). And just as a mirror makes it possible for us to see ourselves, so does the artwork make it possible for us to glimpse the Will as the artist has seen it, momentarily free of the infinite play of desires. The viewer loves, but does not covet; enjoys, but does not desire; the viewer is content merely to wait and contemplate. Unfortunately, this experience cannot last, and soon the spell is broken, the viewer thrown back into the world of desire.

Aesthetic experiences, thinks Schopenhauer, have two distinct sides to them: a subjective and an objective side (WWR 1, 219-23).⁶ Consider the experience of seeing the world laid out before your eyes after a hard day’s climb up a mountainside. Your legs are jelly, your thighs are burning, hunger gnaws at your belly and it’s hard to suck in enough air to make up for all the wheezing on the way up. But once you’re at the top and can see the vista before you, ringed by snow-capped peaks, all of that melts away; you stop thinking about the peanut butter sandwich in your bag, or wondering why you ever agreed to this stupid idea in the first place. Instead of collapsing, exhausted, you’re content—for a few moments!—to take in the view, which really is quite spectacular.

I think it’s fair to say that this sort of thing is a commonplace experience, shared by most who have dared to brave a mountain’s slopes on foot. For Schopenhauer, examples like this one showcase the *subjective* side of aesthetic experience: when we are in the grip of an aesthetic experience, our Will disappears—we forget our pains and desires, and are simply content to take it in. In this respect, Schopenhauer follows the long eighteenth-century tradition (from Kant and others) of characterizing aesthetic experiences as *disinterested*; ‘Will-less’, in his terms. But whereas this tradition held up disinterestedness as an evaluative norm governing aesthetic *judgements*, for Schopenhauer the crucial point is that it is *the experience itself*—i.e. the psychological impression—which is disinterested. In other

⁶ On the distinction between objective and subjective aesthetic experiences, see Shapshay (2012). There is also a third kind of beauty which derives from the harmony of the colours used in painting, but this is a subordinate kind of beauty which merely facilitates our apprehension of the Ideas, much as metre, rhyme, and rhythm do in poetry (WWR 2, 422).

words, disinterestedness is a characteristic feature of aesthetic *experiences*, rather than a standard to which aesthetic *judgements* are held. This kind of aesthetic experience is called ‘subjective’ because it is concerned with the (temporary) cessation of the Will in the *experiencer*, the *subject* of the experience.

It is this subjective side of aesthetic experience which has captivated the interest of artists, aestheticians, and critics alike, most prominently composers such as Mahler and Wagner and their followers. Indeed, much ink has been spilled on the subject by critics such as Carl Fuchs, Franz Hueffer, Karl Friedrich Krause, Paul Schneider, and Wilhelm Tapper (Bonds 2014: 217-68).⁷ And it’s easy to see why: on this model, art relieves and releases us from the everyday, it offers us a peace of mind which we cannot otherwise achieve. This gives art a special, elevated status among cultural activities—and some arts, of course, offer us easier or longer-lasting access to this peace of mind than others. In this way, Schopenhauer’s aesthetics lends itself to a hierarchy of the arts, a pastime which has occupied art scholars since Aristotle, but which found a renewed emphasis from the sixteenth century on (see Porter 2009 and Young 2015).

But Schopenhauer thought that there is also an *objective* side to such experiences: these brief moments give us “intuitive apprehension of the Platonic Idea” (WWR 1, 223). In other words, these moments act as direct epistemic conduits to noumenal reality. Platonic Ideas are thus directly perceived in aesthetic experiences, when the Will’s ephemeral distractions are stripped away and we “devote the whole power of our mind to perception,” focusing our attention on the ‘what’ of the thing instead of its relations to us or other things (WWR 1, §34). Much less ink has been spilled on what Schopenhauer characterizes as the objective side of aesthetic experiences, likely because commentators have, until recently, tended to cast doubt on the importance of Plato’s Ideas to

⁷ The elephant in the room here is Eduard Hanslick, who was one of the principal exponents of musical formalism. Although there are clear parallels between Hanslick’s and Schopenhauer’s views on music, the extent to which Hanslick might have been influenced by Schopenhauer is a matter of some debate. See, e.g., Bonds (2014), Landerer and Zangwill (2017), and Sousa (2017).

Schopenhauer's system.⁸ I shall return to the importance of the Ideas in §5 and §6; but first we should consider Schopenhauer's account of artistic genius, since it marks one of his major contributions to aesthetics.

4. Genius

Doubtless part of the appeal of Schopenhauer's aesthetics among artists lies in his valorization of artistic genius. Genius, he thought, consists in the capacity to understand the inner nature of the world independently of the principle of sufficient reason (i.e. independently of the processes of deduction, induction, and inference which characterize our empirical understanding of the world); genius is the ability to intuit the Ideas of things independently of their individual manifestations (WWR 1, 218). And it is true that he thought that some people are better able to do so than others.⁹ But it may come as a surprise to readers to learn that Schopenhauer did not think this ability was in the exclusive purview of a select few—on the contrary, he thought that *all* people¹⁰ possessed this ability in some measure (WWR 1, 218). The proof, he thought, lies in the fact that we all have the capacity to appreciate works of art, to be moved by the beautiful and the sublime, and these are responses which require us to be able to recognize the Ideas being communicated by the artist, at least to some extent (WWR 1, 218 and 275-6). Of course, this does not mean that everyone makes full use of this capacity. Indeed, Schopenhauer was not particularly sanguine about the wider world's ability to fully actualize that potential:

⁸ Magee (1983), for example, suggests that references to the Ideas were tacked on as an afterthought. See also Hein (1966) and Hamlyn (1980), who are skeptical of Schopenhauer's claimed deference to Plato. Chansky (1988), by contrast, argues that the Ideas are the proper objects of metaphysical knowledge, which is achieved through aesthetics—they thus occupy pride of place in Schopenhauer's system.

⁹ Taylor (1987: 49), for example, suggests that Schopenhauer thought of the genius as a step above ordinary humans, just as humans are a higher grade of objectification of the Will than animals. To my mind, this is something of an overstatement, although it is true that Schopenhauer thinks that the genius suffers far more acutely from boredom than ordinary people do, since—much like Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot—mere existence isn't enough to occupy their mental faculties (in this connection, see Fox 2022).

¹⁰ Well, all *men*, at any rate.

the most excellent works of every art, the noblest products of genius, will always and necessarily remain closed books for the obtuse majority, inaccessible to them and separated from them by a wide gulf, just as the society of the prince is inaccessible to the rabble. (WWR 1, 260)

Nevertheless, Schopenhauer believed that what distinguishes the artistic genius from an ordinary person is just that the genius is better able to part the veil of *māyā* and peer into the realm of the thing-in-itself, and to do so for a more sustained period of time (WWR 1, §37).

Artists, for Schopenhauer, “[anticipate] the beautiful *prior to experience*” (WWR 1, 247). They do not extrapolate from experience to draw a kind of inductive inference about what is or is not beautiful; they simply intuit it *a priori* (WWR 1, 247). The artist’s task is to “[allow] us to look into the world through [their] eyes” (WWR 1, 219) because they “[*understand*] *nature’s half-spoken words*” (WWR 1, 248). But the genius sees even deeper, and more completely, than the ordinary artist can: “by virtue of his objectivity the genius with *reflectiveness* perceives all that others do not see. This gives him as a poet the ability to describe nature so clearly, palpably, and vividly, or as a painter, to portray it” (PP 2, §206).

The genius also enjoys more stamina than most. For ordinary people in the throes of an aesthetic experience, the Will and their own relation to it briefly disappears, so that as I’m admiring Kenojuak Ashevak’s *Majestic Owl* (2011), for example, I am no longer cognizant of my erstwhile headache, the growling churn of hunger pangs, or the pressure in my bladder. I can’t look away, I am captivated, dazzled by the contrast between the work’s deceptive simplicity and its sophisticated composition. But the spell is easily—and quickly!—broken; the world of representation reasserts itself as my baby starts to cry (because he’s hungry, or bored, or has soiled his diaper), and just like that my epistemic access to the Idea is severed (WWR 1, 222). The genius, by contrast, is better able to sustain this kind of contemplation, and does so without the aid of a prop (the artwork): they enjoy a kind of “surplus of cognition” which allows them to become a “mirror of the essence of the world” (WWR 1, 209).

But doing so comes at a cost, since in their creative action artists find themselves mirroring the Will itself, so that others may catch a glimpse of its inner workings. The result is that

For [them] that pure, true and profound cognition of the essence of the world becomes a goal in itself: [they come] to a stop there. Hence, this cognition does not become a tranquillizer of the will for [them] [...] for [them], it redeems [them] from life, not forever but rather only momentarily, and it is not yet [their] way out of life, but only an occasional source of comfort within life itself. (WWR 1, 295)

As Dale Jacquette aptly characterizes it, this impressive ability to overcome one's Will—futile as it is—makes the genius into something of an existential hero (2005: 146). No wonder, then, that Schopenhauer's veneration of genius has struck such a chord among artists! In one stroke, it endows them with spectacular gifts, but also helps to explain why their talents may have gone unrecognized by their contemporaries, who are far more nearsighted than they. This heroic conception of genius went largely unchallenged¹¹ until Linda Nochlin (1971) launched feminist aesthetics by observing that our concept of genius is inextricably tied to gendered social norms and systemically oppressive social practices, and offered a powerful structural explanation for unrecognized genius—women's, in particular.¹²

That said, Schopenhauer's genius is also, ideally, something of a naïf—someone who manages to show us a glimpse of the noumenal without necessarily *trying* to do so. As Schopenhauer puts it, the genius “reveals the innermost nature of the world [...] just as a magnetic somnambulist explains things that he has no idea about when awake” (WWR 1, 288).¹³ Doubtless, this is because, as we shall see in §5 and §6, Schopenhauer prizes immediacy of communication, and the artist who consciously tries to

¹¹ Although Nietzsche did deride Wagner's Schopenhauerianism as a convenience for arrogating musical depth; the musician acts as “an oracle, a priest, indeed more than a priest—a kind of mouthpiece of the “in itself” of things, a telephone from the beyond” (GM, 103), so that their output is doubled: they emit music *and* metaphysics.

¹² See also Battersby (1988) for a philosophical genealogy of our concept of genius, including Schopenhauer's role in developing and promulgating it. Interestingly, Battersby reports that Schopenhauer's mother was a writer of no little acclaim herself, although his jealousy of her success led to a permanent falling out (1988, 110).

¹³ This remark is about composers, but context makes it clear Schopenhauer has more than just run-of-the-mill composers in mind.

communicate an insight into the Will necessarily makes use of concepts as intermediaries. This is why, as we shall see, Schopenhauer thought that music stood above the other arts (and composers above other artists): because music has managed to shed the shackles of spatial constraints and representations, and is governed only by the form of time (WWR 1, 288 and WWR 2, 455).

5. The hierarchy of the arts

The purpose of art, for Schopenhauer, is to facilitate knowledge of the Platonic Ideas, as they are objectified through the Will (WWR 1, 269, 279, 284; WWR 2, 422; see also Chansky 1988: 76). The difference between the various arts, he thought, has to do with the grades at which the Will objectifies the Ideas being expressed (i.e. how easy it is to come to know the essence of the Will through the Idea expressed) (WWR 1, 279; see also Taylor 1987: 46). The quality of our aesthetic experiences also depends on the grade of the Will's objectification: low grades yield only the freedom from suffering that characterizes the subjective side of aesthetic experience, whereas high grades offer us the objective apprehension of the thing-in-itself (WWR 1, 212; see also Chansky 1988: 77-8). Schopenhauer thus elaborates a hierarchy of the arts, based on the degree of their objectification of the Will and the complexity of the Ideas expressed therein, so that the more completely an art form objectifies the Will, and the more complex the Idea it conveys, the higher it sits in the hierarchy.

Architecture, for example, is at the very bottom of this hierarchy because (1) it exists primarily for *practical* purposes, and these tend to dominate the expression of the artform, and (2) because the Ideas which it conveys all pertain to spatial relations—gravity, cohesion, rigidity, and light—and thus are not very far removed from the principle of sufficient reason, meaning that they exist at very low grades of the Will's objectivity (WWR 1, 239-41; WWR 2, 455.). Fountainry (i.e. the design and emplacement of fountains; perhaps also aqueducts, water features, and the like) is in the same boat,

except that it connects the Idea of gravity to *fluidity* rather than rigidity, and to formlessness and transparency rather than determinate extension (WWR 1, 243).¹⁴

Unlike the plastic arts, architecture and fountainry offer us the object itself, rather than a representation of it (WWR 1, 243). Now, one might think that this is a *good* thing, since it means that we are directly perceiving a thing rather than seeing it mediated by someone else's perception. But while it is true that we are presented with the object itself, the problem is that this object appeals to our Will—it offers shelter, etc.—and thus remains, in its presentation, in thrall to the principle of sufficient reason. There is consequently less room for the *objective* presentation of the Ideas undergirding it, since these Ideas are necessarily shackled to a form built to serve specific real-world purposes which are intimately tied to the Will. This means that while architecture can overawe us fairly easily—its subjective aesthetic appeal is on display—it struggles to communicate the Ideas behind it to an extent that other arts do not.

One step higher in the hierarchy is what Schopenhauer calls 'landscape gardening', which we might call, more simply, 'gardening'. The beauty of a garden, of course, depends in large part on the natural objects which are found within (WWR 1, 243). Because these are living matter rather than brute substance, the Ideas which animate them are relatively complex, though not as complex as those found in sentient or sapient life. At the same time, however, there is much less room for the artist to communicate her insight to us, since she must express it using objects with a life and significance of their own. She can pick and choose which plants to plant and arrange them as she wishes, but here again, as with architecture, we find ourselves faced with objects themselves, still tied to the forms of the principle of sufficient reason. The objects of gardening (the plants) stand in for themselves, rather than the Idea of their species. Gardening is thus little more than architecture with more complex Ideas.

¹⁴ Presumably fountainry, unlike architecture, also makes reference to the form of time in addition to that of space.

Moving up the hierarchy, we come to landscape and still life painting. These feature the same kinds of subjects as gardening and thus try to communicate the same Ideas.¹⁵ Unlike gardening, however, painting does not present the object of depiction to us directly; thus, a painted plant does not usually stand for a particular real-life analogue, but rather stands in for the Idea of the species—the Platonic Form of that plant or landscape, if you will. So, although the pleasures derived from this kind of painting are mostly subjective, they have a measure more objectivity than the arts we find lower down the hierarchy (WWR 1, 244).

From landscape painting we move on to animal painting and sculpture, where the objective side of aesthetic appreciation becomes more prominent than the subjective. This is because the Ideas characteristic of the species depicted are made manifest not just in their form (as with plants and raw nature), but also in their actions, gestures, and poses (WWR 1, 244-5). When we look at paintings of plants and landscapes, we see the world through the painter's eyes, free from the (subjective) demands of the Will; we enjoy them primarily for their ability to quiet the Will in us, to grant us a moment of reprieve from its otherwise incessant demands (WWR 1, 244). This is also true, to a certain extent, of depictions of animals; but there, we also see the animal's restlessness and intensity, its striving for life (WWR 1, 244)—its Will, in short. And the Will of the animal is a mirror for our own, although because the animal is not a rational creature, it is wholly driven by it (WWR 1, 245). Put another way, we see depicted plants third-personally, relying on the artist's perception of their Will; but with depicted animals, the artist makes their Will manifest for us in their actions and gestures, thus holding up a mirror to the unadulterated Will that animates *us*. Consequently, to the extent that the plastic arts are better able to capture an animal's characteristic actions and gestures, they are able to communicate Ideas of greater complexity than the visual arts.

¹⁵ With the exception of still lifes depicting prepared food, as was typical of the Dutch tradition, as opposed to the Spanish *bodegón* or Italian *natura morta* paintings. Depictions of prepared food and alcohol, Schopenhauer thought, are more likely to excite the appetite than to convey Ideas (WWR 1, 232).

With historical painting and sculpture, the subjective side of aesthetic pleasure recedes entirely into the background. Animal beauty, thinks Schopenhauer, consists in finding and depicting the most beautiful possible individual expression of the species; but transcendent *human* beauty pushes us immediately to consider beauty itself, divorced from its particular vehicle or the form of its species (WWR 1, 246). “The human body” he tells us, “is a highly complex system of quite different parts, each of which has its *vita propria*, a life subordinate to the whole, yet characteristic” (WWR 1, 247). This makes it the highest grade of the Will’s objectification.

But, to be clear, we should not conflate the fact that historical painting supposedly best communicates Ideas in visual form with art which is designed to express a concept. Art which aims to communicate concepts is mere allegory, according to Schopenhauer. Ideas, remember, are directly perceived and expressed immediately and wholly; allegories, by contrast, are expressed through the medium of *another* thing which suggests them (WWR 1, 246). The result is that to the extent that Ideas are communicated, it is at several removes: what is perceived is not responsible for producing the effect; rather, it is abstract thought which does so. Allegorical works thus often detract from the communication of the Ideas. So much, then, for the hierarchy and value of the visual arts.

It is worth noting that these artworks are directly connected to the form of space, since the material aspect of the plastic arts is all that exists. By the same token, they are *indirectly* connected to the form of time insofar as they depict life *acting* (WWR 2, 455). These depictions are all limited, however, by the fact that they make essential use of concepts to communicate their underlying Ideas—the concept of a horse or tiger, say, or the story of Judith and Holofernes.

Above all these art forms, and at the opposite extreme from architecture, Schopenhauer ranks poetry and the literary arts, notably drama and tragedy, which he thinks gives us access to the most significant Ideas of all (WWR 1, 242, 279-80). Nevertheless, poetry also finds itself inextricably bound up with the forms of space and time, and cannot step outside them—indeed, its interest for us lies

partly in how it manages to make use of the two. This is because its medium is abstract concepts, and the skill in poetry lies in orchestrating concepts in a such a way that they lose their abstract universality and instead come to communicate the poet's perception of the thing-in-itself (WWR 1, 269). To this end, poets mobilize rhythm and rhyme to prime us to their message, and to hold our attention fixed on the poem itself, rather than allowing it wander freely and re-enter into the cycle of desire (WWR 1, 270). Indeed, Schopenhauer thought that allegory is useful to poetry (as opposed to visual art) because poetry can convey allegories directly rather than merely suggesting them and hoping the audience draws the connection (WWR 1, §50; WWR 2, 422-3).

Poetry's reliance on the juxtaposition of abstract concepts means that, compared to the visual arts, it is at a disadvantage when presenting the lower grades of the Will's objectivity, because the inanimate world tends to reveal its nature all at once, in a single, discrete, perceptible event (WWR 1, 270). But when it comes to the higher grades of the Will's objectivity, these do not reveal their inner nature all at once, nor are they necessarily pellucid to sensory perception. The nature of a human being, for example, is not adequately expressed in the statue of a beautiful, muscular nude, such as *Laocoön and His Sons* (c. 200 BCE - 70 CE), attributed to Agesander, Athenodoros, and Polydorus. In order to capture the essence of humanity, art needs to have recourse to the expression of actions, emotions, and thoughts—which is precisely why poetry is at a distinct advantage, since it does not rely on expressing itself through a single static object (WWR 1, 270). Poetry is limited in its range of expression, however, by the fact that it depends necessarily on interpolating our own experience as a key to understanding it (WWR 1, 271).

There is one exception to this hierarchy and its limitations, however, one art form which Schopenhauer thinks has shed the constraining influence of space altogether, and which has no need for concepts to convey its Ideas: music.

6. Music

Music stands entirely outside Schopenhauer's hierarchy of the arts. This is because music, he thought, does not copy any Ideas at all; rather, it is a direct copy of the Will itself (WWR 1, 283 and 289-91). A violinist plucks her strings to make us feel the joy or melancholy of the music; likewise, says Schopenhauer, "In real life and its terrors our will itself is that which is roused and tormented... we ourselves are now the vibrating string that is stretched and plucked" (WWR 2, 452). But music also differs from the other arts in that it is *immediately* understood by *everyone* (WWR 1, 283-4); it acts directly on our emotions, whereas painting, sculpture, and the other arts can only do so through the intermediary of concepts (WWR 2, 450-1). So, for example, to understand Jacques-Louis David's peerless painting, *Napoleon Crossing the St. Bernard* (1801-05), viewers need to recognize that the figure depicted is Napoleon, they need to know who Napoleon was, they need to know what the St. Bernard is and why crossing it is such a big deal, and it would help them to understand the picture if they also knew a little about the Second Punic War and Hannibal's signature achievements in that conflict. To understand Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, by contrast, all one need do is listen to it. Music, then, is entirely independent of the phenomenal world, it stands as a direct representation of the whole of the Will itself (WWR 1, 284-5).

Indeed, Schopenhauer thought that the very structure of music echoed the gradations of the Will's objectification: the melody stands as the highest grade of the Will's objectification, while the bass notes of the harmony anchor its lower grades (WWR 1, 285-6). And just as human Will is characterized by a constant progression from desire to satisfaction and back to desire again, so too is the melody:

Now the essence of a human being consists in the fact that his will strives, is satisfied, and strives anew, and so on and on [...]; correspondingly, the essence of the melody is a constant departure, deviation from the tonic in a

thousand ways [...], always followed however by an eventual return to the tonic. (WWR 1, 287)¹⁶

Music's succession of chords thus mirrors the succession of satisfaction and desire which characterizes the Will's operation on and in the world (WWR 2, 456).

Yet we must be careful not to lump all music together. Some music, after all, is purely instrumental, while other music has vocal and lyrical accompaniments; and even among pure instrumental music, some of it is representational (e.g. Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*), while some is not (e.g. Rachmaninoff's, *Symphony No. 1 in D minor Op. 13* [1895]). The introduction of lyrics—poetry, as Schopenhauer typically calls it—is really the introduction of concepts and Ideas into the composition and, thus, the dilution of its direct representation of the Will, of the work's communicative immediacy.¹⁷

Accordingly, music is *independent* of poetry, although the two are often intermixed, as in song or opera (WWR 2, 448).¹⁸ But even when the two are packaged together, Schopenhauer thought that 'the words' are just of secondary value (WWR 2, 449). The true value of music, he thought, is to be found in its ability to play on our emotional responses without recourse to real objects, to actually *communicate* pain or joy directly (WWR 1, 292). Thus, the music, as it is represented in the work's score, exists independently of the song and its lyrics (WWR 2, 449).

It is worth pausing here for a moment, because this point is of particular historical interest. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were a tumultuous time in musical history, due in no small part to the development of accurate musical notation. The period culminated in a number of significant attitudinal and conceptual changes among audiences, chief among them a new conception

¹⁶ For an analysis of Schopenhauer's musings on musicology, see Ferrara (1996).

¹⁷ Kant, by contrast, took a dimmer view of instrumental pure music, because without the use of words and concepts, it cannot adequately engage the understanding ([1790] 1987: 193-5 and 198-200). Kant is not clear whether he considers it a fine art at all, as opposed to an art of the agreeable. In this connection, see Matherne (2014).

¹⁸ See also WWR 1, 289, where Schopenhauer asserts that music and poetry employ different languages.

of music as featuring standalone, repeatable works. Until this point, music was primarily—though not exclusively—consumed as an accompaniment to something else, whose appreciation took pride of place, and was composed for particular occasions, such as dinner parties or church services. In other words, music was primarily conceived as a background accompaniment to conversation, dance, poetry, religious worship, etc.¹⁹

Because it was composed for particular occasions, music was not much repeated, especially not for different occasions (though particular passages were frequently borrowed for new occasions). Repetition was likewise hampered by the absence of an accurate score for the piece. The result was that music was seldom appreciated for its own sake, and composers enjoyed relatively little acclaim.²⁰ In the absence of a score, the work's performers were free to complete or interpret passages as they saw fit, and enjoyed greater prominence. With the advent of accurate notation, musical works became capable of outlasting their performances and being reproduced for new occasions. The result was increased admiration of particular composers, who now composed music for its own independent enjoyment rather than for some particular patron or occasion, as well as the payment of more focused attention to the musical work and its performance.

In Lydia Goehr's terms, our musical work-concept began to acquire regulative force at the close of the eighteenth century, and it quickly came to govern musical appreciation and practices. With the advent of this new work-concept, everything about our appreciative practices and performance standards changed, including the significance attributed both to musical works and to their composers. We thus find Schopenhauer at a critical juncture in music history, an early exponent of the musical work-concept as we understand it today. Schopenhauer thus set the stage for the contemporary ontology of music, which has largely focused on instrumental pure music, and in which Platonism,

¹⁹ These observations come from Goehr (1992: 176 and 148-202).

²⁰ With some exceptions, such as Josquin; see J. Young (2005).

which maintains that musical works are abstract entities existing independently of their scores, is the dominant view.²¹

It should come as no great surprise that Schopenhauer believed that to the extent that a musical work imitates the Will, composers should not deliberately seek to do so with their music. This is because any such conscious attempt to communicate or replicate the Will will proceed by means of concepts and instead reproduce its *representations*, thus failing to directly express the Will itself (WWR 1, 291). This is what happens whenever music—or, indeed, any art—seeks to represent facets of the world. Clearly, Schopenhauer was not just an early champion of ‘absolute’ music; he would (or *should*) have been a fan of non-representational works of visual art, too, had he lived to see the twentieth century. Non-representational art, such as Rothko’s colour-fields, Pollock’s drip paintings, or Barbara Hepworth’s pierced forms don’t seek to communicate the Ideas of particular things; like instrumental pure music, they communicate directly and without relying on real objects as an intermediary for conveying Ideas.²² Non-representational art, he would have thought, is a pure expression of Will.

7. Conclusion

We can see, then, that Schopenhauer’s influence on aesthetics and art history has been considerable, if often indirect. His ideas are in large part responsible for our contemporary musical work-concept, for the philosophical emphasis on instrumental pure music, and for shaping a dominant—if problematic—view of artistic genius. Notice, however, that his influence lies more in the gist of his theories, rather than in the particulars. We can now see why that is: the details are rooted in a particular view of the world and its nature which is not widely shared. It is easy enough to get composers and

²¹ See, e.g., Wollheim (1968), Wolterstorff (1980), Levinson (1980), Kivy (1983), Davies (2001), and Dodd (2007).

²² Non-representational art should be distinguished from *abstract* art, which *does* represent objects, even if it doesn’t aim for verisimilitude.

musicians to agree that music is incredibly important—perhaps even the *most* important art form. But it is another matter entirely to get them to concede that music copies the Will!

I hope I have shown that there is a great deal that is of interest—especially of historical interest—in Schopenhauer’s aesthetics. It should also be clear, however, that Schopenhauer’s aesthetics are intimately tied to the system he developed, and they do not travel as well outside that system as within it. Schopenhauer’s aesthetics are bound up in his metaphysics, and so rely on his readers sharing the same basic intuitions he has about the essence of the world. As we have seen, his aesthetics is also inextricably coupled to his account of the Platonic Ideas. Although this kind of Platonism has fallen out of fashion, elements of it are still dominant in certain corners of contemporary aesthetics, especially where the art in question is multiply realizable. The ontology of art is charged with the difficult task of untangling the mess of more or less arbitrary social practices and conventions which have haphazardly congealed into the modern-day artworld and its institutions. I hope that at least one of these historical threads has become a little less knotty.

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