

Esthetic Interpretants: Pragmaticism, Semiotics, and the Meaning of Art

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“The work of the poet or novelist is not so utterly
different from that of the scientific man.”

– Charles S. Peirce, “A Guess at the Riddle”,

The Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce CP 1.383

(Peirce 1931-58)

Abstract

This paper studies Charles Peirce’s theory of esthetics from the point of view of his philosophy of pragmaticism and the theory of signs. Esthetics is shown to be a theory of general habits of feeling, which requires introducing the notion of an esthetic interpretant. An argument is presented which establishes that Peirce’s theory of signs and pragmaticism are fundamental theories about the esthetic meaning to the works of art.

Key words: Pragmaticism, Semiotics, Theory of Signs, Charles Peirce, Esthetics, Meaning, Art, Interpretant.

1.

My essay addresses a certain, somewhat complicated issue in Charles Peirce's philosophy of aesthetics and the semiotics of art. The general point I wish to communicate is that Peirce's overall philosophy and the theory of meaning – generally referred to as *pragmatism* – is much more relevant to the question of the meaning of the works of art than what has been recognised by the earlier commentators of his work. Pragmatism is also a theory differing sharply from the pragmatism of William James and most other philosophers and semioticians. I shall moreover argue that pragmatism is relevant to the meaning of art in ways not fully appreciated even by Peirce himself in his written works.

But first, a little bit of background. Peirce's pragmatism is a general theory of meaning of intellectual signs, concepts, and purports. Its point is the following: in order to arrive at the highest clarity of meaning of our intellectual signs, concepts and purports, we need to look at how sign-external practices contribute to the meaning. For example, if I want to know what is meant by the word 'good' in calling something or someone by that name, I should observe how that concept is used in various situations and at various times and occasions. According to Peirce, such observations are not unlike scientists' observations concerning the results of their experiments conducted according to the generally accepted scientific methods and practices of an appropriate kind.

Now perhaps Peirce simply was not very interested in applying his pragmatism to the shadowy questions concerning the meaning of art. He might well have believed that the subject matter of his general theory of meaning readily accommodates, or at least can be reasonably extended to be able to accommodate, all forms of artworks. But being so occupied with a number of more pressing issues such as developing new logics and pursuing actual scientific

inquiry, he did not spend much time on dwelling on esthetics or esthetic meaning. According to his own testimony, he was “lamentably ignorant of” and “a perfect ignoramus in”, the study of esthetics as a form of science (CP 3.120; CP 5.111).¹ Yet he seems to have thought art as one of those human issues that are not the “vitally important topics” (CP 1.649-677), and thus not beyond the reach of reason and science. At any event, however, he kept his comments on the philosophy of art in the minimum.

Let us also emphasise at the outset that Peirce’s esthetics – which he consistently spelled with ‘e’ and not with ‘ae’ – has certainly been a subject of much research before (see e.g. Anderson, 1986, Lefevbre, 2007, and the many papers collected in Parrett, 1994, especially Barnouw ,1994). However, the focus of previous research has been on the clearing of the nature of esthetics as the ‘first’ of the normative sciences. (The second is ethics and the third logic.) That is, the questions that have been posed have been of the following kind: Why is esthetics a normative science in the first place? Why do logic and ethics come after esthetics in Peirce’s classification of the sciences? Or even: What might Peirce have thought of esthetic *experience*? I think these questions do not quite go to the heart of the matter.

It is equally apposite to accentuate the fact that Peirce’s esthetics is not concerned with the same topics and issues at all as that of contemporary aesthetics. Peirce actually defined esthetics, and pretty non-standardly as that, as “the theory of the deliberate formation of habits of feeling” (CP 1.574). This notion of *habits of feeling* is central to the proper understanding of what Peirce intended to accomplish with the pragmatistic approach to esthetics. It is this notion of habits of feeling I will be focussing on in the present work.

¹ The standard abbreviation CP is used to refer to Peirce (1931-58) followed by volume and paragraph number.

At all events, the terminological oddity of ‘esthetics’ versus ‘aesthetics’, it seems to me, has sent many later investigations in the Peircean interpretation of the meaning of art somewhat to the sidetracks. As a consequence, the place of the study of the esthetic meaning of art has been unduly framed within that normative context. In reality, however, esthetics does not exclusively pertain to that compartment. Pragmaticism of art sports notable practical dimensions, values and interests, which do not fall under the domain of the sciences of discovery.

Such a framing is understandable, however, because in the published corpus nearly all of Peirce’s few remarks on esthetics take place within the context of normative sciences. According to his classification of the sciences (see Pietarinen, 2006, for more details), for instance, normative sciences are the sciences of discovery (or “heuristic” sciences), and thus esthetics has likewise been conceived in that context. But the creation of artwork pertains to “practical sciences”, the third branch of all sciences. (The first category in the classification is the science of discovery and the second the “science of review”.) Practical sciences have to do with ordinary activities of human beings in their everyday life. Unlike other sciences, their purpose is not to discover in the sense of hypothesis formulation (Pietarinen, 2006). Esthetics is, Peirce explains, neither strictly practical science nor strictly part of philosophy, and thus cannot exclusively be an heuristic form of science (CP 2.266). But esthetics is not solely a normative one, either, given that the “study of esthetics will be of benefit to an artist” (CP 2.201).

Therefore, I would like to suggest that we should look into new ways of applying Peirce’s philosophy of pragmaticism to the field of art studies. At the same time, we would do well to attempt to develop his own ideas further and to the directions that he himself did not or may have been reluctant to go. The

present paper enters into my larger research plan concerning the overall range of pragmatism. In what follows, then, I will present and go through one argument in the line of this larger research plan but in the specific relation to esthetics and the meaning of art.

2.

The main question boils down to this: Peirce's pragmatism is supposed to be a theory of meaning for all intellectual signs. Presumably, this ought to include the works of art of all kinds. But specifically what is the *esthetic* in the meaning of artwork, from the point of view of pragmatism? Notice that we are not interested here in esthetic *experience*, unlike for instance the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey was as illustrated by his notable 1934 book *Art as Experience*. No, we are interested in esthetic meaning, which is an entirely different ballpark from esthetic experience.

Skeletonised, my answer runs along the following lines:

- (i) Signs are vehicles of communication.
- (ii) Art is a form of communication.
- (iii) Art has meaning and purpose because, among other systems of signs, art functions as a system of signs. It functions as a system of signs because it interprets information that we acquire in experience.
- (iv) Artwork can have objects through interpretants.
- (v) Such 'esthetic' interpretants by which art can have objects aim at answering *how*-questions rather than *wh*-questions.
- (vi) Lastly, 'Final esthetic interpretants' are *habits of feeling* and thus general; they are species of habits of action associated with the creation of artwork.

The conclusion that we arrive at is a paraphrase of Peirce's famous assertion that esthetics is a normative study of "ideals *qua* ideals". In other words, esthetics is scientific inquiry on the subject matter of what is "most admirable in itself regardless of any ulterior reason" (CP 1.611). The proper pursuit of such inquiry, I will argue, is in the need of the introduction of the concept of a 'final esthetic interpretant'. This is in line with the emergence of 'final logical interpretants' in Peirce's pragmatistic theory of signs.

The main thrust here is that the above argument schema (i)–(vi) involves the reasoning implicit in Peirce's sporadic remarks on esthetics. Two important general points of note therefore are that the argument (a) adopts the key assumptions of pragmatism, such as those that establish signs as vehicles of communication (we will not be concerned with this point much further, but see Pietarinen, 2009b), and that (b) it requires the addition of the notion of an 'esthetic interpretant' which Peirce did not care to have. The argument moreover introduces the notion of 'final esthetic interpretant', which falls naturally from the sign-theoretic approach (semeiosis) to meaning. Thus the existence of 'esthetic interpretants' is assumed as the core notion of all art, where art is conceived as a form of communication.

3.

Let us look at the steps involved in the aforementioned argumentation a bit more closely.

(i) *Signs are vehicles of communication.*

This statement is readily justified by the textual evidence from Peirce's manuscripts. He states that the purpose of signs is to

“communicate ideas” (Peirce, 1967, MS 283: 101, 1905) and that signs are “a species of being the mediators of communication” (MS 283: 106).

All communication is based on signs, since Peirce took communication to be an interpretative activity not confined to channeling or coding of information from one agent to another or between communities of inquirers. Thus forms of art constitute systems to which the theory of signs is applicable.

- (ii) If all forms of art are signs and their interpretations, then art is a form of communication. Now all forms of art are signs and their interpretation. Attest, for instance, Peirce’s remark that “the performance of a piece of concerted music is a sign. It conveys, and is intended to convey, the composer’s musical ideas” (CP 5.475). Therefore, *art is a form of communication.*
- (iii) If artifacts of art are to have any meaning, they must function as sign systems. Art functions as a sign system if it interprets information that we acquire in experience. Art interprets information acquired in experience. I take this latter statement to be self-evident. Therefore, *art has meaning and purpose because it functions as a system of signs.*
- (iv) *Artwork can have objects through interpretants.*

All signs have objects. Artifacts of art are signs. Thus artifacts of art have objects.

Two supplementary comments to this argument are in order:

(a) Objects need not be actual and the signs they are objects to need not have an interpreter actually present (EP 2: 478). Meaningful art can lack either an actual object or an actual interpreter or both. Alternatively, both actual objects and actual interpreters can exist even if artwork does not determine them. Pragmatistic meaning is determined in relation to

possible, virtual and imagined interpreters, and the object of a sign is the purpose of the interpretation proportional to the information that signs permit interpreters to acquire in experience.

(b) The extreme scholastic realism – namely the metaphysical view supported by Peirce according to which what could possible is real – applies to the meaning of art just as it does to other kinds of signs.²

Objects need not exhaust the meaning of art. Interpretants can vary and thus the objects can change with the variation accordingly.

Therefore, in art research, Peirce’s sign theory is not concerned with esthetic experience. Rather, his sign theory concerns the clarification of the nature of interpretants that can have esthetic dimensions.

Let me note that Zeman (1977) has aimed at associating Peirce’s notion of the “emotional interpretant” with that of an esthetic interpretation. I think this is misplacement since it confuses the question of what is emotional with what Peirce meant by feeling and habits of feeling.

(v) *Such esthetic interpretants aim at answering **how**-questions rather than **wh**-questions about the works of art.*

This statement is more or less self-explanatory. Examples of such questions are: What are the thought processes that art intends to exemplify and represent? What kind of intellectual activity is associated with all forms of art? What is the nature and import of the processes of creation connected with the artifacts of art? Answering such questions is the goal of the pragmatistic theory of esthetic meaning.

(vi) *‘Final esthetic interpretant’ is a habit of feeling and thus a general.*

²Mayorga (2007) is a comprehensive recent study of Peirce’s scholastic realism.

In other words, esthetic meaning is a species of a habit of action associated with the creation of artwork.

By beginning with the nature of signs as serving the function of communication, we have thus arrived at the conclusion that expresses the pragmatistic meaning of the works of art.

Let us justify this conclusion further with the following three supplementary remarks.

(a) Peirce states that “esthetic valuation” is “a *virtual* factor of a duly rationalized purport” (CP 5.535). I suggest interpreting this idea such as to mean that esthetic considerations and contemplations are always involved, more or less intensely, in the formation of pragmatistic meaning, though such considerations and contemplations need not be present in any singular, actual application of intellectual concepts and signs. Esthetic meaning can be realised in virtual, possible applications and possible interpretations of what may or could be the case in interpreting, conceiving and enjoying art. Again, esthetic valuation being a “virtual factor” is an expression of an instance of *scholastic realism* in which pragmatism favourably reposes. This is to say that there is generality in esthetic valuation, and such generality is a real ingredient in nature. Generality is found in the habits of feeling in a certain way in certain kinds of situations. In the context of the present argument, the habits of feeling refer to the situations and possibilities that involve exposures to various forms of art.

(b) Esthetic valuation is *normative*, because in order to produce actions of a suitable kind, there must be a system of rules that governs the applications of general habits of feeling. I have argued for a related point in length in Pietarinen (2009a). Of course, what these rules governing the actions in the realm of esthetics actually are is a hard question to answer. Nevertheless, an argument for

their existence that is implicated in my remarks is sufficient to reach a better understanding of what esthetic meaning according to Peirce's pragmatism is intended to amount to.

(c) In an important unpublished manuscript of 1905 entitled "The Basis of Pragmatism", Peirce tells us that "habits, so to call them, must be capable of being modified according to some *ideal* in the mind of the controlling agent" (MS 280). Now such habits are rules for thinking about, and thus rules for proper conduct concerning, the meaning of signs. Habits are modified with reference to the purpose or ideal that an agent has in mind, but such an ideal is at the same time a part or a feature of a *controlled* habit, a habit that has to do with feeling and not solely with thinking or action.

Therefore, the habits of feeling that 'final esthetic interpretants' give rise to are controlled and self-controlled. And over and above a control of any deliberate kind, habits of feeling need to be controlled with respect to themselves, as well as controlled with respect to those habits that criticise the forms of self-control (CP 1.574). "When one reasons, it is that critical self that one is trying to persuade", Peirce comments in CP 5.421. This makes esthetic interpretation a rational activity, free from singular accidents of particular human minds that are performing esthetic valuations in actual interpretive situations. Esthetic interpretation involves reasoning, but that reasoning is not only a conscious, self-controlled action directed towards the goal of ideals, but of the nature of "taking a habit" (CP 5.440). Taking a habit is a rule-governed feeling of a certain kind. Ideals, on the other hand, "must be" (CP 1.574) generals, habits of feeling in certain ways in certain kinds of situations. And from Peirce's standpoint, it is the *theory* of such formation, acquisition and modification of habits of feeling that defines the identity of the scientific study of esthetics.

We may observe from these scant comments that habits of feeling are what from the metaphysical point of view must be seen as ‘many-world’ entities. They do not pertain to the actual world only. They link situations to possible states of affairs and to the future. Not all action that art actually produces in the actual world of its extant interpreters can be fully conducive to the understanding of its meaning. For otherwise there would be no worse or better ways of conceiving, interpreting and appreciating art.

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On balance, it needs to be stated that the actions that such habits of feeling relate with those situations in which we are exposed to forms of art, and in which esthetic interpretants and thus meanings are created, will need a *phenomenological* explication in order to be more comprehensively accounted for. (In Peirce’s terms such explication is a “phaneroscopic” one, see CP 1.284.) The actions taken according to, and being guided by, the habits of feeling concern objects phenomenological rather than those of reality. In the confines of the present paper, however, I will not venture into the phaneroscopic issues to do with the transformation of final esthetic interpretants to those of habits of feeling.

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