Imagining metaphors: cognitive representation in interpretation and understanding

Brouwer, E.C.

Citation for published version (APA):
Aesthetical afterthoughts

La fortune des poésies ressemble beaucoup à celle de ces horoscopes dérisoires qu’une sorte de messagers magnifique pose sur les tables des consommateurs aux terrasses des cafés.
Francis Ponge

1 Metaphorical interpretation and metaphors

Metaphorical interpretation, I concluded above, is not specific for the interpretation of metaphor. Metaphorical interpretation involves the productive combination of representations within interpretation, just as other acts of concept formation do. However, what is different in the case of interpreting metaphors is the status of the utterance. A metaphor, or rather a creative metaphor, is an utterance that could violate normal rules, but is nevertheless accepted as an appropriate utterance on the grounds that it is a metaphor. That is, a metaphor is an utterance that is somehow recognizably different from others.

Whether an utterance is to be accepted as a normal one, as a metaphor, or is to be discarded as unacceptable is to large extent dependent on the context in which it is interpreted. Thus, insofar as the context of an interpretation is given

277 Francis Ponge ‘Prospectus distribués par un fantôme’ in Proèmes
by the discourse in which the utterance occurs, social norms may determine the nature of the utterance.

I observed in the first chapter that there are conventional means of indicating that an utterance is a metaphor. Metaphors can be made recognizable through stylistic properties, through their 'non-standard' relation to the context, or even through an explicit indication that an expression is used metaphorically. In other words, there are some formal properties of an utterance that, in a given situation, may indicate that metaphorical interpretation is in order.

Further, we saw that utterances that are not immediately recognizable as metaphors could be interpreted metaphorically, if a different context of interpretation was construed. I did this for the example 'Wolves live in herds', but also for the example of the child that calls a toothbrush 'dog', by assuming that the child and the teacher were just previously discussing the quality of fur of dogs and cats.

In its original context the child's utterance was not considered as a metaphor, but as a mistake, due to our attitude towards the child as a speaker. This attitude towards the child can be summed up as: 'You are learning language, and this is not how we normally use the word 'dog'.' We are interested in the child's capacity to reproduce a conventional use of language, and are not open for any creative act on its part.278

The crucial distinction between the child in this example and the example in which a mother calls her son a pig, is that we think the mother could have said 'You are filthy' had she wanted to, while we do not trust the child of the initial example in its choice of words. In the child's case, we assume the teacher's point of view that the child is too ignorant to present a witty (but somewhat odd) metaphor. This suggests that an utterance only acquires the status of metaphor when we assume (correctly or incorrectly) that it is intentionally produced as such. Consequently, there is a pitfall in the intentional characterization of metaphor: if metaphors become what they are through speaker's intentions, any utterance that is produced accidentally, or, for example, by a machine, could not count as metaphor. The same goes for utterances that are interpreted as metaphors, but were not intended as such, such as the example 'Wolves live in herds' discussed above. Still, in this case, we would not have wanted to say that the utterance actually was a metaphor, at least not until someone reported a possible metaphorical interpretation. Thus, a

278 Examples of instances where this pedagogic attitude is mistakenly adopted are abundant, as every parent knows. Renilde Montessori, for instance, describes a case where a child draws a green cow. The teacher tells him that green cows don't exist. 'But that why I made one' is the child's answer (cf. Montessori[2000]).
context may be construed in which an utterance can be presented and accepted as a metaphor, independent from the original intentions of the utterer.

To recognize an utterance as a metaphor, then, is something different than to interpret it metaphorically. The first is part of social interaction, involving, for example, an estimation of intentions and capacities on the part of the speaker, while the second is an act of understanding. The difference between metaphorical interpretation and the interpretation of a metaphor has been noted previously. Gibbs, for instance, distinguishes between the intentional strategy of interpreting an utterance as a metaphor, an act of what he calls 'metaphorical processing', and the processing of a metaphor. Although he calls metaphorical processing a 'general mode of understanding', he does not provide a more specific description of it than that it 'might not be just a special literary strategy employed only by certain readers when interpreting texts'.

In chapter 3 above, I suggested that this strategy of metaphorical processing be identified as a general mode of understanding, as outlined in section 4 of that chapter. That is, 'metaphorical processing' is the capacity to structurally embed a given expression in a network of imaginative representations that are triggered on the basis of the context of interpretation. As we saw in chapter 1, in the interpretation of poetic metaphor it is the interpreter who finds a context of interpretation for the utterance, and thereby considers the utterance as 'text proper'. However, we also established that such an interpretation could be triggered by formal, or stylistic properties of the text in question. The presentation of the metaphor then indicates that it belongs to a poetic genre, and thereby invites an imaginative interpretation. Thus the utterance does have a context, namely a poetic one.

Generally speaking, a poetic context belongs to the realm of the aesthetic. In the following section I first consider the notion of disinterested reflection, derived from Kant's account of aesthetic interpretation. As I generalize the understanding of aesthetic reflection to the extent that it underlies any act of conceptualization, this feature seems to be the one remaining possible characteristic that would pertain to the interpretation of poetic text, or more

---

279 There is quite some literature on the dynamics of social acceptance of metaphors. For example Cacciari[1998] discusses how the use of metaphor may create a sense of 'in-groupness', that is when such utterances are comprehensible but to those who share some information about one another's knowledge, beliefs, intentions or history. Thus, accepting a metaphor may enhance the intimacy of a conversation, as well as only serve to exclude uninformed participants from the conversation (p 141 Cacciari[1998]). Another, earlier discussion of intimacy is conducted by Ted Cohen, who in Cohen[1978] emphasizes that metaphors need not be made 'respectable' on account of their possible cognitive value alone, since they do also have an important social value (as well as, possibly, an aesthetic one).

280 Gibbs[1998] p 113
generally, of art. I consider how Kant's analysis of objective disinterestedness presents a model for the proper attitude of interpretation, and hence is taken to be the normal response to recognizing an object as art or poetry.

In section 3 I then consider how objects of art or poetic text may be recognized, by a discussion of the different types of conventions that have been proposed in aesthetics as being constitutive for the object of art or poetry. That is I discuss some answers to the tedious question: 'What is art?'. In this discussion, it will become clear that none of these attempts provide a definition of what art is, but that all have some relevance for its characterization. Thus, although it is the interpreter's response to what is presented as poetic that in the end determines how a text is interpreted, such interpretation is not independent of conventional values and an established practice regarding the interpretation of art or poetry.

In the final section, I reconsider how such conventions and established practice of dealing with art and poetry influence the process of interpretation. I thereby return to Ricoeur's theory of metaphorical interpretation, which he uses to characterize poetic interpretation generally. His analysis conforms to a Kantian model of aesthetic interpretation, since it appeals to the use of productive imagination and is characterized by objective disinterestedness. I argue that this analysis ignores how conventional aspects of a poetic context play a role in interpretation. The disinterested, imaginative mode of interpretation, I suggest, presents a model for poetic interpretation. Thus, Ricoeur's analysis describes a conventionally proper attitude to approach poetic text, rather than that it reflects the actual response to a text that is recognized as poetic. I conclude that the notion of free, disinterested aesthetic interpretation, insofar as it is taken by different authors to characterize the interpretation of art and poetry, idealizes how such interpretation yields novel insights, without recognizing the need to sometimes not engage in free imagination in order to develop new insights.

2 The proper attitude

In the sixties the Dutch writer Gerard van het Reve published a collection of letters, in one of which he imagines that God would come to visit him in the body of a one year old, mouse-grey donkey, and that Van het Reve would make love to Him.281 This was the starting-point of a fierce debate, involving even the Dutch Parliament, culminating in a lawsuit against the writer. The question was whether the text was scornfully blasphemous. In the end the Dutch High Court ruled it was not intended as scornful blasphemy, and

281 Gerard van het Reve, Nader tot U
therefore Reve was acquitted; if others were offended by his writings it was no cause for judiciary persecution.\(^{282}\)

With its verdict, the High Court confirmed the artistic freedom of speech that ensures that we can say whatever we deem fit in an aesthetic context. The lack of censorship reflects a longstanding aesthetic tradition in our culture, in which any artistic, literary expression is part of a separate aesthetic domain. In the domain of artistic expression ordinary rules of communication do not necessarily apply: politeness, political correctness, truth and grammaticality are not the principles by which a poetic expression ought to be judged. The legally established freedom of art allows us to entertain a view for the sake of investigating it, of testing its consequences in fiction. We can make-believe without bearing the responsibility of uttering a true belief. The legal system protects this space for make-believe, by ruling out any responsibility on the author's part for possibly offending interpretations.

The establishment of such freedom works in two directions. On the one hand it ensures, as explained above, a realm of freedom of speech and action, a suspension of any worldly responsibility. On the other hand, a distinctive realm where the mentioned principles are of little concern suggests that outside of the aesthetic free-zone, norms of truth, grammar and morality are all the more valid.

However, the realm of the aesthetic cannot be defined by the lack of norms, since not all utterances that violate such norms automatically belong to the realm of the aesthetic. They may, as we saw in the case of heuristic metaphors, provide a challenge to adapt the normative framework of understanding, or they may be simply incorrect or incomprehensible, as in the case of malapropisms or printing mistakes. Thus the realm of the aesthetic is in need of its own criteria for membership. In other words the question is: By what principles do we judge something to belong to the realm of the aesthetic? In view of the previous discussion on aesthetic reflection, it would seem that whichever experience results from an aesthetic attitude of interpretation, that is, interpretation which is oriented towards imaginative reflection itself, and not towards understanding, would qualify as belonging to an 'aesthetic realm'. In this way, then, whether an object is to be interpreted aesthetically is a matter of subjective choice. However, as the verdict of the High Court suggests, there is a public understanding of which objects are suited for aesthetic interpretation, namely, works of art.

In the third *Critique*, Kant analyses aesthetic reflection. Since objects of art or poetic texts are aesthetic objects in a public, conventional sense, they pose some

---

\(^{282}\) The verdict, Van het Reve's plea and the parliamentary discussion are rendered in: Fekkes[1968]
sort of a problem in the *Critique of Judgement*. The objects of aesthetic judgement here are not specifically artistic or poetic. Rather, Kant mostly deals with objects of nature, and only sometimes with objects of art. Thus, his theory of aesthetic judgement is concerned mainly with the reflection on nature, and on its impact on the cognitive faculties.

As we saw in the discussion in chapter 2, the distinction between subjective reflection on an object, and its determinate understanding is motivated epistemologically. The latter is a matter of exercising the faculty of understanding, a process that is mechanical in nature, and yields objective concepts. Thus, if we see a donkey, we can immediately grasp it as an instance of the empirical concept of a donkey. In aesthetic judgement, which is the first type of subjective judgement that Kant discusses, something else goes on. Kant, as said, presents examples of nature to illustrate how judgements of taste are concerned with pure form. To judge, for instance, a flower aesthetically is not a matter of determinant understanding that results in a mechanical judgement on what kind of object it is: 'Hardly any one but a botanist knows the true nature of a flower, and even he, while recognizing in the flower the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end when using his taste to judge of its beauty'.283 The interpreter here is concerned with the form, regardless of how the intuitive presentation of the flower fits into a concept. In reflecting on this form, the subject experiences a typical state of mind. A feeling of harmony in the cognitive faculties is the result of beauty, since intuition, imagination and understanding work together in the on-going determination of the intuitive presentation, that is, while contemplating the possibility of a law in imagination that is not given in understanding. Such imaginative laws can be formed in two ways on the basis of the intuitive presentation. The first is through *schematization* conform to (but not determined by) the laws of understanding, that is, on the basis of perceptual likenesses. The second is through *symbolization*, that is, the rules applying to the sensorily given object can be used to form an imaginative understanding of a different object by analogy.284 While reflecting on such possible laws, the subject experiences the feeling that the beautiful object was, as it were, made for his cognitive faculties. Pure aesthetic judgements, then, are the result of the disinterested reflection on the undetermined object: they are judgements pertaining to how the cognitive faculties can deal with form, rather than object.

As we saw in chapter 2, this analysis can be interpreted as a preliminary for the analysis of teleological judgements, where determined objects are judged with respect to their place in our systematic conception of the world. That is, with

---

283 CoJ 229
284 CoJ 351-352
the analysis of aesthetic judgement the possibility of subjective generalization in imagination is first presented; this functions as a description of productive imagination, such that, in teleological judgement, it becomes possible to subjectively construe a generalization with respect to its suitability for our rational conception of nature. In aesthetic reflection, similarly, an object is considered with respect to its suitability for our cognitive faculties themselves; in this way aesthetic judgements do have 'finality', but it is subjective, not objective. Hence, an object here is considered with respect to the concepts we may subjectively associate with it in imagination, and not in objective determination.

In the model outlined above, all concepts were considered to originate in subjective reflection, and hence, Kant's characterization of aesthetic judgements as subjective judgements is no longer specific of aesthetic reflection. Apart from the conditions that pertain to subjective universals generally, then, the disinterest of the subject in determining the object, and its interest in what imagination produces when running free is specific for aesthetic judgement. Kant mentions a specific necessary characteristic for aesthetic judgements, namely the objective disinterestedness. The subject engages in a contemplation of its own imaginative representations, and has no interest in the objective existence of the object. That is: nothing depends on the possible outcome of aesthetic reflection. To characterize the 'realm of the aesthetic' by means of aesthetic reflection may then not involve any characterization of which objects belong to that realm, since aesthetic interpretation depends on the (disinterested) attitude of the interpreter and not on (determined) properties of the object. Hence, objects of art, belonging to a publicly proclaimed realm of

---

285 Some authors focus on the definition of art through the notion of aesthetic pleasure. For instance Kubovy[1998] proposes a notion of 'cognitive pleasure', which is aroused by the experience of a sequence of emotional events, and specifically by a disruptive turn of events that breaks the expectations of the reader. However, this qualification may, as Kubovy indeed notes himself, also pertain to a ride in a roller coaster, and hence is not specific for art. Levinson[1998] uses a notion of aesthetic pleasure to characterize the interpretation of art. However he thereby presupposes a 'structural basis' in which the objects are presented as art, and further assumes that the aesthetic pleasure is only obtainable in 'properly backgrounded people' who have, for instance, some art historical knowledge. Thus, in his definition of aesthetic pleasure, Levinson refers to the experience of an object already identified as art. In the Kantian sense, the pleasure that may result from engaging in free imagination is of course also not specific to the contemplation of art, since, as already observed, objects in nature may cause the same harmony of the faculties, as well as any other object from the determination of which the reader may dissociate himself.
the aesthetic, need not necessarily belong to a thus subjectively formed realm of objects of aesthetic reflection.
Indeed, the objects that for Kant seem to be best suited for aesthetic judgements are objects of nature. Regarding the relation between nature and art, Kant writes: 'art can only be termed beautiful, where we are conscious of its being art, while yet it has the appearance of nature'. Although an object of art is intended for our reflection, it can only be reflected upon freely if it takes the guise of not being thus intended: 'the finality in a work of art, intentional though it be, must not have the appearance of being intentional; i.e. fine art must be clothed with the aspect of nature'. In other words, an artwork should not betray that it is designed for our faculty of reflection, since it would then represent a technique, or a rule that the artist used to make the work.
Still, art should have some sort of recognizable form: 'in all free arts something of a compulsory character is still required, or as it is called, a mechanism, without which the soul, which [...] alone gives life to the work, would be bodyless and evanescent (e.g. in the poetic art there must be correctness and wealth of language, likewise prosody and metre)'. Further, social conventions of beauty in art appear in the Critique of Judgement, when Kant recommends the study of classical languages, that is, dead languages. He considers the study of dead languages as the field of training the faculty of taste par excellence, since, here, the student can become acquainted with beautiful form. Some products of taste, then, are considered to be exemplary, and they allow the individual to develop his own faculty of taste. For Kant conventions on what is art and how to judge it seem to serve as a training device; partaking in the practice of reflecting on conventionally beautiful objects allows the individual to develop

286 CoJ 306
287 CoJ 307
288 Lyotard states the preference for objects or scenes of nature from the perspective of a deep suspicion of art, or rather of human creativity: 'Die großen Schauspiele der sich in Unordnung befindlichen Natur sind ein Beispiel dafür, daß die menschliche Kunst niemals etwas derartiges hervorbringen kann. Denn alle menschliche Kunst ist immer nur Mimesis und letztlich suspekt, weil immer die Möglichkeit besteht, daß sie mit einer Absicht konzipiert worden ist und von daher ein Begriff und eine Zweckmäßigkeit mit Zweck auf ihr lastet.' (Lyotard[1989]).
In a similar vein, the computational character Huge Harry contends: 'Is it possible to listen in a disinterested way to music that is composed and performed by humans? Human composers and musicians are not disinterested. They want money, fame, sex. They cannot hide this, and often they don't even try. If we do not turn off our microphones when we listen to their pieces, we hear greed, jealousy, lust. Behind the apparent complexity and indefiniteness of their compositions, there are all too clear-cut meanings', and he continues to conclude that computers make for better artists than people. (Harry[1995])
289 CoJ 304, my italics.
290 CoJ 232
Aesthetical afterthoughts

himself, and to learn to use imagination freely. Thus, objects of art should not be copies of what exists conventionally as art, and therewith one characteristic of art is stated, namely that it should allow for the free play of imagination, as Kant writes, 'a freedom without which a fine art is not possible'.

Hence, although the realm of objects of aesthetic reflection for Kant is greater than the realm of art, the latter should be part of it. And art may take part of it if it appears to us as art, and yet at the same time hides its intentional character, such that we may consider it in a disinterested manner, that is, only with respect to its effect upon our cognitive faculties.

The idea that the objectively disinterested aesthetic reflection pertains to objects of art, or otherwise, to objects considered as art, is a common one, and it can be witnessed in different forms in many theories on art or poetry. The feature of disinterestedness can, for instance, be recognised in the concept of aesthetic distance, or detachment from the everyday world. As I remarked previously, Kant remarks that some individuals are capable to see something that was previously judged conceptually as if it were new and unfamiliar; therefore, the most common objects may become the object of aesthetic reflection. This aspect of Kant's analysis has been interpreted as implying that any common object therefore can be considered as art.

The feature of disinterestedness in the object of the judgement is further echoed in Jakobson's notion of the poetic function. Dominance of this function entails that the text draws attention to itself through the purely formal qualities of the poetic message, and at the expense of the referential (objective) function of the text. I already referred to this aspect of interpretation, namely as the possibility of dissociating from a given context, and of imaginatively producing other contexts in which the object may be interpreted. This aspect of aesthetic interpretation is also taken up by Ricoeur, when he explains how poetic text is interpreted: through the suspension of reference the interpretation leads the interpreter to a new poetic world vision. That is, by first undoing any objective references in interpretation, the interpreter may only then apply the 'vision'.

291 Ultimately, in this way, an 'ideal of beauty' may be formed in the trainee's consciousness. However, to express such idea in a 'bodily manifestation' would involve more than mere use of free imagination, since: 'this embodiment involves a union of pure ideas of reason, and great imaginative power, in one who would even form an estimate of it, not to speak of being the author of its presentation' (CoJ 235).

292 CoJ 355

293 Cf. Bullough[1912], Langer[1953]

294 To repeat the quotation: 'In respect of an object with a definite internal end, a judgement of taste would only be pure where the person judging either has no concept of this end, or else makes abstraction from it in his judgement'. (CoJ 231)

295 DeDuve[1998]
that is produced in imagination to reality. Thus, the interpretation of poetry and art is once more related to an attitude of 'objective disinterestedness' in interpretation, and this allows for imaginative reflection. To recognize poetry as poetry, according to this characterization, should encourage the interpreter to disengage from an objective interest, and set productive imagination to work. I will consider how this understanding of poetic interpretation may be used to describe the actual encounter with poetic text in section 4 below. The first question that remains to be answered, however, is how the reader then would recognize poetry as poetry, or art as art. I turn to this question in the next section.

3 Conventions in poetic context

The empirical criterion to determine whether a text is principally poetic, Roman Jakobson writes, is to see whether the poetic function in the text is dominant over other functions, such as its referential, meta-linguistic or addressing functions. This poetic function is present when a message draws the attention to the message itself, that is, a poetic message is one in which the principles for selecting words are constitutive for the construction of the text. Elsewhere Jakobson analyses the principle of selection as the principle of equivalence, or, in his terminology, metaphoricity, as opposed to the principle of combination, namely contiguity (or metonymy). According to this terminology, in poetry the 'metaphorical axis' is projected onto the 'metonymic axis'. Jakobson already warns for an all too eager application of this criterion to genres: poetry is not necessarily principally poetic, and thus the poetic function cannot be identified as the sole definatory characteristic.

In this respect the term 'metaphoricity' is not coincidental, since the same, we saw, holds for metaphors. The poetic function is to some extent always present in metaphor, since all metaphorical interpretation starts with a closer look at the unusual use of a predicate and its possible interpretations in the context. However, metaphors appear in all types of textual messages, and thus can be dominated by any textual function. The property of words drawing attention to their use in itself, I conclude along with Jakobson, is not uniquely reserved for poetic utterances.

296 'Si la poéticité, une fonction poétique d'une portée decisive, apparaît dans une oeuvre littéraire, nous parlerons de poésie. Mais comment, la poéticité se manifeste-t-elle? En ceci, que le mot est ressenti comme mot et non simple substitut de l'objet nommé ni comme explosion d'émotion.' (Jakobson[1973] p 124).

297 Jakobson[1969]
In the case of literature, we can establish that literary discourse in our culture normally is presented according to the conventions of the literary genres, and is thereby distinguishable. Conventions, for example, of typography; of being published through certain publishers; of style, for example in employing phrases like 'once upon a time...', tropes, archaic words or disregard of grammar. Accordingly, we may attempt to define the poetic as the type of discourse occurring in a thus established aesthetic context.

However promising this looks, as a general criterion to determine whether a text is poetic or not these formal conventions do not suffice. As the history of literature, and of art in general, shows, dominant conventional forms of literary text are not restrictive for what may be considered literature in the future. Some art-forms have taken a long time before they were widely recognized as art, and, given the changes in the past of what we consider to be art, there is no reason to assume that what we recognize as art now will continue to provide a criterion in the future.

Many examples can be given to prove the insufficiency of formal criteria based on traditional genres. The by now standard example of the changing form of art is that of the *pissoir*, that Duchamp submitted for an exposition in 1917, which led to the general acceptance of admitting common objects in the realm of artworks. André Breton gave a literary variety of the *objet trouvé*, when he included the listing of several Bretons in the telephone directory, followed by his name, in a poetry book. The reader finds himself wondering whether he could just as well read the telephone book to find an assertion of poetical authorship, since it depends on his personal attitude whether he treats this particular page as a poem.

Furthermore, the criterion of conventional form as constituting the realm of aesthetic interpretation allows only for conservative art forms. It conflicts with our view of art or literature as renewing and original, since it excludes the possibility of interpreting any unconventional text poetically. Such observation may tempt one into the romantic thought that unconventional form itself may be an essential property of art, since we expect of art that it is original or innovative. However the property of unconventionality in itself does not provide a criterion, since something can only be unconventional with respect to certain conventions, leaving others intact. There is no area of which one can say 'This is unconventional therefore it is art', at most we can say 'This is art but it is not conventional'. Furthermore, even as a criterion for merely extending the domain of art it denies itself. If we expect the unconventional to be art, a truly

---

298 'PSTT' in: Clair de Terre
299 I consider these examples in more detail in the section below.
unconventional artwork would be one that does not count as unconventional. But, having figured this out, it would be conventional to make something non-unconventional, and so on.

One can appreciate Reve's lines on the imagined visit of God as provocative, and which thus would have to lead to silly discussions in parliament by ignorant or non-artistic people. Alternatively, upon reading the phrase, the reader can become an ally of the author, feeling himself above such trivial sensitivity. Here the reader achieves a feeling of superiority to those readers who do not adopt the aesthetical attitude of detachment.

This feeling of superiority, based on identification with the author, seems a source of pleasure itself, quite distinct from dwelling on the possible meanings of the utterance. In some form such identification with the artistic is always present in discussions on art. Aesthetic reflection involves a special attitude, an attachment to the aesthetic, which is more than a passive receptivity. The interpreter chooses to make 'the purposeless' an object of reflection, and this personal involvement reflects the interest he has in the interpretive process. Thus, in aesthetical judgments, there is always an interest of personal valuation, of directing one's attention to a rewarding object. Typically, objects of aesthetic reflection are deemed worthy of attention, as a matter of both cultural and personal taste. For example in a social context, the appreciation of an artwork by a highly regarded person often leads to a more general appreciation of that art-work. This is for instance reflected in the thoroughly discussed relation between general appraisal and the economical value of an artwork. If a prominent museum, or a renowned collector acquires the work of some artist, her work more probably than not becomes the object of both economical speculation and of art criticism, and is thereby situated firmly in the realm of art.

Aesthetic recognition within society, as for instance expressed in economic value or in the appearance of reviews, thus may provide both a reason for and guidance in aesthetic reflection. The interest thus presented reveals another type of conventionality in aesthetic reflection, namely that of the social practice

---

300 The construction of such an argument may seem far-fetched, but it has actually been brought forward, e.g. in Bierens[2000]. Bierens gets entangled in this paradox when he argues that the objet trouvé was an artwork when presented by Duchamp in 1917, but is no longer so when presented by Tracy Emin in the nineties.

301 Especially in the case of Reve, there seem to be a number of people who admire the author on the basis of his cynical attitude, i.e. one of detachment, exposing the moral pettiness of the world around them. Their appreciation sometimes even borders on religious worship, adopting the idiolect that Reve uses in his books, calling him 'the Master' etc. See the web-site www.Reve.nl where fans discuss Reve's writings.

302 Robert Hughes has described this process of economical development. Cf., for example, 'On Art and Money' in: Hughes[1990].
of interpreting and judging art. Some authors think that it is through these conventions that we can determine whether something is art. Dickie holds that the social context that brings an object to our attention as art determines whether we look upon something as art. According to Dickie, something is a work of art if it is an artefact brought to our attention as a 'candidate for appreciation' through the judgement of one or more agents acting in the name of a specific social institution, namely the art world. Dickie's criterion of convention is not conservative with respect to the form of the artwork: as long as someone considering himself an agent of the art world presents the object as a candidate for aesthetic 'appreciation', any object can be appreciated as art. This incidentally coincides with the outcome of Kant's analysis in that, if one takes an attitude of objective disinterest, any object may become a candidate for aesthetic reflection.

The problem with Dickie's theory is that mere conventionality presupposes another criterion for deciding what art is in an object's first judging. That is, the 'agents of the art-world' are left in need of a criterion for their judgement of an object as art. Thus whether the formal qualities of the object, or the attitude of the expert-interpreter lead to 'appreciation', the initial judgement is unspecified, and leaves the criterion of institutional recognition as a secondary and hence not a constitutive definition of art. Thus, whether an object will be interpreted as art, or not, in Dickie's theory still depends on the trained 'agent of the art-world', and the way she might apply her expertise. In other words, although the social status of an artwork may prompt its recognition, in the end the status still depends on the subjectively construed interpretation on the part of the representative of the art-world. The institutional analysis does then reveal two sides of answering the question on how art should be recognized. On the one hand, there are conventionally accepted works of art, which one learns to value as art as a matter of cultural education, and hence recognition is based on having learned these conventions. On the other hand, this collection of publicly recognized works is continuously extended by the recognition of new works of art. Thus, if Dickie is right in emphasizing the institutional status of art, then his theory should be supplemented with an understanding of how the individual (which might be an 'agent of the art-world') may extend this collection.

303 Dickie [1974]
304 The same criticism holds for the so-called 'rigid designator model' of art that Matthews [1980] and Carney [1982] propose. Here, 'art' is understood as a sort name with rigid designation, in the sense Kripke and Putnam proposed for natural kind-terms. In this model, then, art-works are considered to be baptised as art by 'experts', and thereby fix the possible referents of the word 'art'. Here, again, a criterion for deciding what is art is presupposed to be available to the 'expert'
DeDuve elaborates on the individual choice of engaging in aesthetic interpretation. He deals with Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgement, and especially the implication that any object may become an object of aesthetic reflection if the interpreter adopts the right perspective. Since it is a matter of personal attitude whether a given object is reflected upon as art, the meaning of the epithet 'art' is equally dependent on personal choice. We can thus take DeDuve to present an alternative rigid designator definition of art: every individual is an expert and has his own extensionally defined understanding of 'art'.

However if we follow this definition strictly, we end up with an unexplainable convergence in what people in fact think is art; for why should there be any overlap in our personal 'art collections', if it were merely a matter of personal baptism? DeDuve explains this along the same lines as Kripke explains the use of proper names by people who do not know the person to whom the name applies. That is, through a causal chain of acts of referring, the use of a name can become conventional. However, why a general term like 'art' should be taken as a proper name (or a natural kind), and why the baptism is taken over only by some, and may be contested by others remain unanswered questions with respect to the use of the word 'art'. Following Dickie's suggestion that there are experts in the matter, we could assume that the act of baptism should fix the reference when performed by some people, but not by others. Thus, we are referred back to the problem of recognizing who is an expert, and of understanding how she could use the word 'art', if we attempt to explain the social convergence in our use of the word.

Lüdeking discusses the conventionality of aesthetic judgement in a Wittgensteinian manner, when he discusses the use of the word 'art'. When we judge something to be art, we recognize it as having a certain value. For instance, if an extra-terrestrial friend from Mars would translate our word 'art' into *art*, and would use it for exactly the same objects as we do, but would then treat these objects as common garbage, we would not think he had grasped the meaning of the word. Moreover we would not think of any object he newly presented as *art* as art. The epithet 'art' to us is a title of honour; it means we treat the bearer of the name with reverence, and the social codes demand from other people that they respect our evaluations, even if they do not agree or understand. Thus before any aesthetic reflection is engaged in, an object can be given as art. Hence, according to Lüdeking, it is not only the outcome of individual reflection upon its value that determines what is art, but again also a social fact, now not merely consisting of an institutionally

---

305 DeDuve[1998]
306 Lüdeking[1988] §§ 64-69
proclaimed status, but of a cultural practice of courtesying other opinions and tradition.

This latter understanding of a broad cultural practice, governed by norms of politeness and standards of judgement, seems to come closest to what could be called a 'normal context' of aesthetic interpretation. To name an object 'art', cannot be simply a matter of personal baptism, since, in doing so, we point to the object as something valuable, deserving special attention by others as well. We expose the object as one that is worthy of reflection. In other words, to personally adopt a specific interpretation is not yet the same as calling something art. The interpretation is a private matter, a matter between the interpreter and the object. But to call an object 'art' is a social deed; one points to an object, as a candidate for more general aesthetic appraisal. Social factors such as one's reputation, intentions and credibility on the one hand, and formal aspects such as the more or less conventional make-up of the object as an art-object on the other hand, play a role in how such judgement is received, and whether it is followed by others. Depending on the social role of the interpreter, and on conventional aspects of form, then, after being named 'art' an object may acquire the social status of art.

Parallel to the use of the word 'art', the epithet 'poetic' indicates an utterance that deserves special attention. Calling an utterance a poetical metaphor is to say that it is of specific value, and promises a rewarding moment of reflection. The poetic nature of a text is then not so much a property of the text drawing attention to itself, but rather, depends on contextual presentation, and on the social convention that some formal aspects of a text should draw the interpreter's attention to the text in itself. Thus, to recognize a text as being part of a poetic context allows a reader to approach the text as one of which the value has been established previously, and thus presents a 'normal' context for poetic interpretation.

4 The realm of imagination

The feature of objective disinterestedness in aesthetic judgement, we saw, is echoed in Jakobson's notion of the poetic function, which draws the reader's attention to the purely formal qualities of the poetic message, and leads him to disregard the referential or objective function of the text. Ricoeur, we saw in the first chapter, takes up this feature in his analysis of poetic metaphor. He calls it a 'suspension of reference', as he finds the dissociation from referential meanings necessary for metaphorical interpretation. Other than Jakobson describes, for Ricoeur at a later stage in the interpretation, the notion of reference, now of the new, metaphorical meaning, becomes relevant again.
Imagining metaphors

Similarly, in Ricoeur's understanding of the interpretation of literary or poetic text, the reference in a text initially makes way for a contemplation of the text in itself, in order to produce a new 'vision', which, as a 'heuristic fiction', may then be applied to the world again. Thereby the interpretation of poetic text is identified as the process of metaphorical interpretation.307

According to Ricoeur, in metaphorical interpretation the contemplation of the utterance allows for a 'predicative assimilation', in the form of a schematization of the similarities between concepts. This in turn leads to the formation of an icon: an abstract representation of the similarity between representations belonging to the vehicle and the target of the metaphor. Hence, metaphorical interpretation involves an 'iconic function' of language.

In the previous chapter I remarked that this notion of an iconic function can be analysed in terms of retrieved associated representations, and as such pertains to any representation, be it a representation of a linguistic expression or not.308

We can then, to some extent, restate Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor in terms of the model outlined above. Metaphorical meaning is produced by the conceptual combination of representations that are associated with the terms in a metaphorical utterance. The metaphorical meaning produced thus is then assumed to present an icon in itself, that is, it leads to the representation of an abstracted similarity between the representations that are evoked.

As I said before, to think of expressions as having meaning through a single icon, that is identified as an abstract image of the similarity shared by the referents of an expression, is to ignore the symbolic functioning of words. That is, a word is a symbolic sign that acquires meaning through the representation of the word itself in relation to other representations, which may include a representation of its referent. Hence it acquires meaning through association, and does not in itself represent an abstraction of perceptual presentations of a referent. In fact, Ricoeur's account of the new 'schema' of the meaning that is attributed to metaphorically used predicates in a sense presupposes that the connection between an expression and an iconic representation is merely conventional, since it can change on the basis of imaginative re-presentation.

The process of iconic imaging then implies the formation of an abstract meaning, or a not yet fully conceptualized abstract meaning, independent from context, which may then, as a new conceptual structuring, be applied to the objective world. Thus, poetic interpretation involves a moment of objective disinterestedness, necessary to engage in productive imagination, and hence to form a new vision. Ricoeur's understanding of the process of interpretation thus appeals to Kant's characterization of aesthetic reflection. In the former

307 Ricoeur[1991]
308 Cf. section 3.4 in chapter 3.
section I concluded that to recognize a text as poetic entails a 'normal' attitude to it, namely to treat it reverently and as worthwhile of reflection. We may now examine the relation between such a convention-guided attitude and the actual interpretation of a text. As discussed in section 2, the moment of objective disinterestedness was used by many authors to characterize the interpretation of art or poetry, and we saw above that Ricoeur again appeals to a suspension of reference to characterize the process of poetic interpretation. The question then is whether this attitude of interpretation is one that belongs to conventions of how to interpret an object that is generally considered to belong to the 'aesthetic realm', or whether it is the actual process that takes place when we open ourselves up to a poetic text, or a work of art.

I first discuss an example of how the notion of an 'iconic function' of language may be relevant in poetic interpretation. Then I consider some other examples of art and poetry, to find in what sense a 'vision' produced in productive imagination through the means of 'suspension of reference' may not be relevant at all for the interpretation of either poetry or art. Here is an example to illustrate how linguistic signs can be interpreted iconically, in the form of a typically imaginative metaphor:

schwarze Vögel, Früchte in den kahlen Ästen
(black birds, fruits on the bare branches) 309

On account of its having no useful conventionally denotative meaning as a predicate for 'black birds', the word 'fruits', according to Ricoeur's theory, will become iconic in its reference. First we imagine the fruits, in the context of a tree. However this image does not fit the purpose of its present use. Therefore we strip the image of fruit, leaving the tree, the blackness and the position of the fruits. This would provide an abstracted image, thus agreeing with Ricoeur's notion of an icon, which fits with the description of the winter tree with birds. Hence, only certain aspects of the images connected to the sign 'fruits' are useful for the interpretation. At first, we might consider representations associated with fruits, that in themselves may have nothing to do with black birds, such as green leaves, summer, being edible, rotting away, containing seeds and so on. In the interpretation we try to find whether these can be connected to black birds. Representations associated with the expression itself, i.e. 'fruits', thus do not yet provide the interpretation we will make of it. We have to search for those representations that can be relevant or appropriate in its present interpretation, that is, in the context of 'black birds' and 'a winter tree', and omit others. Hence, we acquire an imaginative presentation of fruits

309 My translation. The example is derived from Frielings[1996].
'under an aspect of ellipsis'. In interpretation we thus finally arrive at what is shared between the associations belonging to the terms of the metaphor. This is what Ricoeur calls an abstracted image, that is, an icon. In interpreting this specific line, the image can be visualized, and even 'mapped' in a more or less literal sense, namely by visualizing a bare tree with black birds instead of fruits, or vice versa.\textsuperscript{310}

Thus, in reading this particular line, one may rely on the description of a concrete image that provides the basis for constructing an interpretation. We dwell on the image of black birds and fruit, and form an 'icon' that captures the metaphorical predication in an almost visual representation.

The 'iconic function' of imagination that thus consists of the formation of abstract image on the basis of visualizations has been recognized by C.S. Peirce as well. For him an icon represents an abstracted perceptual similarity, shared between a sign and the object it refers to. Visual arts for Peirce fulfil an iconic function, as he writes:

\begin{quote}
'So in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction between the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream - not any particular existence, and yet not general. At that moment we are contemplating an \textit{icon}'.\textsuperscript{311}
\end{quote}

The moment of contemplating, or of 'dreaming' the signification of the artwork before us, coincides again with Kant's description of the aesthetically employed free imagination, contemplating an object as \textit{form}, and without interest in the object, that is without considering 'the real'. Thus, the lingering of imagination on imaginative presentations once more may be identified with Kant's process of reflective judgement, corresponding with the 'disinterested pleasure' that the work in question provides.

However, not every work of art can be considered to be an iconic sign prone to judgementsal reflections and \textit{ad libidem} interpretations on the basis of iconic likeness or perceptual resemblance. The artist has her say in this process. Her images may take such a \textit{form} as to undermine the comparisons the viewers may come up with, confronting them along the way with their want of interpretations. The famous \textit{objet trouvé} of Duchamp, for instance, as visual art downright sabotages any process of iconic interpretation. Contemplating the

\textsuperscript{310} One could say that this particular metaphor does not provide a very nice example of such visual mapping, in that the birds would be on top of the branches, while the fruit would be hanging; thus the mapping involves a reversal of position, which seems arbitrary in that it does not make sense in further interpretation. For instance if one would like to see the birds as an omen of death, to visualize the reversal of position with respect to the branch would involve something like a resurrection of the black winter fruit.

\textsuperscript{311} Peirce, Charles Coll. Papers, 3.362 (original italics)
Aesthetical afterthoughts

pissoir we can hardly derive a satisfactory 'iconic' imaging from it, lingering 'between the copy and the real'. If we want to maintain an attitude of aesthetic distance, or objective disinterest in this case, we must make ourselves willfully naive. It would mean that we dissociate from the recognition of the object as a urinal, and consider it as an object suited for reflection.

Two ways of reflecting on the object are thus possible, if we follow Kant's description of how the sensory presentation may be interpreted by use of imagination. The first is that we merely consider the object as form, and thus, dissociating from its actual determination, we schematize the object in mere conformity to concepts of understanding, without determining the object itself. For instance we might consider formal resemblances to other objects (such as shrines, caves, bathtubs, wombs), or consider its position (upside down). In order to do this we have to make ourselves naive, and willfully ignore the brutal everyday meaning it has for us. However, we do recognize the object as a urinal, and recognizing it as such contests the value that we are supposed to attach to works of art. The alternative, then, is that we look upon the object as a symbolic presentation, that functions as the intuitive presentation of another concept by analogy. Therewith the work is interpreted as a cynical gesture: a urinal symbolizing an art-object, representing the value of objects on an art-show and how to treat them by analogy. In that case we, in the act of looking at the object as art, allow ourselves and our values to be made fools of. A paradox is therewith presented to us in the interpretation: we dismiss the object as an object of art, but we only arrive at this conclusion because we were tempted to consider it as art. That is, in the first place we approach the object as art, which would be normal since it is presented in the context of an exhibition and even signed by an artist, in short, we approach it ready for aesthetic reflection, while in the end it is precisely this reflection that we want to withhold from the object.

The solution to the paradox the pissoir presents to us, has been to acknowledge its working as art on a different level than that of an objectively disinterested free use of imagination. As with all paradoxes the solution lies in distancing oneself from the attitude that evoked the paradox in the first place. Indeed, as the range of interpretations and the vast literature on the pissoir shows, its interpretation has become part of a meta-question on how to look at art. In this light, the work can be understood as the presentation of a mirror to reflective judging, by sabotaging the process of a 'pleasant' lingering in imagination. Instead, it becomes an object representing the problem of aesthetic

---

312 The distinction between these two possible intuitive modes of representing a concept in imagination (as either schematic or symbolic) is stated in Col 351-352. See also section 2 above.
interpretation. As such it has been interpreted as belonging to a different 'semantic' category.\textsuperscript{313} The object of art, given as art, now triggers the question whether it is rightly called so, and the 'image' of the pissoir in free imagination thus leads to the self-conscious reflection on interpretation: the degree to which a spectator might be shocked by such an object in an exposition reveals his attitude and expectations toward what may normally qualify as art.

As a consequence it is now up to the spectator to determine whether or not this object is art. Thus, Thierry DeDuve comes to his previously discussed conclusion that after the pissoir, the application of the word 'art' to an object has become a matter of personal baptism and a following of conventions, that has nothing to do with the nature or specific form of the art-objects themselves.\textsuperscript{314}

And yet further, the meta-standpoint that is thus taken in art theory towards the work shows that the attitude of aesthetic distance, or of a suspension of reference, in this case is not what leads to the interpretation of the work. Rather, the paradox of considering the object as a work of art, and the impossibility of maintaining objective disinterestedness, allows for a new attitude in interpretation, namely of reflection on the 'normal' attitude of aesthetic reflection.

In the case of the pissoir, the unacceptability of a detached attitude that would allow for an iconic representation of the object turns the interpreter to a different type of understanding. The interpretation is blocked by the repulsiveness of an iconic image, and leads the interpreter to interpret his own attitude, or the desired, 'proper' attitude within the cultural practice of looking at art. Similarly, not every literary image, not every metaphorical predication has an iconic signification in the sense witnessed in the example of the winter tree with birds above. Some poetic imagery is designed for never arriving at an established iconic interpretation, or is designed to willfully un-establish any metaphorical interpretations of the 'visions' their work may produce. Writers can blow up an image, making it grotesque, immoral or altogether inconsistent. Above, I already mentioned a literary variant of the objet trouvé by André Breton, namely the presentation of a list of Bretons in a Paris telephone directory in a poetry book. The reader finds himself wondering whether he could just as well read the telephone book to find an assertion of poetical authorship, since, like in the case of the pissoir, it depends on his personal attitude whether he treats this particular page as a poem.

\textsuperscript{313} E.g. by Lüdeking in a paper on Duchamp, presented on a conference on style in Amsterdam in 1991.

\textsuperscript{314} Cf. DeDuve[1998]
But there are other ways of denying vivid literary language its iconic significance. Consider the following story by Daniil Charms

Blue notebook No.10

There was once a red-haired man who had no eyes and no ears. He had no hair, so he was called red-haired only in a manner of speaking. He wasn’t able to talk, because he didn’t have a mouth. He had no nose, either. He didn’t even have any arms or legs. He also didn’t have a stomach, and he didn’t have a back, and he didn’t have a spine, and he also didn’t have any other insides. He didn’t have anything. So it’s hard to understand whom we’re talking about. So we’d better not talk about him any more.

Charms composes a story by the use of imaginative language, provoking the reader to form an image of its hero: red hair, eyes, ears, mouth and nose, arms and legs, insides and so on. However the composition of the image consists of the careful annihilation of every detail of the image. We, as readers, are put at a distance, not being able to understand what sort of character this is. And then we are told that since we cannot understand what he is, we better not talk about him any more. The story is presented as an enigma not worth being puzzled by. The dynamics of the narrative lies between the affirmed fictional existence of such a man in the introduction ‘There was once...’ and the then denied reality of it. He may be a Cartesian mind, this hairless red-haired, or, being red and not able to talk as well as being without spine or substance, he may be an emblematic portrait of a contemporary post-revolutionary communist. And then again, he may just be an empty story.

We can only construct such an interpretation if we realize that in the first introduction we at once allow for the fabulatory existence of a personage, who in fact does not normally have arms, legs etc. since he is fabulated. But the imaginary existence does entail normal imaginary properties, and thus we are confronted with the ordinary presuppositions we have about imaginary characters. Without those attributions, and without any alternatives presented to us, we no longer know whom the story is about - and if we do not want to stick to the unsatisfactory conclusion that the man we can henceforth not imagine is not worthwhile, we have to take interest ourselves and make up an image. But thereby we depart from what the writer has told us (‘we’d better not talk about him any more’), and hence we are no longer concerned with his story. So, once more, if we want to stick to the writer’s version, we take a meta-standpoint, and look at our own act of reading stories, analyse our expectations.

315 quoted from Gibian[1971]
and consider our doing so to the aesthetic impact of the story. Thus, from the required abandonment of our own imaginative interpretations, we can conclude that the story presents a poetical point of view that at least renders certain types of imagination problematic.

Another appearance of literary imagery that sabotages readily made, 'normal' interpretations can be found in surreal writings. The figurative content is overloaded with meaningful elements but in no apparent meaningful consistency, and the resulting imaginative world is bound to be unimaginable from sheer meaningfulness. Similarly, Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* presents overwhelming imaginative descriptions, not only in number, but also in moral implication. The narrator heeds the reader to return to his normal business, to not tire himself with perilous imaging, and hence, for his own safety, to ignore the realm of this book, which is imagination. In one passage the narrator reflects on his own work (the *chant*), and in the act contests just about every aspect of a Kantian aesthetics:

> Il y en a qui écrivent pour rechercher les applaudissements humains, au moyen de nobles qualités du cœur que l'imagination invente ou qu'ils peuvent avoir. Moi, je fais servir mon génie à peindre les délices de la cruauté! Délices non passagères, artificielles; mais, qui ont commencé avec l'homme, finiront avec lui. [...] Pardon, il me semblait que mes cheveux s'étaient dressés sur ma tête; mais, ce n'est rien, car, avec ma main, je suis parvenu facilement à les remettre dans leur première position. Celui qui chante ne prétend pas que ses cavatines soient une chose inconnue; au contraire, il se loue de se que les pensées hautaines et méchante soient dans tous les hommes.¹³⁶

The very precise methods of avoiding or alltogether blowing up conventionally delightful poetic imagery are revealing with respect to our expectations in interpretation, and hence with respect to the possible conventions that guide us. Since Duchamp’s *pissoir* or the Breton poem uproot a normal understanding of art until an interpreter cleverly discover a meta-language, and since we cannot understand what it means to deny an imagined red-haired person a head and a physical appearance, we seem to be looking, normally, for heads and sincere intentions in art. Nevertheless, it is in the same context of art that such expectations may be sabotaged. Inasmuch, then, as genius may provide the bridge between subjective imagination and conventional understanding, the artistic genius may tear it down. Thus, we are left alone with all our cognitive and symbolic tools to extract meaning from an object or phrase presented to us, and we know such meaning is to be found, since we are reading poetry, and we do enter an exhibition. We hope for recognition,

---

struggle for likenesses, and use language to explicate the theories we cling to on the next occasion.

It is in this respect, then, that the development of aesthetic theory has a heuristic function for any theory of understanding, since it describes our ways of coping with the world where learned strategies of interpretation fail. This holds especially for the study of the long time-avoided issue of imagination in philosophy of language, since in the mean time artists, designers and advertisers have acquired a far greater familiarity with the subject.