

## What makes a painting sad?

The experience of art as emotionally expressive is regarded by most art lovers as an unproblematic given. Why should we be troubled by the claim that a painting is sad? The philosopher responds to this in the following way: paintings are not sentient, they have no psychological life and therefore they cannot be sad. If paintings cannot be sad, at least not in the same way a person can be sad, then they cannot express sadness in the way a person expresses sadness. But, if paintings are not expressing sadness, when we call them sad, then, what *are* we reporting? And why is our art critical practice so out of step with philosophical wisdom?

### **0. The theoretical landscape - Whodunit/persona theory**

- (I) some works are expressive of emotion
- (II) comprehending the expression doesn't involve representing *someone's* emotion. (nobodydunit)
- (III) comprehending expression involves representing an expressing subject. (whodunit?)

### **1. Pictorial Seeing**

How does the viewer experience the picture? Three options: In looking at a picture...

- A. the viewer veridically perceives a representation.
- B. the viewer occupies, in imagination, the pictorial perspective.
- C. the viewer accesses pictorial content from a pictorial perspective.

You might think that (A) entails (B), and (B) entails (C). Or you might think that, even if (A) does not entail (C), (C) is true. For avoidance of confusion - I am advocating (C) here. So, my question today concerns what (C) commits us to in terms of occupied points of view (does it for instance, commit us to (B)?).

### **2. Argument steps**

- 1. When we look at a picture we typically perform imaginative acts.
- 2. *The Argument from Perspectives*
  - (i) (1) is best explained in terms of some kind of perspective-shifting, also involved in acts of sensory imagination, such as visualizing
  - (ii) To imagine sensorily a  $\Phi$  is to imagine experiencing a  $\Phi$ .<sup>1</sup> (Martin, 2002)
    - a. Visualising material objects does not entail representing a subject who sees the object
    - b. Visualising affective objects does entail representing an experiencing subject.
- 3. *By analogy* to (3b) we represent an experiencing subject in the case of pictorial expressiveness.

### **3. Objections & Replies**

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<sup>1</sup> Martin 2002, p.403

Objection to Claim 1:

Imagining an F is simply imagining an F and involves no imagination of a perceptual experience of an F.<sup>2</sup> (Noordhof, 2002)

Objection to Claim 2:

We can adequately imagine an emotional expression 'dry-eyed' and hence we can imagine expressions from vacant perspectives.

Bibliography

MARTIN, M. G. F. 2002. The Transparency of Experience. *Mind & Language*, 17, 376-425.

NOORDHOF, P. 2002. Imagining Objects and Imagining Experiences. *Mind & Language*, 17, 426-455.

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<sup>2</sup> Noordhof 2002, p.427