What Art Is: What's Not to Like?

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Those of us who organized the campus Ayn Rand club at the University of Houston in that Spring semester of 1969—like dozens of others of its era, and for the same reason (the legal threats of Rand's lawyer, Henry Mark Holzer), it was called the Society of New Intellectuals—were a diverse lot, in age as well as in professional interests. Don was eighteen, just out of high school, bent on a career in law or maybe politics, determined to make freedom in our time a reality. Howard and Peggy, at the other end of the age range, were in their early thirties. Peggy was a university librarian with a passion for nutrition; Howard, her husband, was a computer programmer at the phone company with a passion for . . . computers. Like the others in the group, I was in between. I was twenty-two, and on my second try at completing an undergraduate degree, after dropping out of school completely for two years. I had long wanted to be novelist, I told Howard and Peggy over dinner one evening, but in recent years, ever since Ayn Rand's essays on art had introduced me to the subject, I had become fascinated by aesthetics. I was beginning to think I'd like to make a thorough study of the field and start trying my hand at writing critical essays on literature.

"You want to tell people what to like?" Howard asked, incredulity and incomprehension struggling for dominance over his facial features. It emerged, over the course of the ensuing conversation, that, in Howard's mind, the only meaningful question one could ask about a particular work of art was: "Do you like it?" The only meaningful question one could ask about art in general was: "What kind(s) do you like?" Aesthetics and art criticism (including, of

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course, both literary and musical criticism) was, to speak plainly, either pure bunkum, pure wind in the rafters, or else an effort by some individuals (the critics and aestheticians) to "tell other people what to like."

For Howard—and, I quickly discovered, for most of the rest of the members of the Society of New Intellectuals on campus as well —Rand's writings on art occasioned no excitement whatever. When they were collected in book form later that year, in the first edition of *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, most of my fellow campus "students of Objectivism" didn't even buy a copy. They'd already read it in *The Objectivist* and *The Objectivist Newsletter*, they explained. And anyway, the only part of Rand's writings on art that had ever really resonated with them—the only part of her writings on art that had stuck with them at all—was the part in which she wrote about what kinds of art she *liked*. She liked *romantic* art. As far as Howard and most of the rest of my comrades in the Society of New Intellectuals were concerned, Rand's only significant contribution to aesthetic theory—the only significant contribution anyone *could* make to aesthetic theory, really—was her proof that the best art was romantic art.

This absurd notion persists to this day, of course, and it persists widely. One might even go so far as to say that the typical Objectivist of the newly turned twenty-first century is, just like the typical "student of Objectivism" of the 1960s, firm in the belief that aesthetics is the least important part of Rand's philosophy, resolute in the determination to remain ignorant of her writings on art (perhaps lest they confound or contradict one's dismissive attitude towards them?), and smugly confident that these writings "prove" the superiority of "romantic" art. Listen to Lindsay Perigo (2000), increasingly popular editor of *The Free Radical*: "Ayn Rand formulated the philosophy of Objectivism, dedicated to *reason* in epistemology, *freedom/individualism* in politics/ethics, *capitalism* in economics & *romanticism* in esthetics." This absurdity is all the more painful to contemplate because it is a double absurdity, an absurdity absurdly compounded. For Rand not only never "proved" that the best art is romantic art, her own theory of art stands foursquare against the

possibility of any such ludicrous "proof."

Unfortunately, however, when it came to writing about art, Ayn Rand was two very different writers. One of them, an analytic philosopher of extraordinary acuity, formulated a marvelously suggestive and startlingly insightful theory of the psychological roots and cognitive purposes of art, which, while not really original in its main outlines, is well worth the attention of anyone seriously interested in understanding the role of art in human life and the life of civilization. The other writer, the other Ayn Rand, a skilled polemicist, tended to confuse her personal tastes and preferences with Philosophical Truth. *The Romantic Manifesto* is neither a manifesto nor a "philosophy of literature," but an unfortunate mishmash of the style and ideas of these two Ayn Rands. It combines thoughtful essays on aesthetics with ill-tempered, ill-considered, and at times irrational diatribes against works of art and an artistic culture that Rand hated and feared largely because of her own pigheadedness—her steadfast refusal to understand them.

For those already convinced of the triviality of aesthetics—those who cannot understand what there is to study or philosophize about works of art, those to whom the only issue regarding art is whether you like it or not—it is the polemical defense of Rand's idea of "romanticism" that best sticks in the mind from *The Romantic Manifesto*. Hence the widespread view that it is part of the Objectivist philosophy that romantic art is the best art.

Torres and Kamhi: The Good News

The good news about the long-awaited *What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand* is that the authors, Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi, understand all this. They know about the two Ayn Rands, and they carefully distinguish between the analyses and arguments of the philosopher and the pronouncements of the polemicist. They properly chastise Rand (though gently, ever so gently—Torres and Kamhi are never other than gentlemanly and ladylike, never other than thoroughly refined and cultured, in their presentation, even at its most polemic; Rand could have learned a lot

from them)—they chastise her, as I say, for her tendency to permit both her alter egos free rein in certain of her essays, so that at times it becomes unclear *which* Ayn Rand is addressing the reader. At times, she certainly *does* seem to be advocating the view so often and so confidently ascribed to her by her less well educated followers, namely that "romantic" art is not only the "best" art, but also the only art consonant with Objectivism.

Torres and Kamhi know better. They know that Rand the philosopher settled the whole issue of romanticism versus naturalism once and for all when she wrote in "Art and Sense of Life" in 1966 that

> [t]he fact that one agrees or disagrees with an artist's philosophy is irrelevant to an *esthetic* appraisal of his work *qua* art. One does not have to agree with an artist (nor even to enjoy him) in order to evaluate his work. In essence, an objective evaluation requires that one identify the artist's theme, the abstract meaning of his work (exclusively by identifying the evidence contained in the work and allowing no other, outside considerations), then evaluate the means by which he conveys it—i.e., taking *his* theme as criterion, evaluate the purely esthetic elements of the work, the technical mastery (or lack of it) with which he projects (or fails to project) *his* view of life. (Rand 1969, 53–54)

Torres and Kamhi not only quote this passage, they also seem to grasp its implications. For, of course, if what Rand says about aesthetic evaluation is true, it must follow that a work of what Rand calls "naturalism," a work of art which "'assert[s] that man's efforts are futile' and presents 'the concretized vision of defeat and despair as his ultimate fate'" is just as capable, in principle, of being a great work of art as a work which "projects 'the values man *is to seek*' and presents 'the concretized vision of the life he *is to achieve*'"—that is to say, a work of "romanticism" (Torres and Kamhi 2000, 31).

Torres and Kamhi also understand that Rand's conception of "romanticism" is inapplicable to any of the non-narrative arts. How

exactly is a sonata or a landscape going to "project the values man is to seek" or "present the concretized vision of the life he is to achieve"? They seem less cognizant of the extent to which Rand's screwball notion of "romanticism" is extremely problematic even for literature, the art it was originally devised for. As Stephen Cox has observed:

> It is true that no good novel—no novel at all, in fact—can be written about characters who are destitute of purpose and effective choice. Even novels about animals have ways of imputing choice and purpose to their protagonists, usually by associating them with humans whose attributes they more or less unobtrusively assume. That is why there are many novels about dogs and cats, very few about ants and beetles, and none at all about viruses. But Rand's analogy between authors and characters is very loose. Many good novels, most of them satirical, have been written about hare-brained or bird-brained people, and even in heroically "romantic" novels of the kind that Rand prefers, the protagonists certainly do not, as she thinks, "determine the course of their lives," in anything like the sense in which the author does. If they did, there would be no sense of the "struggle" that, as she correctly insists, is essential to any story. (Cox 2000, 319)

Moreover, even in those "naturalistic" novels that Rand so disdains, the characters are *not* "destitute of purpose and effective choice." For, if they were, their "story," as Cox points out, could never be told; for all practical purposes it would not exist.

There's more good news: Torres and Kamhi prove themselves to be very nearly first rate expositors of just what Rand's principles were when it came to art. Their book is divided into two parts—Part I, "Ayn Rand's Philosophy of Art," and Part II, "Extension and Application of Rand's Theory"—and both of them, especially Part I, contain much of value.

Particularly outstanding in Part I is their discussion of the key

Randian concept of "sense of life." A sense of life, according to Rand, is "an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence," which "is involved in everything about [a] person, in his every thought, emotion, action, in his every response, in his every choice and value, in his every spontaneous gesture, in his manner of moving, talking, smiling, in the total of his personality. It is that which makes him a 'personality'" (Rand 1969, 31, 39).

This is an important issue for aestheticians, Rand argues, because it is the artist's sense of life that determines what sort of art s/he creates and it is the audience's sense of life that determines what sort of art they like or dislike. As Rand puts it:

> It is the artist's sense of life that controls and integrates his work, directing the innumerable choices he has to make, from the choice of subject to the subtlest details of style. It is the viewer's or reader's sense of life that responds to a work of art by a complex, yet automatic reaction of acceptance and approval, or rejection and condemnation. (43–44)

In Rand's view, "what an art work expresses, fundamentally, under all of its lesser aspects is: "*This* is life as *I* see it." The essential meaning of a viewer's or reader's response, under all of its lesser elements, is: "*This* is (or is *not*) life as *I* see it" (44).

This is an idea of enormous insight and explanatory power. But Torres and Kamhi have the subtlety to see and clearly express ways in which it can be made even more precise and widely applicable.

> In stating that the artist "presents *his* view of existence" in his work, Rand appears to mean that the artist's *comprehensive* view of existence is implied in—and, as she subsequently suggests, inferrable from—his work, regardless of the medium or the scale. As she elsewhere indicates, however, the capacity of an art work to project such a view varies greatly in degree, according to the nature and scope of the medium and the particular genre. Individual works of painting and sculpture, for instance, confined as they are to representing only the visual and tactile aspects of experience at a single moment, are inevitably limited in scope, compared with, say, a novel. They can at best only suggest complex issues such as human motivation and morality. In any case, we would argue that no work of art, however comprehensive, presents the artist's "view of existence." Rather, each work embodies his view of an *aspect* or *aspects* of existence. In sum, while we agree with Rand's proposition that the artist's sense of life governs his selectivity, inferences cannot be reliably drawn from his work, concerning so complex a psychological totality. (Torres and Kamhi 2000, 48)

In Part II, which is very largely given over to attacks on artists and artworks that Torres and Kamhi regard as frauds, there is also much thoughtful analysis and sound scholarship. The attack on Marcel Duchamp, for example, contains a brief disquisition on the controversial French artist's *Fountain* (1917), "a porcelain urinal positioned on its back," which Duchamp picked up at a plumbing supply company and then submitted (successfully!) for inclusion in a New York art exhibit. This was one of a number of "readymades," as Duchamp called them: works of art he found rather than created. "Virtually all the facts surrounding their origin, as well as his own statements about them," Torres and Kamhi write, "make clear that he regarded these objects—which the artworld regards as irrevocably changing the course of art history—as little more than a private joke" (264).

Duchamp was known as something of a trickster and practical joker, and this fact lends further credibility to Torres and Kamhi's thesis. At the same time, however, it tends to make him look rather less like the artistic fraud Torres and Kamhi want to make him appear and rather more like a comedian whose jest was taken seriously.[1]

Earlier, at the end of Part I, as a part of their (to my mind) rather dubious attempt to demonstrate that modernist artists like Duchamp are clinically insane, Torres and Kamhi present a startling quotation from the clinical neurologist and author Oliver Sacks, taken from his bestselling book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat—and other*

Clinical Tales: Each of us, according to Sacks, has "a life-story, an inner narrative—whose continuity, whose sense, *is* our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative,' and that this narrative *is* us, our identities. . . . A man *needs* such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self" (110–11). As Torres and Kamhi (390, nn. 75, 74) astutely comment:

> That an individual's experiences of art may help him to "construct," or at least to clarify and maintain, just such an inner narrative, seems to us to be strongly implicit in Rand's esthetic theory, as indicated by the phrases quoted in the preceding note ["As Rand observed in 'The Psycho-Epistemology of Art,' the pleasure of experiencing art is 'so intense, so deeply personal' that it is felt as 'a self-sufficient, self-justifying primary' pertaining to 'his identity, his deepest, essential self.'"]—and by her metaphor of art as "the technology of the soul," which helps man to discover his values and can give him the "experience of seeing the full, immediate concrete reality of his distant goals."

There is another passage Torres and Kamhi might have quoted in this connection, from the very same page of "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art," in which Rand writes that "[a]rt *is* inextricably tied to man's survival—not to his physical survival, but to that on which his physical survival depends: to the preservation and survival of his consciousness" (Rand 1969, 19).

But even without this additional passage, they've made their point. And in the course of making their point, they've done well by their readers. One of the things readers of a book of this type have a right to expect from the author(s), after all, is some information about other writers whose views bear comparison with, or are strikingly illuminated by, the views of the writer under consideration. Here, as the passage from Sacks and their commentary on it attest, Torres and Kamhi do an exemplary job. It is, in fact, one of the greatest strengths of their book that they continually point out other thinkers whose views on the arts would interest those who are drawn

to Rand's aesthetic theories. There are, however, two large exceptions to this rule—two writers with respect to whom Torres and Kamhi turn out to be not quite such reliable guides as we might like. One of the two writers I have in mind here is simply ignored; the other is grossly misrepresented.

Pepper and Langer

The totally neglected writer is Stephen C. Pepper (1891–1972), an American philosopher, author, and educator whose life-span closely approximates Rand's own. Pepper devoted much, perhaps most, of his career, to art and the philosophy of art. From 1938 to 1952, he was chairman of the art department at the University of California at Berkeley. From 1953 to 1958, he was chairman of the same school's philosophy department, in which he had taught since 1919. During his heyday, from the late 1930s to the mid-1960s, he published at least ten books, mostly in aesthetics, but also in metaphysics and ethics. The most important of Pepper's works for our present purposes are: *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (1942) and *The Basis of Criticism in the Arts* (1945).[2]

World Hypotheses begins by positing an answer to the question: "Why do we philosophize?" Pepper answers that we do so because we want to explore and understand the implications of our world hypotheses. Each of us understands life and the human condition in terms of a world hypothesis—a notion about the way the world is and the way it is to be human—an idea, but not one that has been worked out, not one that can be expressed clearly and specifically in discursive language; rather, an idea that can only be expressed in the mode literary artists choose to express themselves: metaphor. One might say that what we're dealing with here is something that could be described as "an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence"—a "sense of life."

At any rate, as Pepper sees it, four of these world hypotheses, each based on a root metaphor about the nature of reality and life, have come to exercise considerable influence in the social and intellectual history of the world. These four he calls Formism,

Mechanism, Contextualism, and Organicism. (In his last book, *Concept and Quality* [1967], he proposed a fifth—Selectivism.) As Pepper (1942, 91–92) explains it:

> A man desiring to understand the world looks around for a clue to its comprehension. He pitches upon some area of common-sense fact and tries if he cannot understand other areas in terms of this one. This original area becomes then his basic analogy or root metaphor. He describes as best he can the characteristics of this area, or, if you will, discriminates its structure. A list of its structural characteristics becomes his basic concepts of explanation and description. We call them a set of categories. In terms of these categories he proceeds to study all other areas of fact. . . . He undertakes to interpret all facts in terms of these categories. As a result of the impact of these other facts upon his categories, he may qualify and readjust the categories, so that a set of categories commonly changes and develops. Since the basic analogy or root metaphor normally (and probably at least in part necessarily) arises out of common sense, a great deal of development and refinement of a set of categories is required if they are to prove adequate for a hypothesis of unlimited scope. Some root metaphors prove more fertile than others, have greater powers of expansion and adjustment. These survive in comparison with the others and generate the relatively adequate world theories.

For Pepper, a "relatively adequate world theory" is one which exhibits a "capacity to interpret whatever goes on in the world," and is therefore applicable to actual people's lives (1967, 35).

So what are these "relatively adequate world theories" of which Pepper writes? What are Formism, Mechanism, Contextualism, and Organicism? In essence, the Formist chooses the phenomenon of *similarity* among entities and actions as his root metaphor; he adopts a philosophical view that stresses the abstract, the formal, the conceptual. The Mechanist chooses the model of the machine,

whose every part is functional and whose every part behaves according to laws that determine its behavior, as his root metaphor; he adopts a philosophical view that stresses the epistemology of the physical sciences, the orderliness of nature, the discovery of natural laws. The Contextualist chooses the event, the instant of time at which an infinitude of concretes interrelate in a seemingly infinite number of ways, as his root metaphor; he adopts a philosophical view that stresses the pragmatic, utilitarian nature of the way we perceive and conceive the world, leaving out its richness of detail for our own convenience and equating truth with usefulness. The Organicist chooses the model of the integrated organism that is more than the sum of its physical parts as his root metaphor; he adopts a philosophical view that stresses the necessary integration of all the universe. The Selectivist chooses purposive action as his root metaphor and is drawn to the same basic philosophical views as the Contextualist. Indeed, Pepper at one point described Selectivism as "possibly a rather radical revision of . . . contextualism" (2).

This process that Pepper describes—the process of moving from a "root metaphor" to a set of philosophical views, seems not much different from the process Rand describes in "Philosophy and Sense of Life" as "[t]he transition from guidance by a sense of life to guidance by a conscious philosophy" (Rand 1969, 36). In *The Basis of Criticism in the Arts*, Pepper takes a look at how each of the four major world hypotheses is inclined to view the problems of aesthetics. Chapter Five, "Formistic Criticism," would likely be of considerable interest to any student of Rand's aesthetics. Near the beginning of the chapter, Pepper identifies the nineteenth century French thinker, critic, and historian Hippolyte Taine as one of the "best representatives" of Formism "in aesthetic criticism." Interestingly, Torres and Kamhi write that "Rand's analysis of art, religion, and philosophy is strikingly similar to that of the French literary historian and critic Hippolyte Taine" (Torres and Kamhi 2000, 337 n. 33). They point out that Taine is "frequently quoted [by] G. V. Plekhanov, [whose works] may have [been] taught [in] one of the courses [Rand] took in her history studies."[3] They speculate that since "Rand was fluent in French, she might have also read Taine in the original"

(342–43 n. 14).

Pepper goes on to describe how what he calls the "norm of the species" is the basis for the Formist's conception of value. But he is careful to explain that by "a normal man" he does not mean the average man; rather he means what Rand means when she uses the phrase "man *qua* man." He then carries this standard of value into the realm of the arts by stressing the importance of mimesis (just as Torres and Kamhi do in their discussion of Rand's aesthetics). He writes:

> The imitation, however, is not of a particular individual, but of the norm which the individual represents. . . . The artist sees the universal, the norm, through the particular, and the beauty of the representation is in proportion to the degree in which the artist has been able to penetrate to the universal implicit in the particular and exhibits the ideal. The artist aims for the essence, the real character of things, not the depiction of accidental, meaningless details. (Pepper 1945, 105)

At one point, Pepper, not unlike Rand in one of her more polemical moments, equates "[t]he representation of the [human] norm" with "depiction of heroic man" (109). And the brief example he gives of a Formist critique of a poem ("I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day" by Gerard Manley Hopkins) might have been written by Rand herself:

> . . . as to whether the poem offers a representation of the normal, or ideal and healthy man, our answer is promptly negative. The poem is neurotic in subject and expression. There is no relieving sense of catharsis. It is a vivid description of a diseased mind.
>
> In sum, there is little to be said for the poem and much to disapprove. The main thought it leaves behind is what a pity such poetic capacity should go to such a poor purpose. But even this thought leads to a feeling of disgust at Hopkins' loading so deformed a human expression with such ornaments of refined craftsmanship. (138)

This last point about craftsmanship brings up yet another way in which Pepper's discourse in this chapter seems very Rand-like. Recall Rand's description of how one goes about evaluating a work of art:

> One does not have to agree with an artist (nor even to enjoy him) in order to evaluate his work. In essence, an objective evaluation requires that one identify the artist's theme, the abstract meaning of his work (exclusively by identifying the evidence contained in the work and allowing no other, outside considerations), then evaluate the means by which he conveys it—i.e., taking *his* theme as criterion, evaluate the purely esthetic elements of the work, the technical mastery (or lack of it) with which he projects (or fails to project) *his* view of life. (Rand 1969, 53–54)

As Cox puts it: "Rand agrees with Aristotle in regarding the literary enterprise as a purposeful *making* of something . . . and in regarding literary assessment as the study of how well that particular something is *made*" (2000, 318).

And so does one "phase of formism" discussed by Pepper: "Every object has a potentiality of perfection arising from its suitability to the end it will serve, the capacities of its materials, and the technical skill of the craftsman to shape the materials and make the most of them" (1945, 106).

One would think that this chapter of Pepper's, along with the more fundamental work in his *World Hypotheses,* would merit at least brief mention in a book on Rand's aesthetic theory. But one can look high and low through *What Art Is* and find nary a mention of Stephen C. Pepper.

By contrast, there are numerous references in *What Art Is* to Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985), another American philosopher, author, and educator whose life-span closely approximates Rand's

own. The problem with Torres and Kamhi's treatment of Langer is that it seriously shortchanges her in the department of philosophical credit. For the fact is that Langer anticipated almost every major theme of Rand's aesthetic theory a decade or more before Rand set any of it down on paper. But you could read every one of the nearly 500 closely printed pages that make up the main text and notes of *What Art Is* without ever realizing that fact.

A Harvard Ph.D. like Pepper, Langer also devoted herself mainly to aesthetics and began publishing in the 1930s. Her academic career was a good deal more peripatetic than Pepper's, however; while he devoted his years as a teacher to a single institution (the University of California), she taught at Radcliffe, Wellesley, Smith, and Columbia, among other schools, before finally settling down in 1954, at nearly sixty years of age, as chair of the philosophy department at Connecticut College.

Of her ten or so books, two are directly relevant here: *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942) and *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from* Philosophy in a New Key (1953). In the first of these volumes, Langer investigates the use of symbols to convey conceptual meaning. Her understanding of concepts is essentially the same as Rand's, though she employs different terminology. Her explanation of why we need symbols to "stand for" or "convey" concepts is, again, essentially the same as Rand's—"the cognitive need for condensation and 'unit economy,'" as Torres and Kamhi put it (2000, 24–25).

Where Langer diverges from Rand in this 1942 work is by distinguishing two different types of symbols: discursive symbols and presentational symbols. Discursive symbols are best represented by mathematics, musical notation, or language. Langer writes:

> Language in the strict sense is essentially discursive; it has permanent units of meaning which are combinable into larger units; it has fixed equivalences that make definition and translation possible; its connotations are general, so that it requires non-verbal acts, like pointing, looking, or emphatic voice inflections, to assign specific denotations to its terms. (1942, 96–97)

Presentational symbols operate differently, according to Langer. "In the non-discursive mode that speaks directly to sense," she writes:

> [T]here is no intrinsic generality. It is first and foremost a direct *presentation* of an individual object. A picture has to be schematized if it is to be capable of various meanings. In itself it represents just one object—real or imaginary, but still a unique object. The definition of a triangle fits triangles in general, but a drawing always presents a triangle of some specific kind and size. We have to abstract from the conveyed meaning in order to conceive triangularity in general. (96)

In effect, the phrase "a three-sided polygon" is a discursive symbol of the concept *triangle*. A drawing of a triangle is a presentational symbol of the concept *triangle*. To comprehend the meaning of the presentational symbol, one must "abstract from the conveyed meaning."

Compare this with Rand's statement about comprehending the meaning of a work of art:

> the artist starts with a broad abstraction which he has to concretize, to bring into reality by means of the appropriate particulars; the viewer perceives the particulars, integrates them and grasps the abstraction from which they came, thus completing the circle. Speaking metaphorically, the creative process resembles a process of deduction; the viewing process resembles a process of induction. (1969, 44–45)

For, as Langer makes clear in *Feeling and Form*, a work of art is a presentational symbol. And a symbol of what? Of "human feeling," Langer answers. It becomes clear, however, as one reads through Langer's two most important works on aesthetics, that by "feeling"

she does *not* mean merely emotions and physical sensations. She uses the term very broadly, to encompass what Rand would call a sense of life. At one point, Torres and Kamhi acknowledge this, interrupting their own cogent discussion of one of Rand's key concepts to observe in an endnote that

> Rand's concept bears comparison with Susanne Langer's reference to a "personal 'sense of life' or 'sense of identity'" that arises from the individual's experiences, and to a "continuity of thought that systematizes our emotional reactions into attitudes with distinct feeling tones." *Feeling and Form*, 372. (2000, 341 n. 5)

The claim that Rand's concept of sense of life "bears comparison" with Langer's idea is, clearly, one of those charming understatements with which Torres and Kamhi have so generously seasoned their argument. It would seem a fairer assessment of the situation to hold that it was Langer, not Rand, who originally suggested the "Randian" concept of sense of life, and Rand who looked into the idea, saw what might be made of it, and greatly enriched the world of aesthetic philosophy with her insights.

But set such questions of interpretation aside. Is it not clear that by discussing art in 1953 as a presentational symbol of a personal sense of life (or some other aspect of the world of human feeling), Langer anticipated the main points of Rand's aesthetic theory? To acknowledge this is certainly no slight against Rand. Nor should it be understood to contain any implication of plagiarism. There is no evidence to suggest that Rand ever read Langer. Her disinclination to read modern philosophy is, after all, well known and widely attested. Moreover, there are significant differences between the two theories, Rand's and Langer's—though, admittedly, most of those differences are really matters of emphasis. Each philosopher tends to work out in greatest detail those ideas that the other philosopher merely asserted or discussed only briefly. Their analyses are marvelously complementary, in fact, and are most profitably read together. It is indisputable, however, that they amount, in sum, to the same theory. And it is indisputable which of them expressed it first.

No such acknowledgment as this is forthcoming from Torres and Kamhi, however. All their references to Langer are in endnotes; she never merits discussion in the main text. And some of the endnotes in question come close to misrepresenting Langer's actual position.

The most egregious example of this is in the note that marks Langer's entrance into the book, note 9 on page 334, referring to comments in pages 24 and 25 of the main text:

> Rand's emphasis on art's relation to the cognitive need for unit-economy bears comparison with Susanne Langer's view of art as *symbolic* in nature (see, for example, *Feeling and Form*, Ch. 3). Langer, too, stresses the importance of condensing vital experience in art. But her term "symbol" (which implies an arbitrary, conventional sign) does not suggest the all-important mimetic character of art, which Rand's theory properly emphasizes.

Those who have followed my own argument from its beginning know that this comment is either disingenuous or shockingly ill-informed. For it equates "symbol" with what Langer calls "discursive symbolism" and fails entirely to take into account Langer's concept of "presentational symbolism"—though this is, of course, the kind of symbolism she is talking about when she discusses "art as *symbolic* in nature." The term "symbol" by no means "implies an arbitrary, conventional sign" in Langer's work. And Torres and Kamhi are surely aware of this fact. After all, they list both of Langer's major works in aesthetics in their extensive bibliography.

In another note, Torres and Kamhi opine that "Rand's language is less than clear when she states that the art work 'represents an embodied abstraction'" (335 n. 17). But anyone who has read and understood Langer knows immediately what Rand meant by this phrase. For that is precisely what a presentational symbol is: "an embodied abstraction."

Altogether, I think it fair to say that Torres and Kamhi consistently treat Langer as though her works are only of peripheral interest

to those who seek views that "bear comparison" with Rand's. I differ. I think *What Art Is* would have been immeasurably improved if it had included a detailed comparison of these two theories of art—Langer's and Rand's.

And there would have been spillover effects of a desirable character as well. For example, if Torres and Kamhi had devoted a fair and detailed hearing to Susanne Langer's ideas, instead of confining an egregiously misleading representation of them to a few footnotes, they would have been forced to come face to face with her theory of music—and this would have made for an important improvement in their own argument.

Music

Music has long been a major flaw in the otherwise admirable edifice of Randian aesthetics. Rand's own account of it has generally, and rightly, been judged wanting. And the alternative hypothesis put forward by Torres and Kamhi is both ingenious and highly persuasive. One wonders, however, whether it might not be improved by being combined with Langer's similar, but slightly, and very importantly, different understanding of the subject.

Briefly, Torres and Kamhi propose that "the two main aspects of experience [Langer would call it "feeling"—JR] from which music derives its vital meaning—and which it 'selectively re-creates'—are *vocal expression and the sonic effects of emotionally charged movement*" (2000, 89). "Since music consists of *sounds*," they write, "the only aspects of reality it can sensuously 're-create' are *auditory* in nature" (88). "Music," they write, "*selects and stylizes meaningful aspects of our aural experience*" (90). This is an excellent hypothesis, rigorously and persuasively defended. It fits the superstructure of Rand's aesthetic theory like a glove. It is first rate—as far as it goes. The problem is that there is much more to music than just this. And it seems to me that what more there is can be found in Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine—"The Image of Time," "The Musical Matrix," and "The Living Work"—of Susanne Langer's *Feeling and Form*.

In these chapters, Langer sketches a philosophy of music that is

entirely compatible with the one offered by Torres and Kamhi—which, in fact, complements it, in just the way Langer's overall approach to aesthetics complements Rand's. Langer too sees music as a mimetic, representational art (how could it not be and yet be a presentational symbol of anything?) but she sees music as "deriving its vital meaning" from an "aspect of reality" much more fundamental and universal than mere "vocal expression and the sonic effects of emotionally charged movement."

That aspect of reality is *time*—our experience of "passage," as Langer puts it, or "duration," as Henri Bergson, the philosopher on whose theories she explicitly bases these chapters, called it. As Langer writes: "*Music makes time audible, and its form and continuity sensible*" (1953, 110).

My guess is that the meaning of the immediately foregoing sentence is intuitively obvious to almost all my readers. For the rest, a bit of exposition might be helpful. Here is Henri Bergson, from his *Introduction to Metaphysics*:

> When I direct my attention inward to contemplate my own self . . . [beneath the surface perceptions, thoughts, memories, and habits, I find] a continuous flux which is not comparable to any flux I have ever seen. There is a succession of states, each of which announces that which follows and contains that which precedes it. They can, properly speaking, only be said to form multiple states when I have already passed them and turn back to observe their track. Whilst I was experiencing them they were so solidly organized, so profoundly animated with a common life, that I could not have said where any of them finished or where another commenced. In reality no one of them begins or ends, but all extend into each other.
>
> This inner life may be compared to the unrolling of a coil, for there is no living being who does not feel himself coming gradually to the end of his role; and to live is to grow old. But it may just as well be compared to a continual rolling up,

> like that of a thread on a ball, for our past follows us, it swells incessantly with the present that it picks up on its way; and consciousness means memory.
>
> But actually it is neither an unrolling nor a rolling up, for these two similes evoke the idea of lines and surfaces whose parts are homogeneous and superposable on one another. Now, there are no two identical moments in the life of the same conscious being. Take the simplest sensation, suppose it constant, absorb in it the entire personality: the consciousness which will accompany this sensation cannot remain identical with itself for two consecutive moments, because the second moment always contains, over and above the first, the memory that the first has bequeathed to it. A consciousness which could experience two identical moments would be a consciousness without memory. It would die and be born again continually. In what other way could one represent unconsciousness? (Bergson [1900] 1912, 11–13)

Could there be a better description than this of music? As we live, our experience of duration, of the passage of time, is not only irredeemably rhythmic, the rhythm of our heartbeat and our respiration being always a part of the background against which duration unwinds itself (or winds itself up), but also charged with patterns of tension and resolution. *This* is what music stylizes and selectively re-creates. *This* is what it presentationally symbolizes. It is a weakness in *What Art Is* that, by diminishing the importance of Susanne Langer in a full understanding of Rand's aesthetic theory, it leaves out of account this entire vast range of aesthetic creation and response—though, at times, Torres and Kamhi come perilously close to intuiting all this, as when they quote Francis Sparshott's remark that music "is the dance of the inner life." Perhaps they should have remembered the quotation from Oliver Sacks that figured so prominently at another point of their discussion, the one in which Sacks observed that each of us has "a life-story, an inner narrative—whose continuity,

whose sense, *is* our lives." The fact is that not only does each of us have an inner narrative, each of us has a soundtrack to that narrative. Melody is stylized duration, just as plot is stylized narrative. With the nonessentials eliminated, what is left is the melody, expressing the soul, the sense of life, of the musical artist.

Photography and Film

Torres and Kamhi founder somewhat in their discussion of other particular arts as well, though not so much as a result of underestimating the relevance of other thinkers as of simply failing to pursue their own arguments to their own logical conclusions.

Consider the case of photography. Torres and Kamhi get off to a poor beginning here by persisting, like Rand, in an ancient error of aesthetic theory—the effort to determine whether a *process* "is" or "is not" an art. Is photography an art?, they ask. One might as well ask: "Is painting an art?" or "Is writing an art?" The answer is, of course, that it depends on what is being painted or written. If what is being painted is a house, then, no, painting is not an art. If what is being written is a set of instructions for operating a computer, then, no, writing is not an art. The question we should be asking ourselves is not, "Is writing an art?" but "Can anything written be a work of art?" The question is not, "Is painting an art?" but "Can something painted be a work of art?" And the question is not, "Is photography an art?" but "Can any photograph be a work of art?"

Torres and Kamhi's attempt to disqualify photographs as works of art because a machine has been used to produce them will not withstand scrutiny. A machine, such as a camera, is simply a tool, one of many that human beings have devised over the centuries to aid them in the process of making pictures. One can imagine early painters decrying the invention of the brush, for, just as Rand maintains that "the camera operates the same way regardless of the nature of the material," so "the bristles of the brush operate the same way regardless of the nature of the material" (Rand quoted in Torres and Kamhi 2000, 181). Torres and Kamhi approvingly quote the art historian Edgar Wind as observing that "[w]hat precludes photogra-

phy . . . from becoming 'entirely art,' although it may have 'something artistic about it' [the quoted phrases are from Croce], is the crucial surrender of the pictorial act to an optical or chemical agency which, however carefully set up and controlled by the photographer, must remain automatic in its operation" (414 n. 3). One could scarcely wish for a clearer description of the mixing of paints to produce a particular color.

Every advance in the technology of picture making, from the original cave paintings done by hand to the computer arts of today, has been an advance in the design and use of tools. That a picture is produced using tools is irrelevant to its artistic status, whether the tools are brushes and palette knives or cameras. What is relevant is what the picture is used for. Is it, as a great many photographs demonstrably are, used purely for contemplation, as an end in itself, and not as a means of conveying information about some particular person or place? The people who contemplate Ansel Adams's photographs of the Yosemite Valley are not doing so in search of information about Yosemite Valley. They are doing so for the same reason they would contemplate paintings of the Yosemite Valley—because contemplating them is an end in itself, made meaningful by what the pictures convey about the grandeur and beauty of nature and the reflective pleasures of solitude amid such beauty.

Even such an atypical photograph of Adams's as his famous portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe and Orville Cox is clearly a work of art.[4] No one consults it to gain information about either of the subjects. It is valued purely as an object of contemplation, as an end in itself, because of what it conveys about long term human relationships and the humor and endurance that go into them, through all the many changes of "climate" and "weather" (brilliantly suggested by Adams in his handling of the sky overhead) they have to go through over many years. This picture is as eloquent on these themes as any great painting could be—and in precisely the same way.

Torres and Kamhi also come up short in their attempts to argue that cinema is basically a subcategory of literature. A more plausible case might be made for the view that it is a subcategory of storytelling, as long as it is understood that storytelling can be undertaken

either with or without the aid of words. They contend that "anyone who has ever tried to watch a film without the sound knows how difficult it is to follow the sense of the action without benefit of the dialogue, whereas one could readily grasp the gist of the story by listening to the sound track alone" (253). This leaves me wondering what sorts of films Torres and Kamhi are in the habit of viewing—perhaps those dialogue-heavy, talking-heads-type videotaped radio plays typified by *The Big Chill* (1983). On one recent occasion, while viewing *The Patriot* (2000), I had an opportunity to test this (to my mind, already very dubious) hypothesis. The image on the screen in the theater faltered and went dark, while the soundtrack continued for fifteen long, excruciating, and increasingly incoherent and incomprehensible minutes. The patrons were given refunds, as they should have been.[5]

Torres and Kamhi's attempt to portray the screenwriter, rather than the director, as the true *auteur* or guiding artistic intelligence of the film, similarly will not withstand close scrutiny. As long as a film is not a collection of words on paper but a *moving picture*, the guiding artistic intelligence behind that film must lie in the director, not the screenwriter. Torres and Kamhi contend that a film can be made without a director, but this is nonsense. Someone has to make the decisions a director makes. If no one does, the film does not exist. It could never have been shot in the first place. Torres and Kamhi assert that the film *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961) is a film without a director. But it is not. It was directed by Marlon Brando, who took over the indispensable director's chores, once both Stanley Kubrick and Sam Peckinpah had thrown up their hands and walked out. It is closer to the truth to assert that a film can be made without a screenwriter or a screenplay than without a director. Another Marlon Brando film, Hubert Cornfield's *The Night of the Following Day* (1968), in which much of the dialogue was improvised on the spot, is a good example. Quentin Tarantino's breakthrough film *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), in which entire crucial scenes depend upon improvised dialogue, is another.

Much of the latter half of *What Art Is* consists, unfortunately, of lamentations over the state of the arts in the twentieth century. And, alas, much of it is of such a caliber as not to inspire confidence in the

knowledge or understanding of its authors. To focus just for a moment on only one chapter, the relatively brief one on "The Literary Arts and Film," James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) is *not* a "sequel" to the same author's *Ulysses* (1926). Its first line is *not* "also repeated as its last" (244). (And really, how much effort would it have taken to check that? All one has to do is pick up a copy of *Finnegans Wake* and take a look at the first and last paragraphs.) Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) is hardly "meaningless" (246–47), if Torres and Kamhi themselves can provide a perfectly comprehensible description of its meaning later in the same paragraph. And so on, and so on. For all their admirable ability to distinguish between Rand the aesthetician and Rand the frequently ignorant polemicist against all Modernist art, Torres and Kamhi lapse into a good deal of ignorant, anti-twentieth century polemicism of their own.

Copyediting Lapses

It is in the course of these polemics that Torres and Kamhi bring up the issue of the supposed distinction between "art" and "entertainment." At one point, for example, in discussing "postmodern dance," they comment that "a responsible critic" would have described one student dance group's performance "*as entertainment* and would have refrained from referring to the four students as a 'dance group'" (235). In a note to this passage, Torres and Kamhi write: "On the distinction between *entertainment* and *art*, see our discussion in Chapter 16" (446 n. 122). The problem is, there *is* no Chapter 16. There *is* no explanation of this crucial "distinction" that Torres and Kamhi repeatedly propose as an important one to bear in mind when contemplating the phony "art" of the twentieth century.

That Torres and Kamhi should leave such an important point unmade is significant in itself—though of what might be open to dispute. (I'd be inclined to guess that they found the distinction between "art" and "entertainment" untenable once they began examining it more closely.) But that their editors and proofreaders should leave a reference to a non-existent chapter (in fact I found two references to this same non-existent chapter) in their text is even more remarkable for what it tells us about the slipshod manner in which this important work, the first full-length scholarly work on Rand's aesthetics ever published, was prepared for publication.

The two references to the non-existent chapter are only the most egregious of dozens and dozens of egregious errors of editing and proofreading that mar this book at every turn. Grammatical errors ("figures . . . is not art") are left uncorrected. Errors of fact (William A. Henry is called the "press critic for *Time* magazine"; the Supreme Court justice is called "Anthony" Scalia; the Italian film-maker is called "Frederico" Fellini) are left uncorrected. Open Court is a scholarly publishing house with a distinguished history that extends back into the last days of the nineteenth century. Some of the major works of twentieth-century philosophy—Brand Blanshard's *Reason and Analysis*, for example—have appeared under its imprint. That such a house should permit such a half-edited, half-proofread book to be published under the same imprint is shocking. Informal conversation with some other recent Open Court authors leaves me wondering whether it has become house policy to leave all responsibility for proofreading, copyediting, and fact-checking in the hands of authors. If so, my advice would be that all serious scholarly writers should seek to place their manuscripts elsewhere. For, in an effort to save a trivial amount of money (what ten years of experience as a professional freelance copyeditor and proofreader of book manuscripts tells me is less than a thousand dollars), Open Court seems willing to bring an important, if less than perfect, work of aesthetic philosophy into the world in a dirty, unpressed, stained, disheveled, and altogether unkempt suit of clothes.

Notes

1. Somewhat mortifyingly to this author, his longtime hometown, San Francisco, which likes to think of itself as a center of the artworld, has *Fountain* prominently (and quite unhumorously) on display in its Museum of Modern Art. One trusts that Duchamp would get a good belly laugh from this absurdity.

2. For a slightly different, but still relevant, perspective on the similarities between Rand and Pepper, see Riggenbach 1974.

3. Chris Matthew Sciabarra, who provided Torres and Kamhi with information from philosopher-historian George Kline on Rand's possible exposure to Taine, tells me that the authors misidentified the relationship of Rand and Plekhanov. In Torres and Kamhi's book, Plekhanov is misidentified as one of Rand's possible teachers; in actuality, he was the "father of Russian Marxism." His works were required reading in Soviet college courses.

4. See it at <http://photoarts.com/asp/auctions/DetailsFrameset.asp?id=29>.

5. On more than one occasion, I have also watched films on commercial jets without renting the headset. I've found myself perfectly able to "grasp the gist of the story."

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