

On Metaphysical Value-Judgments

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It is exciting to see all the scholarly work that is being published on Rand's philosophy, literature, and aesthetics—especially a serious and in-depth work such as Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi's *What Art Is*. In my view, however, some of the authors' explanations and definitions are unsatisfying. Since Torres and Kamhi each redefine Rand's definition of art, specifically the meaning of metaphysical value-judgments, I think it is worthwhile to examine the reason for their differences with Rand in this important regard.

Under the heading "Metaphysical Value-Judgments" (2000, 25–26), the authors list the questions that give rise to metaphysical value-judgments and which, in Rand's view, are crucial to the phenomenon of art. They agree that the concept, metaphysical value-judgments, is central to Rand's definition of art. But they argue that these questions are related only to literature or art that would have a "literary or narrative base (biblical, historical, mythological, or fictional) known to the viewer or listener" (25). Torres and Kamhi use the concept "narrative base" to mean a literary reference outside of the artwork. In support of this claim, they give an example of David's painting, *Death of Socrates*, and argue that "ethics and moral values [do not] appear to be essential to any . . . art forms" other than "fiction and drama" (26).

Using this example, they maintain that one cannot guess what values are depicted in the painting unless one reverts to knowledge about the historical Socrates. In contrast to this, Rand claims that in art criticism one should analyze the artwork without outside considerations (1975, 42). This means that the theme of a painting, for instance, should make its message clear without any prior knowledge of what the painting is about. This principle is common among art students, teachers, and other artists I know: If it needs a title to be

understood, it's not a good work. For a proper aesthetic analysis of *Death of Socrates*, the critic should not use references to Socrates, but point out the visual information, and then glean the work's meaning from the visual facts since this is a painting's sole means of communicating. Understanding the story that leads up to the image is irrelevant for aesthetic analysis.

Quite independent of the story, the visual information in this painting conveys variations on the themes of great loss and tragedy. But it is not a painting I would use to give insight about metaphysical value-judgments because its total impression is quite complex, due to the variety of emotional states conveyed by the individuals in the painting. Oddly, Torres and Kamhi use this example from a nonconstructive perspective; they don't "see" a connection between this painting and the metaphysical questions Rand raises. This leads them to dismiss a key aspect of Rand's aesthetics.

Because Rand only touches briefly upon painting, any meaningful discussion of her perspective requires an exploration of many more examples and arguments that would elucidate the connection between painting and her broader aesthetic theories. In this regard, let me mention two other artworks: *Liberty Leading the People* by Delacroix, and *The Scream* by Munch.

Rand asks: "Is the universe intelligible to man, or unintelligible and unknowable?" (1975, 19; Torres and Kamhi 2000, 25). In *Liberty Leading the People*, the central figure is a very physical woman in the act of striding over a rampart littered with dead fighters. She is encouraging the masses behind her onwards, the French flag raised in her outstretched arm. The setting of the scene is quite clear and the focus of details and the composition are selected and arranged to make her prominent. The clarity of the scene, combined with an emphasis on some elements, conveys that reality is knowable to the artist, and he exhibits a selective focus that makes the event intelligible.

In *The Scream*, the central figure has a sexless face that is out of proportion and rubber-like. The background is swirling and the figure is on a bridge that is plunging downward in an impossible manner. The painting projects that humans are sexless and non-solid, without muscle or bone structure, and hardly intelligible as real humans. The painting also indicates that the universe swims and

shifts, that its nature is unpredictable and unknowable.

Rand asks: "Can man find happiness on earth, or is he doomed to frustration and despair?" (1975, 19). Though the painting *Liberty* doesn't show happiness, the woman is in the act of acquiring a future life. In *Scream*, it is absolutely obvious that the person is witnessing a hideous horror, and in all probability, he/she will be doomed to despair or worse.

Rand asks: "Does he have the power . . . to choose his goals and achieve them . . . or is he the helpless plaything of forces beyond his control?" (19). Again viewing both these paintings in this context, it is clear that *Liberty* is active: she is not a plaything; she is dramatically in the process of self-preservation. In *Scream*, there is an ominous sense that this person cannot go back, but is being sucked into the horror that he/she is witnessing.

Rand asks: "Is man, by nature, to be valued as good, or to be despised as evil?" (19). Delacroix puts forth an extremely healthy and vital woman in an act of fighting for her beliefs. Her conviction is absolute, and her body is charging forward like an Olympian. She represents the antithesis of apathy and evasion. She positively embodies the values of courage, movement towards an objective, and decisiveness. In *The Scream*, life is simply hell. We have no sense if the person screaming is a good person or not, but everything in the painting—the person, the expression, the surroundings, the color—points toward a nightmare existence. Within the borders of the canvas, Munch is expressing the universe as he sees it, and that universe is evil.

The examples above demonstrate an implied connection to ethics and moral values and, given the process I have used, one can trace the meaning, even the contradictions, in artworks. Of course, in a mediocre work, it is hard to know what is happening. But summing up the visual facts, it is possible to find inherent in the work some metaphysical value-judgments.

Torres and Kahmi present a negation of an important aspect of Rand's definition of art. By their dismissal of Rand's understanding of the tie between important metaphysical questions and the nature of art, they imply that her concept of metaphysical value-judgments is not universal to art but merely specific to literature. This view, surely, minimizes and dilutes Rand's monumental picture of art.

References

Artworks mentioned can be viewed online at <<http://www.artchive.com>>.

- Rand, Ayn. 1975. *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*. 2nd rev. ed. New York: Signet.
- Torres, Louis, and Michelle Marder Kamhi. 2000. *What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand*. Chicago: Open Court.