

**Critical Misinterpretations and
Missed Opportunities:
Errors and Omissions by
Kamhi and Torres**

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In their *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* essay, "Critical Neglect of Ayn Rand's Theory of Art" (Fall 2000), Michelle Marder Kamhi and Louis Torres say that Ayn Rand's "distinctive and substantial" philosophy of art has been misinterpreted, underappreciated, and neglected, and they seek to analyze these shortcomings in the writings of Rand's critics and supporters. Although Kamhi and Torres's own substantial body of writings merits the same kind of attention, this essay will limit itself to an examination of several of the more significant flaws and gaps in their most recent offering.¹

Neglect By, or Of, Others?

Kamhi and Torres criticize others for not taking account of their arguments, but this is neither completely accurate, nor are they completely innocent of the charge themselves:

a. I considered their arguments in my commentary (1997) on their *Aristos* piece of "Meaning in Art" (1997), in my essay (1998) on Rand's definition of "art," and most recently in this journal (1999). I specifically criticized their and Hospers's (1967, 52) and Langer's (1953, 46, 76) problematic, concrete-focused interpretation of art as "imitation" and "re-creation" of *things from* reality, and I urged adoption of an alternative perspective, fundamentally opposed to theirs. My view holds that the fundamental re-creation in art is not of things from reality, but of reality itself, which is created anew in the

form of a “microcosm” or imaginary world. This view is not just my own personal aberration, since it is also held by Peikoff (1991, 417), Gilbert and Kuhn (1953, 6) and many others, including most notably the founder of aesthetics, Baumgarten (1967, 256). Yet, not one of the above has been acknowledged as holding this view. Instead, Kamhi and Torres have erected a large edifice of analysis and criticism on the shaky grounds of the very model of art as re-creation (*viz.*, of *things from* reality) that its most insightful critics have soundly refuted.

b. Although Kamhi and Torres properly mention my revisionist views on perception and music, they say nothing else about my views or my writings (except for my comment that Objectivism champions Romantic art³). As a matter of fact, I began work in 1971 on a manuscript, “Esthetics, Objectively,”³ which was finished in 1991. A copy of this manuscript was sent to Kamhi and Torres for their comments. They subsequently sent me an extensive list of notes, among them the suggestion to extract and seek publication of essays on my interpretation and validation of Rand’s definition of “art” and my critique of Rand’s views on perception and music. These essays (Bissell 1997; 1999) contained, respectively, a lengthy exploration and a briefer mention of the fundamental difference between the view they uphold and my view of Rand’s definition of “art.” Yet, Kamhi and Torres have mentioned neither this basic point of contention, nor the earlier, lengthy essay in which I exhaustively make my case.

Misinterpretation By, or Of, Others?

Kamhi and Torres criticize others for misrepresenting Rand’s views, even while they, at times, engage in misleading, selective quoting of those with competing interpretations:

a. They describe my view (1999, 60) as an overreaction to Rand’s exaggeration of the dissimilarities between music and the other arts, and an example of the widespread attempt to overemphasize their similarities, while “blur[ring] their diversity” (Kamhi and Torres 2000, 32). In particular, they say that I “[go] much too far” in “equating” the progression of events in dramatic music with those in Romantic

literature, and that “the analogy between melodic movement in music and plot in literature should not be pressed too far” (32).

First, in stressing the analogy between musical events and progressions and those in dramatic and literary art, I do not “equate” anything. To the contrary, I expressly warn against taking the analogy too far:

The flip side of the seldom realized deep commonalities between music and the other arts is the more familiar fact that, in the final analysis, music is also, to a large degree, *sui generis*. Despite its significant commonalities with the other dramatic arts, it is also a realm of human expression with a considerable amount of autonomy. (Bissell 1999, 76)

Second, the elements of the analogies I suggest are laid askew in Kamhi and Torres’s remarks: the parallels I draw are, on the more concrete level, between melodic movement and actions of characters, and, on the more abstract level, between melodic-harmonic progression and plot. Their claim that musical progressions are “much more like an organic evolution” than a goal-directed movement, “which implies anticipation by the composer (and, potentially, by the ordinary listener) of a particular end from the outset of the piece” is simply a false alternative (Kamhi and Torres 2000, 32). Every well-made literary plot is an “organic evolution” of events, and every organic evolution of events is end-oriented. A well-designed literary progression is no more “anticipat[ed] . . . from the outset” than is a musical progression, notwithstanding the many predictable works turned out by hacks in each art form.

b. At the same time, Kamhi and Torres claim that I “[seem] to echo Rand’s mistaken notion that music differs essentially from the other arts in that its value lies primarily in the *process* of cognitive integration it affords, rather than in the product of that integration” (32). There could hardly be a more telling misinterpretation of either Rand’s or my position on this issue. First, Rand clearly indicates that although the degree of complexity and ease of integration is the basic factor in determining musical preference, the re-creation of reality as

a *microcosm* is all-important in determining what one will enjoy (and, necessarily, value):

Within the general category of music of equal complexity, it is the emotional element that represents the *metaphysical* aspect controlling one's enjoyment. . . . The nature of the music represents the concretized abstraction of existence—i.e., a *world* in which one feels joyous or sad or triumphant or resigned. (Rand 1971, 61; former emphasis in original; latter emphasis added)

Although Rand did not recognize it or explicitly connect it to her comments on music, the same aspects function in literary and dramatic preferences. There *is* a deeply important element of complexity and ease of integration that determines whether one will prefer light fiction or heavy literature. But within either category, and any gradations in between, it is the *kind* of world, the kind of microcosm, the kind of re-creation of reality presented that determines one's values and thus enjoyment of literature. It is a simple inductive conclusion from empirical observation that this is one important way that value operates in *all* the temporal, dramatic arts.

My reformulation of Rand's assertion about musical value is not a symptom of my inconsistently overemphasizing (with Rand) the differences between music and the other arts, but an attempt to clarify what it is that is being enjoyably (or unenjoyably) integrated in musical perception. Rand thought it was integration of sensations into percepts, while I argue (and Kamhi and Torres acknowledge) that it is percepts (tones) into higher-level percepts (musical patterns). What is unique about music is *not* that it affords different levels of complexity and ease of integration (which *all* the temporal, dramatic arts do), but that it does so in the field of *perception* (rather than in concepts and language, as does literary drama).

c. Kamhi and Torres say that I “[confuse] Rand’s philosophy of art with her literary aesthetic when [I state] that ‘Objectivism champions . . . romantic art’” (Kamhi and Torres 2000, 35 n. 13; citing Bissell 1996, 82; emphasis theirs). Well, Rand *does* champion

romantic art, in her sense of the term. Furthermore, despite Rand's apparent failure to realize it, a great deal of her analysis of literature applies more broadly to *all* dramatic, temporal art, which includes, specifically, a great deal of the music written during the past 400 years or more.⁴ Kamhi and Torres question whether Rand's ideas about the nature of literature are properly a part of the philosophy of art. They claim repeatedly that Rand equates her *personal* aesthetic preferences with aesthetics in general.⁵ Such a view grossly underestimates the depth of Rand's intuition and insight. She was onto something, but she didn't take it far enough. Rand is not saying that all temporal art, in order to be valuable in a deeply philosophical way, *must* be plotted and thus Romantic. She is saying that having a plot is a very important way in which some art is (or can be) better than other art that does *not* heavily employ this element. Using the volition (i.e., plot) premise as a criterion for classifying art as Romantic or Naturalistic is thus just *one* way to sort the arts. And note that this premise is based on an aspect of the human conceptual faculty.

Another aspect (one of others, no doubt) with great potential utility for classifying art is the fact that the contents of our consciousness are *hierarchical*, i.e., structured in interconnected layers, with contents of narrower extent or scope being subsumed by broader contents. Not only are our learned concepts organized in this way, but so are our perception and experience of many temporal processes. And there can be relatively deep (many-layered) or relatively flat (few-layered) hierarchies—not to mention hierarchies on which a great deal too much has been heaped! Literature and music both exemplify this attribute to one degree or another.⁶ Setting aside the question of whether music and the other temporal arts exemplify volitionality and goal-directedness, then, here is another highly important issue: the hierarchical structuring of the temporal arts (and architecture).

The common thread running through both ways of looking at artworks and genres is that they are based on one of the main features of human consciousness. A well-structured story or musical piece—apart from (or in addition to) whatever it may convey about human *volitional* mental functioning—certainly does draw the reader

or listener into a process that conveys an important point about *hierarchically ordered* mental functioning. There is a strong presumption, in other words, that Rand has laid the groundwork for a Grand Unified Theory of Aesthetics. Someday, I suggest, a methodology derived from her work will allow theorists to legitimately classify artworks and connoisseurs to legitimately evaluate artworks as to how and/or whether they enhance one's experience of the volitionality, hierarchical nature, etc., of one's consciousness. Far from viewing Rand's well-argued personal preference for Romantic literature as a mere idiosyncratic intrusion into philosophy of art, I think it is reasonable to see it instead as the preface to a much deeper analysis and understanding of the nature and value of art.

d. Notwithstanding the importance of clearly distinguishing between Rand's more general aesthetic views and her more specific views about literature and her emphatic championing of Romantic art, she cannot reasonably be criticized for naming her book *The Romantic Manifesto* (subtitled: "A Philosophy of Literature"). She clearly states that this book is a statement of her objectives and motives in regard to Romanticism, and that her opening theoretical essays "[identify] the basis in reality" for that statement. This is directly parallel to her naming her ethics book *The Virtue of Selfishness* (subtitled: "A New Concept of Egoism"), which consisted of *one* theoretical essay and numerous applications. The whole point of these two books was *not* to present a fundamental thesis, but to argue for her *values*, Romanticism and Egoism, which were, for Rand, the *correct* applications of her fundamental aesthetic and ethical insights as expressed in her initial theoretical essays. She wanted to enable people to make aesthetic and ethical judgments on the basis of objective standards—and to thereby live a good and happy life. Just because such ability requires an explanation of what aesthetics (and art) and ethics *are* and what role they play in human life, does not mean that those explanations are the "primary purpose" of aesthetics and ethics. Thus, Kamhi and Torres's critique of Merrill's perspective (Merrill 1991, 122–26) on this issue is simply mistaken.

Ahistoricism

While Kamhi and Torres criticize others for being "a-historical," I find it difficult to understand either their unawareness or non-mention of the Founding Father of the science of aesthetics, German philosopher and aesthetician, Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762). Had they referred to Tonelli's commentary (1967, 256) in the same volume as Hospers's essay, they would have found in these comments the basis for resolving a number of controversies in the Objectivist understanding of aesthetics.

a. Baumgarten viewed art as a microcosm, as do twentieth century aesthetic historians Gilbert and Kuhn. Except for Peikoff⁷ and myself, virtually every other writer associated with the Objectivist movement seems to get this wrong, including Kamhi and Torres, Hospers, Merrill, etc. But consider Gilbert and Kuhn (1953, 6) who say: "the idea of the microcosm, the notion that the structure of the universe can be reflected on a smaller scale in some particular phenomenon, has always been a favorite in the history of esthetics." In an even more pertinent comment, they explain that Renaissance painters studied anatomy, psychology, etc., in order to be able to present "a total philosophical treatment of nature which will enable the artist to compose a second nature" (177). Baumgarten himself advocates this idea in a way that clearly resonates with Hospers and Kamhi and Torres. The latter say (in criticism of Kelley and Thomas's emphasis on a more cerebral slant on art): "one cannot meaningfully discuss why man needs art without reference to the emotions" (Kamhi and Torres 2000, 19).⁸ Compare this with Tonelli's commentary on Baumgarten:

The artist is not an imitator of nature in the sense that he copies it: he must add feeling to reality and thereby he imitates nature in the process of creating a world or a whole. The whole is unified by the artist through a coherent "theme" which is the focus of the representation. (Tonelli 1967, 256)

b. As Tonelli points out, Baumgarten viewed aesthetics as being on the same level of abstraction with logic, both of them being branches of epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, which he called “gnoseology” (256).⁹ Kamhi and Torres get this right (as against the relegation of aesthetics by Kelley and Thomas to a position derivative from ethics), but they could have made their case more solidly and historically grounded by reference to Baumgarten.

c. Kamhi and Torres quote Rasmussen’s observation (1988, 6) about the tragedy of the falling-out between Hospers and Rand, in terms of the detailed probing and integrated worldview that could have resulted from a sustained collaboration. A deeper tragedy results from the failure of Hospers and Kamhi and Torres to grasp the fundamental insight of Baumgarten, Rand, and others into the nature of art as microcosm. Such a grasp could have led the way not only to a resolution of the long misunderstanding between Hospers and Rand, but further to a powerful *synthesis* (with or without Rand’s cooperation) of their views. Hospers’s illuminating discussions (1946, 3–9; 1969, 3–4; 1982, 335–63) of the “aesthetic experience” and the “aesthetic attitude” identify the precise psychological correlates of the microcosm in the artwork that one perceives in such an experience and by means of such an attitude. The Objectivist aesthetics has been set back decades by the failure to identify and exploit this fertile avenue for development and synthesis, and Kamhi and Torres have thus far missed a golden opportunity to set things on the right track.¹⁰

Scholarly Lapses

Kamhi and Torres raise the issue of Hospers’s mysterious reference to the “art-as-re-creation” view in his *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article (1967, 52), but they fail to note a second mysterious use of the term in his 1982 book, *Understanding the Arts*. Regarding the latter work, they claim that while Hospers does discuss Rand’s concept of “sense of life”¹¹ in the latter work, nowhere did he mention the “re-creation” theory. However, in chapter 3, Hospers (1982, 177) cryptically states: “Music is not the recreation of anything—music is an act of pure *creation*, of combinations of sound

that are unlike anything that existed in the world before those sounds were created by the composer.” This statement comes totally out of the blue, both in terms of the concept of “re-creation” not being attributed to any specified theorist and in terms of its not being introduced in the discussion leading up to it. Apparently, Hospers intended “re-creation” to be taken as synonymous with “representation” or “imitation,” which he *does* discuss previously in this chapter. If so, this is merely further indication of Hospers’s long-standing misconception of and opposition to the view of art as re-creation of reality, taking it to mean re-creation of *things from* reality. Hospers has told me in personal correspondence that his 1967 article was actually written in the 1950s, long before he met Rand (in 1960). This, he said, is why he did not mention her in his 1967 article; and, moreover, the idea of art as re-creation was too widespread to require any other specific attribution. However that may be, Hospers has provided neither (1) documented evidence of even a single theorist who *did* hold the re-creation view prior to Rand,¹² nor (2) an explanation for his omission of her (or anyone’s) name when he refers in his 1982 book to music as not re-creating reality.

Kamhi and Torres (2000, 35 n. 10) also refer to “The Esthetic Vacuum of Our Age” (originally published in *The Objectivist Newsletter* [November 1962] and included in *The Romantic Manifesto*) as an essay “on popular culture.” What they do *not* mention is the fact that the latter was labeled as being *excerpts* from the address Rand made in 1961 to the Cultural Arts Festival in Michigan, and is undoubtedly closely related to her 1960 Columbia University radio talk, “Our Esthetic Vacuum.” In fact, those excerpts are lifted nearly word for word from a much longer taped lecture¹³ that is very likely a full-bodied replica of the 1960 radio talk manuscript. While the excerpted print version runs to about 2,500 words, the full taped version¹⁴ totals over 7,800 words, and it contains *much* more than comments on popular culture and the Romanticism-Naturalism debate. It discusses Rand’s definition of “art” and the function of concepts, the nature of sense of life, and the relation of reason to aesthetics; it is an eloquent, powerful example of Rand’s writing at its best. Truly, it is the Ur-document for the Objectivist aesthetics, and it should have been

published as the lead essay of *The Romantic Manifesto*. Its general obscurity is yet another result of the Objectivist movement's reprehensible tendency toward an oral tradition. Nonetheless, had Kamhi and Torres exercised their usual scholarly thoroughness, they would have known about this source. One hopes that this oversight will be redressed in their future writings.

Notes

1. These and (except where otherwise noted) all subsequent quotes and references to Kamhi and Torres pertain to their "Critical Neglect" essay (Kamhi and Torres 2000).

2. This was part of a brief remark I made in a non-aesthetics essay (Bissell 1996). See also below.

3. This 200-page manuscript was briefly mentioned in their book (Torres and Kamhi 2000), but not at all in their essay (Kamhi and Torres 2000).

4. The structural hierarchies within which the goal-directedness in Baroque music works itself out are relatively "flat" (i.e., having fewer levels) compared to those in the music of later composers. In this respect, the Romanticism (in Rand's sense of goal-directedness) in early music is more subtle and restrained. It took a great deal of "pushing the envelope" of stylistic boundaries before composers at last broke through into the obvious, lush Romanticism that we most often associate with the term. However, while Bach et al. were far from being full-blown Romantics, it is also the case that there is no Great Divide between the music of the 1600s and 1700s on the one hand and the music of the 1800s and 1900s on the other. Instead, there is a demonstrable *continuum* of gradually increasing amounts of goal-directedness in music during the Common Practice Era (also known as the Age of Tonal Music).

5. And thus, one might add, committing the "fallacy of the frozen abstraction," about which she wrote so cogently in "Collectivized Ethics" (Rand 1964, 94). Also see Bissell 1973.

6. As does architecture, which is included among the fine arts by Rand, but not by Kamhi and Torres.

7. In contrast to Kamhi and Torres's claim that "Peikoff does little to clarify Rand's theory" (Kamhi and Torres 2000, 22), I think he makes a very important clarification in stating that art is a microcosm. This emphatically and unequivocally distinguishes Rand's view from those who, like Kamhi and Torres, regard the re-creation of reality as operating primarily on the concrete-bound level of replicating or portraying specific things from reality. Rather than being an "amendment" to Rand's philosophy, this is fully consistent with her view of art as conveying a sense of an imaginary world.

8. In defense of Kelley and Thomas, as well as Peikoff, there is a legitimate sense in which art as "re-creation of reality" presents something *like* a philosophical view of life. Kamhi and Torres (2000, 20) are correct when they say: "[A] painting of a mother and child might concretize, for instance . . . the concept of maternal love and tenderness, not an entire 'philosophy.'" It does so, however, by re-creating

reality, by creating an imaginary world in which the relationship between mother and child is one (at least partly) of tenderness. It presents a view of the world which, if not a full-blown philosophy (and neither are most *philosophies* full blown!), is certainly very *analogous* to what philosophy does.

9. Tonelli (1967, 256) notes that Baumgarten was extraordinarily influential in German universities during the latter 1700s and was regarded by Kant as one of the greatest metaphysicians of his time.

10. A personal confession: Kamhi and Torres chide Rasmussen and Den Uyl for not including aesthetics in their 1984 book, citing also Hospers's regretted inability to supply an essay. No one regrets this omission more than I. When work was begun on the book in 1977, I was approached to do a chapter on Rand's aesthetics, and I demurred. I thought the time was not yet right, and that I was not as well versed academically or close enough to the "Inner Circle" to expect acceptance as having accurately represented Rand's views. Hospers eloquently expressed my own sentiments about this when he said: "I felt that, if I wrote on her aesthetics, and made one small misrepresentation or misunderstanding, or got something that was (in their opinion) wrong, I would be flayed alive by her ardent supporters . . ." (quoted in Kamhi and Torres 2000, 37 n. 25). In retrospect, it may well have been better to take my lumps in order to get my interpretation of Rand's definition of "art" and my critique of her view of music on the record fifteen years ago. The debate would be much further advanced from the point that it is now, and Kamhi and Torres might have long ago realized the distortion of Rand's views that their present position represents.

11. As Kamhi and Torres note, Hospers enthusiastically supported this idea of Rand's as early as 1962.

12. This is in marked contrast to Hospers's careful attribution of the art as "imitation" view to Plato and Aristotle. In fairness, even Langer (1953, 77), another careful scholar and vociferous opponent of the re-creation view, mentioned only *one* person who held such a view: Dewitt Parker (1926, 51). It is interesting to note that Parker appears to hold not only the "things from reality" variant of the re-creation theory, but also (implicitly) the microcosm variant. While he says "the physical object is inert, but as re-created in the imagination, it may be alive with the most volatile or momentary movement" (85), he also says: "Building up in the imagination *a little world* that shall satisfy his wishes, and embodying it in a medium over which, as expert technician, he [the artist] is master" (30, emphasis added).

13. Tape AR25C, available from Second Renaissance Books at www.RationalMind.com.

14. This has been transcribed by the present author and offered to Second Renaissance Books for publication.

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