The Poetic Mind: *Literariness and Essence*[*]

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Abstract

This paper proposes a new approach to *essentialism* in literature and art. It begins with the assumption that a certain *behaviour* is an *action* when it stands in the right causal relation to an internal process, and particularises it in the following argument: a certain behaviour is art -and the resulting object an artwork- when it stands in the right causal relation to a certain internal and, more specifically, mental/psycho-cognitive process. This process will be termed *poetic thought state*.

1 Introduction

Blaming *essentialism* for all the mischief it has been used for in human intellectual, social and ideological history -the repertoire is surprisingly rich and ranges from sexism and its doctrines to racism and its doctrines- is as wise and advisable as blaming the knife for a killing. Essentialism and its ethics are two rather different things. Scepticism about the latter cannot legitimately permit dismissal of the former.

The attribution of essences is an evolved part of human psychology. Our cognitive organisation has an inbuilt propensity not only to track essence and build certain categories of concepts around it but also to create complex and induced states of essential fuzziness -in, say, effortlessly constructing concepts like BLUEISH or CENTAUR[1].

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[1] It is an accepted convention in philosophy, social science and anthropology to talk about kinds whose having some *essence* is pretty much uncontroversial: kinds that exist independently of the human mind -*natural kinds*, that is- and kinds whose essence we humans invent in the form of a definition or function: *nominal kinds* and *artifacts*. A question that immediately follows is whether artifacts -whatever artifacts are taken to be- can be said to really have an essence. Another question concerns the nature of this artifactual essence: could it be a prototypical shape? Or a prototypical function? Or maybe, an essential structure or function? Or perhaps, none of these.

Beyond conventions of jargon, the borders between artifacts and natural kinds are anything but sharp. *Biological artifacts* (Sperber 2003), combining both a natural and a cultural dimension, are perhaps the prime examples of fuzziness in the borderline between the two categories. Dan

This paper is a defence of essentialism in literature and art. It proposes a possible story on what the essence of art might be, and an alternative account of *literariness* that could potentially answer questions that 20th century *formalist* and *structuralist* models of literary essence left hopelessly unanswered.[2]

2 Structural essentialism in literature and the other arts

The early 20th century avant-garde set out on a venture widely known and usually referred to as *the poetics of language*. Proclaiming the existence of a distinct language of literature, poets and intellectuals of that time treated the literary text as a deviation from the 'norms' and 'canon' of ordinary language and assumed that linguistic form and structure is what makes a literary text distinct from an ordinary linguistic object. Ambitious as it may have been, the project was ill-fated. Founded on largely unsubstantiated assumptions and lacking even the most rudimentary forms of *psychological realism*, in the second half of the 20th century *the poetics of language* eventually collapsed under the weight of indisputable psycholinguistic, pragmatic and philosophical evidence.[3]

Few nowadays still acknowledge that, although incorrect, the *poetics of language* was a venture of noteworthy intellectual bravery. Even fewer realise that this venture was an essentialist project.

To assume that literature is a distinct object because of inherent linguistic properties of the literary text is to assume that literature has an essence. Had the *poetics of language* been correct, it would have proved that some deviation at the formal and structural level is what makes a literary object essentially distinct from an ordinary linguistic object. Generalising this assumption to all art, it would then have been possible to claim that what makes an artistic object essentially distinct from a 'mere thing' is a medium-specific deviation at the formal and structural level.

Sperber proposes: 'The notion of an artifact commonly used in social sciences, particularly in archeology and anthropology, is a family resemblance notion, useful for a first-pass description of various objects and for vague characterisation of scholarly, and in particular museographic interests. It should not be taken for granted that this notion could be defined precisely enough to serve a genuine theoretical purpose.' (Sperber 2003: 124)

At the same time, 'essence' in itself need not be a single and unitary notion applying equally either across both artifacts and natural kinds or across different types of artifacts. In fact, it seems to me much wiser to talk about 'essences' in the plural, acknowledging the many different forms essence may take, each applying to different sets of artifacts -in exactly the same way that it is more appropriate to talk about the 'structures' rather than 'structure' of natural kinds, with types of structure ranging from biological to genetic to chemical etc.

[2] The question of artistic essence is as central to literary theory as it is to the philosophy of art.

[3] For more extensive discussion on this matter see my paper 'On Genuine Interdisciplinarity: Articulating Poetics as Theory' (Kolaiti, forthcoming)

Not only was the poetics of language an essentialist project, it was also an essentialist project of Putnam's *structural* variety. In Putnam's metaphysics, the essence of a *natural kind* - the property (*P*), that is, that makes it the natural kind it is - is determined by the kind's *structure* or *microstructure* (1975). When Putnam walks in a 'gallery of indiscernibles', a 'gallery' of perceptually indistinguishable natural kinds, he peels them apart on the grounds of structural criteria. Of two superficially indiscernible substances, only one of which is actually water[4], water is the substance that has the structure H_2O. Here, 'structure' amounts to chemical make-up. Of two superficially indiscernible beings, only one of which is actually human, the human is the one that has the appropriate DNA structure. Here, 'structure' takes the form of genetic make-up. It is easy to see how the poetics of language can be accommodated in this framework. For the poetics of language, the distinctness of literature as an object as opposed to ordinary language was the result of a differential and deviant *linguistic structure*.

I would be inclined to propose that the last serious attempt in the 20th century to defend the *poetics of language* and show the essential distinctness of literature in structural linguistic terms was Jakobson's notorious 'Closing statement in linguistic and poetics' (1958/1996). In that paper, Jakobson aspires to capture the inherent - and therefore essential- linguistic property that renders literature distinct as an object, and thus emerges as an advocate of structural essentialism whether he is aware of doing so or not. His answer to what this essential -'inherent' he calls it- property might be is notably his notion of the *poetic function* (1958/1996: 17), and 'poetic function' is incontestably a structural concept.[5]

While in the case of literature the clues that disproved structural essentialism came mainly from the outside -I briefly mentioned above that *the poetics of language* was eventually deflated because of increasing evidence of a psycholinguistic, pragmatic and philosophical sort-, in visual art, the decisive evidence against essential structure emerged from within the art world itself.

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[4] For those acquainted with Putnam, what I am referring to in brief here is the famous 'Twin Earth problem' (Putnam 1975: 139-140): '…we shall suppose that somewhere in the galaxy there is a planet we shall call Twin Earth. (…) In fact, apart from the differences we shall specify in our science-fiction examples, the reader may suppose that Twin Earth is exactly like Earth. (…) One of the peculiarities of Twin Earth is that the liquid called 'water' is not H_2O but a different liquid whose chemical formula is very long and complicated. I shall abbreviate this chemical formula simply as XYZ. I shall suppose that XYZ is indistinguishable from water at normal temperatures and pressures. In particular, it tastes like water and it quenches thirst like water. Also, I shall suppose that oceans and lakes and seas on Twin Earth contain XYZ and not water, that it rains XYZ on Twin Earth and not water etc'. The relevant metaphysical question in Putnam's Twin Earth example is what makes Earth water and Twin Earth 'water' ontologically/essentially distinct.

[5] The *poetic function* pertains when both paradigmatic and syntagmatic/structural selections during utterance/text production are not contingent but made on the basis of systematic *structural equivalence*. Structural equivalence in turn refers to systematic relations of similarity and dissimilarity at a structural level.

Conceptual art and its *ready-mades*[6] caused visual art to enter the philosophical 'gallery of indiscernibles' and brought about an art-specific variety of *twin event.*[7] Ordinary Brillo boxes and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, ordinary urinals and Duchamp's *Urinal* are twin events, tokens of the same type. More importantly, ordinary Brillo boxes and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, ordinary urinals and Duchamp's *Urinal* are not just perceptually indiscernible objects, but also, and crucially, structurally indiscernible.

If there was any hope at all for structural essentialism in the first place, conceptual art certainly caused it to evaporate: if Duchamp's *Urinal* is a work of art -and there is strong introspective evidence that it is- and given that Duchamp's *Urinal* has identical structural properties with an ordinary urinal, then the essential property that makes a certain object art cannot be down to its structure. The problem may serve as a rule-of-the-thumb quiz that proves useful in telling a serious intellectual from a run-of-the-mill one: ask them what they think the implications of conceptual artworks are for an ontology of art. The serious intellectual hopefully will realise that what really follows from conceptual art is that, if there is an essence of art, it is not part of the artwork's structure. The run-of-the-mill one will suggest that there is no essence of art!

Structural essentialism had been dead in the context of visual art long before the death of its literary equivalent (i.e. *the poetics of language*).

3 Relational essentialism: Arthur Danto and Jerry Fodor

In modern times, two theorists have come forward with notable proposals on the essence of art. The first is Arthur Danto. In 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace' (1981), Danto draws directly on Wittgenstein's distinction between *behaviour* and *action* as a case of *contextualisation* and suggests that what distinguishes an artwork from a perceptually and structurally indiscernible 'mere thing' is (*historical*) *context*. For Danto the twin events in question (ordinary Brillo boxes and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*) have identical perceptual and structural properties but are essentially distinct because they clearly have *differential contextual histories*: the artwork, unlike the 'mere thing', is located in an *artworld context* (1981: 142).

Notice that while Danto's agenda is unquestionably essentialist, the version of essentialism he is pursuing is critically different from that pursued within *the*

[6] Apologies for taking you through this increasingly frequented common-place; I am frustrated myself by the way conceptual art is used over and over again in theoretical discussions on ontology as a result of theorists uncritically copying theory and examples from each other. I promise that drawing on it in my case is not the result of a 'recycling of theory'; ready-mades are a genuinely intriguing philosophical category and obviously critical to the aims of the present discussion.

[7] The term 'twin-event' is an alternative for referring to a set of indiscernible objects.

poetics of language: Danto seems to have insightfully weighed and interpreted the philosophical implications of *ready-mades* and realised that essentialism of the structural variety -while perfectly adequate for pinning down the essence of natural kinds- is not appropriate to works of art. 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace' thus represents an innovative move away from the dead-ends of structural essentialism and celebrates an essentialism of a *relational* sort: the property (*P*) that makes an object a work of art is not part of the object's perceptual or structural properties, and is not to be found within the object itself; it is rather a *relational property* -in Danto's particular case, a relation between the artwork and a certain artworld-specific historical context.

Danto is right in looking for a relational property; but wrong in what he assumes this property is. My own account will be in keeping with Danto's to the extent that it also treats (*P*) as being a relational property.

The second theorist to seriously tackle essentialism in art is the philosopher of mind Jerry Fodor. As Fodor's 'Déjà vu all over again: how Danto's aesthetics recapitulates the philosophy of mind' (1993) has a more advanced and up-to-date relational story to tell about the essence of art -and is anyway in direct dialectics with Danto-, I will not engage in arguing against Danto's exegetical framework at all. I will try and grapple, though, with one or two of Fodor's philosophical arguments, hoping to show why his account is not satisfactory either.

To say that Danto's and Fodor's frameworks give inadequate accounts of the essence of art is not to say that these frameworks have no place whatsoever in an overall philosophy of art. My proposal does not exclude either Danto's contextual or Fodor's intentional story. It simply assigns them a different locus. Both stories have a lot to say about art as a phenomenon; it is just that none of what they have to say is THE answer to what the relational essence of art is.

Fodor's story is one of *intentional etiology* (1993:44). His account -just like Danto's- pursues an essentialism of the relational sort and is heavily inspired by recent philosophical work on *intentionality*. Quite unsurprisingly for a theorist who totally revolutionised philosophy of mind, Fodor assumes that (*P*) -the property that makes a work of art the kind of object it is- is a relation between the artwork and a certain type of mental state. This state is what we commonly refer to as an *intention*.

Descartes' definition of *action* is of great value to Fodor in establishing the particular relationship that, in his view, obtains between intentions and the essence of a work of art -in the same way that Wittgenstein's definition of action was valuable for Danto:

> A first approximation to the Cartesian story [about action]', Fodor says, 'is this: in the typical case, what makes a motion an action is that it is caused, in the right sort of way, by the agent's intentions. In the typical case, for example, what makes a motion an act of *F*-ing is that it is caused, in the right sort of way, by an intention to *F*. (What makes a

> rising of an arm an arm raising is that it's caused, in the right sort of way, by an agent's intention that his arm should rise.) (…) Suffice it that the Cartesian story (…) would explain why there can be action twins. Having the causal history it does is itself a relational property of an event, hence it's a property that may distinguish events that are "indistinguishable to all appearances". (…) [T]o come to the point at last, this option also suggests itself in the case of artwork twins. A relatively unilluminating version of the Cartesian story might be that what makes something an artwork is that it was *intended* as an artwork by whoever made it. In which case, it could distinguish between an artwork and a mere thing that the latter but not the former was made with the intention of providing a container for Brillo pads. (…) …"artwork" is an etiological concept -thereby explaining how there can be artwork twins; and it connects the intentionality of artworks (their aboutness) with the intentionality of mental states. (1993: 44-45).

Fodor admits that 'the Cartesian proposal isn't of much help as it stands': '[I]ntending to make an artwork needs explication in a way that, say, intending one's arm to rise does not. (…) …it's a lot less clear what it is that one intends when one intends that something should be an artwork'(1993: 45). Hence, the goal of his discussion thereafter -and more specifically, his appeal to the notion of *audience* and *object function* (1993: 46)- is to make the Cartesian proposal even more palpable and concrete. I will come back to this shortly.

Little Johnny is sitting next to his mom scribbling on pieces of paper with his coloured pencils. Little Johnny recently heard the word 'masterpiece' and asked and learned what it means. In fact, he is just now deciding to draw one. He grabs one of his coloured pencils and clumsily smudges a piece of paper. He then summons his mom and says snootily 'Mom, look! A masterpiece!'. His mom takes the drawing/ smudged paper in her hands and agrees: 'Yes, it's a masterpiece!' Little Johnny is over the moon.

Johnny's behaviour is an action of trying to create a masterpiece in the Cartesian sense, in that it is caused, in the right sort of way[8], by an intention to create a

[8] And we know it's 'the right sort of way' because the action brought about by this intention is an action of trying to create a masterpiece as opposed to, say, an action of trying to eat an ice-cream. Defenders of the intentional approach may not find this line of argument satisfactory. Indeed one could resort to a claim similar to Sperber & Wilson's and propose that you can genuinely intend to bring about only states of affairs that are potentially achievable -by you, in that situation-, and creating a masterpiece *isn't* potentially achievable for most children. The claim might be generalised as: you cannot rationally intend that B unless you are capable of carrying out B, if you want your mental state to count as a genuine intention rather than a mere desire or wish. In discussing the matter, Deirdre Wilson suggested to me: 'I don't know anyone who would defend the strong version of this claim. A more standard claim is that you can't rationally form an intention to do something that you know is impossible. Intending to do something -like trying to do something- is rational as long as one has some ground for thinking that the intended state of

masterpiece. Moreover, Johnny's intention to create a masterpiece is recognised as such by his mother. In recognising this intention, his mother interprets his behaviour as an action of trying to create a masterpiece and happily acknowledges the drawing as a masterpiece, although what she is looking at is a smudge. Is Johnny's smudge a masterpiece?

Having an intention to create a masterpiece may cause an action of trying to create a masterpiece but may not necessarily cause a masterpiece per se. Johnny intends to create a masterpiece and this intention brings about, in the right sort of way, an action of trying to create a masterpiece. As it happens, though, the output of this action is not a masterpiece but a smudge. Although the smudge was clearly intended as a masterpiece, its *causal/intentional history* is not in itself sufficient to make it a masterpiece. 'Masterpiece' is an *evaluative concept*. The causal history of an object is sufficient to tell us what the object was intended as but not what the object is! There is a certain sense, as I will argue later, in which 'artwork' is also an evaluative concept. An object may be intended as an artwork and this intention may even be recognised by an audience; its intentional history, however, is not in itself sufficient to make this object an artwork. Its intentional history tells us whether the object was intended as an artwork but not whether the object is an artwork.

This is a fundamental flaw of the intentional account that seems to pertain throughout discussions on intentionality. I think I could not put it better than Dretske (1988: 64):

> Philosophers have long regarded intentionality as a mark of the mental. One important dimension of intentionality is the capacity to misrepresent, the power (in the case of the so-called propositional attitudes) to 'say' or 'mean' that P when P is not the case.

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affairs is compatible with one's representation of the actual world, so that there is some possibility -however remote- of bringing it about. So I'm not sure you need to make a special exception for artistic objects -partly for reasons you discuss in your account, about boundary conditions, etc.'. However, if in some case I were to come up with a response based on the strong version of the claim, my argument would go as follows: intentional objects with *evaluative content* should be excluded from the strong claim. You cannot intend evaluative objects in the way you intend other things. Part of what it means for an object to be evaluative -and both masterpiece and artwork, as I will argue, are objects with an evaluative element - is that an agent cannot intend in the strict sense to bring them about, because she can never assess with complete confidence her capability of bringing them about -in the way, let us say, that an agent can assess with confidence a capability of bringing about an action like raising one's own arm. An artist may cut his own ear off in despair at the limitations of his abilities, spend a lifetime seeing the creation of art as unachievable, doubt the actual artistic status of his output and still be said to have a rational intention to bring about a work of art. The dimension of artworks as objects with an evaluative element allows one to intend to produce an artwork and simultaneously hold the belief that what one intends may not be achievable by him in the given time, with the whole scenario not being a paradox.

It may be that some actions like raising one's own arm fall under etiological concepts in the intentional sense, although there is a lot of room for debate here too. In fact, it can be argued that even in actions like raising one's own arm, the intention alone of raising one's own arm does not suffice to bring about an action of raising one's own arm, if for instance the arm in question is stranded or the individual with this intention has paralysis of the upper limbs etc. There are thus various other boundary physiological and cognitive conditions that have to be met in order for intentions to bring about even simple, uncomplicated actions like raising an arm, which brings into question whether even these actions fall under etiological concepts in a full-fledged and uncontroversial sense.

In any case, art is not such an action and all intentional etiology can reveal about an object is whether it was intended as a work of art, whether it was produced by an action of trying to create a work of art but not whether it IS a work of art. An artwork is not constituted by its intentional etiology -by its being intended as an artwork- any more than a masterpiece is. Intentional etiology leaves the question of the essence of art entirely untouched.

Fodor's effort to clarify his Cartesian story only adds to the problem. First he resorts to a notion of *audience* which, although not theoretically redundant, does not make any obvious contribution to a discussion on the essence of art:

> …the intention that a thing be an artwork is in part the intention that the thing have an audience. (…) that's how it can be that [Warhol's] *Brillo Boxes* is an artwork though Brillo boxes aren't. Whereas *Brillo Boxes* is intended to be *shown*, to be *exhibited*, Brillo boxes are intended merely as boxes for Brillo (1993: 46).

Let's reverse this assumption for a moment. Imagine a scenario where Picasso starts working on *Guernica* with a clear and firm intention that *Guernica* is never to be shown or exhibited. He takes extra care so that no living soul ever lays eyes on it. When the work is at last complete, Picasso sets *Guernica* on fire and lets it turn into ash. How are we to explain the strong introspective evidence that, although the *Guernica* of our somewhat odd scenario was neither seen by an actual audience nor intended to be seen by one, in its short life it certainly WAS a work of art? It may be that an appeal to possible or ideal audiences could potentially deepen a theoretical explanation of how a certain object is recognised as art and highlight issues of aesthetic value, cultural purpose and communicative success, but as regards the essence of art, Fodor's notion of *audience* seems totally redundant[9].

[9] It can be argued here that although this hypothetical *Guernica* of our scenario has not been seen by an actual audience, and was not intended to be seen by one, a notion of some *ideal audience* cannot be totally eliminated. At the least, the producer himself *sees* the work while producing it and a feedback between production and response is thus always present. My concern here is to what extent we want to treat this notion of ideal audience as constitutive of the essence of art. My reaction is that *audience* in any sense is irrelevant to issues concerning artistic essence.

Second, Fodor draws on some implicit notion of (practical) function with the aim of distinguishing further between artworks and 'mere aesthetically gratifying objects'. Greek pots: are they artworks or aesthetically gratifying objects? Fodor suggests the latter:

> …Greek pots *aren't* artworks because they were intended to put (the Greek equivalent of) Brillo in (1993: 46).

Despite my sheer admiration for having come up with such a brilliant conception as 'the Greek equivalent of Brillo', I must admit that Fodor's assumption here is also problematic. Is a practical function sufficient to stop a perceptually -as I would prefer to call it- gratifying object from also being a work of art?[10] Imagine another odd philosophical case. Da Vinci decides to create the *Mona Lisa* not with an intention to show or exhibit it but with an intention to cover a wall damaged by erosion and mould. Strong introspective evidence again suggests that this practically motivated *Mona Lisa* is, nevertheless, far more than a perceptually gratifying object; that it is, indeed, a work of art. If it is the case that Greek pots *aren't* artworks -and let me not give a firm response to this as yet- this is certainly not because they were solely intended for the practical purpose of putting (the Greek equivalent of) Brillo in.

Even more problematic is Fodor's assumption that there can exist such a thing as an artwork of no aesthetic value whatsoever (1993: 43), as has also been claimed by other theorists, of whom Danto is the most prominent. On closer inspection, the course of reasoning that leads Fodor to this conclusion is slippery and contains a crucial mistake. Let me come back to this later in discussing my own proposal.

Those who've closely read 'Déjà vu all over again: how Danto's aesthetics recapitulates the philosophy of mind' will find that the framework I'm about to develop bears quite a few similarities to the Fodorian rationale.

For the record, let us say that:

1. Here too the essential property (*P*) that makes a work of art the kind of object it is will be assumed to be a *relational property*. Moreover, it will be assumed to be a relation between artworks and a certain type of mental object/state; yet this type of mental object/state is not the one Fodor is supposing, i.e. an intention.

2. *Intentional realism*, nevertheless, will also be assumed. There is indeed very good evidence in contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive psychology that we may have been guilty of 'killing the author' a bit too early. Not only do humans entertain mental states such as intentions, desires and beliefs, but also the possession and recognition of these states seems to play a spinal role in human communication and cognition (Sperber 2000, Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995, Searle

[10] It's quite standard to think of objects as having several functions. For illuminating discussion, see Dan Sperber's paper 'Seedless grapes' (2003).

1983 etc). Intentional realism, though, should be assigned a very different place to the one Fodor wanted to give it.

3. In line with Fodor's rationale, my account will propose what can be described as a *mentalistic/ noetic* view of art. It will concentrate on mental states and the relation between such states and objects out there in the world, rather than sets of objects *per se*.

4. The shift from talking about art as a mere inert object to talking about it in terms of actions is an enviable move on the part of both Danto and Fodor, and one that was long overdue in both literary theory and the philosophy of the arts. Artworks (literary texts, for instance) are *local* facts, art/ literary events are *global*. Artworks are local occurrences within the global phenomenon of an art event, in that the art event involves a characteristic *action* which leads to some (occasionally prototypical) *end-product* (artwork) which is likely to trigger some characteristic *response*. An *action-based* account which gives priority to dynamic events rather than static objects enables us to grasp not only the physicality of the object produced as part of the art event, but also the less 'visible', yet no less real, facts of humans and their representations.

5. My account assumes that a certain *behaviour* is an *action* when it stands in the right causal relation to an internal process, and particularises it in the following argument: a certain behaviour is art -and the resulting object an artwork- when it stands in the right causal relation to a certain internal and, more specifically, mental/psycho-cognitive process. Following the philosopher Fred Dretske (1988: 17) I assume that an action involves a process of A causing B that begins with A and ends with B. I therefore propose that art is an action-process that begins with internal efferent activities which bring about artistic behaviour and ends in those external manifestations, objects/results of artistic behaviour, that are commonly perceived and recognised as artworks.

6. If 'artwork' is an etiological concept -and there is good reason to believe that it is- the etiology involved is not intentional. Hopefully my brief discussion on Johnny's 'masterpiece' and the argument I unfolded there has convinced you that etiology of the intentional variety cannot account for whether an object is an artwork or not. The crucial element in an artwork's causal history is not its intentional but what I will call its *psycho-cognitive etiology*. Now, because the psycho-cognitive etiology of artworks is in some sense *evaluative*, artworks can be said to be *etiological objects* with an *evaluative element*.

7. Finally, following the example of Danto and Fodor, I will make a genuine effort to ensure that my aesthetics throughout this analysis is informed by recent advances in the study of language, communication and mind. More specifically, my view on human communication and cognition will be in line with and draw on the hypotheses of Wilson and Sperber's 'RelevanceTheory' framework (1986/1995).

4 The Poetic Mind
4.1 From 'Language' to 'Thought'

Not very long ago, in studying Relevance Theory, I came across the work of Adrian Pilkington. In his book *Poetic Effects* (2000) and also the paper 'Non-lexicalised concepts and degrees of effability' (2001), Pilkington introduces a literary-theoretical notion that he refers to as *poetic thought*. I cannot say with confidence whether the present account would have come forth without this encounter with Pilkington. Not so much because of any of the concrete proposals he makes but because the rationale of his work vaguely pointed, at least to my eyes, to something interesting, original and new.

In the last 25 years, after the *poetics of language* received its final and fatal blow through the emergence of cognitive pragmatics, almost everyone in literary study seems to have become aware that a step in a new direction is called for, but no one seems to know for sure what this direction might be. The collapse of the *poetics of language* and the structural variety of essentialism it adhered to left literary study numb and unable to defend the distinctness of its object. Let me remark here, for those who haven't considered before the colossal implications this development could have for both literary study and the philosophy of the arts, that amongst the immediate consequences of literature not being distinct as an object would be literary theory lying around as a domain without a proper subject of enquiry: if every aspect of literary art can be as well accounted for in terms of the study of ordinary language -on the basis that ordinary and literary language are not after all essentially distinct- then literary theory is possibly a discipline without a domain. What was supposedly its dedicated domain will progressively become appropriated by disciplines which investigate ordinary discourse, such as linguistics, pragmatics or psychology. Generalise these implications to all theory of art and you will realise why the fall of the poetics of language left literary people in a state of anxiety and confusion. It wasn't just a theoretical framework that was at stake here, but the whole edifice of literary enquiry and the reasons for its existence. A number of literary figures of that time -particularly stylisticians and text linguists such as Alan Durant and Nigel Fabb- responded vigorously to these developments and 'defended' the dedicated study of literature as a variety of *elaborate discourse* under a so-called 'Linguistics of Writing' (1987).

I want to remain optimistic and propose that maybe we have been too hasty in giving up. The collapse of structural essentialism and the fact that we cannot defend the distinctness of literature at a structural (i.e. linguistic) level does not in any way entail that literature is not distinct as an object in any other interesting sense. It only entails that, if the essence of literature is to be found somewhere, this somewhere is definitely not its language. Structural essentialism has collapsed, but an essentialism of some other sort is still an open possibility. Instead of hastily giving in to the idea that there is no essence of literature, and trying to rescue the proper subject of literary theory by treating it on a par with 'the language of

advertisement', maybe we should try and think of levels beyond linguistic structure at which a distinct essence of literature might still be defensible.

A poet has the moral obligation to defend the distinctness of her art from 'the language of advertisement' with every inch of rationality natural selection has endowed her with. It is of less importance whether you agree with the account I am about to develop here. What really matters is that a new way of thinking is made possible. A way out of three decades of dead-ends.

To come to the point, it might be that our early 20th century precursors, poets and intellectuals, were mistaken only in that they looked for the essential property of literature in the wrong place. Their venture was structural and therefore medium-based: looking for some notable distinctness at the level of the medium (language) indeed has some immediate appeal but proved entirely misleading in the end. It might be, though, that an essence of literature is still defensible provided that we look for it in the right place. It might be that the place to look for it is not language but *thought*, not media but mental states. After about a hundred years of a poetics of language, it might be that the 21st century will be the century of *a poetics of thought*.

My theoretical kinship with Pilkington does not go much beyond the fact that at some point in the present proposal I will be using a theoretical notion that I also intend to call *poetic thought*. My notion and Pilkington's notion of poetic thought are two fundamentally different theoretical constructs, similar only in name. Allow me here a very brief detour to explain why my proposals are somewhat distant from Pilkington's, although his account too involves that crucial move from media to mental states that I am so interested in.

In discussing the difficulties that *perceptual states* (smells, images, sounds, textures etc) cause for the human expressive repertoire and the relative ineffability of some of these states, Pilkington (2001) proposes the term 'poetic thought' for a type of thought involving such perceptual states:

> [This] kind of thought,' Pilkington suggests, 'is very likely the kind of thought that only a poet would attempt to communicate, or could communicate. It is a thought that uses a non-lexicalised concept that has to be partly constructed using some [perceptual] component. The [perceptual] component is typically evoked through the use of figurative language such as metaphor, simile or quasi-simile. Imagine some chickens getting down from their roost. How might the manner of their getting down be described? (…) Here (…) is Robert Gray: 'They jump down stolidly from their roost/ as an old sailor jumps/ With wooden leg' (2001: 5).

It is clear that Pilkington's notion of poetic thought involves a steady focus on what I would refer to as *proper objects*. These objects are perceptual objects: smells, images, sounds, textures. What Pilkington seems to be saying is that when a

perceptual object is the subject of a thought, or at least features in a thought, then this thought is poetic.[11] But then, there is good introspective evidence that perceptual states are so widespread in the human mental tapestry that almost every thought, even thoughts about abstract objects, is likely to contain a smaller or greater cargo of perceptual material (for extensive discussion on this matter, see Kolaiti 2008). If that is so, then, given Pilkington's definition, almost every thought is a poetic thought. Why call it poetic, then, at all? Simply call it 'thought'. To the extent that 'poetic thought' means thought that involves perceptual material, it is a redundant theoretical construct. All thoughts can be shown to involve such material.

To the extent that Pilkington's notion of 'poetic thought' is employed to allude to some distinctness of the poetic mentality, it is not just a redundant but also a dangerous theoretical construct. To say that the distinctness of the poetic mentality involves a steady focus on certain types of objects (e.g. phenomenal objects such as how blades of grass move or how chickens jump) shows great theoretical kinship to a pre-20th century conventionalist poetics: it assumes the existence of proper objects for literature and art. For pre-20th century poetics, proper objects would be mists, daffodils, sunsets. For Pilkington's poetics, it's blades of grass, chickens jumping and kangaroos eating. Even the addition of 'how' does not improve the picture much. *How* blades of grass move, *how* chickens jump and *how* kangaroos eat grass is still an object *external* to individual consciousness, and therefore a proper object in the conventionalist sense.

It is often said that art can be anything. In some sense this seems true. In some other sense it seems entirely untrue. For some reason, debate in either the philosophy of art or the theory of literature tends to revolve single-mindedly around two recurring reference points: one is the artwork as a physically tractable and tangible entity and the other is our *reception* of it. It should cause at least mild amusement that the third part of the triptych that makes up an art event, the *production*-part, that is, has merited so little attention.

Amongst the innumerable reasons why art is not an action like raising one's own arm, the production-specific particularities of art immediately stand out. It seems to me pretty uncontroversial that, while any human being -provided they are not

[11] In the *International Workshop on the Pragmatics of Poetic Communication* in Paris in 2006, Pilkington put forward the idea that having a perceptual object as its subject is a sufficient condition on poetic thoughts but under pressure of similar criticisms, eventually revised this view and suggested something entirely different: poetic thought, he said, involves an *affective stance* towards an object. This new approach is still quite problematic. First, it is not clear at all why affective attitudes should be given such special status in literature and art. Second, a framework like this fails to explain how movements like 'vorticism', which despised sentimentality and affect and adored formal properties like dynamicity and commotion, can be art. Third and more worryingly, to try and capture the distinctness of the poetic/artistic mentality in terms of affect is more or less to suggest a poetics of the 'Romantic novel' variety.

physically or mentally impaired- can raise their own arm, not every fully physically and mentally capable human being can produce *De niemandsrose* or *Guernica*[12]. If that is not good enough reason to assume, first, some noteworthy psycho-cognitive distinctness in art as an action, and, second, the possibility that the concept of art has evaluative content, then nothing is.

4.2 Poetic thought states

Let us trivially say that there exist *objects* and *mental representations*/ *ways of 'seeing'/entertaining* objects. Do not take the notion of *object* too narrowly. Construe it broadly as anything that could lend itself as subject of a mental representation: an existing or fictional concrete 'thing', a state of affairs, a situation, a sensation, a feeling, a psychological, emotional or mental state or even a tightly interwoven bundle of all these. Do not take *representation* too narrowly either. Think of it not as a mere mental mirroring/projection of an object, but as being in a complex state in relation to some object, involving conceptual, perceptual and affective attitudes towards it. In this broad sense of the term, even non-representationalist art involves an element of representation in that some object -e.g. a surface, a material, a volume, a texture or colour etc- is *'seen'/ mentally entertained* by the artist in a certain *way*.[13]

Particularly in art -and for reasons that *inter alia* rest in the pragmatics of artworks as instances of 'weak communication' (for discussion of this term, see Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 217-224, 235-237, Sperber & Wilson 2007)- objects are of such complexity and fluidity that it is often almost impossible to entirely grasp and pin them down, never mind exhaust them.[14] In fact, the better the artwork, the less likely that its object will ever be exhausted. The fact that objects are not explicitly tractable within the framework of art does not however entail that they are not metaphysically or psychologically real. Both introspective evidence and also the amazing fact of *interpretive convergence* -i.e. the fact that an artwork can cause different recipients to have surprisingly similar perceptual, affective or

[12] They might produce a poem in the conventional/ sociological sense: something that is intended as a poem, purports to be a poem and is conventionally recognised as a poem; but can they produce a real POEM, a poem in an essential sense? An adequate theory of the essence of art should at least in principle allow us to distinguish not just between artworks and 'mere things' but also between artworks and objects that are falsely claimed to be artworks. Both questions are relevant to the metaphysics of art; the second is also relevant to its ethics.

[13] Minimalist artworks, for instance, may be seen as involving a purely perceptual variety of *representation* in that they involve an object, pre-existing or manufactured by the artist, whose formal, spatial, perceptual, substance-related properties are represented by the artist in some non-trivial way.

[14] What is the object of Joel-Peter Witkin's 'Portrait as a vanité'? What is the object of the 'Wasteland'? What mental object can they be taken to represent? How can we ever capture that entirely or exhaust it?

conceptual responses- suggest that objects of art must exist. So, even when we are utterly unable to explicitly and rationally pin down our intuitions of what is the object of an artwork or what a representation is a representation of, our analysis need not admit any serious level of artificiality.

From the indefinite number of lines that hover somewhere at the back of my head, here are a few:

> A child squeals as if being slaughtered /(or someone is slaughtered and squeals like a child
>
> (Boukova 2000, *The Boat in the Eye*)

> Lemon/ Waxen totem of death/ Luminous lust
>
> (Iliopoulou 2007, *Mister T*)

> My heart/ a warm meek mouth/ that your heart's scented caress/ has condemned to survive/ wide open/ stammering/ without lips
>
> (Kotoula 2007, in the anthology *Karaoke Poetry Bar*)

> We are in spring already and the flowers/ bloom upon the temples of the dead
>
> (Polenakis 2007, *The blue horses by Franz Mark*)

> …with all the ways birds have to fly, step after step, towards infinity
>
> (Elytis 1972, *The light-tree and the fourteenth beauty*)

If we want to tell an interesting story about the essence of art, this is a very good place to start out. The object of these lines eludes my ability to fully explicate it. At the same time, though, I can intuitively and pre-rationally grasp that there is 'something' in the way this object is being mentally entertained. I can also intuitively and pre-rationally grasp that this 'something' is not simply conveyed by the formal properties of these utterances but rather inexorably tied up with them.

In talking about birds flying step after step towards infinity, Elytis makes an exciting and unexpected connection. His utterance fluently transforms a vague *gestalt*[15] into structured commotion. It does that with enviable formal simplicity and clarity. There is 'something' vigorous and startling and un-trivial in the way Elytis sees and speaks about his object. Moreover, this 'something' is not *external*

[15] The raw, undifferentiated input to perception.

to Elytis' consciousness. It does not concern *how* birds fly or even Elytis' attending to *how* birds fly. If there is a 'something' here that is relevant for a philosophy of art, it's the *way* in which Elytis '*sees*' the flying of birds. Note that 'how birds fly' is an external -real world- object. 'The *way* in which one *sees* the flying of birds' is an internal, *mental object*.

The *way* in which Elytis '*sees*' the flying of birds is inexorably tied to the *way* in which Elytis '*speaks*' about the flying of birds. It would be impossible for Elytis to *speak* of birds 'flying, step after step, towards infinity' unless he was in some, even subconscious, sense, able to *see* birds as 'flying, step after step, towards infinity'. I would also propose that it is impossible -and I will demonstrate later why I think so- for Elytis to be able to *see* birds as 'flying, step after step, towards infinity' but not be able to *speak* of birds as 'flying, step after step, towards infinity'.

I would like to propose the existence of a special kind of representation involving *a certain way of 'seeing' (objects)*. [16] I am inclined to call it ***aspectual representation,*** from the meaning of 'aspect' in 'the aspect of the mountain on him…' -i.e. the impression the mountain made on him/ the way in which he saw/perceived the mountain/ the aspects of the mountain that he attended to, conceived, came up with.

Aspectual representations are *internal, mental entities*. It is not the external, real-world object of a representation that makes it aspectual but the WAY in which this object is being mentally entertained; there are no proper objects of aspectual representations. Describing something as an aspectual representation is only relevant as a comment about the *properties* of the representation. There is a lot of room for debate as to what these properties might be, but seeing old objects in non-trivial[17] ways seems to be at least one of the overarching relations that holds them together. And seeing old objects in non trivial ways is in effect seeing novel, non trivial *aspects* of objects or novel, non trivial *connections* amongst objects.

It is likely that this ability is enabled by a whole host of more particular sub-abilities: e.g.
to see/conceive properties of objects[18],
to break down objects into their components,
to spot underlying or overarching structures of objects and their relations,
to spot 'telling details',
to be in rich, fine-grained and complex informational states of a perceptual, affective or conceptual sort,
and so on and so forth.

---

[16] 'Seeing' here is to be interpreted metaphorically and not just in the strict visual or even perceptual sense.

[17] *Non-trivialness* can be adequately defined using relevance-theoretic terms as depending on the *intuitive* and *relative* importance of *implications* a representation has in an individual's *cognitive environment* at a given time.

[18] Just a quick reminder that in the broad construal we have adopted here, the *object* can be of either a perceptual, affective or conceptual nature, or all three interwoven.

Do not inflate these sub-abilities to the extent of losing sight of what the notion of aspectual representation is crucially about. Being observant in a certain way and attending to the implications of certain things are merely *enabling factors*: one may well be observant and attend to the implications of certain objects without nonetheless seeing/conceiving non trivial aspects of and connections between these objects -as in the case of being simply perceptive or pedantic. And holding aspectual representations is crucially about seeing/conceiving non-trivial aspects of and connections between objects; it is -to put it differently- about being *creative* in a certain way.[19]

I want to propose that aspectual representations are a necessary *pre-condition* for an essential notion of art. I want to propose that art is not possible without the ability to hold aspectual representations in one form or another. If there is a relevant sense in which, as Danto insightfully put it, art is a 'transfiguration of the commonplace', it should be this. Being the product of an ***aspectual mind***, springing out of a certain way of being creative -the particular way that brings aspectual representations into being- art in its robust, essential sense should always involve a certain way of seeing: seeing old things in new ways, seeing loose, non trivial connections and associations between old objects out there in the world or new-coined objects of our imagination, making visible the invisible, bringing into being something that did not exist before by re-arranging and enriching an existing world of possibilities.

In the last 25 years of cognitive, psycholinguistic, pragmatic and philosophical research, dissimilar and at times mutually exclusive theoretical camps have nevertheless come together in advocating the creativity and flexibility of the human mind: in Sperber and Wilson's 'Relevance-Theoretic' framework or Wilson and Carston's recent work on Lexical Pragmatics, the mind is shown to have plasticity, flexibility, context-sensitivity, and an improvisational range that were inconceivable for theory in the past. However, this latter notion of creativity is creativity in a broad sense: a notion used to disentangle human communication and cognition from the crude and infertile rigidity of the *semiotic* model. This is not the sense in which 'creativity' is used in my analysis. Our interest here is not in the species-specific, broad creativity that every human mind is capable of. Instead we

[19] Creativity is not of course only relevant to the arts. Science, philosophy, design, business and the management of innovation etc etc rest in one way or other on some ability for creative thinking. At the same time, there is a genuine question about what causes this general ability for creative thinking to take artistic form. Why is it, for instance, that schizophrenia usually translates into artistic creativity rather than big scientific ideas? Why is there such a strong link between Tourette Syndrome and musical talent rather than talent in, say, philosophy? Although creativity has been studied in domains such as cognitive psychology and cognitive science, philosophy, artificial intelligence, history of ideas, literary and arts theory, business studies and economics -to mention just a few- and although as an intuitive object it seems so easy to grasp, its understanding is still very much on a speculative level. There isn't at this moment a fully tractable and testable perspective on what exactly creativity is, how it could be measured, why it takes one form rather than another or what exactly causes it.

are concerned with a notion of creativity that is the property of some minds only, aspectual minds.[20]

Aspectual representations are difficult to arrive at. Not everyone is capable of them. It would be possible to claim that those capable of holding aspectual representations meet a pre-condition, a necessary condition, for being poets/artists in an essential sense. But then, not everyone who is capable of aspectual representations is a poet/ artist. Some elaboration is clearly called for if we are to understand the precise locus of aspectual representations in the problematic of art.

I have always been amazed by the fact that ordinary people who never pursued poetic or artistic careers show a mind-blowing aptitude for arriving at and communicating aspectual representations. Some of the most exciting 'poetry' in my life I have come across not in poetry books but in listening to ordinary people talking.[21] Not very long ago, to use one instance, Dina Mendonca from Univarsidade Nova de Lisboa mentioned to me her young son's manifesto of boredom:

> Mom, I'm bored like a tree. I grow and grow and I'm always at the same place.

The little fellow's thought is mind-blowingly aspectual. From an aesthetic and creative point of view his utterance has all the aspectual properties of a poem with a capital P. Still, this utterance is not a poem. I am also thinking: why is it that something changes if, say, I take these words and quote them verbatim in my next poetry book, in pretty much the same way that a visual artist (Duchamp) 'quotes' a ready-made (*Urinal*) in the gallery? Why is it that, in this latter case, the exact same utterance, with exactly the same formal, structural, aesthetic and ultimately aspectual properties, suddenly becomes a poem?[22] Notice also that the child and not I is the creator of this utterance. Isn't it fascinating that when this utterance is put forth by its creator it is not a poem, and when it is put forth by me -even though I am not the creator of this utterance- it is a poem? With young Mendonca's words

[20] This species-specific creativity has been celebrated widely in the cognitivist camp in recent years. Mark Turner's *The Literary Mind* is another prominent example in this tradition. To claim that the human mind is 'literary' in the way Turner suggests, is to say that the human mind is creative in the broad sense of linguistic and conceptual plasticity that applies across the human species. Here I am interested in a more specialised type of creativity which is the property of certain minds only. We may all necessarily be 'literary minds' by virtue of our cognitive make-up, but not all of us are artistic/ 'poetic minds' as I will call it. Hence, the model I hope to develop here is intended to pin down a schematic representation of the specific way in which an artistic mind is creative.

[21] This does not corroborate Turner's generalised creativity view and it will soon become obvious why.

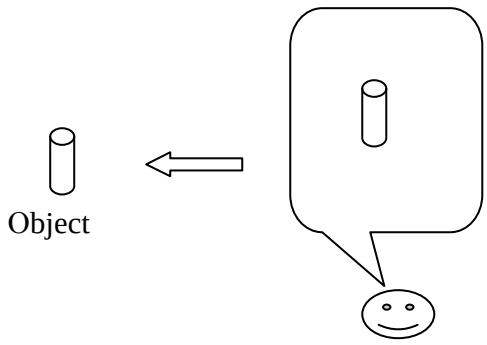
[22] To remind you of the existing debate, Danto would say 'because it is embedded and interpreted within an *artworld context*', Fodor would say 'because its intentional etiology has changed: in the second case it is *intended* as an artwork'.

having entered for good the 'gallery of indiscernibles', let us see where this philosophical problem might take us.

Loose, non-trivial association making is characteristic of both artistic creativity and schizophrenia, insanity. The schizophrenic individual is said to be able to conceive non-trivial links and associations amongst objects to the point that in her mind the whole world is eventually somehow connected. The schizophrenic individual is hence as good an instance of the aspectual mind as the artist. It also seems that for some reason schizophrenia often brings about an insatiable need for what by all appearances looks like 'artistic' expression and activity. Where is the cutting point between insanity and art? Is the schizophrenic an artist?

There is a crucial element, I think, that undercuts both Mendonca's utterance and the schizophrenic's 'artistic' raving: in either case, the creativity is not conscious/intentional. Both Mendonca and the schizophrenic individual are *incidental creators*, *naïve agents*, as I will call them, of aspectual representations. The output of naïve agency is a possibility, a raw material for art but not art. An aspectual mind in itself, i.e. having the ability to be creative in a certain way, although a *necessary* condition for being a poet/artist in an essentialist way, is nevertheless not a *sufficient* condition as well. For the possibility to become actuality, for an agent to be a full-fledged ***poetic mind***, she must be able to entertain not merely aspectual representations but full fledged ***poetic thoughts***[23].

Our analysis to this point has been looking more or less like this: (schema 1)



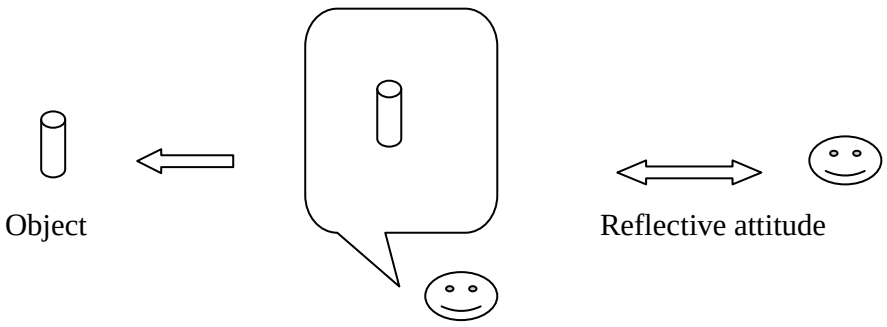
Aspectual representation
(*Novel object/mental entity*)

Let us call this the *pre-artistic condition*.

If we are right that naïve agency is the common thread that underlies Mendonca's utterance and the schizophrenic's creations, disallowing them from being works of

[23] There is nothing about poetic thought that would make it more relevant to poetry than to any other art. Poetic thought could as well be called an 'artistic thought state' or something along these lines. The only reason for calling it 'poetic thought' is that I wanted my account to take the name of my own art.

art, then the leap from the *pre-artistic* towards the *artistic condition* must involve an element of consciousness, reflection and control. It is important that all three terms are construed rather broadly and loosely. I am not suggesting that the agent is at any one time aware of or reflecting upon any one aspectual representation of any one object. All 'consciousness, reflection and control' might mean in our case is *intuitive awareness*. An agent capable of metarepresentational thinking, an agent capable of mentally 'distancing' herself from her own representations in adopting a reflective attitude towards them, is intuitively aware that some of these representations are non-trivial; she is intuitively aware, that is, of the aspectual nature of some of her representations. Our schema now looks more like this: (schema 2)



Aspectual representation
(*Novel object/mental entity*)

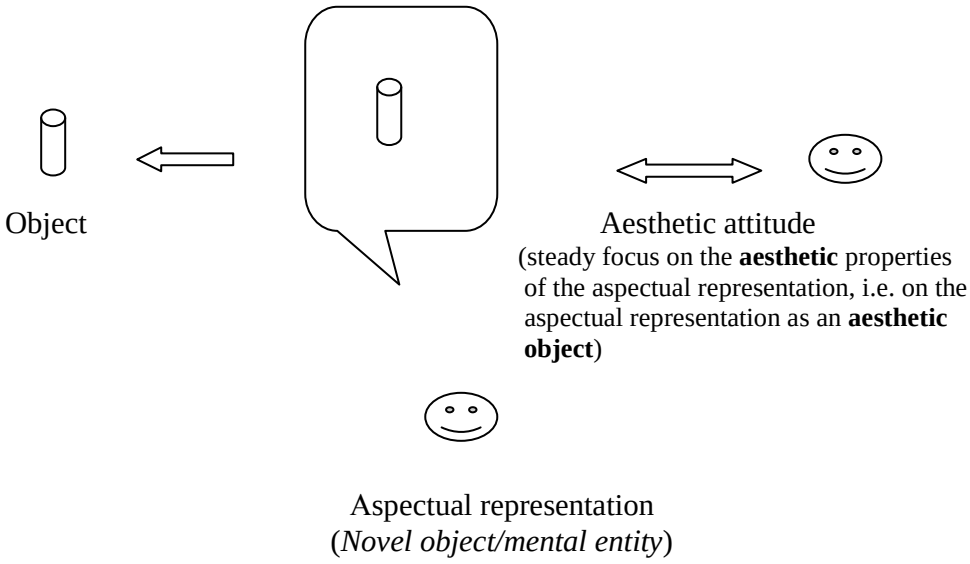
Is this a full-fledged *poetic thought*? Well, no. As it stands, our schema is still very vague and undifferentiated. It fails, for instance, to peel apart poetic thought from other types of creative thinking. Take for instance Newton and the legendary apple. In being intuitively aware of, or 'thinking' -in either the attentive or sub-attentive sense of the term- about what he *sees* in the falling of the apple, Newton has a reflective focus on his aspectual representation of the apple's fall. He is not a naïve agent, but nonetheless, neither his mental state nor its output is in any way artistic. All the current schema captures is the move from a pre-aware to an aware condition.

Let's stay with Newton a bit more. The apple falls. Newton has an aspectual representation which allows him to *see* the apple's fall in a non trivial way (connect it with gravitational forces). He also has a reflective attitude towards his aspectual representation in that he is at least intuitively aware that what he *sees* in the apple's fall is non trivial. But the mental state he is in cannot be legitimately described as an artistic condition. I want to propose that the reason why Newton's mental state is creative in the manner of physics rather than the manner of art rests in the particular way in which his reflective attitude is focused on his aspectual representation. More particularly, I want to suggest that Newton is focused on *conceptual* qualities and

implications of his aspectual representation, and more specifically, conceptual qualities and implications that his aspectual representation might have for physics.

Poetic thought is a state in which an agent intuitively aware of the aspectual nature of her representations is steadily focused[24] on the **aesthetic** qualities of these representations, or in other words, on the aspectual representation as an **aesthetic object**[25]: (schema 3)

POETIC THOUGHT STATE



The idea that full-fledged poetic thoughts involve an *aesthetic attitude* towards one's own aspectual representations implies a number of things about the possible nature of poetic thought states.

For one thing, poetic thought has an *evaluative* element. It crucially involves intuitive assessment and evaluation of aesthetic aspects of one's own representations -quite apart from the fact that the notion of the *aesthetic* in itself, which in future work I will be defining as 'the result of pleasurable perceptual experience of a certain kind', by definition has evaluative content, representing a certain sensation in a certain positive way. For another thing, to say that poetic thought involves an agent intuitively aware of and steadily focused on the aesthetic properties of her representations is to say that full-fledged poetic thought states,

[24] Do not take the notion of 'focus' on the aesthetic qualities of the aspectual representation at face value. It is possible that for an artistic mentality, aspectual representations will always anyway be entertained as nothing other than aesthetic objects; talking about 'focus' is only schematically relevant.

[25] In forthcoming work, I address the content of aesthetic experience, quality and value in detail, propose a scenario of its evolutionary descent and discuss at length its relation to perceptual experience. I do not see a compelling reason why I should put forward a more detailed definition of the aesthetic at this stage, since the line of argument I am pursuing here is fully accessible even to someone with an introspective/intuitive/pre-theoretical understanding of aesthetic notions.

unlike other non-artistic creative thought states, arise only at the point when the aspectual representation has even to a minimal extent occurred in the agent's mind in the particular medium of the agent's art-form.

Some notion of *form* seems theoretically necessary for aesthetic experience and value to obtain. This is not to say that aesthetic value is a property of either forms *per se* or of how forms actualise contents. Aesthetic value is a property of an agent's way of *seeing* forms and how forms actualise contents. Up to the point where an agent is in a mental state in which, say, the concepts TREE, HUMAN, BOREDOM, IMMOBILITY feature interestingly connected in her mind, our agent is only thinking creatively, aspectually (schema 1); and up to the point where she is intuitively aware that the connection is non-trivial, she is a reflective (non-naïve) agent of aspectual representations (schema 2). However, as I explained previously, being in this thought state is not as such or as yet being in an *artistic condition*. This is not a poetic thought state. Notice also that the representation our agent has at this point cannot as such be attributed an aesthetic value in any but the very broad, non-technical, sense in which all non-trivial thinking can be said to be 'beautiful' -the sense in which the theory of relativity or the conception of gravity have beauty. For a representation to be susceptible to aesthetic appreciation in the strong sense that is relevant to a philosophy of art, the representation must have form.

Poetic thought states, then, cannot be *pre-stylistic states* (Enkvist 1964:13): they cannot obtain prior to the representation having been experienced by the poet, even to a minimal degree, as words in the mind (*phenomenal consciousness*). In the pre-stylistic state the poet is only thinking creatively/ aspectually. She can have intuitions about the relative non-trivialness of the content of her representation. Her representation is non-trivial from a conceptual point of view. But this is not aesthetically relevant. Only at the point where her representation figures in phenomenal consciousness, the point where words or phrases or longer stretches of language pop up in the mind (e.g. 'I'm a tree', 'I'm bored like a tree') can the poet have an aesthetic attitude towards her representation and intuitions about the relative *aesthetic non-trivialness* of her representation. At that point only can our agent be said to hold full-fledged poetic thoughts.

Poetic thought states are at least to a minimal degree *stylistic* thought states. The feedback and relationship between pre-stylistic and stylistic states is obscure, intricate and complex. The same goes for the relationship between intentional states, poetic thoughts and their physical manifestations: in the case of raising one's own arm we can speak of an intention to raise one's own arm, which can at any time be entertained and visualised mentally as a representation of one's raising one's own arm and manifested physically as an action of raising one's own arm. But the action of creating *Guernica* is the physical instantiation of which mental representation? Can we legitimately say that such a mental representation could exist -at least in its entirety- prior to *Guernica*'s having been created? And if the action of creating *Guernica* was caused and brought to light by a complex

intentional state, what was the initial object of this intentional state? How much of *Guernica* could have been there before the physical process of creating it had begun?[26]

A further good reason why art is not an action like raising one's own arm is that the complex processes of practical reasoning involved in it, the constant feedback between initial intentional states, mental representations and their physical instantiations, are of an intricacy that often renders any attempt to peel them apart inappropriate and artificial. Often, I do not know what it is that I have a poetic thought of. All I know is that I experience phenomenal consciousness and that I can, and tend to, dispose myself aesthetically towards it; often I do not know that I have an aspectual representation until after I have already written about it. No one has spoken more acutely about this experience than Marina Tsvetaeva:

> …often poems give us something that had been hidden. Obscured, even quite stifled, something the person hadn't known was in him, and would never have recognised had it not been for poetry, the poetic gift. Action of forces which are unknown to one's own acts, and which he only becomes conscious of in the instant of action. An almost complete analogy to dreaming. (2004: 215-222)

It is obvious, I hope, why a theory of the artistic condition need not be supplemented with a further notion of 'dexterity'/ 'ability to communicate poetic thoughts'.[27] To speak of such an 'ability' as separate from having poetic thoughts is, in other words, to falsely assume that poetic thoughts can be complete prior to their being expressed in a certain medium, to falsely think about them as finalised

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[26] As Deirdre Wilson once suggested to me, it might be that we can assume a vague and possibly sub-attentive initial conception, a starting point, which bears however at least some similarity with the end product that *Guernica* is. Indeed, artistic creation sometimes begins with a rudimentary and elusive mental seed. Then, -and quite unsurprisingly for the kind of process it is- it develops in a way and direction that may bear little or even no resemblance to that rudimentary initial conception. On other occasions the end-product simply causes itself. The agent experiences the artwork as the result of pre-conscious activity, as revelation or enlightenment. She can, and tends to, dispose herself aesthetically towards it but may not be able to say how and why it was caused, if it was the object of an intention, or what this intention was.

[27] The reason I am considering this is that in discussing a very preliminary version of my notion of poetic thought at the 2006 *Workshop on the Pragmatics of Poetic Communication* in Paris, it was suggested to me that perhaps some notion of 'dexterity' might also be useful for my account. In thinking about this matter, I have concluded that such a notion is not after all necessary. To sum up: to the extent that 'the ability to communicate poetic thoughts' implies that complete poetic thoughts can exist as pre-stylistic entities (i.e. prior to their being given the form of one art medium or another), it is an assumption entirely irrelevant for art. To the extent that 'the ability to communicate poetic thoughts' implies a mere *propensity*, the propensity that, in one art form or another, poetic thoughts tend to manifest themselves in the particular medium/form of this art, then it might be an interesting addition to an account of how poetic thoughts occur and how art happens.

objects waiting to be put into the right words. It is, to put it differently, to falsely assume that poetic thoughts are pre-stylistic thought states, only 'cloaked' with the language of a certain artistic medium in retrospect. Both assumptions strike me as no more than naïve 'academisms'.

Do not let the 'ut pictura poesis' confuse you. To the extent that a poet 'holds' onto a mental image and 'looks' at it and 'scrutinises' it and 'rotates' it in the mind, she is not doing anything significantly different from looking at a real world object. She is still at the stage of looking at an *external* object. It just happens that this *external* object is in the mind. It is being looked at with the 'mind's eye'. At this stage our poet does not even have an aspectual representation as yet. She will be legitimately said to have an aspectual representation of this mentally held *external* object if she starts *seeing* it in non-trivial ways. She will be legitimately said to have a full-fledged poetic thought when she has become intuitively aware of the non-trivialness of her representation and has a steady aesthetic focus towards it. The very idea of an aesthetic focus, I argued previously, suggests that the aspectual representation has already, if only to a minimal degree, manifested itself to the poet in linguistic form. Poetic thoughts cannot be distinguished from 'their expression'. They are one and the same.

To be in a state of entertaining poetic thoughts is to be in the artistic condition. I assume that poetic thoughts are psychologically real and that the explanatory machinery of Sperber and Wilson's 'Relevance Theory' (1986/1995) could help shed some light on the poetic thought state in explanatory and psychologically realistic terms.

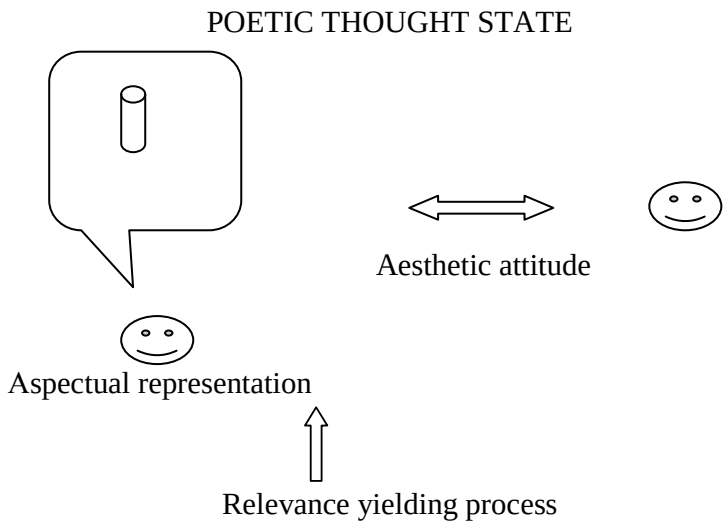
Human cognition, it seems, has tended to evolve in the direction of maximising efficiency, managing reasonably its expenditures of cognitive effort and making best use of its attentional and other resources: the human cognitive system tends, as Sperber and Wilson put it in their *cognitive principle*, to be naturally 'geared towards the maximisation of *relevance*' with *relevance* technically defined as a relation between *effort* and *effect* such that the greater the cognitive/contextual effect of an input -assuming that effort remains constant- the greater its relevance for an individual at a time[28], and the smaller the effort required-assuming that effects remain constant - the greater its relevance for an individual at a time. The cognitive principle *inter alia* explains how human cognition avoids computational explosion. It explains why it is that our cognitive systems do not attend to every single one of the indefinite number of facts that are 'manifest' within our 'cognitive environment' (1986/1995: 38-46), the indefinite number of facts that are perceptible in or inferable from our physical and mental surroundings. It also and

[28] *Relevance* is both a classificatory and a comparative concept (1986/1995: 129). In the comparative sense, an organism assesses the relevance of an input intuitively on the basis of expectations about the effects to be achieved and the effort required. In the quantitative sense, relevance might be tractable by, say, counting the number of contextual implications achieved by adding an assumption to a context, and measuring the effort required to derive these contextual implications.

more crucially explains why we attend to the particular facts that we do: for a stimulus to merit the attention of a cognitive system it must in some way yield *relevance* for that cognitive system.

Now, whether the type of relevance yielded in poetic thought states falls entirely under Sperber and Wilson's cognitive account, the extent to which cognition participates in them and the precise way it interacts with a parameter so crucial for an adequate notion of the aesthetic, *perception*, are all issues to be tackled in detail in forthcoming discussion. Programmatically speaking, I have good reasons to believe that an adequate empirical and evolutionary model of aesthetic attitude/experience and the particular kind of object art is could bring into light and render theoretically necessary new types of effect and also distinct ways of yielding relevance. I have been exploring these matters with Deirdre Wilson for some time now and in forthcoming work, two new terms will be coined: *perceptual effect* and *aesthetic relevance*. The terms expand the theoretical machinery of Relevance Theory in a direction long awaited in cognitive pragmatics and give hands-on evidence of the retroactive effects humanistic thinking may have on the elaboration of theory in empirical disciplines and life-sciences.

For now, let us say that it is possible to describe poetic thought states as characteristic of a distinct *mentality*, of a mind-set for which, inter alia, a steady and recurring focus on one's own aspectual representations as aesthetic objects may yield great relevance. If attending to one's own aspectual representations did not yield great relevance for this particular mentality, the cognitive system would automatically disallow the focusing, never mind the recurrence and propagation, of attention in this direction. To be in the artistic condition is thus possibly and amongst other things to be in a state that makes it possible for masses of implications to follow from steadily and recurrently attending to a certain type of *mental entity*: to the aesthetic qualities of your way of *seeing* things, the qualities of your aspectual representations as aesthetic objects:



To forestall possible criticisms that may spring from a misunderstanding of the nature of poetic thought states and the way they may be entertained on different occasions, or even in different art forms, let me add few more parenthetical remarks. It could be argued that the model of poetic thought states I am discussing here appears more relevant to certain art forms -for instance, lyrical poetry- while it is hard to see how other art forms or genres -for instance, epic poetry- could fit this account. What is 'aspectual' about a story that is anyway heavily indebted to mythology and whose content does not for the most part reveal some unusual or creative way of *seeing*? one may ask. Is there something obviously aspectual in the Odyssey or a 19th century realistic novel? My answer is, yes.

These and other similar concerns could only follow, in my view, from a misunderstanding of my line of thought on aspectual representations. Aspectual representations are creative, non-trivial representations of anything at all. They do not have proper objects and they are only relevant as comments on the PROPERTIES of a representation. Aspectualness concerns WAYS of mentally entertaining contents rather than contents themselves. The particular way in which a story is told may well be a possible content of an aspectual representation. Thinking that there is nothing obviously aspectual in the Odyssey -and hence that it cannot be associated with poetic thought states- can only be seen as a case where 'aspectual' has been misinterpreted as a comment about content, whereas it is a comment about ways/modalities. The aspectualness of the Odyssey, a 19th century realistic novel etc rests in the creative, non-trivial way in which the artist 'sees' the story he wants to tell. What is mentally represented in an aspectual manner is the way in which such and such story can be narrated. The way in which such and such character can be constructed. Some aspectual representation may involve the way a poet sees the flying of birds, another the way an author sees character construction. There is no reason why the one should be a fitter candidate for aspectual representation than the other.

5 Art as distinct psycho-cognitive etiology

The property (*P*) that makes a work of art the kind of object it is is a relational one. More specifically, it is a relation between an artwork and a certain type of *mental state*. This state is poetic thought.

Artworks are, in this sense, *etiological* objects. The property that makes an artwork the kind of object it is is not part of the object's perceptual or structural make-up, but part of its etiology. As my example of Johnny's 'masterpiece' and the argument I laid out there suggests, this etiology is not intentional. Intentional etiology, I proposed, can account for whether an object was intended as an artwork, whether it resulted from an action of trying to produce an artwork, but not whether it IS an artwork.

What makes a work of art the kind of object it is and distinguishes it from perceptually and structurally indiscernible 'twin events' is the artwork's *psycho-cognitive etiology*.

Artworks and their 'twins' -mere Brillo boxes and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, young Mendonca's manifesto of boredom and his *manifesto of boredom* when I quote it verbatim in a poetry book- differ in that they have *differential psycho-cognitive histories*: the one is related to poetic thought states, while the other is not. The one is the 'product' of a *poetic mind,* while the other isn't.

To address Fodor's concern about Greek pots, I would be inclined to say that if (conceivably) a Greek pot could be related to a poetic thought state, if it could have the sort of psycho-cognitive history we are interested in here, then this particular Greek pot would not be a mere functional object, it would not even be a mere perceptually gratifying object, it would be a work of art.[29] It is thus possible to claim that it may be that some Greek pots are works of art; others -possibly the vast majority of them- are simply functional or perceptually gratifying objects. In which category a Greek pot falls does not depend on its having a practical or cultural function: if some or perhaps all Greek pots *aren't* artworks, it is not 'because they were intended to put (the Greek equivalent of) Brillo in' (Fodor 1993: 46) but because they don't happen to have the psycho-cognitive history, the relational essence, of a work of art.

Now, because, as I suggested earlier, poetic thought states have *evaluative* content -in the sense that they involve a steady aesthetic attitude towards and assessment of some aspectual representation-, artworks can be said to be etiological objects with an *evaluative element.*

It follows from this that there cannot exist such a thing as an artwork of no aesthetic value whatsoever. It is impossible for something to be an artwork in an essential way but not be of any aesthetic consequence, precisely because aesthetic considerations are quintessential to an artwork's relational essence: they are indispensable components of the artwork's psycho-cognitive history, essential constituents, that is, of poetic thoughts.

The idea that there can exist artworks of no aesthetic value is a commonplace widely shared by many theorists, including Fodor (1993) and Danto (1981). It is possible, though, that this commonplace is simply the result of a misinterpretation of the implications of ready-mades for a notion of aesthetic value: the rationale typically followed in 'aesthetism' assumes that, as there is nothing about the physical properties of a Brillo box that has aesthetic value, and as a Brillo box may well be put forward as a work of art, then one has to admit that there can exist works of art of no aesthetic value. This and other trains of thought with similar content are clearly flawed: although Fodor and Danto -and the same seems to apply

[29] Kant, for instance, listed gardens as artworks (Freeland 2001: 46), and why not? If a garden is created in such a way as to relate to the specific psycho-cognitive etiology of poetic thoughts, then it is art.

to all advocates of the anti-aesthetic view- propose a *relational* story about the essence of art, and hence adhere to the idea that the property that makes an artwork the kind of object it is is not part of the object's perceptual or structural make-up, when it comes to talking about aesthetic value, they all of a sudden revert to the artwork's perceptual and structural make-up! Although Fodor and Danto are telling us that the property that makes something an artwork is not to be found in the artwork's physical properties, they then assume that *Brillo Boxes* is of no aesthetic value whatsoever by regressing to the physical properties of this artwork, the physical properties of Brillo boxes.

There is no doubt whatsoever that there is nothing about the physical properties of a Brillo box that has aesthetic value. But to the extent that you accept a relational story about the essence of art, you shouldn't necessarily be looking for aesthetic value in the physical properties of Brillo boxes in the first place. You should stick with your relational story and look for aesthetic value in the relational properties of the artwork[30]: Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* is an object of aesthetic value not because of any of the physical particulars of mere Brillo boxes, but because of the relation between *Brillo Boxes* and its psycho-cognitive history -the poetic thought states to which it connects and from which it results. Aesthetic value is not to be found in the physical substance of *Brillo Boxes* but in the relation between *Brillo Boxes* and its psycho-cognitive history.

Works of art, I would like to propose, can be distinguished into two categories on the basis of how they provide evidence of the poetic thought states to which they relate and, therefore, evidence of their aesthetic value.

First, we can speak of works of art that provide *strong* evidence of poetic thought states.[31] These are objects that did not exist prior to an agent's having poetic thoughts. These objects have physically resulted from a poetic thought-state, they are *fabricated* as a result of the artist's steady aesthetic focus on her own aspectual representations, and thus their aesthetic value is strongly evidenced in their form. Their form provides the receiver with nuanced clues of the relation of the object to some poetic thought state. This type of artwork does not have 'twins', i.e. 'mere thing' equivalents.

Second, we can speak of works of art that provide *weak* evidence of their aesthetic value. These are objects that existed prior to an agent's relating them to

[30] To the extent that we respond to formal properties of an object *per se* our response involves perceptual experience of a certain kind but not aesthetic experience in a sense relevant to a philosophy of art. An object capable of causing nothing but perceptual experience is simply a 'beautiful mere thing', a perceptually gratifying object but not a work of art as such. In forthcoming work I tackle the precise relation between perceptual and aesthetic experience, but for now let us just say that for an object to cause aesthetic experience and be more than a 'beautiful mere thing' it must also relate to poetic thought states and be endowed with a psycho-cognitive history specific to works of art.

[31] On the notion of *strong* and *weak* evidence and the notion of *manifestness* see Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995 Chapter 1.

poetic thoughts. They are the so-called ready-mades. This type of artwork has 'twins', 'mere thing' equivalents. In fact, it was itself a 'mere thing' prior to an agent's relating it to poetic thought states. Aesthetic value in ready-mades is *weakly evidenced* in that form provides the receiver with little if any evidence of the relation of the object to some poetic thought state, and hence, the assignment of this relation depends heavily on the receiver's ability to arrive at it inferentially.

The type of relational story about the essence of art that I am attempting in this analysis allows us to address anew at least one other renowned case of indiscernibles: the relation between *art* and *forgery*. In 'Languages of Art', Nelson Goodman (1976: 100) asks what could be the (aesthetic) difference between a Rembrandt painting and a perfect forgery, assuming that the forgery is indiscernible from the original in every perceptual respect. The problem is interestingly puzzling but not hard to solve. Leonard Meyer (1983) and Mark Sagoff (1983) further point out -and indeed there is strong introspective evidence for this- that for some reason, as soon as the forgery is revealed, our (visual) experience of the original and that of the forgery seem qualitatively different, despite the fact that the two objects are perceptually indistinguishable.[32]

The answer to this problem is however pretty straightforward. To say that the property (*P*) that makes a work of art the kind of object it is is a relation between artworks and a type of mental state that we termed poetic thought, is to commit oneself to the existence of an essence of art, a relational essence. It follows *inter alia* that there should be an essential difference between art and forgery: the original artwork and a perfect forgery are two essentially distinct objects in that they have distinct psycho-cognitive histories. Of the two, only the former stands in a direct[33] causal relation to poetic thought states, and thus, only the former has the specific psycho-cognitive history of a work of art. The reason our experiences of original and forgery seem qualitatively different as soon as the forgery is revealed, is that we therefore notionally disentangle (*un-relate*) the forgery from the specific type of psycho-cognitive history that would allow it to be art. A forgery is not the result of poetic thought processes but the result of an action of copying that makes it exactly the object it is: a forgery.

The addition of 'visual' in front of 'experience' by Meyer and Sagoff does not change our explanatory scenario in any interesting way. Perception does not function independently of cognition. Cognition kicks in and enables a bundle of undifferentiated 2-dimensional projections on the human retina to be conceived of as this object or that one. Cognition -and more specifically the new assumption of

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[32] Meyer's (1983) attempt to resolve the problem by taking into account relational factors, i.e. factors beyond the perceptual make-up of the painting, seems to me pretty much in the right direction; his discussion, however, is entirely pre-theoretical.

[33] It is important to mention the *direct* nature of the causal relation between the original artwork and its psycho-cognitive history. As Deirdre Wilson pointed out to me: 'the forgery too has a causal relationship to the original poetic thought state, though an *indirect* one: it wouldn't exist if the original thought state hadn't existed'.

the distinct psycho-cognitive etiologies of the two objects added to the receiver's cognitive environment- kicks in and makes this object 'seem' an artwork and that object a forgery. The two objects are differently *conceptualised* and hence, given the feedback between perception and cognition, lived through as if yielding distinct visual experiences.

To commit oneself to a relational essence of art as a case of specific psycho-cognitive etiology, allows a further distinction to be drawn: between *art* and *pretend-to-be art*. In our story, intending something as an artwork or wanting it to be recognised as an artwork is not a sufficient condition for this something to BE an artwork. While potentially anything can be art, so long as a poetic mind can entangle this anything with a poetic thought state, not everything is art. It might well be an object that purports to be art, proposes itself as art but nevertheless IS NOT art.

Similarly, an audience treating something as an artwork does not necessarily make this something an artwork either. What an audience treats as art is a *sociological* rather than *ontological* matter. It concerns how an object is seen rather than -I'll borrow the expression from Anne Furlong- the 'thingness' of the object. An object may thus BE a work of art but nevertheless not be recognised as such by an audience. Similarly, an object may NOT BE a work of art but nevertheless be treated as art by an audience. How we know something is an artwork is not a question of ontology but of *recognition/categorisation*. It is not a question of what something IS but a question of how human beings identify/categorise it as the kind of object it is[34].

This confusion between ontology and recognition seems to persist throughout contemporary writings on the philosophy of art. Peter Lamarque (2007: 45), for instance, suggests in passing:

> The "being" [of an art object] -the principal condition of its essence- is determined at least in part by the way the object's identity is conceived […] it is an object *under a description* (…)[35].

But the way an object is conceptualised/ conceived of is clearly a matter of recognition, and thus quite separate from the 'being', the ontology of the object. To

[34] A possible story about how certain artifacts are recognised/categorised as art -which I stress once again is quite separate from claims about the ontology of the object- may involve a so-called 'prototype detector'. We may treat art as a fuzzy set involving a continuum ranging from more or less prototypical cases to borderline cases -take for instance aphorisms: are they poetry or philosophy?-, and to cases of misrepresentation. It is a fact about human conceptual organisation that the less prototypical an exemplar, the more difficult for an individual to categorise it with conviction (Barsalou 1987). The value of this fact for a philosophy of art is twofold: first, it highlights our propensity to form artistic 'canons': what else is a canon but a relatively stabilised prototypicality scale? Second, it explains why less paradigmatic exemplars (e.g. ready-mades) were at first harder to categorise as art with conviction and became the subject of so much debate.

[35] My translation from Greek.

understand how this works, think of the following analogy: until very recently in human history black people were in various social contexts treated and perceived as sub-humans, or even animals. Does the fact that black people were perceived as animals make them animals? Black people were *essentially*/ *ontologically* human beings then no less than they are now. What the socio-historical context makes black people be perceived as does not affect what black people essentially ARE. The socio-historical context results for one reason or the other in black people's being perceived as animals; however, even while they are being perceived as animals, black people ARE essentially human beings.

Despite appearances, art is not an *unstable* object. The same object can be perceived as art in one period, social framework or artworld context and as non-art in another, but this does not mean that art is unstable as an object or that 'art is entirely subjective'. This superficial instability does not have any bearing on what art IS; it only has implications for what art is perceived as. Artworks are part of the human cognitive environment. Just like any other type of input, artistic inputs are thus always automatically perceived, assessed and (sometimes) interpreted within a given *context*. We can speak of artworks being perceived differently in different contexts. We can speak of artworks being embedded in one context or the other; but we can never speak of artworks as being context-less. Contexts are made up of externally (perception-driven) or internally (memory-driven) motivated assumptions (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995: 38-46, 137-142). The context can be said to change when the salience or accessibility of these assumptions alters or new assumptions are added and old ones abandoned. The reason my responses to an artwork (*Aphrodite of Melos*) might change when I move in space looking at it from different angles, or when I move in time looking at it from the vantage point of different socio-political and historical frameworks, is not that the artwork itself changes but that the context in which the artwork is being received - the salience or accessibility of certain assumptions - has altered. Aspects of the *artistic event* have changed, not the artwork per se.

Pinning down essence is not a venture that exhausts itself in metaphysical debate. The key feature of Putnam's claims about essentialism in nature, for instance, is that an object's essence (biological/chemical structure etc.) enables humans to make correct predictions about its behaviour in different circumstances. It is possible that the essence of a work of art enables predictions in similar ways. In any case, our notions of the artistic condition and poetic thought have not fallen like manna from the skies. They formulate an exegetic framework for ideas and intuitions that have been floating around in either literary theory or the philosophy of the arts for a good part of a century. They give a possible insight into what it means for art to be *self-reflexive*. They account for Danto's intuition that some 'transfiguration of the common-place' into the non-trivial is crucial for art. They assign intentional realism a different -non essentialist- part in the edifice of the ontology of art. They capture ways in which the artistic mentality is distinct from ordinary mentality and other (non-artistic) types of creativity, and suggest that the

mental objects that are responsible for the distinctness of the artistic condition (poetic thought states) are metaphysically and psychologically real.

What this paper asserts seems almost crudely self-explanatory. To slightly rephrase Hesse, one can be a poet but not become one[36].

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[36] The claim is not that the ability for poetic thought, and consequently art, is fully innate. The claim is that the ability is not wholly the result of training. Some feedback must be assumed between natural 'learning instincts', or 'maturational paths' which are triggered and further developed by certain types of experience.

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