

Art, A Metaphor from Metaphors of Science

Hyder Husain Arastu¹

Abstract

Brains are understood in terms of computers, doing so is elucidatory because we understand computers better than brains. Except, we understand computers through brain terms: neural networks and processing powers. Scientific theory is built on self-referential metaphors, and these serve as heuristics to scientific inquiry. Yet, to say that a work of art is an art-kind and in virtue of being an art-kind is a work of art is unsatisfactory. By reference to historical attempts at formulating an answer to the question, “What is Art?” I demonstrate underlying the concept of art is the same principle as science – metaphor.

Keywords: Art, Art Kinds, Aesthetics, Metaphor, Concept

¹ B.A. West Virginia University (2024).

Ph.D. Student, University of South Florida (2024-Current).

harastu@usf.edu

Michel-Antoine Xhignesse responds to the kind-centered approach to theories of art posited by Dominic McIver Lopes. The kind centered theorists hold that defining art is an impossible task and that instead we must pass the buck onto definitions of art kinds. The question, “What is Art?” is answered by appeal to the arts, “item x is a work of art if and only if x is a work in activity P and P is one of the arts.”² And an art-kind is a fundamentally appreciative practice³ Michel-Antoine Xhignesse argues that this approach is unsatisfactory, “that the root of this dissatisfaction stems not from the act of kicking the can down the road, but from not kicking it far enough,”⁴ instead of providing theories of art kinds he argues “that buck-passing bottoms out in a buck-stopping analysis of art-kinds in terms of networks of conventions.”⁵ It is here that we find disagreement with Xhignesse, with Weitz’s work backgrounding our current project it is argued that the problem in defining art which Lopes alludes to is that as a product of the logical concept of art, “a theory of it is impossible.”⁶ We cannot define art. Xhignesse recognizes that Lopes’s formulation of art-kinds commits the same fallacy that the previous art theorists are prey to, this is demonstrated by bringing to light a series of objections that the kind-centered theorists fall prey to, including free agents and the structural objection – that providing theories of art-kinds is no easier than providing theories of art. Xhignesse instead appeals to conventions to explain art-kinds. We preserve the structure of Xhignesse’s argument here, but demonstrate that Xhignesse’s formulation fixes the symptoms of Lopes’s failure but falls short at fixing the problem itself, the problem being the impossibility of defining art by virtue of the logical concept of art.

Instead, I argue that we must appeal to something distinct from convention, metaphor. Before we get to this conclusion we begin by an analysis of the kind of category that art itself is. To understand the problem at hand, we discuss Weitz’s *open concepts* to bring to light precisely the logical structure which makes definition impossible. Following this, I reinterpret what an *open concept* is by reworking it as concepts distinct from abstract concepts by appeal to Croce’s *Aesthetics*. With this we conclude the first part of the paper. Following this, I demonstrate that the kind of concept present in discussing art is one that aligns with pre-paradigm scientific theories. This creates an analogy between movement in art and scientific progress, providing an answer to the free agent problem. We then understand how pre-scientific theories are defined and appeal to metaphor as the mode of pre-conceptual thought. It is here that we discover the relevance of literature in the philosophy of science to our current analysis. With the analogy established, we move our discussion to the place of metaphor in the philosophy of science. Once we uncover how pre-paradigm scientific theories are understood, we also understand how art-kinds can meaningfully be spoken of – understood as metaphors. Finally, I demonstrate the advantages of speaking of art in these terms by arguing that the work on metaphor in the philosophy of science responds to all of the objections that Xhignesse’s work mentions.

The formulation offered holds the benefit of being capable of distinguishing different arts, but with the added benefit that it does not do injustice to the concept of art, thus preserving its value. Additionally, this formulation as I will demonstrate is compatible with a diverse variety of assertions concerning art, ranging from Plato⁷ to Freud.

Concepts

² Lopes, “Nobody Needs a Theory of Art,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, cv (2008): 109-127.

³ Lopes, “Beyond Art,” (New York: OUP, 2014): 121 and 148.

⁴ Xhignesse, “What Makes a Kind an Art-kind?” *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (2020): 471–488.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 15, No 1. (1956): 27-35.

⁷ I acknowledge the controversy concerning whether the ancient Greeks ever had a concept of art, but for the purposes of the current discussion: that Plato distinguishes poetry from *techné* in the *Ion*, and presents it as *mimesis* in the *Republic*, is sufficient grounds to qualify its relevance to the subject.

Additionally, Weitz mentions the discussion of the question of art in Plato’s time: “For, in spite of the many theories, we seem no nearer our goal today than we were in Plato’s time.” (Weitz, 1956)

The notion of art as something that escapes definition is one that constantly resurfaces, in her discussion of Stephen Davies's view, Catherine Abell argues⁸ that art is defined by appeal extra linguistic institutions. Such assertions in fact predate Weitz: Plato describes poetry as an imitation of the forms and Freud argues that "In only a single field of our civilization has the omnipotence of thoughts been retained, and that is in the field of art."⁹ Though Weitz frames these as distinct from what he means by an open concept.¹⁰ We demonstrate otherwise.

Open Concepts

Weitz defines art as incapable of being defined through necessary and sufficient conditions precisely because art is an open concept, something that by its very logical form escapes any attempt at definition. To attempt a definition of art is therefore "to conceive the concept of art as closed when it's very use reveals and demands its openness."¹¹ He distinguishes what constitutes an open concept from a closed one:

A concept is open if its conditions of application are emendable and corrigible; i.e., if a situation or case can be imagined or secured which would call for some sort of decision on our part to extend the use of the concept to cover this, or to close the concept and invent a new one to deal with the new case and its new property. If necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a concept can be stated, the concept is a closed one. But this can happen only in logic or mathematics where concepts are constructed and complete with empirically-descriptive and normative concepts unless we arbitrarily close them by stipulating the ranges of their uses.¹²

Returning now to our earlier discussion of art as something that escapes definition, Weitz's disagreement with these views is most explicit in his discussion of Croce's *Aesthetic*¹³, which he classifies amongst *Intuitionist* views. Weitz concludes that art, "is an awareness, non-conceptual in character... since it exists below the level of conceptualization or action, it is without scientific or moral content."¹⁴ Later he argues that such views rest on "dubious principles," like "Croce's assertion that there is non-conceptual knowledge."¹⁵

Preconceptual Concepts

It is here that we take a different interpretation than Weitz's from which our argument proceeds. Under the interpretation we take, the notion expressed by the likes of Plato, Freud, and Croce is not one that is non-conceptual, but falls within the scope of what Weitz calls open concepts. Plato's mimesis, Freud's omnipotence of thought and Croce's *Aesthetic* are not assertions of something that is not conceptual, but rather of a different kind of concept, one that precedes rational thought and abstract conceptualization.

Our evidence to this is found in the source of Croce's formulation of the aesthetic, for his work Croce credits Vico saying he "was the first to recognize the aesthetic as a self-sufficient and non-conceptual mode of knowledge, and famously he held that all language is substantially poetry."¹⁶ It is in Vico's work then that we find a full formulation of what constitutes the picture that Weitz labels that of

⁸ Abell, "Art: What it Is and Why it Matters," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 85. No. 3 (2012): 671-69, here 676.

⁹ Freud, "Totem and Taboo" (1913).

¹⁰ We return to this shortly

¹¹ Weitz (1956), 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 31

¹³ Croce, "Aesthetic" (Routledge: 1994).

¹⁴ Weitz (1956), 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31

¹⁶ Croce (1994)220-34. Quoted from: Kemp, "Croce's Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2025), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.)

the *intuitionists*. Vico, whose thought is based on the Platonic discussions on language and poetry¹⁷ argues that the mode of thought in poetry is distinct from modern conceptual thought for it is a primitive kind of thought that is based not on abstract thought but rather on imaginative class concepts¹⁸, the key element to be noted is that both modes of thought are conceptual, and this is precisely what Vico thinks has been missed by the earlier studies of poetry. With this, we see the *intuitionist* as continuous with Weitz's open concept formulation, to know how to speak of art/art-kinds is to understand imaginative class concepts.

Metaphor

To describe imaginative class concepts one must make clear distinction between the imaginative mode of thought and the abstract mode of thought, a distinction which according to Vico is retained in our language through the existence linguistic tropes.¹⁹ The poetic mode of thought (pre-conceptual) is characterized by metaphor where concepts are not abstracted but the universal and the particular are united, yielding imaginative class concepts. This is contrasted with abstract thought which is founded on irony. Artworks then according to Croce's view, which is continuous with that of Freud's, are a retention of an earlier mode of thought where primitive peoples could not abstract from particulars. They are instead concepts uniting character and idea, or in Plato's language are imitations of the forms.²⁰ From this we posit that to understand art-kinds we need metaphor, not convention. We may now shift our attention elsewhere and use an analogy with the philosophy of science to understand precisely how metaphor functions, or for our purposes, to understand what makes an art kind an art kind.

Scientific (pre-)Theories

Max Black in his 1962 essay²¹ presents and defends an "interaction view of metaphor". He develops this view following a rejection of variations of the "substitution view", which as Boyd explains entails that

every metaphorical statement be equivalent to one in which some quite definite respect of similarity or analogy is presented, and that successful communication via metaphor involves the hearer understanding the same respect(s) of similarity or analogy as the speaker.²²

Instead Boyd says Black argues under the interaction view that, "metaphors work by applying to the principal (literal) subject of the metaphor a system of "associated implications" characteristic of the metaphorical secondary subject.... Implications... provided by the received "commonplaces" about the secondary subject"²³. A benefit that follows from metaphors under this view is that they are capable of transmitting cognitive content that cannot be conveyed otherwise and that this is why, "we need the metaphors in just those cases where there can be no question as yet of the precision of scientific statements."²⁴ Boyd provides the following explanation,

one should expect that when metaphorical language is employed in a scientific context, its function should either lie in the pretheoretical (prescientific?) stages of the development of a discipline, or in the case of more mature sciences, it should lie in the

¹⁷ Vico, "The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico" (1944)

¹⁸ Vico, "The New Science" (1744), 34

¹⁹ Ibid., 404-409

²⁰ Plato, Republic X (595a-608b)

²¹ Black, "Metaphor" in "Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy", (Cornell University Press, 1962).

²² Boyd, "Metaphor and Theory Change: What Is 'Metaphor' a Metaphor For?" In "Metaphor and Thought", edited by Andrew Ortony, 481-532. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²³ Ibid. 481

²⁴ Black (1962). 37

realm of heuristics, pedagogy, or informal exegesis, rather than in the realm of the actual articulation or development of theories.²⁵

We see here that Black uses language much like that used by the figures we have discussed above. Here it would be ridiculous to argue, that a discipline that has not yet sufficiently developed to be properly articulated does not include with it a concept. Instead it is *pretheoretical*, or as Weitz might put it, they are at this time open concepts. Of course, what distinguishes art from scientific inquiry is that though we have seen sciences in the past advance from being open concepts to closed concepts²⁶ there is no reason to think that the same holds for art. This much though is sufficient to establish the analogy, and from what we have demonstrated so far, we may conclude at this time that a theory for art kinds bottoms out in metaphor, which is what is used to describe what escapes description. Although, I have demonstrated the viability of replacing convention within Xhignesse's framework and the precedent for doing so, I have yet to defend this as a more fruitful approach to characterizing art kinds.

Art-Kinds as Metaphor, not Convention.

Beyond being accommodating to historical formulations of art, this approach has the added benefit of being better suited to admitting future art kinds. Among Weitz's primary complaints against a theory of art was that they cannot include new cases²⁷, Xhignesse of course provides a response to this complaint. But falls short with the formulation of conventions for it ultimately reduces art kinds to something much less significant. To understand the role of aesthetic theory, Weitz argues we must be able have debates over criteria for the concept of art and of the various honorific definitions²⁸. Xhignesse's formulation does not leave room for this by reducing art-kinds to conventions and treating art kinds as closed concepts.

For our purposes, we preserve Xhignesse's structure since it permits variability in art kinds. By preserving this, we provide a formulation that gives more than Weitz's open concepts. To simply say that art cannot be defined does no productive work. Instead, Xhignesse's preservation of Lopes's framing in terms of art kinds allows us to shift the burden of definition away. Xhignesse then argues that even a definition of art-kinds is insufficient and appeals instead to "a notion of convention", it is here that we differ from Xhignesse, an appeal to convention under our view falls prey to the same problem that Lopes's attempt to define art-kinds does – it still defines art kinds.

A *defining* characteristic of art, artworks, and of art kinds is its tendency to escape definition, to attempt to do this is as Weitz puts it, "a fundamental misconception of art...it radically misconstrues the logic of the concept of art." Instead, an appeal to metaphor is not an attempt to define art, it does not limit the scope of what constitutes art and in a strict sense does not define art²⁹, but the analogy with the development of scientific theories from Black and Boyd provides us with a paradigm to understand what the concept we are working with is and why it functions as it does.

Of course, an immediate concern that comes up is how one functionally accommodates new kinds of art within this framework? The work in philosophy of science once again provides us with an easy answer. Building on Black's work Kuhn provides an explanation of changing paradigms in science with reference to changing metaphors, in *Metaphor and Science* he tells us,

Metaphor plays an essential role in establishing links between scientific language and the world. Those links are not, however, given once and for all. Theory change, in particular,

²⁵ Boyd (1993), 482.

²⁶ i.e. no longer needing to be described through metaphor

²⁷ Weitz, (1956) 32.

²⁸ Ibid., 35.

²⁹ Reduce art to a closed concept.

is accompanied by a change in some of the relevant metaphors and in the corresponding parts of the network of similarities through which terms attach to nature.³⁰

Like theory change in science, which is accompanied by changes in relevant metaphors, new art-kinds and changes in art-kinds are products of changes in language. Consider here the case of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), which paradigmatically demonstrates a change in metaphor in an art kind. Prior to *Fountain*, a mass-produced urinal would likely never have been associated with sculpting as an art kind, but the reception of *Fountain* triggered a change in the associated terms of sculpting which functions as a metaphor here,. And now *Fountain* may be considered an artwork belonging to the art kind – sculpting.

A final potential charge that we will address is that of circularity, once again by recourse to literature on metaphor in the philosophy of science. One may argue that to define an art kind in terms of art works by simply expanding the referent of the metaphor is, is circular. That if the metaphor of sculpture was conceived of, within the relevant context, to label something like Michelangelo's *David*, then to extend it to something like *Fountain* – which bears no similarity to *David*, except perhaps that it possesses three dimensions – by reference to what sculpture as metaphor is used for, is at best circular. The same charge may also be levied against Kuhn's use of metaphor or Darwin's of analogy, which Levine defends as a non-vicious circularity:

Darwin's analogy succeeds... and that success is legitimate. Its legitimacy is perhaps explicable by recourse to the following principle: *An analogy may serve as evidence (function in the context of justification) to the extent to which it approximates the literal truth.* If breeds or varieties really are incipient species, lessons learned about the origins of breeds are evidence in the quest for the origin of species.³¹

Like Darwin's and Kuhn's analogy, there is no reason to think that this circularity does not permit a sufficient formulation of our theory. It is true that there is a circularity in the relation of artworks and art kinds, and a necessary circularity, but this circularity is no damning charge, but a feature of this conception. To conceive of art in this manner is precisely what permits us to have a theory that can accommodate every art kind, past and future.

³⁰ Kuhn. "Metaphor and Science" In "Metaphor and Thought" (1993).

³¹ Levine, "Which Way Is Up? Thomas S. Kuhn's Analogy to Conceptual Development in Childhood," Science and Education Vol. 9, (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000): 107-122.

Works Cited

- Abell, Catharine. "Art: What It Is and Why It Matters." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85, no. 3 (2012): 671–691.
- Beardsley, Monroe C. "Redefining Art." In *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, edited by Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen, 298–316. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- Black, Max. "Metaphor." In *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*, 25–47. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962.
- Boyd, Richard. "Metaphor and Theory Change: What Is 'Metaphor' a Metaphor For?" In *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd ed., edited by Andrew Ortony, 481–532. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Croce, Benedetto. *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic*. Translated by Douglas Ainslie. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Translated by James Strachey. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1913.
- Kemp, Gary. "Benedetto Croce." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Winter 2025 edition. Stanford: Stanford University, 2025.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. "Metaphor in Science." In *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd ed., edited by Andrew Ortony, 533–542. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Levine, Alexander. "Which Way Is Up? Thomas S. Kuhn's Analogy to Conceptual Development in Childhood." *Science & Education* 9 (2000): 107–122.
- Levinson, Jerrold. "Defining Art Historically." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19, no. 3 (1979): 232–250.
- Lopes, Dominic McIver. *Beyond Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- "Nobody Needs a Theory of Art." *The Journal of Philosophy* 105, no. 3 (2008): 109–127.
- Plato. *Republic*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992.
- Vico, Giambattista. *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*. Translated by Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1944.
- The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Translated by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948.
- Weitz, Morris. "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, no. 1 (1956): 27–35.
- Xhignesse, Michael. "What Makes a Kind an Art-Kind?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 60, no. 4 (2020): 471–488.