Art and metaphysics

Article (Accepted Version)

Morris, Michael (2020) Art and metaphysics. Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume, 94 (1). pp. 1-17. ISSN 0309-7013

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ART AND METAPHYSICS

1. Introduction

Artists often think of themselves as engaged in a project of understanding things. Many of those who look at, listen to, or read works of art think that they emerge from the experience with their understanding enriched: that's the point of it, they think. What do all these people think they understand through art? Everything: people, life, the world. Here's an ambitious claim which I think they're committed to:

- (A) One of the principal functions of representational art is to enable us to understand the world as it is in itself in a particular, distinctive way.

My aim here is to explain and argue for that ambitious claim.

2. The World As It Is in Itself

What is the world as it is in itself? I think 'the world' is a kind of schematic phrase: it's schematic for whatever it is that our thoughts and representations are about—at least when they're about something real. Our thoughts and representations themselves are therefore counted part of the world when they're what we're thinking about or representing.

What is the world *as it is in itself*? It's the world as it is altogether independently of any relation to any thought or representation of it. Of course, our *understanding* cannot be independent of any thought or representation, but the *object* of our understanding might be; and what I'll be trying to defend is just the idea that the world as it is in itself is the object of the understanding which art provides.

Even so, it might seem immediately implausible that representational art, of all things, could enable us to understand the world as it is in itself, for two reasons. The first is that representational art is concerned with the appearance of things, and it might seem that appearances are essentially perception-relative. It's surely true that at least a lot of representational art is concerned with the appearance of things, in a natural sense. Representational painting, for example, is concerned with how things look. But *how things look*—to begin with this example—need not be understood as a peculiar perception-relative range of qualities: *how things look* may be no more than *how things show themselves to vision to be*. That is, visible qualities need not be understood as fundamentally perception-relative qualities. There are large issues here about the objectivity of the qualitative which I won't address now. I'll focus instead just on the idea that representational art enables us to understand the world as it is altogether independently of any relation to *artistic representation*: as will become clear, this raises problems enough.

The other reason for finding it immediately implausible that representational art could enable us to understand the world as it is in itself is generated by the thought that understanding the world as it is in itself must be understanding it as it is most fundamentally, combined with the thought that an understanding of something reveals more of how it is

fundamentally the more fundamentally it explains how the thing works—the more fundamentally it explains the thing’s causal powers. And representational art certainly seems unlikely, in general, to reveal a thing’s causal powers. To this again I will offer for the moment just a holding response: we needn’t think that all ways of understanding a thing can be arranged in a single scale of degrees of fundamentality. Understanding a thing’s causal powers is one way of understanding it, and clearly there can be shallower and deeper ways of understanding a thing’s causal powers. But it’s not obvious that a different kind of understanding altogether, one which is not in the least concerned with revealing a thing’s causal powers, must be less fundamental, or reveal less of how a thing fundamentally is. To put the point simply: there’s a kind of depth in art—which at least strikes us as a depth of understanding—which is not less deep than the depth of causal understanding: it seems just to be a different kind of depth, not even a rival to the depth of causal understanding.

So that I can proceed, I ask you to grant me these two points: that it’s possible in principle for the world as it is in itself to be visible in perception; and that a non-causal understanding of a thing may be no less fundamental than, because fundamental in a completely different way from, a causal understanding of it, and it may reveal how the thing is no less fundamentally. I accept that these are large points to grant, but there’ll be enough left to dispute.

3. Principal Functions

What might be required of a principal function of something? The first thing is that it must be one of the things the thing is *for*: it must be in some way built into the point of the thing that it does this, or that it can be used like that. An individual thing may have several principal functions: in that case, one might expect it to be the point of the thing that it does all of those things, or that it can be used in all of those ways. If we say that a genre or kind of thing has several principal functions, perhaps it’s not required that each member of the genre or kind have doing all of them as its point: we may say in this case that if the genre or kind has several principal functions, then each member of the genre or kind must have doing at least one of them, or perhaps some weighted proportion of them, as its point.

Often, though, we require something more when we talk about a thing’s function, or about a principal function of a thing: we want the function to be something which only that thing can perform; we want its capacity to perform that function to be a reason for choosing that thing rather than anything else. I think this is what we’re likely to have in mind when we talk, if we do, of the principal functions of representational art: we’re looking for things that only representational art can do; we’re looking for a reason to paint or look at paintings, to write or read art-writing, rather than doing anything else.

I’ll take this to be how the idea of a principal function should be understood in the ambitious claim (A), and I assume that those who are serious and ambitious about representational art go to representational art for something which they think nothing else could provide. This means that many of the things which are commonly reached for when we try to explain the value of art are not relevant here. Very obviously, it cannot be a principal function of art to do something which a drug could do (Wittgenstein 1966: 21). But

it also can't be a principal function of art to do what psychology could do—tell us how people think—or what history could do—tell us something about certain real events. You might think it cannot be a principal function of art to do what a careful set of instructions could do—get us to imagine something. It is, of course, possible to use representational art to do these things, perhaps as a way of making the doing of them more pleasant than a more direct approach would have been, but this is hardly what makes art seem special or particularly worthwhile.

4. Non-Distraction

What is special about representational art? To understand representational art properly, I think we need to embrace what I call the *non-distraction thesis*. Representational art involves the use of a *medium*, in at least the following minimal sense: what the artist deliberately manipulates in order to portray something. This might be oil paint with a brush, stone with a chisel, or words. And we think that representational art has something which we might naturally call its *content*: the people, scenes, and events which are to be encountered in a work (the face in a portrait; the fields and hills in a landscape; the lives in a novel).

Here, then, is the Non-Distraction Thesis:

(ND) Attending to the medium of a representational work cannot inevitably be a distraction from attending to its content, or vice versa.

The brief argument for the thesis is this: if it were not true, it would be impossible for the artist to produce a representational work (she needs to work the medium to produce the content), it would be impossible to examine the work critically to see how it's done, and it would be impossible to like or dislike the way it's done.¹ Here are two simple examples of the integration of medium and content. Rodin's *Kiss* is made in marble: if you miss the kissing, you miss the point; if you ignore the marble, you're thinking of a different kiss. Shakespeare's *Cleopatra* speaks in verse: if you don't hear a woman speaking, you don't understand the lines; if you don't notice the verse, you aren't listening to Shakespeare's *Cleopatra*.

I suggest that engaging properly with a work of representational art involves a thoroughly integrated engagement with both medium and content. It's striking that the instrumental uses of representational art which I noted just now fail to do precisely that. If we take a representational work as a source of historical information, we look past the medium to get to the facts. If we take it as an invitation to imagine something, our focus is on the thing imagined, with the medium merely a device to get us there and then be abandoned.

But an integrated engagement with both medium and content is not always easy. Sometimes the problem is caused by problematic conceptions of both medium and content. The medium, for example, may be understood, not as what the artist deliberately manipulates, but as mere matter, something best appreciated in abstract physical terms. And the content

¹ Fuller versions of this argument, for three art forms, are provided in Morris (2020: Chs 1, 4, and 5).

may be understood, not as what you might actually find in a painting or a novel, but as a real thing of its kind which we somehow look through the medium to, or superimpose upon the medium. Getting beyond these conceptions may be difficult, and any replacement view is likely to be controversial. Here's one suggestion for the case of representational sculpture. It's natural to say that if you look at Rodin's *Kiss* you see a pair of lovers made of stone. That is, the things you see there are lovers, in a way—you can see their bodies, their arms, their heads—even though they're not real lovers, because they're made of stone. Here the relation between medium and content is naturally described as one of material constitution: the content—the lovers—is constituted of the medium, the worked stone. You cannot see one without seeing the other; nor is looking at one in an ordinary way any kind of distraction from looking at the other.

It's not clear how far this model can be generalized, and I won't attempt to do that here.² The important point for now is this: a proper engagement with a representational work of art requires some kind of integrated engagement with both medium and content.

5. Composition

Why might it be important to engage with both medium and content in a thoroughly integrated way? A natural place to look to begin with is at artistic composition—composition as we think of it in painting and drawing. This may seem an odd suggestion: it might be thought that composition was about form, and form might be thought to be some part or aspect of a work which can be contrasted with, and isolated from content. But I think this kind of worry shows a misunderstanding of composition (and also of form, though I won't chase that here³).

We're all familiar with line drawings which apparently reveal the basic compositional structures of paintings. What's striking is that if you think of the lines in the drawing as just lines—that is precisely not as lines of the figure of a person, for example—they have no significance at all: they are, indeed, just lines. This point is entirely general: anything we might isolate as a compositional feature in a painting or a drawing is only significant insofar as it's seen and understood as the shape of the content of the painting or drawing.

It seems clear that composition in painting or drawing is about the arrangement or shape of the content, in the sense of 'content' which I've been using: it's about the position and shape of the things in the painting or drawing—the people, the trees, the bridges, the clouds. It's tempting to think that the importance of composition in this kind of sense is extremely general, in two respects.

First, it looks as if composition in broadly this sense is at least *an* issue for every representational art form. It's obvious enough in photography. It can be found in a different way in sculpture: a sculpture will always be somewhere, to be looked at from a certain point of view or range of points of view; that will ensure that issues of the spatial arrangements of the parts of a sculpture—a figure's limbs or head, for example—arise, as a kind of three-

² I attempt to work it out in some detail for the cases of paintings, photographs, and novels in Morris (2020).

³ See Wollheim (2001).

dimensional counterpart to composition in painting and drawing. And composition in a more abstract version of the same sense is very obviously an issue in writing: how to order events; how long to spend on particular scenes; when to introduce characters.

But secondly, it's tempting to think that every working decision a representational artist makes is a compositional decision, whether on a small or a large scale—at least once the subject-matter has been decided on. In painting or drawing, this is clearly the case for the decision how finely or roughly some feature of a scene or figure is to be worked; and again this is obviously also an issue for sculpture. This has its counterpart in a photographer's decision about what will be in focus and what will be left blurred; and it has an obvious parallel in the kind of detail which a writer chooses to import. It seems also to be involved in choices of colour in painting—there are always issues of the balance of colours and of the width of colour palette—and in choices of word and syntax in writing: florid or spare, convoluted or loose-limbed. And if we can regard the position of a sculpture relative to the natural angle or angles of view as a compositional matter, then scale in general becomes a compositional matter too: actual size is important in painting, drawing, displayed photography, and writing, in a very obvious way.

If we allow our understanding of artistic composition to reach out from its simple use in painting and drawing across to all art forms, it's clear that at least very many of the decisions which artists make in all representational art forms are compositional decisions.

6. Reason and Resolution

Why should composition matter so much to representational art? I think the reason lies in a simple fact: art isn't everything; art is not the whole of life. Acknowledging this simple fact seems to be denying art its importance, but I think it's what allows art to take its proper (large) place. Because art isn't everything—we need to eat and drink, at least, and usually to work at other things in order to eat and drink—it's always in some way confined. It must always be possible to turn away from it, to move on from it, to have done with it, at least for a while. Every art form contains at its very heart the means of its being left. Paintings fit in defined spaces on walls, which we can either turn away or walk on from; photographs are either framed or displayed on a screen; sculptures occupy their places; novels and plays come to an end. Composition is just the means of handling the boundaries which are essential to art.

At the same time, whatever the point of art may be, if it is to have a point at all, a work of art must be designed to hold you while it can, and to make you return to it, even if only in memory. How might this work? In talking of the medium of a representational art form, I've concentrated on what we might call an *artist-centred* conception, rather than a merely material one: the medium, on this understanding of it, is what the artist deliberately manipulates. The things you encounter in a representational work—the people, the scenes, the events—are worked in this deliberately manipulated medium. Because the medium is deliberately manipulated, everything about the way things present themselves in the work is as it is for a reason: either because it's been deliberately put there like that, or because it's turned up there like that and the artist has been happy to leave it so. Rationalism applies to

works of art: for everything there, there's a reason why it is as it is, rather than otherwise. At least, this applies to good art: for all art it's at least true that there *should* be a reason why each feature is as it is.

Because there's a reason for everything in a (good) work of art, we can always ask what the reason is. What we're doing when we do this is reconsidering the kind of thing that the artist might have had in mind when she was happy to leave each thing as it is. The simplest way of doing this is to think how the work would have been if the feature we're looking at had been in some way different: that will show the contribution to the whole which the choice which was actually made is making. This shows something of the dynamic of understanding a work of art: there's more to be understood as long as there are more things to wonder about the reason for, or more different ways of understanding what the reason might be. At least very often the reasons will be reasons which concern the relation of each part and feature of the work to the whole, and therefore reasons which relate to what makes the work a whole—which is to say, reasons which relate to the work's composition.

Every work of art contains both something to let you turn away and move on, and something to keep you there and return to it. The first thing we might call *resolution*: it's what makes a painted scene fit the painting's frame, or what enables the curtain to be brought down at the end of a stage performance. It's the goal of composition. The second thing is what makes the work interesting all through, which enables one to linger with it: I've suggested that it's rooted in a kind of Principle of Sufficient Reason for everything to be found in a work; and the reasons themselves seem bound to be concerned with the resolution of the work.

7. Seeing-in

We've been looking for what's distinctive of representational art, for something which might give one a reason to turn to representational art, rather than anything else. What seems to be distinctive is its being artistically composed, its content's having been worked in the medium with a view to resolution.

Unfortunately, in developing this account of what's distinctive of representational art, we seem to have been taken away from the real world, the world that representational art somehow represents. And what I want to defend is the ambitious claim that a principal function of representational art is to enable us to understand the world as it is in itself. I need to find a way of connecting the medium-embodied content of a representational work with the real world.

There are some things that are very natural to say which are at least part of what's involved. When we look at or read some piece of representational art, we can be reminded of things in the real world. The face in a painting might strike us as just like the face of a friend; the awkwardness of a moment in a novel might strike us as just like something that has happened to us. And conversely, something in real life might remind us of a piece of representational art: a particular contrast between the blue of the sky and the grey and white of a cloud might remind us of a painting; an absurd event in real life might remind us of a

moment in a play. If it were not possible to find connections like these, described like this, it's hard to see how we could make sense of there being such a thing as artistic representation.

But this kind of description doesn't really explain how representational art might provide a distinctive way of understanding the world: it's too general, and makes too little use of what's distinctive about representational art. To get further, we need to look at more specific ways of connecting what is distinctive about representational art with the world.

An obvious place to begin is with the quasi-technical notion of *seeing-in*, which Richard Wollheim used to describe the experience of looking at representational paintings (Wollheim 1980). The term 'seeing-in' is used in two ways: sometimes to describe what Wollheim's own particular theory takes to be involved in representational painting; but sometimes to apply to a very large range of different theories. I will follow this second kind of use here. On this use, if, when we look at a painting, we see x -in y , x is what I've called the content—the person, or the scene in the painting—and y is, roughly speaking, the medium—sometimes thought of as the paint, sometimes as just the surface. On a view like Ernst Gombrich's (2002), to see a person -in a painting is to be under the illusion that you're seeing a person while you're looking at the paint. On a view like Kendall Walton's (1990), to see a person -in a painting is to make-believe you're seeing a person while you're looking at the paint. On Wollheim's own view, seeing a person -in a painting is a *sui generis* perceptual experience, in which something present—the paint—brings about a vision of something absent—the person (Wollheim 1980: 218).

On all these theories—I think in all theories which can be described in terms of seeing-in—if we see x -in y , x will be a real thing of its kind. So if we see a person -in the paint, we see a *real* person in the paint: if not a particular real person, at least a kind of real person. So for Gombrich we are under the illusion that we are looking at a real person; for Walton we make-believe that we are looking at a real person; for Wollheim, what is evidently absent is a real person. This is how seeing-in theories connect paintings with the real world: the real world is brought into the painting—or, at least, into the experience of looking at the painting.

We can construct a generalized version of this model for all representational art forms. In a metaphorical extension of the term, we can talk of seeing a person -in a novel, as well as -in a sculpture, a drawing, or a photograph. In all cases, it will involve bringing the real world into the work of art—or into the experience of engaging with the work of art. This might then seem to offer a general model for explaining how representational art might enable us to understand the world as it is in itself.

But there are two reasons against using this model in defence of the ambitious claim I'm concerned with. The first is that seeing-in is very hard to square with the Non-Distraction Thesis. If the business of looking at a painting is somehow to see a real person (for example) there, then the medium will inevitably be a distraction, since real people are not generally composed of, or draped in, paint. The same thing carries across to all representational art forms, I think: if you think the Cleopatra you need to find is a real person, then the verse of her speeches will be a distraction, and its poetry will need to be suppressed.

What this means is that seeing the real world -in representational art will tend to make it hard to treat it as art, and therefore as providing something distinctive which only art can provide.

The second reason against using this model in defence of the ambitious claim is just that it gets things the wrong way round. Seeing-in—understood in the broad sense, and therefore in all its forms—is introduced as a way of trying to understand how we could possibly have an experience of a person, for example, when looking at a painting or a sculpture, or when reading a novel. The general idea is that we begin with a kind of experience of a person which we think is unproblematic—an actual experience of a real person—and try to lever this somehow into the way we look at art. On this view, we bring the real world into the work of art in order to try to make sense of the work of art. But the ambitious claim I want to defend is that representational art enables us to understand the real world: for the ambitious claim, we are interested in exactly the opposite direction of explanation.

When this structure is clear, it seems inevitable that the seeing-in model will have trouble finding a way in which representational art could be distinctively revealing about the real world. On this model, an independent understanding of the real world is imported into representational art. Of course, the seen-in real thing of its kind which we find in the work of art may well be very different from any real thing of its kind which we've ever actually seen in the real world. But as long as we keep to the seeing-in model, it will have to present itself as a real thing that we *might* encounter in the real world. The most that a representational work of art can do then seems to be something like this: it can expand our conception of how real things of the relevant kind might be. This is indeed something that is claimed as a thing that art can do by those who keep to a model of the general seeing-in type: for example, novels are sometimes said to show us how people *could* be (Stock 2007). But this is a kind of knowledge which is in principle available independently of art, and therefore not something which provides a reason to go to art, rather than anything else.

8. Inverted Seeing-in

If the seeing-in model looks as if it's the wrong way round, it's natural to suggest inverting it. We suppose that we already understand (somehow) how it is that we can encounter a person, for example, in a work of art, in a way that respects the Non-Distraction Thesis, and we then transfer that understanding to the real world. Let's call this *inverted seeing-in*. The idea is that we (invertedly) see a painted person -in a real person, or a painted scene -in a real scene: something composed -in something not composed.

Experiences of a kind which it's tempting to think of as inverted seeing-in are very familiar. We might see Constable paintings -in the countryside around his home at Flatford Mill, or Poussin -in a sky; we might see the marble of a Michelangelo hand -in the hand of a real person; we might see an actual Greek tragedy -in a real person's life (or more generally, narrative shape -in a real life).

Seeing a painted scene -in a real one, or more generally seeing or finding the composition of a representational work -in some real-life person, scene, or event is, I think, a

relatively common experience. It's something which we can sometimes get ourselves to do, if someone points the possibility out. But it's also something which often just strikes us—particularly if we're familiar with a range of works of art.

We can think of this kind of inverted seeing of a representational work of art -in the real world as a sort of focus case: once we've made sense of that, other kinds of experience with representational art can be made sense of. Most simply, we can look at something in the real world, and without quite seeing any work of art -in it, we can nevertheless see it as prompting or provoking a work of art of that kind. We can immediately imagine, perhaps, what Monet, or Ivy Compton-Burnett—to choose two rather contrasting cases—might do with a scene such as the one before us.

But perhaps more importantly, we can think of our experience of engaging with works of art themselves in terms of inverted seeing-in. I might look at a Rembrandt portrait, for example, and see immediately how that face, the one in the painting, might be invertedly seen-in a real face: how we might find that painted face in a real one. If the person in the painting reminds us of a particular real person we know already, looking at the face in the painting might show us a new way of looking at that real person: seeing this painted face -in them, and hence finding a way to see composition, order, and reason there. Or if the person in the painting just strikes us as a person of a certain kind, the painting provides us with a new way of looking at any real person of that kind.

This suggestion looks as if it generalizes quite naturally. If we come across a character in a novel who reminds us either of a particular person, or of people of a certain kind, reading the novel provides us with a new way of seeing that particular person, or someone of that kind: we can invertedly see the novel character -in them. If we watch a death in an opera, this provides us with a new way of thinking about any real death: we can invertedly see the opera death -in any real-world death.

I suspect that this is the central way in which representational works of art change the way we think of the real world. They enable us to invertedly see the people, scenes, and events in them -in real people, scenes, and events which we either have encountered or might encounter. They provide us with new ways of seeing the real world; if I'm right to focus on composition in my account of the point of representational art, what's new about them will be that they are new ways of finding composition in the world—ways of finding there an artistically constructed world, in which what we see is resolved and a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason holds.

9. The Challenge

I've claimed that what's distinctive about representational art is the artistic composition of the content for the kind of resolution which is intrinsic to the medium. In line with that, I'm suggesting that the principal way in which representational art changes the way we think about the real world is that it enables us to see composition of that kind -in the real world: that is, to see-in the real world something which is artistically composed in the medium of an art form.

But my larger goal was to defend the claim that representational art enables us to understand the world as it is in itself. How can this seeing of artistic composition, seeing composed figures and scenes -in the world, be a way of understanding the world as it is in itself? The world as it is in itself is the world as it is independently of any relation to thought and representation. This seeing of figures and scenes from art -in the world seems precisely not to be seeing the world as it is independently of any relation to representation. First, as I've described it, it seems to be seeing it exactly in terms of its relation to some particular form of representation. And secondly, it involves invertedly seeing-in the world things which are not in the world as it is in itself: the world as it is in itself is not made of stone (apart from the stone parts), or paint (apart from the painted parts); it's not constructed in a narrative; it's not—at least not without begging the question—artistically composed; it's not—at least not without begging the question—subject to the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

Seeing works of art -in the world seems inevitably to be understood in terms of the familiar metaphor of projection: we project onto the world something which isn't really there: in this case, the composition of a work of art. How can this be understanding the world as it is in itself?

10. Grasp

The problem arises here because it's hard to see how seeing works of art -in the real world could count as *understanding* the real world unless the world itself were artistically composed.

Why should this be? I think it's because of a certain model of understanding. I suggest that the problem arises because we're inclined to think that *understanding* something is *simply finding* something in it which is already there. If we accept that view, it looks as if we have to think that the understanding provided by art comes in two stages: first, we impose something artistically composed onto the real world; and secondly, we just find it there. Seeing art -in the world would then somehow involve both these stages—both projecting out and reading back.

This kind of picture is problematic in a number of ways. For one thing—obviously—it makes it very difficult to see how seeing art -in the world could help us to understand the world as it is in itself: it only lets art help us to understand a world which has been shaped by art. But there are problems with the first stage of the two-stage picture too. To do the work that's needed here, projecting something artistically composed onto the world has to be understood as somehow reshaping it. This kind of thought has other manifestations. Sometimes it's supposed that in thinking we somehow *conceptualize* the world, and thereby transform it: that we take an in itself non-conceptual world, and somehow reshape it. Another version of the idea appears in the metaphor of 'carving up' reality, as if our categories might change what's really there. But even if it's common, this is surely a bizarre picture: seeing an artistic composition -in the world doesn't change it; nothing happens to a thing when it's 'conceptualized'; and carving needs a knife.

The basic problem here seems to be caused by thinking of understanding as *simply finding* something which is already there. It seems to force us to get the composed, conceptualized, ‘carved-up’ world established, ready to be found. If that’s right, we need a different model of understanding to make sense of the understanding provided by art. We need seeing art -in the world to provide a kind of understanding which is not just finding what’s already there—or, even worse, first putting it there in order to find it there.

The simplest model we have for a different kind of understanding is provided by the everyday idea of a *grasp* of things, a *comprehension* of them. Grasping is not itself knowing facts, or recognizing some feature of things which is there already, although it’s likely to presuppose such knowledge and recognition, and also to issue in such knowledge and recognition. Grasping is a kind of taking things together, a kind of mental arranging of things. It’s not just any kind of arrangement, of course: in particular, it’s not an arbitrary scattering of them. A moment’s thought makes it natural to think that it’s a kind of mental artistic composition of things: an arrangement of things with a view to resolution, in the sense I’ve introduced. But it’s only a *mental* resolution of things, an arrangement in the mind, because nothing in the world is actually moved or reshaped.

If that’s a natural interpretation of the relatively ordinary notion of grasping, it’s tempting to suggest that the understanding provided by representational art is grasping of just this kind. What seeing art -in the world would then do would be allow us to treat the real world, or some real person, scene, or event, if not precisely as, then *rather as* we treat a representational work of art: it allows us to study it, and then move on, and still return to it again. In encouraging us to treat the real world rather as we treat a representational work of art, it encourages us to treat all of its features as being there for a reason, and that’s what keeps our attention on them, and pushes us to look again at what they are. But we can do this while never really forgetting that what we’re looking at is not in fact a work of art.

How can this count as a kind of understanding if it doesn’t involve simply finding something that’s already there in the world? There’s more to say on this than can be said here, but there’s just time to provide an outline sketch. Here are two plausible necessary conditions for a state or activity to count as understanding the world:

(U1) It must be sensitive to the way the world actually is;

(U2) It must do something appropriate with that sensitivity.

Simply finding something in the world which is already there is one way of meeting (U1); if that’s the way (U1) is met, we’d expect *recording the findings* to be the way (U2) is met. But this is only one way of meeting (U1). I think *grasping*, understood on the model of *seeing* art -in the world, works in a different way.

We can’t see just any work of art -in just any real situation, just any real thing. You can’t see a Poussin sky in a dark cupboard, for example. That fact shows that seeing art -in the world already meets condition (U1). What it does with that sensitivity is not, of course, simply *record* what’s there: instead, it enables us to see what’s there—the real world which constrains inverted seeing-in—rather as if it were artistically composed. What does that do? Very simply, it enables us to come to terms with the world, to face up to it as it is in itself: to

hold it in mind, but also move on from it. That, I suggest, is the way in which the grasping which is involved in inverted seeing-in meets (U2).

Does this kind of understanding, this grasping by treating the world rather as we treat an artistic composition, do anything useful? It may, but that's not the point: to think it has to be the point is to insist once again on the broadly technological conception of understanding which I set aside at the beginning. The core of the understanding which I'm suggesting representational art provides is just that it enables us to come to terms with the world, to face up to it as it is in itself. That's its final goal, and I think it's enough. We often feel a certain satisfaction, perhaps a kind of peace, when we've faced up to the world in the kind of way which art enables us to. But that feeling is not the goal: it's a recognition that the goal has been achieved.

There's a lot more to say, of course: about how it is that inverted seeing-in might be constrained by the world; about how it might enable us to face up to the world; and about artistic composition. But provided something plausible can be said about these things, it looks as if we can give representational art its due by thinking of it as enabling us to grasp, comprehend, or capture the world by treating it rather as if it were artistically composed. This wouldn't be just finding something in the world which is already there; and it wouldn't be a way of reshaping the world. But it looks as if it might be a way of understanding the world as it is in itself.⁴

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⁴ An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference in Padua in September 2019: I'm very grateful to the audience there for their questions, and to Elisa Caldarola and Gabriele Tomasi for inviting me. I'm also very grateful to Sarah Sawyer and Guy Longworth for commenting on later drafts.