

«Meaning (de)coding of symbolic experiences: Wittgenstein on seeing aspects,  
experiencing meaning and art definition»

Paulo Moutinho Barroso

Post Doctoral Researcher

Social Sciences Institute - University of Minho (Portugal)

Address

pbarroso1062@gmail.com

Abstract (150 words)

This article is about a particular and central subject of study within the scope of the conceptual investigations on Aesthetics: the definition of art. I propose an analysis of this question in order to defend the thesis of the impossibility to present a definition of art. According to my perspective, based on Wittgenstein's latter work, art could be understood like a game: both cannot be defined if we isolate its essential qualities or rules. There is nothing in common to all games as well as there is nothing in common to all works of art. Wittgenstein did not answer to the main question "What art is?", but he presented the concept "family resemblance" as a metaphor able to be used to give some meaning to words of our ordinary language, like "art" and "game".

## 1) Wittgenstein on Aesthetics

The common-sense view of art has a simple and standardised definition based on two components: the objective component and the subjective component. According to the objective component, which has a realist character, art is in the object, i.e., we call “work of art” to a given object if there are certain and observable characteristics in it that stimulate pleasant feelings to the observer. Realists and objectivists hold that beauty is a real property that an object may possess and that is entirely independent of anyone’s beliefs about it. According to the subjective component, which has an anti-realist character, art is inside our minds, i.e., it is the observer of an object that has in his head certain aesthetic values, conceptual patterns and cultural ideals. Anti-realists and subjectivists hold that aesthetic values are necessarily tied to human judgements. Thus the common-sense view holds that art has a special objective or subjective condition.

This common-sense view of art is based on the most basic question in Aesthetics: an aesthetic value is really inherent in the object to which it is ascribed? Considering this simple and standardised definition of art, several authors developed their own theories about what is a work of art. One of the most original theses belongs to Ludwig Wittgenstein, because he saw the problem according to a meaning perspective.

However, Wittgenstein wrote so little on the subject. Aesthetics was not his most important concern. Wittgenstein’s own writings on these subjects have remarks on meaning, perception, poetry, architecture, visual arts and music. These remarks are all important to understand aesthetic experience, artistic meaning or cultural interpretation. Wittgenstein did not keep apart the Aesthetics from philosophical subjects, namely from his language interest. For Wittgenstein, Aesthetics represents a vast field of conceptual inquiries.

So, in 1938, Wittgenstein delivered lectures on Aesthetics in Cambridge to a small group of students, which included Rush Rhees, Yorick Smythies, James Taylor, Casmir Lewy, Theodore Redpath e Maurice Drury. The notes taken down by these students are the contents of a book first published in 1966 with the title *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, nothing contained herein was neither written nor checked by Wittgenstein.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter called *LC*.

However, the notes of Rush Rhees on Wittgenstein's lectures, for example, let us consider the Wittgenstein's criticism against Aesthetics. According to Carlos Silva, it is a criticism based on the illegitimacy of Aesthetics, in so far that it has absolute values or references organized around a theory of the beautiful, as if it would correspond to a legitimate use of language (cf. Silva, 1982: 103).

In his lectures, Wittgenstein's opening remarks mentions that the subject of study in discussion, the Aesthetics, is very big and entirely misunderstood. To demonstrate this idea, he presents the example of the use of the word "beautiful", an adjective more apt to be misunderstood (cf. Wittgenstein, 2003: 1). According to Wittgenstein, we are inclined to use this word in propositions such as "This has a certain quality, that of being beautiful". The problem is the use of certain words that describe personal experiences, because, as Wittgenstein points out, "we get a peculiar kind of confusion or confusions which comes up with all these words" (cf. Wittgenstein, 2003: 1). For Wittgenstein, "language plays us entirely new tricks". For this reason, the purpose of Aesthetics is not defining works of art, but it is to elucidate the concept of art.

Later, in Part II of *LC*, Wittgenstein begins by noticing the general idea of what is known as the "science of Aesthetics". About what could be meant by Aesthetics, Wittgenstein criticizes both the perspective of the Aesthetics as a science that tells us what is beautiful (cf. Wittgenstein, 2003: 11) and the perspective of the Aesthetics as a branch of Psychology that is able to understand all the mysteries of art (cf. Wittgenstein, 2003: 17).

There are several conceptions of the properties that a work of art must have. These conceptions disagree on the nature of aesthetic values. The analysis of aesthetic values constitutes the central question in philosophical aesthetics. A fundamental disagreement on the most basic question "What is art?" is the main motive to an endless aesthetics discussion. The question of whether aesthetic values are objective or subjective is a parallel question. The conflict between contradictory theses concerning the definition of art is timeless and beyond resolution. Consequently, there are other adjacent questions beyond "What is art?": "What please our senses observing a given object?"; "What gives meaning to a certain work of art?"; Why a specific work of art is important to me?".

## **2) Wittgenstein's conceptual view of art**

Analysing propositions such as the one mentioned above, “This has a certain quality, that of being beautiful”, Wittgenstein shows, in this initial remark, the attention that he always gave to the use of language and to the semantic category of certain types of words. Namely words linked to subjective experiences (e.g. to aesthetic experiences), i.e., words used in psychological propositions.

After Wittgenstein compared language to a tool chest, he asks how we get the use of certain words. We usually put this question when we discuss words. For Wittgenstein, this question clarifies misconceptions:

“We are concentrating, not on the words ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’, which are entirely uncharacteristic, generally just subject and predicate (‘This is beautiful’), but on the occasions on which they are said – on the enormously complicated situation in which the aesthetic expression has a place, in which the expression itself has almost a negligible place” (cf. Wittgenstein, 2003: 1).

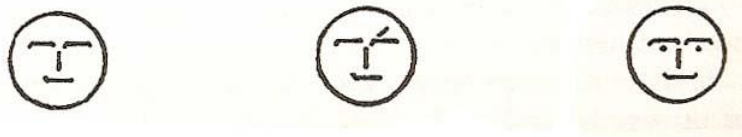
This means that it is a mistake to pay attention only to a small and specific group of words such as “good”, “beautiful” or “ugly”, because this kind of words are used as interjections or simple expressions of taste. Such words are less important than our reactions to a work of art. So, our aesthetic appreciation, by the rule, does not depend if we like or not a given work of art. On the contrary, it depends if we understand it or not according to certain patterns.

For Wittgenstein, it is also a mistake to give more importance to the linguistic form of aesthetic expressions than to its use. Words should not have too much importance. It is a certain occasion, in which the words are used, that is important. So, according to this contextual or relative view, the occasions are animated by culture and by forms of life, and the aesthetic appreciation is just a reaction.

“It is remarkable that in real life, when aesthetic judgements are made, aesthetic adjectives such as ‘beautiful’, ‘fine’, etc., play hardly any role at all. Are aesthetic adjectives used in a musical criticism? You say: ‘Look at this transition’, or ‘The passage here is incoherent’. Or you say, in a poetical criticism: ‘His use of images is precise’. The words you use are more akin to ‘right’ and ‘correct’ (as these words are used in ordinary speech) than to ‘beautiful’ and ‘lovely’.” (Wittgenstein, 2003: 3).

The main problem is due to the use of words like “beautiful” and “lovely”. These words qualify and are first used as interjections. Only then these words are used in few occasions, because people have difficulties to express adequately themselves (cf. Wittgenstein, 2003: 3). Therefore, people use these words as simple interjections to what they want to express. The language-use that does not respect the categories of words and that employs them in improper contexts is one of the main factors that cause philosophical problems, which are identified by Wittgenstein.

In § 10 of *LC* and in Part II of *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>2</sup>, Wittgenstein mentions that there are certain types of images that convey unequivocal pictorial meanings even when we never had learnt how to interpret them. In *LC*, Wittgenstein presents the example of the following images of faces:



When we contemplate the expression of a drawn face, it is deeply misleading to know for sure the objective expression represented. And it is even more misleading to seek for the expression without the drawn face or to get the expression from a dualistic drawn face.

The above images of faces do not mean a form of aesthetic reductionism, i.e., a kind of isolation of our reactions to aesthetic objects. The expressions of those images of faces are not hermetically sealed. They do not reveal isolated effects when we experience them, i.e., when we decode the adjacent meanings of each symbolic experience; when we just see the aspects and experience a given meaning. So, Wittgenstein discusses our aesthetic reactions to subtle differences between differently drawn faces. He stimulates us to see the connections between the lines of the drawn faces. He does it to show the significance of making connections (between facial expressions) in our perception and understanding of seeing aspects of signs.

Classifying symbolic experiences carried with meanings is like giving the work a face. Words describing symbolic experiences (mainly adjectives used to classify meaningful expressions) are like all our aesthetic vocabulary, because language should not be detachable from the particular cultural context within which it has its life. For Wittgenstein, through the draw technique of human face, we could convey an innumerable number of expressions “by four strokes”:

“Such words as ‘pompous’ and ‘stately’ could be expressed by faces. Doing this, our descriptions would be much more flexible and various than they are as expressed by adjectives. If I say of a piece of Schubert’s that it is melancholy, which is like giving it a face (I don’t express approval or disapproval). I could instead use gestures or dancing. In fact, if we want to be exact, we do use a gesture or a facial expression.” (Wittgenstein, 2003: 4).

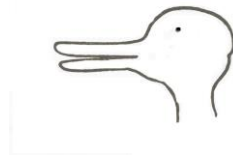
---

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter called *PI*.

In Part II of *PI*, Wittgenstein refers two uses of the word “see”: one has to do with observable and easily verifiable expressions such as “What do you see there?” or “I see this”<sup>3</sup>; the other has to do with expressions not observable, such as “I see a similarity between these two faces”<sup>4</sup> (cf. Wittgenstein, 1996: 193). With this differential use of the word “see”, Wittgenstein points out the different class between two “objects” seen. The first case is able to be represented or described by words or other visual signs, while the second case may or may not allow the perception in the representation of the similarity between the two faces. To notice an aspect is a visual experience, i.e., a perceptual and subjective experience. According to Wittgenstein’s words:

“I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience ‘*noticing an aspect*’” (Wittgenstein, 1996: 193).

Following this perspective, Wittgenstein connects in the *PI* the duck-rabbit figure of Joseph Jastrow. This is an ambiguous figure; it can be seen in a dual view, i.e., as a duck or as a rabbit:



In this case, i.e. a gestalt figure, the problem concerns the need to distinguish between “the experience of continuing to see an aspect” and the transformation of an aspect in the image that I see (cf. Wittgenstein, 1996: 194). Soon after, Wittgenstein goes back to the example of human faces to mention that an image of an object can be taken as the image of a face:



About this last example, Wittgenstein remarks:

“In some respects I stand towards it as I do towards a human face. I can study its expression; can react to it as to the expression of the human face. A child can talk to picture-men or picture-animals, can treat them as it treats dolls.” (Wittgenstein, 1996: 194).

---

<sup>3</sup> In this case, “*this*” means a description, a draw or copy, according to Wittgenstein.

<sup>4</sup> In this case, the similarity is pretended by someone who hears saying something about that similarity between two faces.

However, there are images that we do not interpret, but react to them in an immediate way. Our reaction may be influenced by our way of life, by our cultural habits, by our social learning. The understanding of images, pictures, drawings or other representations does not necessarily presuppose any prior training on pictorial conventions. A photographic image, for example, is not always clearly interpreted; therefore, it can be interpreted in different ways.

The problem about different ways to see a picture (of a face) and interpret it expressing a certain aspect has to do with the application or not of a specific rule to be followed properly, in order to capture its meaning and to say “this is how the representation (pictorial or musical) should be understood”. For example, how poetry should be read? Wittgenstein refers to the poems of Friedrich Klopstock, a poet who believed that the poetic diction was different from popular language, rejecting the ordinary rhymes and preferring the metrics of the verses. Wittgenstein recognized a way to read the poetry of Klopstock based on metrics, because the poet put signs in front of his poems. In Wittgenstein words:

“When I read his poems in this new way, I said: ‘Ah-ha, now I know why he did this’. What had happened? I had read this kind of stuff and had been moderately bored, but when I read it in this particular way, intensely, I smiled, said: ‘This is *grand*’, etc. But I might not have said anything. The important fact was that I read it again and again. When I read these poems I made gestures and facial expressions which were what would be called gestures of approval. But the important thing was that I read the poems entirely differently, more intensely, and said to others: ‘Look! This is how they should be read’.” (Wittgenstein, 2003: 4).

If we acknowledge correct ways to read a poem, for example, the expression of approval is very relative. In § 13 of the *LC*, Wittgenstein presents another example to reinforce the idea of the difficulties of using ordinary language, including words of approval, in the expression of subjective experiences. In the case, what we should say about the proof of a tailor, i.e., about the way of expression or showing agreement:

“What does a person who knows a good suit say when trying on a suit at the tailor’s? ‘That’s the right length’, ‘That’s too short’, ‘That’s too narrow’. Words of approval play no role, although he will look pleased when the coat suits him. Instead of ‘That’s too short’ I might say ‘Look!’ or instead of ‘Right’ I might say ‘Leave it as it is’.” (Wittgenstein, 2003: 5).

The tailor applies the technique of sewing the suit after having learned the rules. The expression of approval may be based following or not the rules established, insofar as we can tell to the tailor: “The suit is not good, because it is not conform the rules and requirements for their design”. We do interpret the rules and apply our interpretation on

whether or not the rules. The aesthetic judgement would be justified by the previous learning of the rules of the suit design (cf. Wittgenstein, 2003: 5). As in the case of the poems of Klopstock, if we learn the rules, according to Wittgenstein, we can have a more appropriate aesthetic judgement concerning the aesthetic subject.

This question of the rules is important, because it differentiates a person who knows how to make suits and another that knows nothing of the matter. And this distinction is also due to the use of a certain set of typical expressions such as “too long”, “very tight”, “well done”.

And maybe we could consider the rules or instructions for the conception or design of this aesthetic object or object of our valued judgement as part of their interpretation and aesthetic creation. For example, the marks of the measures taken by the tailor in the suit can be used to ascertain whether, in fact, the tailor properly followed or not the rules for the design of the object. These marks or temporary notes made by tailor’s chalk, as they did in the past, would be the expressions of tailor’s intentions to follow pre-established rules for the design of the suit.

According to these examples, the problem is to know or how to know what we mean when we express a psychological proposition based on subjective experiences of good taste, feeling of beauty, approval, satisfaction, and so on. What mean these expressions and states of appreciation? According Wittgenstein:

“It is not only difficult to describe what appreciation consists in, but impossible. To describe what it consists in we would have to describe the whole environment.” (Wittgenstein, 2003: 7).

However, when we talk about a Beethoven’s symphony, we can not use certain expressions of approval or talk about correction. There are numerous and varied works of art. Therefore, we can not talk about appreciation, approval or correction for all these objects:

“[...] When we talk of a Symphony of Beethoven we don’t talk of correctness. Entirely different things enter. One wouldn’t talk of appreciating the *tremendous* things in Art. In certain styles in Architecture a door is correct, and the thing is you appreciate it. But in the case of a Gothic Cathedral what we do is not at all to find it correct – it plays an entirely different role with us. The entire *game* is different.” (Wittgenstein, 2003: 8).

The philosophical position of Wittgenstein to the differentiation of tastes about art is, in a sense, relativistic. It justifies the use we make of certain words and expressions of aesthetic judgments in the culture of an epoch (cf. Wittgenstein, 2003: 8). To describe the use of these expressions of aesthetic judgments or to describe what

we mean by a cultural taste presupposes to describe a culture, a game (a language-game) or way of life. This culture, game or way of life will determine or constrain the different ways of people appreciate works of art or respond to them. Therefore, Wittgenstein states that “in order to get clear about aesthetics words, you have to describe ways of living” (cf. Wittgenstein, 2003: 11). Certain behaviours and attitudes can mean a lot to certain societies or cultures, but they also may not mean anything for other societies or cultures. Beyond meaning, also the modes of express feelings or sensations are different between societies or cultures.

In the end of his *LC*, Wittgenstein mentions the attitude we could have toward a picture. The attitude could be the result of all associations we establish with the picture. For Wittgenstein, “associations may vary, attitudes may vary, but change the picture ever so slightly, and you won’t want to look at it any more” (cf. Wittgenstein, 2003: 36). He seems to turn to the question about the attitude we take toward a picture. Wittgenstein employs the case of seeing the very slight change in the depiction of a smile within a picture of a monk looking at a vision of the Virgin Mary. Where the slight and subtle change of line yields a transformation of the smile of the monk from a kindly to an ironic one, our attitude in viewing might similarly change from one in which for some we are almost in prayer to one that would for some be blasphemous, where we are almost leering.

### **3) The argument against the definability of art**

Since Plato’s writings, one of the most interesting philosophical tasks remains the problem of how to define and apply a concept. In Aesthetics or in Philosophy of Art, this problem is “How to define ‘art’?”. So, the immediately following reflexive questions are: “If we did not succeed in defining a concept, can we implement it properly?”; “Is it possible to define ‘art’?”. This interesting philosophical task has been motivated by the essentialist perspectives based on the idea that the concept of “art” is definable and allows us to distinguish objects belonging to the extension of this concept from other objects that do not belong. According to these essentialist perspectives, only works of art have certain properties which distinguish them from other objects. This perspective support several essentialist theories, defending the existence of essential properties that distinguish objects with or without such properties.

With regard to the above-mentioned problem of how to define “art”, the aim of all essentialist theories is to find out the essential properties that only works of art have.

The essentialist perspectives state definitions of art based in a set of necessary<sup>5</sup> and sufficient<sup>6</sup> conditions in order to determinate carefully which objects belong to the extension of “art”.

Despite numerous and contradictory traditional theories of art, there are always something useful that we can learned from them. Even if the attempts to determine the “essence” of art are failed.

The essentialist theories can not achieve the essential properties of art, the necessary and sufficient conditions to be considered a work of art and, therefore, the definition of art. So, the problem of defining art remains unsolved. Since all definitions are complex, superfluous and relative, I propose the characterization and reformulation of the so-called indefinable art argument. To achieve this aim, I mention Wittgenstein’s writings, proposing that we can not define art because it is an open concept.

Taking into account the failures of all essentialist theories searching for a definition of art, we must consider, at least, the hypothesis of look at the problem differently and, instead of seeking for a definition, analyse the sense of the question “what is art?”. This is the main idea behind all theories defending the indefiniteness of art, i.e., defending that art can not be defined by a logical impossibility that has to do with the rules for applying the word “work of art”.

Morris Weitz was an influent supporter of the indefiniteness of art, picking up the terms of “game”, “family resemblance” and “open concept” from Wittgenstein. But Wittgenstein used these concepts differently, i.e., with the intent to refute the idea that the task of philosophy is to grasp the essence of language and not, as Weitz did, to refute the idea that art can be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions that circumscribe the essence of art.

An “open concept” means a concept for which we can not provide necessary and sufficient conditions to specify which objects belong to the extension of that concept. The concept of game is very important, because it is the starting point of Wittgenstein perspective. “Game” is used as a paradigm of an open concept. The idea is that if we consider a set of games (e.g. football, chess, patience, and so on), we easily find out that these games have no characteristic in common, and, therefore, there is no necessary and sufficient characteristic for something to be considered a game.

---

<sup>5</sup> Those that all works of art must have, which are not enough to identify them as such.

<sup>6</sup> Those that determine an object like a work of art, because all of them have.

Each game can share a set of properties with other games, but not with all games. Thus, we decide to classify a new activity and give it the name “game” if we evaluate the already established and shared similarities of a set of games (and not of all games). Features such as luck, competition or entertainment are shared differently by different sets of games.

These features are called the similarities of family or, taking Wittgenstein’s words, “family resemblances”. It is a “family resemblance” that allows a correct use of the word “game”. For Wittgenstein, the majority of concepts are open concepts and we should be conscious or reminded about this.

The pursuit of a definition of art is a perennial theme/problem of philosophy, because it is difficult and misconceived to define the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to count as art. If the knowledge of art depends on being to define it, there is a tricky situation: if we can not provide a definition of art, how can we be able to recognize what is art from what is not art?

According to the initial mentioned common-sense view of art, we seem to know easily what it is. But the problem is not so simple. Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblance” provides one way out of this tangle. For Wittgenstein, if we take the word “game”, we all have a clear idea what games are, since we can give examples of games, make comparisons between different games, and so on. However, difficulties arise when we attempt to analyse some essential meaning or definition that encompasses every instance. So, Wittgenstein points out that there is no such common denominator, because there are lots of things that games have in common, but there is no single feature that they all share.

Wittgenstein supposes that the concept of “art”, like the concept of “game”, is a family-resemblance word. Considering this, he believed that most of our difficulties evaporate. There are no features that all works of art possess. Any attempt to define art is in vain, i.e., is misconceived and doomed to failure.

In his mentioned work called *LC*, Wittgenstein was against the thesis of the essence of art, denying the existence of common properties in all works of art. For Wittgenstein, we can not define accurately the artistic phenomenon, because there is not a common essence to cover all cases. So, art can not be defined.

According to Wittgenstein, there are no essences covering human phenomena; there are only “family resemblances”, likeness between the phenomena that characterize the concept of art.

The problem of the indefiniteness of art comes from problems of language: the question “What is art?” leads to the question “The question ‘What is art?’ makes sense?”. Language and art have no essence. Works of art do not have a common nature, a defining essence. The idea of “game” leads to the question of the nature of language and this take us to the conclusion that language has no essence. Language only has family resemblances.

It is important the § 65 of *PI*, where Wittgenstein asks: there is or there is not something common to all games? The answer is “no”. The use of the concept “language game” is not governed by necessary and sufficient conditions. In the set of all games (patience, football, etc.) there is not any common characteristic; there is not a necessary and sufficient condition for the implementation of “game”. However, there are characteristics (competition, luck, fun, skill) shared by groups of games.

“Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, - but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all ‘language’.” (Wittgenstein, 1996: § 65).

“Consider for example the proceedings that we call ‘games’. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? [...] For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.” (Wittgenstein, 1996: § 66).

“I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.” (Wittgenstein, 1996: § 67).

The concept of game and the concept of art are open concepts. There are not any common characteristic among the various objects we call works of art. When Wittgenstein demands “don’t think, but look!” (Wittgenstein, 1996: § 66), he is referring to observable features of the games and works of art.

#### **4) Weitz’s open concept argument**

The argument against the definability of art was developed by Morris Weitz in his paper called «The role of aesthetic theory». According to Weitz, the problem raised up by the aesthetic theory, proposing a true definition or set of necessary and sufficient properties of art, is rejected in his essay. Weitz does not seek any definition “as the statement of the necessary and sufficient properties of what is being defined” about the essence of art, “what characterizes and distinguishes it from everything else” (cf. Weitz,

1956: 27).<sup>7</sup> He wants to show that such aesthetic theory is never forthcoming and that philosophers would do much better to supplant the question “What is the nature of art?” by other questions, “the answers to which will provide us with all the understanding of the arts there can be” (cf. Weitz, 1956: 27).

“Art, as the logic of the concept shows, has no set of necessary and sufficient properties, hence a theory of it is logically impossible and not merely factually difficult.” (Weitz, 1956: 28).

Following Wittgenstein’s conceptual view, Weitz clearly explains his main purpose:

“My intention is to go beyond these [criticisms of traditional aesthetic theories] to make a much more fundamental criticism, namely, that aesthetic theory is a logically vain attempt to define what cannot be defined, to state the necessary and sufficient properties of that which has no necessary and sufficient properties, to conceive the concept of art as closed when its very use reveals and demands its openness.” (Weitz, 1956: 30).

His interest is in the meta-aesthetic question of knowing if the question “what is art?” makes sense.

“The problem with which we must begin is not ‘What is art?’, but ‘What sort of concept is *art*?’. Indeed, the root problem of philosophy itself is to explain the relation between the employment of certain kinds of concepts and the conditions under which they can be correctly applied.” (Weitz, 1956: 30).

Weitz paraphrases Wittgenstein and says that we must not ask “What is the nature of any philosophical x?” or even “What does ‘x’ mean?”, avoiding a disastrous interpretation of “art” as a name for some specifiable class of objects. Instead, we must ask “What is the use or employment of ‘x’?”, “What does ‘x’ do in the language?”. In Weitz words: “This, I take it, is the initial question, the begin-all if not the end-all of any philosophical problem and solution” (cf. Weitz, 1956: 30).

According to Weitz, the first problem in Aesthetics is the elucidation of the actual employment of the concept of art. This is an obvious influence of Wittgenstein’s question “What is a game?”. There is nothing common to all games. There are only similarities, relationships.

“Not all games are amusing, nor is there always winning or losing or competition. Some games resemble others in some respects – that is all. What we find are no necessary and sufficient properties, only ‘a complicated network of similarities overlapping and

---

<sup>7</sup> For Weitz, all the great theories of art (Formalism, Voluntarism, Emotionalism, Intellectualism, Intuitionism, Organicism) converge on the attempt to state the defining properties of art, fighting each other for the true of what they defend about the nature of art. According to Weitz, the inadequacies of these theories reside in a fundamental misconception of art. It is not possible a correct theory of art because it radically misconstrues the logic of the concept of art (cf. Weitz, 1956: 27-8).

crisscrossing', such that we can say of games that they form a family with family resemblances and no common trait." (Weitz, 1956: 31).

The main Weitz's thesis is that the concept of art is an open concept, as the concept of game is. For this reason, all essentialist theories trying to define the concept of art are wrong, because they seek for necessary and sufficient conditions and consider "art" a close concept. For Weitz, the problem of the nature of art is like that of the nature of games, because art also have no common properties, but only strands of similarities. It is impossible to define art, because "art" is an open concept. Art can not be defined; not by a factual impossibility to include different objects in a definition, but by a logical impossibility that has to do with the rules for applying the term "work of art".

Weitz picks up the Wittgensteinian concepts of "game", "family resemblance" and "open concept". With these concepts, he refutes the idea that the task of philosophy is to grasp the essence of language. Weitz rejects the idea that art can be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, i.e, conditions that apprehend the essence of art.

"Open concept" is a concept for which we can not provide necessary and sufficient conditions to specify which objects belonging to the extension of that concept. If there is a new case, we can extend the use of this concept to include this case.

The concept of game is used as a paradigm of an open concept. The idea is that, if we consider a number of games (e.g. football, chess, patience, etc.), we discover that they have no characteristic in common and there is no necessary feature (and much less sufficient) for something is considered a game.

Our decision to classify a new activity with the name "game" is to evaluate the similarities shared with something already established as a game; it is not to evaluate if this new activity share some property (e.g. luck, competition, fun) with all games.

It is the "family resemblance" that will allows a proper use of the words "game" and "work of art". For Wittgenstein, most concepts are open concepts. Wittgenstein do not argues that it is bad the existence of open concepts. He only argues that philosophers should be reminded of this when they develop their theories.

The main thesis of Weitz is: as the concept of game is an open concept, so it is the concept of art. The "artefactuality" may not be also a necessary condition of art. Weitz, however, states that closing the concept of art as well as their associated

concepts (sculpture, drama, etc.) is ridiculous, since it would mean to exclude the proper notion of creativity in art.

The purpose of Aesthetics is not to arrive at a definition of art. On the contrary, it is to elucidate the concept of art, to describe the way how we apply it, i.e., to describe the way how we use correctly the word “work of art”.

“The primary task of Aesthetics is not to seek a theory but to elucidate the concept of art. Specifically, it is to describe the conditions under which we employ the concept correctly.” (Weitz, 1956: 33).

However, the theories about the definition of art have the utility (although they do not provide a definition of art, which is impossible) to provide the conditions of similarity, i.e., “bundles of properties”, the set of characteristics that allow us to classify an object as a work of art. This is a function for establishing the criteria by which we identify an object as a work of art, i.e., criteria for application of the expression “this is a work of art”.

“I shall call these the ‘criteria of recognition’ of works of art. All of these have served as the defining criteria of the individual traditional theories of art; so we are already familiar with them. Thus, mostly, when we describe something as a work of art, we do so under the conditions of there being present some sort of artefact, made by human skill, ingenuity, and imagination, which embodies in its sensuous, public medium – stone, wood, sounds, words, etc. – certain distinguishable elements and relations.” (Weitz, 1956: 33).

I agree with the general thesis of Weitz’s theory: it is impossible to provide an essentialist definition of art. According to Weitz, there are no generalizations or definitions in art, because there is no common feature to all works of art.

### **5) Objections to the argument against the definability of art**

Weitz’s theory concerning the indefiniteness of art allows me some elementary objections:

- a) Describing how to apply the “criteria of recognition”, Weitz do not expect a work of art radically different, as the case of conceptual art. If X can not be recognized as work of art, then, X do not share any characteristic with the others works of art.
- b) Suppose that X is an object and shares some characteristics with the works of art, but X actually is not a work of art. So, we would have to recognize X as work of art?

- c) Weitz wanted to refute any kind of definition of art, but he only seems to reject the possibility of providing essentialist definitions. Weitz also thought that a work of art was something that depends on its intrinsic properties.

In my opinion, Weitz's theory takes a double risk: on the one hand, the risk of being excessive, classifying something that is not a work of art as a work of art; on the other hand, the risk of being confined, leaving outside a work of art because it does not share any characteristic with the other works of art. Following this main objection, Weitz's "criteria of recognition" have no practical utility and it is not too simple and accurate as Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" concept. If "art" is an open concept, it does not mean that this is a specific feature of art, because all concepts are "open concepts".

Face with a radically different work of art (as the case of the conceptual art), we can not recognize it as a work of art, because it does not share any trait or distinguishing feature with the previous works of art. If we see an object that shares some characteristics with the works of art (but it is not a work of art) we must recognize it as a work of art?

In this point, Weitz's criteria of recognition lose their practical usefulness. Rather than to refute any kind of definition of art, as Weitz intended, he only refutes the possibility of providing essentialist definitions. So, Weitz committed the same mistake of the essentialists: he thought that to be a work of art is something that depends on its intrinsic properties.

In 1965, Maurice Mandelbaum wrote an essay entitled «Family resemblances and generalizations concerning the arts», where he refutes the arguments of Wittgenstein and Weitz. As an opponent to the open concept of art, Mandelbaum criticizes the nature of Wittgenstein's development of the concept "family resemblances". Mandelbaum's aim is to argue the very expansive character of art, making it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties. However, he admits that we can choose to close the concept, taking the risk of closing the inherent creativity conditions of art.

After that, Weitz formed a counter-criticism against Mandelbaum in his work «The opening mind», to show that family resemblances does succeed, and that this open concept of art moves forward past a reliance on family resemblances.

## 6) Concluding remarks

The objective of this small research is to keep away all philosophical theories about art, i.e., all theories with an explanation about the inexplicable: the essence of art. My purpose is also to characterize Wittgenstein's last writings on Aesthetics as a long-term, sequent, and interdisciplinary conceptual project, mainly related to the linguistic expression and representing departures in new approaches towards contemporary and central topics of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art.

In this Aesthetic scope, my conceptual inquiry takes the questions: "How should art be read?"; "What are we talking about when we talk about art?"; "What art is?"; "What delight us watching a given object?"; "What gives meaning to a given work of art?"; "What makes a given work of art important to us?"; etc.

To fulfil this purpose, I was based on Wittgenstein's lectures and conversations on Aesthetics (remarkably concerning meaning and symbolic experiences), that only started to be well-known and published in the last years and have been a lamentably neglected field of study. So, my research methodology is theoretical; it is supported by the lecture, analysis, interpretation, discussion and inquiring of Wittgenstein's remarks, i.e., on the definition of codes of meaning to express symbolic/artistic experiences.

My theoretical perspective is essentially linguistic, in order to approach the main Aesthetics issue about the nature of art. We use language to express what art is or what we feel seeing a work of art. Language has no essence too. It is a mistake to look for the nature of language. We should look for the use and not for the meaning of words. What belongs to a language-game is a whole culture. Accordingly, the main concluding remarks are:

- a) The initial question in Aesthetics should not be "What is art?", because this question supposes the existence of an essence. There is no art essence; there is no common essence that fits all artistic phenomena. I agree with Wittgenstein, who said that there are only "family resemblances" between phenomena, objects or works of art.
- b) The indefiniteness of art is not a Wittgensteinian theory of art, because there is no theory of art or any theory at all in Wittgenstein's work.
- c) If "art" is an open concept, it has several fields of application, but this does not mean necessarily that art can not be defined. However, it is not possible an ostensive definition of art as we do with other objects.

- d) Like the essentialists, the supporters of the indefiniteness of art think that a work of art depends of the internal features of the objects.
- e) One thing is to demonstrate that there is something in common to all works of art; another thing is to demonstrate that there is nothing in common to all works of art; and another thing is still to demonstrate that there is nothing in common to all works of art in terms of internal features.
- f) Art is what we considered to be the product of human creation of beautiful or significant things.
- g) The “criteria of recognition” of Weitz is inspired by the “family resemblances” of Wittgenstein. Both represent sets of features that mean perceptive properties in works of art; both are inefficacious to identify objectively works of art when these are new forms of expression that do not share any similarity in terms of perceptive properties with what is consider art till then (cf. D’Orey, 1999: 202). It is the case of the conceptual art.
- h) The question will vary case to case. Aesthetic satisfaction, for Wittgenstein, is an experience that is only possible within a culture. It is not usually possible to specify in advance the exact conditions required to produce the aesthetic satisfaction.

## 7) References

- DIFFEY, T. J. (1973) «Essentialism and the definition of ‘art’», *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 13 (2), pp. 103-120.
- D’OREY, Carmo (1999) *A Exemplificação na Arte – Um Estudo Sobre Nelson Goodman*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.
- GRAHAM, Gordon (2001) *Filosofia das Artes – Introdução à Estética*. Lisboa: Edições 70.
- MANDELBAUM, Maurice (1977) «Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts», *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- SCHLESINGER, George (1979) «Aesthetic experience and the definition of art», *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 19 (2), pp. 167-176.
- SILVA, Carlos H. C. (1982) «A cor do indizível – ou da Estética da Lógica em Ludwig Wittgenstein», *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, Tomo XXXVIII, Fasc. 1, Braga, pp. 87-119.

- SLUGA, Hans & STERN, David G. (eds.) (1997) *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- VESEY, Godfrey (1976) *Understanding Wittgenstein*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- WARBURTON, Nigel (2007) *O Que é a Arte?* Lisboa: Editorial Bizâncio.
- WEITZ, Morris (1956) «The role of theory in Aesthetics», *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. XV, n° 1, Baltimore, pp. 27-35.
- WEITZ, Morris (1977) *The Opening Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig (1979) *Notebooks – 1914-1916*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- "" (1993) *On Certainty*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- "" (1996) *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- "" (1998a) *The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- "" (1998b) *Culture and Value*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- "" (1998c) *Philosophical Remarks*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- "" (1998d) *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- "" (1999) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge.
- "" (2003) *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Oxford: Blackwell.