



Tiny Dancers. Photo by Riad Traboulsi

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Knowledge Claims about the Arts

David Novitz (1998) points out that there are three basic kinds of knowledge claims we can make about the arts, all of which are distinguished by their objects. The first concerns what we claim to know or believe about the art object itself and whatever imaginary or fictional worlds might be connected to that object. For example, I can claim to know things about the way the light reflects in Monet's *Water Lilies*. I can also claim to know things about Anna Karenina's relationships with her husband and with her lover, Vronsky. Beyond this, we may feel *justified* in our pity for Anna, because of the way Tolstoy's novel presents her story. Can my knowledge of Anna be meaningful, however, or be considered knowledge at all in the traditional sense (justified true belief) if Anna Karenina is a non-referring name? Further, how can one's interpretation of her situation be any more legitimate than anyone else's? Can single interpretations hold value over time and across cultures? Without the propositional content used to legitimize the standard analysis of knowledge, it seems that the knowledge claims we have about the content of an artwork will never have the same kind of validity. Whether or not that same kind of validity is required also needs to be called into question.

The second kind of knowledge claim we can make about art concerns what we know or believe to be an appropriate or warranted emotional response to the artwork. We often believe that works of art are only properly understood if we have a certain kind of emotional response to them. One problem here, of course, concerns how it is that we know what kind of response is

appropriate to a particular work. On occasion we talk to friends about a response they had to a particular work of art that was manifestly different from the one we had. How is it possible to judge which response is more appropriate or justified? Even suggesting that one should respond as if a novel, for example, were to be taken as an account of true events, with responses following as if the events depicted therein were actually happening or had happened, does not solve the problem. For one thing, not all emotional responses to real events are taken as equally justified. For another, most novels are not meant to be taken as true (despite the “report model” of emotive response [see Matravers 1997]). The fact that we do respond emotively to art, and to fiction in particular, would seem to indicate that there is something in the artwork that is worth responding to, even if it is not the same thing possessed by the objects we respond to outside the art world.

The third kind of knowledge claim we can have about art concerns the sort of information art can provide about the world. That is, how is it that we can gain real knowledge from fictional or non-real events or activities? It is widely accepted that art does, in fact, convey important insight into the way we order and understand the world. It is also widely acknowledged that art gives a certain degree of meaning to our lives. Art, and literature in particular, can elicit new beliefs and even new knowledge about the world. But the concern is this: fiction is not produced in a way that is reflective of the world as it *actually* is. It might be quite dangerous, in fact, for one to obtain knowledge about human affairs only from fiction. For example, it could be downright unhealthy for me to get my sense of what it is like to be in love from romance novels alone.

We can easily be experientially misled by art. The so-called empathic beliefs, those we gain from experiencing art, should be based on and enhanced by our broader experience of the world and should not arise independently of our other beliefs. But here the problem of justification returns. That is, if the empathic beliefs we gain from our experience of art actually coincide with our experience of the real world, then they can pass as empathic knowledge (i.e., beliefs become true and justified when they are connected to other justified beliefs). The problem is that often the emotions and beliefs that we adopt empathically turn out to be temporary, since they are not grounded in concrete experience. Can the experience we have with a work of art be confirming in and of itself, or must there be another, external authority to make the experience, or at least the knowledge gained from the experience, legitimate? It seems that much of what we learn about the world does come from art, and thus the justificatory claims to knowledge must be reconsidered.

The propositional theory of knowledge holds that one must have justified true belief in the content of a proposition in order to have knowledge. This appears reasonable under normal circumstances, but seems not to work at all in the case of art. It seems odd, in fact, to hold that in order to show that one has learned from a work of fiction, one must show that the work has propositional content of a general or philosophical nature, or that it provides experience that cannot be gained in any other way. If we can learn from art, we must be able to do so in a manner that diverges from the traditional notion of justified true belief, but that still holds some sort of legitimate ground.

What kind of justification is needed to ground these potential knowledge claims that art provides? First of all, we must be at least somewhat aware of what the new *knowledge* consists of. Moreover, one’s engagement with the artwork should provide at least some degree of justification (e.g., I feel pity for Anna Karenina because she is in an unfortunate set of circumstances that she feels she has no control over. I am justified in my emotional response to

her if I can see that she is in a truly pitiable situation). It is important to distinguish *learning* from art from merely being affected or influenced by it, or even from being challenged by it. Accounts of knowledge provided by art should be able to identify clearly what it is about the artwork itself, *qua* artwork, which prompts knowledge. A cognitivist account in particular will require first that the content of the work be specifiable (what is it we learn?); second, that the demands for justification be respected; and third, that these accounts appeal directly to aesthetic experience (Freeland 1997).

