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Chapter Seven¹
Framing Effects in Museum Narratives: Objectivity in Interpretation
Revisited

Anna Bergqvist

‘The map is not the territory’ - Korzybski

Abstract

Museums establish specific contexts, framings, which distinguish them from viewing the world face-to-face. One striking aspect of exhibition in so-called *participatory* museums is that it echoes and transforms the limits of its own frame as a public space. I argue that it is a mistake to think of the meaning of an exhibit as *either* determined by the individual viewer’s narrative *or* as determined by the conception as presented in the museum’s ‘authoritative’ narrative. Instead I deploy the concept of a *model of comparison* to illuminate the philosophical significance of perspective in understanding the idea of objectivity in museum narratives.

1. Introduction

Museums are, among other things, sites for conveying meaning. This makes them interesting to philosophers. In particular it would be interesting to understand how, if at all, museums convey meaning *through* the objects exhibited in them. Here I shall not talk about the mechanics of museum display, nor say much about the nature of the putative educative function of the museum as such (until I draw out an implication at the end). My focus is rather on a methodological meta-problem about museums and the meaning of the objects exhibited that stems from a number of characteristic features of any museum’s display that we may identify as the *narrative*

¹ Forthcoming in A. Bergqvist, V. Harrison & G. Kemp (eds.), *Philosophy and Museums: Ethics, Aesthetics and Ontology. Philosophy* Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, Cambridge University Press. Publication date: August 2015. © All rights reserved.

aspect of museum exhibits as organised intentional-communicative artefacts,² artefacts that have been put together in order to tell a story.

Engagement with museum narratives has sometimes been characterised as a cognitively unmediated process in sensory items. However, new museum forms, especially given focus on audience participation in the wake of Hilde Hein's work,³ for instance, draw our attention to the constructive nature of aesthetic judgement such that perceived order in it is constituted, at least in part, by the ascription of intention.

In what follows, I will assume as uncontroversial that museum exhibits can have a narrative communicative function by virtue of their curator's intentions,⁴ manifested in what Ivan Gaskell calls the invariably *selective* process of display, the *discursive* means of their physical arrangement (even if unaccompanied by text of any kind), and their status as *authored* (even when the agent of the intention is not explicitly acknowledged or even clearly conceived).⁵ Moreover, the ascription of intention employs background knowledge and experience on the part of the audience or, in other words, implicates the perceiver's conceptual framework to account for events.

² I borrow the term 'intentional-communicative artefact' from Gregory Currie's *Narrative and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

³ See, for instance, Hilde Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Smithsonian, 2000) and Hilde Hein, *Public Art: Thinking museums differently* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

⁴ For a defence of the related, but importantly different, moderate actual intentionalist claim that the *meaning* of art is a function of the communicative intentions of its author, see Noël Carroll, 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', in his *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), 157–80; also see Carroll's 'Art Interpretation: The 2010 Richard Wollheim Memorial Lecture', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52/2 (2011), 117–135. For criticism of Carroll's communication argument for moderate actual intentionalism, see Andrew Huddleston, 'The Conversation Argument for Actual Intentionalism', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52/3 (2012), 241–256.

⁵ Ivan Gaskell, 'Museums and Philosophy – Of Art, and Many Other Things Part II', *Philosophy Compass* 7/ 2 (2012), 90. See also David Carrier, *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

This aspect of the narratives of museums, the significance of the reader's background knowledge and conceptual framework, may seem incompatible with another truism, namely that many museums, notably art galleries, can serve to criticize prevailing values and norms, including conceptual schemes, and thereby be a source of novel insight. Drawing this conclusion would however be too hasty, and here I show how we can make better progress by examining the deeper underlying issue of perspective and point of view in museum practice in ways that connect with debates in contemporary philosophical aesthetics about authorial intention and the question of interpretation and objectivity in the arts more generally.⁶

One central issue in recent discussions over authorial intention and interpretation of art (and by extension art exhibitions) centres on the idea of conversation. Thus, for example, Gregory Currie says of narrative art that

we must see text-based works for what they are: the intentional products of communicative action. We have every reason to think that it is by treating them as such products that we do interpret them, and no idea about how else we might do it.⁷

This leads many contemporary authors engaged in the debate (though not Currie) to the moderate actual intentionalist view that, in Robert Stecker's words, "text-based works" have the same sort of meaning as other linguistic utterances and reference to the actual intentions of a work's creator plays an in-eliminable role in specifying what that meaning is'.⁸ If we deny, so the conversation argument goes, that an

⁶ Gregory Currie, 'Interpretation and Objectivity', *Mind* 102/407 (1993), 413–428.

⁷ Gregory Currie, *Arts and Minds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 132.

⁸ Robert Stecker, 'Moderate Actual Intentionalism Defended', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64/4 (2006), 429. Other prominent versions of moderate actual intentionalism in the contemporary debate over authorial intention include the works of Noël Carroll and Paisley Livingston. See, for example, Carroll, 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', *op. cit.* and 'Art Interpretation: The 2010 Richard Wollheim Memorial Lecture', *op. cit.* For Livingston's position, see, for example, his *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) and *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film As Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford

author's actual communicative intentions should constrain the proper interpretation of his or her work and instead opt for some alternative construal of our own, we are depriving ourselves of the chance to engage in a conversation (in some metaphorical sense) with this author – and thus are losing the chance (again, in some metaphorical sense) to commune with another human being.⁹ Hence, if museums' exhibits can and should be understood as essentially communicative artefacts (as "text-based works" or in some other metaphorical sense), then understanding or interpreting the meaning of some exhibit would similarly seem to invite us to engage in conversation of some kind with its curator. Against this view, recent philosophical contributions to the literature on museum exhibitions often place great emphasis on audiences' *experiences* over that of curatorial intention. Advocates of this approach to museums often maintain that meaning is dependent on the individual subject's point of view and as such is radically pluralistic and open-ended.

Here I argue that (a) questions about interpretation of museum exhibits can have correct answers depending on how things are, but that (b) this claim for correctness and objectivity does not undermine the critical pluralist intuition that it is appropriate to bring a multiplicity of internally incompatible perspectives to bear on one and the same exhibit in a way that mitigates against the idea of combining perspectives into a single comprehensible view – if by the relevant notion of 'comprehensible view' we mean integration by *simple addition*.¹⁰

University Press, 2009). Historically, Monroe Beardsley would be the defender of anti-intentionalism in the movement of New Criticism, with work on the "Intentional Fallacy" going back to the 1940s; in continental philosophy anti-intentionalism is found in the "death of the author" movement in post-structuralism associated with the works of Roland Barthes; and E.D. Hirsch put authorial intention back on the table with literary hermeneutics in 1967. While advancing his own arguments, in his 2012 BSA Richard Wollheim Memorial Lecture, Carroll argues (rightly in my view) that Wollheim's seminal work *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) is justly thought of as an authorial intentionalism (criticism as retrieval).

⁹ See Huddleston, 'The Conversation Argument for Actual Intentionalism', *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Robert Stecker sets up a related argument but draws a different conclusion. For further discussion of the idea of comprehensiveness, the idea of basing the claim for the objectivity of interpretation on what Gadamer (1975) calls the "fusion of horizons", see Gregory Currie,

After clarifying some issues in recent interventions on authorial intention, I develop a theory about what meaning within the museum context might be, and about the appropriate method for meaning retrieval in the epistemology of language more generally. That package I call *methodological particularism*. Much recent argument for objectivity in interpretation, a view sometimes referred to as ‘critical monism’, insists on the claim that texts can have literal meanings that ultimately derive from their (implied) author’s intentions.¹¹ Conversely, pessimism about objectivity in favour of indeterminacy and subjectivism in interpreting art typically depends on scepticism about this claim.¹² In contrast to the standard versions of intentionalism (actual or hypothetical), the methodological particularism argument for objectivity abandons the commitment to authorial intentions in meaning retrieval in favour of an alternative *non-reductive* conception of linguistic meaning as *open-ended* to serve as an adequate model for meaning in museum narratives. Such reorientation of focus makes available a novel conception of interpretation where the emphasis on authorial intentions is criticized not as false *per se*, but as failing to yield the insight

‘Interpretation and Objectivity’, *op. cit.* and John McDowell, ‘Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World’, in E. Schaper (ed), *Pleasure, Preference and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). See also Adrian Moore, *Points of View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹¹ I borrow the terms ‘critical monism’ and ‘critical pluralism’ from Robert Stecker’s ‘Art Interpretation’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52/2 (1994), 193–206. Readers familiar with this article will see some similarities between my approach and Stecker’s moderate actual intentionalist argument for what he later calls the ‘unified view’. See Robert Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Robert Stecker, ‘Interpretation’, in B. Gaut and D. Lopes (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2001), 239–251; Robert Stecker, ‘Moderate Actual Intentionalism Defended’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64/4 (2006), 429–438. The main difference between us is the commitment to anti-reductionism about meaning in the novel argument about authorial intentions in museum narratives defended here.

¹² See, for example, Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1989); see also Sanford Levinson, ‘Law as Literature’, in S. Levinson (ed), *Interpreting Law and Literature* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

about meaning it was the point of that move to make in understanding objectivity in interpretation.

2. The Challenge from Viewer-Centred Narratives

Recent philosophical contributions to the literature on museum exhibitions often place great emphasis on the concept of *construction* in museum narratives. Thus, for instance, in his discussion of intention in relation to artists and artworks in museum exhibits, Michael Baxandall claims that ‘it is not possible to exhibit objects without putting a construction upon them’, since exhibitions themselves embody a selective ordering of items involving a tri-fold structure of salient ‘cultural terms’: historical context, curator and viewer – each dimension laden with theory and evaluative outlook. He writes:

First, there are the ideas, values, and purposes of the culture from which the object comes. Second, there are the ideas, values, and, certainly, purposes of the arrangers of the exhibition. These are likely to be laden with theory and otherwise contaminated by a concept of culture that the viewer does not necessarily possess or share. Third, there is the viewer himself, with all his own cultural baggage of unsystematic ideas, values and, yet again, highly specific purposes.¹³

The emphasis placed on construction, both in the prescribed ‘authoritative’ museum narrative (including the ‘implied’ curator narrative, if a museum conceals that authorship) and the viewer’s narrative, marks a shift in our perception of the museum and, in particular, a changed attitude toward the role of museum-goers’ experience. As Hein puts it, nowadays the members of the audience are ‘viewed as variegated, textured beings marked by their own history and experience and by the

¹³ Michael Baxandall, ‘Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects’, in Ivan Karp and Steven Laine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museums Display* (Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 33. See also Svetlana Alpers, ‘Museums as a Way of Seeing’, in the same volume.

constructive proclivities they brought with them into the museum'.¹⁴ On Hein's model, objects in museum collections inspire new experiences through an open-ended dialogue (in some metaphorical sense): the unified narratives of which they are part are fluid and collaborative, drawing on the museum, the curators and the visitors. The underlying conceptual model for Hein's account of museums is that of public art, where the role of public artists is in turn described in terms of the process and the responses of the public, rather than the objects themselves. She writes:

Today's public artists incline to replace answers with questions. They seek to advance debate and discussion. Their art is left open-ended and invites participation. Its orientation is toward process and change rather than material stability. Since its borders are indefinite, so is its authorship.¹⁵

Hein argues that all of these characteristics, and more, are to be found in new public art that can come to serve as a paradigm for the new museum. The new museum's focus on affecting certain *experiences* in the visitor is typically presented as a challenge to the traditional model of the museum as public educator by virtue of its (alleged) capacity to *illustrate* established ideas and to *demonstrate* truths through displaying objects in its collections.¹⁶ So far so good: we can perhaps all agree that there has been a shift in focus in current museum practice to connect with its visitors' personal interests and individual histories. The more interesting question is whether this development calls for a new model of meaning and objectivity in museum practice. If it does, we can ask: What should such a model be like?

Current thinking with respect to museums and the meaning of the objects exhibited – especially given the fashion for focusing on visitor participation – seems to assume that the meaning (significance, essence, nature) of an exhibit is fixed by either of the following alternatives:

¹⁴ Hilde Hein, *Public Art: Thinking museums differently* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁶ Jonathan Neufeld, 'Review of Hilde Hein, *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently*', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66/1 (2008) 102–105.

- (1) *Viewer narrative construction*: determined by the individual viewer's narrative (where that might include her own values, memories, socio-political ideals), or
- (2) *Museum-curator construction*: determined by the conception as presented in the museum's 'authoritative' narrative.

Much contemporary work on 'the experimental museum' in the wake of Hein's contributions to the philosophy of museums urges the conceptual and explanatory priority of the former, viewer-centered personal narratives, often culminating in the radical individualist constructivist claim that the meaning of the objects is personal in the sense of being relative to the individual's point of view. On this construal, then, rather than seeing museums and their curators as authoritative in the determination of the meaning of the objects collected and exhibited, we should instead put the perspective and autobiographical narrative history of the individual viewer in the driving seat. While such radical individualist perspectivalism *could* be read into Hein and other contemporary works on the participatory museum, it is by no means mandatory, and in what follows I will sketch an alternative model to the starkly dichotomized contrast between discovery and projection that informs many discussions and debates over meaning and objectivity in philosophy of museums. Before doing so some clarifications are in order.

My discussion so far about the meaning and interpretation of art has treated museum narratives as a species of communicative intentional action on a par with linguistic action (utterance meaning). One may question the fundamental analogy implicitly under consideration here between linguistic and artistic meaning on the grounds that museum exhibits are not necessarily "text based" works. My broad use of the phrase 'intentional-communicative artefact' to capture the status of a museum exhibition as authored is intended to accommodate this objection; it is compatible with a conception of the museum as performative, for instance.¹⁷ However in discussing meaning in the museum I will limit my focus to the narrative arts. This is not because I think other models of the museum are impossible, but because, at least

¹⁷ See Hein, *Public Art*, *op. cit.*, 111 ff.

within the analytic tradition, recent interventions in the philosophy of museums are actually informed by movements within literature and cinema.¹⁸

Secondly, while much contemporary work on participatory museums prioritizes viewer-centered narratives over that of the curator's vision it should be noted that Hein's own model would seem to invite a "no-priority" view whereby objects inspire and narratives are fluid, drawing on the museum, the curators and the visitors. She writes in *Rethinking Public Art*:

The monotonous voice of authority, long associated with didactic schooling and the conventional curator-interpreted museum, has given way to visitor-centered museums, with options to engage the public to create meaning. Inviting debate, museums become sites of controversy. At the same time, there must be critical standards. Minimally, the museum must have *defensible grounds* for the positions it takes.¹⁹

Although the emphasis placed on individual museum-goers' experiences and autobiographical histories has a distinctively anti-intentionalist ring to it, one may wonder what is being "opposed" to what here. On the one hand, the emphasis on indeterminacy in Hein's positive account ("Since its borders are indefinite, so is its authorship") might seem to suggest an objection to the idea of intentional explanation that is already on the table with, for example, Carroll's moderate actual intentionalism about art, whereby the explanation of meaning is given (retrospectively) by articulating the thoughts or ideas of some curator or group of individuals who *express* them as a unitary creative work (in the sense of a single item or a whole). On the other hand, there is also good reason for thinking that the real target here might *not* be intentional explanation of meaning as such. Indeed, in urging curators to advance "debate and discussion" to create "sites of controversy", Hein and her followers seem to applaud the image of conversation in understanding our engagement with museums. So the point is perhaps not so much that there is *no* explanation forthcoming on the model of meaning in terms of intentional

¹⁸ For a helpful overview, see Ivan Gaskell, 'Museums and Philosophy – Of Art, and Many Other Things', Parts I & II, *Philosophy Compass* 7/2 (2012); Part I, 74–84; Part II, 85–102.

¹⁹ Hein, *Public Art*, *op. cit.*, footnote 16, 113. Emphasis mine.

communicative action, or even that the concept of authorship as such is inapplicable in the participatory museum context. The claim, it seems to me, is that we would do better to explain participatory museums in terms of collective action rather than as the expression of the intentional agency and creativity of some individual curator since an overly individualistic account of exhibitions and museum displays simply does not fit current museum practice.

Whether or not the notion of individual authorship is indeed possible within the context of creative collective museum activity is something that I leave open here.²⁰ However that may be, in speaking of museums as enjoying a status as *authored*, I assume that the idea of collaboration in museum practice is at least compatible with the concept of joint authorship, in as much as the curator and her team are in some sense (legally or otherwise) *responsible* for the creation of the work or exhibition (either for an individual item or for the whole). As Paisley Livingston expresses the point about authorship in collaborative film-making, minimally for some artistic cinematic activity to count as genuinely *authored*, collaborators ‘must share the aim of contributing to the making of an utterance or work of art for which they will jointly take credit (and blame)’.²¹ I maintain that Hein’s claim that the museum as a “site of controversy” must have *defensible grounds* for the positions that it endorses similarly involves certain conditions on responsibility and control.

But note what has happened here. Originally we tried to explain content (meaning) in museum narratives in terms of authorial intentions; now we are explaining the *status* of museums as expressions of intentional creative activity involving conditions of responsibility. I claim that there are two distinct notions of intentional explanation that figure in the argumentation over authorial (curator’s) intentions, which we should keep apart. To see this, we need to take a closer look at the concept of open-endedness and the aforementioned conversation argument, the idea that part of the

²⁰ For criticism in the analogous case of collaborative film-making, see Berys Gaut, ‘Film Authorship and Collaboration’, in Murray Smith and Richard Allen (eds), *Film Theory and Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 149–72; and Berys Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), Ch. 3.

²¹ Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*, *op. cit.*, 73–74. For further discussion of this topic see Livingston, *Art and Intention*, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3.

value of our engagement with art and museums has to do with communing with another human being.

3. Museums and the Conversation Argument

As intimated in the introduction, much argumentation over objectivity in interpreting art often proceeds as a stark choice between two alternatives: either we view meaning as closed and in this sense ‘objective’ in being determined and pre-fixed by authorial intentions (whether the actual intentions of some historical figure or the “implied” content from some hypothetical point of view) or we view meaning as open-ended and indeterminate in being fixed by audiences’ subjective meaning-making propensities. The implicit, often unarticulated, assumption in this picture of meaning-content is the idea that for some item to count as meaningful (to have ‘objective’ content) there must be a something that *makes* it so. Thus, for example, in his influential article ‘Interpretation and Objectivity’, Gregory Currie explicates the idea of interpretation in narrative art as a species of intentional explanation such that retrieval of meaning is a matter of uncovering the underlying (hidden) narrative intentions on behalf of the (implied) author. He writes:

A point of clarification. Earlier and for the sake of a slogan, I said that interpretation is intentional explanation. That is not quite right. An interpretation tells you what is true in the story; an intentional explanation tells you what someone intended by writing the text of the story. We might say instead that an intentional explanation *generates* or *determines* an interpretation. The best explanation of the text tells us what the author intended to communicate by way of a story, and this account of what is intended to be true in the story determines what the story is. An intentional explanation has premises that jointly constitute what we might call an intentional hypothesis—a hypothesis about the author’s narrative intentions—and that hypothesis is true or false, depending on whether it corresponds to the author’s real narrative intentions. It is really that hypothesis, constituted by the premises of our explanation of the relevant text tokening, that generates the interpretation. But the interpretation itself is neither true nor false; at most it is generated by an intentional hypothesis that is true, in which

case it is the intended interpretation.²²

One problem with this picture of art criticism and, by extension, conversations about museum exhibits, is that retrieval of meaning in the analogue case of linguistic understanding is typically not “hidden” from view in the way suggested by Currie’s use of intentional explanation as ‘intentional hypothesis’. True, speakers need not mean what they say. But content-meaning, the semantic significance of words, in the linguistic case is *typically* publicly displayed in the surface grammar of heard speech of others (as opposed to being merely a ‘hypothesis’ about their behaviour).²³ If this is right, there is also an important sense in which recovery of semantic content is not really a matter of interpretation either: while speaker-hearers may be insincere or otherwise conceal their minds on occasions, meaning is typically readily available *in* the expressions that competent and reasonable speakers are to understand by their words (as opposed to the articulation of hidden goings-on).

Another issue with the present interpretation model of criticism is this. Even if meaning in narrative art and museum exhibitions is in fact not always or even typically transparent to the reader (in which case the analogical argument above might fail), the practice of criticism does not support the image of a stark polarized contrast between discovery of pre-fixed objective content (as determined by curatorial intentions) on the one hand, and (if recovery of such intentions is not possible or appropriate) subjective projection. As Frank Sibley reminds us, the reality of arguing about art is such that ‘we use what keys we have to the known sensitivity,

²² Currie, ‘Interpretation and Objectivity’, *op. cit.*, 418.

²³ Here I endorse McDowell’s “perceptual” model of the epistemology of language: ‘the outward aspect of linguistic behaviour is essentially content involving, so that the mind’s role in speech is, as it were, on the surface – part of what one presents to others [in one’s words], not something that is at best a hypothesis for them’. John McDowell, ‘In Defence of Modesty’, in John McDowell, *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 100. In suggesting that recovery of semantic content is not a matter of interpretation I also maintain John McDowell’s endorsement of Wittgenstein’s publicity constraint on meaning. But I cannot argue for either of these claims here.

susceptibilities, and experience of our audience'.²⁴ What we will find in those real cases is that criticism is more a matter of articulating significance, what makes works *pointful*, in a number of ways; sometimes simply by mentioning the salient considerations in question; sometimes illuminating what one sees by contrasts, comparisons, and reminiscence (consider cases where we get someone to see some *pointful* aspect of a work by mentioning something different).²⁵

There are two parts to this claim. First, with regard to the first alternative of the dichotomy, one may challenge the analogical argument for intentionalism based on conversation on the grounds that its appeal to the value of communicating with the author through the artwork (or exhibition) renders the very concept of 'conversation' inapplicable. As Kent Wilson articulates the objection, unlike the ordinary linguistic case, this "conversation" will in fact be a monologue since 'the interpreter will not get to say what is on his mind when he interprets an artwork'.²⁶ Andrew Huddleston reaches a similar conclusion. He argues that the idea of (actual) authorial intentions serving as a *constraint* on interpretation of works mitigates against the *interactive* nature of conversation *per se*, in which case the conversation argument for intentionalism would fail on its own terms. He writes:

Once we require that we must take into account the intentions of our conversation partner if we are to have a conversation—as surely seems right—we must be careful not to make the further step to another and more dubious claim: the thought that this 'conversational' literary interpretation is a project whose final hermeneutical result should be, not just informed, but *constrained* by these authorial intentions. Good conversations involve give and take: we see what we can make of a person's ideas—how we can develop

²⁴ Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', in John Benson, Betty Redfern and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (eds), *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics by Frank Sibley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 18. I discuss Sibley's position in 'Why Sibley is Not a Generalist Overall', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50/1 (2010) and 'Thick Aesthetic Concepts: Giving Sibley his Due', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (forthcoming).

²⁵ See Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', *op. cit.*

²⁶ Kent W. Wilson, 'Confession of a Weak Anti-Intentionalist: Exposing Myself', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55/3 (1997), 311.

them, expand on them, and improve them. And to do that, we of course need to know what their real ideas were in the first place. But simply divining an interlocutor's intentions is not the end of a good conversation; it is only the beginning of one.²⁷

Second, once we see meaning-content as a matter of articulating significance, that which makes individual works and exhibitions *pointful*, we can also put pressure on the second alternative of the dichotomy, projection. My strategy will be to defuse the threat to objectivity commonly associated with the idea of open-endedness and indeterminacy by resisting the temptation for thinking that for an item to be objectively meaningful there must be *a something* that makes it so.²⁸ The new way of understanding linguistic meaning brings with it an alternative and *non-reductive* way of seeing meaning in museums (and artistic meaning more generally) in a way that does not follow nor support the polarized dichotomy between discovery and projection with which we started.

4. Semantic Particularism and Open-endedness

The position defended here, which I call semantic particularism,²⁹ maintains that meaning is an essentially intentional phenomenon, in as much as meaning is fundamentally to be explained in terms of intentional action among competent speaker-hearers within norm-governed linguistic practice in a way that is answerable to how things are.

Charles Travis is adamant that intentions cannot play the role of *determining what is said* by an utterance, and instead appeals to Wittgensteinian considerations about

²⁷ Huddleston, 'The Conversation Argument for Actual Intentionalism', *op. cit.*, 242.

²⁸ For detailed discussion of this topic in Wittgenstein, the conception, the picture, of meaning-content as an underlying hidden *ingredient*, see Garry Hagberg's contribution to this volume.

²⁹ See Anna Bergqvist, 'Semantic Particularism and Linguistic Competence', *Logique et Analyse* 52/208 (2009), 343–361. This position is also defended in Anna Bergqvist, *Understanding Moral Situations: An Essay in Particularist Epistemology*, PhD Thesis, University of Reading 2009.

rule-following and judgements formed from within a shared linguistic practice. Thus, for example, in commenting on McDowell's construal on the publicity constraint on the epistemology of understanding, Travis writes,

intentions cannot play that role [of determining what someone has said,] ... a statement's content is fixed by what one might have reasonably be[en] expected to do with it, given where and how it occurred. Whatever a speaker's belief, intentions, and so on, might suggest might thus be cancelled out by the way his words fit into our lives. That is another correct take on the idea that words are not animated by hidden goings-on.³⁰

As I read him, Travis is here *not* objecting to the psychological, as such, as irrelevant in explanations of how and where words gets their semantic life.³¹ The claim, rather, is that linguistic acts do not *inherit* their content from the intentions with which they are made. Or at least, this is the position of the semantic particularism that I defend. How should we understand this? The first thing to note is that we here have the beginning of a formulation of the idea that the epistemology of language concerns something *normative*, namely, what it would be *reasonable* for a competent speaker to understand by uses of some expression given the practical shape of the circumstances at hand. Hang onto that thought; we will return to it below in connection with the work of a museum curator. What we are presently interested in is the role of speakers' intentions in the resulting account. Let us take a closer look at Grice's view.

According to a Gricean theory of meaning and communication, when I use a given linguistic expression of a natural language vocabulary to say or state something, I intend to bring it about that my intended audience forms a certain belief about the

³⁰ Charles Travis, 'Taking Thought', *Mind* 109/435 (2000), 553.

³¹ Travis's overt suspicion of 'a speaker's belief, intentions, and so on' has its own discursive context that forms part a long-standing critique of Grice's theory of meaning and communication. The Gricean view has also been criticized by John McDowell in his 'Meaning, Communication, and Knowledge', in John McDowell, *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, *op. cit.*, 29–50.

very intention that I have in producing the speech-act in question: the belief that I aim to communicate. (Or at least, I *try* to make my hearers form such beliefs about what my intentions or beliefs are.) For our purposes, the important point is this: on a Gricean view of conversation, belief and expectations about speakers' intentions is *all* there is to meaning (except for what Grice calls 'natural meaning', which is reserved for causal relations of indication such as clouds meaning rain and spots meaning stress). But this does not mean that there is no such thing as *the meaning of a sentence in a language*.³² On a Gricean theory of (non-natural) meaning, the lexical meaning of a sentence is the very same thing as what speakers *standardly* mean by it, that is, the belief speakers standardly intend to cause their hearer to recognise as the belief intentionally communicated by their assertoric use of the sentence in question. Note, by the way, that one might try to invoke this suggestion as an explanation of "what makes it the case" that a competent speaker's reasonable expectation of what thought is expressed by the use of some sentence is, in general, the *right* one. That is to say, one might hope to shoehorn *objectivity* into the semantic discourse concerning the normative facts that the semantic particularist is interested in by appeal to some statistical conventional standard concerning what speakers' intentions are standardly expressed by assertoric uses of the sentence.³³

On a Gricean model of meaning and communication, content is thus ultimately determined by the beliefs speakers have and intend to communicate to others. I think this sounds wrong. For what speakers mean by a declarative sentence in everyday communication is, typically, *that something is thus and so*. As far as I can tell, this 'something' is not typically the fact that the speaker in question *has* a certain

³² Particular sentences may be open to interpretation, in as much as it may not always be clear what belief or thought the speaker aims to communicate/cause his audience to have; but the lexical literal meaning of the sentence used is fixed by what speakers standardly intend their audience to believe, as per above.

³³ For discussion and defence of broadly Gricean theories of speakers' intentions in connection to the issue of objectivity in semantic discourse, see A. Barber, 'Truth-Conditions and their Recognition', in A. Barber (ed), *The Epistemology of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 367–395.

belief about the things talked about.³⁴ There are various formulations of the exact structure of the belief-forming procedure from speaker to hearer, but all are rooted in the suggestion that communication is a matter of a speaker intentionally trying to make his hearers recognize that a certain belief (that is, the belief that *p*) is the belief that the speaker *intends* them to have. However, the same suspicion arises at the level of intentions: the Gricean picture fails to accommodate the *prima facie* plausible suggestion that taking someone at her word in communication is a matter of appreciating just *what* the speaker is saying, by way of producing significant linguistic acts intentionally.³⁵

This is not a play with words. It is one thing to claim that one can form a certain belief, call it the ‘belief that *p*’, that somehow bears on the topic of the conversation in understanding what is said by literal uses of expressions in a language. It is quite another thing to say that speakers typically use declarative sentences with a view to getting their intended audiences to recognize that they intend their hearers to come to believe that *p*. As before, there are cases that might fit the Gricean suggestion. For example, if I am being interrogated by the police after having robbed a bank, and know that the police suspect, falsely, that I am innocent and that I am deliberately covering or taking the blame for somebody else, I can exploit this knowledge by saying, truly, ‘It was me who did it’. The idea would be that I say something I “believe” to be true, namely *that it was me who robbed the bank*, with the intention of bringing it about that the interrogator recognizes that I want him to believe that I robbed the bank (that it was me who did it) so that the person the police suspect

³⁴ Of course, I *can* want to impart information about the beliefs that I have in speaking with others. For example, if I wake up one morning finding myself believing that green men from planet Chaos are hiding under the bed I would do well if I tried to impart the information that I have such beliefs to a medical doctor. Still, this does not seem to resemble the standard case of everyday linguistic exchanges between speaker-hearers of a shared natural language.

³⁵ For discussion of this point in relation to authorial intentionalism about art interpretation, see, for example, Wilson, ‘Confessions of a Weak Anti-Intentionalist’, *op. cit.*

really did it gets away with the crime.³⁶ (These sorts of cases are commonly known as ‘anti-lying’ in the literature.)

Although communicative exchanges between speakers at the ground level of linguistic practice *can* no doubt involve substantial inferential transitions between judgements about speakers’ intentions like the ‘anti-lying’ case described above, I hold that we need an independent argument to show that *semantic content* is a function of speakers’ intentions in the Gricean sense.

I have not offered any arguments for the claim that non-reductive normativism is correct in the domain of linguistic meaning. Instead I have sought to motivate the view by showing that the appeal to authorial intentions to defend objectivity in interpretation is based on a misconception of available positions in conceptual space. But what is the analogous conception of meaning in museum narratives (and artistic meaning more generally) that this new way of seeing the matter of meaning brings with it?

5. Concept and Conceptions

A museum narrative frames the objects on display, where the framing is a result of selection, prioritization and organization not only on behalf of the curator but also the participating viewer. It is however a mistake to think that radical subjectivity is entailed by the fact of different narratives because these are *conceptions* of the object of inquiry, not the object itself. There is no implication, or so I claim, for the meaning or nature of the object on display in the museum based on the fact of different narratives.

One is easily led to suspicion of narrative explanation as a genuine form of explanation by exaggerating the role of interpretation. Taking a leaf from Peter Goldie’s work on historical and autobiographical narratives, part of the problem is that the suspicion that putative supporting documents for any such particular

³⁶ I owe this example to Barber’s discussion of anti-lying in connection to Gricean intention-based theories of meaning. See Barber, ‘Truth-Conditions and their Recognition’, *op. cit.*, 376.

narrative are ‘just more text, multiply open to interpretation’ motivates the *assimilation* of narratives and what they are about.³⁷ Transposed to the present case, the exaggeration about interpretation is the simple point that all these salient features pointed to in making good some particular museum narrative are themselves open to radically open-ended interpretation in line with the individual viewer’s experience and, or so a constructivist argument would continue, “meaning-making” propensities.

I maintain that this way of thinking mis-locates the role of context in museum practice. The meaning is not to be found *in* the narrative, whether in terms of some ‘authoritative’ curator’s construction or the individual viewer perspective. The narrative can reveal (or conceal) the object’s meaning – but it does not determine the object’s meaning. To think otherwise would be a failure of running together what is represented with the representation.

Why does the temptation exist? There are all sorts of reasons for thinking that there must be perspectival facts, but the consideration that I will focus on in what follows connects with the Wittgensteinian critique of the atomistic, picture-driven Russellian model of meaning discussed in Garry Hagberg’s contribution to this volume.³⁸

The idea of narrative as *revelatory* of meaning can be brought into sharper focus by comparison with Wittgenstein’s idea of a ‘perspicuous representation’ as being a key aspect of the task of philosophy as he sees it: offering a model of comparison that ‘earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things’ in order to achieve a ‘clear view’ of that which is troubling us.³⁹ However this does not mean that there is some single philosophical method through which this is achieved. On the contrary, Wittgenstein presents the philosopher with an *open-ended* range of conceptual tools and techniques that can be used in a variety of different ways including (but not limited to): offering ‘objects of comparison’ and presenting ‘alternative pictures’; pointing out particular ‘family resemblances’ and ‘neglected aspects’ of our language;

³⁷ Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153–154.

³⁸ See Garry Hagberg, ‘Word and Object: Museums and the Question of Meaning’ in this volume.

³⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* XXX, §122 and §133.

grammatical analysis of our use of language in practice, and so on. The real task at hand is to discern which method available to one is the most *pointful* in each context of critical appraisal for attaining clarity and reveal meaning – to which “*whatever it takes*” would be the only answer to give in the abstract.

The meaning of the notion a ‘perspicuous representation’ is controversial within Wittgenstein scholarship. One view is that that perspicuous representations are independent of any particular point of view.⁴⁰ On this model, the notion of a perspicuous representation is not to be understood as a way of seeing things and there cannot be multiple perspicuous ways of seeing the rules of ‘our grammar’; any difference we might perceive between multiple perspicuous representations of an area of our grammar is merely a difference in how they are selected and arranged, something that *can* vary depending on the purpose of the investigation. However, just as a cartographer might combine maps of Buda and Pest in order to produce a map of Budapest, so the philosopher can combine a series of related perspicuous representations to produce a more comprehensive whole. (In this respect, orthodox readers see perspicuous representations as ‘additive’, in as much as we can combine multiple perspicuous representations of a thing’s parts in order to gain a perspicuous representation of the whole.) Whether or not this is the best representation of Wittgenstein’s position falls beyond the scope of my current argument. At any rate, I am inclined to agree with Gregory Currie (who in turn follows John McDowell) that a *representation* (as used in ordinary contexts) that transcends any point of view seems incoherent.⁴¹

To make good my initial claim that the general idea of open-endedness and indeterminacy is nonetheless compatible with the idea of objectivity we may follow the basic tactic of Adrian Moore’s defence of ‘absolute representations’, representations that can be added without danger of conflicting points of view, and distinguish between the conditions of the production of a representation on the one

⁴⁰ See Rupert Read and Phil Hutchinson, ‘Toward a Perspicuous Presentation of ‘Perspicuous Presentation’, *Philosophical Investigations* 31/2 (2008), 141–160, see especially 151.

⁴¹ Currie, ‘Interpretation and Objectivity’, *op. cit.* See also Gordon Baker, *Wittgenstein’s Method: Neglected Aspects* (London: Blackwell, 2006), especially chapters 12 and 13.

hand and ‘the role that the representation can play in such process as indirect integration’ on the other.⁴² What is interesting about Moore’s account for present purposes is his argument that the perspectivalness of the *production* of a representation, expressive of an answerable stance upon the world that (at least in the evaluative case) includes the history of whatever conceptual apparatus that is used in it, has no effect on the stance-independence of the latter. He writes:

One attractive feature of this tactic is that it leaves considerable room for concession whenever anyone insists on the parochial, conditioned, nay, perspectival character of any act of producing a representation. They are right to insist on this, if it is properly understood. Apart from anything else, any act of producing a representation in an *act*, and agency itself is impossible without some (evaluative) point of view giving sense to the question of what to do. But one possible thing to do is to represent the world from no point of view.⁴³

Just how we should best understand the relation of the parochial – which lies at the heart of my non-reductive conception of meaning – to that of an absolute conception of the world is something that I leave open for future work. The claim here is simply that the “producer” of an evaluative representation has a point of view *operative* in producing it; the context of the agent *betrays* a stance upon the world. Whether or not it is impossible to exercise the *concept* – a representation – of a representation “from no point of view” in Moore’s sense is another matter.

Now, in terms of how what we may think of as Wittgenstein’s method(s) looks in practice, one is reminded of Frank Sibley’s notion of “perceptual proof” in aesthetic evaluation: (1) the ways in which, by various means, we can enable someone else to see for himself that a work is good; or (2) with the giving to someone of reasons that, if he accepts our statements, must admit that a work must be good, though he cannot see that it is for himself; or (3) with the person who finds a work good and later looks

⁴² Moore, *Points of View*, *op. cit.*, 89.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

for the reasons why it is, in order to justify his initial judgement.⁴⁴ The focus of Sibley's discussion is Michael Scriven's scepticism about what he calls the 'independence requirement' on aesthetic evaluation. The independence requirement is a demand on rational (aesthetic) thought that 'we must be able to know the reason or reasons for a conclusion without first having to know the conclusion; otherwise we can never get the reason as a means to the conclusion'.⁴⁵ In its strongest form, the independence requirement demands that reasons must be *logically prior* to aesthetic verdicts (as opposed to temporally prior in perception).

Like Wittgenstein before him, Sibley does not attempt a refutation of the sceptic by way of showing the independence requirement could be met. Instead he effectively uses the strategy of offering a 'perspicuous representation' of art criticism by pointing to the way it is actually practiced to show that aesthetic evaluations stand in no need for external validation.

How a critic manages by what he says and does to bring people to see aesthetic qualities they have missed has frequently puzzled writers. But there is no real reason for mystification. ... What mainly is required is a detailed description of the sorts of thing critics in fact do and say, for this is what succeeds if anything does; the critic may make similes and comparisons, describe the work in appropriate metaphors, gesticulate aptly and so on. Almost anything he may do, verbal or non-verbal, can on occasion prove successful. To go on to ask how these methods can possibly succeed is to begin to ask how people can ever be brought to see aesthetic (and Gestalt and other similar) properties at all.⁴⁶

Thus, for Sibley and Wittgenstein, there is no *one* method of how we ought to do philosophy, but rather we employ a range of different tools that fit the task at hand;

⁴⁴ See Frank Sibley, 'General Criteria and Reasons in Aesthetics', in Benson, Redfern and Roxbee Cox (eds), *Approach to Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, 116. Sibley first introduced the notion of a 'perceptual proof' in his seminal article, 'Aesthetic Concepts', *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Mark Scriven, *Primary Philosophy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966). Quoted in Sibley, 'General Criteria and Reasons in Aesthetics', *op. cit.*, 115.

⁴⁶ Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', in Benson, Redfern and Roxbee Cox (eds), *Approach to Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, 38.

whatever it takes. With this in mind, let us return to the problem with the idea of museums framing reality.

6. The Museum as a Model of Comparison

The passage from Baxandall that I quoted above in introducing the emphasis placed on construction and individual viewer narrative contexts above effectively declares content-involving (and so rationality-involving) phenomena in human life to be inseparable from point or purpose. But nothing in *that* bare thought precludes the alternative understanding of perspective and the significance of context where content and human-involving interests or purposes are seen as interdependent, such that neither can be understood except in connection with the other.

The individualist constructivist model of “meaning-making” by contrast, opens the door to something more: to the prospect that we can see content as *determined* by independently specifiable viewer-centred narratives, patterns of attention, or on a larger scale, generic socio-political cultural narratives that are discernible in public discourse. In so far as the promises of the ‘new museum’ lies in such a reduction of meaning to a perspective, it is a new paradigm I think we should resist.

Instead I suggest that we may think of a museum narrative as a *model of comparison*, deployed in the interests of *uncovering* meaning in a way that is perhaps analogous to the very activity of philosophy itself. Maybe the question of what exactly is to be understood in a museum exhibit is itself an ill-posed question, and that it is this ‘dislodging’ of ideas that the new museum forms endeavours to illuminate. If we may think of the participatory museum as taking on this task (as Wittgenstein does with philosophy), we can also preserve a critical perspective in favour of a purely sociological or autobiographical one.⁴⁷ Such reorientation of focus

⁴⁷ This paragraph was inspired by recent unpublished work on Wittgenstein and contextualism by Jason Bridges and by Avner Baz’s work on aspect seeing. See, for example, Avner Baz, ‘What’s the Point of Seeing Aspects?’, *Philosophical Investigations* 23/2 (2000), 97–122; and Avner Baz, ‘Aspects Perception and Philosophical Difficulty’, in Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn (eds), *Handbook on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Oxford University Press), XXX.

makes available a distinctive mode of criticism, in which claims to ‘objective’ meaning *in* museum narratives are criticized not as false *per se*, but as failing to yield the insight about the problem of objective meaning in museums practice it was the point of those claims to provide. The alternative strategy is rather to defuse the threat to objectivity commonly associated with the idea of open-endedness and indeterminacy by resisting the temptation for thinking that for an item to be objectively meaningful there must be *a something* that makes it so (be it curatorial intentions or the individual reader’s point of view).

Thinking of a museum narrative as a model of comparison offers an alternative *conception* of an object as exhibited. We might think that the object is absolute, and the conceptions of it are perspectival, and stance-dependent. What this means is that the *route* to truth will be stance-dependent, shaped by your conceptions. Nonetheless, locutions such as ‘X is objective’ are yet legitimate, in as much as there are better or worse ways of conceiving of X. This preserves a critical stance in museums practice, in as much as we are now in a position to hold that the meaning of the objects on display cannot be accessed except through a perspective, and yet think of competing narratives (either personal or, on a larger scale, world-view models of comparison) as offering different perspectives on the object of inquiry – without reducing meaning and truth to a perspective.

I conclude with some remarks about the wider significance of the present picture in elucidating the use of concepts such as value and perspective more generally.

7. Concluding Remarks

Like photographic images, museums establish specific contexts, framings, bounded horizons of legible selectivity that distinguish them from viewing the world face-to-face. What I have suggested here is that we may think of an exhibition and its museum objects (as already framed in the museum) as instantiations of a particular model of comparison, which can act as a site for reinforcement and re-examination of the stances of its viewers.

In the context of moral philosophy, Maximilian De Gaynesford argues that reference to the first person – first personal thought – in ethical thinking is of greatest importance in understanding the very notions of ‘rational agency’ (agency that involves responsiveness to reasons) and ‘practical reasoning’ (reasoning leading to action). As he puts it, ‘[u]nless some *situation* is *mine*, I am unable to recognise it as open to my agency or as relating me to various reason-giving facts. And unless some *reasons* are mine, I am unable to engage in reasoning that leads to action’.⁴⁸

Similarly, in the aesthetic context, we may ask what makes it the case that some reason or wider curatorial context of the museum is a situation of *mine*? What is the relation of agency that discloses objects on display as ‘open’ to me as a responsible critic or art practitioner?

I claim that we may speak of narrative structure in certain museum exhibits as making reasons available *to* the agent, where the concept of ‘narrative’ is to be understood as something fundamentally perspectival. I use this noncommittal formulation deliberately in order to avoid more theoretically loaded models of the relationship between the normative content of ethics and practical agency, and the general notion of deliberating ‘from a perspective’. A familiar representative theoretical model of the relation between the moral agent and ethical values uses the idea of agent-relative reasons for action, where the notion of the ‘agent-relative’ is invoked to bring out a tacit relativity to the agent’s personal point of view in the *content* of a particular class of reasons or values *within* non-perspectival moral reasons or values.⁴⁹ This is a standard way of understanding the idea that a reason stands in a special constitutive relation to a particular agent (or class thereof). The central idea is to establish a contrast between that which is ethically relevant when viewed impartially and that which is ethically relevant from a particular personal perspective: impartial or agent-neutral reasons ‘constitute the background against

⁴⁸ Maximilian de Gaynesford, ‘The Bishop, the Chambermaid, the Wife and the Ass: What Difference Does it Make if Something is Mine?’, in J. Cottingham, P. Stratton-Lake and B. Feltham (eds), *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Obligations and the Wider World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91.

⁴⁹ Alan Thomas, ‘Reasonable Partiality and the Personal Point of View’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8 (2005), 32.

which we are to ask whether there are any other reasons *other than these*'.⁵⁰ However, understanding point of view as a *determinant* of a special class of agent-relative reasons or values contrasted with another class of values or reasons determined by the impartial perspective is entirely optional and not something that I am advocating here. Instead, we may think of point of view in museum narratives as an agent's standpoint on independent reality, where my concept of narrative structure identifies something that makes value available *to* an agent's judgement in conversation with others rather than a determinant of value itself. The new image of meaning-content as a matter of articulating significance reminds us that conversations about art and museum exhibits concern the on-going dialogue pertaining to what makes objects on display *pointful*, in ways that do not readily support the stark polarized contrast between discovery and projection with which we started. Herein lies a value of museum narratives (exhibitions) – they offer us opportunities for reflection on the way that we see the world by presenting particular points of view in showing and being shown the world a certain way.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 168.

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