
Interpretation

Artistic Meaning

Definition, Interpretation, Criticism

- ❖ Once we know we're confronted with an artwork (= we've settled the definition question to our satisfaction, at least for now), we tend to move directly to criticism.
- ❖ Yet, arguably, there is a stage between: *interpretation*.
 - ❖ In all art forms—or, plausibly, or at least possibly, in all art forms—the question of meaning arises.
 - ❖ This is unsurprising, if we think that artworks are *inter alia* communications of various kinds, and that communications are communications only if they are meaningful.
 - ❖ The question thus arises: what is the *meaning* of a given work of art?
 - ❖ This, then, is the question of interpretation.

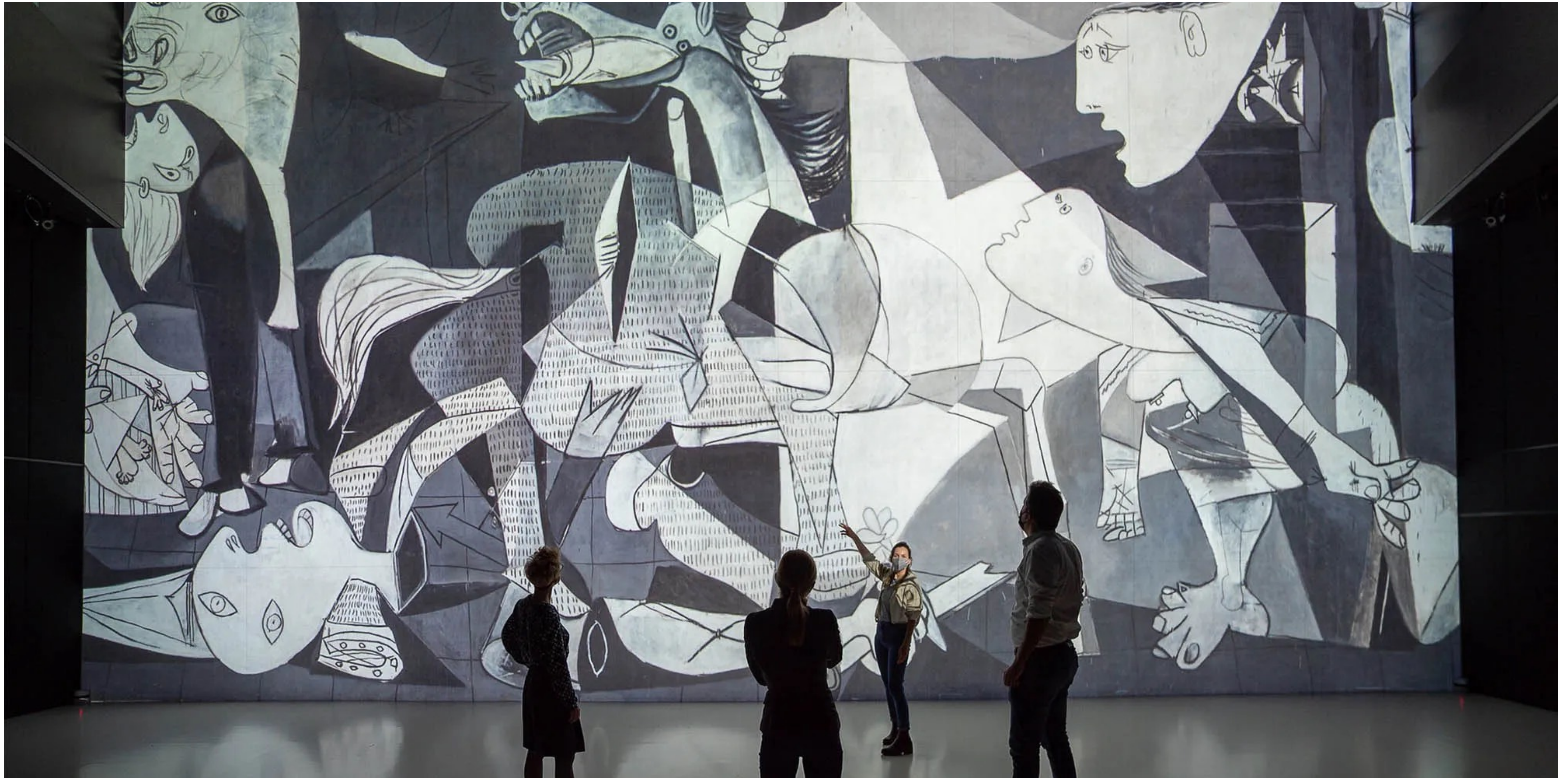
Plausibly or Possibly?

- ❖ The claim that a given artwork a is meaningful—as an artwork—seems more readily true for some arts rather than others.
 - ❖ In literature, we expect meaning for the obvious reason that the matter of literature is language and language is semantically laden.
 - ❖ The same seems to hold true of film, opera, and drama, for the same reason.
 - ❖ The claim extends without too much fuss to representational works of various kinds.
 - ❖ Here, though, one needs to allow that not all expressions of meaning are propositional, in the sense of making declarative claims assessable for truth or falsity.
 - ❖ Take, e.g., Munch's *The Scream*, which we have considered earlier: it might be taken to express some content (dread, horror, anxiety. . .), without expressing some proposition or other (e.g. the universe in which we live is threatening and dreadful, or the appropriate response to the meaninglessness of nature is anxiety).
 - ❖ It is harder, though, to extend claims of the expression of meaning to abstract works of art and pieces of pure music.
 - ❖ Perhaps, though, these constructions too can be bearers of meaning, in the non-propositional sense. (Recall our listening to Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony*, 'The Pastoral')

Guernica (Picasso, 1937)



Guernica (Scale: 11.5 x 25.5 feet)



Relevant Information?

- ❖ Context of production:
 - ❖ The leaders of the Republican Government of Spain approached Picasso, an illustrious Spaniard then living in Paris, to commission a work to be displayed at the Spanish Pavilion at the World's Fair, to be held in Paris.
 - ❖ This was partly a bid to legitimize itself during the Spanish Civil War, when fighting back an insurrection of Nationalists, led by General Francisco Franco.
 - ❖ Picasso at first demurred, but then after the sustained, brutal bombing of the Basque city of Guernica by the German Nazi government, conducted at the request of General Franco and the Nationalists, Picasso agreed to produce a piece. (The Blitzkrieg had leveled the city and killed roughly one-third of its population.)
- ❖ Picasso's own interpretation: he said almost nothing at first, leaving the interpretation to viewers, critics, and, eventually, art historians. Opinion divided rather sharply around the painting, as to its message, its proper interpretation, and its final significance.
- ❖ The Nationalists won the civil war, leading Picasso to remark, 'the painting will be turned over to the government of the Spanish Republic the day the Republic is restored in Spain!'
- ❖ Fearing the Nazi occupation of France, Picasso had the painting removed to MOMA in New York, where it remained until being sent to Spain in 1981, well after the deaths of both Franco and Picasso in the early 1970s.

Interpretation

- ❖ Art Historian Patricia Failing calls attention to the symbolic character of the bull and the horse: ‘The bull and the horse are important characters in Spanish culture. Picasso himself certainly used these characters to play many different roles over time. This has made the task of interpreting the specific meaning of the bull and the horse very tough. Their relationship is a kind of ballet that was conceived in a variety of ways throughout Picasso's career.’
- ❖ Picasso's response: ‘. . .this bull is a bull and this horse is a horse. . . If you give a meaning to certain things in my paintings it may be very true, but it is not my idea to give this meaning. What ideas and conclusions you have got I obtained too, but instinctively, unconsciously. I make the painting for the painting. I paint the objects for what they are.’
- ❖ Beverly Ray, another art historian, offers a list of commonly agreed interpretations, some more and some less obvious:
 - ❖ ‘The shape and posture of the bodies express protest.’
 - ❖ ‘Picasso uses black, white, and grey paint to set a somber mood and express pain and chaos.’
 - ❖ ‘Flaming buildings and crumbling walls not only express the destruction of Guernica, but reflect the destructive power of civil war.’
 - ❖ ‘The light bulb in the painting represents the sun.’
 - ❖ ‘The broken sword near the bottom of the painting symbolizes the defeat of the people at the hand of their tormentors.’
- ❖ Others point to the left palm of the soldier as symbolizing the stigmata of Christ, and still others to the ‘hidden image’ in the horse's head.

Two General Observations

- ❖ It seems fair to conclude that this painting may be said to express meaning, and so to admit of interpretations, whether propositional or not.
- ❖ Second, it seems equally fair to conclude that interpretations are not completely and finally determined by even a careful viewing of the painting.
 - ❖ This is not to say, however, that its meaning cannot be determinate, or at least reasonably determinate.

So, what does an artwork mean?

- ❖ Three theories:
 - ❖ Actual Intentionalism
 - ❖ Hypothetical Intentionalism
 - ❖ Moderate Intentionalism

Actual Intentionalism (AI)

- ❖ AI: the meaning of an artwork *a* by artist *S* is precisely the meaning *S* intended *a* to have.
 - ❖ N.b., if I say to you, 'I'll meet you by the bank after work.' intending you to meet me in front of the place where we keep our joint savings account, then the meaning of 'bank' is just that, which is to say what I intended it to mean.
 - ❖ If you toddle along to the patch of grass bordering the local river, then you have not apprehended my meaning.
 - ❖ Not assigning blame here, but just noticing that you did not understand what I meant.
 - ❖ If that's right, then the meaning is precisely what I intended.
 - ❖ Notice here, too, that context may help reveal my intentions, but my intentions determine the actual meaning.
- ❖ So too with a work of art.

On Behalf of AI

- ❖ AI assigns meanings to artworks in the same way (or so it seems) that meaning are assigned to words and sentences in natural languages.
- ❖ Further, where an artwork *a* is concerned, *S* seems somehow privileged or authoritative—just as I am privileged or authoritative with respect to what I meant by ‘bank’ when I uttered it.
- ❖ Careful, though:
 - ❖ An *interpretation* by an artist is not an expression of intention.
 - ❖ An *expression* of an intention may not reveal the actual intention.
 - ❖ The artist may be coy, or insincere, or confused about her own intention.
- ❖ Still, one might say, the *actual* intention determines the meaning.

AI Slightly Refined

- ❖ AI: the meaning of an artwork *a* by artist *S* is precisely the meaning *S* intended *a* to have, as that intention is expressed in *a*.
- ❖ As a corollary, then, the correct interpretation of an artwork *a* is that interpretation which identifies and reveals the intention of *S* as it is expressed in *a*.

Worries about AI

- ❖ Intentions are often obscure, especially in art, and may indeed be obscure even to the artist whose intentions they are.
 - ❖ Response: True, intentions are not always immediately transparent, but in fact we often know what others intend in their communicative acts; we should not let the fact that we may be wrong in identifying an intention derail the thought that the meaning of an art work *a* by *S* is just what *S* intended.
- ❖ Sometimes in art, as in life, we fail to mean what we intend to mean; but even then we end up meaning something. Perhaps I mean to insult you by calling you 'obdurate' or 'intransigent', but you take it as a compliment. Others do, too. Possibly I ended up meaning something I did not intend.
 - ❖ In short, intention and meaning can come apart.
- ❖ Finally, perhaps works of art are unlike ordinary acts of communication, such that they are intentionally polysemous or open-textured and suggestive; if so, it would be wrong to identify *the* meaning of a work of art *a* with the intention of an artist *S*, because there simply is (in some range of cases) simply no such meaning.
 - ❖ Still, interpretative *monists* (who expect as a default that there is a single meaning associated with a work) can surely tolerate multiple related intentions as constituting the corrected meaning. —This is, after all, what we do, in a low-level sort of way when we are confronted double meanings in jokes and puns.

Hypothetical Intentionalism

- ❖ Perhaps some worries about Intentionalism fade if we supplant *actual* with *hypothetical* intentions.
- ❖ Here the shift is that we do not identify the meaning of an artwork *a* by artist *S* with *S*'s actual intention, but rather with the *audience* of a work would normally take to be intended by *S* in the context of the creation of *a*.
- ❖ Here there are some of the same worries about AI concerning evidence of intentions and contexts, coupled with another concern: *which* audience?
 - ❖ Are we thinking about the audience contemporary with *S*? Of the elite or educated audience? Of *S*'s intended audience, whether contemporary or for the ages?

Moderate Intentionalism

- ❖ A hybrid view, drawing meaning from:
 - ❖ Actual intentions
 - ❖ Conventions in place at the time of creation
 - ❖ An artist's intentions or understanding of the expectations and intentions of the intended audience.
 - ❖ Here the main worry is that the account threatens circularity, in a spiral of interlocking intentions.
 - ❖ Perhaps, though, one may counter, this is just the messy way that meaning works, in natural languages no less than in the languages of art.