Ayn Rand's Philosophy of Art
A Critical Introduction (Part VI & Conclusion)

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In Parts I-V of this article (Aristos 1/91, 9/91, and 1/92), we briefly analyzed the intellectual context for Ayn Rand's philosophy of art and examined in detail the first four essays of The Romantic Manifesto, in which she presents that philosophy.

In this final installment, we recapitulate Rand's principal insights and review the meager critical literature on her theory. In addition to documenting The Romantic Manifesto's hostile reception by reviewers, we point out flaws in the book that have no doubt been partly responsible for the general neglect of its foremost ideas. Further, we indicate errors and omissions in commentaries on Rand's work by her disciples and admirers, which have also contributed to the underappreciation and misunderstanding of her ideas on art. Finally, we argue that Rand's philosophy of art is of inestimable value in any effort to stem the current tide of artistic disintegration.

VI. Critical Overview

Before we survey how Rand's ideas on art have fared in the quarter-century since she introduced them, it is appropriate to review what we consider to be the highlights of her theory. Here, as in other areas of her philosophic thought, Rand offers an unprecedented integration of original insights with ideas that have historical antecedents. We cite the cardinal principles of her theory in her own words, though not always in the sequence in which she presented them. In bracketed numbers after each item, we indicate, first, the relevant page in the paperback edition of The Romantic Manifesto, followed by the part (in Roman numerals) and page or pages where we discuss the idea in this article.

・ Works of art—like everything else in the universe—are entities of a specific nature: the concept requires a definition by their essential characteristics, which distinguish them from all other existing entities. [77; V,6]

・ Art is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgments. [19; II,3,4]

・ Art is inextricably tied to man's survival—not to his physical survival, but to that on which his physical survival depends: to the preservation and survival of his consciousness. [17; I,1]

・ Art brings man's concepts to the perceptual level of his consciousness and allows him to grasp them directly, as if they were percepts. [20; II,4-5; IV,3]

・ All [the] arts are conceptual in essence, all are products of and addressed to the conceptual level of man's consciousness, and they differ only in their means. [47; V,2]

・ The proper forms of art present a selective re-creation of reality in terms needed by man's cognitive faculty, which includes his entity-perceiving senses, and thus assist the integration of the various elements of a conceptual consciousness. [73; V,1]

・ [Whereas] the essence of art is integration.... the keynote and goal of modern art [is] the disintegration of man's conceptual faculty. [76; V,6]

・ The subconscious mechanism that serves as the integrating factor both in artistic creation and in man's response to art.... [is] a psychological phenomenon which we call a sense of life. [24; III,5; IV,2-5]

・ A sense of life is a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence. [24; III,1-2]

・ The emotion involved in art is not an emotion in the ordinary meaning of the term. It is experienced more as a "sense" or a "feeling," but it has two characteristics pertaining to emotions: it is automatically immediate and it has an intense, profoundly personal... value-meaning to the individual experiencing it. The value involved is life, and the words naming the emotion are: "This is what life means to me." [35; IV,3]

Given the originality and substance of Ayn Rand's theory of art, evident even in these brief excerpts, one might reasonably expect that her ideas would by now have entered into general intellectual discourse and debate. Yet if one turns to the critical and philosophic literature, beginning with the scant reviews of The Romantic Manifesto, one is sorely disappointed.

Reviews of "The Romantic Manifesto"
The critical response to the publication of The Romantic Manifesto was not only sparse but generally superficial and disparaging, even outright hostile. Rand's theory of art drew virtually no comment. The prevailing impression reviewers conveyed was that the book is concerned almost exclusively with literature—in particular, Romantic fiction—and that, in any case, her ideas are utterly devoid of merit.

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On the whole, the requisite brief items in the leading publishing and library trade journals were critical of Rand for what they characterized as her "contralto pronunciamentos" (Kirkus Reviews) and her "tiresome clichés" and "sweeping judgments in quasi-philosophical jargon" (Publishers' Weekly), and dismissed the book as being of interest only to followers of Objectivism and to "avid Rand fans" (Library Journal). Especially negative was the Kirkus review, which began with an allusion to Rand's earlier political essays and closed with a gratuitous innuendo, "$$$$ or sense?"

Nor did the three general periodicals that allotted review space—the Christian Science Monitor, The New Leader, and The New Republic—have anything favorable to say, much less anything of substance regarding Rand's philosophy of art. Of the three reviewers, only Richard Cattani in the Monitor did not bring up extraneous political, economic, or social issues, but dealt directly with the literary theory Rand presents in the book. Yet he, too, failed to mention the theory of art propounded in the book's opening essays. Characterizing Rand as "contentious, crabby, and cerebral," he charged that her view of contemporary writers was "singlemindedly narrow." On her definition of Romanticism, he faulted her (not unjustly, however) for ignoring Romantic poetry.

John W. Hughes, writing in The New Leader, was vitriolic in his condemnation of Rand as a "sterile elitist" whose "polemic sputtering, inflated with a phallic giantism" revealed a "Nietzschean nostalgia for Apollonian clarity and cleanliness." Like Cattani, he censured her for overlooking Romantic poetry. He was also critical of her total neglect of the Dionysian side of Greek culture. Both omissions were due, he thought, to her failure to come to terms with "the human condition, the tension between ideal and imperfect." Hughes concluded that The Romantic Manifesto represents the "angry, threatened conscience of a censor" and charged it "could only have been written by the leader of a cult." He said nothing of Rand's theory of art.

By far the longest review (about 2,500 words) appeared in The New Republic under the derogatory title "Fictive Babble." The reviewer, Peter Michelson, was relentlessly negative. "Not to put too fine a point upon it," he began, "this is a crummy book . . . [It] augments ignorance with incoherence." The only reason for its being published and reviewed, he opined, was that "Ayn Rand is a 'phenomenon.'" Like the Kirkus reviewer, who casually derided Rand's concept of sense of life, Michelson referred to Rand's philosophy of art only to ridicule it. Merely citing the titles to "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art" and "Philosophy and Sense of Life," without commenting on the substance of the essays, he implied that Rand for "masquerading [her] solipsism as a philosophical essay." He quoted her definition of art, but solely as an example of her "pretentious jargon." And he derided, as an instance of "empty dialectic," her thesis that "art confirms or denies the efficacy of a man's consciousness." The bulk of Michelson's review purported to deal with Rand's ideas on literature, but the underlying political agenda was evident in allusions to "chaunistic capitalism," "murderous technocratic imperialists," and "the stagnant sloughs of capitalism," and to "war and capital" as "institutions designed for anti-human ends." So much for critical objectivity where Rand's ideas are at issue.

Inherent Flaws

The hostility toward Rand among American intellectuals that is evident in the reviews we have cited has hardly been the only factor impeding the dissemination of her philosophy of art, however. In truth, Rand herself is partly to blame. To begin, the title of The Romantic Manifesto is misleading. It not only fails to indicate Rand's crucial essay on art, but it is inappropriate in other respects as well. The volume as a whole is not a manifesto, nor is it devoted primarily to the subject of Romanticism. In total pages, at least half of the book—that is, the four chapters presenting Rand's theory of art, "Basic Principles of Literature," and "The Simplest Thing in the World" (her fictional treatment of the way in which sense of life guides the creative process)—is devoted to aspects of art or literature, in general. The remainder deals with Romanticism, almost exclusively from a literary perspective.

Nor does Rand's ill-conceived Introduction accurately represent the contents of the book. Beginning with a dictionary definition of the term "manifesto," she refers to the volume as "this manifesto," yet concedes in her next paragraph: "the actual manifesto—the declaration of my personal objectives or motives [as a novelist]—is at the end of this book," that is, in "The Goal of My Writing." Further, she treats her essays on esthetics as subordinate to her primary goal of championing Romanticism. She scarcely refers to the substance of those essays—remarkably only that the book contains "the base of a rational esthetics." And she appears to view her philosophy of art merely as part of the "theoretical grounds" justifying her personal manifesto as a fiction writer.

Attention is further deflected from Rand's theory of art by the book's subtitle, "A Philosophy of Literature"—carried on the dust jacket and the title page of the original, hardcover edition, and on the title page but not the cover of the paperback editions. Only the second, revised paperback edition of the book (1975) gives any hint on the front cover of Rand's theory of art: it carries the notice, in small type, "Revised and Updated to Include 'Art and Cognition.'" Ironically, the description on the dust jacket ascribed more fundamental value to Rand's theory of art than she did in her Introduction. It stressed that in the book Rand "defines the nature of art and lays the foundation of a new, rational esthetics as revolutionary as her theory of ethics" and "demonstrates . . . that the roots of art lie in the nature and requirements of man's mind."

Discrepant views of the book's focus are also expressed in two brief notices on the pages in question in the paperback editions. The first item, set in capital letters, quotes from Rand's Introduction, stressing her notion of a Romantic manifesto:

This Manifesto is not issued in the name of an organization or a movement. I speak only for myself. There is no Romantic movement today. If there is to be one in the art of the future, this book will have helped it come into being.

Following that excerpt, a statement from the publisher calls attention to Rand's theory of art: "In this . . . work, Ayn Rand cuts through the mentalism and vague thinking that surrounds the subject of art. For the first time, a precise definition is given to art, and a careful analysis made of its nature." That emphasis is echoed on the back cover of the paperback editions; but it has not outweighed, in the minds of many readers, the stress placed on Romanticism by the title and the Introduction.

A further impediment to serious consideration of Rand's esthetic theory is imposed by her idiosyncratic presentation. Having written the original essays for a sympathetic audience well-schooled in Objectivism, she failed to revise them in any significant respect for publication in book form, for a broader readership. She cites no other thinkers (with the noteworthy exception of Aristotle), and she sweepingly disparages her adversaries, with vague references to "modern philosophy" and "the philosophers' war against reason," for instance. Though such charges are not without cause, Rand loses credibility by failing to be more specific. Finally, she sometimes resorts to grossly inappropriate imagery—as in this passage from her Introduction:

As for the present, I am not willing to surrender the world to the jerky contortions of self-inductedly brainless bodies with empty eye sockets, who perform, in stinking basements, the immemorial rituals of staving off terror, . . . and to the quivering witch doctors who call it "art." Not only did such invective provide an easy target for reviewers, it has undoubtedly repelled many a reader, especially those of a scholarly bent.

In view of such impediments, it is little wonder that the philosophy of art presented in The Romantic Manifesto has languished in relative obscurity. Many American intellectuals, ill disposed to Rand's ideas from the start, would scarcely be inclined to probe beyond the obstacles she placed in their path.
Commentaries by Followers and Admirers

More surprising than the neglect of Rand's ideas on art by the intellectual establishment, however, is the extent to which those ideas have been disregarded or misunderstood by her followers and admirers. For example, Rand's biographer, Barbara Branden, though a longtime friend and associate prior to their break in 1968, merely lists *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature* as one of several published collections of Rand's articles. 77 In a major oversight, Branden says nothing of Rand's theory of art, leaving the reader with the distinct impression that the book deals only with literature. Further, Nathaniel Branden, in his memoir of his years with Rand, explicitly characterizes *The Romantic Manifesto* as "her book on the aesthetics of literature."78

Most important, Rand's theory of art has been passed over even by professional philosophers who have done much to disseminate or develop other aspects of her thought. In *The Philosphic Thought of Ayn Rand*, for instance, Douglas Den Uyl and Douglas Rasmussen present a valuable first collection of essays by academic philosophers on various aspects of Rand's work, yet exclude her esthetic theory—treating only what they regard as "the three central divisions of Rand's philosophy," that is, "metaphysics and epistemology, ethics, and political and social theory."79 Accordingly, they do not list *The Romantic Manifesto* among her "major nonfiction works.

Similarly, David Kelley, in a brief outline of "the essential content" of Objectivism (in his monograph *Truth and Tolerance*), omits esthetics—"just as Ayn Rand did," he notes, citing her own brief summary of the central principles of her philosophy. 80 That summary dates from 1962, however, several years before she wrote her essays on art. In a later essay, "Philosophy/Who Needs It?" (1974), Rand clearly states that "the fifth and last branch of philosophy is esthetics, the study of art"—a statement that warrants including her own theory of art in the main body of her philosophical thought. 81

Holding that Rand's "most distinctive" ideas were in ethics and politics, Kelley argues that, even where her basic principles in those areas were derived from previous philosophers, she offered an original defense of them. As we have indicated, however, comparable claims can be made with equal force for Rand's esthetics. Her ideas on the nature of art and its relation to man's conceptual mode of cognition are as distinct from previous esthetic theories as her ethics and politics are from those of other philosophers, perhaps more so. Kelley further notes that, in addition to esthetics, he omits "a number of points in epistemology, ethics, and politics," as well as Rand's ideas on such matters as the role of philosophy in history. He argues that all are "principles of limited range and significance for the system as a whole." Yet we would maintain that the basic principles of Rand's theory of art are so profoundly related to her metaphysics and epistemology as to constitute an integral part of her philosophic system. 82

Objectivist philosopher Harry Binswanger comments briefly on Rand's esthetics in an overview of her philosophic achievement, published shortly after her death. 83 Because he is an uncritical disciple of Rand and brings to bear scant knowledge of esthetic theory, he sheds little light on her contribution. Of the seven items he lists as "highlights" of her "wide-ranging contributions to the field," only one—in her concept of sense of life—actually pertains to her theory of art. His other items—which include Rand's "definition of Romanticism vs. Naturalism in terms of free will vs. determinism, and her passionate defense of Romanticism"; and "her analysis of literature (especially of plot)"—are not central to a philosophy of art, for reasons we have previously discussed.

Rand's ideas on art have been ill served even by her admirers.

Binswanger does offer one important insight: that the "key to the Objectivist esthetics" is Rand's theory of concepts, which he pointedly contrasts with the Platonic theory of Forms. Although he restricts his discussion to philosophic "ideals" and "great art," the contrast is illuminating. Whereas Plato holds that abstractions, or concepts, exist as real "Forms" in an imperceptible, otherworldly sphere, and that the concrete entities we perceive are but a shadow of their respective Forms, Rand holds that concepts are mental integrations of qualities observed in real entities. According to Plato, art is at best only a shadow of a shadow, and therefore of little value to man. Rand, however, maintains that art, as a concrete embodiment of fundamental concepts and values, provides man with the most vivid awareness he can possess of those abstractions.

Ironically, until recently the only academic philosopher to write on Rand's esthetic theory in any detail has been a non-Objectivist—William F. O'Neill, the first philosopher to publish (in 1971) a comprehensive critique of Objectivism. O'Neill characterizes Rand as a courageous and significant thinker worthy of serious consideration, although he is extremely critical of many of her ideas. As indicated by the title of his book, *With Charity Toward None*, he particularly objects to what he perceives, however inaccurately, as the negative social and ethical implications of Objectivism. Yet he offers a largely favorable, albeit brief, account of Rand's theory of art. 84 O'Neill identifies the funda-
writing in the field of aesthetics. To our knowledge, however, he has publicly called attention to her esthetic theory on only two occasions. In 1962, he invited her to present her not-yet-published ideas on "art and sense of life" at the annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics.\textsuperscript{90} Twenty years later, in his introductory textbook on the philosophy of art, he included a brief discussion of Rand's ideas on "sense of life," with quotations from several key passages.\textsuperscript{91} Identifying her only as a "contemporary novelist," not as a philosopher as well, he discusses sense of life solely in the context of "truths about the artist" that may be learned from a work of art—a context so limited as to trivialize the concept.\textsuperscript{92} Hespers correctly stresses that a sense of life is different from an articulated philosophy and "is often at odds with the explicit moral and philosophical tenets" held by the artist. But he adds: "nor can it be expressed in some kinds of art, such as music"—an erroneous assertion for which he offers no evidence or explanation, and which clearly contradicts Rand's position.\textsuperscript{93}

Branden reports that "in scholarly journals [Hespers] has edited over the last twenty years, he has arranged for the publication of numerous articles on aspects of [Rand's] philosophy, firmly entrenched her name and importance in the philosophical literature."\textsuperscript{94} While this statement is true to a degree for Rand's ethical and political ideas, our search of the literature reveals no such articles on her theory of art. Despite his profession "general agreement with principal points in Rand's aesthetic," Hespers seems, in fact, to reject her fundamental principles. For example, though he addresses the question "What is a work of art?" in his textbook (ch. 1), he does not cite Rand's definition. Consider also this revelation from his memoir: "[Ayn] had no use for non-representational painting, though I liked Mondrian a lot—and I tried vainly to convince her that a line could be expressive even though that line was no part of a represented person or object."\textsuperscript{95} The central issue for Rand, of course, would not have been whether a line alone could be "expressive," but whether it could concretize metaphysical values.

Further, Branden notes that the principal area of disagreement between Hespers and Rand was epistemology.\textsuperscript{96} As we have stressed, Rand's epistemology—in particular, her view of the conceptual nature of human consciousness and her conviction that all conceptual knowledge depends on a process of abstraction from the data of sense perception—constitutes the foundation for her theory of art, including her contention that painting and sculpture are, by nature, representational. In that light, it is clear that her esthetic differences with Hespers are not just a matter of personal taste, they are symptomatic of a profound philosophic disparity. Nonetheless, given the high regard he has expressed for Rand as a thinker, it is most disappointing that he has not dealt with her esthetic theory, even critically, in any of the numerous professional articles he has published.

Merrill's Interpretation

That Rand's ideas on art have, on balance, been ill served even by her admirers is further exemplified by the discussion of "Objectivist Esthetics" in a recent book entitled The Ideas of Ayn Rand, by Ronald Merrill,\textsuperscript{97} a scientist and entrepreneur who has been an Objectivist since the 1960s. Though not scholarly in his approach, Merrill is often thoughtful and informed, and brings interesting insights to certain aspects of Rand's philosophy and fiction. Yet his understanding of her philosophy of art is deeply flawed. An analysis of his interpretation will serve to clarify Rand's ideas, however.

At the outset, Merrill misconstrues the purpose of Rand's esthetic theory. Although she did attempt to put esthetics "on a firm logical foundation" (as he notes), she did not seek mainly "to make it possible to make esthetic judgments on the basis of objective standards." The primary purpose of Rand's philosophy of art—as of any systematic esthetics—is to explain what art is and what role it plays in human life. Yet Merrill treats the nature and function of art as the first of "three subdivisions" of the Objectivist esthetics, as if it were of no greater concern than the other "subdivisions."

Further, Merrill is mistaken in asserting that "Rand does not attempt to connect esthetics to ethics."\textsuperscript{98} Indeed, that assertion contradicts his own prior discussion of the "metaphysical roots" of Rand's ideas— in which he maintained that, in her view, one's conclusions about ethics constrain one's views on esthetics.\textsuperscript{99}

In addition, Merrill holds that the second "subdivision" of Rand's esthetics is "the ethical evaluation of art, which for Rand boils down to the conflict between Romanticism and Naturalism."\textsuperscript{100} But "ethical evaluation" is not a concern of esthetics (though it is a central concern of Rand's theory of literature). And Merrill seems to forget his previous claim that Rand does not connect esthetics to ethics.

Merrill also makes the common mistake of accepting Rand's definition of Romanticism as applicable to all art (a premise we questioned in Part II). Compounding the error, he adds that "Romantic art exhibits...ethical themes, strong plot, and larger-than-life characters—overlooking that such attributes belong only to certain forms of literature.

Rand's third and last "subdivision," in Merrill's view, is "the esthetic evaluation of art, which is a matter of judging effective craftsmanship and technique." This area is barely touched upon by Rand, however. It is, in any case, properly a technical concern, regarding which, philosophy determines only the fundamental principles, not the criteria specific to each medium.\textsuperscript{101} Yet Merrill seems to put this "subdivision" on a par with questions pertaining to the nature and function of art.

Although Merrill recognizes that the concept sense of life is "absolutely central to the Objectivist esthetics," he misconstrues what Rand means by the term and how it relates to her philosophy of art. For example, in claiming that an artist "expresses his sense of life—or at least a sense of life" (implying that an artist can express a sense of life other than his own), Merrill shows that he has not grasped Rand's concept of sense of life as a subconsciously integrated, uniquely personal, appraisal of reality, the expression of which is spontaneous and automatic, not merely by choice.\textsuperscript{102}

More significant, Merrill fails to appreciate Rand's ideas on the conceptual nature of art. Questioning whether her definition of art as "a selective re-creation of reality" can apply to music, he merely asserts that music does not re-create, or represent, reality. He then mistakenly concludes that nonrepresentational (abstract) painting and sculpture, like music, also "challenge the Objectivist esthetics," because they, too, are art—since they "can convey a sense of life." His subsequent suggestion that abstract painting be classified as "decoration," rather than "important art," indicates that he recognizes no essential difference between art (albeit "unimportant" art) and decoration. He certainly misses the fundamental distinction Rand maintains between the conceptual nature of the major (fine) arts and the primarily sensory character of the "decorative arts," and he is entirely wrong to infer that Rand "seems to regard [the decorative arts] as a borderline case."\textsuperscript{103}

Merrill's most serious error is his revision of Rand's definition of art. In place of her "selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgments," he proposes that the "correct definition" is a man-made object or process the function of which is to induce a sense of life in the observer. According to Merrill, Rand's definition is "fundamentally flawed" because it violates the principle that "every man-made entity is properly defined in terms of its function."\textsuperscript{104} But the function of art is largely implicit in Rand's definition, as is the concept "man-made." And, whereas Rand's genius ("a selective re-creation of reality") succinctly identifies the essential characteristics of the category of man-made objects and activities\textsuperscript{105} to which art belongs—a category also including billboard illustrations, model airplanes, and comic impersonations, for example—Merrill's alternative ("a man-made object or process") is far too broad, conveying no such information.

Merrill's differentia ("the function of which is to induce a sense of life in the observer") is equally flawed, based as it is on several misconceptions. "For what purpose do we use art?" he asks, implying that art is merely a means to an end. "What we seek from a work of art," he postulates, "is to be induced to feel an emotion—specifically a sense of life." But a sense of
life cannot be "induced." Every individual has a sense of life, which cannot be altered solely by a work of art. In any case, if an "artist" did succeed in "inducing" a sense of life through his work, his effort would be closer to propaganda than to art. Merrill also overlooks that a work of art serves a need of its creator, or maker, as well as that of the "observer," or "user." More important, his focus on the emotional response to art belies one of Rand's major insights: the primary function of art, for both artist and responer, is not to elicit a response, but rather to concretize fundamental values so that they can be grasped directly, "as if they were percepts." And that function is implicit in her definition, for in selectively re-creating reality according to his "metaphysical value-judgments," the artist concretizes those values in a directly perceptible form.

Peikoff's Summation

Ayn Rand's ideas on art receive their first extensive summation by a philosopher in Leonard Peikoff's Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand. Peikoff assumes an equivocal role, however. Characterizing his book rather self-servingly as "the definitive statement of Ayn Rand's philosophy—as interpreted by her best student and chosen heir," he purports only to "present," not to critique, amend, or expand the substance of her thought. Yet he cautions that his book cannot be "properly described as 'official Objectivist doctrine,'" since Rand did not live to see it completed (although she did endorse the lecture series on which it is based). Further, he states in his Preface that some material is based on discussions he had with Rand over the years; but he provides no documentation.

To his credit, Peikoff devotes an entire chapter to esthetics. He is the first philosopher to fully articulate the importance of Rand's theory of art in the total framework of Objectivism, and to offer explicit justification for her view that esthetics is one of "the five branches that make up the full system of philosophy." Whereas subjects such as the philosophy of law, education, or science address "the problems of a specialized professional field," Peikoff argues, "a branch of philosophy...is universal and timeless. It deals with an intellectual need of man qua man." Esthetics is a branch of philosophy because art fills a need of man's mind, of man 'qua thinker and valuer.' It is why, he adds, "art has always existed among men...and why animals have neither art nor any equivalent of it." Although Peikoff errs in accepting Rand's idea that esthetics, like politics, depends, in part, he argues—persuasively, we think—that esthetics is both broader and "more profound" than politics. (His proposition is the more striking when one considers the scant attention paid to Rand's esthetics in other commentaries on her philosophy.) Whereas politics is concerned only with "the application of ethics to social questions," Peikoff observes, "art's special root and concern is not ethics, but metaphysics"—that is, the nature of reality itself.

Beyond his valuable opening statements and a useful discussion of esthetic evaluation (see below), however, Peikoff does little to clarify Rand's presentation. Instead, he perpetuates a number of her errors, and he further muddies the waters with odd reformulations of, or additions to, her published exposition. Especially troubling is his freewheeling use of the term "philosophy." Rand carefully distinguishes between philosophy (as the product of a "consiously directed process of cognitive integration"), religion (which she characterizes as a "primitive form of philosophy" based on "belief unsupported by, or contrary to, the facts of reality and the conclusions of reason"), and sense of life ("a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics"). But Peikoff's careless use of "philosophy" tends to obfuscate these distinctions. For instance, when Peikoff asserts that, like art, "philosophy itself...has always existed among men, from prehistory to the present, it may be alluding to early forms of religion. As Rand has noted, philosophy—that is, "the science that studies the fundamental aspects of the nature of existence"—was born in Greece, less than three thousand years ago, not in prehistory. Peikoff also remarks that "one can learn a great deal about life from a work of art (from its philosophy and theme),...a claim that has little meaning. In general, works of art (fiction and drama included) do not have a "philosophy" in any precise meaning of the term—though they do convey a sense of life. One does not "learn" anything from a work's sense of life, however—or from its theme.

Further, Peikoff states: "Philosophy by itself cannot satisfy man's need of philosophy" (in other words: "man requires the union of...philosophy and art, the broad identification and their concrete embodiment"). Surely it would be more meaningful to say: "Philosophy by itself cannot satisfy man's need for a comprehensive view of existence." The reader should be especially wary of Peikoff's blurring of the distinction between the fully conscious, rationally derived form of knowledge articulated by philosophy and the subconsciously integrated, preconceptual awareness involved in a sense of life. The distinction is crucial in the realm of art.

Although Peikoff purports to present Rand's philosophy of art, he tends (like most other commentators) to reflect The Romantic Manifesto's emphasis on literature—with the concomitant misapplication of strictly literary principles to other art forms. He seems to be aware of the difficulty, however, and at times attempts to mitigate it. For example, in connection with Rand's statement (from "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art") that "art is the indispensable medium for the communication of a moral ideal," he adduces a passage from "The Goal of My Writing" likening ethics to moral "engineering" and art to the "technology of the soul," and offers this comment on Rand's thesis that "art...builds the model":

Not all art works perform this function. The essential field for this context (which can be supplemented by the other arts) is literature, which alone is able to depict the richness of man in action across time, making choices, pursuing goals, facing obstacles, exhibiting not merely an isolated virtue, but a whole code of them. Further, although all art works involve some moral content, at least implicitly, the nature of such content depends on the basic viewpoint of the artist,...The model-building aspect, therefore,...is not a universal attribute of art; and even where it is present, it is not a primary.

Peikoff is largely correct here (except for his ascribing "some moral content" to all works of art, but he is wrong to imply that he is merely clarifying, not amending, Rand's intent. Moreover, though he again stresses that "the primary concern of art, whatever its medium or viewpoint, is not ethics, but that on which ethics depends: metaphysics," he nevertheless refers, in subsequent passages, to "art as model-builder" and to "the model-building function of art." In a section entitled "Romantic Literature as Illustrating the Role of Philosophy in Art" (another use of the term "philosophy" where "sense of life" would be more appropriate), Peikoff acknowledges that Rand "was concerned as an esthetician predominantly with her own field, the novel." Yet he accepts, without comment, her definition of Romanticism as "a category of art based on the recognition of the principle that man possesses the faculty of volition," and he twice cites her declaration that Romanticism is "the greatest achievement in art history"—although Rand's criterion of volition can apply only to dramatic or narrative literature, not to all art, as we have noted, and as Peikoff's comments just quoted on the "model-building function" of literature tend to confirm.

The most unsatisfactory aspect of Peikoff's chapter on esthetics is his equivocating treatment of a key reference Rand
makes to Aristotle. She begins her essay “Basic Principles of Literature” by stating:

The most important principle of the esthetics of literature was formulated by Aristotle, who said that fiction is of greater philosophical importance than history, because “history represents things as they are, while fiction represents them as they might be and ought to be.”

Rand’s purported quotation of Aristotle, which has long served as an aesthetic rallying cry among Objectivists, is in fact a distortion of the following passage from the Poetics (ch. 9):

... The poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary.

The distinction between historian and poet... consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of greater import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars [particulars].

By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do. ... 121

As the italicized portions show, Aristotle neither states nor implies that all poetry (fiction) presents life as it ought to be. 122 Yet Peikoff perpetuates Rand’s distortion. Citing Aristotle, he omits the definitive portions of the passage, and refers to her statement merely as a “paraphrase.” 123 Not only does he thereby gloss over Rand’s misappropriation of Aristotle, he fails to recognize a more fundamental error: her claim that fiction must represent things as they “ought to be” is inconsistent with her view that the artist’s sense of life is the central governing force in the creative process. Her insistence on idealization in literature reflects her own personal esthetic as a novelist; it is not a valid requirement for literature per se.

Early in his chapter, Peikoff explains that esthetics is concerned with three basic questions: “what is art? what is its role in man’s life? by what standards should an art work be judged?” Devoting an entire section, “Esthetic Value as Objective” (nearly a third of his chapter), to the last question, he suggests that, though Rand “does not discuss esthetic evaluation systematically,” she points to three principles: (1) selectivity in regard to subject; (2) clarity, or intelligibility; and (3) integration—that is, the internal consistency of all aspects of the work. Although flawed in some of its details, Peikoff’s presentation is a useful synthesis of key ideas that are scattered throughout Rand’s essays.

With regard to the first principle, choice of subject, Peikoff injects a major qualification. Quoting a passage from “The Goal of My Writing” in which Rand argued that “that which is not worth contemplating in life, is not worth re-creating in art,” Peikoff comments, oddly: “I take her to be speaking here as an Objectivist, defining a crucial esthetic implication of her view that evil is impotent, but not as an esthetician prescribing standards of judgment for art as such.” 124 However, the context of Rand’s statement strongly suggests that she is indeed speaking as an esthetician, who intends her statement to apply to all art—though it conflicts with her view that the artist’s choice of subject (like other aspects of the creative process) is governed by his sense of life, not by her idea (or by anyone else’s) of what is “worth contemplating.” When Peikoff injects his own opinion (contrary to the general disclaimer in his Preface), he seems to be trying to rescue her from this inconsistency.

A glaring deficiency of Peikoff’s chapter on esthetics is that he devotes only one brief paragraph to “Art and Cognition.” Since that essay presents Rand’s analysis of the major art forms in relation to man’s perceptual and conceptual faculties, it merits fuller discussion. Peikoff singles out only Rand’s “hypothesis concerning the nature and meaning of music” as “especially noteworthy,” because it “offers an unprecedented integration of epistemology and esthetics with the physiology of hearing.” As we suggested in Part V, however, some aspects of that hypothesis are highly problematic.

In his final paragraph, Peikoff seeks first to demonstrate that esthetic evaluation has an objective basis, and then to defend Rand’s thesis that Romanticism is the school of art most appropriate to man as a rational being. (On the fallacy of that thesis, we have already commented.)

Drawing an analogy between ethics and esthetics, Peikoff concludes: “Like goodness, ... beauty is not ‘in the object’ or ‘in the eye of the beholder.’ it is objective. it is in the object—as judged by a rational beholder.” The questionable validity of his assertion aside, the importance Peikoff places on the concept of beauty here is not justified. Rand does not discuss beauty in her essays on esthetics. 125 Contrary to most philosophers (and wisely so, we think), she apparently did not consider it of fundamental concern to the philosophy of art.

Nor is Peikoff’s final assessment quite accurate. In his view, Rand “defined the nature and deepest roots of great art” and “was explaining such art while creating it.” To be precise, she wrote her essays on art years after she wrote her last work of fiction. What she defined, moreover, was not the nature and function of “great art,” but of art as such.

Conclusion

For millennia prior to the twentieth century, man’s primary forms of artistic creativity were remarkably consistent. Despite a boundless variety of styles and subject matter in broadly diverse cultures, the major arts remained unchanged in their essential characteristics. In some measure, each involved a selective recreation (Aristotle called it mimesis) of reality, as perceived and appraised by the artist, and thus served to concretize fundamental human values.

In the early years of the twentieth century, however, a profound and deliberate break with that long tradition occurred, a break far more radical than even the most dramatic shifts of style or content in any preceding era. As evidenced first and most strikingly by the emergence of total abstraction in painting, modernism in all the arts ultimately involved not merely a rejection of the conventions of earlier art but, more ruinous, a denial of the essential nature of art itself.

As early as 1911, the prominent academic painter and critic Kenyon Cox warned of the danger ahead. Two years later, having seen examples of abstract work in the landmark Armory Show, he concluded that the “abandoning [of] all pretense of representation or even of suggestion” meant nothing less than “the total destruction of the art of painting.” 126 Most of his fellow critics, however, eagerly championed such new work, discarding all traditional standards yet offering no “intelligible argument” (as Cox would later remark) to justify their position. 127

By mid century, when modernist trends were well established in all the arts (albeit in varying degree), the pervasive lack of critical standards provoked the philosopher Eliseo Vivas to charge, in an essay entitled “The Objective Basis of Criticism”:

Contemporary American criticism suffers from a serious defect: it ignores, sometimes truculently, the need for a systematic philosophy of art.

What the enterprise of criticism requires from philosophy, Vivas stressed, is a clear idea of its theoretical foundations—that is, of such underlying issues as “the nature of art, its relation to other modes of activity, ... and its function.” 128

A generation later, the deepening chaos in the art world moved cultural historian Jacques Barzun to observe:

Art today ... is an institution without a theory. No coherent thought exists as to its aim or raison d’être. 129

Though “a large incoherent body of beliefs surrounds the production and acceptance of art,” Barzun further remarked, “this incessant verbalizing uncovers even more confusion than the output of artists.” 130 His words, spoken nearly two decades ago, ring no less true today.

Ayn Rand, too, deplored the poverty of twentieth-century thought on art. As she observed in her first essay on esthetics:

While ... men are able to study subatomic particles and interplanetary space, ... art has remained a dark mystery, with little or nothing known about its nature, its function in human...
life or the cause of its tremendous psychological power.133

We maintain that Rand succeeded in penetrating that "dark mystery." She formulated an original philosophy of art that is not only coherent in its basic principles (our criticism notwithstanding) but also essentially sound, rooted as it is in the conceptual nature of human consciousness.134 Based on the metaphysics and epistemology of her wider philosophic system of Objectivism, her theory provides a singularly cogent answer to the central question of esthetics, What is art?—and to its corollary, What purpose does art serve? Rand's philosophy of art has particular relevance for the twentieth century. In the light of her ideas, it becomes clear that much of what has passed for art over the past eight decades—from the earliest abstract paintings to "Pop Art" to such post-modern concoctions as "performance art"—should not be deemed art at all. Indeed, Rand's esthetic theory discards modernism and post-modernism alike at their common root: the premise that something is art if a reputed artist or expert says it is. That premise is by now so fixed in contemporary thought that few individuals, least of all those in positions of influence in our major cultural and educational institutions, think to question it. But question it we must if the arts are to be fully reclaimed, and if the true artists among us are to receive the recognition they deserve.

We must begin at the beginning—by understanding what art is, and why man needs it. Ayn Rand's philosophy of art makes an unprecedented contribution to that understanding, providing a solid theoretical foundation on which scholars and critics alike can build.1

Notes
63. We do not include Rand's ideas on Romanticism here, since they properly belong to a theory of literature, not to a philosophy of art.
66. Because "Art and Cognition" appeared only in the second paperback edition, neither Cattani nor the other initial reviewers saw it.
67. Rand may have found it difficult to reconcile Romantic poetry with her definition of Romanticism in terms of volition.
68. Similar objections have been raised in friendlier quarters. For example, Stephen Cox maintains that Rand's novels sometimes suffer from her "insistence on morally idealized characters" (Ayn Rand: Theory versus Creative Life, Journal of Libertarian Studies, VIII [1986], 20-22).
70. We, too, find that thesis unconvincing, as we indicated in Part II (Aristos 1991, p. 5).
71. In "Ayn Rand and the Literary Critics" (Reason, Nov. 1974, pp. 44-50), Robert Greenwood documents the anti-Randian animus evident in reviews of her books. (When characterizing The Romantic Manifesto, however, he implies that it deals only with Rand's "esthetics of literature," not with her philosophy of art.)
73. The Romantic Manifesto, p. v. According to Rand, her manifesto is also "partly" presented in her "Introduction to Ninety-Three."
74. The jacket copy continued with a brief summary of "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art" and "Art and Sense of Life," before noting, on the back flap, that "a major part" of the book deals with Rand's philosophy of literature. No mention was made of a "manifesto."
75. The Romantic Manifesto, pp. 76, 77, 127.
76. Ibid., p. viii. Rand also writes (p. 130): "The composite picture of man that emerges from the art of our time is the gigantic figure of an aborted embryo ... who crawls through a bloody muck, red froth dripping from his jaws, and struggles to throw the froth at his own non-existent face, who parades periodically and, lifting the stumps of his arms, screams in abysmal terror at the universe at large."
79. Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, eds., The Philosophical Thought of Ayn Rand (1984), p. xi: they note: "Her aesthetic philosophy is not discussed." In reviewing the Den Uyl-Rasmussen volume in Reason (Jan. 1985), philosopher Randall Dipert remarked that a treatment of Rand's "lived [That's not art!] would have made an important addition" to the collection. (Yet he subsequently characterized that theory as no more than a "robust but ... naive and not-well-thought-out romanticism"—a judgment that not only ignores Rand's essays on esthetics but implicitly mistakes her theory of literature for a philosophy of art. Tibor Machan had similarly characterized Rand's esthetics as a "bold romanticism"—but "with a realistic, rational basis to it"; see "Ayn Rand: A Contemporary Heretic," The Occasional Review, No. 4, Winter 1976, p. 148.)
81. See below, n. 109.
82. See our comments in the section entitled "Peikoff's Summation."
86. When he met Rand, Hespers had already published numerous articles on esthetics in professional journals—as well as Meaning and Truth in the Arts (1946), a book based on his doctoral dissertation. He later served as president of the American Society for Aesthetics, from 1983 to 1985.
89. The Passion of Ayn Rand, p. 413; see also pp. 323-24.
90. Ironically, that event ended their friendship. At Rand's request, Hespers was the session's official "commentator." He reports that, following mildly critical remarks he made at the end of her talk, Rand "lashed out savagely" at him and consequently broke off all contact. Liberty, Sept. 1990, p. 52.
92. Hespers writes, in part: "Art 'tells us something' about the artist by communicating to us the artist's 'sense of life.'" (Ibid., p. 256). Significantly, Francis Sparshott, in his review of Hespers' book in the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XL1 (1983), 335-37, cites Rand's ideas on sense of life as one of two aspects of the book that might be ''of interest to anyone versed in aesthetics or in general philosophy."
94. The Passion of Ayn Rand, p. 413.
95. Liberty, July 1990, p. 26. Hespers' attitude is further reflected in this passage from Understanding the Arts (pp. 29-30): "When someone who isn't accustomed to contemporary art ... says 'There isn't any!' he isn't really denying that it's art ... What his remark means is that in his opinion it isn't good art ... ."
96. The Passion of Ayn Rand, p. 323.
98. See our comments in Part II (Aristos 1991, pp. 4-5).
100. This "subdivision" roughly corresponds to Peikoff's discussion of "Romantic Literature as Illustrating the Role of Philosophy in Art."
101. In "Art and Sense of Life," Rand states: "The esthetic principles which apply to all art ... and which must guide an objective evaluation, are outside the scope of this discussion. I will mention only that such principles are defined by the science of esthetics ... " (The Romantic Manifesto, pp. 42-43.)
102. That, indeed, is the theme of Rand's short story "The Simplest Thing in the World" (ch. 12 in The Romantic Manifesto), in which the protagonist, a novelist, is unable to write a commercial story that would require betraying his sense of life. See also Aristos 9/91, n. 17.
103. See The Romantic Manifesto, pp. 74-75; and our discussion in Part V (Aristos 1992, p. 6).
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Readers' Forum

We invite your comments on our critical introduction to Ayn Rand's philosophy of art. Letters become the property of Aristos, and we reserve the right to edit for length or clarity.