

The Curse and Promise of the Absolutely Abstract

At a broad and fundamental level, art is the expression of sentiment, belief or imagination using creative tools and skills. This expression manifests itself in various forms- musical performance, visual art, dance, theatre and literature are among the most visible examples. Art in terms of effort ranges from painstakingly made and time consuming paintings to arguably less deliberate street graffiti. Goehr describes what she believes to be functional attributes of art- that observers and listeners experience it removed from their empirical surroundings and purely in abstract form. She believes that this is an *active* deed that requires them to enter a mindset concentrated purely on the work of art, dismissive of reality and the self. Here she seems to suggest that this mindset is necessary to truly experience and enjoy art, and that any lesser removal from the real world is indicative of a lesser experience or understanding of the art. In this essay, I shall analyse her proposition and explain why I disagree with its suggested mechanism and endgoal. More crucially, I shall explain why I disagree with it being generalised.

The first assertion Goehr makes is that appreciating art involves *removing* oneself from the real world and rendering it purely aesthetic and abstract. She characterises it to be an escape mechanism of sorts, allowing for mental and abstract exercise without involving elements of the real world. I will assume here that by *real world* she is referring to empirical happenings we are witnessing and aware of on a daily basis. This may include the conversation you had with your mother in the morning, the recent speech made by your country's President, the car crash you saw from your window or the colour of your room's walls. The glaring premise of her proposition is that it is possible for abstract concepts to exist independent of what our senses perceive of the real world, and that humans are capable of conjuring these. A materialist would argue here that there doesn't exist any such realm beyond the physical universe. This is a monist stance- it claims that the world consists of only one substance, and the 'abstract ideas' that we refer to are only interpretations and perceptions of this very physical world. A simple way to understand this is to try and fathom an object, being or even concept that you have never thought of before. Anything that comes to mind is likely to be at least indirectly based on something you have empirically seen. For example, if I try to think of a new kind of animal, it is likely to be a

combination of animals I already know to exist. Similarly, it is impossible to visualise an entirely new colour.

A counter narrative may point out that many thought processes are purely based on logic or reasoning and not at all on empirical surroundings. My ability to be aware of my own cognition or to prefer one ethical doctrine over the other doesn't seem dependent on the physical world in any way. For example, a syllogism in its skeleton form isn't contingent on any kind of physical object. However, note that the conception and usage of such reasoning is created by the empirical world. A syllogism in a vacuum has absolutely no utility- its essence and value is derived quite directly from its application in the real world. Therefore even these kinds of abstract concepts or *a priori* propositions do not exist independent of the real world.

Alternatively, a nominalist would argue that these abstract concepts exist but only as names, not as existing substances or objects themselves. That is to say, while the title 'Great Expectations' may exist in reference to the published novel, the story 'Great Expectations' in itself is not a real or fathomable concept. Even here, notice that the physical existence of Great Expectations is necessary for any consequential abstract concept to exist- whether that be as a published book or a verbally narrated story. Even if it exists only as an idea in the head of the author, it still has been contrived based on real world experiences. Every idea in our head is a product of our brain processing the data our senses receive as input.

For all the above reasons, at a very fundamental level, Goehr's premise itself falls. I have shown that it is impossible for abstract concepts to exist in complete removal from the empirical world and the 'purely aesthetic experience' she refers to simply doesn't exist.

However, the above analysis takes on the quote literally. Perhaps Goehr's stance was softer. I will now interpret that she is asserting that people use art to escape their *current* circumstances and *current* emotions. It seems quite relatable, given that many of us turn to a good movie after a stressful day at work or listen to music in order to feel better and stop thinking about a bad grade. The core question here is with regard to how people access art. Here I am willing to concede that there are certainly instances of people who instrumentalise art to cope with their own struggles in reality, or simply to crowd out reality with happier and more appealing sentiments offered by art. In fact, I am willing to concede that quite a significant proportion of people who enjoy art do so to serve this very purpose. Even then, however, I have two contentions with the quote.

The first is that this shouldn't be generalised as a necessary aspect of the artistic experience. The reason for this is that a lot of art's importance in society comes from the very opposite narrative, which is that art should be enjoyed and used in the context of the real world. Every art movement has been a reaction to real world circumstances- offering powerful political beliefs and symbols, moving translations of the emotion experienced by people across boundaries. Examples of this are Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, which reflects on painful and gory loss of life during war, and the Surrealist art movement that rose in reaction to the faith crisis being experienced worldwide due to increasing focus on science and rationality.

One could take this very example and counter argue that surrealism is a very good example in favour of the quote because it involved people turning to art for relief from trends in the real world, an escape from reality. But even then the art had a layered impact such that even if people turned to it for escape, they experienced along with that a heightened awareness of reality because of the stark contrast being highlighted by the artwork. This cannot be done if art is totally removed from societal context surrounding it.

Crucially, many popular works of art gained fame largely because of how the story it narrated resonated with people. This ability of art to share grief and happiness necessitates that the art be grounded in real world circumstances. People are able to reflect and introspect when they observe art, they are able to dip into emotions and feelings they otherwise may never have come in touch with. Art calls out the flaws of reality, emphasises on its shortcomings, shames people for their inescapable streaks of imperfection. None of this would be possible if art were solely an otherworldly experience, without any reference to reality.

Additionally, what of impressive architecture that was constructed solely to assert political rulers' authority in his state and beyond? What of the beautiful Byzantine murals that were used to convey the superiority of the Church to people? None of these allowed people to escape reality, since they were designed to cement certain beliefs in the minds of people so as to have social outcomes in reality. Does that disqualify them from the category of 'art'? That would not be justified, because regardless of the intent and reception, these are expressions of creative skill that have provoked thought and awe in people.

For a moment, let us even forget art that is heavy with underlying messages. Let us consider art that was simply made to be appreciated at face value. When one sees a Grandma Moses painting depicting people celebrating Christmas in a town, do they wish to completely forget their reality and drown their thoughts in this so called purely aesthetic realm? Many would want

to reminisce the times they've spent with their family during Christmas. This simple but powerful ability that art has to evoke memories is another important aspect. Its feature of facilitating people in recalling memories is *mutually exclusive* with Goehr's idea of an art experience totally detached from reality.

Given this array of the purposes art serves, I have shown that restricting it to one definition is not justified since it would result in the dismissal of many works as simply not art, as well as the dismissal of many people's experience of art as inferior to what Goehr's believes to be the ideal artistic experience. Note here that I am not arguing that these are the only ways art should be interpreted, rather that they are important ones and shouldn't be disregarded.

My second contention with the quote is that even in cases where people use art to escape reality, they tend to use it as a metric to measure society. An Opera that plays out a perfectly Utopian society doesn't only intend and allow for people to slip into this fantasy and forget their harsh reality, but also to set goals and aspirations in society. The sculpture of an evidently strong man with his chin rested on his hand, deep in thought, became famous as *The Thinker* not only because of the excellence in skill that it exhibits, but also because it set a standard. It portrayed an ideal man as of that time in history, who combined intellectual and physical prowess. It feeds an image of perfection that people work towards. Again, it is impossible to set this kind of ideal without reference to and context in reality. Therefore, even in cases where Goehr's idea of detachment from reality is valid, it is never completely so, especially at the subconscious levels of human cognition.

Goehr says that that this active abstraction of artwork from reality which results from a state of self and world forgetfulness leads to entering the new world of the work of art. Given the definitional tone of this quote, she seems to be suggesting that this is either the *only way* or the *best way* to access art. I have already dealt with the first option, having shown the numerous ways in which art can be accessed apart from as an escape from reality, and will now look at the latter. One could argue in favour of the quote that the artistic experience is diluted by external influences and thus less enjoyable when experienced in the context of the real world. The essence of the art is lost when mixed with so many interpretations, political messages, individual nostalgia and historical baggage. It is hard to reach and evaluate the true meaning, skill and value of art if you are forced to associate it with other perhaps controversial or meaningful parts of life. If X is extremely meaningful to you and likely to trigger certain sentiments, its association with Y makes your judgment of Y biased. Quite simply,

X = emotionally meaningful

Y= art that is abstract and detached from reality

X + Y = art becomes emotionally meaningful, and therefore your interpretation of it is biased

While it is true that this association is likely to skew your interpretation of the art, it is important to consider the relevance of this argument (is a total detachment of art from reality ever possible?) and whether art that is free from emotional baggage is necessarily better. With regard to the first, I have already explained why art without reference to reality is meaningless and impossible to create. Even if the artist were to produce something in a completely random manner and therefore ensure that it has no specific intentions and is thus, in theory at least, independent of circumstances in reality, it doesn't stop the observers from interpreting and making immediate associations of that art with something else. It is impossible to control the thought processes of every individual who sees a painting, and because of humans' psychological wiring which causes them to constantly associate, it is impossible to ever create art that isn't immediately burdened with some linkage to reality or the other. More importantly, it is definitionally contradictory for art not to have any meaning and scope for interpretation. Meaning is what differentiates any other set of concentric circles from those painted by Kandinsky (by meaning here I refer to a sense of relevance and purpose that the existence of something has) Meaning is art's *essence* (essence being defined as the necessary attribute without which something ceases to be itself) Given that meaningfulness is a necessary aspect of art, and humans derive meaningfulness from reality, it is impossible to detach art and reality.

But secondly, is art detached from meaning better than the alternative? Without the biases referred to above, would art evoke the same emotions and have the same impact? If art weren't to touch upon sentiments close to our heart, would we care about it at all? Is an objective, unbiased evaluation of art really the ideal artistic experience? Given that art is immensely subjective, I will not make Goehr's mistake of generalising and leave this question open to the reader. Personally, I would argue that art in a vacuum cannot possibly evoke emotion because the emotion is being sourced from real world experiences. Goehr's idea of an artistic experience without these emotions seems painfully bland, and completely devoid of the very experience so many fall in love with. Without that kind of biased and meaningful experience, the artistic experience, in my opinion, is lost.

Therefore I have proven that Goehr's endgoal of an artistic experience is not ideal at all, and at best ideal to only some. Now I will go on to explain why her suggested mechanism is also likely to worsen the experience.

Let us look at Goehr's idea of this transition from the real world to purely aesthetic world being an *active* deed. This indicates that she expects listeners and observers to consciously convert their sensory and thought frame into a purely abstract one. I disagree with this prescription because it hinders the appreciation of art instead of enhancing it. Appreciation of aesthetic is characterised to be intuitive and free flowing. Perhaps it takes a degree in art to best evaluate intricacies of technicality and artistic history, but sheer and honest enjoyment of art is unadulterated and natural. If art were to be enjoyed in a deliberate and learned manner, people would simply read the Wikipedia page on Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, understand it's historical context and technicalities, and be satisfied. People could simply read descriptions of Magritte's paintings and feel as though they had experienced his art. This is not the case because there is a surge of emotion and a provocation of thoughts that is unique to the direct witnessing of art. It is impossible to suppress if it exists and equally impossible to cultivate if it doesn't. Given that artistic appreciation is of such an intuitive nature, and also that humans have limited ability for conscious attention, adding in this need for *actively* transferring into a purely abstract mindset (which I have already proven impossible) only results in creating *unnecessary competition for the brain's bandwidth*. It does not seem justified to take on this deed if it does not result in an improved experience but rather restricts the actual appreciation of art. Again, I am willing to agree that perhaps this is a methodology that works for some, but do not agree with it being a generalised standard given that the experience of art differs from individual to individual.

Even if all of the above fails to convince the reader, let us turn to a very basic and necessary attribute of art. This is that it cannot be restricted. Historically, art has always epitomised the freedom of expression and creativity, a completely blank canvas on which to use whatever colours in whatever manner. Art is defined by its flexibility and its expansive scope. To restrict the experience or definition of art to only things that are removed from the real world is a blatant contradiction of its essence. Without its space for diverse intention, creation and interpretation, it ceases to be art as the institution we have made it to be in society. Why aren't subjects like Physics, or Biology, or Economics considered 'art'? Are these not also fields that often require thinking out of the box and cogitating, observing and deriving reasonable explanations and solutions for phenomenon around us? Aren't there many who are deeply passionate and emotionally invested in these fields? The answer is obvious. All these subjects ultimately turn to

rules. All of these fall upon structures and foundations that define their ambit and capacity. Art on the other hand, is proud in its resistance of rules and definition. **The definition of art is that it *cannot be defined*, and given this, any attempt to restrict it doesn't stand.**

Therefore, I have first and foremost engaged with Goehr's assumption that a purely abstract realm exists. Having shown why it doesn't, I have elucidated why given the many diverse purposes art serves, while Goehr's statement may be true to some, it cannot be generalised. After showing why her endgoal is not ideal, I have also explained why Goehr's proposed mechanism for the ideal experience of art is counterproductive. For all the above reasons, I believe that the "new world" of the work of art Goehr refers to is not new at all, but only a recycled reality. Art's impact lies in its ability to glorify and make beautiful even the ugliest of truth- but, whether it be creating or interpreting, to do so it requires its most critical tool, which is reality.