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Criticism and Interpretation Redux : Responses to My Commentators

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Criticism and Interpretation Redux: Responses to My Commentators**Introduction**

Kalle Puolakka, Stephen Davies, Cynthia Freeland, Elisabeth Schellekens, Gemma Argüella Manresa and Randall Auxier have been generous enough to comment on my article "Criticism and Interpretation." I am grateful for their time and attention. In what follows, I will take up their objections commentator by commentator.

Kalle Puolakka

Kalle Puolakka raises three issues: 1) are everyday interpretations and art interpretations alike; 2) can a Deweyan defense of modest actual mentalism be developed; 3) can hypothetical intentionalism do a better job dealing with features of artworks that appear unconnected to authorial intentions? I shall answer these questions in the order Puolakka advanced them.

In response to Puolakka's first question, I observe that he presumes that interpretation occurs in response to bewilderment in both art and life and, since bewilderment is not the typical response in ordinary discourse, there is neither an analogy between art interpretation and ordinary interpretation nor a continuum. But bewilderment sets the standard too high for interpretation – far higher than I have set it. Bewilderment may come into play in certain art works, such as some avant-garde productions, but it not required for interpretation to be apposite in either art or ordinary discourse. Interpretation in art and ordinary intercourse obtains constantly without being prompted by bewilderment. It may be set in motion merely by anomalies.

Moreover, as anyone who has ever looked at a transcript of everyday speech knows, ordinary discourse is shot full of anomalies – ellipses that need to be filled-in, ambiguous word choices, unstated presuppositions and all sorts of other deviations from the norm, which, as pointed out by philosophers like Donald Davidson, we need to negotiate in our interpretive stride.¹ These need not be bewildering but they nevertheless call for interpretive adjustment – reversing a "he" for a "she" or inadvertently placing a "no" where it doesn't belong and

¹ See D. Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in: idem, *Truth, Language and History*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 2005. See also his "James Joyce and Humpty-Dumpty" in the same volume.

innumerable other conversational glitches. Likewise artworks contain many comparable, less-than-bewildering anomalies which invite interpretation and are on a continuum with the less-than-bewildering interpretations we supply constantly in dialogue with our conspecifics.

Of course, sometimes there are words and deeds, perhaps especially our actions, that are arrestingly perplexing and call for interpretation. We may wonder why our lover used that tone of voice. Often we find ourselves saying in response to the words and deeds of others: "Why did you say that?" Or, "Why did you do that?" Perplexity rather than a mere sense of anomaly or of a deviation from expectations may prompt interpretation in, I want to stress, *both* art and everyday life. So again, both these interpretive practices are on a continuum.

Of course, some artworks are bewildering and call for interpretation for that reason. But, equally, there are also bewildering events in everyday life that cry out for interpretation.

That not all interpretation in everyday life is provoked by bewilderment does not establish that art interpretation and everyday interpretation are discontinuous, since in both art and life, what is simply anomalous, unexpected, and perplexing typically elicits interpretation. Indeed, in both art and life, what is merely a choice worthy of questioning is an occasion for interpretation as when we so often query "Why did you do that?"

Needless to say, art interpretation differs from much ordinary social exchange because it often presupposes knowledge about the context and history of the artwork that is not available to everyone. Yet this is only to call attention to the fact that art interpretation is context specific. This makes art interpretation no more discontinuous from everyday discourse than does the context-specificity of gardeners' conversations take them out of the realm of the ordinary.

With respect to Puolakka's defense of a view like mine on Deweyan/aesthetic grounds, I have nothing to say until I have a better sense of what it would look like. I am not a great fan of Dewey's aesthetics, but anyway, I wish Prof. Puolakka good luck with this project.

Lastly, Puolakka proposes that hypothetical intentionalism is better suited to interpret features of works that cannot apparently be connected to the artist's actual intentions. Puolakka writes in terms of *intentions*, but my view, modest actual mentalism, speaks in terms of our mental stock. I think it is very unlikely that there are features of artworks that are not connected at all to the artist's mental stock, conscious, tacit and even unconscious.

Furthermore, the contest that Puolakka imagines also strikes me as highly improbable, since hypothetical intentionalism and modest actual mentalism share most of the same interpretive resources. The only difference is that my position allows resort to what the hypothetical intentionalists stigmatize as "private." But this means in effect that any feature the hypothetical intentionalist can find a hypothesis for, the modest actual intentionalist can as well. So absent the so-called private avowals, the two views will arrive at comparable hypotheses. Thus, it is hard to imagine cases where the hypothetical intentionalist will have the advantage Puolakka contemplates.

Puolakka appears to accept the hypothetical intentionalist's claim that it counts in favor of an interpretation that it makes an artwork turn out better. Although this appeals to the nice guy in many, I have always rejected this suggestion. In art, we care about rewarding artists for what they have actually achieved which will be connected to what she has done which will be connected to her real purposes. But this is not consistent with attributing made-up purposes to artists, however generously minded or kind-hearted that may seem. There are no "A's for effort" in art.

Making artworks seem better is not a grounds for supporting an interpretation, especially where we know the author's interpretation is at variance with the author's actual purposes (as in the much discussed case of A. E. Houseman).

I do not think that we commend or should commend artists for what they could have achieved but rather we praise or blame them for what they have done.

Stephen Davies

Stephen Davies raises questions about the relation of anti-intentionalism to actual intentionalism, about the value-maximizing view, and about authorial endorsements of allegedly unintended meanings, as well as proposing an analogy between artworks and children. Let me address these concern one at a time.

Anti-intentionalism: I was very surprised by Stephen Davies' comments concerning anti-intentionalism's putative closeness to modest actual mentalism. As Davies points out, Wimsatt and Beardsley categorically denied the relevance of evidence of authorial intention *external* to the text. Modest actual mentalism accepts that such evidence may be relevant and even, in some cases, decisive. The views do not converge. Also, the anti-intentionalist position was developed far beyond its founding document. Beardsley expressively rejected the notion that intentions were "in" the text on Humean grounds and argued that [literary] interpretations had to be grounded in the meaning of words their histories, and linguistic conventions. The evolved versions of anti-intentionalism, stridently reject reference to authorial meaning-intentions, even if that may be somewhat ambiguous in "The Intentional Fallacy." Thus, the contrast between anti-intentionalism and modest actual mentalism is not exaggerated. Looking at the development of anti-intentionalism, the orthodox view seems correct.

The Value Maximizing View: I do not think that I confuse the value-maximizing view with hypothetical intentionalism, as Davies appears to suggest. I do think that they both invoke something like the institution of literature (and the arts in general) and its supposed protocols in defense of their reluctance to acknowledge the importance of actual authorial intentions. But otherwise I do not equate them.

It is true that I reject both views on the grounds that the actual practice of art interpretation evinces no settled opinion on the matter of authorial intention. Critics are as apt – or even more apt – to cite evidence of authorial intention as they are to eschew it. Consequently, existing practice does not support the claim that actual authorial intentions are out of bounds. However, I do not claim that actual practice entails my view. I defend modest actual intentionalism on

normative grounds and I challenge hypothetical intentionalism and the value maximizing view to do likewise.

Davies maintains proponents of the maximizing view, like himself, are more conservative than their postmodern brethren because they do not wish to betray the identity of the text. Davies asserts that this may be achieved by distinguishing between ontological (or categorical) authorial intentions and content (or meaning) authorial intentions. The former will be acceptable, the latter not. Davies concedes there may be some slippage here, but, without argument, he contends it will not be serious. Yet, with a great deal of avant-garde art, there is a categorical commitment to subvert conventional meaning. On Davies' view, is that an ontological or a content intention?

I have argued that in philosophy of interpretation, we need to distinguish the epistemological question from the constitutive question – the question of how we come to know the meaning of a work from the question of what determines the meaning of the work. It seems that there are three possible answers to the constitutive question: the artwork itself, the audience, or the author. Claiming that the artwork determines the work, it seems to me is no more than a *façon de parler*; taken literally, it amounts to animism. Hypothetical intentionalism and the value maximizing view suggest that the audience determines meaning. But that seems to lead to indeterminacy of meaning as well as to the counterintuitive implication that you, rather than I, determine what I say. So, modest actual mentalism seems to me to be the best option.

Authorial Endorsements: Sometimes we encounter cases where an artist endorses an interpretation of her work that she avows was not something that she intended. Davies wants to know how a modest, actual mentalist would handle such a case.

The first think to note is that neither modest actual mentalist nor most actual intentionalists are committed to accepting artistic pronouncements about their intentions at face value. Artists sometimes assert intentions that don't have and/or deny intentions that they do have. In this, artists are like the rest of us. And as in the everyday course of affairs, we have no more reason to accept authorial pronouncements than we do the pronouncements of friends, neighbors, and politicians. Artists like everyone else lie and deceive themselves.

Artistic pronouncements endorsing allegedly unintended meanings, like any other artistic pronouncements, must be treated gingerly. For example, artists are often opportunistic and will concur with their interpreters in order to ingratiate themselves to them and/or to seduce a wider audience. An example of this is Alain Robbe-Grillet's endorsement of a psychologistic interpretation of his novels. Thus, one must be careful about endorsements of putatively unintended meanings.

Modest, actual mentalists and most actual intentionalists need not go with whatever an artist says. One must weigh what the artist says against other factors including the artwork itself, its context, and other pronouncements by the same artist.

The modest actual mentalist does not have to agree that the work means *x* just because the artist says it does. And that applies to cases where the artist says she

likes an interpretation that she never thought of. For example, we may reject such an endorsement if the supposed meaning was not available cognitively to her when the work was created – for example, if the proposed “meaning” involves some arcane, esoteric metaphysical theory, known only to a handful of adepts.

However flattering such an interpretation may be to the artist intellectually, inasmuch as it was not part of her cognitive stock when the work was created, it cannot be a part of the meaning of the work. For, it is her actual, originating mental states that fix the meaning of the work – no matter what the artist claims. That is the target our interpretations should strive to identify. Since the “metaphysical” conception in this example was not part of the artist’s mental stock at the time the work was “born,” it cannot determine the meaning of the work, no matter how much the artist likes it.

But, it might be asked, haven’t there been cases where artists have endorsed unthought of interpretations sincerely? Probably. But in those cases, I think what is most likely is that interpreter has put into articulate form something the artist had in mind, but, in descriptive, verbal terms, only vaguely. Artists need not be interpreters of their own works. The work is frequently said to “speak” for itself. We have critics – interpreters – to describe the work to us on our own terms. That is why we have interpreters. Thus, I hazard that when an artist sincerely endorses an interpretation that she says she had not thought of, what is going on is that the interpreter is articulating something that the artist had never put into words exactly, but which nevertheless feels “right,” in the same way that the artwork felt right at the moment of its completion.

Of course, we expect that the interpretation of a critic will be more linguistically explicit and verbally articulate than that of the artist will be. The artist would be a critic otherwise (which, though possible, is not necessary). Thus, in those cases where the artist legitimately endorses meaning that she says she never thought of, I suspect that that is because she feels the interpretation is getting at *the same thing* that she was getting at.

Is this account of what is going on viciously circular? I think not, since it will be based on a number of factors about the work and its context and the artist’s biography.

The Artwork as Child. Davies rejects the metaphor of the artwork as a conversation and in its stead proposes the artwork as child. His reason for rejecting the conversational model appears to be that some artists, like Harold Pinter, refused to answer questions about their work. This is a strange objection, since the conversation model is not based on artist’s speaking apart from their works. The work is the pertinent element of conversation. But in any event, the artwork as child analogy does not seem to me to work in Davies’ favor. After all, we do not service to the developing child by interpreting what she says in ways she doesn’t intend, no matter how much it pleases us. That borders on child abuse.

Cynthia Freeland

Cynthia Freeland questions the originality of my position, my use of the notion of abduction, my alleged claim that intention always precedes action, and my putative overestimation of the authority of artists’ pronouncements.

Prof. Freeland questions whether my arguments are new by associating my position with Robert Stecker, presumably because Stecker also employs a Gricean framework. But I did not claim novelty for my viewpoint on the basis of simply invoking Grice. That was done long before Stecker and not by me, but, I believe, by William Tolhurst.² Influenced by the philosopher of language, Stephen Neale, I have introduced to the discussion in aesthetics, I believe, the distinction between the constitutive question and the epistemological question *and* the undermining, on Gricean grounds, of the need for the notion of utterance meaning (neither of which moves are to be found in Stecker). As for the idea of hypothesis formation, that was already present in my own work and that of Jerrold Levinson in the early nineteen nineties. Moreover, what I would also claim to be original in my recent writing is the Linguistic Fallacy which is not available in Stecker or elsewhere.

Prof. Freeland claims that I base my contention of the superiority of modest actual mentalism over hypothetical intentionalism on the basis of the modest actual mentalist's use of abduction. This is inaccurate. Both interpretive approaches will employ abduction in the standard case. Both will employ hypotheses in the same way. The epistemological difference between the two views is the distinction that the hypothetical intentionalist draws between public and private evidence. I maintain that this distinction is arbitrary and unsustainable in practice as well as being at odds with a great deal of contemporary (and traditional) interpretive activity.

That is the basis of the epistemic divide that I draw between my view and hypothetical intentionalism. Abduction has nothing to do with it, since I readily concede that both sides make use of it.

Abduction is especially important in my view in relation to the Linguistic Fallacy. The Linguistic Fallacy appears to treat all interpretive practice as something akin to reading a sentence – decoding dictionary in hand (or mind). I argue that this is a mistake since interpretation is typically a form of abduction. I see no reason why a hypothetical intentionalists must commit themselves to the Linguistic Fallacy, although some may have done so in the past.

Freeland attacks my position on the grounds that "not all actions are done 'with intentions' in the mind ahead of time at all." For instance, intentions, under one construal must be conscious forethoughts. However, modest actual mentalism is not such a narrow form of intentionalism; it pertains to the artist's entire mental stock including tacit presuppositions and unacknowledged desires. The move to talk about the the artist's mental stock – cognitive and emotive, conscious, tacit and unconscious – follows upon Richard Wollheim's criticism of intentionalism, narrowly conceived.³ Thus, Freeland's criticisms of my view in terms of the subconscious miss their mark. She is attacking another kind of theory.

2 W. Tolhurst, "On What a Text Is and How It Means," in: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 19, #1 (1979), pp. 3-14. I rely on Part I of P. Grice's *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1989. Also relevant to my view is D. Davidson's requirement of interpretability. See his "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," *op. cit.*

3 See my "Art Interpretation," in: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51, #12 (2011), pp. 117-135.

The same kind of objection applies to Freeland's Collingwoodian observation that the artist's intention need not precede the execution of her work – it need not be a matter of forethought or preplanning but rather it might emerge in the execution of the work. There is nothing in modest actual mentalism or even in modest actual intentionalism that precludes this. No intentionalist I know of has ever claimed that the relevant art intention had to be a fore-intention (save perhaps Edgar Allen Poe in his "Philosophy of Composition," although that may have been ironic).

Freeland also appears to worry modest actual mentalists and actual intentionalists put too much faith in authorial pronouncements. But as argued in my response to Davies, modest actual intentionalists and actual intentionalists know that artists may dissemble and/or misspeak. We do not put blind faith in the declarations of artists but strive to identify the relevant mental states that determine their performances by interrogating authorial pronouncements in terms of their consistency with the artist's oeuvre, her other statements, historical and cultural context and so forth. Authorial pronouncements are not taken aboard whole cloth and uncritically, but, by the same token, that does not make them altogether forbidden territory either.

Elisabeth Schellekens

Prof. Schellekens' response mainly concerns a worry that my view will have difficulty negotiating the work of the recent avant-garde, such as the Young British Artists. I am not familiar with all of the works she cites. However, her explicit reason for referring to these works is that they are "open." That is, they *invite* viewers to interpret them in their own way. I do not think putatively "open works" pose a problem for modest actual mentalism or for most versions of actual intentionalism. For, whether or not a work possesses an open-ended structure is itself determined by authorial intention.

Pace Schellekens, open artworks have appeared throughout the modernist and postmodernist stages of modern art. For instance, Merce Cunningham intends his choreography to encourage the interpretive play of his audiences.⁴ This invitation is built into his work in a number of ways. For instance, the relation between the dance movement and the accompanying music is typically aleatoric; often the dancers hear it for the first time on opening night. The chance relation of the music and the dance opens a space for the audience to make what they will of whatever correspondences they find between the sound and image. But since it is Cunningham's intention that has determined that this is an open structure, it, and comparable open works like it by other artists, said open artworks problematize neither modest actual mentalism nor most forms of actual intentionalism. When it comes to open-ended artworks, these interpretive approaches will endorse interpretive play precisely because that is what is intended.⁵

4 Schellekens also cites some works that promote open-ended moods as counterexamples to my view. I have not seen these works. And I am not sure whether it is their open-endedness or their moodiness that presumably presents a problem for me. But, provisionally, without having seen them, let me say that their moodiness should not challenge my view, since my view includes expressive properties as an object of interpretation whereas their open-endedness is, I hypothesize, intended.

5 This is a point that I have made throughout my writings on interpretation.

Moreover, as the Cunningham example implies, the issue of avant-garde works with open-ended interpretive invitations are not of distinctively recent vintage. Yet, at the same time, I am not as convinced as Schellekens that recent avant-garde art is so pervasively open-ended. A great deal of it is political and promotes determinate theses regarding such subjects as capitalism, consumerism, racism sexism, homophobia, and so on.

Schellekens maintains that I claim that evaluation is always the consequence of interpretation. That is not accurate, since I maintain that there are artworks that do not require interpretations. Nevertheless, they can be evaluated.⁶

Schellekens further points out that evaluation may critically proceed interpretation. I think what she has in mind are cases where when one is attracted to a work, one naturally goes on to ask “why?” That is undeniably correct. But it is a mistake, I think, to identify that initial attraction with critical evaluation. It does not become a critical evaluation until the grounds for approval have been secured, as they might be by an interpretation in the relevant case.

Gemma Argüello Manresa

Gemma Argüello Manresa’s major objection to modest actual mentalism appears to rest upon her apparent rejection of my distinction between the constitutive question (what fixes the meaning of an artwork?) and the epistemological question (how do we figure out the meaning of the artwork?) with respect to interpretation. Yet these seem distinguishable insofar as you may know the answer to the constitutive question without having a settled way of discovering the meaning. The issue is the difference between what fixes the determinate meaning and finding it where fixing is a metaphysical matter and finding is epistemic.

Manresa challenges my deployment of the Gricean framework by alluding to our recognition of emotions on the basis of facial expressions and bodily postures, where nothing about the persons bearing these features is known to the observers. Presumably, these examples, where they are experimentally substantiated cross-culturally, would be instances of natural meanings. Artworks are instances of non-natural meanings. Presumably when artists employ naturally meaningful grimaces and gestures – as do actors and dancers on stage and screen – they are employing them intentionally and we recognize their intentions to do so. Whether or not intentions are involved in the recognition of basic emotional facial arrays in the field, so to speak, is not obviously germane to the question of their use in artworks, including acting and dancing in theater and motion pictures, not to mention their mobilization in portraits, sculptures and photos.

Manresa’s concluding remarks about evaluation are not directly pertinent to the theory of modest actual mentalism, since it is a theory of interpretation, not evaluation. Though the sorts of interpretations modest actual mentalism delivers are relevant to evaluation, the evaluative questions Manresa presses cannot be answered from inside modest, actual mentalism.

⁶ Also, I cannot be thought to advance the view that all interpretation precedes evaluation since I allow that historians and cultural theorists may interpret artworks without evaluating them.

Randall Auxier

Randall Auxier presents me with a putative problem case and an allegedly alternative theory. Let me deal with them in that order.

The problem case comes from Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum*. There is a piece of paper which is a document belonging to a secret society. It is destroyed. Eco was asked what the document contained. He said he didn't know. He was asked if it was a grocery list. He said he didn't know. Auxier wants to know how a modest, actual mentalist will deal with the case.

Well, unless there is evidence to the contrary, I see no problem in taking Eco at his word. This is not because I accept anything an author claims, as my discussion of Davies indicates. Nevertheless, to suspect an author's veracity does require some grounds for suspicion.

Furthermore, I don't see why this is a problem case. Perhaps Eco just needed a something to move the plot along, but he had no reason to decide anything else about it. Novels, at any rate, are necessarily indeterminate ontologically. Auxier insists that there must be a fact of the matter about whether or not the document is or is not a grocery list. That is true in the world that we inhabit. But it need not be true on the other side of the fiction operator. Must there be a fact of the matter regarding the number of Lady MacBeth's children.

Auxier calls his alternative theory actual intentionalism and contrasts with my theory which he says is virtual. The difference appears to be that what Auxier calls virtual intentionalism does not recognize that intentions can be formed in the process of creating an artwork. Virtual intentions exist prior to the artwork. In this, Auxier returns us to one of Freeland's complaints.

However, to repeat our response to Freeland, modest actual mentalism is not committed to the view that authorial intentions must pre-exist the pertinent artworks. Like Collingwood, I believe that artists typically come to clarify their intentions in the process of composing their works. So in that specific regard, there is no difference between Auxier and me.

I do, however, distrust his suggestion that artworks *explain* virtual intentions. I deny this because I do not believe that artworks explain anything. Nor do they have intentions or communicate them. Artists do that. To think the artworks do it is a form of critical animism, a superstitious manner of speaking we would be better off without.