Ruskin’s Idea of Relation and its Connection to Post-Modern Painting

The first volume of John Ruskin’s renowned study *Modern Painters* (1840) includes a discussion of the idea of ‘Relation’ (p26). Within a short section Ruskin expresses his belief in the importance of the intellectual relationship of subjects within a painting and their significance in regards to the aesthetic qualities. Although he is notoriously fickle and unstable in his art criticism the points raised in this chapter are very relevant today.

‘Under this term relation, must be arranged everything relating to the conception of the subject and to the congruity and relation of its parts; not as they enhance each others beauty by known and constant laws of composition, but as they give each other expression and meaning, by particular application, requiring distinct thought to discover or to enjoy.’ (John Ruskin 1840, p26)

Fundamentally the viewer will look at the painting and not just find pleasure in the formal qualities but also appreciate the subject(s) on an intellectual level. He gives a clear example of a painting that contains this ‘Relation’ in Turner’s ‘Dido Building Carthage’ (1815)

‘The principal object in the foreground of Turner’s “building of Carthage” is a group of children sailing toy boats. The exquisite choice of this incident, as expressive of the ruling passion, which was to be the source of future greatness, in preference to the tumult of busy stonemasons or arming soldiers, is quite as appreciable when it is told as when it is seen.’ (Ruskin 1840, p27)

Importantly at the end of this passage Ruskin says the intellectual quality of the painting is ‘quite as appreciable when it is told as when it is seen’ suggesting it is strong enough to exist independently of the aesthetic. This is strikingly modern and one could say that the painting of the 20th century onwards where, ‘Language increasingly invaded the canvas and the formal increasingly ‘appreciated the cognitive.’ (Thomas McEvilley 1993, p7), was a physical manifestation of this.

In terms of the aesthetic value Ruskin believed that it must enhance the intellectual matter. ‘The choice, for instance, of a particular lurid or appalling light, to illustrate an incident in itself terrible’ (Ruskin 1840, p27) If this was not so the painting would lose it’s ability to convey its expression as the aesthetic would stop the viewer fully comprehending the subject.
This balance is integral to the impact of the most significant works in history. From symbolism through to neo-expressionism, as time past the aesthetic of the painting radically moves away from the archaic, reflecting the changing intellectual condition. This was already happening during Ruskin’s lifetime with the late work of Turner, the Pre-Raphaelites and Whistler.

Ruskin suggested whatever approach aesthetically the painter took even if it was just the ‘scratch of a pen’ (Ruskin 1840, p27), if they were was talented enough they could convey the idea and speak to intellect of the viewer. Picasso changed his aesthetic repeatedly, cubism becoming his most recognisable style. This work aesthetically was very abstracted, yet combined with the ‘Relation’ of figures and objects in his paintings they are hugely effective.

In his painting Guernica (1937) the impaled horse could represent how the woman and child are being butchered like animals and the bull could be a metaphor for the fascist state or perhaps represent Picasso himself in a state of shock from the horror around him. The paintings subject carries the same kind of intellectual depth as Turner’s painting did yet the aesthetic approach is totally different.

‘Relation’ for Duchamp is more than an expression of social issues but also a critique of painting itself. In Tu m’ (1918) he chooses to use the traditional material of oil paint yet dialectically creates the illusion of shadows of his own Ready-mades. The ‘Relation’ of these subjects; the three-dimensional coloured cards, the industrial style painted hand and the painted tear in the canvas leaves the viewer asking what is painting capable of? How can it relate to objects? The mix of illusion and reality - particularity the safety pins pinned over the painted tear creates a ‘Relation’ that is self critical it stops the viewer following a typical intellectual direction it makes them think about the painting’s own value.
Although post-modernist painting is primarily intellectual it comes after a peak of formalist art championed by Clement Greenberg. Instigated by post-impressionist artists such as Matisse and Cezanne and later minimalists Mondrian and Pollock. These painters focused on the aesthetic and moved away from expressive intellectual subject, prioritising the values of colour and form.

For Greenberg in 1940 formalism was a way of preserving the value of painting by making it less accessible. The paintings ‘Relation’ is removed and it is therefore harder to comprehend and less likely to be assimilated by the public domain and become ‘kitsch’. However, the value of purely aesthetic painting dropped as the society came realise humanities flaws and the shocking atrocities it had committed. A simple formal painting could no longer deal with this.

‘The rejection of formalism came as ‘In the 1960s and 1970s Minimal artists, Conceptual artists and performance artists put art through a rigorous purification in which an attempt was made to eliminate the aesthetic as if it were a frivolous decoration - to eliminate precisely the aspect which had ruled the previous age.’ (McEvilley 1993, p9) Formal painting had no connectivity with the state of flux at that time.

It is interesting at this point to mention that during his lifetime Ruskin rejected formalism out right; ‘beauty must not draw the mind away from the expression’. (Ruskin 1858, Lecture I p15) For him ‘the utmost glory of the human body is a mean subject of contemplation’ (Ruskin 1858, Lecture I p15) and the same can be said of conceptual art.

The condition of painting following the collapse of formalism was self-destructive painters strove to make work with as little ‘aesthetic intention presence as possible’ but with strong ‘cognitive or ethical aspects.’(McEvilley 1993, p9) ‘The painting is not impressing the viewer through a display of skill. In it skill is negated.’(McEvilley 1993, p9) This approach was a way of denouncing painting as it though of as a part of modernisms’ flaws. This extreme approach could be seen, as I mentioned earlier, as the idea of ‘Relation’ being independent of the aesthetic.

The return of painting is surprising considering in the eyes of most post-modern critics it stood for everything negative and archaic about modernism. McEvilley suggest that because our culture ‘articulated themselves visually through painting for at least five centuries it is therefore in painting that they can be ‘immediately confronted.’ (McEvilley 1993, p10) this is shown by the return of figurative painting as the ‘figure brought social concerns back in to the practice of painting as the incorporation of language brought cognitive ones.’ (Thomas McEvilley 1993 p8)

Furthermore it began to be practiced with a ‘Conceptual deconstructive force that revealed itself in various ways, including quoting and simulation the prominent incorporation of verbal elements and less frequently, elements of performance.’ (McEvilley 1993, p108) This self-critical deconstruction can be clearly linked to Duchamp who academically played with painting and its capabilities intellectually as well as bringing other elements into his practice such as performance and film.
In modern painters Ruskin suggests that great paintings have a balance of various aesthetic and theoretical values such as ‘Relation’. Post-modern painting often shares these values. Neo-expressionism reintroduced the aesthetic aspect alongside the cognitive and ethical elements which had come to dominate in the 1970s.'(McEvilley 1993, p206) This sounds like the balance Ruskin suggested, more so when McEvilley suggests a new formula has emerged, one which should have an aesthetic aspect and should also ‘assert a cognitive aspect’ (McEvilley 1993, p206)

Carlos Maria Mariani would be an example of a Post-Modern painter working in this manner. Mariani is a conceptual painter whose work offers an ‘alternative mode of thought, to be used by all who seek refuge from mass-media induced mediocrity and cynicism...’ (David Ebony 2003) The use of the archaic classical style combined with a self-critical approach to the issues of post-modernism in The Hand Submits to the Intellect (1983) creates work that is unusual and intriguing.

'It exerts a considerable appeal to the intellect through a set of references to Modern and classical motifs and styles which interacts in a variety of controlled significations. This is an art which deals with the theme of ideal beauty while at the same time subjecting it to the elenchus (as Plato called it) the “test” or “trial” of the intellect.’ (McEvilley 1993, p136)

Similarly Peter Doig’s paintings use a wide range of references to create fascinating subject matter. He weaves mysterious narratives and generates fascinating images using scenes from horror films and photos from the publications such as the National Geographic. His painting ‘Blotter’ is a great example of the intellectual qualities discussed previously, the relationship between the man, staring down at his own reflection and the eerie frozen landscape is haunting. Furthermore the voyeuristic position of viewer seems like a reference to a horror movie scene while the small lonely figure is very reminiscent of a Friedrich painting.
‘Relation’ is integral in the history of painting and a valuable reason why certain works had such a significant impact. It gives the painting a more complex connection to the viewer than the immediate reaction to the aesthetic. There is a compelling depth to these of paintings. Today this intellectual quality is a necessity of a successful painting; each painting needs underlining concepts to defend its existence.

The powerful quality of post-modern painting is, as Frank Reijnders said, ‘It has become custom to place oneself within the temporal framework of the unstoppable progress of history from which point one can survey the social field: looking forwards and backwards’ (Frank Reijnders 2003, p20). Paintings today can be cultural hybrids composed from various references from the past and the present and these can come together within the subject creating an advanced version of Ruskin’s ‘Relation.’

However, while artists such as Peter Doig, and Carlos Maria Mariani borrow references from various sources and periods there are also possibilities in re-examining ideas by theorists such as Ruskin in a contemporary context. In doing so the painter may find ideas that resonate with them, such as Ruskin’s idea of ‘Relation’. If the artist then mixes these older elements with present theories and expectations they can create new methods of valuing the quality of contemporary painting. In turn these rules provides painters with the ability to push new barriers and begin radicalising the aesthetic in response.
Bibliography


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