**Art and Interpretation**

Interpretation in art refers to the attribution of meaning to a work. A point on which people often disagree is whether the artist’s or author’s intention is relevant to the interpretation of the work. In the Anglo-American analytic philosophy of art, views about interpretation branch into two major camps: intentionalism and anti-intentionalism, with an initial focus on one art, namely literature.

The anti-intentionalist maintains that a work’s meaning is entirely determined by linguistic and literary conventions, thereby rejecting the relevance of the author’s intention. The underlying assumption of this position is that a work enjoys autonomy with respect to meaning and other aesthetically relevant properties. Extra-textual factors, such as the author’s intention, are neither necessary nor sufficient for meaning determination. This early position in the analytic tradition is often called conventionalism because of its strong emphasis on convention. Anti-intentionalism gradually went out of favor at the end of the 20th century, but it has seen a revival in the so-called value-maximizing theory, which recommends that the interpreter seek value-maximizing interpretations constrained by convention and, according to a different version of the theory, by the relevant contextual factors at the time of the work’s production.

By contrast, the initial brand of intentionalism—actual intentionalism—holds that interpreters should concern themselves with the author’s intention, for a work’s meaning is affected by such intention. There are at least three versions of actual intentionalism. The absolute version identifies a work’s meaning fully with the author’s intention, therefore allowing that an author can intend her work to mean whatever she wants it to mean. The extreme version acknowledges that the possible meanings a work can sustain have to be constrained by convention. According to this version, the author’s intention picks the correct meaning of the work as long as it fits one of the possible meanings; otherwise, the work ends up being meaningless. The moderate version claims that when the author’s intention does not match any of the possible meanings, meaning is fixed instead by convention and perhaps also context.

A second brand of intentionalism, which finds a middle course between actual intentionalism and anti-intentionalism, is hypothetical intentionalism. According to this position, a work’s meaning is the appropriate audience’s best hypothesis about the author’s intention based on publicly available information about the author and her work at the time of the piece’s production. A variation on this position attributes the intention to a hypothetical author who is postulated by the interpreter and who is constituted by work features. Such authors are sometimes said to be fictional because they, being purely conceptual, differ decisively from flesh-and-blood authors.

This article elaborates on these theories of interpretation and considers their notable objections. The debate about interpretation covers other art forms in addition to literature. The theories of interpretation are also extended across many of the arts. This broad outlook is assumed throughout the article, although nothing said is affected even if a narrow focus on literature is adopted.

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**1. Key Concepts: Intention, Meaning, and Interpretation**

It is common for us to ask questions about works of art due to puzzlement or curiosity. Sometimes we do not understand the point of the work. What is the point of, for example, *Metamorphosis* by Kafka or Duchamp’s *Fountain*? Sometimes there is ambiguity in a work and we want it resolved. For example, is the final sequence of Christopher Nolan’s film *Inception* reality or another dream? Or do ghosts really exist in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*? Sometimes we make hypotheses about details in a work. For instance, does the woman in white in Raphael’s *The School of Athens* represent Hypatia? Is the conch in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* a symbol for civilization and democracy?

What these questions have in common is that all of them seek after things that go beyond what the work literally presents or says. They are all concerned with the implicit contents of the work or, for simplicity, with the meanings of a work. A distinction can be drawn between two kinds of meaning in terms of scope. Meaning can be global in the sense that it concerns the work’s theme, thesis, or point. For example, an audience first encountering Duchamp’s *Fountain* would want to know Duchamp’s point in producing this readymade or, put otherwise, what the work as a whole is made to convey. The same goes for Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, which contains so bizarre a plot as to make the reader wonder what the story is all about. Meaning can also be local insofar as it is about what a part of a work conveys. Inquiries into the meaning of a particular sequence in Christopher Nolan’s film, the woman in Raphael’s fresco, or the conch in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* are directed at only part of the work.

We are said to be interpreting when trying to find out answers to questions about the meaning of a work. In other words, interpretation is the attempt to attribute work-meaning. Here “attribute” can mean “recover,” which is retrieving something already existing in a work; or it can more weakly mean “impose,” which entails ascribing a meaning to a work without ontologically creating anything. Many of the major positions in the debate endorse either the impositional view or the retrieval view.

When an interpretative question arises, a frequent way to deal with it is to resort to the creator’s intention. We may ask the artist to reveal her intention if such an opportunity is available; we may also check what she says about her work in an interview or autobiography. If we have access to her personal documents such as diaries or letters, they too will become our interpretative resources. These are all evidence of the artist’s intention. When the evidence is compelling, we have good reason to believe it reveals the artist’s intention.

Certainly, there are cases in which external evidence of the artist’s intention is absent, including when the work is anonymous. This poses no difficulty for philosophers who view appeal to artistic intention as crucial, for they accept that internal evidence—the work itself—is the best evidence of the artist’s intention. Most of the time, close attention to details of the work will lead us to what the artist intended the work to mean.

But what is intention exactly? Intention is a kind of mental state usually characterized as a design or plan in the artist’s mind to be realized in her artistic creation. This crude view of intention is sometimes refined into the reductive analysis one will find in a contemporaneous textbook of philosophy of mind: intention is constituted by belief and desire. Some actual intentionalists explain the nature of intention from a Wittgensteinian perspective: authorial intention is viewed as the purposive structure of the work that can be discerned by close inspection. This view challenges the supposition that intentions are always private and logically independent of the work they cause, which is often interpreted as a position held by anti-intentionalists.

A 2005 proposal holds that intentions are executive attitudes toward plans (Livingston). These attitudes are firm but defeasible commitments to acting on them. Contra the reductive analysis of intention, this view holds that intentions are distinct and real mental states that serve a range of functions irreducible to other mental states.

Clarifying each of these basic terms (meaning, interpretation, and intention) requires an essay-length treatment that cannot be done here. For current purposes, it suffices to introduce the aforesaid views and proposals commonly assumed. Bear in mind that for the most part the debate over art interpretation proceeds without consensus on how to define these terms, and clarifications appear only when necessary.