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Art is Serious, Life is Serene

Abstract

By not being able to surround ourselves with works of art like we used to, we are painfully reminded of how important they are in our lives. In this essay, with the help of the Russian man of letters Leo Tolstoy and the Austrian philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein, we will point out the critical role art plays in human life. In particular, works of art can be helpful in finding a new lifestyle, an appropriate way of living, and open new entrances and perspectives to the world around us.

Keywords

Leo Tolstoy, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Learning from Art, Art and Society, Pandemic Times

The Importance of Art and Artists

Do you remember the children's book *Frederick* by Leo Lionni, published in 1967? The little mouse Frederick lives with his family in an old stone wall. As the seasons change, all the mice collect stocks for the winter, except Frederick. He is sitting around and looks like he is doing nothing. In truth, however, he is also collecting something important: sunshine, colors, and words. When winter comes, as the food becomes less abundant and the mice feel down, Frederick shares his collections: the memories of sunshine warm them up, beautiful colors pop up in their heads, and Frederick also presents a poem he wrote. The mice end up saying: "you are a poet!" (Lionni 2017, 38).

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Artists like Frederick are those who keep us going in dark and grey times. Like in this story, we find ourselves set in such times, and we can flee to better ones with the help of artworks. Artworks—either in the form of online concerts, online movie festivals, virtual art galleries, or streaming services—can help to keep us safe at home and comfort lonely souls. Artworks take up an extraordinary place in our everyday life. A life without any form of art is barely imaginable, and if so, it ends up in disturbing visions ingeniously described in Ray Bradbury's dystopia *Fahrenheit 451*. Nevertheless, the first thing that comes to mind while thinking about art in pandemic times is closed concert halls, postponed exhibitions, canceled movies, and shows. We experience the loss of access to primary art forms and realize that we miss those artworks in our daily lives. This loss is a strong indicator of the importance of art. As humans, we long for it.

Our study of art's role in society will start with remarks on Leo Tolstoy and his conception of art. Tolstoy was convinced that works of art could communicate feelings from the creator to the recipient. The audience gets "infected" with those feelings, which are much more than just emotions. In this way, artists and consumers merge, and the uniting power of art is brought to light. For Tolstoy, art, just like language, can travel through time and space and is fundamental for human life.

After taking a closer look at Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks on Tolstoy's approach, we will follow Wittgenstein's thoughts on works of art and their ability to help us live a good life. On this occasion, the title of this paper sheds light on Wittgenstein's evolvement from his previous work, the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, towards his later remarks. In his earlier years, Wittgenstein, alongside Gottlob Frege, followed Friedrich Schiller's famous saying, "Life is serious, art is serene" (Schiller 2017, Prologue), claiming that only propositions can picture facts of reality and communicate thoughts. In contrast, works of art are located outside the world of facts and therefore cannot teach anything. As shown in the lines below, after 1931, Wittgenstein enlarged his views on art. He realized that art is serious since it has a vital role to play in our lives. We can *learn* something from art, and this something concerns life itself.

Artworks Communicate Feelings—Leo Tolstoy

For more than 15 years, Leo Tolstoy, known for his masterpieces *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, actively reflected on the problems of art and its role in society. The results of these ruminations were published in 1897 in his book *What is art?* Some critics have taken it as "an attack upon both

the art and the aesthetic theory of the nineteenth century" (Guyer 2014, 290). In truth, it examines the role that art is supposed to play in society. In order to understand Tolstoy's thoughts on this topic, we will follow his arguments step by step.

To begin with, according to Tolstoy, his reason for dealing with art and its significance for society lies in the large number of workers tied up in its production (Tolstoy 1995, 3-4). While searching for a definition of art, he read more than 70 thinkers and aesthetic theorists, including Baumgarten, Kant, Schiller, Hegel, Hutcheson, Diderot, and Schopenhauer (ibidem, 17-30). He concluded that all the theories he studied only support the status of works of art recognized as exemplary by a particular group of people—above all, by the upper class (ibidem, 32-33). Tolstoy marked this approach as fundamentally wrong. In contrast to those theorists, Tolstoy put the term "feeling" instead of "beauty" in the center of his conception of art: "Art begins when a man, with the purpose of communicating to other people a feeling he once experienced, calls it up again within himself and expresses it by certain external signs" (ibidem, 38). In this way, the recipient of the artwork can feel the *same* feeling that the artist felt (ibidem, 38).

In What is Art?, Tolstoy refers to a variety of broadly-understood feelings that works of art can transmit: (i) general human sensations such as fear, sadness, or joy, often collected under the umbrella term of emotion; (ii) complex feelings like respect for specific objects or appearances, devotion to an inevitable fate, as well as elusive feelings such as the love for God or a feeling of a life force (Tolstoy 1995, 38; Zurek 1996, 280). Due to this multitude of sensations, Gary Jahn rightly pleads that the word "feeling" is better than "emotion" for the translation of the Russian *yyscmeo*, the term Tolstoy uses. He classifies, for example, acts of will, impressions, emotions, feelings, perceptions, and moods under Tolstoy's usage of this term (Gary 1975).

For Tolstoy, all works of art that convey feelings that can be put into the list above are part of universal art. In such artworks, feelings are conveyed accessibly to all people, regardless of their origin, level of education, class, or age. Besides universal art, Tolstoy's account of religious art is based on religious feelings and deals with people's position in the cosmos or their relationship to God and other human beings (Tolstoy 1995, 132). The term "religious" should not be misunderstood here. Tolstoy explained this religious consciousness, which can be conveyed via an artwork, in the following

¹ Authors like Zurek suggest that instead of using the critical term "religious consciousness" one should refer to a "philosophical" one (Zurek 1996, 317).

way: "The religious consciousness of society is the same as the direction of a flowing river. If a river flows, there is a direction in which it flows. If a society lives, there is a religious consciousness that indicates the direction in which all the people of this society more or less consciously strive" (ibidem, 124). This religious consciousness leads a society by providing a benchmark for what is good and evil and also "the worth of the feelings conveyed by art" (ibidem, 43).

Tolstoy emphasizes that the feelings conveyed by works of art can be good and moral or wrong and immoral. Both infect in the same way, with the same intensity. Bad art conveys bad feelings that separate people instead of uniting them, as good art does. If an artwork communicates one of those feelings just mentioned, universal or religious, it can be called good art. "A successful experience of a work of art is a moment of ethical performance, practical commitment and moral improvisation" (Darsel 2012, 170).

But what about the strange term "infection"? Connecting the term infection with art during a pandemic sounds like the last thing we should do. However, for Tolstoy, the term does not have a negative connotation. Instead, it summarizes a problem that he already addressed in *Anna Karenina*: "The spark of joy kindled in Kitty seemed to have infected everyone in the church" (Tolstoy 2015, Part 5, Chapter 6). It infects everyone involuntarily and immediately. This dimension of infection is widespread, and it inevitably can also be transferred to the infection of a feeling through works of art.

In his famous novella, *The Kreutzer Sonata*,² Tolstoy describes the infection of a feeling via a work of art in a vivid way:

They [the wife of the protagonist and her alleged lover] played Beethoven's 'Kreutzer Sonata.' [...] Music makes me forget my real situation. It transports me into a state which is not my own. Under the influence of music I really seem to feel what I do not feel, to understand what I do not understand, to have powers which I cannot have. Music seems to me to act like yawning or laughter; I have no desire to sleep, but I yawn when I see others yawn; with no reason to laugh, I laugh when I hear others laugh. And music transports me immediately into the condition of soul in which he who wrote the music found himself at that time" (Tolstoy 2014, XXIII).

In short, for Tolstoy, it is clear that the feeling felt by the artist can be communicated one-to-one (identically) to the recipient. Through the infection of the feeling of the work's creator, the recipient is "brought to the similar state of mind" (Mounce 2001, 65). The artwork's recipient takes on the

 $^{^{2}}$ It should be noted that the writing of this story happened parallel to his work *What is Art?*

artist's *mood* to such an extent that they now believe that the work was not created by a stranger but by themselves—the artist and recipient merge. It is important to note that this fusion of the creator's and recipient's feelings extends to all recipients of the work of art. The remarks made above help us see the power of art clearly: The aim of infection with one of the universal or religious (spiritual/philosophical) feelings mentioned by Tolstoy is to create a connection between people and unite them.

Tolstoy further compares this system of communication of feelings with language (Tolstoy 1995, 123). Language communicates thoughts from one person to another, just like art does with feelings.³ However, works of art express something about the spirit of human beings that language cannot express (Eismann 1986, 61). In Tolstoy's words: "[I]t is that through the word a man conveys his thoughts to another, while through art people convey their feelings to each other" (Tolstoy 1995, 38). For Tolstoy, works of art and language are two means of communication between people to overcome different times and places and fulfill an essential function for the human race. In this way, knowledge and feelings of previous generations come into the present and thus advance human development. Tolstoy concluded: "Art is one of two [the other one being language] organs of mankind's progress" (ibidem, 138). However, how is it possible for an artwork to communicate feelings in the way language communicates thoughts?

The artist's objective is to communicate to a recipient a called-up feeling they have felt or imagined in the process of creating a work of art (ibidem, 39). However, in order to master this task, some conditions must be met:

- (i) The artist must have experienced or imagined an intense specific feeling. The power of the infection depends on how idiosyncratic the feeling is. The basis of such feelings is life itself.
- (ii) The artist must "stand on the level of the highest world outlook of his time [...]" (ibidem, 90). The artist must also be aware of themselves and their position in their environment in order to be able to take a new position towards it. In general, they have a higher understanding of the meaning of life, of what society strives for as the highest good.

³ Here a parallel can be drawn to Wittgenstein's claim in the *Tractatus logico-philo-sophicus*: Propositions conveyed through thinking and language are actually one and the same thing, the only difference being that whereas language can be perceived by senses, thoughts cannot (T. 3.1).

(iii) The artist must also have the will, the desire to share this feeling with their fellow human beings and future generations.

(iv) The artist must demonstrate "a talent for some kind of art" (ibidem, 90). Significantly enough, "[i]nfection is achieved only when and in so far as the artist finds those infinitely small moments of which the work of art is composed" (ibidem, 99). All these conditions are based on what Tolstoy considers most important for creating a true work of art: sincerity. Above all, the artist has to be honest, sincere, and authentic (ibidem, 121).

Tolstoy believes that, in principle, all people can meet these conditions (ibidem, 40). In this move, Tolstoy expands the group of people who should be artistically active and widens the forms art can take. For example, folk dances, jokes, rhymes, and children's games could be listed (ibidem, 155). In this way, the content of art is expanded, and new possibilities of artistic expression can address new topics that are important for other human beings. Only this way can "works of art teach us about ourselves, the others and the world" (Darsel 2012, 167).

The results of infecting with feelings via a piece of art can be summed up in the following two points: (i) The feelings experienced or imagined by the artist enrich, by being infected with them, our treasure trove of feelings and our understanding of them. (ii) artwork triggers a community experience; it connects the artist, the recipients, and anyone else who experiences it.⁴ Through these two processes, art expands our wealth of experience, lets us empathize with unknown feelings, and promotes people's understanding of one another, thus forming a basis for the acceptance of others. Human beings get to know themselves, others, and the world better and develop an interest in expanding their world. Furthermore, works of art can also trigger critical questioning of one's feelings and way of living.

Ultimately, the task of artworks in Tolstoy's conception of art can be formulated this way: "art, genuine art, guided by religion with the help of science, must make it so that men's peaceful life together [...] should be achieved by the free and joyful activity of men. [...] And only art can do that" (Tolstoy 1995, 165-166).

⁴ Just like Israel Knox points out: "The dearest quality of art to Tolstoy is its power of union" (Knox 1930, 68).

A Theoretical Refinement— Ludwig Wittgenstein and Leo Tolstoy

Before taking a closer look at Wittgenstein's critique of Tolstoy's remarks on art, it is essential to draw a connection between both thinkers. Letters, diary entries, and other sources show that Wittgenstein read Tolstoy's works throughout his life, exchanged information with others on them, and spoke highly about them (Thompson 1997, 97). *The Gospel in Brief*, in particular, was significant for Wittgenstein during the First World War. He wrote 11.10.1914: "I always carry Tolstoy's 'Statements of the Gospel' around with me like a talisman" (Wittgenstein 2015, Ms-101, 37v).

The common ground of the two thinkers, at least until 1931, concerns the role intellectuals play in society. Tolstoy emphasizes that even people called wise and cunning know no more than the peasants, the ordinary people (Milkov 2012, 73). "For the teaching of a great man is only great because it expresses intelligibly and clearly what others have expressed unintelligibly and obscurely" (Tolstoy 2016, preface). Therefore, what intellectuals, including himself, have to achieve is an overview and a clear presentation of what everyone is already aware of. In short: "Tolstoy sees philosophy as an activity of clarification" (Thompson 1997, 106) of elucidation. Here the connection to the early Wittgenstein becomes apparent: "Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity" (T. 4.112). For years, Wittgenstein and Tolstoy shook hands on this point.

However, from 1931 onwards, Wittgenstein maintained that clarity alone is not a sufficient goal for philosophers. The point is that people themselves have inherent inhibitions about recognizing truths as such. As a result, Wittgenstein developed his therapeutic method in philosophy that should be formative for his later work.

Along with revising Tolstoy's views on the role of the intellectuals, in 1947, Wittgenstein advanced a direct critique of Tolstoy's conception of art. However, speaking of a critique seems to be a little too harsh if we look more closely at Wittgenstein's remarks: "There is *a lot* to be learned from Tolstoy's bad theorizing about how a work of art conveys 'a feeling'" (Wittgenstein 1980, 58e). Moreover, Wittgenstein goes on to say: "You really could call it, not exactly the expression of a feeling, bit at least an expression of feeling, or a felt expression. And you could say too that in so far as people understand it, they 'resonate' in harmony with it, respond to it" (Wittgenstein 1980, 58e).

At this point, it is crucial to keep in mind that Tolstoy was not a philosopher. He was just a man of letters. His argumentations and usage of terms are perhaps not "academically correct." Nevertheless, taking a serious look at Tolstoy's theoretical writings can provide a fruitful approach to art. As we see it, the corrections Wittgenstein made to Tolstoy's conception of art are not destructive but constructive.

On the one hand, it would be more precise to say that a successful (*gelungenes*) work of art is a "felt *expression*": the emphasis is now on the expression, not on the feeling. In addition, people are not "infected" by the expression they feel, but "in so far as people understand it, they 'resonate' in harmony with it, respond to it" (ibidem). In short, for the later Wittgenstein, Tolstoy's conception of art is crude and hastily constructed. However, it can be made more precise, and that is what Wittgenstein does.

Our first step in understanding those specifications is to consider Wittgenstein's concept of the gesture (*Gebärde*) as a further development of his earlier conception in his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* that the works of art do not transmit thoughts. Now "Wittgenstein came to adopt the view that successful art posits (*setzt*) gestures in this sense" (Milkov 2020, 511). This view had important implications because gestures in this sense often refer to different lifestyles (ibidem, 510). In short, works of art are assigned, similar to language,⁵ the vital function of communication.

Furthermore, a work of art, just like a sentence, does not refer to anything outside itself—art does not communicate anything but itself. What successful works of art can convey to us, and what language cannot indicate is how to live. For the later Wittgenstein, it is now clear that artworks have a connection to our life—to our style of living.

This change in Wittgenstein's views after 1931 was an implication of what could be called the *creative turn* in his philosophy (Milkov 2003, 104ff.). At that time, he recognized that human activities of any kind should be included in his considerations. Whereas in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* Wittgenstein stated that facts stand on their own, now he emphasized that facts are also connected and embedded in human actions and the feelings that go with them. Accordingly, Wittgenstein introduced "aesthetic gestures as potential actions or, better, as 'germs' of actions—something substantiated by the circumstances that like gestures, actions can be only performed or copied (mimicked)" (Milkov 2020, 511).

⁵ In Wittgenstein's words: "This tune says something... And yet I know it doesn't say anything in which I might express in words or pictures what it says" (Wittgenstein 2015, 310, 138 [2]).

In addition to Wittgenstein's criticism of Tolstoy, Nikolay Milkov suggests: "A Wittgensteinainian refinement can be added here by suggesting that music expresses not simply an emotion in some general sense, but more precisely what it expresses is the species of cognitively informed affect that we term a 'mood'" (ibidem, 513-514). As Gilbert Ryle points out, in contrast to feelings or emotions, a mood is not short-termed like those and does not necessarily have to be related to a specific object (Ryle 1949, 131). A mood takes hold of the whole person and keeps them in it for a more extended period. They shape the entire human existence. If we follow this suggestion, the life-influencing power of art can be better explained and understood.

What We Can Learn from Art

Although Tolstoy distinguished good art from overwhelming art (Haldane 2017, 160), the thinker holds that all works of art impact their recipient's life. In Tolstoy's vocabulary, all works of art, regardless of whether they are good, unifying people, or bad, dividing people, infect equally. Wittgenstein argued that only *successful* art has the power to insinuate itself into our lives.

As the works of art insinuate themselves into the recipient's life, they become part of them and thus influence the life of the person concerned. Using the example of music, Wittgenstein states: "I adopt it [this musical phrase] as my own" (Wittgenstein 1980, 73e, italics added). In particular, successful art pieces can become part of our multi-layered life and thus can lead to a deeper understanding of ourselves and our lives in this world. In fact, "Wittgenstein's idea is that a successful work of art can prove of value in such cases by transforming the perspective from which we see our life" (Milkov 2020, 509). However, not only the way we see our lives can be influenced, but our entire way of living, our lifestyle. In exceptional cases, a successful work of art can help us solve the "problem of life": "The way to solve the problem you see in life is to live in a way that will make what is problematic disappear. The fact that life is problematic shows that the shape of your life does not fit into life's mould, what is problematic will disappear" (Wittgenstein 1980, 27e).

Therefore, the problems of life are not something that a singular answer can solve (ibidem, 4e). The real goal is to solve these agonizing questions and to achieve this, a change in the way of life itself is required. This change is not an easy one since "[t]he problems of life are insoluble on the surface and can only be solved in depth" (ibidem, 74e). However, not much in our life can penetrate the depths.

Science cannot provide any answer to the actual questions of life: "People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, *etc.* to give them pleasure. The idea *that these have something to teach them*—that does not occur to them" (ibidem, 36e). Nevertheless, successful works of art that can sneak *deeply* into our lives and can thus become part of us are capable of setting life-changing impulses: A work of art can become "a solution to the problem of life made manifest" (Tilgham 1991, 65).

In this way, works of art are sources of knowledge, conveyors of information about life: "[Wittgenstein] was convinced that in their different ways arts thus communicate knowledge" (Milkov 2020, 508). Works of art show new and different ways of life and can point the direction to them. Through pieces of art, we can become aware of what we hope for in life and in which lifestyle we feel comfortable and secure. In short, works of art "could be a real existential guide" (Darsel 2012, 167). What can be learned from works of art is relevant for human beings and their form of living and influences their actions and thinking equally. It has been clearly shown that the late Wittgenstein, as an extension to the author of the *Tractatus logico-philoso-phicus*, established that art could teach us something: art can have a directional effect on our lives. In this sense, art is serious and can make life serene.

Conclusion

The study presented in the lines above is based on the ideas of Leo Tolstoy and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It has shown that artworks are essential for human beings and society. In contrast to Friedrich Schiller's famous saying, "Life is serious, art is serene," it can also be said that art is serious since it plays an important role: it can help form our lifestyle. Moreover, life can be serene if it is accompanied by good art. This claim is also valid in pandemic times. Not being able to socially interact normally, being stuck in one's own four walls, art is one of the few forms that can keep people's minds open. Like Tolstoy highlighted, art can show society desirable directions for its development. Moreover, this troubled time is also a chance for new art forms, for new feelings and moods that can be communicated with artworks.

We need to keep in mind that our society needs characters like Frederick, particularly in pandemic times, just like we teach our children. Not only to lighten the mood but also to open up new perspectives on living and life itself.

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