

Art and Abstract Objects

EDITED BY

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

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First Edition published in 2012

Impression: 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-969149-4

Printed in Great Britain by
MPG Books Group, Bodmin and King's Lynn

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Indication, Abstraction, and Individuation★

JERROLD LEVINSON

I.

Roughly thirty years ago, as part of an exploration of the ontology of art, I suggested that musical works were not *pure abstract structures*, like geometrical forms, but rather, *impure indicated structures*.¹ But what exactly does that mean? In this chapter, I propose to revisit that old idea of mine in the hope of clarifying it, before then using it as a springboard for discussion of *artistic* indication as a singular psychological act, of the individuation of indicated objects that results from such indication, and finally, of the relation between artistic indication and neighboring sorts of action, what we might call actions of *simple* indication.

It is necessary, before we start, to briefly explain why it is that musical works—and by the same token, literary works—cannot be considered to be pure tonal or verbal structures. For instance, why it is that Shelley’s famous poem *Ozymandias* cannot be reduced to the sequence of words: ‘I’ ‘met’ ‘a’ ‘traveler’ ‘from’ ‘an’ ‘antique’ ‘land’ . . . , and why it is that Chopin’s Mazurka in A minor Op. 17, no. 4 cannot be reduced to a complex sequence of notes starting with an altered F major triad. Here are the most important reasons why such works cannot be reduced to pure structures. First, pure structures of elements, which are similar to mathematical objects,

★ This chapter originally appeared in ‘Rethinking Creativity. Between Art and Philosophy,’ special issue of *Tropos: Rivista di ermeneutica e critica filosofica*, edited by Alessandro Bertinetto Alberto Martinengo, 2011, 4(2): 121–33.

¹ Levinson (1980). But see also Levinson (1990b).

cannot be created, since they exist at all times, but works of art, and that includes musical and literary works, surely are *created*, by specific artists working in definite historical contexts.² Second, works of art have a number of important aesthetic and artistic properties that they could not have were they pure structures existing atemporally, with no essential links to creative artists, preceding artworks, preceding artistic movements, and more generally, surrounding cultural environments.

All this was shown, quite conclusively I think, in Jorge Luis Borges' brilliant short story 'Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*' and, in the philosophy of art, through a number of important writings by Gregory Currie, Arthur Danto, Ernst Gombrich, Jacques Morizot, Kendall Walton, and Richard Wollheim, to cite but a few authors.³ A musical or literary work, though it is partly defined by its tonal or verbal structure, is nonetheless, like a pictorial or sculptural work, a particular human creation; it came into being at a certain time; it may be destroyed in the future if the conditions for its existence cease to obtain; and it gets its meaning and produces its effects on us not simply in virtue of its abstract perceptible form, but in virtue of its status as a *statement*, *expression*, or *utterance* arising in or emerging from a singular generative context. A Beethoven sonata would not say the same things, musically speaking, if we thought it to be a work by Brahms, a Jane Austen novel would not communicate the same message if we considered it to be a heavily ironic Woody Allen production, and an expressionistic painting by the young Mondrian would certainly look much different if we saw it as a work painted sixty years later by a mature Jackson Pollock.

This is roughly why musical and literary works cannot be pure or eternal structures, but must rather be considered instead as impure, historically conditioned, temporally anchored, structures. I suggested that such works are really what I call *indicated structures*, which are partly abstract sorts of objects, the result of the interaction between a person and an entirely abstract structure, such as a sequence or series of words or notes. The interaction in question is precisely an act of indicating, and it is this action that creates the link between the abstract structure and the concrete

² More cautiously, if such structures are not eternal they at least exist as soon as a musical system or linguistic system is in place, and thus well before the works composed employing elements of such a system.

³ See Currie (1989); Danto (1981); Gombrich (1963); Morizot (1999); Walton (1970); Wollheim (1968).

individual human that lies at the heart of such an artwork. A paradigmatic musical work, for instance, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, is therefore a tonal-structure-as-indicated-by-a-specific-composer-in-a-specific-historical-context;⁴ similarly, a paradigmatic literary work, such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, is a verbal-structure-as-indicated-by-a-specific-author-in-a-specific-historical-context.⁵

The hyphens employed in the above formulation are not idle. They are meant to draw attention to the particular sort of entity that comes into existence through the structure-indicating actions in question. So for instance, it is not the case that what it is to be Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is to simply be a tonal structure (S) that is indicated by a specific composer (C) in a specific historical context (H). Rather, what it is to be Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is to be the *indicated structure* S-C-H, an object distinct from any tonal structure *simpliciter*, though an object into which a specific tonal structure enters essentially.

I know that to describe the act through which an artist creates a work of art in music and literature as an act of *indication* might seem odd. I must therefore say a few words about the kind of indication I mean. Of course, when composers or writers are creating works, they probably don't take themselves to be indicating, and probably they don't take their acts of creation to be fundamentally acts of indication. More likely they would be tempted to describe what they are doing as making, as expressing, as formulating, as narrating, and there are no reasons to deny that these do apply here as well, at least generally. But it remains true that what these symphonists and poets are doing, at least most saliently, is indicating, from among all those available in a given language or tonal system, the notes or words that will, arranged in a certain order, constitute the symphony or poem that is theirs.

Naturally, the kind of indication I am discussing here, which we can label *artistic indication*, and through which musical and literary works come to be,

⁴ I here leave aside, as regards standard musical works, that such a work arguably has as its core not simply a *tonal* structure, but rather, a *tonal-instrumental* structure. I do so because my concern in this chapter is narrowly the role of indication, in the sense I try to elucidate, in the generation of certain sorts of artworks, and not the debate between sonicists and instrumentalists as to whether performing means are essential to standard musical works.

⁵ A similar complication might also be observed in the case of standard literary works, whether poems or novels. Their core structure is not simply a *verbal* one, if that be understood as merely a sequence of words or sentences, but such a sequence partitioned into lines, stanzas, paragraphs, chapters, and the like. Such a core structure might perhaps be labeled a *verbal-segmental* structure.

should be distinguished from more ordinary kinds of indication, which we can label *simple indication*. For example, if I notice something of interest in the street while on a bus, I may point to it so my traveling companion will attend to it. This is quite a common type of indication, but not the sort of indication that creates artworks. Or, if in the midst of a conversation I make reference to a passerby, there is a sense in which I indicate him or her, yet I surely do not create either of the people I indicated, nor do I even create a partly abstract object of which they would be constituents. Or, if I find myself facing a waitress in a restaurant and I nod my head at the blackboard special that I want to order, again, I indicate, but I do not thereby bring something new into existence merely in virtue of my act of indication.⁶ The same can be said for any usual everyday action whose purpose it is to draw someone's attention to some thing or other. In all such cases, the indication in play is not plausibly one that thereby brings into existence some thing that didn't exist before.

So the specific nature of the indication that lies at the heart of the creating act, whether in music or in literature, needs to be identified. Let us, then, compare the indication in operation in the creating of a musical work, say Chopin's Mazurka in A minor, Op. 17, no. 4, and a perfectly ordinary act of indication, say that of drawing my friend's attention to a strange passerby on the street. We'll start with this second indication: I notice the strange person walking along; I then point my finger toward him so my friend will turn her gaze in his direction. In other words, I indicate, or point to, this unknown individual, singling him out as something worthy of attention. If my friend does indeed look at him as a result of my pointing gesture, then my act of indication has succeeded; if my friend doesn't look, then my act of indication has failed, which is not to say that it never occurred. The action is purely transitory; it is tightly bound up with a fleeting situation, one that dissolves almost as soon as it comes to be. The action exhausts itself in the moment, and doesn't aim at anything permanent. My goal is simply to draw my friend's attention, here and now, to the passing phenomenon, and there is no goal beyond that. I am not engaged in an activity that is future-oriented, I have no intention to establish or to build anything, I have

⁶ The qualification 'merely *in virtue of* my act of indication' is important, since an act of ordinary indication can clearly bring another event into existence in a straightforwardly *causal* way. For instance, my indicating something of interest to my companion can bring about the event of her being aware of the thing in question.

no desire to leave any traces, however small, on the sands of time. At any rate, such unconcern about what might follow or issue from my act of indication is characteristic of indication in the ordinary, non-artistic sense.

Something quite different goes on in artistic indication. What is Chopin doing, by contrast, when he composes the short but magnificent and heart-rending Mazurka in A minor? There is a sense in which he too—using his fingers, whether he inks the notes or plays them on the piano—is engaged in indication. And what he indicates, in a particular order, are certain individuals of the tonal realm that existed before the act of composition. In this case, there is indeed an act, or rather many acts, of simple indication by which Chopin draws our attention ultimately to a certain tonal configuration that was there before, hidden in the tonal domain as a field of possible sounds. But Chopin does more than that when he is composing, because his intention is indeed to leave a mark of some sort on the world, to insert something new into the musical culture that precedes and surrounds him.

So what exactly does Chopin do above and beyond simple indication when he creates his Mazurka? We can start by noticing that he *chooses* or *selects* notes—here including pitches, rhythms, timbres, and dynamics, and from both vertical and horizontal perspectives—he doesn't merely *draw attention* to them. That is to say, Chopin has a certain attitude—in part approval, in part appropriation—toward those particular notes. He doesn't in effect merely say: 'here are some sounds' but rather, 'here are some sounds, they are now specifically mine, I embrace them, and in this exact sequence.' When we simply indicate, say by physically pointing or by referring in conversation, we do not take that perspective with regard to the object targeted; we don't choose it, we don't select it, we don't designate it as something that henceforth has an enduring relation to ourselves.

But in creating his Mazurka Chopin doesn't *just* choose or select a sequence of notes, which he thus puts in a special relationship with himself. If he were simply improvising, that might suffice as a description of his activity.⁷ However, as a composer of a work for *performance*, or

⁷ Though it might not. Musical improvisation of some sorts can involve indication as selection, the difference being that in the improvisational case the musician's actions of selection have rather *broad* targets, such as a given standard or a given style of playing, rather than *narrow* ones, such as a tonal structure defined in detail.

possible future instantiation, he aims in addition to *establish* something by that very choice or selection: And what he establishes is a *rule*, a *norm*, a miniature *practice*, whereby pianists play a piece *by Chopin* and not just any piece of music when they play *that* sequence of notes chosen by Chopin, and do so precisely *because* that sequence was chosen by Chopin. That's what makes the Mazurka in A minor exist *as* a work by Chopin. To indicate, as a composer, a particular sequence of notes consists precisely in establishing a rule to reproduce the sounds in a certain way following the indications of a particular, historically-situated musical mind. And it is as such an indicated structure that we can identify a classical musical work.

This idea of compositional indication as an action of establishing a rule was well expressed by Nicholas Wolterstorff in a 1987 essay:

A work of music, then, involves a complex interplay among three sorts of entities: a performance-kind, a set of correctness and completeness rules, and a set of sounds and ways of making them such that the rules specify those as the ones to be exemplified... Once we see the contribution of rules to the constitution of music, it becomes apparent that the three-phase model of composition... [invention, evaluation, selection]... is deficient when it comes to music. Invention is of course still involved, as is evaluation. So too is selection. But the process of selection is now ancillary to the distinct action of *ordaining* rules for correctness and completeness. In light of his evaluation, the composer selects a set of sounds and ways of making those sounds; but he does this in the course of ordaining a rule to the effect that exemplifying those sounds and those actions is necessary for a complete and correct performance.⁸

The key idea in the above formulation is that of *ordaining* a rule to be followed by performers wishing to instantiate or perform a given work, but clearly this is just a more forceful, more sacerdotal variant of the idea, already mentioned, of *establishing* such a rule. And this is an element essential to artistic indication, one that serves to distinguish it from indication of the mundane sort.

Let us take stock: Artistic indication, unlike simple indication, normally involves a deliberate *choice*, an act of *appropriation*, an attitude of *approval*, and the *establishment* of a rule or norm. But it is now time for us to explore the way in which artistic indication creates a link between the abstract tonal or

⁸ Wolterstorff (1994, p. 120).

verbal world and a concrete individual human being, in other words, to explore how this act serves to individuate the tones or words that it recruits for its creative and expressive ends.

We often say, pre-theoretically, that a sonata is composed of tones, and that a poem is composed of words, albeit ordered in a certain way, and indeed there is some rough truth to these claims. But to be more accurate, the altered F major triad that opens the Mazurka Op. 17, no. 4, or the word ‘traveler’ in the first line of *Ozymandias*, aren’t components of these works that serve to identify them as such, components that would distinguish them from possible works that resemble them, at least superficially, to the point of being perceptually indiscernible from them. The story of Pierre Menard and ‘his’ *Quixote* clearly shows that works that are perceptually indiscernible are not necessarily identical; in fact, such works can be dramatically different in meaning, significance, or content. Therefore, even a given series or configuration of notes or words, however complex it may be, is not sufficient to fix or uniquely individuate the musical or literary work in question. This individuation must rather rest on the unique identity of the artist who, in the interests of self-expression, combines these brute elements—abstract notes or words—in a specific creative context, and who then ends up combined with them, so to speak, in the resulting work.

It is for this reason that the true identifying elements of such works aren’t really the purely abstract tones and words that the artist uses or appropriates in fashioning his or her work but, as it were, those tones and words *as-indicated-by-this-artist-in-his-or-her-singular-artistic-situation*. The elements of the work so understood in effect guarantee that the work really is the work of *that* artist, and it is by indicating, in the sense I have been trying to make clear, the abstract elements of a given language or system, that the artist brings into being these half-abstract and half-concrete entities that I call indicated structures. The indicated structures are more individual, more personalized, we might say, than the pure structures that can, unlike indicated structures, be part of any work of any artist. Again, only the indicated structure, not the pure structure, can be created by the artist. Only that structure, and not the purely abstract one whose existence predates that of the artist himself or herself, can have the aesthetic, expressive, and semantic properties proper to the work of art as such.

Having somewhat clarified, at least in a contrastive manner, the nature of the indication involved in the creation of indicated structures, I must

now take note of a difficulty concerning the type status of such entities. Is an indicated structure, that is, a structural-type-as-indicated-in-a-context, itself strictly speaking a *type*? Well, odd as it may seem, perhaps not, and for the following reason. If, as many philosophers maintain, types are wholly defined in terms of essential properties, ones that must be possessed by any token of the type, and if, in addition, such properties, even when relational, are held to be eternal, and so not subject to creation, then types will also be eternal, and equally not subject to creation.⁹ But that is precisely the opposite of what indicated structures and initiated types are supposed to be, and so insisting that they are types would undermine one of the main motivations for introducing them. Thus, perhaps the act of artistic indication that operates on a preexisting structural type and yields an indicated structure or initiated type should not be conceived as having, as output, a type *tout court*.

But if initiated types are not, *sensu strictu*, types after all, then what are they? One possibility would be to assimilate them to *qua* objects, items such as Obama-as-President, or Venus-as-seen-from-Earth.¹⁰ However, that is not a happy suggestion, for at least two reasons. First, is that it would render initiated types too insubstantial, too aspectual, and thus poor candidates for creation in a robust sense. Second, is that the *qua* object model seems inadequate to capture the intuition that in creating a musical work of the standard sort one is *constituting it from* or *making it out of* some preexistent sound structure.¹¹ Be that as it may, if initiated types are then neither types as classically defined, nor *qua* objects, they are nonetheless recognizably what Wollheim called *generic entities*, that is, things that can have instances and that can be exemplified in a concrete manner. In the case of musical

⁹ An argument of this sort has been offered in Dodd (2000, 2002). For discussion and partial defusing of the argument, see Howell (2002). What I call *indicated types* Howell there calls *types-in-use*, and the reservations aired here as to whether indicated types are finally properly thought of as types would apply equally well to Howell's types-in-use.

¹⁰ A theory of *qua* objects is worked out in detail in Fine (1982).

¹¹ This is convincingly argued in Evnine (2009). Evnine also articulates an attractive positive conception of what the work of making a musical work involves, a conception not far removed from that of artistic indication as elaborated in the present chapter: 'The labour, in the case of composition, is not transformative of the sound structure out of which the work is made. But in some looser sense it is work on that sound structure. It is the work of locating it within the saturated sound space and distinguishing it from other sound structures' (Evnine 2009, p. 215).

initiated types, such instantiation-exemplification occurs through musical performance.¹²

That there is perhaps, at bottom, not that much of an issue here is nicely formulated in a recent essay by Robert Stecker on the methodology of the ontology of art:

Some believe that types are by definition eternal and unchanging (Rohrbaugh, Dodd), and others think that at least some types are created and are subject to change and can cease to exist (Levinson, Howell, Thomasson). On this latter issue it seems to me that there is no real dispute other than a dispute over which entities should be called ‘types’. As long as one can give a consistent, intelligible description of a kind of entity, it is not important what we call it.¹³

II.

In the rest of this chapter I address three further questions, ones concerning the sorts of indication *effected* by works of art, as opposed to the sort of indication with which we have so far been concerned, the sort that operates to *create* works of art, at least in certain art forms.

First question: How does a work indicate *that it is a work of art*, and is thus to be appreciated as such? A brief answer is this. On the view of arthood that I have proposed and defended over the years, a work of art is such—that is, is a work of art—because it, or the object or event or structure it contains, has been projected by an artist with a specific intention, that of making it the case that the work be taken or treated, or regarded, or engaged with more or less as some works of art have been taken or treated, or regarded, or engaged

¹² One difficulty, though, surely remains, namely, saying what it is to instantiate the *historical-cultural aspect* of an indicated type. The instantiation of the structural aspect—the sound/performance means structure or performance type at the core of the indicated type—by a concrete performance is a familiar and relatively unproblematic idea, but instantiation of the other aspect is arguably not. Perhaps all one can say is that to produce a performance that complies with the structural aspect of a musical work *in a way that is mindful of and conformant with* the historical-cultural aspect is thus to instantiate that aspect as well.

¹³ Stecker (2009, p. 385). One might still insist that a reasonable methodological concern remains, namely this: That the extent to which the kind of entity one posits resists being classified according to the standard metaphysical taxonomy is the extent to which the kind of entity posited can seem *sui generis* or *ad hoc*. But in response to that I would point out that it would be surprising if new metaphysical insights or proposals did not often require such posits.

For a judicious review of the pros and cons of conceiving musical works as types of *some* sort, see Davies (2011), ch. 2.

with in the past.¹⁴ It follows immediately that anything can be, or at least can become, a work of art, if it is simply sincerely and seriously projected in such a manner, and thus that there are no foolproof external signs that something presented for our consideration is a work of art.

That said, some features serve as reliable, if not infallible, signs that what we are presented with is a work of art. For instance, and confining ourselves here for simplicity to the visual arts, features such as extraordinary beauty, striking form, enigmatic appearance, ostensible reference to earlier artworks; employment of a traditional artistic medium, a tag or label attaching to the object, an autograph or signature on the object itself, or finally, location in an art gallery or exhibition space. In many instances, these are some of the ways that a visual artwork indicates or signals to us that it is indeed a work of art.

Second question: What does a work of art indicate *in the world beyond it*? A brief answer is that it indicates as much as can be indicated by any other symbolic vehicle and, in some respects, rather more. Works of art can indicate worldly objects in many ways: by representing them; by expressing them; by exemplifying them; by evoking them; by alluding to them; by serving as metaphors for them, and so on. Works of art sometimes go beyond these general ways of referring in ways that are more evaluatively loaded, as with homage, pastiche, parody, satire, burlesque, or caricature. Of course, the question of what exactly works of art indicate about the world outside them, in how many registers or modes, and with what import for their overall meaning, cannot adequately be answered short of a study in effect summarizing the whole of art criticism and meta-criticism.

Third question: What things do works of art enable us to glimpse or discern *without explicitly indicating them*? In other words, what do artworks indicate *indirectly*, without being meant to, without expressly drawing our attention to them, and so to speak, in spite of themselves? A brief answer is that they so indicate many things, and possibly more than they directly indicate. In some sense, artworks indicate indirectly whatever one can reasonably conjecture, given the work and the artistic context in which it was created, about the creator and the process of creation. That is to say, works generally reveal or betray, without aiming to do so, a range of things about their creators and the processes by which they were created.

¹⁴ See the relevant essays in Levinson (1990a, 1996b, 2006).

For instance, the way in which a novel was written can tell us much about the neuroses of its author even if the novel doesn't depict a neurotic narrator and doesn't directly address neurosis. Something of that sort might be true of Kafka's *The Trial*. A symphony, merely by being excessively long, can convey the difficulty faced by the composer when trying to finish the composition, even if the symphony does not directly exemplify this difficulty. Bruckner's Fifth Symphony is perhaps an example of such a work. The violence of a painting's *facture* and the savage character of its forms can suggest a feeling of self-loathing that the artist himself might not be aware of, without the painting actually expressing, representing, or symbolizing that feeling. I am thinking here of some of Williem's De Kooning's paintings from his *Woman* series.

In short, works of art do not only indicate what their creators meant to convey or communicate, and which in successful cases we understand above all in engaging with them; they can also indicate much about those creators and their creative processes that was never meant to be conveyed or communicated.¹⁵

If we label the sort of indication I have been concerned with in this section *work indication*, the question can be raised of how work indication relates to the sort of indication of principal concern in this chapter, namely, *artistic indication*, that involved in the creation of literary and musical works of art. We might ask, in particular, if work indication is *figurative* indication, while artistic indication is *literal* indication. I think not. My view is that both are literal, though of course there are salient differences between them. First, their *agents* are different, artists in the one case, and artworks in the other case. Second, the *agency* involved is different, being immediate in one case, and mediated in the other. That is to say, the author or composer directly performs actions that constitute the selectings, fixings, and ordainings identified earlier as central to literary and musical art making, the artist's agency not being dependent on that of other agents, whereas their artworks perform (or 'perform') actions only in virtue of having been constituted as artifacts of a certain sort by their creators. Finally, the action involved in work indication, if not quite figurative, is admittedly action in a *weaker* sense than that involved in artistic indication, one that does not imply

¹⁵ For related reflections on what artworks indicate directly and indirectly, see Levinson (1996b).

will, intentionality, or goal-directedness, and amounting, more or less, to bringing about an effect or result.¹⁶

In conclusion: The work of art, and more specifically, the musical or literary work of art, can be considered a site where several kinds of indication intersect. There is, on the one hand, the kind of indication performed *by the artist*, which makes the work what it is, through transforming an ensemble of abstract tonal or verbal elements into an individualized such ensemble, one tied essentially to the artist himself or herself. On the other hand, there is the kind of indication performed *by the work*, which encompasses all of what the work signifies, in a wide sense, about the world and the artist, directly or indirectly, for better or for worse.

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¹⁶ It is in that respect similar to the sort of action invoked when speaking of the gravitational action of one mass on another or of sulfuric acid on susceptible metals.

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