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Aesthetic Understanding and Epistemic Agency in Art

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Abstract

Recently, cognitivist accounts about art have come under pressure to provide stronger arguments for the view that artworks can yield genuine insight and understanding. In Gregory Currie's *Imagining and Knowing: Learning from Fiction*, for example, a convincing case is laid out to the effect that any knowledge gained from engaging with art must "be judged by the very standards that are used in assessing the claim of science to do the same" (Currie 2020: 8) if indeed it is to count as knowledge. Cognitivists must thus rally to provide sturdier grounds for their view. The revived interest in this philosophical discussion targets not only the concept of knowledge at the heart of cognitivist and anti-cognitivist debate, but also highlights a more specific question about how, exactly, some artworks can (arguably) afford cognitive import and change how we think about the world, ourselves and the many events, persons and situations we encounter. This paper seeks to explore some of the ways in which art is capable of altering our epistemic perspectives in ways that might count as knowledge despite circumventing some standards of evidential requirement. In so doing we will contrast two alternative conceptions of how we stand to learn from art. Whereas the former is modelled on the idea that knowledge is something that can be "extracted" from our experience of particular works of art, the latter relies on a notion of such understanding as primarily borne out of a different kind of engagement with art. We shall call this the *subtractive conception and cumulative conception* respectively. The cumulative conception, we shall argue, better explains why at least some insights and instances of

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knowledge gained from art seem to elude the evidential standards called for by sceptics of cognitivism.

Keywords
aesthetic cognitivism, aesthetic understanding, art and knowledge, epistemic agency, epistemic perspective.

1 Introduction

The question about how best to conceive the relation between art and knowledge has long divided philosophers into two broad camps. On the one hand, cognitivists argue that significant knowledge stands to be gained from artistic experience, and that such gain gives us reason to value art.[1] On the other hand, anti-cognitivists deny this, and reject either the idea that what artistic experience leads to really counts as knowledge or that the knowledge one may secure is important and capable of bearing on the issue of why art matters to us.[2]

Recently, cognitivist accounts have come under increased pressure to provide stronger arguments for the view that art can yield genuine knowledge and understanding. In Gregory Currie's *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction*, for example, the author lays out clearly the reasons for being sceptical about the cognitivist's claims with respect to fiction. If we do indeed gain knowledge from reading fiction, Currie argues, we must be able to articulate what the acquired knowledge actually amounts to (in order for it to count as knowledge). As Currie trenchantly puts it,

> [i]t cannot count as the generation of genuine insight merely that people have the feeling that insight has been generated… We must offer some standards … by which to tell when people have arrived at whatever form of enlightenment is at issue [and] gotten it right. (Currie 2020: 8)

Crucially, Currie sees no reason for being less exacting about the standards required for the knowledge claims we make about art in comparison with those made about the natural and other sciences. That is not to say that Currie necessarily concludes that we learn from fiction in precisely the same way we learn from scientific practice, but that the knowledge

[1] See, for example, John 1998, Kieran 1996, Putnam 1978, Nussbaum 1990 and Robinson 1997.

[2] See, for example, Lamarque & Olsen 1994, Diffey 1995, Stolnitz 1992.

claims in each case should be subject to the same empirical standard.[3]

To be clear, Currie is not denying that we may learn something from *Anna Karenina*, or from Shakespeare's *Othello*. Rather, he is arguing that if we do learn something from such works, we should be able to assess and evaluate what we learn *qua* knowledge. In short, we should "insist that the claims of literature to give us knowledge of whatever kind be judged by the very standards that are used in assessing the claim of science to do the same" (Currie 2020: 8). Thus, *pace* Currie, it may well be the case that we learn something about the nature of longing and desire from *Anna Karenina*, or about jealousy from *Othello*, and it may be that what we learn arises in the form of "knowing-that", "knowing-how", or "knowing by acquaintance" (Currie 2020: 8); but also, that if what we learn is to qualify as knowledge, we should be able to account for it as such by using some accepted norm of verification. Without such a standard, the credibility of cognitivism crumbles.

Currie is surely right that when it comes to defending the idea that we gain genuine understanding from fiction in particular, and art in general, the ball is in the cognitivist's court. If we do indeed acquire understanding or knowledge from reading a novel, say, we should in principle be able to describe what the knowledge or insight consists of, relate the kind of knowledge to something which is generally agreed to count as knowledge, and show why the knowledge gained is central to our experience of works of fiction *qua* literary works of art.[4] The latter is important because many of the most committed anti-cognitivists do not deny that some knowledge can at times be gleaned from art. Rather, they argue that the knowledge we typically obtain from engaging with art is either trivial, more reliably accessed elsewhere, or generally tangential to our aesthetic experience of the artwork.[5] Currie puts the matter with characteristic candour when he asks why, "[i]f someone says they learned so much from *Anna Karenina* it [nonetheless] seems poor form to ask: 'What exactly did you learn?'" (Currie 2020: 6). The underlying assumption, Currie hypothesizes, is that literature is held to educate us in ways that are "too subtle, too pervasive, to be discovered by the crass methods of the sciences" (Currie 2020: 6-7).

While Currie and other sceptics correctly point out that evasive responses to questions

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[3] "[T]he standard of science is empirical evidence and that is, or should be, everyone's standard." (Currie 2020: 8).

[4] It will be noted that Currie's argument concerns only works of fiction *qua* works of the imagination, and that the present paper concerns itself with art and aesthetic experience in general.

[5] See e.g. Stolnitz 1992.

about what we learn from engaging with artworks do little to strengthen the cognitivist cause, it is still possible to develop a fuller picture of the different ways in which knowledge and understanding can arise through engaging with art. For the revived interest in this philosophical discussion targets not only the concept of knowledge itself and the criteria that need to be met for something to count as such. It also leads to a broader question about how some artworks seem to afford cognitive import by changing how we think about the world, ourselves and the events, persons and situations we encounter despite circumventing standard evidential requirements.[6] This cognitive import, we shall argue, can more helpfully be conceived in the broader terms of agency, in relation to how we as epistemic agents seek to apply the understanding and knowledge gained in artistic experience.

Two alternative conceptions of how we stand to learn from art will be contrasted. The first conception we call the *subtractive model*, according to which knowledge is something that can be taken away, or "subtracted", from our experience of particular works of art, and accounted for as such. The second conception we call the *cumulative model*, which relies among other things on an idea of knowledge as something accumulated during the course of a spectator's, listener's or reader's engagement with art over time and by referencing across contexts. This second conception builds on the idea that the epistemic gain we stand to make from art (i) is not necessarily the product of one single work; (ii) cannot necessarily meaningfully be disentangled from other previously acquired items of knowledge; and (iii) depends greatly on the spectator's, listener's or reader's dispositions, expectations and ambitions *qua* epistemic agent. This conception, we shall argue, can better describe why some insights and instances of knowledge seem to elude the evidential standards called for by sceptics of cognitivism. For reasons to do with how such knowledge arises and acquires its epistemic character, not all instances of knowledge gained from art can (or indeed aspire to) meet Currie's articulation requirement (i.e. that for something to count as count as knowledge, "we must be able to articulate what the acquired knowledge actually amounts to".)

Generally, we will be less concerned with a technical rebuttal of the approach pursued by Currie than with developing a positive cognitivist account capable of side-stepping the call for ill-suited evidential criteria. That said, a constructive context for doing this comes from accepting the challenge laid down by Currie so precisely when he questions

[6] What is more, it concerns the extent to which such additions to or shifts in our epistemic repertoire can accurately be described as knowledge.

why it seems "poor form" to ask what we learned from a particular work of art. For this, we will argue, can at least at times have to do with a failure to properly distinguish between subtractive and cumulative models of knowledge acquisition in art. If our only conception of the way in which we acquire knowledge from art takes the form of extracting cognitive nuggets from particular works of art, then it seems reasonable to expect direct answers to questions such as Currie's. But if the cumulative conception can also explain some cases of cognitive gain, much of what is learned in one particular artistic encounter cannot be articulated or reported in such a manner.

In what follows we try to show why much of the awkwardness around questions such as "What exactly did you learn from *Anna Karenina*?" comes from operating with the wrong set of expectations. In the next section we will briefly discuss a motivational issue for the cognitivist project in general before looking again at why questions of this kind have such bite. In the third section we move toward a more detailed discussion of the distinction between the subtractive and cumulative conceptions and flesh these out with some examples. This will help us establish a better grasp of what a satisfactory answer to Currie's question might look like. In the fourth section we turn to Jerome Stolnitz's well-known repudiation of cognitivism about art (Stolnitz 1992), and discuss his contention that works of art can never confirm the knowledge we may acquire from them. Here we argue that works of art are less unlike other potential sources of knowledge than is often supposed, and that in many cases the things we learn from art, if they are true, can be confirmed broadly speaking along similar lines as in non-artistic contexts. In a fifth and final section we summarise our conclusions.

2 Motivating cognitivism

Before we confront the question about how we can learn from art, it may be instructive to consider a motivational issue. With so many grounds for scepticism about the knowledge claims of art, is it really worth persevering with the cognitivist project? After all, there are plenty of other reasons for valuing art and fiction, such as the pleasure it brings or the sense of identity it nurtures. At the same time, we have many other more reliable sources of knowledge, most notably perhaps the natural sciences. Terry Diffey expresses the matter succinctly when he asks who

> in the face of the overwhelming cognitive achievements of the natural sciences would tough it out now with the brazen claim that art is an equal, or indeed another, source of human

> knowledge?…Confronted with the phrase "artistic knowledge" my mind is inclined to go blank. (Diffey 1995: 211)

One might express Diffey's worry thus: while there may have been a time, such as during the Renaissance, that art and science were in some sense conceived as equals in terms of their capacity for pursuing and disclosing truth, the epistemic success of science has, over the course of the last few hundred years, made apparent to us that the purpose of art lies elsewhere. The concept of artistic knowledge, Diffey seems to argue, no longer makes any sense for the reason that we have come to realize that art is not properly concerned with producing or conveying knowledge.[7]

Is Diffey settling for a negative conclusion too hastily? Few would deny the idea that knowledge *about* art is a genuine instance of knowing something, such as when I assert that Tolstoy is the author of *Anna Karenina* or that the novel first appeared in 1873. The issue, rather, is about the knowledge of the world we claim to have gained *from* or *through* art. Now, crucially, there are many fictional contexts in which the question, "What exactly did you learn from X?" is entirely apposite. That is to say, there are plenty of cases for which the question is both intelligible and relatively easy to respond to. For example, if someone asks us what we learned from Aesop's fable about the crow and the fox, we shouldn't have too much trouble answering the question satisfactorily. The target of the question changes, however, when we broaden the epistemic context and ask what we learned from *Aesop's Fables* as a whole. We may of course enumerate the lessons learned from each tale, and perhaps even summarise them thematically, but there will probably be a sense that what we have learned amounts to more than the sum of individual observations. For when the epistemic context of the question is widened, there is a change in the kind of thing the knowledge takes as its object. In the narrow context we take it that what we learn is something specific about the world, in this case a moral precept about being wary of flattery and not taking everything we are told at face value. In the wider context, however, a broad range of possibilities arise. We may have learnt about when to use cunning in a

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[7] Of course, many cognitivist issues are contingent on the historical context in which artworks are presented. For example, where the nineteenth-century novel was widely conceived in terms of its moral role and generally approached with the expectation that one might learn something about human nature and psychology, say, today we set out to appreciate these novels autonomously and "for their own sake". As a result, the myriad functions that art was traditionally construed as fulfilling have gradually been side-lined as extraneous, even distracting.

particular situation. We may have learnt about when to be compassionate. Or we may have learnt something about art in general, say the educational function of story-telling or the narrative structures central to moral tales.

A similar pattern can be observed in relation to *Anna Karenina*. When asked "What did you learn from the character of *Anna Karenina*?", we can reply that we learnt about the strict regulation of female propriety in polite society. Again, when asked, "What did you learn about love from *Anna Karenina*?", we can formulate an answer such as, say, "That love without propriety is tragic but still preferable to propriety without love". When asked, however, what we learned from *Anna Karenina*, the interpretative constraints that hitherto framed and guided our responses start to disintegrate. As a result, clearly formulated and articulated propositions capable of capturing the knowledge and understanding we seem to have gained begin to fail us. For however many individual items of knowledge we can ascribe to *Anna Karenina* on subjects ranging from nineteenth-century social etiquette to the gender politics of adultery, and however these are added together to capture something approaching the totality of knowledge acquired from *Anna Karenina*, there will always be something further about the novel and what we gained from it which our answer fails to capture. Whatever reply is offered, the question will continue to resist the kind of closure Currie's question seeks to establish and will, to some degree at least, remain an open question.

In this sense, then, there seems to be something fundamentally holistic about many works of art. In ways not entirely dissimilar to how our knowledge of a certain friend, say, does not seem amount to the addition of all the individual things we know about them, so too does what we have learnt from *Anna Karenina* seem to exceed the sum total of things we can readily express about the novel.[8] Of course, it does not follow that all the particular and general things we have learned from the novel are not still part of what we have gained from our reading. It is, rather, that taken by themselves they do not add up simply to what we have learnt. For we can combine the particulars to form general ideas or concepts which, in turn, we can employ to shed light on related specific situations, events or persons. We can compare both general and particular ideas with other aspects of our experience in order to ascertain their validity and relevance. We can choose to apply the knowledge in practice or in theory. We can also use it to form an epistemic perspective which we can employ in

[8] For discussions comparing works of art to persons in this way, see Dammann & Schellekens 2017 and Nehamas 2016.

relating to certain other contexts and situations, before reverting back to the case at hand. Epistemic possibilities abound, to such an extent that questions of the kind "What did you learn from X?", when asked in this way, simply seems misguided.

3 Subtractive and cumulative knowledge

Can the distinction between two models or conceptions of how we acquire knowledge through art—the subtractive and the cumulative—shed light on the issue at hand? By observing this distinction we do not mean to suggest that there are only two modes of acquiring knowledge, nor even that the two models are always or necessarily exclusive; merely, that such a distinction will help us make sense of how why it is not always possible to give a definitive account of exactly what it is we have learned.

Generally speaking, the subtractive model approximates to what we tend to have in mind when we think of acquiring knowledge from a particular source. If we come across an unfamiliar word, for example, we might look it up in a dictionary. We can then take away our new knowledge about the word and employ it in a variety of contexts. The process of extracting knowledge in artistic contexts can operate in a similar way, for example when a literary text is used as historical evidence. In coming across the phrase "salad days" in a newspaper feature, say, we look it up and discover that it refers to a time of youthful exuberance and innocence, and that the earliest known usage is in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. If we then consult the play, we find that the phrase is followed by its own definition "My salad days, / When I was green in judgement: cold in blood." Thanks to the knowledge that we have gleaned from Shakespeare, we increase our understanding of how we may use the phrase with more precision. The subtractive model also seems to capture the kinds of learning we use to understand concepts as they are deployed in fictional narratives. If we are unaware, for example, of what a beadle is, Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* provides sufficient information for us to understand not only what role the title denotes but also how Mr Bumble's moral character, and name, exemplify one kind of person attracted to the role.

The cumulative model, by contrast, captures the way in which much of the knowledge we acquire through art happens over time and across different contexts. Three main features characterize the cumulative conception. Firstly, the cumulative conception allows us to see how the knowledge gained by engaging with a work of art does not necessarily have its source exclusively in that particular work, but is often acquired in part by situating that artwork also in relation to other works. The relation might be one of works by the same

artist, in the same artform, belonging to the same genre, and so on. Or it may be a less direct relation, such as when one artwork shares a theme, outlook or ideology.

This aspect leads us to our second feature, which is that the epistemic gain from works of art cannot always be meaningfully disentangled or isolated from other contexts which have shaped or otherwise contributed to the accumulation of relevant knowledge. In such cases, the knowledge is in some sense exemplified in the work of art we have at hand, so to speak, but the source of the knowledge is diffused through one or more other experiences of both artistic and non-artistic character. Over and above the straightforward idea that the knowledge in question builds on other things we have previously learned, this is a case of knowledge which relies on our calling to mind its diffuse range of sources in the light of a specific work or example.

The third, and perhaps most interesting, feature of the cumulative model is that the cognitive gain we stand to make from art depends largely on the spectator, listener or reader *qua* epistemic agent. By this we mean that the work of art's potential as a source of relevant knowledge depends on the effort and disposition of the individual to incorporate what is available through the artwork into the way they understand and act within the world. Such agency, we argue, can lay the grounds for an alternative evidential standard, capable of consolidating our experience's epistemic credentials.

Let us flesh out these three characteristics with the help of some examples. The first aspect of the cumulative model is certainly the most ubiquitous, but comes into focus when what we learn from one work of art is somehow made possible by a previous encounter with another. In V. S. Naipaul's 2004 novel *Magic Seeds*, for example, we learn about the contradictory emotions involved in cultural assimilation. The book's narrative follows Willie, an Indian emigrant and writer who finds himself emotionally and in two instances literally exiled from the contexts which he tries to make his home, concluding with his uneasy slide into a comfortable middle class life in suburban London. Although the novel is a sequel, the narrative is self-contained and Willie's emotional trajectory makes perfect sense on its own. That said, if one has read Naipaul's *Half a Life*, from 2001, which relates Willie's experience of alienation in London several decades earlier (the "half a life" of the title is not merely chronological but refers to the way in which the state of being a stranger is a kind of half-life), the character's ambivalent slide into suburbia and an affluent existence enabled by the trappings of literary success is all the more readily grasped in all its richness. The knowledge that a displaced existence can easily result in us despising the things we once longed for is increased by the depth of the context in which it is applied.

Such cumulative epistemic gain can also occur, as we have said, in much less di-

rect associative relations than between a novel and its sequel. Looking at Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819), for example, one is well aware that the level of detail—the depiction of which drew on the artist's extensive research and interviews with the survivors of the incident—and vastness of the canvas invoke the genre of history painting. Indeed, in the same way that many other painters before him had enabled their acceptance into the Academy with lavishly executed history paintings, the work marked Géricault's establishment as one of the rising actors in French romantic painting.



Figure 1: *The Raft of the Medusa*, by Théodore Géricault

When we find echoes of the painting in the art collective Forensic Architecture's work

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Fig. 1: *The Raft of the Medusa*, by Théodore Géricault

Original title: *Le Radeau de la Méduse*

Date: 1818 - 1819; France

Location: Louvre, Paris, France

Dimensions: 491 x 716 cm

Liquid Traces: The Left to Die Boat (2014), a field of aesthetic and cognitive resonance establishes itself between the two works of art. In particular, the later work, with its trademark criminological methodology and sometimes overwhelming level of detail, and the differences between the boat of the title and the military and trade vessels which crossed its path, is clearly conceived with the intention of holding up to the light universal truths about immigration, social exclusion and the geopolitical context of the sea. Looking back at Géricault the likelihood increases that we now see something similar, an artist using a forensic brush and the grand, nation-building context of history painting, to bring to our attention an uncomfortable insight about a national scandal for post-revolutionary France.



Figure 2: Caption still film video from *Liquid Traces: The Left to Die Boat* (2014)

The epistemic gain here can be construed in different ways. In one sense, the parallel between two scenes from real life, one contemporary and the other historical, calls to mind

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Fig. 2: Caption Film Still Video from Liquid Traces—The Left-to-die Boat Case (2014)

Project team: Charles Heller, Lorenzo Pezzani, Richard Limeburner, Samaneh Moafi, Rossana Padeletti.

Produced within the frame of Forensic Architecture with the support of the House of World Cultures (HKW).

Available from: https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat.

©Forensic Oceanography.

a plethora of facts about life at sea, political and economic inequality, fear, the limits of compassion, and more. In another sense, we learn that the tradition of societal critique through visual art is less recent than one often supposes. The exact content of the knowledge acquired is also clearly dependent on contingent details such as the order in which we experience the relevant works of art. In the case of Géricault and Forensic Architecture, one might assume that upon first seeing the *Raft of the Medusa* we are struck by the splendour of the representation, the dramatic depiction of an historical situation, the brilliance and consistency of the composition, and the geometric trajectory mirroring an emotional one from despair leading to hope. When we next see it, however, having recently come across *Liquid Traces*, we see an almost entirely different painting, one in which the depiction of suffering, starvation and death is foregrounded in such a way that the absence of compassion and illusory nature of hope are brought into focus (only three of the fifteen sailors who boarded the raft survived). In the first viewing, the painting's composition had its apex in the flag waved hopefully by the sailor. In the second, we notice the flag is tattered and torn. Of its original three colours, symbolizing respectively fraternity, equality and liberty, only the first, red, remains.

While we can identify what has been learned by the viewer in such a context, it seems hard to do so without taking into account the particular series of events which allowed the viewer's artistic journey to take place. Another example helps us clarify the matter further. The reader of Shikibu's 11^{th}-century classic, *The Tale of Genji*, stands to learn a great deal about Japanese courtly culture during the Heian period. What the reader succeeds in learning, however, depends to a large extent upon previous relevant knowledge. The book may be taken up, for example, by a reader who having read Arthur Golden's best-selling 1997 historical novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, travels to Japan in order to see the country for herself. Although it is of course a truism to say that no reader brings an entirely blank slate to her reading of a novel, the point here is that epistemic encounters with works of art build on contingent and highly individual trails of experience and, what is more, that the resulting knowledge is not merely coloured by this experience but fundamentally bound up with it. Thus, when asked to give an account of what she has learned from *The Tale of Genji*, our reader's knowledge may only with great difficulty, if at all, be separated from the web of memories, images and intertextual references in which it is embodied in a way which makes sense to another person. Yet surely the knowledge, say, about the Heian court that a reader who has only read *The Tale of Genji*, and the knowledge acquired by our reader, who can integrate this with her memories of modern-day Kyoto and knowledge of contemporary Geisha culture from *Memoirs of a Geisha*, are importantly different. Clearly, the latter will

be more detailed and, being more integrated into an understanding of Japanese societal norms, possess a greater range of application.

This greater range of application impinges on the third feature of the cumulative model, namely the way in which the epistemic gains made through art depend not merely on the cognitive background which a reader or viewer brings to their artistic experience, but also on their individual propensity and disposition to implement this knowledge to their own fields of deliberation and action. For engaging with art can serve as an invitation to take control of our own epistemic trajectories and to put them to work in the way that we conceive and relate to the world around us. In other words, much of what we learn from engaging with fiction depends largely on what we are willing and ready to do with the cognitive potential of the work. It is up to us to connect the cognitive dots, so to speak, and this is often a gradual process, prolonged over time. Thus our reader of *The Tale of Genji* might not be properly conscious of what she has learned from her reading of the book until that knowledge is crystallised in future actions (such as, say, fundraising for a charity which provides economic support for women who have managed to escape trafficking in Asia). In this sense, the knowledge we gain from our artistic encounters can become part of the resources we use to understand the world and our place in it, and serve as part of the toolbox with which we negotiate our actions and reactions.[9]

Viewed in this way, the cumulative conception seems indeed to answer to many of the ways we learn from art. This knowledge has a bearing both on verifiable features of the world, but also, and perhaps ultimately more importantly, on the perspectives and epistemic frameworks we employ in our relations with the world. To the extent in which this accumulated knowledge manifests itself in such epistemic frameworks, the more it becomes difficult and perhaps undesirable to stipulate exactly what that knowledge amounts to. The cumulative model, in other words, both sheds light on and gives us reasons why we need

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[9] An interesting feature of this cumulative conception of artistic knowledge is that part of what controls the way in which we incorporate our epistemic gains into our epistemic and moral dispositions is our grasp of the aesthetic qualities of the works of art that we construct and shape in this way. Part of our experience of viewing *The Raft of the Medusa* in the light of *Liquid Traces*, we may remember, was the way in which the altered epistemic context transformed our aesthetic experience of the painting. Instead of merely marvelling at the majesty and beauty of the depiction, other features of the painting occupied the foreground and the details picked out by the artist's hand were cast in a different light. In this way, as the cognitive gains made (here in relation to two different works of art) bounce off each other, so to speak, the aesthetic qualities are also amplified in virtue of the new cognitive work they perform.

not expect all instances of knowledge to abide by the same evidential standards.

4 Non-trivial pursuits

Distinguishing between subtractive and cumulative conceptions of artistic knowledge need not rule out a pluralist approach to how we learn from art. The ways in which we stand to make epistemic gains from engaging with works can and do differ, and our two models can co-exist and operate in connection with one other. At times, our epistemic gains can be characterised by neatly articulated claims, and at others by gradual shifts in our epistemic and moral disposition, action and perspective. One problem that remains, however, is the question of how we evaluate these gains as knowledge. In other words, how can we say with any certainty that the cognitive gains we make from *The Raft of the Medusa* or *The Tale of Genji* count as knowledge (or not)?

In his landmark statement of anti-cognitivism, one of the more compelling points made by Jerome Stolnitz is that "art, uniquely, never confirms its truths." That is to say,

> [i]f we find that stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice sometimes keep attractive men and women apart, we find the evidence for this truth about the great world in the great world. The fiction does not and cannot provide the evidence. (Stolnitz 1992: 196)

If works of art somehow succeed in conveying something, Stolnitz argues, these knowledge claims are just not subject to the standard of correctness which allows us to evaluate that something as knowledge. The fact that, to follow Stolnitz's own preferred example, Oedipus successfully exemplifies the maxim that "pride goeth before a fall" does not in itself constitute grounds for believing that maxim to have any truth value. The grounds for believing it must be found elsewhere. Stolnitz writes,

> [i]n science, history, and religion, confirmation of a statement also counts as evidence for other, logically related statements. Thus truths, notably in the cumulative advances of science, support and build on each other. Out of them and epistemic auxiliaries, theories are constructed. There are no theories, strictly, in garden variety cognition. Even there, however, truths attach themselves to other truths and make up crudely defined but substantial nodes of knowledge. That Summer is warmer than Winter is built up from small experiences and sustains a host of related beliefs concerning dress, festivals, and other behaviours appropriate to each. Art is unlike any of these kinds of knowing. The truth derived from one work of art never confirms that derived from another work of art, though the truths are related to

> or resemble one another, not even if they should be identical. They are truths about the great world. Yet who has ever said or thought that *Antigone* confirms *Ajax*, though they are both Greek tragedies, by the same dramatist? Hardy does not confirm *Oedipus* any more than *Invictus* refutes it. The very speculation is silly, though remarking that it is is, again, instructive. (Stolnitz 1992: 197)

As is clear from this passage, Stolnitz's conception of scientific knowledge is broadly speaking one whereby evidence and theory build on each other. His objection is rooted in the fact that the accumulation of knowledge in science relies on the logical connections observed between the evidence, the theories they confirm and the laws observed in relation to these connections. These logical connections can also be observed in relation to the more practical matters of "garden variety cognition", whose truth value can similarly be evaluated in relation to how the knowledge claims are borne out in our experience of the world. Against these kinds of knowledge, Stolnitz places the case of art, which he contends is "unlike any of these kinds of knowing". Works of art, on this line, do not provide evidence for the claims they happen to make, or the things they seek to show.

But is the artistic case really as different as Stolnitz supposes? While it seems right to hold that works of art do not themselves constitute evidence for knowledge claims, there are many things we can learn from art which we can check, confirm and apply in different contexts, just as there are things we have learned from non-artistic contexts which we use to help us understand the work. And perhaps rather like a knowledge of geometry is likely to help us master physical geography more deeply, so too will expertise in the works of Tolstoy help us penetrate further into the world of Dostoyevsky. It need not be a question, *pace* Stolnitz, of "confirming" *Anna Karenina* with *The Idiot* so much as of finding confirmation of our knowledge of *Anna Karenina* in the way in which the world of *The Idiot* opens itself up to us. This kind of knowledge, clearly, is not the product of a single reading of a novel or a single viewing of a painting. It is, rather, the product of an accumulation of reading and viewing, each instance of which has underwritten a number of epistemic gains in the form of the dispositions used to carry on reading and viewing. The works of art we encounter and find meaningful do, so to speak, stay with us, feeding into the gradual increase and enhancement of knowledge in relevant areas.

The important point here, then, is not that *Oedipus Tyrannus* causes us to "discover" that "pride goeth before a fall" but that it demonstrates this or other maxims with a force such that we can readily bear them in mind and recognize situations in which the maxim might be worth recalling. It increases the likelihood, in other words, that the maxim will remain

with us and become a part of our epistemic perspective, applicable as an epistemic tool in fictional and non-fictional contexts alike.[10] To put it differently, we now see the world armed with the maxim that pride goeth before a fall and we, in our encounters with reality, see that the maxim is confirmed in our experience. *Oedipus* thus helps us make sense of the world and in that respect constitutes an epistemic gain which can be evaluated in and by the way we live our life once equipped with it—"tested" through being put into practice in the way we see and act in the world.[11]

5 Conclusion

On the basis of what we have argued, it seems reasonable to conclude that we stand to learn a number of things from reading *Anna Karenina*. By virtue of the subtractive model, we may have learned a number of facts about the life in the upper echelons of nineteenth-century St Petersburg. Importantly, we stand to confirm this knowledge in the same way as we would confirm it in other non-artistic contexts, by reading a historical record documenting life in Russian society around 1880, say. By virtue of the cumulative conception too, we may have increased our understanding of the constraints on both happy and unhappy marriages, and how and why people who find love outside their marriage find it better to choose a path of self-destruction than one of miserable resignation. This knowledge will be entangled with our past experiences of art and non-art alike in the ways captured by the model's two first features. We may even learn to see the world through Anna's eyes, or Levin's, or with the help of aspects of both characters, and act in the light of this acquired perspective. We can confirm this understanding in the way it succeeds or fails to make sense of our own environment. Just as it remains open to the rational reader or viewer to determine to what extent the knowledge gained from *Anna Karenina* or *Oedipus* is relevant

[10] Often, it is by virtue of the aesthetic values of *Oedipus Tyrannus* that all the events that take place in it are lit with striking clarity and resonance. To this degree, we can say that it is the play's aesthetic value which prompts us to suspect that this is indeed how things are. Considered in this light, the work's aesthetic value can be seen as a motivation for us to confirm that work in our real world experience.

[11] While we have argued that the aesthetic value of such works of art may well play a role in the way we acquire and put such knowledge to use, we stop short of suggesting that any such knowledge must be available uniquely through our aesthetic experience of art. An argument to that effect is beyond the remit of this paper, and our own conclusions here can be maintained independently of any ambition to defend or refute such a strong cognitivism about art.

and generally applicable to other spheres of life, so too does it remain open to the rational reader or viewer to determine to what extent her knowledge of how the world looked and felt to Anna Karenina or Oedipus is relevant to her own looking, feeling and acting in other contexts.

This brings into focus a final point, which is that the cumulative model helps us better appreciate how and why readers do not necessarily learn the same thing from reading *Anna Karenina*. Some readers will be more receptive and pro-active than others, and explore the epistemic potential in different directions and with different levels of ambition. This is important not just as a point of clarification, but because it shows that one of the things a cumulative model of knowledge can help us explain is how our engagements with art can further individuate us both as epistemic agents and as persons. The framework it contributes to, in other words, is not merely the one we use to understand a novel, say, and others like it, but the framework of our thinking and acting in the real world. The fact that such knowledge is difficult to articulate conclusively—that there is always something about *Anna Karenina* that our answers fail to capture—need not be quite so problematic as was initially supposed.[12]

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