

FA/YSDN 4002 3.0 Type In Motion

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The Poetics of the Open Work

An excerpt of “The Poetics of the Open Work” by Umberto Eco.

“A number of recent pieces of instrumental music are linked by a common feature: the considerable autonomy left to the individual performer in the way he chooses to play the work. Thus, he is not merely free to interpret the composer’s instructions following his own discretion (which in fact happens in traditional music), but he must impose his judgment on the form of the piece, as when he decides how long to hold a note or in what order to group the sounds: all this amounts to an act of improvised creation.

The possibilities which the work’s openness makes available always work within a given field of relations. As in the Einsteinian universe, in the “work in movement” we may well deny that there is a single prescribed point of view. But this does not mean complete chaos in its internal relations. What it does imply is an organizing rule which governs these relations. Therefore, to sum up, we can say that the “work in movement” is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. The invitation offers the performer the opportunity for an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author.

[...]

In other words, the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work to be completed. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own. It will not be a different work, and, at the end of the interpretative dialogue, a form which is his form will have been organized, even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not have foreseen. The author is the one who proposed a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development.

[...]

Now, a dictionary clearly presents us with thousands upon thousands of words which we could freely use to compose poetry, essays on physics, anonymous letters, or grocery lists. In this sense the dictionary is clearly open to the reconstitution of its raw material in any way that the manipulator wishes. But this does not make it a “work.” The “openness” and dynamism of an artistic work consist in factors which make it susceptible to a whole range of integrations. They provide it with organic complements which they graft into the structural vitality which the work already possesses, even if it is incomplete. This structural vitality is still seen as a positive property of the work, even though it admits of all kinds of different conclusions and solutions for it.

[...]

When we speak of a work of art, our Western aesthetic tradition forces us to take “work” in the sense of a personal production which may well vary in the ways it can be received but which always maintains a coherent identity of its own and which displays the personal imprint that makes it a specific, vital, and significant act of communication. Aesthetic theory is quite content to conceive of a variety of different poetics, but ultimately it aspires to general definitions, not necessarily dogmatic or sub specie aeternitatis, which are capable of applying the category of the “work of art” broadly speaking to a whole variety of experiences, which can range from the Divine Comedy to, say, electronic composition based on the different permutations of sonic components.

[...]

According to Luigi Pareyson:

The work of art ... is a form, namely of movement, that has been concluded; or we can see it as an infinite contained within finiteness ... The work therefore has infinite aspects, which are not just “parts” or fragments of it, because each of them contains the totality of the work, and reveals it according to a given perspective . So the variety of performances is founded both in the complex factor of the performer’s individuality and in that of the work to be performed ... The infinite points of view of the performers and the infinite aspects of the work interact with each other, come into juxtaposition and clarify each other by a reciprocal process, in such a way that a given point of view is capable of revealing the whole work only if it grasps it in the relevant, highly personalized aspect. Analogously, a single aspect of the work can only reveal the totality of the work in a new light if it is prepared to wait for the right point of view capable of grasping and proposing the work in all its vitality.

The foregoing allows Pareyson to move on to the assertion that all performances are definitive in the sense that each one is for the performer, tantamount to the work itself, equally, all performances are bound to be provisional in the sense that each performer knows that he must always try to deepen his own interpretation of the work. Insofar as they are definitive, these interpretations are parallel, and each of them is such as to exclude the others without in any way negating them.

[...]

The poetics of the “work in movement” (and partly that of the “open” work) sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society. It opens a new page in sociology and in pedagogy, as well as a new chapter in the history of art. It poses new practical problems by organizing new communicative situations. In short, it installs a new relationship between the contemplation and the utilization of a work of art.

Seen in these terms and against the background of historical influences and cultural interplay which links art by analogy to widely diversified aspects of the contemporary worldview, the situation of art has now become a situation in the process of development. Far from being fully accounted for and catalogued, it deploys and poses problems in several dimensions. In short, it is an “open” situation, in movement – a work in progress, contemplation and the utilization of a work of art.

Umberto Eco, “Poetics of the Open Work”