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Artspeak (Or: What Dorothea Learned in Rome)

This paper is about a familiar experience when engaging with art: the experience of being in the presence of profundity, but finding oneself unable to articulate or access that profundity to one's own satisfaction. To make sense of this sort of experience I propose a novel kind of deep content in art. The *ostensive content* of an artwork, as I call it, consists in that to which our non-perceptual attention non-accidentally falls through the use of the art object as an ostensive (or pointing) device. Deep content in art is not what is encoded by representation vehicles on the surface of the art object; it is that to which our attentional gaze falls when we engage well with the artwork.

I. Introduction

This paper is about a familiar kind of experience. Think back to the last time you saw a painting in an art gallery that resonated with you, or heard a music performance that moved you, or read a poem that really spoke to you – the last time you underwent genuine aesthetic engagement with an art object (whatever that means to you). The sort of experience I have in mind has two separable components. The first is a sense of being in the presence of profundity. This is the sense that there is something deeper conveyed by the artwork that goes beyond its surface properties — its shapes, colours, sounds, and so on. Not merely that there is something beyond those properties, but that there is something *more significant* there, something that will reward the assiduous observer with fundamental truths about important things. The second concerns what happens when one tries to articulate those truths, or even just to access them to one's own satisfaction.¹ Predictably (in my own case at least), this results in a bumbling collapse into misfired platitudes and disappointing dead ends. The whole articulatory endeavour inevitably feels a bit *silky*, or at least ill-fated. Experienced together, these two components appear to put the subject in a rather strange epistemological position: one is struck with the sense that there are great cognitive gains to be had by engagement with the artwork, but also with the sense that there is no use — indeed, that one only demeans oneself — in trying to recover them. *There are profound truths here, but they are not for me.*²

It is an experience of just this kind that Dorothea is described as having in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* when she immerses herself in the art world of 19th Century Rome on her honeymoon. While her erudite new husband, Casaubon, spends the trip picking over dusty archives, Dorothea's days are spent visiting Rome's basilicas and art galleries, all the while cementing a new friendship with the young Will Ladislaw over conversations about art. Dorothea finds herself to be deplorably ignorant on the subject. Over and over, she denounces her own limitations in what she can recover from these great artworks; she is, she says, quite cut off from the mysteries of art, derives little enjoyment in considered aesthetic reflection, and cannot square herself to Casaubon's repeated enquiries as to whether the art interests her (the real question, she muses, is surely whether one *cares* about it). The strength of feeling provoked by her artistic ignorance, as she sees it, is set off against her expectation – encouraged by both Casaubon and Ladislaw – that others are meanwhile reaping tremendous insights from their

¹ I will move somewhat loosely (and without further commentary) between not being able to *say* what the contents are, and a sense of not *knowing*/lacking *access* to them; the connection I have in mind comes from Clark (1998) – the verbalisation of a content corresponds with a suite of further possible cognitive operations, including metacognition; see also Salje (2025) chapter 4.

² This target phenomenon will be recognisable to those familiar with the third critique as related to Kant's notion of sublimity in aesthetic experience; I will not be pursuing these themes in a Kantian framework here.

exposure to the very same artworks. The result is a painful feeling of epistemic disadvantage, like ‘being blind, while other people talk of the sky.’ (1871/1994, p.206)

Familiar as it might be for many of us, this situation is a peculiar one. If one is sufficiently attuned to the artwork to know that it contains great truths for the taking, what explains one’s failure in the uptake? The subject apparently has access enough to the artistic contents to recognise their profundity, but not so much as to be able to say what they are.

Of course, things might not be as they seem. The experience I have just described is as of being in a certain epistemic situation — as of being confronted with an artistic means of conveying deep truths, together with a felt inability to access them. If we want to make sense of this puzzling combination, we might start by debunking one or the other of its elements as being a good guide to the underlying epistemology. Either there really aren’t deep truths to be accessed here (despite impressions to the contrary), or there are and one could in principle do so (if only one tried a bit harder, say). I’ll briefly consider both options in section II, but will recommend against taking either as our starting point.

Instead I am going to argue that we can extricate ourselves from this puzzle by identifying a mistake in the way that Dorothea conceives of the contents of artworks – and in the way we conceive of them too, insofar as we feel the grip of a puzzle here. The mistake is in conceiving of the ‘deep truths’ she is seeking as contents encoded by the daubs of paint. Thought of like this I agree that the search is fruitless: no matter how hard she looks she won’t find any such kernels of truth hiding among the colours.

More specifically, the initial mistake is to think that deep artistic content is restricted to the presence of a representational vehicle determining truth conditions, on the model of verbal content. This is, for sure, *one* sort of content that artworks in some media can have. But for reasons I will spell out in section III, it doesn’t seem like the right one to capture the sort of deep content relevant to Dorothea’s position. For that, we need to loosen the tie between talk of ‘content’ and the model of propositional content encoded in a representational vehicle. One way of doing this, following Catherine Elgin, is to move to a model of *exemplified* content – the artwork is about sadness, for instance, in virtue of *exemplifying* sadness, just as the colour of a paint swatch stands as an exemplar for itself. While this is a move in the right direction, it is still an encoded-content account, and in this, I argue, it doesn’t go far enough.

In section IV I set out my alternative conception of deep artistic content that takes *pointing* – rather than words or paint swatches – as its canonical model. On this conception, the deep content of an artwork is determined by its use in guiding our attention. I propose the view in section IV, and close in section V by returning to and resolving Dorothea’s starting predicament.

II. Two debunking moves

Consider again Dorothea’s apparent epistemic position while gazing up at Caravaggio’s heavenly figures on the Casino del Aurora ceiling: *there are profound truths here, but they are not for me*. I have been inviting us to see this as a strange position to seem to be in. One way of undoing its strangeness is to reject one or the other conjunct as providing a real guide to the epistemology of her situation. There are two ways of doing this, corresponding to the two components of the target experience – we might deny that there are really deep truths in these artworks, or we might allow that there are but deny that there is any interesting or principled reason why they should be inaccessible to Dorothea.

The first option amounts to scepticism about the existence of what I will call *deep artistic contents* — contents that outstrip an artwork's surface representational content, where such there is. Scepticism about deep artistic content shows up in philosophical theorising across the arts, so were we to take up this first option it would be well paved ahead of us in the literature. This sort of scepticism admits that art can have profound *effects* on an observer, but denies that they amount to any additional kind of *content*.

The second option is to insist that these truths really are available to Dorothea, at least in principle. She might *feel* as if she is cut off from the contents in question, but the conditions for uptake really are in place — she just isn't exploiting them as she should. This would be a bit like holding up a newspaper before one's eyes, but being prevented from accessing its contents by fault of a wandering concentration, or missing glasses, or a lack of fluency in the relevant language. Likewise, the idea would be, there really are deep artistic contents here; it's just that Dorothea's own shortcomings are getting in the way of their uptake. To access the contents (and to *experience* them as accessible) she needs to overcome these personal limitations — by boning up on her history of art, say, or being a bit more mindful in her approach and dropping her preoccupation with other matters.

Rather than engage with these debunking moves in earnest, I propose the following suggestion: we may want to keep these moves as fallback options, but they shouldn't be the starting points of our enquiry. This is simply because they are both *debunking* moves — they work by denying that the target phenomenon is really a good guide to how things really are with the experiencing subject. This may be where we end up, but in the first instance, let's look for an explanatory resolution to the target phenomenon represented by Dorothea that honours the epistemic significance of its phenomenology.

So, how might we do that?

III. The feature exemplification view

There has been an unsurfaced assumption at play in setting up our target phenomenon. That is, that if an artwork has content of any kind — and so, a fortiori, deep artistic content — then it must be propositional content encoded by a representational vehicle, on the model of verbal content. Propositional content, I am taking it, is content individuated by a specification of how things would have to be in order for it to be true, that minimally includes operations of reference (specifying what the content is *about*) and of predication (specifying *how it would have to be*), concatenated into a structure that looks something like that of a natural language sentence. This assumption, I take it, reflects a broadly orthodox approach to content in philosophy of mind and language.

Now, if this is the sort of content we have in mind, then we have a compelling diagnosis for the air of paradox surrounding Dorothea's situation. (1) By starting observation, she seems to apprehend deep artistic content in the artwork. (2) By assumption, this content must be truth-conditional propositional content encoded by the representational vehicles she sees in the art. And yet, (3) by definition, deep artistic content is content that goes *beyond* the content encoded by representational vehicles she sees on the surface of the artwork. It's hard to see how these three claims could be true at once. What's more, if this really is the sort of content Dorothea apprehends, then it remains to be explained why she can't say what it is. If what she apprehends is an ordinary propositional content, then what is stopping her from rearticulating it in an ordinary natural language sentence — a representational medium suited *par excellence* to expressing ordinary propositional contents?

I am not the first to notice that truth-conditional propositional content seems like content of the wrong kind to capture our sense of profundity in art.³ One strategy that might help us here is offered by Catherine Elgin (1993, 2002). Elgin argues that specific features of artworks can serve as exemplars of themselves, and in so doing can achieve self-reference.⁴ This is still symbolic, or vehicular reference, for Elgin. But the content is not propositional because it is not truth-apt, and the sort of reference she has in mind is achieved through reflexive feature exemplification rather than conventional reference relations. She explains:

Exemplification is a mode of reference by which an object highlights some of its own features; it brings them to the fore. An exemplar is thus not just an instance of the features it exemplifies; it is a symbol that refers to them. (2002, p.6)

The suggestion made available by this sort of view is that art achieves the kind of aboutness that I have been calling deep artistic content not through a representational vehicle encoding truth-conditional propositional content, but by the contextually-salient *showing* of a given feature.

How would this help us to resolve Dorothea's situation? Well, if the deep content of art is a function of feature exemplification rather than propositional content, then there is no longer a clash between the presence of surface representational content and the positing of (additional) deep artistic content. The same formal vehicle is not being asked to determine two sets of propositional contents at once, one somehow layered over the other. Instead, it determines one set of propositional contents, and one set of exemplified contents – and there doesn't seem to be any problem with that. What's more, if the deep artistic contents are not propositional, then that helps to make sense of Dorothea's inarticulacy. These profound contents are contents of the wrong kind straightforwardly to double up as the content of a sentence.

This sort of response to Dorothea's situation is fine – attractive even – as far as it goes, but it seems to me that it doesn't go far enough. That's because appeal to a mechanism of exemplification imports limitations on what deep artistic contents can be about. Specifically: they can (only) be about *features*, since that (according to Elgin) is what the operation in question ranges over. That seems like rather a narrow set of resources out of which to construct the sorts of contents we seem to apprehend in deep art.

Elgin does do something to enrich the sort of content made available by her account. She expands the candidate range of exemplified properties to include *metaphorically* as well as literally exemplified properties; 'a literally lifeless painting can exemplify the vigour, vitality, exuberance and optimism that it metaphorically instantiates' (2002, p.8). But this complexifying strategy itself strikes me as only being fine as far as it goes. For one thing, it relies on the notion of metaphorical feature exemplification, which is likely to drive a wedge between those who find the notion illuminating, and those who find it too mysterious to earn its keep.⁵ More seriously, we are still left with a content composed of nothing more than punctate *features* – even if those also now include metaphorically sustained features – and this still seems like a modest set of

³ Indeed, a move like this seems to be approved by Eliot herself, who is derisive about those who try to fend off ignorance of good and evil by carrying information about Christian art 'either in their heads or their pockets' (1871/1994, p.188); it is (the suggestion is) laughable that knowledge of the kind carried about in pocket guidebooks is what puts us into epistemic contact with fundamental artistic insights about normative value.

⁴ A similar view I could have drawn on here is Dodd (2014), who gives an account of musical profundity in terms of reflexive property display; I discuss Elgin's view rather than Dodd's because there are elements of Dodd's view that come closer to my own proposal in the next section, so Elgin provides for the cleaner contrast. Both Elgin and Dodd's views are influenced by earlier work by Nelson Goodman (1985).

⁵ Dodd, for example, finds this proposal fanciful; Dodd (2014) p.308.

resources out of which to make up the sort of deep truths that Dorothea takes to be beyond her reach.

What should we take away from all of this? I think we should take Elgin's lead in freeing our notion of deep content in art from the verbal model, on which the only content worthy of the name is truth-conditional propositional content encoded by a representational vehicle. But notice that even if Elgin moves us somewhat away from the verbal model, hers is still an 'encoded content' account of another kind: the representational vehicles on the artwork's surface might not encode complete truth conditions, but they do encode exemplification relations. That's to say, the propositional model and the feature exemplification model are both in the business of giving a systematic 'encoding' story about how formal properties of an object come to be associated with particular meaning-properties. A story like this inevitably requires specificity in the formal properties over which the encoding operation ranges – for Elgin, this limits her to features, over which her exemplification operation ranges. As long as one is in the business of giving a story like this, then, one is bound to build limitations of this kind into one's account of deep content. So while Elgin has moved us a certain distance from the sort of background assumption that has got us to this point, it's tempting to wonder whether the line might be pushed even further – away from an 'encoded content' account altogether.

In the next section I will propose an account of deep artistic content that offers just such an alternative. The proposal takes its cue from Elgin, but leaves behind the encoded content approach. Rather than words or paint-swatches, the proposed account takes pointing as its basic model of content.

IV. The ostensive model

I have found it natural throughout to talk about a presence of profundity. Dorothea's sense, while looking up at the magnificent painted arches, is that she is in the presence of deep truths – they are there, she just can't get at them.

A nice thing about Elgin's view is that it takes this sort of talk seriously. The artwork displays its deep content in virtue of certain of its features exemplifying themselves. This assimilates the presence involved in deep artistic content to a kind of presence we already have a grip on: run-of-the-mill perceptual presence. The feature of the artwork, on her view – its beauty, its vivacity, its modesty – just is there, perceptually speaking, for all to see (hear, etc). The observer perceives it as she would in any other context; it's just that in the context of treating the object as art she is primed to understand these features in a comparatively loaded way, and when successful, she understands that they are standing for the abstracted feature itself.

Notice now, however, that perceptual presence isn't the only kind of presence we might appeal to. There is also attentional presence. Attentional presence is broader than perceptual presence, in that it can be perceptual – as when I carefully attend to the rip I have just spotted in my tights – but it need not be. I can also attend to things outside my perceptual environment: my daily route to the station, my breakfast this morning, the current EU leadership. In the last section I argued that Elgin's view might be too constrained to account for the full range of deep artistic contents needed to explain Dorothea's situation and cases like hers. I now want to see where we get to by developing a notion of content for the job that treats as primary the notion of non-perceptual attentional presence.

Here is a statement of the proposal:

Deep artistic content consists in what is ostended by the art-maker.

By ostension I mean an episode of interpersonal attention-guidance. When I successfully apprehend the deep artistic content in a painting, a piece of music, a poem, a performance art piece, a dance, it is in virtue of having my attention successfully directed onto some subject matter by the artwork. Like Elgin's view, this proposal allows us to take seriously talk of presence of profundity: the deep content of an artwork is what is, in a perfectly non-metaphorical sense, made *present to mind* by successful engagement with it. The most important novelty of this proposal is a shift in how we think of the art object as 'carrying' its content – a shift from taking it to be encoded by the art-object's formal properties to taking it to be what is "out there", so to speak, under our attentional gaze. To put it metaphorically, this is a shift from thinking of the formal properties of artworks as *vehicles* of content, to seeing them as *pointing towards* content. Call this the *ostensive model* of deep artistic content.

The proposal thus stated needs unpacking in three ways. I need to say more about (i) the proper objects of ostension, (ii) the mechanisms of ostension, and (iii) what it takes to be included in what is ostended by the art-maker. I'll take each in turn, and in the course of their unpacking hope to bring out further detail to the account.

Ostension is nothing over and above an episode of interpersonal attention guidance. A question about the proper objects of ostension, then, quickly becomes a question about the proper objects of *attention*. From the off, we must be careful to keep apart a technical notion of intentional object – what a state of non-perceptual attention can be *about* – from an 'act-object', or genuinely relational model of attention that implies an existing relatum as its target. When we are speaking carefully, we can regiment things using Chris Peacocke's (1998) suggestion that the proper objects of non-perceptual attention are what *occupy* attention, rather than constituting their objects in strictu sensu – a notion helpfully elucidated by M.G.F. Martin (1998) in terms of *full specific modulations of consciousness*. We should ignore any lingering inclination to think of non-perceptual attention as an object-dependent proto-sensory state, relating the attending subject to a really existing attentional target. Still: we mustn't lose sight of the fact that when this happens, what so occupies one's non-perceptual attention – what the specifically modulated conscious state is *about* – is not itself a mental item. What I attend to is the prospect of rain, or the Californian wildfires, the human condition, or what have you, not something in my mind.

With these preliminaries in place, then, what *are* the sorts of things that can occupy our non-perceptual attention? The answer is vast. The subject matter of non-perceptual attention can involve objects, properties, events, processes, and states of things. We can attend to the actual, in each of these cases, or to the merely possible, or indeed, to the *impossible* ways things could be. We can rest our attention on abstracta – on universals, or facts, or unrealized states of affairs. We can attend to relationships between these things, or to their internal structure, which may be propositional but needn't be. Crucially (and relatedly), these intentional targets needn't be truth-apt. Beethoven's late string quartets might draw my attention to a certain kind of readiness to grapple with mortality, but it needn't draw my attention to anything *about* that stance that can be said to be true or false of it. Beethoven's work steers my attention there in a very specific way, and then leaves me to feel my way around it for myself. The field of proper objects of attention, then, is extremely broad. Indeed, *anything we can think of* is a possible object of non-perceptual attention. So, perhaps with the exception of perfectly private sensations, it seems unlikely that there will be anything falling within the scope of effability that falls outwith the scope of the proper intentional objects of ostension.

Take the mechanisms of ostension next. A striking thing about attention-guidance, generally speaking, is that we can do it in all sorts of weird and wonderful ways. I can wink. I can blink. I can ring the lunch bell. I can wave my unopened umbrella. I can point, I can kick. I can pause meaningfully. I can use a sign printed on a piece of paper and taped up on the wall. Indeed, I can

simply gaze with exaggeratedly wide-eyed wonder, with the hope that you will take up my implied offer to join me in my line of sight. Ostension is a ‘whatever works’ notion, and creatures like us are impressively attuned to what will and won’t work in shared perceptual environments. A rather more modest way of putting the proposal I am making here is just to say that art objects can be added to this long list of ways in which we can guide one another’s attention, this time by controlling the *non-perceptual* attention of another.

But *how* exactly does art do this? In the representational arts – literature, poetry, representational visual arts – the representational contents themselves can be used to draw our attention to their subject matter. The *way* in which we have our attention so drawn, however, matters, and characteristically differs between artforms. Consider the distinctive pleasures involved in reaching a given subject matter through the medium of poetry – of coming to rest one’s attention on the yearning ache of unanswered love through a linguistic composition that pays special heed to the sounds, rhythms, shapes and associations of its selection and sequencing of words, heightening its attentional effects through assonance, alliteration, meter, caesura, rhyme and many more such techniques besides. A poem also *unfolds over time*, layering one such poetically-enhanced image or idea over the other. This allows for revelations, mis- and re-directions, evolution and telic structure in the dynamics of one’s engaged attentional gaze, effects that are much harder to recreate in a temporally static medium like a painting. In short, while the representational content of two representational artworks may be similar in subject matter (a poem and a painting, say, both on the theme of unrequited love), the difference in medium will bring in its train distinct suites of characteristic attentional affordances.⁶ Indeed, there may be some deep contents that could *only* be conveyed in, for instance, poetic form, since that may be the only medium through which the art-maker could achieve the specific attention modulation in question.

Many theories have been offered about how a non-representational format like instrumental music can have any kind of extra-musical intentional content. It may be that a piece of music mimics cadences and intonation patterns of vocalised emotional expression, or manipulates our responses through physiological arousal, or invites the hearer to recreate the processes involved in creative expression, or involves a kind of metaphorical experiencing-as, and so on.⁷ For present purposes, accounts of this kind are not in competition. For all I have said, there may be several equally correct accounts of how pure music can come to be about anything beyond itself – and more broadly, there may be multiple mechanisms of encoded meaning operative in any given artwork of any given form. Ostension is, as I say, a ‘whatever works’ notion, and there will be many different things across the spectrum of the arts that can do the trick. The sort of content that is of interest to us – the *deep* content of the artwork – abstracts away from the details of these encoding operations. The deep content of the artwork, according to the present account, consists in that to which our attentional gaze falls as a non-accidental result of successful engagement with the artwork – *however* exactly that attention-guidance is effected in a particular case.

Finally, what does it mean to be part of the ostension range of the art-maker? This is a delicate question. At first pass, this condition restricts our interest to cases in which the art-maker creates

⁶ Cf. Liz Camp’s notion of a ‘frame’: representational vehicle-types apt to express a distinctive ‘categorization’ or intuitive dispositional structure of thought about its subject-matter (Camp 2019a: pp.18-19). Different frames will e.g. render different elements of the subject-matter more or less salient, or easy to recall; differ in discernibility, or signal-to-noise ratio; in how central/peripheral a given element is to the associated categorization; in differences in holistic Gestalt-perception; in cross-contextual stability in one’s configuration of attention on the subject-matter; in what patterns or explanatory connections one is intuitively likely to notice (2019a, 2019b).

⁷ These views are represented respectively by Descartes (1650/1908), Noordhof (2008), Smith (2024) and Scruton (2016), and Peacocke (2009, 2020); there are others on the market besides.

the art-object in such a way that it is suited to serve as a means for guiding the audience's attention to some subject matter. To state the obvious, this isn't the only sort of art there is. Not all art has deep content.

The delicacy comes in two caveats. First, this isn't to commit to anything like a strong intentionalist claim that the deep content of an artwork needs to show up in the creator's art-making intentions. The content needn't have occurred to the art-maker at all. To see why, compare the case of conversation. Over the course of a conversation you might convey to me a well-rounded sense of how you think some portion of the world is. But this is likely only in part because of what you intend me to understand of your worldly vision. Much of the rest might come from your unreflective choice of words, hesitations, body language, or a whole host of further ways in which you might let slip your vision of the world. Still, what I pick up on *comes from you* – intentional or otherwise. My first caveat makes a parallel point about art. The artist might let slip her vision of a subject matter in all sorts of unintended ways. But what is conveyed still has *her* as its source; it is not merely a trick of the light or a gust of wind. So understood, the required involvement of the art-maker is really very minimal. Why, then, include it at all? Because it nevertheless captures the important fact that our practices of art creation, engagement and interpretation add up to something quite extraordinary that we do *together*, with and for each other – that in the special case of art, I am put into epistemic contact with profundity *as a result of what somebody else does*.

The second caveat concerns the level of grain implied by this ostensive model of content. Suppose I draw your attention to a mutually perceivable object – a harvest moon perched on the neighbour's roof, for instance. What you *do* once I've drawn your attention there is not up to me. You might do little more than register the object, or you might take great delight in drinking in its every last detail. If I draw your attention to a particularly interesting, complex, or thematically rich object of attention, it is much more likely to absorb your attention at a granular level. Still, the level of grain is not in my control. My second caveat makes a parallel point about art. The art-maker creates her artwork in such a way that it serves to draw our attention to something. The epistemic channel to profundity has been established. But once she has led us there, the level of grain at which we rest our attention on it is not up to her. We might hope that if the deep content of an artwork is sufficiently rich it will hold our reflective attention at a higher level of grain – and, indeed, this is just what seems to happen with the most profound works of art. But for all that, the level of granularity is not an intrinsic property of the artwork's deep content. I can equally well engage superficially with a profound work of art.

This last comment brings us to a final point about the account that requires clarification. At the start of the paper I set my sights on 'deep' content in art, understood as *weighty* or *important* or *significant* content – the sort of content that Dorothea felt to press on her in her artistic meditations. We might now wonder whether I have settled for something less ambitious, in that my proposed account merely tells us what it is to be 'deep' content in the quasi-spatial sense of *content that outstrips the surface representational content*. In a way, that's true, but I take the two senses to be connected in the following way: the explosion in what can be included in the deep content of an artwork on my view (in the quasi-spatial sense) provides rejuvenated possibilities for creativity and novelty in approaching the subject matter – which in turn is liable to produce deep contents in the 'significance' sense. In other words, the central proposed shift in how we are thinking of art objects as carrying their content is a vastly liberating one, and *that* is what explains why the proposed notion of ostensive content in art is apt to reflect importantly new or disruptive ways of thinking about their subject matters. Depth (on my account) in the quasi-spatial sense creates the conditions for depth in the sense of significance.

V. What Dorothea learned in Rome

That, in any case, is the proposal, which I now hope will finally help us to make sense of Dorothea's experience in Rome.⁸ It differs from both of the initial debunking reactions from section 2, but it also has something in common with them both. (Those, recall, were either to deny that there are deep contents in art, or deny that there is anything interesting or principled about their inaccessibility.)

It shares with the first an interest in the *effects* an artwork has on its audience. Unlike the sceptics, however, the proposed account treats ostensive content as content proper – not merely as the causal consequents of engaging with the formal and surface representational properties of an artwork.⁹ 'Content' is, of course, a term of art, which has different defining roles in different theoretical contexts. There are two such theoretical roles, however, that I take to be front-and-centre in much of our thinking about content, both of which are present in the proposed account. The first is that content is *what is understood*, or *what is grasped in understanding*. This is present in the proposed account: ostensive content is what is grasped in successful episodes of engagement with art. The second is one of principled *constraint*, or *exclusion* of possibilities. Again, this is present on the proposed account: the deep content of an artwork is not unconstrained – not just anything will count, merely because one ends up attending to it as a result of engaging with the artwork. One *successfully* grasps the deep content of an artwork just in case what one ends up attending to aligns – within a reasonable range – with how another's attention would be affected by the same art-object in similar conditions. (Compare: I count as successfully having my attention directed by a pointing gesture of yours just in case I end up attending to roughly the same thing in our shared perceptual environment as others would in my place). So while the proposal is somewhat friendly to the spirit of a sceptical reaction, it separates itself from the sceptics in its commitment to an additional existing layer of deep content in art.

The proposed account shares with the second debunking reaction a denial of principled inaccessibility. But the *explanation* of that denial is very different. It is not merely that the contents would be accessible to someone other than Dorothea – someone without her contingent personal failings. Rather, the misleading appearance of inaccessibility is controlled by misleading expectations about *what it is* to make epistemic contact with profundity in art, whose explanation, in turn, is located not with Dorothea but in the artwork, and specifically, in the nature of the artwork's profound content.

With this proposal in hand, then, let's return to Dorothea, gazing upwards at the painted ceilings of Rome. She feels that there are great truths here for the taking, but when she tries to say what

⁸ Thanks to Jessica Leech for an alternative suggestion for how the proposed account could explain Dorothea's situation: she may be in a position to *recognise* that the artwork has ostensive content, but not to make any sort of epistemic contact with what is ostended. This is an interesting alternative position we sometimes find ourselves in, but to my mind falls short of what Dorothea is in fact described as retrieving from her aesthetic experiences in Rome.

⁹ Why does it matter if we treat this as content proper? I think it matters because of what we can do once we have this sort of content on the table. There has been a recent groundswell of neo-cognitivist accounts of the epistemic value of art, on which the epistemic value of engaging with art is not the acquisition of propositional beliefs / knowledge, but improved grasp of a domain through new or renewed (non-propositional) *understanding*. Much excellent work has been done on the epistemological side of this picture (e.g. Gibson 2007, 2008; Elgin 1993, 2002; Vidmar 2013, 2019, 2023; Carroll 2002; John 1998; Baumberger 2013, 2017; Olive 2024). A complementary non-propositional account of the deep *content* of artworks could serve to round this picture out, but this offer only stands if we can make the case that this is a kind of content proper.

they are she feels nothing but her own limitations. Here, finally, is our explanation of Dorothea's position, made available by the account I have proposed.

Take first the first component of the experience – the sense of being in the presence of profundity. While it may no longer be felicitous to describe her as being in the presence of 'truths' (propositionally individuated), on this view she really *is* in the presence of deep artistic contents; contents that promise illumination about fundamentally important insights – about how things hang together, what is important and how we should value it, about what it is to be in the world, and more. On the proposed ostensive model, these contents consist in what is ostended by Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Raphael and the rest, artists whose paintings shepherd our attention onto important subject matters that outstrip their surface representational contents. Of course, these aren't contents that I can easily rearticulate for you here and now – but that is only to be expected on this account. Likely these are not propositional contents, and so not contents of a kind that can easily be repackaged in a natural language sentence. To see what they are, one would need to go to Rome.

This latter point speaks to the second element of Dorothea's experience – her sense that these deep contents are, for all their presence, apparently inaccessible to her. On the proposed view, her inclination to find the contents inaccessible comes from her expectation that she will be able to put what she finds into words. But unlike propositional contents, the vast expanse of what she finds when her attention makes contact with what is offered by these artists is not readily expressed in a sentence. The structures she finds there are many and varied, and need not resemble anything like a natural language sentence. So the sort of content Dorothea is in a position to take up simply needn't be of the right kind to rearticulate verbally. Little wonder the slip from here to a sense of epistemic deprivation.

But for all her inarticulacy, it's hard to see Dorothea as a character who really is blocked from accessing the deep artistic contents of the art she beholds. Indeed, in comparison with her inhibitedly reflective husband, who never gets beyond the point of preliminary note-taking in his life's work, Eliot characterises Dorothea as having a mind of direct intuition; a mind in which 'there is a current into which all thought and feeling were apt sooner or later to flow – the reaching forward of the world consciousness toward the fullest truth, or least partial good' (1871/1994, pp.202-3). For an intuitive mind like Dorothea's, her connection with the artwork doesn't proceed piecemeal, via careful deliberation with encoded intermediaries. It is direct and visceral – as she enters an art-filled palace, she is attentionally overcome:

[A]ll this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred with her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which emanated through her after-years. (1871/1994, p.193)

She might not enjoy considered aesthetic reflection, but she is struck by the aesthetic experience 'as with an electric shock', whose cognitive aftershocks last long after the honeymoon is over. Dorothea really was in the presence of artistic profundity drenching her young mind. She just didn't know that this was what it would be like.¹⁰

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Dr. Léa Salje
School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science
University of Leeds
Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, LS2 9JT

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