



“Decolonising the ineffable in art: The case of the Parthenon Sculptures”

KEY CONCEPTS

- **Ineffable:** Aspects of meaning that cannot be adequately paraphrased or put into words. It is associated with affect, i.e. emotions, feelings, sensations, attitudes and moods (Blakemore 2011; Gäb 2020; Potts 2007; Wharton 2022).
- **Cognitive effects:** These are propositions, thoughts, contextual assumptions, something that is true or false.
- **Affective effects:** They can be primary – occurring before cognitive effects or secondary – caused by propositions (Saussure and Wharton 2020; Wharton and Saussure in press; Wharton and Strey 2019).
- **Aesthetic experience:** The affective state triggered by appraising an artwork.
- **Parthenon Sculptures:** A set of Ancient Greek sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens, Greece. Some of them are displayed in the British Museum (BM) whilst others in Athens. Most people know them as the ‘Elgin Marbles’ from the person who ‘brought’ them to England. The UK government constantly denies their return to Greece.

1. Introduction

Humans have been drawn to art since the beginning of time. Recent work on pragmatics of communication and the interpretation of art indicates that we allocate energy and attention to artistic stimuli (such as poems or sculptures) that we see as rewarding and attempt to interpret their ineffable meaning (Fabb 2021; Kolaiti 2019; 2020; McCallum and Mitchell 2021; Wharton 2022). However, if the artwork is not contextualised properly then, its ineffable meaning becomes more difficult to interpret.

2. Aim

To explore how inappropriate contextualisation, the case of the Parthenon Sculptures in the BM as such, can hinder the interpretation of ineffable meaning in art.

3. Theoretical framework

Relevance theory

(Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995)

In a certain context, assumptions are relevant when:



4. Relevance & affect

Artworks become relevant in a context to the extent their affective effects in this context are large.

4.1 – Context 1

You visit the Parthenon Gallery in the BM. These sculptures were looted and this is not their rightful place. They are displayed under a glass ceiling through which the English sun creeps in. Supposedly, you feel awe when you enter the Gallery or you feel *something*. You experience primary affective effects that might give rise to propositions.



Fig. 1: Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece

4.2 – Context 2

You visit the Acropolis Museum with its big glass windows (see Fig.1). The Parthenon dominates the Athenian skyline. This context adjusts relevance much quicker. You feel *something*, something different this time that you cannot explain. The proper contextualisation leads to a completely different aesthetic experience possibly leading to both primary and secondary affective effects.

5. Conclusion

- Affect and contextualisation are crucial in the interpretation of art-related meaning
- The example of the Parthenon Sculptures showcases how badly contextualised artworks as a by-product of colonialism hinder the translation of the ineffable meaning leading to different aesthetic experiences

References
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