

Avenues of Vision: The Unique Character of the Artist

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Analysis

In the beginning was the Word. And that the world was made through the Word. And that nothing exists but that the Word created it¹. Therefore, the Word was an Artist.

We differ from the Word in many respects, but, for our purposes, it is to be noted that we are provided Material: we do not create it. The Material is given that we may create, and that we may create according to the inspiration that is given us by the Word.

We receive Creation. We have been given senses that perceive Creation, in whatever form it is manifested. The impact provokes response in emotional forms: anger, sorrow, warmth, joy, even lust and fear.

How Material is formed and manipulated, how it is presented, and how it is used and received are the issues we will discuss in this book. Somewhere we have lost the ability to perceive Creation and must somehow wait for the impact to make itself felt without our interference or interpretation.

According to the Author's (Highly Biased and Subjective) Dictionary . . .

Therefore, to create the appropriate leash for the arts, we need to define Creation ("Art") as it relates to the artist, the church and to the public.

Art is a creative expression, using visual, aural, lingual, sequential, even culinary and other, media to express concrete and abstract ideas in affective ways. Art may be considered anything that impacts the senses and gives an emotional impression or reaction. Watching a beautiful sunset, one can consider it amazing "Art" by the mere fact that an item has impacted that person emotionally, or aesthetically as some philosophers distinguish them. Whether it has

been “created” or not is beside the point, but even in this, we can recognize a “Creator,” if only in the fact that the media in question can only be manipulated by Someone of God-like power.

Art is one of those amazing things, a blend (some might say “juxtaposition”) of process and vision. A vision, since a project needs a form to emulate, and a process, since that vision needs sinews and bones to exist beyond the mind of the Artist.

The Vision

The Artist first must produce the “vision.” This vision is an imaginative entity of what God, or in pagan cultures, a “muse,” breathes into being. This may be a “final” product from the point of imagining but it can also be a starting point, a thing that can be molded and shaped as human flaws become evident, even in within the vision itself.

In its initial stages, a vision is a raw affective thing which may be merely indescribable in that particular manifestation, that which exists within a transcendent mind. Here, I mean “transcendent” inasmuch as the mind in question can perceive in modes that go beyond the material world. We see this in the way a passionate artist tries to describe his new “idea” to someone else. At best, it is entertaining, although not in the way an artist would like to see! At worst, there is no communication and the artist gives up in frustration. This makes for a somewhat entertaining time when soliciting financial support.

The *expression* of the vision is not the vision itself, but an emulation of it. The vision is that “something” that an artist feels or perceives within her own mind.

The interesting thing is that the vision is not just emotion. Often, emotion is only evidence that it is present. A mundane way to express it would describe it as “spiritual,” although such a word is inadequate to those who have experienced the condition, and inconceivable to those who have not. This is why so many artists, in both secular and sacred worlds, have more than a cursory idea than most society that the spiritual is “out there” in CS Lewis’s “Numinous.” Kierkegaard pointed out that non-believers receive this awareness of the spiritual and are led into Sentimentalism, while I would add two more possible paths: the occult

and the mystic. A fourth opportunity is “the knocking by One” in hopes that the door will be opened. Opened, it is, at the hearer’s request, and that hitherto non-believing artist is introduced to Christ in a very new, personal and overwhelming sense.

The working of the vision is shaped by education and by experience even though the original material is unchanged. Both are events that color a person’s perspective. Done properly, they enhance the artist’s awareness of his vision: anything else clouds and distorts it. When I was a child, my family insisted that “more is better” when decorating a Christmas tree, until the poor thing was so wrapped in tinsel and stuff that the original item was lost. Trappings may be well and good. Used sparingly and appropriately, they enhance the form and color of the original. Too much, and the concept is lost amidst the *stuff*. This was my own experience: others may find that a lot of decoration recalls childhood memories of their own and thus an emotional bond with something opposite to my own sensibilities.

A vision in and of itself is usually barely tangible to the artist and, again, is manifested by her emotions. Education will open the mind to new possibilities in expressing that vision in a logical, pedagogical way. Experience tends to be more affective, with classic “positive” and “negative reinforcement” manipulating the person’s responses and her application and interpretation of that “vision.”

A third thing is the inner being of the artist himself. In Tolkien’s words, “suddenly, he was neither the Eye, nor the Voice²” but himself, and able to choose an avenue for his own sake, from his own perspective. The artist is neither education nor experience and the inner person, stripped of such, will choose accordingly. The original item will appear again, once the trappings fall away.

The vision has now taken some sort of shape. Beyond a spiritual birth and its emotional impression, it now takes form in the mind of the artist as a tangible product. The artist projects upon the vision and its emotional by-product the form necessary for physical manifestation, form developed by the media in which the artist is familiar. Although true to itself in form, the minimal trappings allow it to appear as a symphony, a sculpture, or a painting.

Structure and Chaos

Art without form is chaos. Art without freedom is stark. One might also say that about mathematics and other “logical” sciences, as well. One notes that the most gifted mathematicians are skilled in, or at least enjoy, some aspect of the Arts, while the most skilled artists find great wonder in the sciences, as well. Scientists reach empirically what Artists envision aesthetically.

Our vision must take on some form without losing its affective qualities. Our artist seizes this opportunity to clothe that vision in tangible materials that may be perceived by others. As our brain is made up of a logical half and an affective half, so must we communicate in such a way. Our vision will show itself best as a form with clothing, as flesh with a skeleton.

The artist, without letting go of his “vision,” then begins the process of birthing it. The artist must “break down” the vision intellectually to analyze its moving parts, composition and being. In his mind, he destroys that he may create.

Colors are broken down to their initial components so the artist may reconstruct them. The musician hears a chord and education and experience again allow her to analyze the frequencies inherent that she may write them down. A cook is aware of the spices in that particular taste so he can mix just the right amount of one or the other to emulate or enhance it.

The artist then proceeds to rebuild his vision in the real world, comparing it to the vision within his mind. As materials do not become available, he must literally improvise: at the worst he must reshape his vision to conform to his materials. Many are the visions that cannot be made manifest in this material world. They must be substituted by symbols so that those with “ears to hear” and “eyes to see” can perceive the truth behind.

What We Need Here is the Ability to Communicate

As with any communication, success depends on the original concept, the transmission and the reception of the concept. If one of these three is flawed, accurate communication

cannot occur. An artist's talent is apparent when it identifies an affective or cognitive piece of material (the concept) and puts it into a tangible medium (the transmission) to deliver that concept to a receptor. Art and dance schools, music theory classes and piano lessons, cooking school, English and literature classes are all effective in helping the artist with the transmission, and allow him to put that original “message” into a form that the public can perceive. On the receiving end, the human condition is physically predestined to receive in certain ways. The senses are in this universe the only physical avenues through which to convey any concept. The human brain is disposed to break things down into the affective and the logical, to varying degrees. The public should be culturally or institutionally educated to accurately interpret the media language delivered.

Our vision exists. It has been made manifest within the mind of the artist. It has been broken down into its fundamental pieces and rebuilt within our four-dimensional world in a form that is expressive to others. We can even see others receiving and understanding it, albeit interpreted properly only by the guidelines within their own minds.

We see the “what” and the “how,” and even a little bit of the “why.” Although the vision is perfect itself, the quality inherent within that piece of manifestation – a.k.a. “Art” – is yet another issue.

Integrity is Integral

Integrity is the standard by which we judge the quality of Art. Paul’s famous line from I Corinthians³ well states the ultimate standard of quality in any person’s life: “Without love. . .” any effort is pointless. I find it interesting that one of the examples he expressly cites is that of public speaking. This was an Art he much admired and was gifted in (both physically and spiritually, I believe). Any expression is futile if we have not love. Although I use the word “integrity” to encompass more than just “*agape*,” that self-denying love found only in things of God, let us examine first the role of *agape* in a Christian artist.

All our lives are to be inundated by *agape*, until nothing else is ultimately left. Such love is the only gold worth buying. All else will be burned up in that final conflagration intended, not to destroy, but to purify; it is dross. This even includes our “Art,” as passionately as we may hold on to it. Like the FDA label says, if used for anything other than its intended purpose, it may be harmful. It is an idol, a demon and will eventually destroy us if we allow ourselves to follow it into hell. But our Art is another demigod that on the positive side, if fulfilled by Love and baptized by Grace, can transcend all that even we in our aesthetic ecstasy can imagine for it⁴.

If *all* is futile without Love (thank you, Solomon and Paul, for demonstrably making that clear), then the Christian artist must directly apply Love to her artistic life. In the Christian, it is clear that *agape* is the only true reason for creating, and the humility and self-denial that are the definition of *agape* will come as a matter of course.

Self-denial? Naturally. An experienced church musician has only to consider the time he had to play “Just As I Am” – straight, mind you, with no embellishments – 1500 times during one altar call. Or maybe it just seemed like 1500. A graphic artist is asked to design the new church logo and out of the five options set before the church board, the “cheesiest” version is selected over the artist’s protests. A nationally known theater producer volunteers to teach drama to a group of unappreciative youth, in the belief that it nonetheless furthers the will of God.

Yet, self-denial without a false martyrdom comes from the work of the Holy Spirit and, if we are lucky to get this far in our spiritual growth, from the realization that God is bringing people to Himself through the talent He gave us. This is only one manifestation of God’s Love within the heart of the Artist.

Humility is inherent within the Christian as he follows Christ. “Let this attitude be in you that was in Christ Jesus who. . . humbled Himself.”⁵ In the development of his Art, the Christian rides that fine line – truly a razor’s edge – between confidence and arrogance. One must have enough confidence in his Art to stretch, grow and respond to criticism without wilting, yet humble enough to acknowledge the Source of his inspiration comes not from within himself. An

appropriate view is found in William Goldman's The Princess Bride, as Domingo Montoya describes his relationship to his art:

"You are an artist," Yeste said.

"No. Not yet. A craftsman only. But I dream to be an artist. I pray that someday, if I work with enough care, if I am very very lucky, I will make . . . a work of art. Call me an artist then, and I will answer."⁶

Montoya does not cease to create in the deprecation of his heart, but lifts his head in the hope that someday his Art may reflect that he is an Artist, but not before. Saxophone player Ernie Watt conceded in a session I was in that one often had to compromise to make a living, so that he could do a project or performance with utmost integrity.

But much can be done even within a project. It may be "boring," and it may be very different from the actual things the instigator wishes, but even pragmatic, utilitarian jobs can be done with integrity. It is vital that one understands the fine line between the starving artist that has complete integrity and the money-grubbing mercenary that has long forgotten what her initial passion catered to.

One artist that seem to have understood this balance is violinist (or should i say "fiddler"?) Mark O'Connor. While having the technical "chops" to "sit-in" on multiple performances, in almost any style, he recognizes where his passion lies. There is no question about his skill on the violin, but his background and his passion is clearly in his improvisation. It is the fluidity and the unique aspects of each performance that drives his passion on improvisation.

On his Youtube release, "The Improvised Violin Concerto," he describes his background, his style and his new composition for orchestra and solo violin. With a background with such "classical" string players as Yoyo Ma and

Practical Integrity

With the idea that Art is merely a medium to convey vision, and therefore neither inherently “good” or “bad,” let us examine Art as created within the bounds of the human being, those of God and those who are not.

“Is it Truly *Art*?” Then, in a general sense, no matter who or what the artist is, believer or unbeliever, it comes from the depths of the soul, for the soul is where the vision starts. True Art will transcend the processes of conveying that vision so that the vision is the most accurate it can possibly be.

This transcends what culture has to say about True Art, for it is not culture that determines whether Art has Integrity, but the artist, and God who knows the artist himself.

What about “obscene” material that may proceed with Integrity (or at least honesty) out of an artist's soul? It may still be Art, by that strict definition of Integrity, but simultaneously that creation is a magnifying glass into that person's soul. The mind and spirit that produced that twisted Art may be twisted themselves, deserving our pity and prayers as much as our animosity and ridicule.

Again, Art is merely a medium, and the messenger should not be killed for the news it carries.