

Art and the tyranny of meaning

By Dr Steve Trudgill

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I have been distrustful of interpretations of 'what the artist meant' for some time. I remember especially an early visit to Tate Modern when I compared my interpretations of the paintings with what it said on the labels. I recall one particularly which showed trees growing all over a disintegrating war memorial. 'The healing force of Nature eventually triumphs over all' I said to myself. The label said: 'It reminds us that history is an artificial concept extracted from the experience of individuals'. My interpretation tells you a lot about my predilections, but the label started me thinking about artists' intentions, viewers' interpretations, the meanings given to art and the diversity of personal meanings of art.

Intrigued - and running a lecture course which included discussion of the depiction of nature in art - I hung a painting in my College room and asked supervision students what they thought was being depicted, what it meant to them and what the artist meant by it.



Author's painting of a tree, Ingleborough, Yorkshire. Negative as the tree is partly dead or positive as the tree is surviving?

Some saw it as positive as representing how life clings on despite adversity; others saw it as negative as showing something dying. It can thus be described as hopeful or gloomy. The response was usually about 50:50 each way. Either way it is seen as imbued with significance and purpose. Whatever the narratives, there seemed to be some emotional engagement and a search for meaning.

The supervision students, not knowing initially that it is my painting, discussed the artist's intention, often with some relish and assumed insights which, for them, imbued the painting with a sense of purpose. When I revealed that I had painted it and I recognised very little of what they said as motivational for me, they were often crestfallen. However, when they pushed me, they felt comforted, I thought, when I said that I think the appeal for me is about the juxtaposition of the living and the dead parts. But that is a post hoc self-interpretation. In truth I just sat down and painted it without much conscious thought of why – it just appealed to me, perhaps compositionally and as a striking image as much as anything. It told me that unless the artist was aware of and specifically stated their intentions, then not only is it easy to over-interpret the artist's intention but that all interpretations are possible – and untestable. The viewer is making up stories about the artist which are justifiable, and which then become true for the viewer. What, however, is interesting for me is the phrase I used above of 'without much conscious thought'. To me this relates to the search for wider and deeper interpretations of art, particularly landscape art. Are we are tapping into a subconsciousness which both the artist and the viewer can share?

In books *The Picturesque* and *Landscape and Western Art* Malcolm Andrews (1994, 1999) asks how the mind of the artist influences the subject and mode of depiction. He traces genres, movements and styles and places them within cultural contexts. Classic cases of shared imagery include paintings like Constable's *Haywain* and the author (1999, 171 – 175) refers to Constable's landscapes as providing 'portable icons' and he describes how Dutch and French landscape artists have contributed very much to Western consciousness of the countryside. He writes of "a ... contribution to the construction of English national identity as fecund, domesticated and profoundly stable" and Helsing (1997) in *Rural Scenes and National Representation* writes of the political instrumentality of art.

In Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1950), art is seen as a means of creating truth by being not merely representational, but actually producing a community's shared understanding, with the attendant observation that each work of art changes the meaning of existence for the observer. This led me to the corollary of how far art can be interpreted as reflecting a community's shared understanding.

In George Mather's book: *The Psychology of Visual Art: Eye, Brain and Art* (2014) the author writes about landscape art stressing that we seem to have innate preferences for types of landscape even across a range of cultures and that this has some kind of biological and evolutionary basis. Although the weighting varied from country to country (ranging from USA, Germany to Kenya and China) the dominant preferences were for visual representation of lakes/rivers/oceans category and the fields/rural areas category (Mather 2014: 129). He shows how in Europe there was a northern tendency to represent dense forests, mountains and vast horizons such as in the landscapes of Cranach the Younger, Altdorfer, Durer and Brueghel while in the south of Europe "the predominant motif was rolling countryside, a cultivated landscape dotted with ancient ruins or farm buildings" (Mather 2014: 138). He continues:

"By the seventeenth century, painters such as Claude had developed a set of conventions for depicting idealised or classical landscape scenes. The painting was usually divided into a series of receding depths planes. Tall trees occupied the middle distance, giving way to distant

views of mountains. People and animals were often placed in the foreground. Water in the form of a lake or river was a common element, as was a blue sky and low sun partially obscured by dramatic cloud formations. Evidence of human habitation took the form of a distant farmhouse or villa, or perhaps temple or classical ruin. Some of these elements recur in landscape art of the nineteenth century, such as paintings by Constable and Corot. By this time ‘a peaceful scene, with water in the foreground reflecting a luminous sky and set off by dark trees, was something which everyone agreed was beautiful’ (Clark 1976: 147)”

In terms of the origin of these preferences Mather (Ch 9 and 10) refers to our evolution on the savannahs of Africa and the related idea that this gives us a preference for open landscape. A fundamental evolutionary approach is adopted by the idea of The Biophilia Hypothesis promoted by E. O. Wilson (Kellert and Wilson, 1993). This relates to early human evolution on the open savannahs and our deep affinity with other forms of life. Mather argues that this is a limited hypothesis as the archaeological evidence shows that early hominid evolution was in a range of habitats including woodland, and brushland. He relates the importance of what may be hidden (a sense of mystery) and the associated exploratory behaviours as well as the refuge-prospect theory of Appleton (1975, 1996). Here preferred scenes offer both shelter and a good view – both for viewing possible resources and also potential threats. He develops the theme that aesthetic preferences reflect some kind of advantage in order to have survived and developed during evolution and these may involve fitness and location of resources, like water, though he observes that aesthetics may not necessarily be focussed explicitly on utility.

Mather also observes (128-129) that the most consistent responses to the question ‘which type of outdoor scene appeals the most?’ were for a preference for “open, rural scenes containing water, rather than forest or manufactured landscapes”. Mather is citing here a discussion of the work of two Russian-born American conceptualist artists Vitaly Komar (born 1943) and Alexander Melamid (born 1945) from the book on a scientific guide to art edited by JoAnn Wypijewski, (1997). Mather continues that “It is remarkable how often the world’s most popular paintings contain all the elements highlighted in Komar and Melamid’s work – predominantly open rural scenes containing both animals and humans”. The telling finding is that while these elements are so prevalent in Claude’s landscape and those of so many other artists, it is “unlikely to reflect culturally transmitted standards based [solely] on Western art”: these preferences were expressed strongly in all populations surveyed including African and Asian respondents and are also common themes in Chinese art.

So have we found a deeper psychological basis for a shared interpretation of art? Or are we just imposing a set of meanings on art which the artists never intended? Or both. Or neither?

I leave these questions open, but what I do feel is that it is important not to reduce the diversity of meanings. As the writer Feyerabend proposed in *The Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being*’ (1999), “even the simple attempt to describe may throw a veil of illusion over the viewed” and he considers C18th travellers and naturalists described by Mary Lousie Pratt (1992) in *Imperial Eyes* who “reduce and dismantle all they find while retaining the language of direct observation”. He writes: “Anyone who tries to make sense of [events, any phenomenon], is forced to introduce ideas that are not in the events themselves but put them in perspective. There is no escape: *understanding a subject*

means transforming it lifts it out of a natural habitat and inserts it into a model or a theory or a poetic account of it”.

So let us take that positively and have as many ‘models, theories or poetic accounts’ as possible - and celebrate a diversity of meanings in art - and especially to cherish our own meanings rather than be necessarily swayed by given meanings from others.

I will end on the words of John Piper about the window behind me. In the recently completed Guide to Robinson College Chapel we find Piper’s words:

The Chapel, in which I am involved, is large as college chapels go and its west window is a prominent feature inside and outside in the court. The subject of the stained glass, which I designed, is a modern ‘Light of the World’, with a great circular light penetrating and dominating all Nature’. The window is seen at its best in the late afternoon in summer, when the coloured light bursting through from behind the curtain wall delivers an image both of hiddenness and of revelation.

A Fellow recalls a conversation with John Piper who thought that ‘...only limited views of the light of life can be found quickly’. The Fellow was trying to photograph the new window and ‘when I offered that I had had to crouch near the altar position to capture anything on film that I was happy with, he [Piper] agreed that kneeling on the floor near the altar position was where he had intended that the light should ‘shine on you’ and you appreciate its glory. He added that this was not necessarily a ‘theistic’ interpretation but open to each viewer to take their own meaning from it.’

There, I think is a lovely infusion of artist’s intention which allows – and indeed encourages - a diversity of individual meanings.