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The Uncommonness of Commonality

An Examination of Relationships Among the Arts

The idea that there is something in common between one poem and another and between either poem and certain music, or the work of a painter, ostensibly having the same theme, is intrinsically attractive to makers of curriculums. At last, say they, we have a way of organizing the arts for instruction. MacGregor takes considerable pains to review the numerous parallels and analogies that occur among arts activities, and to explore a number of contexts or "behaviour complexes" in which art has function, in order to distinguish the conditions under which any commonality might be identified. The more closely he examines apparent relationships, however, the more he finds that each of the arts has a unique character, not amenable to synthesis with the others.

One of the most potent images to emerge from the recent *Music of Man* programs on television was that of a saxophonist "playing" fish. The five parallel lines of a musical staff were drawn on the side of a large fishtank, and as the fish moved behind it they took on the role of musical notes. The saxophonist blew notes to correspond with their various positions on the staff; as they moved, sequences and runs developed. In this fashion, an aleatoric function, of notes occurring by chance, was maintained in a setting more stimulating than the random shuffling and dealing of sheets of music that is the usual procedure for this kind of music-making. The originality of the performance was enhanced by its being presented through the medium of television, where judicious editing ensured that incidents not contributing to the total effect (lack of movement on the part of the fish, or any tendency to travel from right to left instead of left to right) were eliminated.

A similar case of combining art forms to create an original synthesis occurs in Visconti's film *Death in Venice*. In the opening sequence a small steamboat materializes out of a Turneresque haze and, to the music of Mahler's 5th Symphony, makes its way through a gentle swell towards Venice. So powerful is the combination of sight and sound that one is conscious of the rise and fall of the boat as a heightened physical sensation, as well as being emotionally prepared for what is to come.

An explanation for the success of presentations like these is that the author, drawing upon commonalities existing among the arts, has selected two or three originally independent elements and spun them together in a compatible arrangement which the audience recognizes and finds delightful. A new revelation is achieved through the integration of experiences.

The educational consequences of following such procedures have been frequently discussed in the professional literature of the past decade. Find the key common words, runs the argument, and structure the program around them. In one example, unity and variety are taken as the thing all the arts have in common, and exercises have been devised for students wherein, for instance, primary colours in art are equated with instrumental sounds. Hence, strings may be "brilliant and exciting," and woodwinds "cool and mellow." Students are then encouraged to decide which instruments might best reproduce sounds like the inside of a dark cave, and finally they listen to *Fingal's Cave* to have their initial impressions confirmed. (Gingrich, 1974)

Another writer describes some possibilities for inter-arts programs as follows:

The arts can be related by a shared expression of an emotion, by a common theme, by analogies of form, or by a common origin in a particular culture (and) a series of experiences can be offered to develop perception involving still objects (painting, sculpture, photographs, natural forms), moving objects (dancers, film, kinetic sculpture, light), sound (instrumental, electronic, vocal, natural) and whatever else the imagination of the teacher can devise. (Lewis 1976:17)

Sir Herbert Read has set out a case for what an integrated approach might achieve, in more general terms. The arts, he claims, begin with states of feeling which are then given material being. Their commonality emerges from different personal expressions which, however, reflect and influence public disposition to the point where, ideally, significant transformations can occur in the values held by the members of society at large. (Read, 1955)

All these positions are flawed, in that they assume identical purposes and conditions among arts activities, and imply that linking these together is a simple, even an inevitable process, set in motion by recognition of a resemblance. That leads, I would argue, to superficial bonding, and, in turn, to structurally indefensible programs. My intent will be to show that it is mistaken to assume, from the use of identical wording or from apparently similar kinds of response to the various arts, that real commonalities exist among them.

Physiological and cognitive considerations

In clearing the ground for pursuing our argument, we ought to consider first the manner in which the brain seems capable of dealing with commonalities. In order to do so, there must be some notion held cerebrally of what

is “the same” or “similar,” and some method or mechanism by which data gathered by the receptors are pooled and compared for similarity.

Neural structure is such that “communication,” in the sense of neurons firing, is continually taking place within the brain. Furthermore, this “cross-talk” has a capacity to spread quickly, involving different areas which seem to control specific responses. Geschwind (1979) describes two of several forms of transformation that may occur: the first involving the utterance of a word, the second, the comprehension of written language. In the first operation, three areas are involved. The structure of an utterance seems to evolve in part of the temporal lobe called Wernicke’s area and is transferred to Broca’s area, in the frontal lobe, where it is programmed for vocalization. The motor cortex then comes into play so that utterance is achieved.

The second operation, that of comprehending a written word, involves the transfer of information from the visual cortex, where sense-data are received, via the angular gyrus to Wernicke’s area where these are “understood.” Both operations clearly illustrate that transference from one mode to another is physiologically possible and in fact common. They help to explain and complete propositions advanced by communication theorists such as Edmund Leach (1976) who, in distinguishing between the sense-image, which he terms the “signifier” element, and the concept, termed the “signified” element, bases his understanding of the process on intuitive and logical rather than empirical grounds.

A further basic question related to the human capacity to establish notions of commonality concerns the relative degrees of freedom which humankind enjoys in making choices. Just as there are limitations upon the amount of visual or auditory information which the eye or ear can deal with, so, it would seem, there could be limitations upon cortical functioning which metaphorically blind us to possible alternatives. The animal world is full of such instances. Eisenberg (1972) writes of

... the white crowned sparrow, which, though it must learn its song, is structured in such a way that its neural networks resonate only to a restricted set of external harmonic sequences. The data of linguistics suggest the possibility of a similar restriction on the form of language and the nature of grammatical structures; they imply limited variability in the neural schemata underlying limited structures. (p. 125)

Genetic engineering has doubtless had a share in setting limits upon human potentiality. But human cortical development has also resulted in a capacity to reflect and make decisions which calls for the weighting of several factors at once. This requires a brain sufficiently labile to permit the envisaging of a number of possible solutions to a problem. “Circumstances alter cases” is a phrase which sums up the evidence against genetic determinism insofar as it is able to shape human thinking. It also implies a recognition of modes of thought which reflect a sense of similarity and of difference.

Social and cultural considerations

It is one of life's paradoxes that most people are prepared to accept the human race as essentially of common stock, possessed of brains that weigh about the same amount, endowed with physical dexterity and muscle capacities that vary relatively little throughout the world; yet some persons place so little confidence in the ability of human beings in separated social groups to find similar solutions to similar problems that the intercession of flying squads of extra-terrestrial beings is seriously proposed to explain the creation of ancient monuments similarly constructed in places geographically far apart. Clearly, different perceptions of the possibility of commonality, in a socio-cultural as well as in a physical sense, have influenced the shaping of these beliefs.

In Leslie White's (1973) view, cultures in every case display four common complexes of behaviour: ideological, sociological, attitudinal and technological. *Ideological behaviour-complexes* might produce, say, a strong movement towards nationalism. This is in a sense the obverse of Read's view that the arts influence what is, in his phrase, "the public will," but perhaps both positions can be reconciled if we admit that the relationship between ideology and the arts is an interactive one: current ideas influence future products, current forms influence future ideas. The idea of disposability and transience which dominated such widely different fields as furniture design, architecture, and the layout of periodicals in the 1960s resulted in products that contributed to and reinforced a "disposable lifestyle": people tried on roles as they might try on a garment, and discarded them when they got tired of them. (Reich, 1971)

Sociological behaviour-complexes are more likely to be found cross-culturally than within any one culture, for the possibility of two socially-equivalent groups operating independently within one culture defies the accepted definition of social classes, which requires that each be different from the others in structure, function, and composition. Writers on Marxism have no difficulty in perceiving commonalities in a cross-cultural setting, though Richard Johnson, for example, refers to two main distinguishing features of Marxist culturalism: experiences, wherever noted, are understood as class experiences; and there is an over-riding concern for the authenticity of working-class culture, whatever the society studied. (Johnson, 1978:60)

Attitudinal behaviour-complexes are formed from feelings which human beings share, no matter where they live. In arts where human interaction is basic (as in theatre or opera), like responses may be obtained from audiences whose sociological or political backgrounds are quite different. What makes an appeal to them are evidences of human sensibility, perhaps, or themes involving risks and consequences, which are basic to human existence. Attitudinal commonalities also help explain the International Style in art, wherein an artist from Frankfurt may exhibit before a sympathetic and appreciative audience in New York or Tokyo, using forms in his work which transcend any national affiliation.

Finally, *technological behaviour-complexes* have brought about the elaboration of simple soundboxes into drums, xylophones, and stringed instruments, in technological developments which seem to have followed similar paths in different countries. For an intra-societal example in music, one might look to 19th century America, where a generation of calliopes came into noisy being in various places across the country as a result of a common application of energy derived from steam to the creation of notes of varying pitch.

Some definitions

White's model, then, demonstrably will allow us to look at arts activities as these occur in any combination of the four behaviour complexes just discussed. Hence, we can perhaps discover socio-cultural commonalities among the arts. But as a final preparatory step, we need to make clear the distinctions between a metaphor, an analogy, and a commonality — because frankly, I suspect that the latter two terms are frequently confused, and that what is only an analogous relationship is often given the status of commonality.

A metaphor is composed for a specific purpose, so that the equivalence given its two compared elements is temporary. Thus, in using orchestral performance as a metaphor for ritual sequence, Leach (1976:45) draws a parallel, good for that occasion only, which indicates that in ritual as in playing instruments, the meaning of the act is to be found in the mutual relationships occurring among the participants.

An analogy denotes similarity in attributes or relationships. Noah's Flood, for example, has analogues in the history and folklore of many different countries. But an analogy is like Kleenex: the more you try to do with it, the thinner it becomes. A complex situation defies interpretation by simple analogy.

A commonality results from comparisons made among several attributes or elements, equally accessible and equally represented in a situation or state. Differences between an analogy and a commonality lie in the number of relationships perceived and in the equivalence of these relationships. One might say, of the local high school and of the Roman Republic, that each was administered by a council. Though a permissible, if rather transparent analogy, it is no grounds for inferring commonality. For our purposes a commonality will be admitted if two or more artistic acts or events, arising from a like purpose or from the employment of like media, show several closely similar features or occasion closely similar kinds of response from their audiences.

The search for commonalities among publics

We can identify several classes of people for whom the arts provide avenues for ideological, sociological, attitudinal, and technological behaviours. These are the artists or performers; their promoters (dealers, producers, impresarios); their

audience or consumers; and the critics. Within each of these classes, considerable segmentation occurs, differing markedly across classes. Compare the art public and the theatre public. The art public's interest is centred upon the physical object, the art work. It has easy access, directly or via reproductions, to centuries of other art works upon which to make comparisons. The attitudes of the viewers may change, but the work, once created, is relatively stable. Re-evaluation is therefore possible merely by reconfronting the work.

The theatre public's interest, on the other hand, is as much concentrated upon the actor as upon the play. Lacking the possibility of setting Edmund Kean's *Hamlet* against Olivier's to make immediate comparisons; having in the script of the play only the bones of what it may become on stage; faced with significant variations in the performance from night to night, the theatre audience's response derives from a number of dynamic particles temporarily and ephemerally brought together and later recalled through the shifting curtains of memory. Evaluation is of a product constantly re-created, but never quite in the same way.

Harold Rosenberg has noted that there are additional publics even within each art, perhaps more completely separated from each other than are the publics of the different arts. One thinks of the chamber music public and the rock music public; of the art public which sees the art museum as a cloister, and that which looks on it as a marketplace. Outside these publics exists a reservoir of uncommitted persons whose attractiveness for one faction or another lies in their potentiality to be recruited. As Rosenberg says, "The public is defined for each activity and each organization of taste as the mass of those who have not yet identified themselves with it." (Rosenberg 1968:180) For those, the as-yet-uncommitted public, a provisional assumption of neutrality is made, which is the one thing *they* have in common.

The search for commonalities among artists and performers

Among artists or performers one readily identifiable feature is that all engage in activities occurring on a continuum from totally spontaneous to exclusively telic. When one compares performances, however, it can be seen that the places along that continuum where activity in each of the arts may begin and end are not identical.

Take the generation of dance steps and the utterance of words. It is a familiar experience to dance without knowing what the next step will be. Where one is determines where one goes next. But in verbal utterance, that kind of spontaneity is more difficult to maintain. "Drying up" is more frequent; thinking ahead in a paradoxical effort to appear spontaneous usually begins after the first few sounds have been expressed. In music, activity may arise in spontaneous banging, clapping, or drumming. As with speech, the deliberate search for repetitive sequence, for rhythm, is almost immediately taken up. In painting, the period of aimlessness can go on much longer.

Cerebral processing mechanisms may play an important part in determining how much direction is required to prolong an activity, but one should not forget that cultural payoff also counts. In North American white society, language is decidedly telic; little children are encouraged to talk purposively, to address particular concerns. Parents say, "Don't babble," and children learn that speech is for serious stuff. Dance, on the other hand, is almost never used as a means of serious communication. No elder corrects a small child's dancing style and there are no incentives for the latter's physical movements to "mean" anything. (The onset of ballet lessons, usually coincident with visits to the orthodontist, occurs for reasons not particularly relevant to our argument here.)

Bringing a work to a conclusion reveals similar disparities. The member of an orchestra has a definite objective: the execution of the work as laid down by the composer. The clear division of role between composer and performer dictates a moment when the composer must say of his creation, "It is finished," and hand it over to others, who print it and disperse it to performers wherever they may be. The visual artist, by contrast, is both composer *and* performer. He carries within him his own blueprint for the work (in which sense he may be said to be the composer) and it reveals itself to him as he works (in which sense he may be said to be the performer). Yet its revelation is often untidy, fragmentary, and unclear. The artist returns to it, in some cases repeatedly; even to the point, as in the case of Bonnard, of sneaking into the gallery where his painting was hanging, to add yet one more touch, or two. (Schneider, 1962)

Within the performer class itself, one would have to make a distinction between the relationship set up between composer and performer which results in a live performance, and the situation in which the performer uses all the resources of the recording studio to compile and edit a rendering of a particular work. Here, the notion of completion is different; whatever character the performing artist gives to the score while he plays to a live audience, in the end he has to rest on what he has done. For the recording artist, the possibility of making alterations and revisions puts him closer to the way of the painter than to his fellow musician.

A proposition alluded to indirectly in the previous paragraphs holds that in all the arts two components are basic: invention (characterized by reflective behaviour) and performance (characterized by acts). Both require, on the part of the participants, some notion of the stance or role which they are expected to take and an appreciation of the structural, environmental, and technical constraints within which inventing and performing occur. Arthur Koestler wrote, on this point:

The measure of an artist's originality, put into the simplest terms, is the extent to which his selective emphasis deviates from the conventional norm and establishes new standards of excellence . . . The decisive turning points in the history of every art form are discoveries which . . . uncover what has always

been there . . . they compel us to revalue our values and impose a new set of rules on the eternal game. (Koestler, 1964: 336, 337)

Unbridled reliance upon deviance leads artists into strange by-ways. It can also prove self-defeating. One example is of a group of artists who, feeling that culture had become assimilated by the merchandizing ethic to the point where it was merely "a subdivision of tourism and gastronomy," organized as a protest a series of events at which they "maintained an obstinate and indecipherable silence, showed canvases that each signed with the name of another and that were based on an anonymous motif." (Fremigier, 1968:55)

However impeccable the intent, the result is a bore. Deviance alone (particularly group deviance) does not bring about great works of art, the continuing power of which lies not in aberration but in the directly-felt impact which they make upon a succession of publics who re-interpret them in modes to which they are particularly susceptible. Themes recur without loss of interest because the artist adapts them to a specific audience.

The "artist-as-deviant" theme also fails to account for those many occasions when the artist assumes the responsibility of preserving or transmitting something already valued. Folk artists come within this category, as do those who re-integrate folk themes in ways which remind the audience of their origins, their roots, and their ideals. Charles Ives, for example, has taken fragments of hymns and ballads and reworked them to show the character of archetypal America. One could certainly refer to Shakespeare as a playwright who took themes and narratives already in the folk domain and re-interpreted them to place the focus on matters of personal significance to every social level of his Elizabethan audience.

Other artists have sought to maintain the ideals and values of a small but influential élite. Craftsmen like Cellini, musicians like Handel, painters like Canaletto, architects like Vanbrugh made their reputations by consolidating and celebrating the power of established authority and patronage.

Cases of apparent commonality among the arts

It is, in sum, difficult to identify a common character which artists possess, or a common motive which they share. The more complex the society, the more varied are the roles which they are asked to assume. But let us suppose that we were presented with a group of artists representing various disciplines, having similar aims and philosophies (ideologically similar), living in a situation where frequent interactions occurred (sociologically similar), sympathetic to each other as personalities (attitudinally similar). Surely, then, we might expect to find commonalities among their ways of working, their interpretation of subjects, and their products.

Historically, an example is provided by the French Symbolists of the 1890s. They drew upon nature and mysticism for their material; in the phrase of one of

them, the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, “Suggestion — that is the dream.”¹ Mallarmé held regular Tuesday meetings at his house, for kindred spirits such as the composer Claude Debussy and the painter Odilon Redon. Each admired the work of the others and each embraced the Symbolist ethic that all arts aspire to be one art.

At first glance, commonality of imagery seems obvious. In Mallarmé’s poem “The Flowers” lines such as “. . . like woman’s flesh the cruel rose, flowering Herodias of the bright garden” (Bosley, 1977:75) seem an exact mirroring of the feeling to which Debussy subscribed, “the interweaving of scents, colours and sounds.”² The spirit of these words similarly resonates in Redon’s flower-pieces, where figures swim into our visual consciousness out of a flower-filled ground.

But when we probe deeper, that initial correspondence becomes difficult to sustain. In what seemed ideal conditions, Redon was asked to illustrate one of Mallarmé’s poems, “A Cast of the Dice.” Each actually *lost* something as the result of that collaboration. The ambiguity of the Mallarméan phrase was all of a sudden fixed in one visual image. Redon’s illustrations in turn suffered from the tentativeness that comes from being too anxious to do justice to someone else’s idea.

Debussy set several of Mallarmé’s poems to music, of which the best known is his prelude to “L’après-midi d’un faune.” Accounts differ on how closely Debussy felt constrained to follow the original, and that may be itself significant. Using the poem as a score, the reader/listener *may* persuade himself that flute and Faun are identical and that the combined effects of woodwinds and horns are a direct translation of lines such as “This flock of swans, no! naiads, takes to the air or dives.” (Bosley, 1977:121) But how is one to derive an equivalent for thoughts such as “I lift the empty grapeskin to the summer sky, and puffing up its luminous husk, look through it till the light ebbs?”³ In the end, Debussy’s musical translation gives us the equivalent of a conversation heard through a wall. The unaided listener, unfamiliar with the piece, makes the wildest guesses at its content. Only at the most superficial level, that of marching feet or choo-choo rhythm, do people achieve agreement about what it is that a particular note or series of notes signifies outside their purely musical function.

Conversation heard through a wall may leave an overall impression — of argument and anger, of comfort and intimacy. Debussy’s designation as an Impressionist composer is in that and in other respects justified.⁴ He admired the Impressionist painters and was close to them in spirit; he capitalized on the temporal dimension in music which makes it a medium particularly suited for creating, building, and sustaining mood. But the notes he uses are not symbols, in the sense that Mallarmé and Redon create symbols, and in fact the history of music contains no Symbolist movement. For while, in music, we may ask what the *function* of particular notes may be, we do not ask what the *meaning* of a particular note is.

In dialogue with a poet, we may focus upon a particular phrase in his work and enquire as to its function, in the sense of its being used to form a bridge between two thoughts, or as a coda or a summation of what has gone before. We can also legitimately enquire whether the words mean more than their immediate denotation. In Mallarmé's poetry, Herodias first appears as a symbol of slightly nervous purity; in "L'après-midi d'un faune" she has taken on a laxer, more erotic character. For Mallarmé, one might argue, Herodias symbolizes degrees of sensuality that vary from poem to poem.

This kind of accretive image-building has no equivalent in music. "The lascivious pleasing of a lute" referred to by Richard of Gloucester in the opening lines of *Richard III* springs not from the notes given out by the lute, but belongs to the whole ritual of capering "nimble in a lady's chamber"⁵ - a ritual of which the lute, as instrument of love, forms one part.

So we might say that Debussy's languid afternoon floats like a long gauzy scarf before us. But we cannot ask, "What does that harp passage mean?" and expect to hear that, in Debussy's music, it symbolizes languor, or three o'clock.

Mallarmé's eclogue, by contrast, might be compared to a collection of objects in a sealed box. By listening to the sounds the objects make within it when we tilt it, shake it, turn it over, we can begin to discern what these objects are. Then we can begin to speculate on their significance, in relation to each other and as they exist in other, perhaps related settings.

A common theme does not lead to a common spirit of interpretation. If any further evidence is required, the reader is referred to Ker-Xavier Roussel's painting "L'après-midi d'un faune," produced in 1919.⁶ Roussel gives us a literal-ideal snapshot: here a faun, there a nymph. It is not a good painting, but more directly to my purpose, it has nothing of the many-faceted ambiguity of Mallarmé or the shifting evanescence of Debussy.

In sum, the only commonality among all three works is their title. Differences in product are distinguishable, in the case of Debussy and Mallarmé, as consequences of the medium in which each has chosen to work; while in the case of Roussel, the difference is also in the quality of the product. It is not that Debussy and Mallarmé had access to what for argument's sake we might call "colour," while Roussel had not. "Colour" emerges as a by-product of a work of quality; it is not prefigurative of quality work.

Conclusion

The conclusion to which this article is directed, is simple. What we see, in making comparisons among the disciplines, are frequent parallels: in thinking, in doing; sometimes momentary, as in an analogy spontaneously made; sometimes extended, as when we examine the components of the creative process. In model

form, parallels might be represented by a series of vertical lines of varying length. Horizontal lines, representing commonalities, would be infrequent, and would tend to be intermittent and broken. Partly this is because of the nature of the creative act itself, which is unique to a particular time and place and therefore unlikely to be duplicated in the several dimensions required for commonality. Partly, it is an outgrowth of the old Deweyian question of standards and judgments.⁷ Commonalities can be unequivocally measured in the sciences, in that a scale provides a standard by which to determine levels of acidity or amounts of flexion or frequency of pulse. In the arts, however, we deal in judgments, which are often made in terms of what has not been made available to us before and for which no existing scale is relevant.

In the most general sense, when we speak of “the creative process” or “drawing ideas from the environment” we may find commonalities, and be able to deal usefully with them.⁸ But they break down as soon as we move away from the broadest issues. They do little for curriculum planners at the local level, who are probably better served by including opportunities for teachers of the visual arts, music educators, resident poets, visiting dramatists to do what each does best, offering what is uniquely theirs, while at the same time encouraging their students to be attentive to what is unique in the others. Good programs are less likely to be found in taking common words and trying to fit common responses to them, than in assuming that common words will turn out to be uncommon when used in the context of the separate arts.

NOTES

1. This phrase, a slogan of the Symbolists, appears in the majority of books written on the subject. This particular version appears in M. Wilson, *Nature and Imagination: the Work of Odilon Redon* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978).
2. Another common attribution to the Symbolist movement, this phrase appears in French in M. Schneider *et al.*, *Debussy* (Paris: Realites Hachette, 1972). I have made my own translation of the original.
3. My translation.
4. Debussy himself, according to one source (N. Slonimsky, “Debussy, Achille Claude,” *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, NY, Schirmer, 1958, pp. 357-360), was not happy with the term Impressionist when it was applied to him, and denied his role in that movement.
5. From *Richard III* by William Shakespeare, Act I, Scene 1, lines 12-13.
6. A reproduction of this work may be seen in Edward Lucie Smith, *Symbolist Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972).
7. John Dewey devotes most of Chapter 13 in his book *Art as Experience* (NY: Capricorn 1958; first published 1934) to the exploration of these differences.
8. For some thoughts on this see R. N. MacGregor, “Reaching Out: a Search for Commonality among the Disciplines,” *Art Education*, Vol. 29, No. 8 (1976), pp. 25-29.

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