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A Disdain for the Discrete: How Art Transcends Logic and Language

By Venkat Ramanan

Venkat Ramanan [Follow]

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Introduction

Frank Auerbach, the German-British painter, <u>observed a few years back</u> that when he sees a work by Picasso he feels that, "Picasso… has made this thing in his imaginative private mind and there it is, and it's captured the world. That's what people want to see, they don't want to see something they know about already, they don't want to have a programme presented to them of something they believe in or approve of, they want this amazing thing they haven't thought of before." And Paul Klee <u>expressed a similar idea</u> when he asserted that "art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible." These observations allude to how artists reveal to the world a new vision, open a different window on to reality.

I intend to show in this essay that this is possible only when art can transcend reason and the confines of language. I propose to also argue that both logic and language have their limitations when used as tools for the creation of meaning and that art helps us overcome these inadequacies in the way it transcends—or even transgresses—the

absolutes that underpin our "rational" view of the world. I believe further that the violation of the strictures of logic by art is also emblematic of art's heightened awareness of certain unique features of reality—in particular, its dynamic and fluid nature—which are not normally readily visible to a mind tied to thinking in terms only of binary truth values.

Art and the creation of meaning

Aristotle may have been one of the earliest proponents of the law of excluded middle which can be expressed using the propositional formula ($p \lor \neg p$). This proposition holds that a statement is either true or false and to claim that p can be both true and false will be a contradiction. But then Aristotle (in his *Metaphysics*) tells us also that "the mathematical sciences particularly exhibit order, symmetry, and *limitation*; and these are the greatest forms of the beautiful." (italics mine). This tells us that Aristotle was certainly aware of the bounds of mathematics (which some may consider the highest logic) in terms of its ability to provide structure to human knowledge. These limitations —which Aristotle seems to consider a component of beauty—are exemplified by the fact we continue to encounter statements in mathematics that can neither be confirmed nor refuted. (See for instance a recent discussion in Quanta Magazine discussion about the "continuum hypothesis" which includes a reference also to Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem.)

This is of course not to claim that the way we acquire knowledge is built on shifting sands. As Graham Priest (1998) illustrates with an example, it would be irrational to believe that I am a fried egg. And what is worse is to believe that I am both a fried egg and not a fried egg. It is therefore important to bestow sufficient weightage to some contradictions at least as otherwise our everyday world cannot be rationally understood and negotiated. (Priest, 1998, p.410) But, as also emphasised by Priest, there is an important distinction between believing *some* contradictions but not *all* contradictions and this "illicit slide between 'some' and 'all' is endemic" to all discussions of the question…" (ibid.)

Having said that, there are some issues associated with respecting *all* contradictions and we confront these issues when we try to create meaning—which is the common thread that connects reason and logic on the one side and art on the other.

This nexus can be explained as follows: the act of reasoning depends on language for expression and both language and art are in the business of conveying meaning, of communicating what is in someone's head.

The perfect transmission of meaning, in both cases, by the initiator of the conversation—the speaker or writer when considering language, the artist in the other case—is near impossible as it faces several impediments. These include the disparity in content between what the

speaker intends to convey and what is actually said. This difference is coloured additionally by the speaker's beliefs, societal norms and cultural milieu. Similar considerations apply also when looking at how meaning is further transformed or even eroded when the receiver tries to figure out what is said. What's more, this attenuation of meaning is catalysed to a great extent by the fact that in language we use symbols to denote objects. While the use of symbols helps make our language concise and productive, its downside is that symbols by their very nature rarely if ever exhibit complete fidelity with all the facets of an object. No wonder that Ludwig Wittgenstein once expressed his frustration with using language to discuss any subject by observing that

> *"My whole tendency and I believe [that] of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics … [which he was referring to in this context] was to run against the boundaries of language… running against the cage is absolutely hopeless."*

Hence, while meaning is germinated in individual minds, it is cultivated collectively. (Meaning, to put it differently, is sculpted by society. While we are all makers of meaning, we are not its sole custodians.) This process of a shared creation of meaning involves much more than just the conventions of grammar and syntax but also other elements of communication including what is referred to as "pragmatics" in linguistics. Pragmatics in the study of languages recognises the fact that comprehension goes beyond the syntax and meaning embedded in words and needs to incorporate other factors such as context, the meaning implied by the speaker (and as is generally understood by the receiver), the structuring of the discourse among the participants—and also the prosody, the rhythms and intonations that aim to enhance meaning.

But the meaning that is the fruit of this co-operative effort between speaker and listener can in the end be left derelict by the Boolean binaries of truth tables that underlie the notion that there cannot be a middle ground between a statement being true and being false and that an alternate view risks leading us to logical antinomies. On the other hand, when "contradictions arise at the limits of thought", Priest points out, we are in fact driven to such contradictions "precisely because those limits are themselves contradictory." Such an "encounter with limit contradictions is therefore an argument for the best explanation for the inconsistent nature of the limits themselves." Moreover, this situation can give rise also to "an entity we have not yet thought." (Priest, 2003, pp.3–4) (Remember how Frank Auerbach too talked about people wanting "this amazing thing they haven't thought of before.") This it seems is when we move from a purely linguistic standpoint to an ontological one while considering how we acquire knowledge—and when we reach the frontiers of rationality.

This is also where art comes into the picture, so to speak, when it breaks the fetters of reason and can portray the protean manner in

which meaning is crafted. As Theodor Adorno observed, "no concept that enters into an artwork remains what it is." What Adorno means by this is—according to Paul Chen, the writer and painter -

… when a concept finds expression in material form… it is refracted and is made indeterminate by the very form that enables it to be experienced as something sensuous and real. If… a concept [is] to attain a more experiential form of meaning by becoming art, [that gain] is paid for by that concept losing a semblance of its own discursive authority.

Chen talks also about Adorno's belief that there is an emancipatory aspect to art. It creates a new relationship from what already exists by loosening the grip social reality and conventions have over the elements of a work of art (including its concepts) and liberating them from "their pre-existing uses and meanings… their place in the order of things". (ibid). This view is similar to the disentanglement—rather than decipherment—of meaning that the French literary critic Roland Barthes identified as a feature of literature. When meaning is "disentangled" it is freed from the shackles of language—as opposed to when it is "deciphered", when it reveals only a pre-existing connotation that gets occluded furthermore by codes and symbols. "Writing", as Barthes notes,

"posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature… by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text) … [and becomes] an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse… reason, science, law." (in Culler, 1983, p.83).

We can elaborate upon these ideas by analysing, for instance, how a person looking at a work like *Landscape with Ruins* by Claude Lorrain (1604–1682) responds to it. Someone—especially one with no knowledge of classical history—will describe it merely as an attractive scene with peasants and animals in the foreground with a few old broken buildings in the distance. In someone else steeped in classical history, on the other hand, it may trigger remembrances of a collective knowledge and shared heritage and evoke thoughts on how the Roman Forum would have been the centre of daily life for so many centuries. (It is not dissimilar to how one person may appreciate Handel's *Messiah* merely as a piece of exquisite music—while for some it may just be a familiar jingle—whereas a more "learned" hearer would look upon it as an epitome of the finest liturgical expression.) What is more, if the same person views the *Landscape with Ruins* say about twenty years later, it may evoke in him or her perhaps entirely different thoughts and feelings. They say a picture says a thousand words. But, is it always the same thousand words every time, though?

These ideas about how there is no pre-existing meaning, how art facilitates the process of creation of meaning but how the meaning thus

garnered—and how we perceive the world—is nevertheless defined and shaped by our individual heritage, beliefs, norms and values are in line with the thoughts of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the cohesive bond between perception and meaning. He held that perceptions are "subtended by an 'intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation" (in Quinn, 2009, p. 41). Moreover, any meaning that thus becomes visible, "is defined against this 'invisible' or 'silent' background of perceptual, reflective, and historical relationships…" (ibid).

Joaquin Torres Garcia, "Interior", (1924)

Art and the nature of reality

When we examine the mechanics of our vision, we realise that we perceive the world not in discrete hermetic frames but in a free-flowing cavalcade where one image coalesces into another. By being more closely aligned with this aspect of cognition, as Merleau-Ponty and others have felt, art—especially in the hands of some masters—does a peerless job revealing reality to us.

Merleau-Ponty, for instance, demonstrates how art reflects this dynamic nature of perception by examining the work of Paul Cezanne (1839–1906). In many of his paintings, Cezanne exhibits his disdain for the use of contour lines for depicting objects. He employs instead a system of colours and a diverse array of outlines, "trying to capture," Merleau-Ponty notes, "in the painting, the very way in which objects strike our eyes and attack our senses." (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 63) In the still life *"Basket of Apples",* for instance, there is a noticeable jaggedness in the way many of the objects are drawn. This applies to not just the apples and the other organic elements but also the bottle of wine that is part of the scene. We notice also that the two sides of the table are not exactly on the same plane and that throws up a deliberate re-alignment of perspective. James Voorhies from the Metropolitan Museum of Art cites a few other still life works by Cezanne which also evince Cezanne's intention to ignore "the laws of classical perspective, allowing… the relationship of one object to another take precedence over traditional single-point perspective."


Paul Cézanne, "The Basket of Apples", (1895).

These artistic devices reflect too to some extent how the slight difference in the visual image between our two eyes engenders depth perception. "That is why Cezanne follows the swell of the object," Merleau-Ponty argues, "in modulated colours and indicates several outlines in blue. [O]ne's glance [then] captures a shape that emerges from among them all, just as it does in perception." (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 65–66) Merleau-Ponty describes how reality emerges from art in this way by noting

… when Cézanne's pictures are seen in wholeness, their perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right, but rather contribute, as they do in natural vision, to the impression of an emerging order, of an

object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes. (in Quinn, 2009, p. 51)

Voorhies highlights the fact that while Cezanne may have been the first post-impressionist painter to toy with such ideas, several painters from that group—including Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh—also experimented with incorporating such distorted perspectives and creating new dimensions among objects within a work of art. What these artists were trying to convey was the blurring of the frontier where the subject ends and the external world begins. The corollary to this notion is the idea that life is movement, it is not a still point. While drawing our attention to Rembrandt's quality as "a conceptual artist, who manifested his ideas not through classical emulation… but through a sketchy roughness", the English art historian Simon Schama declares, "It was that direct hit of the imagining mind that distinguished true art, registering the flux of life, its contingent, temporal quality, the buddings and sheddings that gave human existence its majestic poignancy." Schama adds that a "whole succession of practitioners" have looked upon Rembrandt "as having struck the first great blow to rid art of the callow equation between optical appearance and lived experience." (Schama, 2007, p. 38)

From another phenomenological perspective—this time it is our perception of time—art seems to yet again mirror how our minds work. A cardinal feature of psychological time is its fluidity; it is hence not surprising that time is often compared to a flowing river. This analogy can be delineated by examining the difference between how art and photography function in terms of their relationship with time. A photograph always captures a moment in time. (This is so even when using a video camera which in reality emulates "motion" by capturing multiple frames and "stitching" them together to create an illusion of movement.) A painting by an artist like Cezanne, on the other hand is an expression of his awareness that "the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one," as Merleau-Ponty tells us. (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 65) While elucidating this notion, Merleau-Ponty highlights how (in a portrait of Mme Cezanne by the artist) the wallpaper on one side of the subject's body does not form a straight line with the other. Similarly, in another Cezanne portrait (that of Gustave Geffroy) the table at which the subject sits seemingly stretches beyond the bottom of the canvas and presents the illusion of being an irregular trapezoid. "When our eye runs over [this picture]," Merleau-Ponty maintains, "the images it successively receives are taken from different points of view…" (ibid).
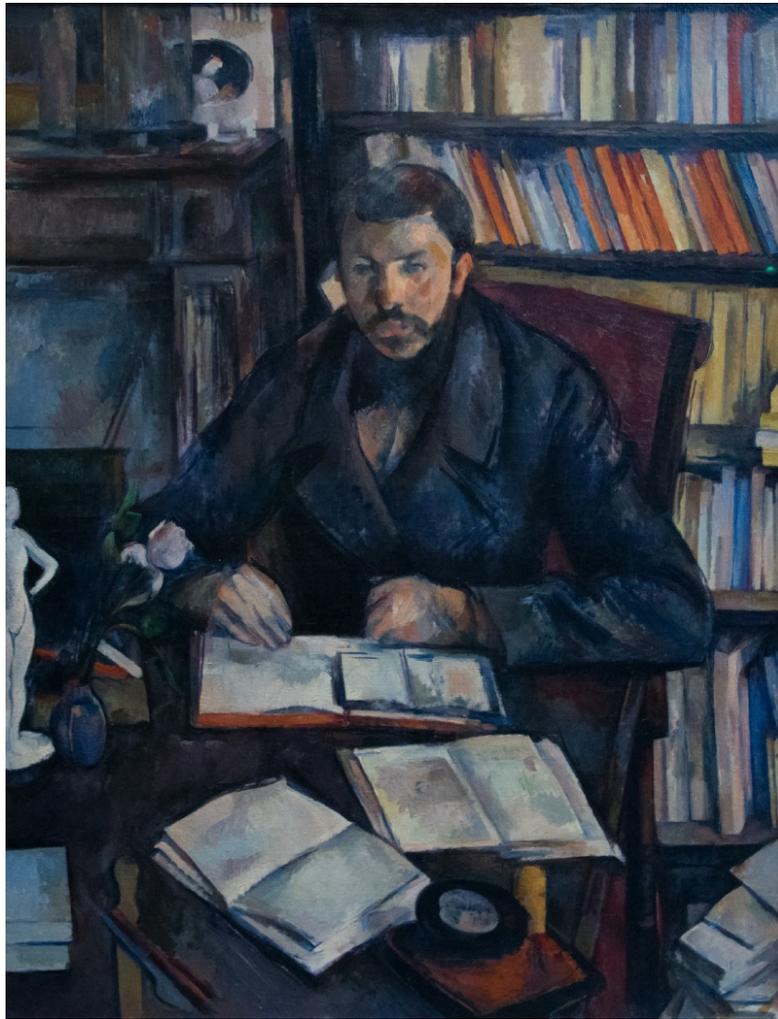
Paul Cézanne, "Gustave Geffroy", (1896).

These differences between art and photography in how they deal with —and depict—time become further apparent when we recall that today's digital photography meshes closely with a conception of the world in terms of the discrete—rather than the flux and contingent temporality of lived life that Schama talks about—in the way a photo is recorded by means of pixels that stay either off or on. In art we perceive movement instead, a shift from the discrete to the continuum, from the distinct to the connected.

Merleau-Ponty's contention that the work of artists like Cezanne reflects closely the way life is lived and the flow of phenomenal time is also in line with his critique of what Quinn identifies as an "objectivist" view of the world. This view revolves around the belief in the sciences —and in certain schools of philosophy—that "the abstract, objective view of the world employed by science represented a complete, self-sufficient view of reality…" (in Quinn, 2009, p. 47) Merleau-Ponty lamented that we were held hostage by this worldview and his contention was that this standpoint is (as Quinn explicates) "neither autonomous nor complete… [On the contrary] the world is not something external we merely contemplate but something we primarily inhabit…" Merleau-Ponty held that "the perceived world is always the

presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence" (in Quinn, 2009, p. 38). Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty charges not only science but philosophy too with this criticism for being too wedded to the prescriptions of language and the zeitgeist (in Quinn, 2009, p. 57)—stating elsewhere that the role of philosophy is not to "reflect a pre-existing truth but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being." (in Quinn, 2009, p. 49–50).

This view of Merleau-Ponty's that art's value lies in its ability to facilitate the process of "bringing truth into being" appears antithetical not only to a perspective of the world based solely on the dogma-like dichotomies of reason but perhaps also flies in the face of Parmenides's stricture that things cannot hold an ontological position between being and non-being.

Conclusion

In the end, it is almost like we are talking about two different paradigms or different worlds if we limit ourselves to using the prism of logic and reason alone in trying to comprehend what art is trying to tell us. The idea that art can transcend the bounds and bonds of rationality sounds so counter-intuitive that it is like telling someone living in Edwin Abbott's two-dimensional *Flatland* that there may be other worlds which are three-dimensional. (Or, that some other universes could feature even more dimensions—and one which even those in a three-dimensional domain may quickly dismiss as fable.) It is akin also to explaining how light can be both a wave and a particle or how those mystifying photons can apparently talk to each other across spooky distances.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was alluding I guess to art's unique in-between-or-maybe-both nature when he called a painting "the intermediate somewhat between a thought and a thing." This refers to the fact that a work of art first comes into being as an artefact that is

subject—like every other man-made "thing"—to the dictates of physical reality. A painting for instance is a spread of canvas or a blank sheet on which an image is created by using pigments, pencils and other paraphernalia. But nothing stops the meaning it then evokes from seeping from the confines of the canvas into the minds of the viewer.

It is perhaps this unique nature of art that enables it to connect the material to the immaterial (as in something impalpable), talk to us about the ineffable and show us that what is implicit in the gaps between the certitudes of rationality is not just a semantic wasteland as some may assert. It can instead be as pregnant (if not more) with meaning as our circumscribed binary view of the world—and an inordinate reverence for logic—allow us to perceive. What is more, art also reinforces in the process the idea that the reality presented to us by science and mathematics is either not the only reality or could at least be an incomplete one.

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About the author: *Venkat Ramanan is an ex-technology professional from Australia whose interests include comparative philosophy, philosophy of mind, philosophy of art and literary criticism. His papers on Borges, and Literature and Reality, have been published in the journal "*<u>*Literature and Aesthetics*</u>*".*

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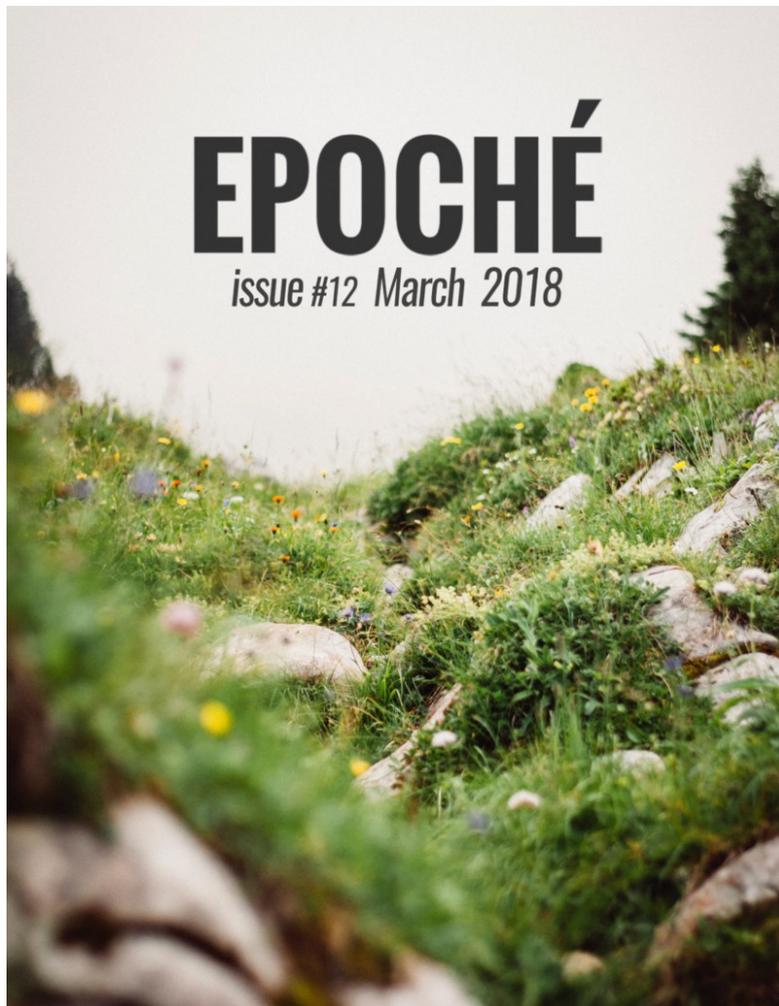
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