

Meaning in Art

James Baldwin, in his 1962 essay “The Creative Process” writes, “The artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, and scientists—by the fact that he is his own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being.”¹ The mystery of the human being. What does this mean?

I used to present a well-rehearsed short “lecture” to my choir classes early in the first term of each year. I use quotation marks because it was really less a lecture and more a short performance piece. I would deliver about 10 minutes of an answer to the question, “What does a work of art mean?” Drawing on humor, surprise, and the imagination, I led the students into the mind of the creative artist as he or she used the tools at their disposal to express something that escapes the realm of using simple expository speech. I wanted these young people to understand that, while our work would take place quite strongly in the concrete realities of performance preparation, there was a deeper and much more profound purpose to our actions. And, while our performances were programmed to be engaging and even entertaining, we were beholden to the intent of the composer in a depth of expressive understanding that transcends the need to entertain.

So, what is this meaning?

We begin with the idea of feeling. In my telling, feeling is more fundamental than emotion. For an example, let’s have a look at the term “love.” I would tell the students that I love my wife. I love my children. I love spaghetti. But here’s hoping that my feelings for spaghetti were different than my feelings for my wife and children. So, to understand the intent of the creative artist, we need to get beyond emotion. We need to delve more fundamentally into the idea of feelings.

I would tell the students a story of their graduation day from high school sometime in the future (I mostly taught middle school). I would talk about how eager they were to be liberated from the day-to-day expectations of the academic environment, of how anxious they were to be moving into the world of adulthood, of how excited they were about the ceremony and about going out afterwards with their newly-liberated friends. But then I would throw cold water on these feelings by a scenario in which their mother insists that they come straight home after the ceremony to look after their little sister so that mother and father can go out. Oh, how the feelings change. How the frustration mounts, on and on and on. Then, out of nowhere, we learn that this was a ruse to bring you home early because the party was a surprise one at your house, all of your friends are there, and mom and dad present you with the keys to a brand new car. So, how do you feel? I would very quickly rattle off a long list of adjectives to show that, frankly, your feelings really can’t be described within the limitations of speech.

Then I would move on to Mozart and Beethoven. Using the same long list of adjectives, I would tell them how these composers developed themes, which turn into larger themes, which turn into works, and then which turn into larger works and so on to express complicated emotions based on feelings working in counterpoint to one other. Then I would turn it back to the topic at hand and say let’s have a look at some music that we’ll be performing and see how the composer approaches this challenge.

¹ <https://openspaceofdemocracy.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/baldwin-creative-process.pdf>

A work of art potentially has a great deal of power on many levels. The better the work is, the more carefully and skillfully crafted it is, the more power it has. Now, does the creative artist worry about this? Not particularly. Instead, she or he uses the rudiments of the specific art form together in support, in counterpoint, in contrast, and in other technique to engage and to express in the medium most available to him or to her. The power lies in the work itself as it interacts with the artist and, ultimately, with the individual consumer in real time.

Here is an example:

Near the beginning of Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Jesus Christ Superstar," we discover two musical pieces, "What's the Buzz/Strange Thing Mystifying" and "Everything's Alright," set side by side in a powerful contrast to express something with a subtlety so profound that it is often missed overtly, but affects the listener in a significant way. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cZsHLOKR3g> from 8:22 until 17:50)

When you listen to this, focus on what's going on away from the soloists. Listen carefully to what's happening in the band, in the orchestra, and in the chorus parts.

Before we begin to take apart the way Lloyd Webber and lyricist Tim Rice have set this section, it's important for you to know something about meter. "Meter," in the written and spoken word, music, and dance refers to the organizing system of stressed and unstressed beats and/or syllables that highlight the expressive intent. The poet sets certain words in order within the line to emphasize particular words and even particular syllables as an expressive device. The musical theatre composer then may work with this poetry as it is set or he or she may work in contrast to the poetic meter through use of rhythm, pitch and musical meter for a further expressive effect. Now, back to this piece.

It's clear from the opening of "What's the Buzz" through the ending of "Strange Thing Mystifying" that Lloyd Webber and Rice are expressing a great deal of energy (angst, if you will) through their musical and poetic settings (this angst is even more pronounced if you listen to the piece from the beginning of the overture). Then, as a contrast, they put in a scene wherein things are to be relaxed- both as a part of the story and, more importantly, to give a "break" to the characters and to the audience. This heightens both the material before and after the respite. The break is short-lived, as you've heard. But, more importantly, in careful analysis, you can hear that there really is no break at all. It's a very clever use of meter that does this.

The piece "Everything's Alright" is put into the story as a lullaby. The poetry of the character Mary Magdalene says, essentially, "everything is alright, relax, sleep." However, for some reason, we're not at ease. In fact, Lloyd Webber builds tension, over time, into a feeling of desperation by the climax of the piece with cast members frantically singing "everything's alright, yes, everything's alright, yes..." But what is the underlying tension that is there from the start? It takes a minute to figure it out, but the careful listener hears that the piece is written in 5/4 meter. Lullabies are often set in 3/4- think Brahms' famous one. Or "Rock-a-bye Baby." Or "Silent Night." 3/4 is set "One two three One two three," symmetrical and consistent. The phrasing in 3/4 meter, particularly in lullabies, is often set in measure groupings of two, coming across as *One two three Two two three* (*Rock a bye Ba-by- One two three Two two three- In the tree Top, again One two three Two two three*). 5/4 is an asymmetrical meter filled with tension, set either as 2/4-3/4 or the opposite, as it is in this case- 3/4-2/4 (*One two three One two- although syncopated, you can count along "Everything's all" is the One two three with "right yes" coming on One two*), or sometimes alternating between the two. It's intentionally "clumsy," in that it is asymmetrical. Instead of patterns of three following on patterns of three, we have a pattern of three

followed by a pattern of two and then another set of three followed by another set of two and so on. This asymmetry is energetic, and not the least bit relaxing. And it sets a foundation on which Lloyd Webber builds with an argumentative duet later in the piece between the characters Jesus and Judas, with Mary's voice increasingly frantic (using both dynamics and pitch) in trying to maintain control, finally lost in the end as they bring in the ensemble.

But, here's the thing. This 5/4 is extremely well hidden at the beginning of the piece. Lloyd Webber disguises this meter very effectively in two ways. Firstly, he sets up the intro to the lullaby in the ending of the piece just prior. "What's the Buzz/Strange Thing Mystifying" ends on an ascending "riff" by the band, cadencing at the top, pitch-wise, a move that generates a lot of tension. Your ear really wants to have a resolution, an ending to the song, in a lower register. (This technique reminds me of the "cliff-hanger" endings that serial television shows have traditionally used at the end of a season to make you want to tune in for the beginning of the next season.) On top of that, the cadence (ending) happens on what's called the "and" of beat three- basically halfway between beat three and four. In 4/4 time (which is the meter of this piece at the end- it varies between meters throughout), a strong cadence is on beat one or three of a measure, two is the next strongest, four even less so. But between a beat is weak and it really drives your ear to seek resolution.

Then, the band opens up an intro to "Everything's Alright" using only a soft bass and guitar, with a "tinkling" type of run in the upper register of the piano and with the drums lightly in the cymbals- specifically *not* giving a strong beat. Because he has cadenced the previous piece in the way that he has, or, in fact, not really cadenced it at all, the beginning of this piece almost feels like the resolution of the previous piece, rather than the beginning of this new one. Further, Mary's opening melody begins on the third degree of the scale ("mi"), the weakest element of the tonic chord. There is much to know here about musical theory as to why "mi" is the weakest element of the tonic chord, but the important thing for our purposes here is that the tonal center of a piece of music written in traditional Western tradition is most strongly identified by the root and fifth of the tonic chord. "Mi" is the third of the tonic chord and is not nearly as strong, tonally, as the root and fifth are. The third of the scale, "mi," is active, it makes the ear want the melody to move from there, in a much stronger way than the root or fifth would. Note that "Silent Night," Brahms' Lullaby, and "Rock-a-bye Baby" also start on the third degree of the scale.

In other words, in simpler terms, Lloyd Webber has set up the listener by giving you a respite from the tension of the earlier pieces. This way, you don't initially feel the asymmetry of the 5/4 meter which he uses to such great effect by regenerating all the confusion and tension that comes in later in the song.

Now, why does any of this matter? The story, in Andrew Lloyd Webber's and Tim Rice's telling, requires significant tension from the beginning. They are bringing to the surface the underlying tension of the conflict between the characters. But, as the driving rhythms and tight poetry of the piece to this point in the play have been relentless, continuing to brow-beat the audience, as it were, would not provide the effect of the building tension. Audiences become inured in time to relentlessness and the rhythms lose their effectiveness. A composer of an opera needs to set up the potential to move the audience in rising tension by giving "breaks," as it were. We need to undermine the natural tendency to become acclimated to a brow-beating, so that we can generate the underlying energy of further tension more effectively, letting the audience (and the performers, frankly) calm a bit before building the tension again. Lloyd Webber builds on the opening of this piece by adding voices, instruments, and counterpoint over the asymmetrical 5/4 meter.

So, in telling the story using musical devices in this way, Lloyd Webber and Rice are exploring the story by manipulating both the expressive intent of their characters and also the emotional response of the listener in a fundamental and very powerful way. This goes far beyond an expository telling of the story and gets into the visceral, very dynamic and, yes, subjective element of the affective. Is this entertaining? Certainly. But it is more. It pushes the listener to interact with the performer and, ultimately, with the artistic work on a foundational level, intellectually and emotionally. The creative artist understands that every performer, in every performance, will realize this aspect differently. And, just as importantly, every listener, in dynamic relationship to the performance, will also interact differently with the piece *as it is happening*, in real time, whether this be a recorded performance or, more powerfully, when experienced live. This interaction, expressing as it does the abstract, dynamic reality of the human experience, is the vital aspect of a work of expressive art.

Now, we have been discussing artistry within the context of telling a story. But the story, while important, is *not* the point. Instead, telling the story is the foundation on which the artist expresses that which transcends expository language, that which is intended “to reveal all that [the artist] can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being.” This expression is fundamental to the experience of art itself in all artistic disciplines. And if we move away from using expository language and/or representational form, as we do in some written work (think Faulkner and Joyce), in instrumental music, in the visual arts, and often in dance, this fundamental expression, unshackled by the bounds of story-telling, becomes even more apparent.

Have a look at the picture below:



This is a piece by the American painter Clyfford Still, finished in 1936, when he was well into the creation of the style that would come to be called Abstract Expressionism- a style very interested in exploring expressive technique in visual art outside of representational forms. But, as we can see, in 1936 he was still creating works based in representational form. I do not have the training in visual art that I do in music, so I cannot comment on the specific techniques of palette, structure, or brush stroke. But as a sensitive consumer of this piece, I can comment on the underlying expressiveness. The expressiveness here lies, in part, in his use of contrast to establish areas of tension and relief. As sound is absent from

this form, the metrical organization is more abstract. But it is still very much there. I find that the light coming from the left of the piece draws my eye in a motion of left to right- the same direction that the solitary figure is walking- in contrast to the telephone pole cutting through the vision. The yellow of the larger building does the same thing in contrast to the grey-blue of the building at the right edge. To move away from the person, to move my gaze to the left, requires more effort than to go in the other direction- try it to see for yourself. And I believe it is no accident that the walking figure is not in the center of the picture, but “downstage left,” as it were. This pulls my gaze away from the center and pushes me to view the piece dynamically, I must move my eyes around the piece to experience it. This movement, this pull is something I experience again and again in viewing the works of Clyfford Still specifically and Abstract Expressionists generally, even in their most abstract (think Jackson Pollock).

Here is a non-representational Still piece working with the meter of tension and release in a more abstract way, from 1943:



Again, this piece requires movement of your eyes to experience it. The lines and colors, working in response to one another, create energy and compel the viewer to experience the piece dynamically, both visually and emotionally. And, in that there is nothing demonstrably representational in this piece, this dynamism is heightened- were the piece to “look like something familiar,” we might well focus on our relationship to the item viewed rather than to the inherent tension of the relationship of the elements in the painting. Still has taken the idea of dynamism present in the earlier piece and focused entirely on this aspect- the abstraction has freed the expressive technique.

Clearly, these are simply tiny peeks at techniques within much larger works of expressive art. We could spend many hours delving into the specifics of each piece’s use of the rudiments of the medium available to the creative artist. The idea germane to my discussion here is that the creative artist expresses himself or herself with techniques and skills designed to highlight human feeling in a way much more fundamental, much more human, than mere expository language can do. Lloyd Webber could say simply “Judas and Jesus are arguing and Mary is trying to calm them down.” Still could say “a man walks from the left to the right of my view.” Technically, these are correct and they express a truth. But these sentences are not art. In the artist’s viewpoint, these sentences are incomplete as they fall short of expressing the more dynamic truth of the situation.

Feeling is a dynamic experience. As I hinted at in my performance piece, feeling exists within time, and, as such, it is dynamic, it is subject to nuance, to change, to interpretation, and to expression in a way

that is extraordinarily life-affirming and, yes, central to the human experience. In the day-to-day realities of our lives, we are constantly having experiences and we are constantly responding to these. This response is based, to greater and lesser degrees, in our human ability to experience feelings in complex and dynamic ways. The artist is responding to this, looking to express this reality as it truly is, dynamically.

Expository language, perhaps the single most important creation in all of human history, conveys information from one person to another in very effective and efficient ways. But it falls well short of being effective in adequately expressing the nuance and power of complex and dynamic feelings, which are the truly life-affirming aspect of the human experience. The information we may convey to another in an expository manner, as it is static and limited, falls short of the profundity of the associated feelings. In the view of artistry, expository language falls short of expressing dynamic truth or, frankly, of actually being true.

Lloyd Webber is telling an overt story, but is doing so in a dramatic fashion to explore the dynamism and the power of the emotions of the characters as they communicate with one another. He enhances this both overtly and subtly with use of various rudiments of the musical and dramatic tools available to him, most notably melody, rhythm, and tone color. Still is not telling a story, at least not overtly, but he is reflecting on something he is seeing which has emotion and power beyond the simple expository experience of observation. Perhaps it is isolation, perhaps it is something else. But, with his use of motion, lighting, and dynamic contrast, he is breathing life into the experience of his painting.

It is very important to point out here that artists, as artists, are not, of necessity, sales people. They do not hold to an expressive agenda intended to ask you to do something specific. They are not propagandists. Yes, I understand that art is often used by propagandists. Yes, art is sometimes used to manipulate people. And, yes, artists do need to sell their creative works to provide for their livelihood. But it would be a mistake to think that a work of art is intended primarily to do this. If an artist is creating propaganda, he or she is not acting as an artist in this work- she or he is acting as a propagandist, a very different thing.

Here is an example of what this means.

I have heard the argument that Picasso was intending to be a propagandist when he painted "Guernica."



(Keep in mind that this piece is 11 feet 5 inches tall by 25 feet 6 inches across. Its power is significantly muted when we make it this small.)

Perhaps his intent was to manipulate opinion toward opposition to war. But the work does not say this specifically. The piece is expressive of the cataclysm of the terror and of the suffering experienced at the moment of the event itself. And, if, in fact, this piece is anti-war, it is so specifically because it focuses on the suffering in a human and intensely personal way. In expository language, the term “war” is an abstraction, removed from its overwhelming impact on the individual. As war is experienced directly by the individual, within space and time, its meaning is no longer abstract but is immediately impactful in a very fundamental way. Picasso is using his learned craftsmanship, his individual technique, and his gift for observation on several levels at once to express the dynamic feeling of the event as it happened. In Picasso’s work, we can experience the moment of terror and pain directly, and dynamically, on a very human level.

Contrast this to an expository report on this event as written by the leader of the German squadron, Colonel Wolfram von Richtofen. From his journal:

“When the first Junkers squadron arrived, there was smoke already everywhere (from the VB [VB/88] which had attacked with 3 aircraft); nobody would identify the targets of roads, bridge, and suburb, and so they just dropped everything right into the center. The 250s toppled a number of houses and destroyed the water mains. The incendiaries now could spread and become effective. The materials of the houses: tile roofs, wooden porches, and half-timbering resulted in complete annihilation. Most inhabitants were away because of a holiday; a majority of the rest left town immediately at the beginning [of the bombardment]. A small number perished in shelters that were hit.”

In von Richtofen’s report, the humanity is intentionally absent. In Picasso’s painting, the humanity is intentionally present. Picasso doesn’t tell the consumer that one should be opposed to war. Instead, he is expressing a truth as he experiences it of what the results of the attack are, in human terms. He is speaking to this truth in a nuanced, dynamic way. He is putting the consumer into the event. Richtofen doesn’t tell the consumer that one should be in favor of war. Instead, he is giving a report based on static facts in which humanity is specifically removed, as much as it can be. Both are expressing truth as

they see the truth. But they are expressing different truths about the same event, based on their experience of the event and of their intent in reporting. Picasso is bringing the consumer into the experience, von Richtofen is keeping the consumer away from the experience.

Expository language, in its interest in delivering the dry facts of a situation, is explicitly and intentionally removed from the dynamic reality of the human emotional response. In such, it seeks to express truth in a way that is static and concrete. In this expression, the experience of the consumer should be free from emotional response and, thus, from interpretation. "Just the facts."

Artistic expression is intended to do exactly the opposite. It seeks to express the dynamic reality of the human response, in emotion reduced to its fundamental feelings. This truth is abstract and it is fluid. The experience of the consumer, then, should be interpretive and dynamically emotional.

When the expressive quality of the technique used is itself intended to provoke a *specific* emotional response by the consumer, then we are no longer in the realm of expository language or art. Instead, we have found ourselves in the arena of manipulation, that of propaganda.

Lloyd Webber, Rice, Still, and Picasso, in the examples above, were specifically *not* telling you, the listener and/or viewer, what they wanted you to feel. There were *not* telling you how to respond. Instead, they were expressing the emotional realities of their subjects as they, the artists, themselves were responding to their unique experience with these subjects in a period of time within their life as a whole. If the piece is strong and if you are open to the experience of it, then you, the consumer, will respond to your experience of the work of art itself; and your experience will be emotionally dynamic and unique to your experience of your interaction with the artistic work within a moment of *your* life as a whole.

Susanne K. Langer, in her important book Philosophy in a New Key (Harvard University Press, 1941) writes, "The assignment of meanings [in music] is a shifting, kaleidoscopic play, probably below the threshold of consciousness, certainly outside the pale of discursive thinking. The imagination that responds to music is personal and associative and logical, tinged with affect, tinged with bodily rhythm, tinged with dream, but *concerned* with a wealth of formulations for its wealth of wordless knowledge, its whole knowledge of emotional and organic experience, of vital impulse, balance, conflict, the *ways* of living and dying and feeling."

Because the human condition is dynamic, so too is the very human need to express feelings. The artist, in creating a work of art, is seeking to express feelings in a way that is most true to the feelings themselves. In such, the artist seeks the expression of truth as it exists, in the form available to the artist himself or herself.

The mystery of the human being, indeed. This, then, is what art is. This is meaning in art.

David White