

## Existentialism, Aesthetics, Dance

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In everyday life we find some presence of art lurking in many situations, particularly when we share perception and action in some kind of unity. Moving in the dappled light of a forest, cooking within a novel design of kitchen, roaring with a football crowd at sheer deftness, all these can surprisingly remind us of or seem to transcend our solitary mental apartness and physical vulnerability. We may deliberately attend aesthetically or be brought to that by what presents itself.

At the simplest, we all need some order in life and a pattern for our thinking, and one way society augments this is by enlisting art to commemorative and educational purposes. Thus integrated we escape, are distracted from, the sense of alienation, and interest and pleasure develop through the institutional selection of exhibits and repertoires and the established canon of favoured works. But it is the most intense interactions, whether of creation or appreciation, that best characterise the essential role of art – which is perhaps to disturb and reveal anew.

Artists are allowed, even expected, to be a bit odd: in the Romantic tradition they are almost heroic. A certain waywardness is part of their sometimes magical role, and art itself by satisfying our imagination can displace the merely implausible from thought. The ordinariness of life - which can seem so secure yet is perilously fragile - is transformed by art whether it is a shamanic dance into an imagined world, a Greek tragedy recounting the inevitable consequences of folly, or an Impressionist painting of transient perception potentially available to all.

Existentialism adopts a perspective of matching intensity. It is, like art making, an urging to understand in a particular way and to be moved by that recognition to a response. At the heart of Existentialism is a deep sense of apartness, of being isolated by an almost tangible 'nothing' that threatens to engulf consciousness of self. Most of us rarely (or never) feel this crisis except perhaps in the contemplation of death - though it may be discernible if you reflect sensitively on the difficulties of human relationships, the cursedness of objects, or as a dancer on the practicalities of the choreographic struggle to elucidate in movement and the frustrations of the body in performance. In all these we attempt to bridge a gap.

### TRUTH

It is the purpose of this article to sketch a theory of aesthetics that depends on the work of art occupying a crucial position. This mediating place bridges the fearful disjunction between the individual and the world, which is the 'not-me' of other consciousness and of things. Art is a possible mode of authentic action that is in one aspect personal and intentional, in another objective and analysable. Laban clearly saw this both on the individual level and as distinctive of the dramatic situation of mankind (as in the introduction to *Mastery of Movement*: alas that insights are often harder to develop than technicalities).

There is a kind of progression in significance and meaning. It runs, for example, from a fallen tree that happens to afford a seat, to a tool that has been hand made for grasping, to a public promise of intended action, to a work of art which presents

itself as an extended subjectivity thrown out and realised in the world. But, unlike a person or a thing, the otherness of art is without the challenge of either rivalry or denial and therefore can be contemplated without threat.

The philosophers of Existentialism are exceptional in the way that their ideas are bound up in their lives. This is disconcerting to academic philosophy not least because it suggests that the ideas are contingent on peculiar (often unhappy) circumstances, and that the arguments are either an attempt to rationalise what is arbitrary or a kind of unwitting self-help for psychological distress. It might be suggested that Sartre's hatred of the clinging viscosity of personal history and his insistence that our capacity to choose ourselves is limitless (as though the ancient 'it is but thinking makes it so' were somehow dramatised as certainty) reveal one who protests too much. A characteristic existential tactic has been to illustrate issues by writing which is forcefully persuasive (Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, driven respectively towards and away from their god) or encapsulates ideas in cameos that immediately catch us as true (Sartre). They are all notably concerned with aesthetics - a study usually marginal in the British tradition - both in life and in philosophy.

Kierkegaard regarded his own life as falling into stages: when he abandoned the aesthetic as insufficient despite its offer of a humanist freedom, there followed a disastrous progression to bitter isolation. Nietzsche accepted fully the importance of art, speaking of the need for the philosopher-artist. His happiest period was of involvement with Wagner whom he attempted to interest in his own compositions; and his writing often seems more like an attempt at a rhapsodic literature than philosophy. Though Nietzsche failed as an artist, also falling into a ruin of loneliness, Sartre and his school succeeded brilliantly in literature. And with this their lives were correspondingly more productive and engaged.

Closely interwoven with Existentialism is Phenomenology, the attempt to examine consciousness without any contamination from prior ideas. When we first meet a person or indeed a work of art we often come with expectations or at least with a whole range of stereotypes or classificatory devices that will quickly place them in a slot. This functional approach treats the person more as a role than as a free agent, the art work as a production which is a social instance of such-and-such a style or genre for a particular audience. Both humanistic therapy and the proper appreciation of art direct us rather to interact without selfish concern or the prejudice of prior assumptions; and to reflect on our awareness. Of course it often happens in life generally that we find it easier to adopt or accept a role - being an alcoholic, Brit, commuter, daughter ... zealot - finding protection within the type and even celebrating its enactment. Art making can become an uninspired skill, choreography that relies on the imitation of patterns already given by music for example.

## CREATIVITY

Sartre vividly portrays the so skilful performance of a waiter who commits himself to this inauthenticity of being utterly waiter-like, this pretence to be a thing. (Sometimes nowadays 'things' like unwanted telephone salespeople offensively pretend to be real to me by using my first name.) Of course, by the merest wink the waiter could have restored authenticity, with a probable bonus of applause for virtuosity safely distanced from identity. Genet could have lived in acceptance of the

label 'criminal' but achieved a freedom through literature equivalent to that of Camus whose personal history was similarly difficult.

Denial of freedom is 'bad faith' (you may know the fictional detective Wallender whose artist father will paint only the one picture with a trivial variant). Artistic freedom is hotly defended for good reasons: purported art made cynically or for extrinsic purpose falsifies. Swan Lake is a great ballet because, however strange its world, we understand it as a valid representation of an aspect of love which is embodied in the work; the most rhetorical of sermons on love surely fails in validity if designed to ensure a coffer of donations.

In dance, an art in time, relationships - part abstract, part dramatic - are played out through patterns of bodily movement. Merleau-Ponty recognised that, most fundamentally, our movement constitutes a capacity for doing, for realising the possibility 'I can': thus the world is an environment for our action. For Sartre there is an inescapable awareness of our own bodies and ultimately of the sheer alien physicality of the world which when observed takes on the discomfort of nausea. This malaise is perhaps easier to comprehend when perceptual or physical disability intrudes on our mental urge to freedom. But it is worth noting that he understands emotion as a kind of incipient action and it might be argued that art proposes hypothetical actions (given in dance both literally and metaphorically), a counterattack by which nausea may be repelled.

Time (duration, sequence, continuity) is a topic of central concern within phenomenology, and the problem was discussed, for example, by Husserl in relation to the specific experience of a long sustained musical note. For some existentialists the moment is problematic, even paradoxical, because dreadfully transfixed by past and future. But a sculptural figure preserves a moment in perpetuity. And it might be suggested that dance and the other performance arts of time carry us through moments by the flowing achievement of form. To invert Husserl's technique, it is the moment which is bracketed off and implied by the remaining whole, as though it has to be just what it is. As persons we bear the vicissitudes of time, but art is liberated and endures - continuously present to the possibility of engagement with us whether that is primarily by consideration or action.

The problem of choice, with its unending creation of all that is nonchosen, confronts freedom at every step. To this anxiety, this angst, one answer is resolution. There is, at the simplest, a requirement of honesty. The choreographic triumph of Jooss was to confront, without flinching, the dangers of his time (not that they have gone away) in such works as *The Green Table*. Art is not about 'fiddling while Rome burns' or pleasing the portfolios of the rich. It is a doing, an effort to truth, which may be great and famous or, more commonly, is briefly recognized only as a precious glimpse achieved within ordinary circumstances. But without the aesthetic work put into it there can be no psychological reworking as an outcome. This in no way implies art must be serious and taxing, for joy and wit are as legitimate as portraying despair or exploring relationships. In all cases there is more to it than just a sampling (which we get from the world), there is a processing which allows resolution in both encounter and catharsis.

Consider, for example, a dance gesture of parting which conveys some sense of farewell. There is the physical action, found with the body but then fixed, imposed, and adopted by the performer. The movement may be described by a cluster of concepts, overlapping and not easy to verbalise. There might be elements of closing and surface withdrawal, scatter and regather, a breath-like rhythm of dynamics, postural relationship, peripheral arc and redirected gaze. In part the gesture may seem generalized, referring to many social variants, but it may also embody much that is specific to and interesting about this particular addressing. It is not so much a mechanical event, more the realizing of a thought (felt, pictured), as if a fragment of self is fleetingly instantiated. If you find it hard to get beyond picturing mere physicality, try placing the gesture in a dramatic context and allow the transformation to simile and metaphor: enter that state, perhaps as into a poetic evocation may come a personal presence, an 'I'. Try again to experience the imagining of your own version of this gesture. Next, what mood and attitude are appropriate in forming a continuation? Or how is the experience changed if there was no one there, the gesture made from a state of abandonment?

## UNDERSTANDING

Every great painting was once a blank canvas on which anything could have been put: even within the limits of available techniques and style it was open to endless possibility. If amidst constraints and whims I begin to make a dance, how many other beginnings are lost, and even as the process continues there are still alternatives. Yes, the final work has its unique cohesion but that does not entail some unique determinacy. Performance itself introduces difference and the relating of the spectator ushers in new perceptions however slight.

Existentialism emphasizes the limits of rational understanding, as fundamentally we are thrown into the world arbitrarily. Our situation is absurd and our own irrationality is deeply bound up with that predicament. An important claim can be advanced for the arts as therapeutic, created in a relationship both with reason and the unconscious: for dance, as directly enacted action, there is an especial potential.

The work of art as a realisation of individuality (usually with its own name as well as that of descent from an artist) enters a domain of shared access and is not antagonistic to gaze. This outcome is not the possession sought by Nietzsche, though the creation process may be masterly; nor is it truth as a resemblance to some contingent facticity or report of some conceived idea, but instead as a revelation of possibility. A rather dull orthodox view of aesthetic appreciation provides an informed audience giving attention to a composed work within a culture and a specific physical and social situation. It is generally so, but by itself this account strikes me as thin beer, too passive and weak in regard to interaction and the psychological generation of change.

Comprehending the work of art as neither autonomously conscious nor as mere object-thing places it as an intermediary over the disjunction between these. Here it is a possibility of salvation offering both relief and comprehensibility, a place to meet that is special in both context and time. Here seems to be the pivot for an account of the artistic endeavour which is of strength to match the achievement and necessity of art. Our recognition of the values of beauty and, more loosely, of spirituality may indeed supplant religion and magic as foolishly literal beliefs in the supernatural.

An explanation of these values in natural biological terms - through the link of quality between form and function (not least in sexual selection), our useful curiosity, and the perceptual aspirations of completeness for example – seems adequate enough. Add the practical utility of working rhythm, of enhanced gesture and vocalisation, of pictorial illustration, and the ingredients for the development of art are present.

Rather long ago I argued that works of art could properly be construed as quasi-persons, here the pivotal intermediary. That account relied on concepts such as acquaintance knowledge, sincerity and distance, creativity and expression, and was informed by the application of Laban movement analysis to dance as the primary example of art. Such familiar and respectable aesthetic tools have distant, much transformed, correlates in existential terms. In philosophy it may not be quite the done thing to arrive at an equivalent proposal by a different route, though science and art give examples enough.

What may matter, it seems to me now, is that the intensity of art in our experience of it is better caught by an existential account that more vividly addresses its motivating purpose. Perhaps it is the fractures and losses of which the existentialists are so aware, the struggle with absurdity, that drive the aesthetic labour of making and relating.

NOTE Compare Practical Aesthetics also in this journal, 28.2.09. The QuasiPersonal in Art was a doctoral dissertation (CNAAL 1983). In this journal and its predecessor the importance of expression was emphasised in Movement as Expressive Behaviour Therapy (15.2.96) and in the speech and language teaching of Moving Words (17.1.98): the rational/ mystical debate was argued in Choreutics – A Rational Structuring (27.1.08). Any comments to [kl.humanfactors@virgin.net](mailto:kl.humanfactors@virgin.net) please.