

Report

□ **Aesthetics, the mother of ethics**

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“The more substantial an individual’s aesthetic experience is, the sounder his taste, the sharper his moral focus, the freer - though not necessarily the happier - he is.” (Joseph Brodsky, 1987)⁽¹⁾

From neuroscientists studying the workings of the human nervous system, with lofty pretensions to comprehending contemporary human beings, many years ago we began to take an interest in art, to search art for the answers to our increasingly complex questions, and to search art for new questions. Our experiments on the physiology of visual perception have always been, and will always be, conditioned by the technological resources and methods of statistical analysis at our disposal, by the language used to describe them, and, no less, by the way in which subjects used as laboratory rats respond to the questions posed by the experimental paradigm. These subjects, whether healthy individuals or patients, are often asked to describe what they see during an experiment, or to summarize the complex sensations behind their choice of pressing one button with respect to another, forcing them to transform perceptions and emotions into simple verbal or motor responses. Let us attempt now, for a moment, to accept that vision is not merely a simple analysis of the external stimuli that reach the eye and arrive at the brain, but that it is also a process guided by the human instinct for research and acquisition of new knowledge, and is therefore unfailingly conditioned by the internal emotional state of the person in ques-

tion. How then can we think to distil all of these complicated aspects of human vision into a simple response, which only makes sense to the scientist searching for an explanation for a known phenomenon whose response is already conditioned by the way in which the question itself was formulated? It is here that the artist can help us, by unveiling the mysteries of this process in all its complexity: a work of art and the creative process become the explicit and direct account of the visual experience.

Every experience that we have is the result of extremely complex processing by our nervous system. Nothing around us is stable; everything is in constant mutation and subject to evolution, which can, on occasion, be unpredictable. The constant state of flux that drives us, and our surrounding world, has modelled the nervous system in such a way that it is able to extract, through art, a kind of stability from that which is inherently unstable - a stability that is our sole compensation for the inevitability of our fate.

This fate, united with our extremely sociable nature, propels us every instant towards what we could call an obsession: the craving to communicate and to extract meaning from all that surrounds us. It is a vain attempt to oppose entropy, to recompose every detail from a scene into a coherent whole, with the intent to force chaos into a kind of order and semantic harmony.

The South African artist William Kentridge, in a memorable performance entitled *I am not me, the horse is not mine* (Figure 1), reminds us of these habits, and highlights our tendency to complete other

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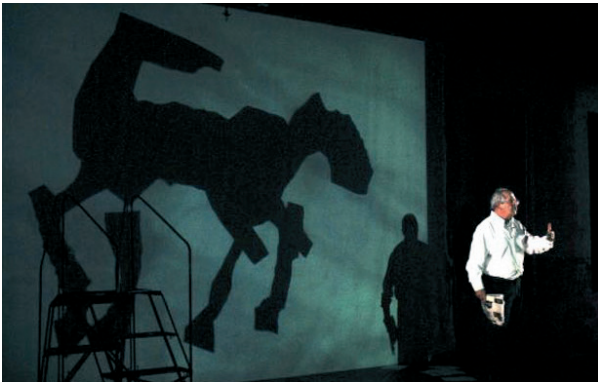


Figure 1. William Kentridge, *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, 2011. Performance still.

people's sentences: "One sees a series of abstract black shapes, and one will force them into a meaning for oneself. So that even as one tries to say, no, it's a series of sheets of black paper that are being torn and manipulated, one cannot stop oneself seeing a figure, a shape, a horse, a form. What is this pressure for meaning? It's about the pressure for meaning we have inside us, where you finish everybody else's sentences. You finish them literally, if they stop halfway through. But otherwise even as they are speaking, we are predicting the rest of the sentence. It's as if we have sent someone ahead, to the road ahead, to look around the corner and see what is coming, and come back and report to us what is there. And with this push for meaning we latch onto any half-word or half-image and make sense of it. And once a meaning is found, we hold onto it even as it disintegrates. We do this with images, but also with ideas, so that even as utopia is dead, we hang onto its skeleton, hoping to resurrect it through a wish, a will."

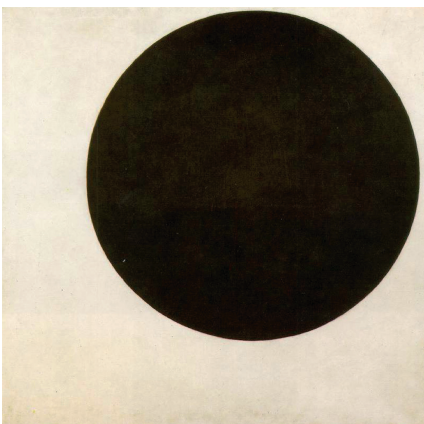


Figure 2. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Circle*, 1913.

To enable us to survive in an ever-changing world, our brain incessantly searches for constants. Despite the continual changes it must endure, in order to acquire knowledge the brain employs several mechanisms, some inherited and some acquired, that permit it to organize our experiences and render them as independent as possible from external change. These mechanisms are revealed, for example, in the perception of colour, where the chromatic stimulus is perceived as a stable property of an object, irrespective of variations in illumination.

This search for stability manifests itself not only in attribution of a meaning to the signals that reach us from the surrounding world, but also in the construction, perception and expression of our own body and our own emotions, and ultimately our own identity.

Art represents the extreme attempt to give form to emotional and sensory experiences, art is the compensation for our incapacity to reach perfection; art exorcises fear and is the most complex and sophisticated product of our brain. It is perhaps for this reason that art is so powerful, in works of art we empathically recognize precisely the things that most easily escape us, those that are so difficult to verbalize: illusions, disturbances, chimeras, feelings, terrors. Facing a work of art perhaps becomes a way to dialogue with oneself. As Kazimir Malevich (a Russian painter and art theoretician) said, art evokes a transcendental experience (Figure 2).

Culture in general, and the visual arts, poetry and music in particular, contribute to the reconstruction not only of our psychological and individual makeup, but also of our sense of both national and social identity. As the poet Joseph Brodsky, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1987, said in this acceptance speech, "If art teaches anything, it is the privateness of the human condition. Being the most ancient as well as the most literal form of private enterprise, it fosters in a man, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness - thus turning him from a social animal into an autonomous «I»"⁽²⁾.

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