

Does Religious Belief Affect Creativity?

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Introduction

I am not an artist, but during the last year have felt an interest in the subject blossom as I left Mormonism. This is sad in many ways, but a reality nonetheless. That does not mean that Mormonism affects all as it did me, but no doubt it does some.

I have not studied in a systematic fashion what "art" is, but have run across a number of thought provoking ideas in this regard. I will share a few here with a little of my own analysis.

Aesthetic Arrest and Kitsch

James Joyce in "The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man", his semi-autobiographical work, has his main character, Stephen Dedalus, indicate as follows:

The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic; desire and loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The aesthetic emotion (I used the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing." (A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, p. 233)

Since Joyce here uses a number of relatively uncommon words, or uses common words in an uncommon way, I will provide a few summary definitions:

Kinetic – relating to or caused by motion.

Pornographic - writings, pictures, films etc. designed to stimulate excitement, usually sexual.

Didactic – intended to instruct, esp. excessively; morally instructive; containing a political or moral message to which aesthetic considerations are subordinated.

Aesthetic – relating to pure beauty rather than other considerations.

When I read this for the first time it brought me up short. As I reviewed my experience with art, I realized that most of what I thought of as beautiful or artistic was didactic pornography – things that either made me desire or loath something, or become motivated to do something, which are sides of the same coin. However, I was able to

sort through the mental attic and find a number of experiences – some in nature and others with works of art – during which I experienced the aesthetic arrest of which Joyce speaks. And once focused on that experience, I recognized how precious it is, and think it reasonable to put this experience above the rest from an artistic point of view. So, perhaps it is not fair to say that all else is not art, but from now on I will seek art and other experience that can deliver "aesthetic arrest".

Think about the language we use with respect to the best art. "It moves me", we say, or something to that effect. Most often we use this language indiscriminately for both the aesthetically arresting and the kinetic. But why would it seem appropriate for what arrests us, stops us dead in our tracks, makes time stand still? This is likely because when we stand still in a world where all else is moving, it feels that we are moving too, but differently. If nothing else is still, there is no frame of reference within which to understand that this is our state. When we look out the window, we do not perceive the Earth, and us, to be whirling at an amazing speed through space. And if we suddenly became "still" while the earth continued to move, we would perceive ourselves, not the Earth, to be in motion.

Matt Berry put this another way:

Thus, as with voodoo, failing to get the point becomes the point. To be realists, so we assert, we must forever deliver point of attention elsewhere. The morning newspaper supersedes all prayer – for the danger has been assigned to the other side of the world. And how rudely a little distraction – pass the butter please – interrupts our devotions, as if the reality had been interrupted and not presented ... for we have more important things to consider than a slab of fat since so-and-so just died of a heart attack, and on page two no less. ...In fact, the farther away I look the more I believe I know myself. (Post-Atheism, p. 15)

That is, in our mental work, everything is moving and so that which stops is what seems to move.

The Western mind has been made skittish by generations of being trained to look to the future to plan and work with that future state in mind, to be always moving toward that goal and so to be discontent with the present. This has also made us wealthy relative to the rest of the world, which not coincidentally tends to be more present oriented. And now, the tendency of many in Western society is toward a greater present orientation that facilitates enjoying what we have instead of trying to get more. That is, there is a growing tendency in Western society to seek what aesthetically arrests. And the younger one is, the more likely this is to be the case (See various essays, including "Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values", Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker , at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/library/index.html>)

I am grateful to an online friend who pointed out to me that the term "kitsch" is sometimes used to convey a point similar to the one Joyce was making. "Kitsch" can be

described as the "reduction of aesthetic objects or ideas into easily marketable forms." Some post modern theorists describe this as the "kitschification" of culture. Jean Baudrillard provided the following insight:

This proliferation of kitsch, which is produced by industrial reproduction and the vulgarization ... of distinctive signs taken from all registers (the bygone, the 'neo', the exotic, the folksy, the futuristic) and from a disordered excess of 'ready-made' signs, has its basis, like 'mass culture', in the sociological reality of the consumer society. ...

To the aesthetics of beauty and originality, kitsch opposes its aesthetics of simulation: it everywhere reproduces objects smaller or larger than life; it imitates materials (in plaster, plastic, etc.); it apes forms or combines them discordantly; it repeats fashion without having been part of the experience of fashion.

(Consumer Society 110, 111). (See <http://www.sla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/theory/postmodernism/terms/kitsch.html>)

I think it fair to suggest that the absence of aesthetic arrest and the use of artistic simulacra for didactic or pornographic purposes is responsible for much that could be in post modern terms described as "kitschy".

The Effect of Fear and Desire

It is fascinating that the same emotions Joyce identified as causing problems for art are those Buddha identified as causing all of life's problems – fear and desire. Buddha found enlightenment under the Bo tree, and his "middle way", when he discovered how to live life out of the reach of both fear and desire. Many books of been written on the subject of how fear and desire interfere with us. Mormonism uses both in spades. See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/temple%20marriage.pdf> at about page 23 for a summary of some of my thoughts on this point.

As long as a person is committed to any particular point of view or is simply trying to sell something in any way he can (which are often, but not always, the same thing), it will be difficult to avoid producing "didactic pornography" when attempting the artistic, no matter how skilfully a work might be wrought. Leni Riefenstahl, the creator of the greatest propaganda films of all time in aid of Hitler, comes to mind in this regard.

One of the flaws of most didactic pornography is that it is less dimensional than art. This is a reflection of the fact that attempts to attract, repulse or persuade often fall short of reality by neglecting information that does not fit one's objective. Most of this neglect is subconscious. The forces of cognitive dissonance are more than adequate to mould our perceptions in this regard. For example, one of BH Roberts' criticisms of the Book of Mormon was that its characters were too thin – not realistic enough. He said that this marked the book as the creation of a relatively unsophisticated mind, and set it apart from real history (let alone art). And perhaps most importantly, a reality not perceived

cannot be communicated. Much of art is about communicating aspects of reality that are otherwise difficult for most of us to perceive.

The prevalence of a dogmatic worldview within Mormonism in my view explains, among other things, the relative dearth of Mormons who have received Nobel or Pulitzer Prizes (See "What is the Challenge for LDS Scholars and Artists", John and Kirsten Rector, Dialogue, Vol. 36, No. 2, Summer 2003, <http://www.dialoguejournal.com/excerpts/36-2a.shtml>). And at the more mundane level, it explains the wonderful experience I have had since learning of my own modest creative bent and beginning to express it.

Where Does Religious Based Fear and Desire Come From?

The authoritarian nature of many religions can be traced to their formational periods, during which a restrictive culture was likely useful. Sripada and Stich (See "Evolution, Culture and the Irrationality of Emotions" at http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~stich/Papers_Available_OnLine_Master_File/papers_available_on_line1.htm) speak of "cultural inertia" – that is, the fact that organisms as well as organizations tend to evolve much more slowly than their environment changes. Hence, traits that evolved for one purpose may be counterproductive for a long time after the environment that gave rise to them has disappeared. I believe that the authoritarian religious leadership structure within Mormonism is an example of this.

Authoritarian organizational structures tend to originate in places and times of scarcity where group cohesion is important. In such environments survival of the group often dictates the sacrifice of individual liberties to the greater good, while in environments rich in resources such a stifling of individual initiative and energy would likely cost much more than it would produce, and hence would be considered maladaptive. For a current example of this behaviour, consider the Old Order Amish living in contemporary US society, or the Hutterites in Canada (See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.brainwashing973274.pdf>). While modern Mormonism is not as extreme in its restrictions as is Hutterite society, it tends in the same direction.

Authoritarian organizations, by definition, attempt to quell anything that may cause followers to question leadership authority. This causes many religions to use, mostly without knowing it, fear and desire producing mechanisms to control believers' behaviour. This is done with the best of intentions as part of "teaching reality" as perceived within various religious traditions. That is, for example, the Mormon Celestial Kingdom is "real", and so the desire to qualify to go there after death, and the fear of being separated from one's family if one does not so qualify, are healthy emotions. Kind of like the fear of touching a hot stove – hot stoves are real; the Celestial Kingdom is real. Teaching about one is as justified as teaching about the other. It is that simple. And in certain other cultures, it is still thought best for all concerned based on an understanding of the laws of cause and effect, that women (but not men) who engage in pre-marital sexual intercourse should be killed.

Religious Faith Does not Require Dogmatism, Fear and Desire

This issue is the subject of an essay titled "Religious Faith: Enlightening or Blinding?" (See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.religious%20faith%20-%20enlightening%20or%20blinding.pdf>)

Religion can help to produce "aesthetic arrest". However, this aspect of religious experience has traditionally been thought dangerous, and kept secret. Karen Armstrong provides some support for this in her book "The History of God". She there summarizes the experience of the mystics of various religious traditions. They seem to swim in the same waters; feel the same rapture; and even experience the same God. Fowler's "stage 5" spirituality, while not the same thing, may be similar (See "Out of My Faith", page 58 and following, at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf>). I suggest that this is the result of their having broken free of the bonds of fear and desire within each of their religious traditions. These bonds produce what in my view might fairly be called religious kitsch, which regrettably passes for spirituality in most lives. The lives of the mystics show that religious belief of almost any type can help us to transcend fear and desire, and leave us in the place of calm that Buddha described as the "middle way", thus teaching us how to find the experience Joyce calls "aesthetic arrest". We see more evidence that this is the case in lives of some of the greatest artists of all time, who professed deep religious belief. However, we also see much evidence around us of the narrow worldview, and kitsch, that tends to result from dogmatic religiosity.

Some might suggest that the professed faith of long dead artists is evidence that the theory I have proposed is incorrect. My response is that we don't know much about the beliefs of these people. For most of human history it was unwise to express anything but devotion to the dominant religious and political views of the day. And it is too late to find out what these people really believed. However, it is possible today to compare various populations within society in terms of their degree of dogmatic religious belief, and the nature of the art they produce. I do not have the data to do a reliable comparison in this regard. However, as noted above, Mormons do not fare well when their production of Pulitzer Prize winners is compared to other groups. And, it is my observation that what passes for art in the Mormon community contains a much higher percentage of kitsch than in other similarly well educated communities. I would welcome any assistance anyone might offer in terms of data or experience that might support this theory, or call it into question.

I also note that what we are talking about here are tendencies of a general nature. I would not suggest that being Mormon precludes the production of good art. I suggest, rather, that being dogmatically Mormon will reduce the probability that any particular person will produce good art. And in the case of a particularly talented artist, it will reduce the scope of talent.

Rebirth

As I shed my Mormon point of view my emotional range, and hence ability to perceive manifold aspects of "reality", dramatically increased. I have a minor artistic bent, and to me it felt like a creative fire hose went off in my head as my Mormon blinders fell away. I am now sure that this is because of my Mormon urge to interpret all events in an unrealistic fashion (that is, as evidence that Mormonism's worldview was "true") prevented me from perceiving much of my experience. And as already noted, a reality not perceived cannot be felt, understood, or expressed. This does not mean that art must be realistic. Rather, art that does not in its simplicity or complexity evoke reality – aid in the perception of otherwise hidden aspects of reality – will not move us to aesthetic arrest. Sometimes, art does this by emphasizing to a fault reality's "unreality". And while what falls short of aesthetic arrest might be good or even great didactic pornography, most often it is merely kitsch. Mormonism is choc full of kitsch.

While I have not done a scientific study respecting this matter, I have heard from many friends who upon leaving the Mormon fold experienced a creative burst. These run from the talented musician who found new depth and range to many more pedestrian folk (like me) who suddenly and unexpectedly discovered new dimensions in their lives and both the desire and ability to express them. This, to me, feels like a miracle. Robert Ingersoll, a contemporary of Brigham Young, expressed his sentiments respecting a similar experience as follows:

When I became convinced that the universe is natural; that all the ghosts and gods are myths, there entered into my brain, into my soul, into every drop of my blood, the sense, the feeling, the joy of freedom. The walls of my prison crumbled and fell, the dungeon was flooded with light, and all the bolts, and bars, and manacles became dust. I was no longer a servant, a serf, or a slave. There was for me no master in all the wide world; not even in infinite space.

I was free; free to think, to express my thoughts; free to live to my own ideal; free to use all my faculties, all my senses; free to spread imagination's wings; free to investigate, to guess and dream and hope; free to judge and determine for myself; free to reject all ignorant and cruel creeds, all the "inspired" books that savages have produced, and all the barbarous legends of the past; free from popes and priests; free from all the "called" and "set apart"; free from sanctified mistakes and holy lies; free from the fear of eternal pain; free from the winged monsters of the night; free from devils, ghosts, and gods.

For the first time I was free. There were no prohibited places in all the realms of thought; no air, no space, where fancy could not spread her painted wings; no chains for my limbs; no lashes for my back; no fires for my flesh; no master's frown or threat; no following another's steps; no need to bow, or cringe, or crawl, or utter lying words. I was free. I stood erect and fearlessly, joyously, faced all worlds.

And then my heart was filled with gratitude, with thankfulness, and went out in love to all the heroes, the thinkers who gave their lives for the liberty of hand and brain; for the freedom of labour and thought; to those who proudly mounted scaffold's stairs; to those whose flesh was scarred and torn; to those by fire consumed; to all the wise, the good, the brave of every land, whose thoughts and deeds have given freedom to the sons of men. And then I vowed to grasp the torch that they had held, and hold it high, that light might conquer darkness still. (Robert. G. Ingersoll, "Why I Am Agnostic", 1896)

This wonderfully expresses my experience, and I note in passing that a review of Ingersoll's enlightened point of view as evidenced by his other writings (See http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/robert_ingersoll/index.shtml) provides an interesting contrast to the ignorance that dominated Mormonism during his life. I would far rather have been part of a social group that followed Ingersoll's advice than Brigham Young's.

The part of my experience that I find most interesting, and to which Ingersoll alluded, is the zest for life, gratitude and joy that still regularly surprise me. For years prior to my "awakening", I had trouble getting out of bed in the morning and finding things to keep me interested as I passed my days. I seldom have such difficulty now. In fact, the opposite prevails. For weeks at a time I wake up with excitement (as I did this morning) earlier than usual with wonderful ideas spinning through my head, feeling rested and hungry to start my day. And I regularly find myself pausing as my heart swells over something I have learned or felt, while an almost tear inducing feeling of gratitude sweeps over me. I have wondered at times if this is a form of madness, so different it is from what I had previously known. I have felt from time to time drunk with this freedom Ingersoll so eloquently described. And if such is madness, I wish it had found me long ago. Life must then be madness. I am now more alive than I have ever been.

Freedom is an intoxicating tonic. It intoxicates because of the new choices it provides and the instability this creates. It is a tonic because over time it builds new strength and capacity. This is the story of human history – increasing freedom breeding both uncertainty and new strength.

As time passes and I become accustomed to the fresh perspective I am so fortunate to have found (or to have been found by, I am not sure which), it most often feels ordinary and comfortable – like an old friend whose presence is both routine and still deeply satisfying – while still occasionally filling me with fire. I do not regret the fading of the honeymoon feeling I so enjoyed. Thus life prepares us for next steps to be taken. However, I will never forget the thunderous entry freedom made into my life, and hope to share with my children and others the reverence it has inspired in me for the miraculous fact of our existence.

Our Creative Wellspring

Closely linked to the creative act is our perpetually unfulfilled yearning to understand, and hence to learn. I believe this is the instinct that defines our species. It has caused

one of the most vulnerable mammals forms on this planet to dominate to the point at which its only enemy is itself. I think it fair to assume that the importance of this particular itch is what makes scratching it so satisfying. The same kind of mechanisms are likely involved that make things related to human reproduction an endless source of fascination. And it is not a coincidence that the rapture of the creative and sexual acts are described in the same language both in the vernacular and by our great writers.

Our urge to learn is fuelled by recognition of reality's inherent uncertainty and the elusive nature of meaning, and stifled by perceived certainty. The fruits of this process feed the creative mill as long as we resist the temptation to feel that we finally and definitively understand. At the moment we fall into that trap, the creative font stops flowing and the expression of "understanding" causes what might aesthetically arrest to become the didactically pornographic expression of meaning. This, I suggest, is because much of what moves us finds its root in paradox – life's majesty amidst existential uncertainty; the constant companionship of good and evil (as each society defines it) in the heart of every human being as well as nature itself; beauty in the mundane; life springing from death; wisdom in the babbling of idiots; and idiocy from the mouths of sages is almost always apparent if enough time is allowed to pass; etc. Such is the nature of our reality. These things don't mean anything necessarily; they just are.

I once heard a story told of a great artist who was regularly questioned about what his art "meant". It was said that he only gave definitive answers in this regard to those he most despised, since to so answer the question is to turn off emotive power, not to mention the enlightenment of any metaphor the piece of art may evoke.

Conclusion

It is my view that the human compulsion to find certainty makes us prone to those who make promises that cannot reasonably be kept. They promise what we most want, on conditions, in exchange for obedience. The promised reward ignites our desire. Its threatened loss if we fail to obey ignites our fear. And as a result, much of the experience available to us flows by as a vast river around a small fish that has been taught that its salvation is found in clinging to a particular rock.

Letting go of the rock is terrifying. Most can't do it. But those who do find that they can swim, and new world after world opens up to them. The large predators that the little fish had feared turn out to be either non-existent or manageable with the help of the many other fish that populate the river.

Life is good, and getting better.