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The Importance of the Artist's Intent

Daniel Conrad

Abstract

Does considering artists' aesthetic intentions enrich our experience of art and enhance art's aggregate value for human culture? By examining non-aesthetic intent, working motivations, biographical/historical context, and cases in which an announced intent drives aesthetic transformation, I argue that, while its specific value varies from case to case, aesthetic intent is a key part of our cumulative experience of art, correlates with specific neuroanatomical loci, and raises interesting and compelling questions specific to this age of automatized thinking.

Key Words

artistic intent, Death of the Author, evolutionary aesthetics, intentionalism, neuroaesthetics, non-initiation

1. The question

In experiencing painting, film, literature, theatre, dance, music, and other arts, is it useful to consider the artist's intent, including evidence from previous work, external statements, and historical and personal contexts? I am not asking if an artist's intent defines a work's validity or meaning, if any. Rather, I am asking if considering that intent can enhance art's function, that is, how art affects audiences and, in the aggregate, human culture. I will show that, while the specific value of intent varies greatly from case to case, the act of considering it is a vital and central part of our cumulative experience of art. Moreover, the question has grown in importance because of recent developments in computational intelligence.

To clarify my approach, I am not addressing this question as a philosopher but as a practicing artist. I am treating art as an exercise of the creative process by both artist and audience, and works of art as sets of patterns or structures that provoke, and thereby enhance, parts of the mind that make sense of the raw input of our senses. In this model, the pattern or structure of a work may communicate meaning as a means to an end but this is not its only function. Rather than focusing on issues of semantics, I stress more general elements, such as congruence, symmetry, rhythm, resonance, empathy, expectation, and surprise.

2. Art and nature

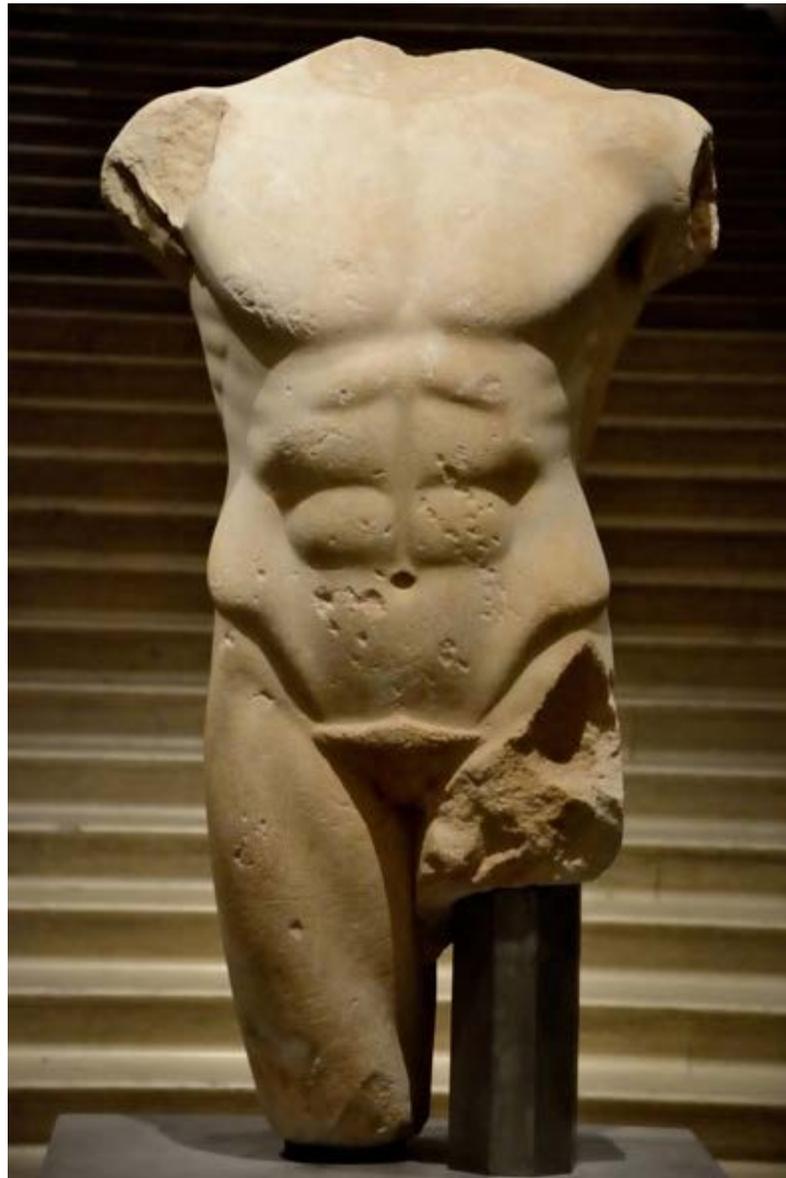
First, consider aesthetic objects not made by artists, such as hummingbirds, sword ferns, and diatoms. Their attraction comes from structure; they seem designed for a purpose. But as accidents of evolution, they lack a willed purpose. Instead they display the illusion of purpose, a purposefulness Kant called *Zweckmäßigkeit*, and biologist Jacques Monod called teleonomy. In nature, this purposefulness without purpose (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*) mimics intent.

Nature's illusory intent is discovered by the observer, conferring unity on the aesthetic object. The sense of significance that arises from this unity may help one find pattern (*Gestalt*) or even meaning within life's chaos. It also illustrates the deep, natural human compulsion to find or construct patterns from the substrate of sensation, our ability to acquire new modes of perception, and the principle that perception and interpretation are creative acts.

When we intervene in this *Zweckmäßigkeit*, we can add real intent. This yields a continuum of increasing intent, from Chinese Lingbi scholars' rocks (the *found art* of collecting special rocks from nature) to landscape photography, *plein air* painting, Cézanne, Calder, and so on. The continuum follows the degree of intent along an axis from discovery to invention. Of course, neither discovery nor invention is pure. Even in found objects an artist deliberately chose this rock instead of another.

The knowledge that a choice was made may help an audience to seek a unifying intent. The human need to find pattern is much stronger when we consider a work as deliberate. Sensing an intent, then, is an inescapable part of how art affects the audience. Like a Method actor's objective, which I shall explore later, the palpability of intent can drive the experience.

Working empirically, consider the Miletus Torso of Apollo (480 –470 BCE), a Greek sculpture in the Louvre. In the poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Rilke, who was mentored by Rodin, implies that this statue gains a gentle beauty from its unintentional mutilation. (It lacks head and arms.) We know the amputations are found elements. By contrast, we interpret the lack of head and arms on Rodin's *L'Homme qui marche* (1907) very differently. We know they were intentionally omitted, so their omission is more provocative. (See images below.)







3. Non-aesthetic intent

Now consider didactic, commercial, or religious intent in art. The intent to sell cars, “clean” coal, ideology, or religion affects our responses to this art. An intent-from-above is ulterior, “interested,” in Kantian terms, rather than aesthetic. If this ulterior intent competes with the aesthetic intent, it may rob a work of some of its depth and openness, diminishing its aesthetic effect.

Pure ulterior intent may use aesthetic means as a contrivance but it does not ultimately seek to fulfill aesthetic intuition; it has other ends. Take commercial television. A network’s intent is not to deliver aesthetic revelations to viewers but to deliver viewers to advertisers. Producers use aesthetic appeal to attract, not to enlighten, viewers. If anything, advertisers want audiences less enlightened. Viewers with sharp interpretive power might be more likely to doubt that a new shampoo will help them confront life’s challenges.

Of course, ulterior intent does not necessarily ruin a work, especially if it is accompanied by aesthetic intent and if we can see a form artfully following the ulterior function. Artists have always had patrons: the Greek city-states, the Catholic Church, Renaissance dukes, Baroque merchants, the Chinese Imperial Court, and so on; and they do not necessarily destroy the art. Moreover, ideology is not always ulterior. Consider Käthe Kollwitz, Richard Wright, Wisława Szymborska, Goya, Grünewald, and Brecht. Their ideologies were internal and integral components of their aesthetics. Still, where the ideology of the patron, church, or nation is heavily imposed, such as in medieval Europe, Russia in the 1920s, and contemporary television advertising, there is a risk of artistic death-by-ulterior-intent. In these cases, artists who escape may yet thrive. The period of German art between 1933 and 1945 is termed the period of “exile” (in literature, *Exilliteratur*), since most of the best artists escaped from Germany.

Is it useful for audiences to distinguish aesthetic intent from ulterior intent? Take Eisenstein. His political enemies accused him of formalism, so he larded his films with ulterior political content. To best appreciate his work, it helps to know this, so we can make allowances, not to justify, but to see past superfluous gestures meant to please censors, to see indirectness and irony.

4. Working motivations and the artist’s own testimony

Some intentions are working motives that drive creativity. In Method acting, actors try to find objectives. These are not necessarily a character’s motives, but personal motives to drive uncontrived performances. We see characters, not the actors inside. An actor may seem to weep for a lover by using their memory of a parent’s death as a motive, even if it is not congruent with the character. Does it help the audience to know an actor’s private objective? While the *specific* private intent may not be very useful to spectators, the *palpability* of that intent carries authenticity, and the effect on those spectators can be very powerful.

How can pre-set private working motives generate authentic performances? When Method actors perform, they find real moments through “non-initiation.” Though following private motives, they do not

initiate action *de novo*. Instead, they *respond* intuitively to their partner(s). They give up only that part of their motivation that involves premeditation. When working solo, the audience is the partner. There may be rational planning in constructing performances, but the aesthetic choices are intuitive, un-premeditated responses.

Private working motivations do not always stay private. James Joyce organized his novel *Ulysses* by superimposing elements of Homer's *Odyssey* on Dublin's geography, the time of day, different prose styles, and so on. The correlations are not Procrustean; Joyce does not follow Homer chapter by chapter. But they are more than devices; they are motives, pulling him along, revealing order choice by choice. Readers can feel his intent, educing unity from a poly-vocal work.

Is it useful to study this intent from outside sources, including biography and history. Joyce started writing *Ulysses* in 1914, and called history "...a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."^[1] Moreover, Joyce deliberately leaked his use of mythological resonance to Larbaud^[2] and others.^[3] The vague superimposition of the *Odyssey* and the myth of Daedalus on the ironic heroes Dedalus and Bloom, Joyce's self-exile and loss of faith, his views on naturalism and romanticism,^[4] and his adaptation of stream of consciousness may be useful knowledge to readers. This external testimony describes a kind of heroic/ironic voyage, adaptable to a reader's life, making personal, historical, and formal sense. This is more visible in the context of Joyce's declared intent.

Joyce's work feels uncontrived. What allows his pre-set rules to transcend contrivance? It is the Method actor's principle of non-initiation. The "partner" he is responding to here is that momentary combination of external accident and internal choice that acts as a transient partner in most creative acts.

Gerhard Richter's "smear" paintings and Jackson Pollock's "drip" paintings also use non-initiation. Semi-accidents are followed by a selective process using internal, intuitive choice. Many semi-chance events are tested, and the artists choose only what works, placing their bets after the roulette wheel stops.

One virtue of working with external accident and intuitive choice is that it allows artists to probe the workings of motivations that lie within their unconscious minds. This can be a deeply creative act. As Eric Kandel frames it in his elegant study of Viennese Expressionist art and the origins of Modernism, "...human creativity – the creativity that led Copernicus and Darwin to their theories – stems from conscious access to underlying, unconscious forces."^[5]

5. Personal and historical context

For audiences pursuing their own intuitive responses, artists' personal contexts can sometimes be illuminating. The poetry of Li Qingzhao, from the late Song dynasty, makes deeper sense if readers know of her exile in south China. Or consider Stendhal, a progenitor of modernism. Disillusioned by Napoleon's fall and mid-nineteenth century romanticism, he went into self-exile in Italy and said he was writing for twentieth century readers. As Joyce, another exile, stated, "The supreme question about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring."^[6]

Personal and historical trajectories also intersect in painting. A Cubist work by Picasso is enhanced when flanked by other Cubist works, but it makes even more sense in a larger context. As John Berger noted, the best Cubist work was made between 1907, after Cézanne's death, and the start of World War I in 1914, a short period of rapid and optimistic

historical evolution. Cubism "...recreated the syntax of art so that it could accommodate modern experience," a buoyant pre-war experience marked by failing old institutions, promising new technologies, and new mathematics of space and time.[7]

In the Great War, space, time, and vision changed again in the poetry of Wilfred Owen, foreshadowing work by Paul Celan and Anna Akhmatova, whose intentions are more visible in the light of their personal histories. Knowing these histories may enrich the readers' experiences.

Picasso painted *Guernica* (1937) for Spain to exhibit at the Paris World's Fair. It was intended to have a political impact. Picasso was enraged by the bombing of the Basque village of Guernica by Spanish Fascists. He testified, "Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war against brutality and darkness." [8] Here the political intent is not ulterior to Picasso's aesthetic intuition but is as much a part of it as the paint. It may greatly help the viewer to know both the historical event and Picasso's connection to it.

More intimately, Pierre Bonnard, an avid reader of Bergson and Mallarmé, wrote about perception as an active process, continually reassembling itself over time in collaboration with memory. His late work, painted from memory, takes time to see. It feels archeological. If you take time to look, layers of foreground and background may melt together or separate and objects on the margins take form. In 1893, he met a woman stepping from a streetcar. She called herself Marthe and said she was sixteen. Actually, she was twenty-four. Bonnard painted her all the rest of her life, including many paintings of her in her bath, when she was in her fifties and sixties. In this work, her body is always twenty-four, and it merges into the complex light of the background. If we know that Bonnard studied time and memory and was exquisitely sensitive to the passing of time, we may more easily arrive at the realization that we must take time to see these time-inflected paintings.

In cinema also, knowing about a director's life can enrich the way we watch. Take *Las Hurdes: Tierra Sin Pan* (Land Without Bread, 1933), Luis Buñuel's ironic documentary. If a program error had mistakenly credited the film to Carl Dreyer, and you had seen Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), you might interpret *Las Hurdes* as a tragic social-issue film and miss its mordant irony. If, though, you knew it was Buñuel's film and knew of his life and philosophy, you would likely see a richer version of the film. Many naïve viewers at the time of the film's release misinterpreted *Las Hurdes* as tragic.

6. Intent as part of the work: the act of transformation

When Song dynasty Chinese scholars chose naturally occurring *Lingbi* rocks to display, they treated them as works of art. While they did not create these works, they were exercising aesthetic choice, removing rocks from nature and directing their visitors (the audience) to see them as art. They were announcing their intent. By themselves, the rocks were works of nature; with the addition of the scholars' intent, they could fulfill the functions of art.

If announced intent can be an integral part of a work, and *Lingbi* scholars' rocks function as art partly by virtue of intent, then is a urinal, for example, art if an artist signs it? I posit that this depends on the particular urinal and the particular context. A work that carries *only* the idea that a signed thing is art may primarily appeal to theorists; intent may *categorize* an object as art, but categorization alone may not make the object worth looking at. As Duke Ellington noted in the eponymous song, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

On the other hand, mundane objects may function brilliantly as art if, for example, the artist uses the specific formal grace or context of an object to generate its elevation from the mundane. This worked for the *Lingbi* scholars, Degas, Pina Bausch, and others. Realistic representations of found mundane objects, discovered by close examination of mundane life, worked well for Flaubert, Joyce, Zola, Vittorio De Sica, van Gogh, and others. At its simplest, most minimal level, if someone just *points* to an old pair of shoes or a cast-iron art-nouveau *pissoir*, and says “Look!,” that momentary act *might* move the viewer’s creative faculties to the point of revelation. In that case, the simplest work may be a momentary experience, propelled by an uncontrived aesthetic intent that sets it apart from nature and transforms it. What kind of transformation is this?

In an old example of this transformation, Tetsugen, a seventeenth-century Buddhist, raised funds to print an edition of the Sutras. He toured Japan for years, raising money. At one point he arrived at a region ravaged by floods. He used all his money to feed the local people, and then resumed fundraising. Years later, he came to an area devastated by an epidemic. He used all his money to buy medicine, saving many lives. He finally finished collecting enough money to publish an elegant wood-block edition of the Sutras. When admirers praised it, the response was: “It’s nothing; you should have seen the first two editions.”

A recent example involves the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei who, in 2009, investigated the deaths of over 5,000 schoolchildren from the collapse of poorly built schools in the Sichuan earthquake. He mounted an exhibition at Munich’s *Haus der Kunst* using some 9,000 tiny backpacks, and was subsequently beaten almost to death by Chinese police. He later posted the names of 5,000 young victims online, and when the authorities responded by destroying his new Shanghai studio, he publicly claimed that *their* act of demolition was one of *his* finest works of art, a work defined almost entirely by his claimed intent and his personal context, and which succeeded as art by provoking aesthetic revelation in his audience.

7. Situational approaches to intent

Many stated intentions by artists are less useful than Ai Weiwei’s. Kandinsky’s writing, for example, may seem hermetic. However, if we take his work from 1908 to 1918, and observe his passage to abstraction in the context of other artists (Matisse, André Derain, Alexj Jawlensky, and Marianne von Werefkin), and the events of 1914, the pattern has a sense of purpose. Even if we might not fully grasp his specific “inner need,” this sense of purpose moves the work along the path from accidental to deliberate in the viewer’s mind.

If an artist’s intent is ungraspable, can searching for it be rewarding? In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zosima has saintly healing powers. He tells his acolyte, Alyosha, to leave his monastery, enter the world, and practice love. Then he dies. By Orthodox tradition, saints’ bodies do not putrefy, but Zosima’s body rots hideously. The stench fills the monastery, as if by some dark miracle.

What was Zosima’s intent? Since Zosima is fictional, we are asking for Dostoevsky’s intent. Perhaps Zosima, who valued humility, did not (to Dostoevsky) want to be worshipped after death, so he willed his putrefaction. Maybe he was testing Alyosha’s faith, so the young man would learn love by entering the world (which is what happens). Or maybe he wanted us to see that putrefaction is natural, and that love is the only surviving miracle. Or, as Joyce Carol Oates posits, maybe this life-affirming novel contends against its dark reflection; characters and ideas are doubled, and we have to make sense of this.^[9] Putrefaction

would then balance Zosima's life-affirming heart.

The key point here is not what answer we give to these fictional questions of intent but that we are drawn to imagine answers. And this imagining makes us, in a sense, authors. The author himself withholds explanation. Does it help us to consider his life? He was a deeply religious utopian socialist with a strong sense of justice. He spent four years in an inhuman Siberian prison on political charges, had a gambling addiction, and suffered from epilepsy. He appears to have had a penetrating knowledge of the human heart. If we learn this history, it does not give us answers; however, it adds to the provocation of the question.

Dostoevsky compels us to pursue the rich question of Zosima's intent in the way we pursue the intent of Shakespeare's fictional Prince Hamlet, which I explore later. Our continued pursuit of these unanswerable questions can be intensely aesthetic because we pursue them as artists might. Thus, while we may never arrive at a fixed, communicated meaning, the effect of the author's provocation is felt deeply.

8. The intent of the audience

Umberto Eco proposed that many contemporary artists intentionally leave the interpretation partly open, offering "open work" with fields of potential sense. The audience completes the creative act, becoming, in a sense, artists. In this collaboration, they find their own intent. Eco actually posits three intentions: *intentio auctoris* (of the author), *intentio lectoris* (of the reader), and *intentio operis* (of the work).^[10] This last refers to an ideal work with its own idealized intent, through which Eco's idealized Model Author and Model Reader generate each other.

In open work, each spectator can see a work of art differently. One of the strengths of open work is precisely this adaptability, unfettered by fixed, specific meanings. Choreographer Paul-Andre Fortier told me that after one of his performances a woman told him his work inspired her to get a divorce. He then told himself that what he was doing was "*pas inutile*" (not useless). His gift to her was not meaning, *per se*, but creativity.

Audiences may imagine an artist's intent by imagining that artist's persona; this is how Eco's Model Author is constructed. This imagining can be richly rewarding. As I argue later, spectators can, in this way, learn something of the artist's creative process.

There are risks, of course. A work of art need not carry a fixed meaning but audiences may assume one, leading to what we might call "semiopathy," perceptual inflammation from excess meaning. For example, in London's National Gallery, Goya's portrait of Doña Isabel de Porcel (1805) displays a faint shadow on her chin. Is it a beard? X-rays reveal only the pentimento of an eyebrow from previous work, so Goya likely did not intend an epicene reference. Some viewers might invent one, though, leading them to form impoverished responses to the rest of Goya's oeuvre. In like manner, biographical details, especially those which verge on gossip, can be highly misleading. Not all art is autobiographical, and even when it is, literal-minded application can create a shallow experience.

Confounding the matter, artists may deliberately make apparent errors. But if we know John Coltrane's squawks and Ornette Coleman's slurs are deliberate, the sense may become audible. External evidence may help. Watching videos of Coltrane or Coleman playing may be useful in this regard. In a similar way, Hans Namuth's 1951 film *Jackson Pollock 51* gives us a sense of Pollock's intent and a wider repertoire of ways to see his work.

9. Artist's statements: bad cases make bad law

Thus, to avoid confusion, artists may write statements. Such writings are often unhelpful guides to an artist's intentions. They may be fraudulent, inept, opaque, or even irrelevant. The artists themselves may not even be conscious of their intent. Nor can a claimed methodology validate a fatally contrived or didactic work. As Louis Aragon stated, "If you produce wretched imbecilities by following a Surrealist procedure, wretched imbecilities they remain."[\[11\]](#)

But bad cases make bad law: Roland Barthes, criticizing the authority of authors, denied that the "author-god" (the artist) had ultimate power over a work's sole, "theological" meaning.[\[12\]](#) Bakunin, inverting Voltaire, said if there really were a God, we would have to abolish him. In that playful spirit (not Nietzsche's), Barthes abolished not just the bourgeois author-god, but the author, claiming literature was born of language and authors were midwives.

To be fair, Barthes wanted us to find our own interpretations rather than relying on unknowable authors. However, though artists cannot enforce an interpretation of their work, is considering their intent a categorical fallacy? Applying Barthes's own argument, a work may lack a fixed interpretation, since the audience needs to be free to interpret. But then art functions in the passage between chaos and sense, where it engages the creative process in the audience; and in that passage, they are free to ponder an intent. Then the goal becomes discovering the richest experience of that work, using all our resources.

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, I am working within a provocation model, in which works of art, by virtue of their patterns or structures, provoke, and thereby enhance, parts of the mind that make sense of raw sensory input. Here, addressing Barthes's erasure of the author, our provocation model has an advantage over a pure communications model. Because we are focusing on experience (individual response to an artistic provocation rather than an intended meaning), it is easier to discuss how audiences' knowledge of the artist can be part of their transformational response to the art. By contrast, in a communications model, we would have to include the artist as part of the code, which is conceptually clumsier.

10. Textualism

Some intentions are visible in works of art. One can argue that if an intent is visible in a work, the artist is irrelevant, while if it is invisible, the intent is irrelevant. This argument assumes everything in the work is visible without external context, yet I have cited works in which artists' identities and contexts greatly aid visibility, and in which external evidence of intent, such as Ai Weiwei's, may operate synergistically as a creative element in its own right. One of the basic principles of the neurophysiology of pattern recognition is that things become visible within contexts and with external reference. So there is valuable space between the extreme poles of what is in the work and outside the work.

In the case of literature, the New Critics proposed that art could evoke specific emotions without reference to biography, history, and the like. This model stresses the effect of the work on the audience, which would seem to be compatible with a provocation model. However, the New Critics, because they proscribe studying an author's life and historical context, run into problems when such study is relevant. In New Critic T. S. Eliot's own critique of *Hamlet*, for example, he judges the play "an artistic failure," as it does not fully account for its hero's emotions.[\[13\]](#) Are Hamlet's emotions too opaque? Or does Eliot, by cleaning the play of

its author's life, resemble Kenneth Rexroth's riverine raccoon who, when given a lump of sugar, washes it in the stream until it all dissolves away?[14]

We may not know a great deal about Shakespeare's life but most educated audience members know that he acted in, wrote for, managed, and co-owned a theater. Through his plays, we know that he used theater as an existential trope; that he was deeply concerned with the theatrical themes of identity versus imposture and reality versus illusion; and that he often revealed character slowly. Thus, he may have deliberately *intended* to hide the logic of Hamlet's emotions, as Hamlet, himself an actor and a playwright, does. Is he mad in some way? Why is he slow to take revenge? Is the ghost real? Is Hamlet real? His existential problems, strangely, are ours. We empathize even as we look for answers. We may feel these questions concerning Hamlet's mind more vividly in a context that includes some knowledge of the author and how we imagine his motives.

Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia argued for an author-free textualism: "If the ringing of an alarm bell has been established, in a particular building, as the conventional signal that the building must be evacuated, it will convey that meaning even if it is activated by a monkey." [15] The linguist Mark Liberman responded: "I question the implication that people who hear a fire alarm interpret its meaning without paying any attention to theories of how it was activated: on Scalia's theory, how can we make sense of the everyday concept 'false alarm'? When I'm told that a particular alarm is due to a circuit fault (or a mischievous monkey, though monkeys are thin on the ground in Philadelphia), I don't conclude that the conventional meaning of the fire alarm signal has changed, but I do join everyone else in aborting the evacuation." [16]

If on/off fire alarms can transcend semantic rules, this is surely more so for art, which can be multivalent. In literature, for example, rather than being mere servants of language, artists may invent *new* language even as we read. Reading, say, Virginia Woolf, we follow a moving target propelled by her intent. And while her intentions are not transparent, neither are they totally opaque, given our knowledge of and empathy with her life. These intentions, however we may see, deduce, or imagine them, form a context that partly governs how we derive sense from her work, that is, how the work functions.

Beyond literature, as Barthes himself laments, non-textual art is even less accessible to semiotic systems. [17] Music, abstract painting, and much contemporary dance, for example, are largely non-semantic.

11. The larger significance of intent, and some neurophysiological speculations

Art may engage neural pathways of aesthetics with little reliance on semantics by using other faculties. These include empathy with imagined artists, including their created characters, and an insightful ability to construct a "theory of mind," giving us access to the emotions and motivations of others; and Gestalt functions, such as rhythm, symmetry, harmony, novelty, congruity, incongruity, resonance, filtering out the noise, connecting the dots, and surprise. Evidence for such aesthetic models has been persuasively summarized by Consoli and Kandel. [18], [19] Interestingly, some aesthetically linked functions display anatomic specificity in fMRI studies; and lesions at specific neural loci are thought to weaken some of the insightful, empathic, or Gestalt functionality, potentially giving rise to disorders such as autism or prosopagnosia.

When it comes to empathy and other functions depending on a “theory of mind,” this directly implicates the audience’s construction of the imagined artist in its reception of the work. Accordingly, if we take an intuitive view of the artist’s intent, using our faculties of pattern recognition, empathy, and insight to look into the minds of others, we may see a lineage of intent, as Milan Kundera does in his brilliant study of novels.^[20] We may even see patterns in what Woolf chose from Joyce, Joyce from Flaubert, and Flaubert from Stendhal, in the same way we see patterns of fractals from iterations of recursive equations without analyzing individual iterations.

Now consider intent in the aggregate, beyond individual artists. I posit that the cumulative effects of pondering the intentions of many artists in the context of their work are extremely valuable. Why is the urge to share aesthetic intent ubiquitous across cultures? In any culture, when you work with paint, notes, or words, the material incites you to transform it. These transformations nurture a plasticity (in this case, a fluid creativity) of mind. This ultimate intention of plasticity supersedes any proximate one. Plasticity itself, though empty, is filled with creative possibility. Recall the empty room in the wind-swept house at the end of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, a novel that explores artistic intent from the inside.

What art offers, then, is not *just* objects or moments but, ultimately, the artist’s fluid, uncontrived process of creation. When we experience many works of art over time, we acquire some of that process. We adapt, however inaccurately, the intentions of artists. Learning many intentions, however imperfectly, is valuable far beyond what we get from individual works. Thus, looking for intent is a key part of the experience and, although specific meaning may or may not be present in individual works, the process of extracting pattern or meaning (making sense) from chaos is central to the larger experience of art.

I previously proposed a neurological model for how aesthetic experience helps the brain form new modes of perceiving and making sense.^[21] These new modes replicate through culture. Creative processes, that is, finding new ways of seeing patterns, listening, and making sense, mediate creation for individual artists. Through their forms—works of art—they are stored or handed down within culture to enable sharing, and then adapt to changing conditions over time.

Aesthetic intent, then, has two components: the modes of artists’ creative processes and the drive to share these modes. This sharing is conserved across cultures, so it likely has survival value. I propose that its survival value is its power to enhance the perceptual and interpretive repertoires of others.

In hunting-gathering cultures, individual luck varies, so the kill or harvest is shared. Personal survival depends on the luck of the group, so enhancing the group’s adaptive perceptual agility helps one’s own survival. Our conserved drive to make and share art still carries survival value, offering new ways to adaptively reinterpret our changing world and see emerging patterns.

12. The dangers of commercial and automatized intent

I have argued for the importance of artists’ aesthetic intent in individual works of art, the value of this intent in the aggregate experience of art, and the survival value of that experience. To take my argument further, if aesthetic intent carries survival value, what happens if commercial intent replaces it?

Artists' aesthetic intentions, when we absorb them, help us to be like artists in the world, to find creative ways to see patterns of change. If aesthetics yields to commerce, the danger is not that we will buy the wrong toothpaste but that we will be blinded by contrived patterns. Then the artistic process, which should be helping us to adapt to the unanticipated, loses survival value.

As an example of contrived patterns, take recent trends in commercial music. As author/musician John Gray explains: "In commercial recording, trumpets have been replaced by samplers, operated by one-handed pianist-technicians, in total ignorance of its sound, range, the role of breath and tongue in phrasing, and the distinctive way the trumpet negotiates a melody.... In its wisdom, the commercial marketplace has decreed that music is primarily aural wallpaper to enhance other activities, like driving a car or shopping."^[22]

Moreover, that marketplace is becoming automated. On the Internet, commercial curatorial systems count "hits," like TV ratings systems. And while the 'net happily opens public space to artists, it also fosters free appropriation, making it harder for artists to survive. This free content is hosted by sites supported by advertising and the harvesting of personal information.

This is not to say that the idea of artistic identity will disappear. Certain robust identities will even thrive: brands, promoted by advertisements, the one component of internet content (and intent) protected from appropriation.

Creative intent will become more removed from individual artists as decisions are increasingly made not by a collective "hive mind" but by artificially intelligent simulations of that mind, using user-input to adjust the algorithms. Such algorithms prioritize ratings, so they tend to generate transient, sensational work. As in other commercial art, the nature of the intent—in this case an automatized intent that we might term *intentio ex machina*—may degrade the value of the work.

Norbert Wiener, the prescient progenitor of cybernetics, observed as far back as 1950 that artificially intelligent systems are dangerous because they follow instructions blindly.^[23] They are rule-bound, lacking empathy, conscience, and an understanding of human needs. They do not give you what you want (intent) but, very literally, what you ask for. This can yield unhappy surprises when the instructions are "maximize profits" or "increase viewership."

When artificially intelligent systems are applied to making art, these dangers can self-amplify. As I have argued here, art ideally functions to enhance our aggregate perceptive and interpretive faculties, enabling us to see and adapt to unforeseen, unhappy surprises, which is what confers its survival value. But automated, commercial art, instead of helping us see the dangers of automatized, commercial thinking, blinds us to those very dangers. This art, degraded by an automatized intent, loses survival value. Thus, when we argue for the value of the aesthetic intentions of individual artists, we are arguing for the value of those same human artists and the dangers of the artificially intelligent alternatives. In the twenty-first century, then, the "death of the artist" is more than just a theoretical idea.

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Endnotes

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