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## Why bother being disturbed by disturbing art!

Prakash Iyer

"It seems as *unaccountable pleasure* which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety and other passions that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy." – **David Hume**

We are all familiar with this unaccountable pleasure Hume is referring to. He was speaking of plays, but it is true of a lot of popular music, paintings, photographs, movies, and other art forms. Not all good works of art evoke positive feelings like calmness, happiness, ecstasy or a sense of beauty. Some of them evoke non-positive emotions; they disturb us, make us sad, evoke horror or sometimes even create morbid feelings or a sense of futility of our own existence. Many of us actively seek good art and the criterion for us to decide if we will enjoy it or not is irrespective of the kind of emotion it evokes. Why are humans drawn to art that generates negative emotions like sadness, melancholy, horror, fear, disgust? Shouldn't we avoid art that depicts behaviors and attitudes we find reprehensible, or abhorrent?

### Aesthetic experiences and our responses

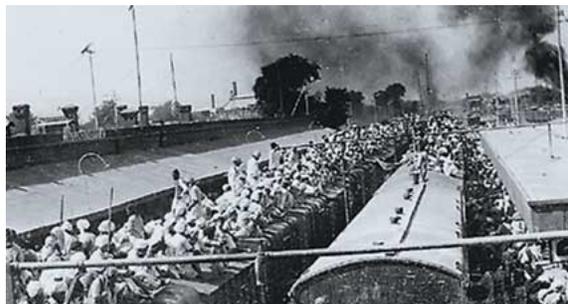
Whenever we watch a movie, see a painting, listen to a song, observe an artistic installation, we know the experience is not real; in the sense that it is artificially constructed by an artist. But despite it not being a real experience, we are moved by it and experience emotions that are real for us. These emotions are real and we do not have control over them.

If the world created by art is make-believe and yet we feel real emotions, there must be something that moves our perception of a work of art from *make-believe* to *truth*. When we encounter a work of art with the intention of appreciating it, our imagination takes over. We put elements of the art together in our mind and reconstruct it for ourselves, and this effort draws us into the artwork as if it is a real experience. We transport ourselves into the world that the art in question has created. From a distant object of our attention, it changes into an experience we have. It becomes our personal experience.

It is an unusual combination of pleasure (which we derive from the act of imagination and work we do in our minds) and the emotion created (which is a direct response to the qualities and content of the work of art). The mark of good art is that it draws us towards it and coaxes us to put effort to imagine and reconstruct the ideas being conveyed by the artist, and then be overcome by its emotional effect. The more effort one puts into understanding an artwork, the more intense the experience is, and counter-intuitively, the more authentic it is too. We are deeply moved by complex works of art, but not simple ones. A ditty or a jingle might make us tap our feet and bring a smile to our face, but a complex and well composed song evokes profound and subtle emotions which simple ditties cannot.

One of the four narratives in the Tamil movie "Super Deluxe" gives us a richly detailed view of the day's experiences of a young child and his parent who has returned home after over seven years, as a transgender. Most of us who haven't encountered or interacted with a transgender person, cannot have experienced the kind of emotions the movie evokes in us. The director coaxes us to imagine what she goes through when she is doing a mundane daily

activity any parent does: take her child to school. The director creates a series of situations when most people either subtly or explicitly tease her, ridicule her, suspect her of kidnapping the child, and do not even acknowledge her as a person, leave alone a parent. Everyone refers to her as "it" rather than "she". These events lead to a deeply disturbing moment when the principal of the son's school, sees her and with utter disdain, just repeats, "Go go go go...!" without even opening his eyes or caring to listen to what she has to say. We are made to watch this from her point of view and feel appalled that one human being could treat another in this manner. I was overcome by a desire to shake that principal and scream, "She is a human being, not a thing. Talk to her". I watched the movie twice last week.



### Response and meta-response

Why do we return to works of art that demand so much effort and also make us upset, angry or feel disturbing unpleasantness?

Susan Feagin, a distinguished philosopher of art and aesthetics, in trying to answer this question, describes two distinct parts to our response to any artwork: the direct response and a meta-response. The direct response to a work of art involves perceiving the content and

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quality of the work of art, the accompanying imagination, reconstruction and emotional response we spoke about until now. The meta-response is "...a response to the direct response: it is *how one feels about and what one thinks about one's responding (directly)* in the way one does to the qualities and content of the work."

While we are responding to a work of art, part of our mind is also observing the way we are responding. We see ourselves as the kind of person who responds in this manner to this kind of situation; as someone who would be angry if another human being is treated in this manner, as someone who feels it is unjust that a child is made to feel ashamed of his parent, as someone who feels sad when his friends tease him about his parent. If we were not affected in this way by the artwork, I suspect we would be surprised, even disturbed. *"Am I so cold and unkind that I do not feel bothered by this?"*

But some artworks fail to generate any emotional response, or the kind of response the artist designs it for. This might happen for multiple reasons, but two reasons for us being unaffected by a work of art are important for this discussion.

One possibility is that the work of art is not well made. It is either too direct or didactic, in which case it does not allow for any imagination on our part, and that takes away the pleasure of constructing the aesthetic experience. On the other hand, sometimes the artwork is made so complex that it is inaccessible to those of us who do not have an expert's understanding of the art form. The latter problem is solvable with an in-depth learning of the form of the art.

But I think there is a middle path that is (and should be) available to most of us who do not aspire to become connoisseurs of any art form. We should not have to go to school to learn how to listen to music or watch a movie. That most of us do appreciate and respond emotionally to most popular art forms indicates a reasonable understanding of popular forms of art. For example, with respect to movies, we have an intuitive sense of good acting, but most of us also learn about good editing, direction, camerawork, screenplay from repeatedly watching movies. This is similar to developing familiarity with a language in order to enjoy literature, or the knowledge of ragas in order to enjoy classical music. By developing an understanding of an art form, we are reaching out to a world of experiences that are unavailable to us.

#### Aesthetic experiences and real life

No matter how well-made works of art are, they are fictitious, and we are conscious of the fact that they are fictitious. In spite of that, good works of art have the capacity to draw us towards them, and make us imagine and reconstruct what the artist is saying, and go through the aesthetic experience.

Artists have the liberty of packaging art in a way that we are directed towards some emotions in isolation from other emotions. In real life, if a situation similar to the one with the principal were to occur, we might also worry that we will encounter the principal again, we might be



scared of the attention we draw, we might worry whether we should act brave or be prudent. On the contrary, when we are watching the movie, we reprimand him or shake him and scream at him in our imagination. When we experience a work of art, we experience pure emotions and respond with a thought-action that is not corrupted by pragmatics or prudence.

This feeling is similar to the feeling of moral obligation; the obligation we feel when we tell ourselves, this is the right thing to do, I have to do this, irrespective of what happens next. *I cannot not do this*. That feeling of obligation that results in an emotion and a thought-action is authentic. Art is the closest an artificial situation can come to generating an authentic moral response from us.

#### Art in a classroom

I have often used artworks (mainly movies) in a classroom as a starting point for discussions, but I am realizing that art can be much more than a mere prop for conversations. A good work of art can create experiences for our students and ourselves that we might otherwise never have in life. The meta-response to our response to works of art provides a window into ourselves and helps us understand ourselves better. This response does not only tell us who we are, it also hints at possibilities of who we can be, the kind of person we ought to be. The mere act of feeling what we do, and listening to what others felt at the same time can open up avenues for reflection, which a regular conversation or dialogue cannot.

Watching "Super Deluxe" made me feel like I was someone whose sympathy for the transgender parent overwhelms any reticence or fear, and I sensed what it feels to confront someone and fight injustice. It is possible that these momentary feelings and imaginary responses are retained in our psyche, such that if we encounter such a situation in real life we might act differently than we would act today.

Of course we might do the opposite, or be indifferent. But teaching is about exploring possibilities, and art provides opportunities for a teacher to overcome the limits of her own life experiences and bring to a classroom, experiences from which we might learn as much as our students do.

**Reference:** "The Pleasures of Tragedy" by Susan Feagin in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20(1):95-104, 1983.

The author teaches Philosophy of Education at Azim Premji University. He can be reached at [prakash.iyer@apu.edu.in](mailto:prakash.iyer@apu.edu.in).

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