

Art, Aldous Huxley

Art

I'm going to try to talk in this lecture about an impossibly large subject—the subject of art—and how it relates to the human individual. When one comes to think of it, the enormous part played by the arts in human history—the great importance which man has always attached to his arts—is one of the strangest things. One has to consider why this would be so and what the relationship is between the arts and human life. The subject is vast, and I can only touch on various aspects of it in a rather tentative way.

We have seen that in general man has what may be called an urge to order and an urge to meaning. We are given by our nervous system a profusion of experience, and a profusion so great that it seems to us confusion. Consequently, even after our nervous system has done the selection from immediate reality, we find ourselves bewildered, and we have, in some way, to cure our bewilderment. We desire to think of ourselves as coherent beings, living in a coherent world which makes sense. But in order to live in such a world, we have to create it by imposing upon the world of our experience a pattern of order and meaning, and this we do by imposing a system of symbols upon it.

We can say that science, art, and philosophy are three ways of making sense of the world in which we live. Science and philosophy are concerned with explaining the world in terms of the fewest possible number of general principles which will give meaning to the profusion with which we are presented by our nervous system. The order and meaning sought by the artist and imposed by him upon the confusion-profusion of the world is of a different kind. He doesn't seek to explain it in terms of beauty. To use a phrase originally used by Clive Bell, which, although it is quite vague, is still a very useful phrase, the artist gives order to the world in terms of 'significant form'. What he does is to try and perceive the forms inherent in nature and to find a symbolic equivalence for these forms which he then imposes upon the world in order to produce the order which he feels to be so supremely important, and which, indeed, we all feel to be supremely important.

The artist seeks to impose this order of beauty and of significant form upon both the external reality and the internal reality within himself. He wants always to see himself in relation to the world and to create symbolically a harmony in which both fit. In this respect—in that it consciously takes into account the internal world as well as the external—art differs markedly from most types of science.

The orders and meanings which the artist imposes upon the world are naturally of very different qualities. There are good orders and there are bad orders. There are good meanings and there are bad meanings. An order may be either not orderly enough—and we have a chaotic work of art—or it may be too orderly—it may be rigid and conventional and boring in its formality. Or else we may have an order in which the elements out of which the symbol system is created are excellent, but in which the total arrangement fails. Conversely, we may have a good overall arrangement of rather inadequate elements. And occasionally we get an excellent arrangement of excellent elements, in which case we have a masterpiece. But as we all know, masterpieces of art are very rare.

In the same way, we can have different degrees of excellence in the meanings given by artists to the world. We can have meanings which are noble and meanings which are ignoble. We can have meanings which are true to nature and realistic, and meanings which are profoundly unrealistic. We can have low and unpleasant meanings, and we can have fine and important meanings. Here we see where the social importance of art comes in; one can say that the style of life in any given society within a given period is, to some extent at least, dictated by the quality of the art prevailing at that time. If the art is good and if people care for it, then on the whole what may be called the style of living will be good.

If the prevailing art is bad, then the style of living may be extremely wanting in elegance and nobility. So we see that in a certain way aesthetic errors and shortcomings may have social consequences. A bad work of art may in a sense be a social offence; it can do a lot of harm—or anyhow fail to do a lot of good. The best works of art somehow help us to know ourselves and to know our relations with the world at our best and at the best of the world, whereas bad and inferior works of art encourage us in our weaknesses and encourage us to see the world in a completely uninteresting and insignificant way.

In a certain sense we can say that the citizen in Julius Caesar who kept shouting, 'Tear him for his bad verses', was right, that the man who writes bad verses is committing some kind of crime against society.

The great artist must proceed through understanding and sympathy. The greatness of the great artist depends precisely on the width and the intensity of his sympathy. There have been, of course, extremely gifted artists whose view was exceedingly narrow. They have produced remarkable works of art within a very small compass, but on the whole the artists whom the world has always recognized as the greatest are those with the widest sympathy. The people who combine intensity with wide extension are able, so to speak, to take in a greater amount of material and give order to it than the smaller artist.

Walt Whitman has some interesting remarks on sympathy. He says,

The messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose, What we enjoy you may enjoy. Did you suppose there could be only one supreme? We affirm there can be unnumbered Supremes, and that one does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another.

There is a line in 'Song of Myself' where Whitman says, 'whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral, dressed in his shroud'. And, another famous line, 'I am the man ... I suffered ... I was there.' These lines about sympathy are followed by a striking series of identifications where the poet identifies himself with different classes of suffering humanity. He identifies himself with the hunted slave, with a victim of the massacre of the Alamo, with a sailor on the Bonhomme Richard. It is curious to compare this Whitmanian rhapsody, which is extremely beautiful, with the much more classical expression of the same idea which we find in Matthew Arnold's 'Strayed Reveller', where he speaks of the poet seeing the world as clearly as the gods see it, but seeing it also very differently inasmuch as he is identified and suffers with what he looks at. The poem can be summed up in these words: 'Such a price the Gods exact for song, to become what we sing.'

The process is one of becoming and then expressing what we become in terms of the most powerful and penetrating symbols possible; it is a matter of finding a symbolic equivalent to the immediate experience of sympathy and putting it across in the noblest and finest form possible. And it is when the artist fails to put it over in the form which we recognize as noble that we are faced with the problem of bad art and the bad social consequences it may have.

Here I would like to make a little digression on two aspects of art which are always present: art as communication and art as therapy. All poets have stressed the fact that art is a therapy. They talk again and again about the power which art has to get rid of the painful emotions and thoughts which torment the poet—to get rid of them simply by paying attention to them and expressing them. This cathartic, therapeutic side of art has been found in modern psychotherapy to be extremely important. Innumerable people with psychological problems have found that they get great relief in making artistic expression of their ideas; the painful pressure within them is let loose, and they are able to carry on much more effectively as a consequence.

However, what we do find now, I am sorry to say, is that many people who take up art in an amateur way and get a great deal of pleasure out of it seem to confuse the two functions of art and imagine that, because the art they produce is for them therapeutic, it will give pleasure to other people. This, alas, is not necessarily true. The picture that I draw, which may be very good for me, may make you sick; this is something which, unfortunately, many people find difficult to understand. I think that we should make it quite clear that art as communication is a job for specially gifted people, but that art as therapy is something which probably everybody ought to practise for his own good. If we make this clear, and make it clear to ourselves that art as therapy is not necessarily the same as art as communication, then the distressing confusions and disappointments which greatly affect many amateur artists will be avoided.

Let us now go back to the problem of art as contrasted with science and philosophy. In science and philosophy there are probably two main methods of explaining reality. One is the method of concentrating attention on the atomic elements of reality. This is represented in classical antiquity by the work of Democritus and Lucretius and is the basic methodology of modern physics and chemistry starting with Galileo and Newton. We see it applied on the psychological level in behaviourism.

The other method is the formal one of concentrating attention on the gestalten of nature, on the forms which are presented on a large scale. In the classical period this formal approach was represented, in different ways, by Plato and Aristotle, and in modern science we see it in taxonomy, in comparative anatomy, and in morphology. Incidentally, the word 'morphology' was invented by Goethe, so it has a profoundly artistic and poetic overtone to it; in modern psychology we see it represented in the Gestalt school.

In most cases art has been more interested in the second approach to reality, although there have been atomic approaches. In modern literature we can find examples in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, in Dorothy Richardson's novels, and in parts of James Joyce's novels, where the concentration of attention seems to be on psychological elements so small—psychological atoms, so to speak—that they are below the level of character and narrative.

There is an analogy here with the smallest particles of physics and chemistry. In chemistry the molecule is below the level of colour and of temperature. The atom and the sub-atomic particles are still lower—they are even below the level of chemistry. Nevertheless, in literature as in science, when they are used well the 'elementary particles' do give us remarkable insights into reality.

In the field of music we may find something analogous in the works of the French composer Pierre Boulez, where the tones are almost atomic—below the level of melody and the ordinary forms of construction. Something of the kind can also be seen in some manifestations of non-representational art. I would think that some of the paintings of Jackson Pollock may be seen in the same way, as being art in which the artist has concentrated on the atomic elements of form—which are below the level of pattern in the ordinary sense and certainly below the level of representation of natural objects.

These atomic approaches, if they are well done, can be extremely interesting, although I think we should get tired of them after a time. In general, art has concentrated on the formal elements; it has concentrated not on the atoms composing the reality, but on the general patterns. It has looked for these patterns in the outside world and it has sought, by means of symbolic equivalents of these patterns, to impose an overall order and meaning on the reality which it finds so confusing.

Here another brief digression must be made to consider the nature of the symbolic forms which artists have chosen. Art can be divided into two main classes: those forms of art which deal with spatial reality and those forms of art which deal with reality where there is a time element. We shall find in both these cases that the symbols used by artists have a relationship with patterns occurring in the external world.

Let us consider first one of the fundamentals of spatial art, which is also one of the fundamentals of living objects in the natural world: the question of symmetry and asymmetry. As we see when we examine living creatures, there are two main forms of symmetry. There is the symmetry of the free living animal, which is a bilateral symmetry: the two sides of the animal match one another, but it is different fore and aft; it has a head and a tail and it moves in one direction. This is radically different from radial symmetry, which we find in many flowers and in those kinds of animals which are either sessile or free—which don't have the capacity for moving purposively in any direction, but either stand still or just float passively about.

When we examine the way in which artists have used symmetry in their symbols, we see that where radial symmetry occurs as a symbol, it is always associated with ideas of repose and restfulness. The symbols having bilateral symmetry seem to have something dynamic and powerful and directed about them. This is strikingly illustrated when we contrast the domes and round arches of Byzantine and Romanesque architecture with the spires and pointed arches of Gothic. The first give us a strong impression of repose and stillness. The others give an equally powerful impression of dynamic purposefulness and movement and direction. We see, then, that there is here a strong, close relationship between the meaningfulness of symbols and the kinds of facts in the outer world which we observe and which we unconsciously transfer to our symbols.

The mathematical relationships within the patterns of the outside world are often very close to or identical with the mathematical relations within the symbolic forms which we find satisfactory in art. For example,

the Golden Section, which underlies practically the whole compositional procedure of Western art, is frequently found in nature; and such mathematical relationships as the Fibonacci series and the logarithmic spiral occur both in nature and in art and are felt to be profoundly satisfying. The mathematical relations which are used by animals as what modern ethologists call 'releasing mechanisms' are very simple and striking patterns which are easily recognized even by animals on a quite low level, and they are felt by human beings to be aesthetically significant.

In the same way, we find that natural rhythms are used in temporal symbols. After all, in all forms of temporal art (poetry, drama, narrative, dancing, music) we find the same elementary symbols being used: repetitions, variations on a theme, rhythms of a more or less circular nature, or rhythms proceeding, so to speak, in a straight or an undulating line. Analogies of all these are found in nature. The movement of the heavenly bodies, the cycle of growth, the rhythms of breathing, of heart activity, of peristalsis, and so on, and the more irregular rhythms such as hunger and satisfaction, all find their analogy in the various arts which contain an element of time.

Man looks at the external world, sees the cosmic and physiological rhythms around him, makes an analogue of them in his temporal arts, and uses them to impose upon what Alfred North Whitehead calls 'the flux of perpetual perishing' a rhythmic and repetitive pattern. He gives meaning and order to something which, when it is not ordered, is apt to seem terrifying—the movement towards an inevitable darkness in the future. Man has to make these patterns to give a kind of sense and coherence and meaning to the flux of time; he derives them from elements in nature, strengthens them in his system of symbols, and then reimposes them upon nature so as to make nature more coherent in his own mind.

Now we have to consider what happens when the artist decides to create. Psychologically, what he does may be described roughly in this way: he pays attention to something in his own mind or in the external world in which he is interested and which he wants to reduce to symbols and express. Then he leaves himself open to anything which may come into his mind and enrich his ideas about what he is paying attention to, permitting him to impose a more elaborate and subtle order upon the symbol system which he is going to make. Anything which drifts into his mind may be used in this process—associations with events in his past life, pieces of scientific or philosophical or historical knowledge, things observed here and there in the external world—all this is grist to his mill. These elements are then by the imagination harmonized into a whole and expressed in the symbolic terms appropriate to the particular art in question.

The definition of imagination given by Coleridge is a very famous one and you are probably familiar with it, but I think it is worth reading again. He defines it as

the power which reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities, of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; of the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects.

This bringing together of disparate and often apparently irrelevant or even mutually hostile objects of knowledge or experience, and fusing them

together in a single whole, is extremely important in all considerations of artists.

On what may be called the 'molecular scale' of art, we see the power of imagination illustrated very clearly in literature by the metaphor. The metaphor is essentially a bringing together by the imagination of elements which are fundamentally disparate and irrelevant to make of them a new whole which strikes us when we read it as giving a new meaning and order not only to the elements which are brought together, but to the point which they illustrate.

Let me give a few examples of good metaphors. First, the metaphor in Macbeth about sleep: 'Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care.' Here the metaphor is the ball of silk which is being tangled by a kitten playing with it; sleep smoothes it out and puts it to order again. This is an extremely powerful and beautiful metaphor.

Consider the metaphor we find in The Tempest, where Prospero says, 'The strongest oaths are straw/To the fire i' the blood.' Again, a very powerful metaphor. And here it is worth remarking how these metaphors depend on a certain social and economic context. To a child brought up in a city apartment this metaphor would mean nothing at all. He has never seen straw, and if he lives in a well-heated apartment he has never seen a fire. If he were writing this he would probably say, 'The strongest oaths are celluloid to the short circuit in the blood.' Anyhow, if we have had the luck to be brought up in the old-fashioned countryside and to see fires, this is a very powerful and illuminating metaphor. The same kind of illumination of the force and violence of desire is expressed in another Shakespearean metaphor, 'for those milk paps/That through the window bars bore at men's eyes'.

I think of a striking metaphor which occurs in one of the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, where he speaks about the horror of being an isolated ego: 'Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours.' The religious tragedy of being an egotistical self resisting God is powerfully illustrated by this extremely homely metaphor of yeast in bread.

Here is a beautiful metaphor from Julius Caesar: Portia says to Brutus, 'Dwell I but in the suburbs/Of your good pleasure?'

I want to read the whole of this extraordinary sonnet, 'Prayer', by George Herbert. The poem is a series of rather extravagant but very beautiful metaphors which illustrate very clearly the imaginative power of bringing disparate elements together to illustrate the point at issue:

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
Engine against th' Almightye, sinners towre,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-daies world transposing in an houre,
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;

Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,

Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,

Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,

The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,

Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,

The land of spices; something understood.

The end is extraordinary: this whole series of extravagant metaphors ends with 'something understood'. And it is perfectly true that these metaphors, where the imagination has brought in elements from all over the place, do permit us to understand the mysterious process of prayer which Herbert, the passionate, ecstatic Christian, is talking about.

An interesting sidelight on metaphors is cast by the Chinese system of writing. The Chinese use ideographs which are, in many cases, crystallized metaphors. They bring together disparate elements which are symbolized in a single character and which stand for certain ideas. The character which stands for 'good' contains the two characters of a woman and a child—a touching and beautiful symbol. But the Chinese were very realistic people, and they knew, as Bacon said, that women and children were hostages to fortune and a man who has given hostages to fortune is impeded in many ways. Consequently the symbol for woman in conjunction with another symbol which, in its literal sense, stands for 'square', means 'hinder'. The Chinese person who sees these symbols is stimulated to think about what the symbols stand for and the significance of them in a way in which our alphabetical writing, although far more efficient and utilitarian than the Chinese, never does.

On a large scale, the imagination harmonizes these small elementary elements of art and much larger patterns into the great whole of the complete work of art. Here I must emphasize something which I feel very strongly, although I think there are a number of contemporary critics who disagree. I feel strongly that there is a hierarchy in perfections. You can have artistic perfection on a very small scale, but it is perfection of a lower order than perfection on a large scale, which involves the harmonization of very many aspects of experience. The song 'Full fathom five thy father lies' is a perfection. There is no question about this. It is an incredibly beautiful small piece of poetry. But I would certainly say that this perfection is of a lower order than the perfection of Macbeth or Hamlet, which combines an immense mass of material into an artistically satisfying whole.

I would say, for example, in the sphere of the visual arts, that a piece of Sung pottery is perfect, but its perfection is of a lower order than, say, one of the best of the Sung landscapes, which harmonizes a great number of elements. A piece of weaving or a carpet may be perfect, but it is a perfection of a lower order than the Assumption of El Greco, the Nativity of Piero, or the Dos de Mayo of Goya. And if I may venture to criticize a contemporary manifestation of art, I would think that a great many non-representational works, although extremely beautiful, are works of a perfection whose order is of a lower order than the perfection of any of the great compositions which I have mentioned before, simply

because they harmonize far fewer elements. A work like the Nativity or the Dos de Mayo harmonizes not only extraordinarily complicated systems of form and colour but also every kind of human feeling and ethical value judgments.

There is a kind of modern Puritanism which thinks that these so-called literary judgments should be omitted entirely from works of art. Why this should be, considering that human beings have been using art to express them for the last five thousand years, I don't know. But my own view is that if you can have a work of art which does harmonize all these elements, other things being equal, its perfection will be superior to one which harmonizes only a few elements.

Let us go into the question of the different kinds of art. A hundred and fifty years ago it was assumed that there was only one satisfactory kind of visual art, the Greek or Roman renaissance type. We have got past this simply because we know a great deal more than our parents knew. Photography and anthropology have put at our disposal the entire range of art for the last one hundred thousand years. We have now seen the works done by Palaeolithic man; entire new cultures which were simply not known when I was a boy have come to our ken. We now know there are very many different kinds of art and that, as Whitman says, there are many forms of the Supreme, all of which have a perfect right to their own existence.

We see from the very beginning wide differences in the styles of visual works. In the caves at Lascaux in France one can see that twenty thousand years ago man painted animal figures in a fantastically naturalistic way. He used what Erich Jaensch and his fellow psychologists call 'eidetic imagery'; he had the capacity somehow to project what he had seen with absolute fidelity upon the wall of the cave. But ten thousand years later, when we come to Neolithic art, we find a totally different approach: Everything is represented in an entirely symbolic form. The human figure and animal figures have been reduced to the most abstract kind of expressionism.

We find the intense and violent expressionism of many types of so-called primitive art—African art, Polynesian art, pre-Columbian art—projecting internal feelings in the strongest possible way into external forms, which are then distorted by the extraordinary power of the emotion which is being poured into them. We have art involving what may be called empathy, which is illustrated very clearly in Chinese landscape paintings and in impressionism. We have purely decorative art, the art of the arabesque, which the Moslems were condemned to practise because they were not allowed to represent human forms. And we have a sort of architectonic art—building on geometric forms, such as we see in cubism, and the art of pure fantasy, the art of surrealism. All these have been illustrated at one time or another in different places, in different parts of the world, and all are obviously perfectly legitimate methods of giving order and meaning to the world. The one does not disvalue the other. They are all supremes of equal value, and a perfection can be achieved in each one of them.

I want to end with a very few words about the most difficult of all the arts, music. Music is a very mysterious field of art simply because the symbols of which it makes use are remote from our immediate experience. In literature we are using words which have a meaning fixed in advance, and in painting we are using forms from the external world with which we are fairly familiar. But in music we are using tones which seem to have a life of their own, apart from the external world, and rhythms which, though they have analogies with natural rhythms, are strangely

independent of them. And yet, as all great musicians have insisted, and as anybody who has listened to music with understanding agrees, music has some kind of cognitive meaning. It does say something about the nature of the universe. Beethoven insisted on this very strongly, and we find similar statements by almost every great composer. They have this intense feeling that what they are saying is not just a mere pattern of sound.

On a strictly individual basis, these complicated rhythms tell us something about the equally complicated rhythms in the inner life of man. These are probably quite inexpressible in words, but then a great many things are inexpressible in words. We see the inexpressibility of music in words when we read an 'explanation' saying, 'At this point Beethoven was expressing his agony, having parted from his lady love' or something of the kind. The next programme will read, 'Beethoven at this point was laughing uproariously over the comedy of human life.'

All this proves that words are extremely unsatisfactory means for saying what music is about—it is certainly about the very subtle and obscure kinds of movements within the mind-body and the spirit. And maybe at the same time music is about the universe at large. It seems to express a kind of pure non-physical dynamism in the external world. It seems even to express something which Bergson described when he spoke of William James:

The powerful feelings which stir the soul at special moments are forces as real as those that interest the physicist; man does not create them any more than he creates light or heat. According to James, we bathe in an atmosphere traversed by great spiritual currents.'

This may sound rather like a mystical view of what music stands for and what indeed all the arts stand for; but my own feeling is that there is a profound truth in this.

All the arts, though they speak about us in our relationship to the immediate experience, at the same time tell us something about the nature of the world, about the mysterious forces which we feel to be around us, and about the cosmic order of which we seem to have glimpses.

The end