

How to Tell the Difference Between What Is and Isn't Art

One of the great advantages of STEM in education is that it's generally easy to distinguish between what's true and what's false, and to construct test questions for which there're only a very limited range of right answers. The experimental method will weed out fact from fiction, and testing, if done sufficiently rigorously, enables teachers to get an accurate idea of what pupils know. Music and art, and for that matter, English literature and creative writing, drama and dance, are a challenge in this respect; it's much harder to find 'right' answers to questions posed about the arts and humanities. Judging the quality of creative work, such as paintings, performances and compositions, is even harder. The most basic question, *What is art?* floats around like the proverbial e in the r. If teachers don't know how to distinguish between what is and isn't art, how can they teach pupils to make such distinctions? Can they even judge pupils' work, and tell them when or if they've created something that can, in some sense, be called good?

The conundrum for teachers is how to actually teach these two categories, the sciences and the arts. STEM subjects have right answers, a boon to teachers and pupils alike, and initially rely on serial processes; this makes them relatively easy to teach and learn.

Jane gives Paul two apples. Paul already has five apples, and decides to chop all of his apples, plus Jane's, into four parts; he places the segments in a bowl, and there're exactly the right amount for every member of his class, including himself and Jane. How many people are there in his class?

Answering this question involves serial processes. We add 2 and 5 together. Then we multiply the resulting figure, 7, by 4. This process is very different from writing a story involving several characters with different feelings and motivations. Each character interacts with other groups or individuals, triggering responses which quickly generate multiple streams of thought and feeling. Pupils at school need to learn in both ways. They need to understand simple processes (Paul and Jane) but they also need to engage with complexity if they are going to stand a chance of functioning in the adult world, undoubtedly a complex system.

Teaching technical aspects of the arts and humanities requires skilled teaching and a big investment in time. Starting early is always an advantage, but beyond the teaching of technique, there's a challenge to teachers that has not yet been met; how to distinguish art from not-art. Art is characterised by a certain level of complexity, even if it sometimes appears to be simple, but complexity alone does not define art, any more than someone using lots of long words necessarily leads us to the conclusion that they're clever. Working towards some notion of what good is in the arts is essential if pupils, teachers, parents, employers and governments are going to be convinced of their value. In recent years, there's been remarkably little discussion about this topic, and the lack of discourse has ended up knocking the confidence of all parties. Not knowing how to distinguish art and not-art may have contributed to the rise of STEM and the limitations of a STEM-focused education, which for many pupils never reaches high levels of complexity, is denying many of them the chance to acquire vital skills. Learning STEM to U.K. undergraduate level does not require complex thinking. It requires that pupils master serial processes and then use their memories. As many pupils and students do not progress beyond this level, it's safe to say that large numbers of school and university leavers will be woefully ill-equipped to deal with complexity, unless they've had a rich diet of SHLAM.

If the teaching of the arts and humanities is being held back by a collective reluctance to discuss what art is, then starting a dialogue should help. A brilliant but neglected contribution to the understanding of what is and isn't art was made by the philosopher R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943). Although now famous for his work on history, his *Principles of Art*, published in

1938, constantly evokes visual art, but is just as relevant to music or any other art form. It's worth looking at his work in depth, not because it provides some sort of cut-and-dried answer, but because it shows that it is possible to talk about such things. Further discussion is urgently needed.

For the first 100 pages of the *Principles of Art*, he defines four categories of activity which are mistaken for art, but are not art: craft, representation, magic and amusement. Initially, one might think that to take so many pages to explore what something isn't, is a bit extravagant, but Collingwood quickly convinces us that by daring to ask what is and isn't art, we have catapulted ourselves into a maze. Confusion follows confusion as definitions elide; this isn't to blame Collingwood. He's extraordinarily clear-headed, but he shows us that in ourselves and in our cultures, layer upon layer of sediment has accumulated in our collective consciousness, a waterway in need of a good dredging.

Not-Art as Craft*

The poet is a kind of skilled producer; he produces for consumers; and the effect of his skill is to bring about in them certain states of mind, which are conceived in advance as desirable states. The poet, like any other kind of craftsman, must know what effect he is aiming at, and must learn by experience and precept, which is only the imparted experience of others, how to produce it. This is poet-craft, as conceived by Plato and Aristotle...

* *The 'Not-' is my own addition, to stress the fact that what he's describing is something that isn't art. Collingwood's headings are Art as Craft, Art as Representation etc.*

On the face of it, this statement is far from objectionable. I'm a musician. I prepare for performances by learning scores, then rehearse with other musicians, and hope that during concerts, audience members experience desirable states of mind, such that they're prepared to come back on other occasions for more of the same. If I carry out my role well, it may be possible to have a career as a musician.

What Collingwood points out is that if my goal as a musician is just to use craft, i.e. a series of techniques which I employ *specifically with the intention* of eliciting certain 'desirable' responses from my audience, I'm not engaged in an artistic activity. The nature of my intention is crucial; in as much as I'm purely concerned with triggering responses in the audience, such that they will say to each other, 'Wasn't that a wonderful performance!' I'm engaged in a craft. This is confusing, because it's perfectly natural for me to hope that audiences will enjoy performances; why would they ever come back if they didn't? However, Collingwood states that if an artist's intention is simply to induce such a state of mind in the audience, the activity they, the artist is engaged in, is a form of manipulation. In this context, I'm no longer any sort of artist, but a puppet master, trying to pull the emotional strings of my audience in order that they come back for more and keep me in the style to which I have become accustomed.

I repeatedly catch myself and other musicians falling into this trap. It's especially difficult to spot when one is doing it because the technical skills required to produce what Collingwood goes on to call *art proper* are identical to the skills needed to manipulate people. Indeed, as musicians, we spend so much time and effort on technique that it's not terribly surprising that we lose track of what we're actually trying to do. In professional terms, we have to sound the way that super models in the fashion industry look. Unlike super models, we then have to invite our audience into the inner world of our souls and imaginations; the craft relates to making the outside, the surface of the sound, pleasing, and art proper involves a journey beneath the skin.

Not-Art as Representation

Collingwood starts off his discussion of representation by saying that it shouldn't really be necessary; if his argument relating to art as craft holds good, it should obviate talk of representation, but he feels that the idea of art as representation is so firmly rooted in the popular imagination that it needs special attention.

At first glance, especially with regard to painting, representation is clearly a facet of technique or craft. Does the object or person depicted look plausibly realistic? The naive notion of artistic talent judges on this basis, rather as a simplistic view of what constitutes a good musician is based on whether they can sound like a recording. In both cases, to paint something that looks like a photograph or play a musical instrument to a standard comparable with a professional recording is a considerable feat. Indeed, we're often so impressed with anyone who can achieve this that we don't look any further. We gape, rather in the way that we gape when we watch an acrobat or actually meet a super model; for the nonce, we're dazzled, but although good draftsmanship and mastery of a musical instrument are dazzling, what we use them for may not produce something that is necessarily art.

If you're frustrated by the fact that he hasn't yet told us what art is, only what it isn't, that's the point; he's defining what art is by what it isn't in order to clear away the detritus. It's not just craft, or technique, although clearly, when we get to what art is, it's possible (probable, even) that artists and musicians will deploy formidable technical skills.

Representation doesn't only refer to the outer appearance of things; Collingwood also explores how emotion can be represented. Emotions can be depicted through manipulating surfaces, or reinterpreting subjects. Many artists change the outward appearance of people or objects in order to induce emotional responses in their viewers. I could model the Houses of Parliament in clay, and then paint it red, in order to elicit a response from an audience. The choice of words here is important; 'in order to elicit a response from', reveals that I had a motive. Whether my motives are benign or otherwise, I'm trying to manipulate my viewers. Propaganda and advertising often fall into this category; a person equipped with skills associated with art, uses these skills to create something designed to induce a certain mental state. In the case of my clay model, it's likely to convey the message, 'Britain is now a socialist country', inducing happy feelings in socialists and sad feelings in everyone else. The model could be very unrealistic; as long as it's sufficiently reminiscent of the original to be recognisable, that will not matter. Indeed the nature of the variation from the original, beyond the red paint, could also be a powerful means for manipulating my audience. If, for example, it looks like a child's model, another emotion might be triggered. For some, it might suggest innocence corrupted, and for others, hope for the future.

Not-Art as Magic

Collingwood uses the term magic to encompass activities we associate with rituals of one sort or another. Here, what may be not-art functions as a useful catalyst or lubricant for specific emotions associated with activities such as religious services, sporting events, military parades and graduation ceremonies, or the launching of ships, laying of foundation stones or unveiling of plaques. Again, confusion arises because there is a great deal of art proper that is structured around rituals. Bach's church cantatas were written to be performed during services, but undoubtedly fall into the category of art proper.

The not-art associated with ritual is often hard to spot as not-art because of our tendency to be affected by the rituals themselves. At a christening, we may be overwhelmed by emotion, seeing a couple rejoicing at the arrival of their child. This emotion may be intensified by a particular piece of occasional music, or the sight of the mother receiving a bouquet of

flowers from a friend. Something of this experience might reach the level of art-proper, or it might be a type of not-art. He doesn't say that the not-art associated with such occasions is bad; he just points out that we shouldn't confuse it with art.

Not-Art as Amusement

These are Collingwood's words at the start of his section on art as amusement:

If an artifact is designed to stimulate a certain emotion, and if this emotion is intended not for discharge into the occupations of ordinary life, but for enjoyment as something of value in itself, the function of the artifact is to amuse or entertain. Magic is useful, in the sense that the emotions it excites have a practical function in the affairs of every day; amusement is not useful but only enjoyable, because there is a watertight bulkhead between its world and the world of common affairs. The emotions generated by amusement run their course within this watertight compartment.

Every emotion, dynamically considered, has two phases in its existence: charge or excitation, and discharge. The discharge of an emotion is some act done at the prompting of that emotion, by doing which we work the emotion off and relieve ourselves of the tension which, until thus discharged, it imposes upon us. The emotions generated by an amusement must be discharged, like any others; but they are discharged within the amusement itself. This is in fact the peculiarity of amusement. An amusement is a device for the discharge of emotions in such a way that they shall not interfere with the concerns of practical life.

The words Collingwood uses, 'entertainment', 'amusement' and 'magic' are deceptively lightweight, but somehow help to keep our minds uncluttered. Perhaps he's also steering us towards differentiating art and not-art. Not-art is essentially less substantial, therefore its labels need to reflect that fact.

Once again, he shines a light on my own experiences as a performer. He reminds me that there are many occasions on which the activity I'm engaged in is actually amusement. I might think it's something else because of the situation in which I find myself; that situation could be one in which art proper is about to effloresce, but I might end up simply amusing people. Collingwood makes another important distinction, between the world of play and make-believe, a world where emotions are exercised, developed and explored, and something called art proper.

As with his other categories, craft, representation and magic, amusement seems to overlap with art proper. A character in an opera would seem to be trapped in a form of entertainment, yet the best performances of the best operas ascend to the level of art proper.

What Collingwood describes is extremely challenging, even brutal, for performers such as myself. We regard ourselves as artists, and aspire to give performances that are more than craft, representation, magic or amusement, but in truth, we often fail, or succeed only in part.