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## **Nietzsche and the Creative Process in Art**

### **Introduction**

In this essay I shall consider what Nietzsche has to say about the creation and appreciation of art. How his ideas have influenced subsequent thinking about creativity and been confirmed by our increased understanding of how the brain works and the beginnings of an understanding of what art as a mental process might involve.

### **Nietzsche's art aesthetic**

Nietzsche's influential reading of Schopenhauer, his classical philology, his inspiration from Wagner and his frustration with contemporary German culture, found expression in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

In this he describes his aesthetics of art through his thesis of how Greek tragedy evolved, the role of music and his aspirations for a new German culture. It was written when he was quite young and in later years he criticised it in many respects but his ideas on aesthetics remained substantially unchanged.

The significance to him in writing this book about aesthetics is expressed in his statement "... it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified" (Nietzsche, 1995, p.17)

In it he states '... the continuous development of art is bound up with the Apollonian and Dionysian duality; just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes, involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations.' (ibid, p.1). This is Nietzsche's claim for a dialectic as the necessary basis for art.

### **The Apollonian and the Dionysian**

He distinguishes '... between the Apollonian art of sculpture and the non-plastic, Dionysian, art of music.' (ibid, p.1) The Apollonian as the dream world, a world of appearances as opposed to the Dionysian which he equates to drunkenness which causes '... the subjective to vanish into self-forgetfulness' (ibid, p.4)

He goes on to claim that it was when both the Apollonian and Dionysian were included in Greek tragedy that it found 'glorious consummation' (ibid, p.13) as Attic tragedy.

### **The birth and decline of tragedy**

He makes this claim in describing how Greek tragedy evolved from early performances involving a chorus only, subsequently adding performers and developing a stylised form without regard to realism but only to the effect on the audience. Nietzsche claims that the effects on the audience were brought about by the introduction of the Dionysian and that at this stage Greek tragedy reached its greatest art form. Prior to that he claims that the art was only Apollonian and that the introduction of realism by Euripides and others, under the

influence of Socratic ideas, removed the Dionysian element and led to the decline of Greek tragedy as great art.

### The meaning of art

Nietzsche does not explain what he means by art and seems to assume there is a universal understanding of the term. That may have been truer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century than now, but one suspects that he assumed established forms were all art could be. He seems to have been focussed on his dreams of a renaissance of German art especially through music as that was Germany's strength at the time.

His references to art in the Birth of Tragedy are about performance, whether it be tragic drama or music and thus he seems to be considering the appreciation of art rather than its creation. Perhaps he saw no difference between the creation and appreciation of an art work. However this assumes a very high level of appreciation in the audience, if it is to match that of the process of creation. It is how Nietzsche ideas relate to ideas about the creative process that I intend to consider next.

### The creative process

Arthur Koestler in *The Act of Creation*, (Koestler 1989) suggests that we are at our most creative when rational thought is suspended and describes the creative leap made by the mind that gives rise to new perceptions and glimpses of reality:

'I have coined the term 'bisociation' in order to make a distinction between the routine skills of thinking on a single 'plane', as it were, and the *creative act*, which .. always operates on more than one plane' (pp 35-36) (my italics)

In his book, *The Hidden Order of Art*, (Ehrenwieg, 2000) about the psychology of artistic creativity, Anton Ehrenwieg, argues that the creative artist relies on an unconscious, intuitive critical process, that he terms 'unconscious scanning' to give shape to his view of the world. He goes on to discuss ego dissociation and concludes:

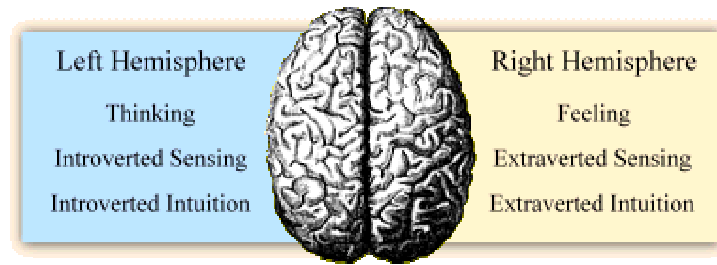
'The close cooperation between precisely focused reasoning and almost totally undifferentiated intuition has, to my mind, made our time so abundantly creative, both in art and science.' (p. 129)

	Left Hemisphere	Right Hemisphere
Spatial Perception	Poor	Superior; Distance 3-D analysis
Thinking	Symbolic, analysis	Holistic, imagination
Focus	Foreground, Specific	Background, General
Aware of	Detail	Overall picture
Better at	Structured tasks	Open-ended tasks
Language	Decoding, literal surface meaning	Context, meaning humor, metaphor

Figure 1: Specialisations of the hemispheres

Modern neuroscience has an increasing understanding of how the two sides of the brain work. Early ideas pictured ' .. that there appear to be two modes of thinking, verbal and non-

verbal, represented rather separately in left and right hemispheres, respectively, ..' (Sperry, 1973) and were elaborated into more detailed description of the differences as in Figure 1 (Bruzon, 2005) and yet further into the functions of the hemispheres Figure 2 (Bruzon, 2005).



**Figure 2: Functions of the brain**

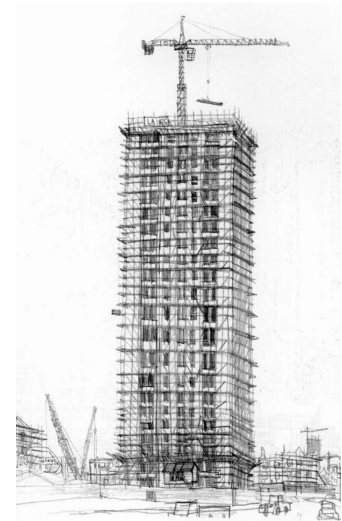
This division of functions and abilities to respective halves has become well established but recent work casts doubt on the this clear division and may be an over simplification as shown in this extract from 'Left Right Brain' (Macrone 1999):

' .. it seemed to be processing styles that distinguished the two halves. Under the scanner, language turned out to be represented on both sides of the brain, in matching areas of the cortex. Areas on the left dealt with the core aspects of speech such as grammar and word production, while aspects such as intonation and emphasis lit up the right side. In the same way, the right brain proved to be good at working with a general sense of space, while equivalent areas in the left brain fired when someone thought about objects at particular locations.'

Because of these results and that these divisions apply strictly to right-handed people (for left-handers it is reversed) it is more appropriate to use the terms R-mode and L-mode as suggested by Betty Edwards (Edwards, 1987). These theories are reinforced by results from people with left hemisphere damage as quoted by Helen Phillips (Phillips, 2004)

'Savants are also found among people with a rare neurodegenerative condition called frontotemporal dementia. a neurologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, who is an expert on the disease, has documented a handful of patients who developed artistic skills as their illness advanced. One patient with no prior interest in art took up drawing at the age of 53, producing vivid childhood scenes from memory (Neurology, vol 51, p 978).

The art produced by these people is distinctly savant-like, in that it consists of realistic scenes or memories rather than expressionistic or creative imagery. But what struck Snyder most was Miller's discovery that his patients all had damage in the same area of the brain, the left frontotemporal lobe. Previous studies have suggested that the majority of autistic savants have left-sided damage, and Miller himself has studied an autistic patient with damage in the left frontotemporal lobe. What's more, the people who became savants after a head injury also had damage on the left side.'



**Stephen Wiltshire,  
aged 11 year**

Stephen Wiltshire is one such savant with amazing drawing skills and powers of observation.

From such research it is clear that some aspects of artistic skills are R-mode. It is as a result of this work that Betty Edwards', *Drawing On The Right Side Of The Brain*, has been so successful in stressing the need for the drawer see what is the reality of the view and to suppress the L-mode's attempts to codify and classify.

It is as Aldous Huxley said in 'The Doors of Perception' (Huxley, 1954):

'To be shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception, to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and inner world, not as they appear to an animal obsessed with words and notions, but as they are apprehended, directly and unconditionally, by Mind at Large – this is an experience of inestimable value to everyone.'

### **Nietzsche and music**

Nietzsche adopted Schopenhauer's philosophy of pessimism and hated the optimism inherent in Socratic ideas which he saw as still present in his age. It was his hatred of Socratism, enlightenment, science etc which drove his stress on the re-introduction of the Dionysian into German culture.

In the Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche expresses his agreement with Schopenhauer's description of music as a universal language - '.. it is not a copy of the phenomenon, but an immediate copy of the will itself' (Nietzsche, 1872, p 56) and is thus pure Dionysian or R-mode.

Nietzsche categorises sculpture as Apollonian but perhaps because in his time all sculpture was highly representational he had not the opportunity to appreciate the universality of sculptural form, which perhaps becomes clearer as more abstraction appeared in art after his death. He would perhaps have extended the forms of art that he attributed value to if he had lived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century – or was it in part because of his ideas that art embraced new creative modes including ever more abstraction and the search for universal means of expression?

Certainly many artists acknowledged his influence particularly Rothko as can be seen in the following extracts:

'From Myth to Music to Stillness' (Ashley Eldridge-Ford, 2001)

'.. Rothko associated himself with Nietzsche's Dionysian in whom the spirit of music was felt and restored man to nature. Through his paintings Rothko creates a much discussed universal language, like that of music, through which, according to Nietzsche, the primal universe could speak through the artist.'

From the catalogue to the exhibition 'Mark Rothko', National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998

'Rothko's reading of Nietzsche .. suggests that his compositions could represent the binary opposition between a rational or abstract element versus an emotional, primal, or tragic one (referring to Nietzsche's discussion of the polarity between an Apollonian and a Dionysian principle in artistic expression).'

Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian duality as a modern idea has really taken a hold, if not always with understanding, as in the review of 'Matisse and Picasso: a Gentle Rivalry', Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, 1999 by Jacob Weisberg (Weisberg, 1999):

'That Matisse is essentially an Apollonian artist and Picasso a Dionysian is evident even from the backhanded compliments they paid each other. Matisse called Picasso "capricious and unpredictable." Picasso described Matisse's paintings as "beautiful and elegant.'

## Conclusion

Reflecting on all this Apollonian dreaming should remind us of the need to get back to some kind of grounding, back in the Dionysian loss of self, back to some sense of reality, even if we cannot express it. Perhaps we need a reminder from Macleish's *Ars Poetica*: (Macleish, 1926)

'A poem should not mean  
But be'

Nietzsche's ideas of art as a dialectic, a clash, an interaction between conflicting or contrary forces seems to be reflected in our understanding of how the brain has two ways of processing its sensory inputs. It is at the very least a useful concept for our Apollonian side to bring to our appreciation of the world. At worst it creates the awful prospect for Nietzsche of the Socratic ideal explaining the creative process. However as Nietzsche (Nietzsche,1995) says:

'Perhaps there is a kingdom of wisdom which is forbidden to the logician?  
Perhaps art is even a necessary correlative and supplement to scientific understanding?' (p.51)

a salutary reminder to the scientist who must never fail to recognise the need for Nietzsche's Dionysian in all creative processes, especially in his research. Thus the creative scientist is a true artist?

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