

Apollonian and Dionysian Forces in Art: A Theory of Art

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Abstract: This brief essay argues that the Apollonian and Dionysian can be used to muster a theory of art, one where “sets” or logical operators allow a certain discerning of why certain art is considered great i.e. A masterpiece. It only works of course if we begin by assuming the truth of the narrative of the theory and history of art which obtains even in the deconstructive impulse of postmodern analysis. An argument is developed that a certain creative dialectic exists in the case of such art and does not exist in the great mass of art produced, where the ultimate state and “artwork” is a harmonious world quite literally.

Keywords: Narrative; elements; great art; form, Apollonian; Dionysian.

INTRODUCTION

On the one hand, there is in art a will to form or order. This is the Apollonian drive. On the other hand, there is its opposite – wild abandon, the formless, the chaotic. This is the Dionysian element in art. The former is light, while the latter is a state of intoxication. I write this essay with two axioms in place: That the narrative of art history is sound as it is practiced and that it is true. The second axiom is that this Apollonian and Dionysian set of forces are behind the generation of art and heightened in the case of great art or the masterpiece. This is based on the further equating of the Apollonian with the aesthetic and mimetic (of which abstract art is a special species or subset), and the Dionysian with the extra-aesthetic and unknown. Through an analysis of various balancing between such forces, we shall corroborate the narrative of art and its veneration of certain art. This will enable a deeper theoretical principle underlying art and the possibility of the ultimate art, namely the obvious goodness of empirical and experiential reality.

To describe further the Apollonian/Dionysian distinction, one may observe that the former is associated with light and illumination, clarity of thought and formal coherence, whereas the latter is associated with formlessness, the sublime and that which appears to disregard the rule. Nietzsche considered tragedy to be a Dionysian art, whereas architecture embodies principles of clarity and wholeness, rather than give in to a destructive and intoxicating influence. The themes investigated herein assess the various combinations of such forces: On the one hand, a kind of Freudian death instinct – the Dionysian impulse, while on the other, a sense of mathematical truth, the Apollo that reveals the underlying structure and principle that inheres in all things and communicates in effective and clear language.

Intersection – Great Art (A Masterpiece)

Where elements are shared between the Apollonian and Dionysian, that is where there is wildness of expression, it is also contained and controlled and where it is contained and controlled, it is also expressive. An example where this is evident is in the case of Jackson Pollock’s “action painting”. It exists on the precipice of chaos and formlessness, while at the same time this very disorder is controlled, measured and conscious. This is why such work is groundbreaking and part of the narrative with its pantheon of great artists and great examples of their work.

Unification – Most Art

Where elements are either Apollonian or Dionysian, there is no interesting dialectic between the two; no new stylistic advance; no fresh iconographic, symbolic, and visual advance or rebellion. This one-sidedness makes such art stale, repetitive; unoriginal or uncreative; a mere copy; without a sense of awareness – so it might just be expressive and just be about crafting a form, but it is not expressive as form. Or it is not as form expressive. It is dry, empty, and meaningless. This is the output of most art and one’s that will never be canonized over time.

Subset – Premodern

A subset occurs when the Apollonian is subsumed in the Dionysian or its corollary. In that case there is either a prevailing aesthetic (form) or there is a prevailing extra aesthetic (a world-order). This is not clear. What I mean to say is that elements of either one is contained in the other, though one or the other exceeds the other in number and kind of elements. In this case, form is either a particular form that is dominant, or a particular world-order that is so. In either case, they still share some

elements in common. This is thus the style or more crudely, the fashion of the day. One could categorize premodern art as satisfying such a condition. For example: the classical style of ancient Greece; illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages; the invention of perspective as used in Christian iconography; Buddhist mandala painting and travelling further back in time, the motifs and methods of cave art, the geometries of early art; the aesthetics of Egypt and so on.

Set Equality – Formalism, Expressionism, Institutionalism

Where Dionysian and Apollonian forces are one and the same, as every element or quality of the one is found in its opposite. So that a measured line that describes say a face is at the same time a certain known person and expressive of the state of say that person, giving rise to – In Kant’s words “kindred associations”. This, following Kant once again involves in the artist and viewer of the object of art, “the free play of imagination and understanding (Kant 1790).

Such set equalities can only be verified on a deeper structural level, namely a theory of art. Three theories represent such an ideal model or equality:

1. *Formalism* – Here the meaning of art is precisely the elements of art themselves as an aesthetic phenomenon, preceding any meaning. It is simply the beauty of these elements and not the form it may or may not so describe. Form is content. This theory is good because it encompasses both abstract and mimetic art.

2. *Expressionism* – Here the meaning of art is precisely the elements of art themselves as an emotive agent, preceding any corresponding ideas. It is simply the feeling that the elements can elicit in their variety, quantity, and quality. Form is inner reality. This is good because it also accommodates both mimesis and the abstract.

3. *Institutional Theory of art* – Here the meaning of art is precisely not the elements of art themselves, but the function that the object may serve in the context of the game of art theory, history, and practice. If the object – or whatever it may be – is considered within such a game, it is art, regardless of – even in the absence of – any particular elements or likeness to preceding art. This is a good theory because it can embrace many forms of art and argues there is nothing in the object itself which makes it art which motivates the creative expansion of art or even its own critique.

In all three cases, the said theory either equates form and content as aesthetic or expressive or nullifies form and content and argues for a larger social game that confers form and content through the game of art mediated by institutions of power, thus equating the Apollonian and Dionysian, as the chaos that is art practice is subsumed under a formal and coherent order of theory and history or the theory and history of art and at the same time the theory and history of art is subsumed under the formal or objecthood, i.e. the things to which it refers – and thus there is set equality.

Universal – No Art, As Art is Particular

The universal, the field of reference in which the various Apollonian and Dionysian spirit (sets) interacts or not, cannot be applied to an artwork. The reason is the artwork is an object or transient process that fall within a certain culture and thus is never the action of the culture itself, which is always larger, undefined as it occurs. Art is particular and not universal. It may imply through its specificity something general or universal, but it is not itself the Universal. If it were so, then the object would be an object of worship, of idolatry. One might thus say pre the secular paradigm shift, much “art” functioned as such within a ritual context. But this is a mistake. Form – however subtle – is always limited. The Universal substrate is unknown. Art merely picks a few candies in a candy shop that is invisible.

Compliment – Most Art

The complement occurs when elements are in one set, say the Apollonian and not found in its complement, that is, the other set – the Dionysian or vice versa. This is the state where an artwork does not generate much thought and there is no creative oscillation between form and not form. Most art – Sunday painters, hobbyist; art appreciation; learning to...; commercially-minded artists and organizations; art in the service of other institutions, for example political, religious, commerce or investment. In all such cases, one might say one is either dealing with bad art or most art, or even not art at all. This is not the mark of great art.

Empty Set – Great Art (A Masterpiece)

This is the most interesting, perhaps. Here the Apollonian and Dionysian elements are so strong that they cancel each other out. It is as if one is left with nothing, or emptiness and one cannot define such art as either being of one or the other. For example, Newman’s art appears rigid, geometric, and purely Apollonian. But really, it is newly formed image that is Dionysian in its originality

and its intent, such as areas of mystical allusion. It is so unique that neither the Apollonian precision nor the alternative possibilities of meaning and considerations of the infinite are wholly present. It becomes empty, a transparent medium so that it is actually with and without form, a seeming contradiction that one might rather describe as simply empty – without elements, without description even in the possibility of fecund content. Think of the Taj Mahal as being so potent materially and in terms of content as actually assuming the identity as “Empty” and without any formal shape, without any corresponding discursive comprehension. It is what might also be described as mystical. The complement of the Universal is also the empty set. When the particular is emphasized, the mystical comes to bare, like Van Gogh’s painting of shoes.

Minus – Most Art

When an element is found in one set and not in the other, then since there is no sharing of concept and form, then there is an incongruence. This is the case with most art, wherein there is no correspondence between form and intention or consciousness – art is just a random process or structure like knitting or it is just a mechanized process like learning a skill or certain know-how. This is the case with most art, namely it is bland, and it is usually always the case that the so-called “artist” has no idea why he has created this work, let alone attempt to even think around and about it and usually with little knowledge of the theory, history and practice of the game called art.

Axiom: Narrative of Art is true

This whole series of analysis whereby certain relations are formed through the overarching concept of the Apollonian and Dionysian only holds if the history of art is taken as a benchmark for great and significant art and the strides made in further developing and evolving the field. If it is false, then the examples used and the theory around it would be different, and the same logical operations will only hold in a completely different set of cases or even be radically different concerning the overarching form-not-form dialectic which then requires revision as some other theoretical entity. Yet, I maintain, as with the exact sciences, that this history (and theory) is not arbitrary and there is something inherently real about say the Classical; the distorted; the abstract; the mimetic; the conceptual; the changing meaning and use of “art”; the exemplars of traditions and their paradigm shifts in say the acquisition of perspective; proportions; the dematerialization of

reality in the form of the abstract; the expressive; the individual as key in a modern concept of art; the wild abandon of the expressive and the current deconstruction of that very history is itself a certain kind of corroboration of it insofar as it is not simply a paradigm shift, but it is a shift of what already exists and therefore a continuation, a tangent, a new vista built from the foundations of ancient civilizations and the artistic culture that corresponds to that particular manifestation of the creative, chaotic and ordering devices of a given society in a certain time and place and the individuals within that Zeitgeist.

The results of this analysis suggest that a healthy dialectic between opposing forces evolve art of greater richness both in form and content. Where this is lacking, the resultant art is usually simply a copy of previous art or not at all innovative either conceptually or formally. This analysis also draws attention to the idea that in order to manifest new and interesting artistic solutions, both a creative and destructive force ought to obtain simultaneously. It is precisely this vying between forces that tend to cancel each other out that new insights and new directions in art may be forged. It is also a mechanism where the emotions and passions are able to be expressed without mitigating intellectual content – ideas. It is this careful balance that separates great art from the majority of insipid and frigid art.

Why great art is great art? The logical permutations suggest that the dialectic between form and chaos is the definition of great art. To reiterate Kant’s early formulation: It is the free play of the imagination and understanding. It borders on the one hand with the idea that art is everywhere and natural and playful and that it is consciousness, rare and “full of” content. The ultimate artistic state of being or art object is where form and meaning are so aligned that reality itself is beautiful and the empirical understood and experienced with great joy, free of the evils of the destruction of ethical commitments.

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