



# 9

## Art Is Indistinguishable from Life: The Artistic Nature of the Human Species

*Art is not to be taught in Academies. It is what one looks at, not what one listens to, that makes the artist. The real schools should be the streets.*  
—Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

Martha's video contains yet other segments that are of direct interest to the semiotician. There is one scene, for instance, where Cheryl shows a picture on her cellphone of a sculpture that she had made, showing it proudly to her amorous partner. Ted looks at it with admiration, remarking, "How beautiful, Cheryl. I didn't know you were so talented." "I have always loved to draw and sculpt," she responds. "For me art is indistinguishable from life, as the saying goes." The semiotician would agree completely.

The making of art is likely unique to the human species. The capacity to draw and appreciate pictures, to make music, to dance, to put on stage performances, to write poetry, is a truly extraordinary and enigmatic endowment of our species. Art not only gives pleasure and delight, but also affords a truly profound perspective on the human condition. The subfield of semiotics (and other disciplines) that deals with art is called *aesthetics*; the related subfield of art interpretation is called *hermeneutics*. The two are concerned with such phenomena as human responses to sounds, forms, and words and with the ways in which the emotions condition such responses.

It should be mentioned that there are apparently examples of art made by animals other than humans. Already in the 1950s, anthropologists were collecting paintings made by non-human primates, which seemed to show a kind of intrinsic motivation to simply create abstractions on a surface. Many

of these paintings were exhibited in art galleries in the 1960s. These soon disappeared, given the problem of interpretation. What do they mean? Since these could be simply markings on a surface, rather than visual texts in the human sense, they are no longer seen as “art.” Elephants in captivity have been trained to paint, producing some rather remarkable works. Again, it is not clear what the paintings are about, nor what the elephants themselves are actually doing. Since the elephants draw the same painting over and over, conditioning effects (mentioned earlier) cannot be ruled out.

## What Is Art?

Art is so much a part of human life that it is impossible to define it adequately as separate from it. There is no culture that does not have its own repertoire of art forms. Art expresses the entire range of human feelings and spiritual beliefs. It is indisputable evidence of the workings of what Vico called the *fantasia*, the human capacity for knowing from within. No one knows exactly why, but everyone loves certain pieces of music, certain poems, some dance styles, and so on. Art works can be seen, heard, touched, experienced in different ways; art gives pleasure, excites the senses, and “moves” the spirit. Art survives because it is valued as precious, because it is perceived as transcending time, because it is seen as saying something about human nature. Art is something that everyone knows and recognizes, but which defies definition with words.

The word *art* is derived from the Latin *ars* (“skill”). Art is, at one level, skill at performing a set of specialized actions, such as, for example, those required to be a gardener or to play chess competently. We also refer to such skills as “gardening art” and “chess art.” Art provides the person or people who produce it and the community that observes it with an experience that is both emotional and intellectual. In classical and medieval times, poets and other writers who used linguistic skills expertly were usually ranked above dancers, musicians, painters, and sculptors, who used physical skills. From the Renaissance on, as all aspects of human creativity came to be valued, those skilled in the visual and performing arts gradually gained greater recognition and social prestige. Today, art in all its categories is considered an essential part of human achievement, and all types of artists are ranked among the most prominent citizens of the world. Traditionally, art has combined practical and aesthetic functions. In the eighteenth century, however, a more sophisticated public began to distinguish between art that was purely aesthetic and art that was mainly practical. The *fine arts* (*beaux arts* in French)—literature,

music, dance, painting, sculpture, and architecture—came to be distinguished from the *decorative* or *applied arts*, such as pottery, metalwork, furniture, tapestry, and enamel, which were later “demoted,” so to speak, to the rank of *crafts*. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, greater appreciation of crafts and folk traditions has tended to blur this distinction. Both categories are valued as art once again.

Because many prehistoric paintings seemingly symbolizing rites or meaningful events of some type have been discovered, it is probable that art originated in ritual. The notion of artists as individualists and eccentric creators crystallized in the Renaissance. Since then, artists of all kinds created art for its own sake—to be put in galleries, to be performed in public settings, to be read by common folk, and so on. In ancient cultures, art was part of ritual, of magic ceremonies, and thus a form of creative behavior meant to please the gods. It was made and performed by various members of the community, rather than by professionals alone. Art was anonymous because it belonged to everyone. In aboriginal cultures of North America, art continues to be perceived as one aspect of community rituals that are designed to ensure a good harvest or to celebrate a significant life event such as a birth.

Even in the Internet age, art continues to reverberate with ritualistic connotations. At a performance of a piece of classical music, there is ritualistic silence and stillness in the audience. At a rock concert, on the other hand, there is ritualistic shouting and movement. Hanging a painting in an art gallery invites an individualistic interpretation; drawing something on a city wall, on the other hand, invites social participation (graffiti, commentary, annotations, and so on). In the first cities, art was meant to decorate the public square, to give communal life a sense of purpose through sculpture, to commemorate some meaningful event with wall carvings of various kinds, and to invite opinions through wall painting. Anonymous, participatory art is much more ancient than the “private” or “authored” art that has become the standard since the Renaissance. In a public space, art is open to “contributions” from observers. In a gallery setting, on the other hand, interpretation focuses on the intentions of the individual artist; and any “contribution” to the painting by an observer would constitute defacement.

Archeologists trace the origin of visual art to the Old Stone Age (20,000–15,000 BCE). The well-known figure of a bison painted on the rock wall of a cave in Altamira, Spain, is one of the first examples of art-making in human history. What it means remains a mystery, but the features that make it art are easily noticeable. It is not just a reproduction of a bison, but of a bison in motion, seemingly scared, perhaps running away from something or

someone. It is, in a word, a reflective representation, an interpretation of an event that attempts to provide a particular perspective of its broader meaning to human life.

As American philosopher Susanne Langer insightfully pointed out, art is powerful because it works on our perceptions and our feelings. It is a “feeling form” of representation. We experience a work of art not as an isolated event, but in its entirety as a unitary emotive form, and thus as interconnected with personal life events.<sup>1</sup> Trying to understand what it means forces us, however, to analyze why the art work so moved us. However, no matter how many times we try to explain the experience, it somehow remains beyond analysis. One can analyze the opening movement of Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* as a series of harmonic progressions and melodic figures based on the key of C# minor. However, the elements of melody and harmony come into focus as components of the work only during an analysis of the sonata’s structure. When one hears it played as an artistic performance, on the other hand, one hardly focuses on these constituent elements. One will experience the music holistically. This is what makes it emotionally moving. In effect, no theory of art is really possible. Langer remarked, further, that because of its emotive qualities, great art transforms human beings and cultures permanently. It is truly a “mirror of the soul.” The course of human history was changed permanently after Michelangelo sculpted his *David*, Shakespeare wrote his *King Lear*, Mozart composed his *Requiem*, Beethoven composed his *Ninth Symphony*, and so on and so forth. The spiritual meanings and the aesthetic effects in such great art works are constantly being experienced across time, across cultures. Such works seem to have been constructed with the universal spiritual blueprint of humankind.

The word *aesthetic* requires some commentary. It means, literally, “perceiving with all the senses.” More generally, it refers to a sense of beauty or a feeling of *meaningfulness*. The first aesthetic theory of any scope was that of Plato, who believed that reality consists of ideal forms, beyond human sensation, and that works of art are imitations of those forms. He claimed that forms already existed in the world and that it was the role of the artist to flesh them out. For example, the human form is already present in a slab of marble. However, it can only be seen by the eyes of sculptors, who literally draw it out with their hands. If the form resonates with viewers, then the artist has extracted from matter an ideal form (or a form that is felt to be meaningful). However, fearing the power of art to move people, Plato wanted to banish some types of artists from his ideal republic because he thought their work encouraged immorality, caused laziness, or incited people to immoderate actions. Aristotle also spoke of art as form, but not in the Platonic sense. For Aristotle, the role of art was to

complete what nature did not finish by imitating it. The artist separates the form from the matter of objects, such as the human body or a plant, and then imposes that form on another material, such as canvas or marble. Thus, imitation is not just copying an object; rather, it is a particular interpretation of an aspect of the object. Because Aristotle held that happiness was the aim of life, he believed that the major function of art was to provide satisfaction. In the *Poetics*, his great work on the principles of dramatic art, Aristotle argued that tragedy so stimulates the emotions of pity and fear, which he considered morbid and unwholesome, that by the end of the play the spectator is purged of them. This *catharsis*, as he called it, makes the audience psychologically healthier and thus more capable of happiness.

The third-century philosopher Plotinus (205–70 CE), born in Egypt and trained in philosophy at Alexandria, also gave art great philosophical and psychological importance. In his view, art revealed the true nature of an object more accurately than ordinary experience did, thus raising the human spirit from the experience of the mundane to a contemplation of universal truths. According to Plotinus, the most precious moments of life are those mystical instants when the soul is united, through art, with the divine.

Art in the Middle Ages was viewed as serving religious functions. Visual artists and playwrights were hired by the Church to create art texts designed to extol Christian themes. The choice to be an artist was a matter of social custom, not of some esoteric inclination at birth. Artists, like other people, customarily followed their fathers' profession. It was during the Renaissance that it reacquired its more secular role. The Renaissance also saw little difference between the artist and the scientist. Indeed, many were both: Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), for example, was a painter, writer, and scientist. After the Enlightenment and Romantic movements, a division emerged, pitting artists against scientists. However, this is a misguided view, the semiotician would remark, because both are "seekers of meaning," trying to represent the world and to convey their experience of the world to others in their own ways.

The view of the artist as an eccentric genius impelled by inner creative energies, free of the yoke of culture, is very much a product of Romanticism. Traditionally, artists were considered employees of society. Sumerian priests and Renaissance princes, for instance, provided sufficient wealth to professional artists to enable them to work comfortably. Even the kind of art that artists created was dictated by social needs and conditions. The Romantic Movement, which lasted from about 1800 to 1870, changed all this dramatically. The Romantics praised subjectivity and the passions. The individual artist's work was seen as intrinsic to their life. From this period we have inherited our modern assumptions about the primacy of artistic freedom, originality, and self-expression.

## Dadaism and Pop Art

But almost right after the Romantic movement, artists started to explore different functions of art, moving it away from its spiritual quest to a more mundane, almost ironic, domain of representation. From this new *Zeitgeist* Dadaism surfaced. This was an art and literary movement, starting around 1916 and fading by the early 1930s. The artists rejected traditional forms of art by creating nonsensical images. The term *dada* is itself indicative of the movement—it is a French baby-talk word for “hobbyhorse,” chosen arbitrarily by writer Tristan Tzara (1896–1963). In discarding all accepted values in traditional art-making, Dadaists produced works that were deliberately provocative and outrageous. Their approach is sometimes paralleled to various aspects of pop culture, which often produces forms that provoke or befuddle. The mammoth sculpture by the Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1923)—a work that defies any simple or singular interpretation—is sometimes pegged as the first example of a Dadaist painting. Duchamp was the originator of conceptual art and “ready-made,” mass-produced objects selected at random and displayed as works of art. Defying any standardized aesthetic interpretation, perhaps this painting, and Dadaist art generally, was a way to mirror the inanity of the modern world in the form of the art text itself. The mosaic-pastiche technique brings out the heterogeneous and disconnected cultural structure of modern urban societies and their commodity-based worldview, wherein everything from actual goods to art and ideas are conceived and distributed as if they were commodities. The Dadaist imprint in aesthetic thinking can be seen conspicuously everywhere today in cultural representations.

More significantly, it led seamlessly to the pop art movement, which actually used commercial objects and pop culture texts (such as comic books) as its subject matter. The movement emerged shortly after World War II. It was inspired not only by Dadaism, but also by the mass production and consumption of objects. For pop artists, the factory, supermarket, and garbage can became their art school. It was an artistic reaction to consumerism. So, despite its apparent absurdity, modern people have always loved pop art, no matter how controversial or crass it appeared to be, because it emerged from a commercial environment to which people can relate directly. In a certain sense, the pop art movement bestowed on common people the assurance that art was for mass consumption, not just for an *élite* class of *cognoscenti*. Some artists duplicated beer bottles, soup cans, comic strips, road signs, and similar objects in paintings, collages, and sculptures; others simply incorporated the objects themselves into their works. Using images and sounds that reflected the materialism and vulgarity of modern consumerist culture, the first pop artists sought to provide a view of reality that was more immediate and

relevant than that of past art. It rendered it obsolete as an artistic sign system that related to the modern world.

Pop art reached the zenith of its popularity from the 1940s to the 1960s, when painters like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns strove to close the gap between traditional art and mass consumerist culture. Rauschenberg constructed collages from household objects such as quilts and pillows, Johns from American flags and bull's-eye targets. The first full-fledged pop art work was *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?* (1956) by the British artist Richard Hamilton. In this satiric collage of two ludicrous figures in a modern-day and cluttered living room of useless objects, the pop art hallmarks of crudeness and irony are emphasized.

Pop art developed rapidly during the 1960s, as painters started to focus their attention on brand-name commercial products, producing garish sculptures of hamburgers and other fast-food items, blown-up frames of comic strips, or theatrical events staged as art objects. Pop artists also appropriated the techniques of mass production. Rauschenberg and Johns had already abandoned individual, titled paintings in favor of large series of works, all depicting the same objects. In the early 1960s, the American Andy Warhol carried the idea a step further by adopting the mass-production technique of silk-screening, turning out hundreds of identical prints of Coca-Cola bottles, Campbell's soup cans, and other familiar subjects, including identical three-dimensional Brillo boxes. It is unclear if there are any true pop artists painting or sculpting today. Pastiche and collage are elements that anyone can execute with computers, through appropriate software. Indeed, if there is any movement that is a possible descendant of the pop art one, it is likely to be computer art, based on the utilization of digital technologies. An artist may combine traditional painting techniques with digital (algorithmic) ones. This has also led to robot-produced art, whereby a robot is programmed to produce paintings that are indistinguishable from artist-created paintings.

The question a semiotician would ask the robot is: What does it mean? Now, a programmer may anticipate this question and program it into the robot. But without that human-made program, the robot would have no way to answer this fundamental semiotic question. Indeed, answering unprogrammed questions is the basis of the art of semiotic interpretation. This is unique to humans.

## The Performing Arts

Performance is, literally, the enactment of an artistic form (from Latin *per* "through" and *forma* "form") before an audience. Performances are given spatial prominence, through a raised stage or a platform, or else on a screen where

the same enactment can be seen; they generally involve using props and paraphernalia such as costumes, masks, and artifacts of various kinds; they occur within a socially defined situation (they are scheduled, set up and prepared in advance, or else made available permanently today on YouTube or through streaming); they have a beginning and an end; they unfold through a structured sequence of parts (for example, acts in a play); and they are coordinated for public involvement.

From the very beginning of time, performances have been mounted to serve ritualistic and other social functions: to get people to reflect upon the values and goals of the culture, to critique them, to convey the “will of the gods,” and so on. The type of performance called *theater* extends right back to the origins of culture. Theatrical performances reenact some event in human life, involving actors and a spatial location, such as a raised stage, around which an audience can view and hear the performance. The term *theater* describes both the performance itself and the place where it takes place, because the stage setting is intrinsically intertwined with the dramatic text. The performance involves both words and actions, but it can also be based purely on bodily movement. The latter is referred to more precisely as *pantomime*, or the art of dramatic representation by means of facial expressions and body movements rather than words. Pantomime has always played a basic part in theater generally. In the open-air theaters of ancient Greece and Rome, where the audience could see more easily than it could hear, it was a critical element of acting. Ancient actors used stylized movements and masks to portray a character to the accompaniment of music and the singing of a chorus.

The most common form of theater is the *drama*, which comes from the Greek word *dran* meaning “to do.” The first notable dramas—those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in ancient Greece, for example—tell as much, if not more, about the meaning of life than do the writings of philosophers. Most theories on the origin of drama point to ancient religious rites and practices. The first evidence that drama became autonomous performance art was in ancient Greece in the sixth century BCE. The plays of the Greek dramatists were drawn from myth and legend, though their focus was not a simple reenactment of mythic stories but a portrayal of the tragedy or comedy of human actions. The oldest extant comedies are by the Greek satirist Aristophanes, who ridiculed public figures and the gods equally. A few centuries later, the emerging Christian Church attacked ancient genres as profane. With the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE, classical theater forms were banished, replacing them subsequently with the *liturgical drama*, which was based on Bible stories, evolving, by the fifteenth century, into the *morality plays* performed by professional actors.

The roots of the modern drama can be traced to the Renaissance when the Florentine statesman and writer Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) wrote and staged *The Mandrake*, which revived the farcical comedy genre. At around the same time (and probably earlier), there emerged in northern Italy a form of theater, called the *Commedia dell'arte*, which emphasized improvisation. Troupes of *Commedia* actors relied on stock characters, masks, broad physical gestures, and clowning to entertain large, diverse crowds. The characters were instantly recognizable—lecherous, cunning Arlecchino (Harlequin) wore a black, snub-nosed mask; gullible Pantalone disguised his old age by wearing tight-fitting Turkish clothes, hoping to attract young women; the pot-bellied rascal Pulcinella (Punch) concocted outrageous schemes to satisfy his desires; and so on. Although some governments attempted to censor and regulate this vulgar form of theater, the characters of the *Commedia* were so popular they eventually were incorporated into conventional theater.

To use a cliché, drama is psychologically powerful. For example, take Samuel Beckett's (1906–89) late 1940s play, *Waiting for Godot*, a dramatic “countertext” to the morality plays, which portrayed life as a spiritual journey, and the world as a place created by God for humans to earn their way back to the paradise lost by Adam and Eve. Those plays depicted human actions as centered on God's plan and desires, guaranteeing that death is not extinction.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a disturbing parody of this inherent narrative. In Beckett's world there is only a void. Human beings fulfill no particular purpose in being alive. Life is a meaningless collage of actions, leading to death and a return to nothingness. The play revolves around two tramps stranded in an empty landscape, passing the time with banalities reminiscent of slapstick comedians or circus clowns. The tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, seem doomed to repeat their senseless actions and words forever. They call each other names, they ponder whether or not to commit suicide, they reminisce about their senseless past, they threaten to leave each other but cannot, they perform silly exercises, and they are constantly waiting for a mysterious character named Godot, who never comes. A strange couple, Lucky and Pozzo, appears, disappears, reappears, and finally vanishes. Pozzo whips Lucky, as if he were a cart horse. Lucky kicks Estragon. The two tramps tackle Lucky to the ground to stop him from shrieking out a deranged parody of a philosophy lecture. Vladimir and Estragon talk endlessly about nothing in particular, and keep on waiting, pointlessly, for Godot. Allusions in their dialogue to the Bible are sardonic and acrimonious. There is a bare tree on stage ironically suggestive of the biblical tree of life. The tramps engage in trivial theological discourse. On and on it goes like this throughout the play, which ends with no resolution. The theme is transparent. Life is meaningless; a veritable circus farce. The God we are supposed to meet will not come.

Beckett's bleak portrait spurs us on, paradoxically, to search for the very meaning it seems to deny. Beckett's text impels us to think "Please, let there be a God!" We may be condemned to waiting for Godot, and the rational part of our mind might tell us that existence is absurd, but at a more profound spiritual level we seem to sense that there is meaning to life. This is how drama works. The ancient tragedies portrayed life as a mythic struggle between humans and the gods. Medieval morality plays put on display actions and themes that informed the populace how to live according to a divine plan. Playwrights like Beckett capture the modern angst, the fear of nothingness, all the while stimulating in us a more desperate search for meaning.

*Waiting for Godot* questions traditional assumptions about certainty and truth. It satirizes language, portraying it as a collection of words that refer only to other words. It also deconstructs classic theater, which drew its stories and characters from myth or ancient history. The objective of the ancient dramas was to consider humanity's place in the world and the consequences of individual actions. The classical actors wore costumes of everyday dress and large masks. Movement and gesture were stately and formal. The plots emphasized supernatural elements, portraying how humans and the gods struggled, interacted, and ultimately derived meaning from each other. *Waiting for Godot* is a deconstruction of this kind of theater. The ancient dramas portrayed a world full of metaphysical meanings; Godot portrays a world devoid of them.

## The Musical Arts

Music plays a role in all societies, existing in a large number of styles, each characteristic of a geographical region or a historical era. Like any art, music is not easy to define, and yet most people recognize what it is and generally agree on whether or not a given combination of sounds is musical. The great works of musical art of all cultures transcend time and are performed again and again, inducing listeners to extract meaning about themselves and the world they inhabit. In a fundamental sense, music is an international language, since its structures are not based on word meanings and combinations, but on melody, rhythm, and harmony, which seem to evoke the same pattern of feelings universally.

Three basic forms of music are now commonly distinguished: *classical* music, composed and performed by trained professionals originally under the patronage of aristocratic courts and religious establishments; *folk* music, shared by the population at large and transmitted informally; *popular* music, performed by professionals and disseminated through radio, television, YouTube, social media, and the like, and consumed by a mass public. Although most of our musical performances are text-based (composed by someone in advance), some

involve improvisation. The latter usually proceed on the basis of some previously determined structure, such as a tone or a group of chords, as in jazz. In other cultures, however, improvisation schemes can be devised within a set of traditional rules, as in the *ragas* of India or the *maqams* of the Middle East.

An interesting amalgam of music and theater is *opera*, which traces its origins to the chorus of Greek tragedy whose function was to provide commentary on the drama being performed. A similar genre exists throughout the world. The puppet drama, *wayang*, of Indonesia is a musical-dramatic reenactment of Hindu myth. Acting, singing, and instrumental music are mingled with dance and acrobatics in many varieties of Chinese musical theater. In Japan, the theatrical genres of *No* and *kabuki* represent a union of drama, music, and dance. In Europe and Britain, the few secular medieval plays to survive, such as *Le jeu de Robin et Marion* (The Play of Robin and Marion, 1283), alternate spoken dialogue and songs. During the Renaissance, aristocratic courts staged performances that mixed pageantry, recitation, and dance with instrumental, choral, and solo vocal music. Out of these, opera became a staple in Florence near the end of the sixteenth century. A group of musicians and scholars who called themselves *Camerata* (Italian for “salon”) decided to revive the musical style used in ancient Greek drama and to develop an alternative to the highly contrapuntal music (the technique of combining two or more melody lines in a harmonic pattern) of the late Renaissance. Specifically, they wanted composers to pay close attention to the texts on which their music was based, to set these texts in a simple manner, and to make the music reflect, phrase by phrase, the meaning of the text.

The first composer of genius to apply himself to opera was the Italian Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). He molded songs, duets, choruses, and instrumental sections into a coherent operatic text based on purely musical relationships. Monteverdi thus demonstrated that a wide variety of musical forms and styles could be used to enhance the drama. Opera spread quickly throughout Italy. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it had become popular in most parts of Europe. What is particularly interesting is that traditional opera—that of Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, Puccini—has perhaps never achieved more favor with the general public than it has today. This is because technology has exposed new audiences to it, especially through the proliferation of recordings and through Internet sites. Today, opera as a popular spectacle has become a thriving enterprise.

The power of music to transform people was brought out brilliantly by the 1984 movie *Amadeus* directed by Milos Forman (1932–2018). The movie is based on the 1979 play by British playwright Peter Shaffer (1926–2016) about the purported eighteenth-century rivalry between Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Italian composer Antonio Salieri. The play plumbs the

meaning of musical art and genius in the life of human beings. It captures these themes by juxtaposing the sublime music of Mozart against the backdrop of dramatized events in his life and the truly splendid commentaries of Salieri, who guides the audience through the musical repertoire with remarkable insight and perspicacity. Forman's close-ups, angle shots, tracking shots, and zooming actions allow us to literally probe Mozart's moods (his passions, his tragedies, his successes, his disappointments) on his face as he conducts or plays his music, as well as those of his commentator Salieri (his envy, his deep understanding of Mozart's art) as he speaks through his confessor to us. *Amadeus* thus blends music, biography, and aesthetic commentary through camera artistry to create a truly effective *mise-en-scène* that is narrative, drama, musical performance, and historical documentary at once. The movie conveys the power of music to transform human evolution. A world without the music of Mozart can be envisioned, but it would be a greatly impoverished one.

Whatever the style, and whatever its function, music has great significance to people because it speaks to them emotionally. The ancient philosophers of Classical Greece believed that it originated with the gods Apollo and Orpheus, and that it reflected in its melodic and harmonic structure the mathematical laws that ruled the universe. They also believed that music influences human thoughts and actions. The question of what constitutes musical art is not an easy one to answer, because music appeals to our feelings more than it does to our intellect. However, one thing is for certain—only those works that are genuinely meaningful to one and all will remain. Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and his last four string quartets, to mention but two examples, will remain because they convey a profound inner quest for meaning to life.

Some musical styles are connected with nations and historical epochs. This is true of much of classical music and it is true of jazz—the only genuinely novel American musical art form, or more accurately, African-American art form. African-American culture actually produced the first genres of popular American music, including jazz, blues, and gospel, at the turn of the twentieth century. From these other musical styles, dance trends, and overall lifestyles developed. This in itself should constitute a powerful unconscious antidote to racism, that African Americans have unfortunately always experienced and continue to experience.

Jazz emerged as a distinct musical form in the 1920s. The specific origins of jazz are not known. It was an amalgam of several styles in New Orleans at the start of the 1900s, including West African music, folk music, and light classical music popular in the late nineteenth century. Most early jazz was played by small marching bands or by solo pianists. In 1917, a group of New Orleans musicians called The Original Dixieland Jass (Jazz) Band recorded a jazz phonograph record, creating a sensation. The term "Dixieland jazz" was immediately attached to it. In 1922 the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, and in 1923 the Creole

Jazz Band, led by cornetist King Oliver, became popular throughout the United States. The term “cool jazz” surfaced 1948, when tenor saxophonist Stan Getz recorded a slow, romantic solo of Ralph Burns’ composition *Early Autumn* with the Woody Herman band. This style was adopted by a group of young musicians that included Miles Davis, Lee Konitz, Gerry Mulligan, and arranger Gil Evans. Their recordings emphasized a lagging beat, soft instrumental sounds, and unusual orchestrations that included the French horn and the tuba. The recordings, with Davis as leader, were later released as *Birth of the Cool*.

The role of jazz in the evolution of American music and even society cannot be overemphasized. This was a major theme of the movie *Chicago* (2002), which starts off with the signature tune “All That Jazz.” Once strictly background music in the brothels of Kansas City and New Orleans, jazz started to spread and flourish as a mass musical art because people related to it and loved it. It was fun and it bespoke of a new freer lifestyle, in contrast to the stodgy one of the previous Victorian era. By the end of the 1920s, spurred by the cheapness and availability of mass-produced records and the emergence of the radio as a promoter of popular music, jazz and its derivatives came to define early pop culture. To this day, recordings of jazz music sell in the millions, with updated versions played and sung by a new cadre of “retrospective” jazz artists.

## The Visual Arts

Visual art predates civilization. As discussed several times, art works of remarkable expressiveness have been discovered by archeologists deep within caves of southern Europe that go back to the Paleolithic period, roughly between 40,000 and 10,000 BCE. The invention of sharpened flint blades by Paleolithic humans also led to the first sculptures—small carved or incised pieces of wood, ivory, and bone. These symbolized a dependence on hunting and a worship of fertility.

Every culture has developed its own particular way of representing the world through visual forms. The aesthetic pleasure these give seems, by itself, to be a motivation for their creation. Paintings and sculptures betray an innate fascination in our species with what the eye sees and attempts to understand. In Italy and other parts of Renaissance Europe, painting became a sophisticated visual art form with the development of the principles of linear perspective by various Italian architects and painters early in the fifteenth century. This enabled painters to achieve, in two-dimensional representations, the illusion of three-dimensional space. Renaissance artists also introduced innovations in how to represent human anatomy and new drawing media and methods, such

as oil painting and fresco (painting on fresh, moist plaster with pigments dissolved in water) techniques. Masters of the High Renaissance, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian developed these techniques to perfection. Paradoxically, Leonardo left only a handful of paintings, so occupied was he with the scientific observation of natural phenomena and with technological inventions. Raphael perfected earlier Renaissance techniques involving color and composition, creating ideal types in his representations of the Virgin and Child and in his penetrating portrait studies of contemporaries. The Vatican's *Sistine Chapel*, with its ceiling frescoes of the *Creation*, the *Fall*, and the vast wall fresco of *The Last Judgment* attest to Michelangelo's genius as a painter. Titian's portraits include representations of Christian and mythological subjects, and his numerous renderings of the female nude are among the most celebrated of the genre.

Since the late nineteenth century, meaning-bearing visual communication has found a new medium—*photography*. Through the photographic image we can relive the moment or recall someone as they were at that point in time. The photographs that adorn tables and walls in homes, offices, and other buildings are visual testimonials of who we are, giving a visual form to human memory. This is one off the subtexts in the 2001 film *Memento*, written and directed by Christopher Nolan and based on a short story written by his brother Jonathan Nolan (*Memento Mori*). The main character, Leonard, is forced to live entirely in the present, unable to create new memories after a head injury. The movie revolves around his attempts to get revenge for the rape and killing of his wife. Leonard writes notes on his body, takes Polaroid photos, and keeps pieces of paper so that he can remember what he has discovered—hence the name *Memento* to indicate that his memory is a series of external mementos, which he is unable to connect to any life story and therefore to any sense of reality. The time sequence of the narrative is presented in reverse manner, so that the audience is denied the key clues of which the protagonist is also deprived, due to his amnesia. The viewer is thus projected directly into the horror of having lost one's memory. Fragmentation and dislocation lead to doubt about the reality of consciousness and existence.

We get the idea that Leonard's wife was killed at the very start. Leonard was hit on the head in the act, and is left without short-term memory. He carries a picture of a man he suspects of the murder. The death of this man, and the inference that he killed him, ends the tale. Leonard goes on to write a letter, in the style of previous mementos, perhaps to himself, knowing that he would otherwise forget that he was the one who wrote them.

The movie is replete with symbols of time—alarm clocks ringing, a wrist-watch, notepads, and so on. The movie, however, destroys the sense of time

created by such artifacts by showing the plot in both forward and reverse time, distinguishing the two sequences by black-and-white and color cinematography. Color sequences show what actually happened; black-and-white ones what Leonard believes happened. The first color scene, in which Leonard shoots and kills the suspected man Teddy is, in actual fact, the last scene of the narrative. In it we see a Polaroid undevelop, a bullet fly back into the barrel of a gun, and Teddy come back to life after the sound of a shot is heard. This is followed immediately by a black-and-white scene of Leonard in a motel room talking to an anonymous person on the phone explaining his circumstances.

To make the movie even more horrifying, Nolan intersplices the parallel story of a man named Sam Jenkins. As an insurance investigator, Leonard came across a medical claim from Jenkins, who eerily had the same memory problem that he has now. Leonard investigated the case and had the insurance company deny giving Jenkins the money he sought, believing that Jenkins was faking his condition. Sam's wife also wasn't sure if her husband was putting on a charade. So, she devises a memory test, based on the fact that she suffered from diabetes and it was Sam's job to administer shots of insulin to her. If she repeatedly had to ask for the shots, she would be able to prove that his condition was real. Sam administered the shots, forgetting however that he had just given her one. Eventually, she slipped into a coma from the overdoses and died, leaving Sam a patient in a mental institution. The Sam Jenkins subplot clearly creates a sense that Leonard may, himself, be a patient in the same mental institution, and that he also killed his wife. Ultimately, the movie raises ancient philosophical questions in a new way: What is truth? Is memory the essence of selfhood?

Movies such as *Memento* and *Amadeus* bring out the power of cinematic art. Cinema is perhaps the most influential visual art form of the contemporary world. Today, movie actors and directors are better known, and certainly more popular, than writers and playwrights. Names such as Fellini, Spielberg, Polanski, Hitchcock, DeMille, Cocteau, to name but a few, are part of modern cultural lore. Cinema actors enjoy more fame and recognition than do scientists and philosophers.

Cinema historians trace the origins of this art form to French magician Georges Méliès. In 1899, in a studio on the outskirts of Paris, Méliès reconstructed a ten-part version of the trial of French army officer Alfred Dreyfus and filmed *Cinderella* (1899/1900) in twenty scenes. He is chiefly remembered, however, for his clever fantasies, such as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), in which he exploited the movie camera's capacities to capture the emotional subtleties of human expression through close-up and angle camera techniques. His short films were an instant hit with the public and were shown internationally. Although considered little more than curiosities today, they are significant precursors of an art form that was in its infancy at the time.

American inventor Edwin S. Porter produced the first major American silent film, *The Great Train Robbery*, in 1903. Only a little more than eight minutes long, it was to become a great influence in the development of motion pictures because of its intercutting of scenes shot at different times and in different places to form a unified narrative, culminating in a suspenseful chase. Most films of the era were short comedies, adventure stories, or filmed performances by leading vaudevillian actors of the day.

Throughout the first century of its existence, cinema was experienced as a communal event, inside a movie theater, complete with intermissions, food fare, and other accoutrements of the traditional theater. On every corner of urban America one was bound to find a movie theater. It was often the center of attraction of the town. However, all that changed in the late 1980s with the advent of VCR technology, which threatened to make the movie-watching experience a more individualistic one and, thus, lead to the elimination of the movie theater. The new technology, combined with the advent of cable television, which featured relatively current films on special channels, seemed in fact to seriously threaten the survival of movie theaters and created a climate similar to that of the early 1950s, when television also began to challenge the popularity of motion pictures. As a result, film companies increasingly favored large spectacles with fantastic special effects in order to lure the public away from home videos and back to the big screen. However, despite the challenge from video, and even new sites and platforms today like Netflix and HBO, the traditional movie theater has remained popular—a testament to the power of cinema as a “social art form.” Although one can now see movies on YouTube or stream them in some way, thus making it possible to enjoy movies individually, the movie theater is still around.

In effect, today, the threat to the traditional movie theater is coming from the same sources that are threatening traditional paper book culture—cyberspace and new electronic devices. It remains to be seen, however, if the social function of movie theaters will be transferred to other locales (whether indeed they will be replaced). As it has turned out, so far, the advent of videos, movie channels, Netflix, and other new devices for receiving movies has actually fostered a much wider audience for movies. All kinds of films, past and present, are now available in different media and formats. With television cable networks and Internet platforms as additional sources of revenue, and functioning in some cases as producers themselves, a substantial increase in feature-film production has ensued.

However, movie theaters have shown themselves to be resilient by becoming more and more part of the overall experience. Indeed, to emphasize their entertainment function, today’s megaplexes feature not only movies

and the usual fast food fare, but also video game sections, restaurants, and other recreational accoutrements. The movie theater has become itself an amusement park.

## The Verbal Arts

As already discussed in Chap. 6, every culture has produced verbal accounts (tales, stories, and so on) to make sense of the world. The most ancient and universal verbal art is poetry—a form of expression that creates an aesthetic effect through the special sounds, rhythms, and imagery produced by its language. These mark the difference between poetry and other kinds of verbal art.

Views on the nature and function of poetry in human societies have been varied. Plato asserted that poetry was divinely inspired, but that it was nonetheless a mere imitation of ideal forms in the world. Aristotle, on the other hand, argued that poetry was the most sublime of the creative arts, representing what is universal in human experience. The philosopher Vico saw poetry as the primordial form of language. He characterized the first speakers as poets. The texts found by archeologists at ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, Hittite, Egyptian, and Hebrew sites suggest that poetry originated alongside music, song, and drama as a communal form of expression to seek favor from, or give praise to, the divinities. This ritualistic aspect of poetry is still functional in many societies. In the Navajo culture, for instance, poetic forms are used as incantations for rain. We use poetic form on greeting cards and on special kinds of invitations; we use poetry to impart knowledge of language to children (just think of the widespread use of nursery rhymes and children's poetry books in our society).

Alongside poetry, the world's cultures have also developed prose forms of verbal art. The novel, for instance, has become a major genre of literature. The word *novella*, from Latin *novellus*, “new,” was first used by the great Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) to refer to the anecdotal tales that he spun in his *Decameron* of 1353. This collection of 100 stories is set within a framework of ten friends telling stories to one another. To escape an outbreak of the plague, the friends have taken refuge in a country villa outside Florence, where they entertain one another over a period of ten days with a series of stories told by each one in turn. As mentioned, Boccaccio called the stories, more specifically, *novella*, “new things.” The novel is an outgrowth of the novella.

Many of the tales that are part of our own literary traditions originated in Egypt. Narrations also enjoyed considerable popularity among the Greeks. The chief examples of “proto-novels” written in Latin are the *Golden Ass*

(second century CE) by Lucius Apuleius and the *Satyricon* (first century CE), which is generally considered the work of Petronius Arbiter. It must not be overlooked that in Japan, the Baroness Murasaki Shikibu (c. 978–1031) wrote what many literary scholars now regard as the first real novel, *The Tale of Genji*, in the eleventh century (translated 1935).

The long narrative verse tale, the equally voluminous prose romance, and the Old French *fabliau* flourished in Europe during the Middle Ages, contributing directly to the later development of the novel. Advances in realism were made in Spain during the sixteenth century with the so-called picaresque or rogue story, in which the protagonist is a merry vagabond who goes through a series of realistic and exciting adventures. Between 1605 and 1612, the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616) wrote what is considered the first great novel of pre-modernity, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. As the novel genre became increasingly popular during the eighteenth century, writers used it to examine society and the human condition with psychological depth and breadth. They wrote revealingly about people living within, or escaping from, the pressures of society, and criticizing society for failing to satisfy human aspirations.

From the nineteenth century onwards, novels have become widely read texts, ranging from trashy bestsellers to works of great import and substance. In the latter category, one thinks, for example, of the novels and short stories of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, Hesse, Mann, Woolf, the Brontë sisters, Poe, Hemingway, Camus, Sartre, Kafka, Twain, and Joyce. Such writers used the novel and novella genre as a narrative framework for probing the human psyche.

To conclude the discussion of art, it is remarkable indeed that even in seemingly commonplace situations, such as a courtship displays, human beings are constantly attempting to transcend their biological state to reach for something elusive, beyond the physical. Cheryl's pride in her artistic abilities reminds us that there is more to life than flesh and blood. For humans, art is indeed indistinguishable from life. Art is a guarantee that our weary search for meaning is itself meaningful. Life would be inconceivable without art.

## Note

1. Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of art* (New York: Scribner's, 1957).

## Bibliography

Langer, Susanne K. 1957. *Problems of art*. New York: Scribner's.