

Research Note

Meaning, Truth, Art and Education

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Truth and Meaning

The guiding purpose of art is “meaning.” The aim of knowledge is “truth.” Truth and meaning are two different things. Human beings seek both. They aspire to live in a world that is meaningful and a world whose artefacts and ways of behaving incorporate the fruit of true knowledge. We seek truth because we want or need to know “what is the case?”—did X happen or was it Y? Often, we are mistaken, deceived, or confused about what happened. Sometimes finding out “what is the case” is a revelation; on occasions it is “the truth,” a shocking revelation. But mostly what we find out is simply information that we use for effective every day and professional functioning. Knowing “what is the case” sometimes prompts us to find an explanation (a cause or motive) for the occurrence. Generally, such explanations take the form “if B happened, then X occurred.”

Not only are we often mistaken or deceived or confused about what happened. It is even more difficult to explain what caused X to happen or whether it was really Y after all. Claims of true knowledge are frequently wrong. Persons sometimes lie about events. Sometimes we lie to ourselves about events. Periodically we are obliged to revise our stock of true knowledge and when we do that, we often find out eventually that even our revisions are untrue. Truth is a tough standard. It is covered with a thick layer of opacity. We peel that layer back only to find that what we thought was there, isn't. Our knowledge more often than not is frustratingly untrue. Yet the idea of truth remains appealing even when it turns out to be unfruitful.

We investigate the world around us to understand how it works. Good natural science produces true knowledge that to some degree approximates how nature works. Likewise, social science tells us something about the way society works. Often, we are mistaken so our knowledge is frequently false. Nevertheless, we do our best to improve that knowledge. But improvements are difficult. In part this is because we like to codify truth. We defend the pursuit of truth by treating truth (subjectively) as a matter of self-certainty (the feeling of "being right") and (objectively) as something that can be codified like a tablet of laws. We hold onto what we codify as true knowledge because this is reassuring. It provides us with a sense of certainty. It quells our anxieties—our fears of the unknown. Knowledge and the accompanying feeling of certainty pacifies anxiety. But

this pacifying effect is just as often the result of false knowledge as it is of true knowledge.

Knowing is a precarious enterprise. Some two million articles are published every year in an estimated 30,000 science journals. Despite those large numbers the actual annual advance of science is miniscule. When knowledge is created it is a claim to truth. But most truths are trivial and inconsequential. They are not important and they produce no lasting benefit. Most of these truth claims will turn out in the long run to be untrue. They will directly or indirectly be falsified or made irrelevant by the handful of annual papers that make a sustainable truth claim of consequence and that surprise us with insights that provide the building blocks of discovery for years or even decades to come.

Meaning is different from true knowledge. It is about how things fit together. If we hear a sentence or read a paragraph that “makes no sense” we find ourselves thrust onto the terrain of meaning. The human mind is primed to recognize things that are meaningful—that fit together in a manner that is structured and ordered but also interesting and attractive. The mind intuitively recognizes and utilizes a large—but far from infinite—array of ways of putting things together that generate meaning. Things that are meaningful are composed or structured in a way that is satisfying. In contrast to truth, which is often disputed and combative, meaning generates feelings of relaxation, absorption, and self-contentment.

The most intense and successful way that human beings have of generating meaning is through art. Art though is by no means the only way of generating meaning. In everyday interactions we are called upon to “make sense.” This even applies to true knowledge. Knowledge has to make sense. That is, it must pass a minimal threshold of meaning in order to be successfully communicated. Often that threshold is quite low. Academic and professional papers are often badly written, obscurantist, and near unintelligible. They may be able to sustain a truth claim but they struggle to sustain the lucid sense that we imply when we say that something “makes sense.” It is not so much that these papers are nonsensical—though occasionally they are—but rather the reader of them who is in pursuit of some kind of true knowledge has to struggle through awkward prose and ugly locutions to get to the end. Many readers never make it to the end.

Of all kinds of human behavior, art is the one that is most reliant on the generation of meaning in order to realize its ends. The end of art is the intimation and communication of meaning through composition. Let’s take an example: the humble color wheel. Whether it is the traditional red-yellow-blue (RYB) or the more contemporary red-green-blue (RGB) color wheel, its function is to systemize what artists do intuitively, that is, combine colors that are complementary. Complementary colors combine in a way that the mind thinks of as harmonic. Harmony is one of the many ways that the mind fits things together in meaningful—that is inherently satisfying and interesting—patterns. The warmth of yellow

harmonizes with the cool of blue. The recession of blue finds a complement in the emphasis of red.

Art draws on the patterned ways that the mind fits things together in a satisfying or pleasing manner: light and shade, mass and void, foreground and background, accented and unaccented beat, etc. All of these do basically the same thing. They combine opposites. Human beings create meaning through the combination of opposites. These include even opposite truths—antinomies. As Charles Dickens observed in his serial novel *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), politics is populated with opposition parties who oppose each other on any imaginable question no matter how trivial. This is a politics of truth. The electors of the town of Eastanswill listen to them fight about the skylight in the marketplace or an additional pump in the High Street. Each party denounces the horrendous error of the other party. But Dickens's comic art (like successful comic art in general) is not about political truth. Comedy when done well is the art of marrying opposites. Dickens's comic matrimony is twofold. There is union in exaggeration. Each party shares with the other exaggerated truth claims. There is also union in color. The cool primary-colored Blues and the warm brownish-yellow quaternary-colored Buffs neatly complement each other even though the parties are polar rivals.

Art is not knowledge. Successful art eschews the pursuit of truth. It avoids the pitfalls of boisterous or ideological truth claims and combative postures about society or nature. It is not preoccupied with truth but rather with meaning.

Dickens squeezes comic meaning out of the truth claims of political parties by means that are wry, amused, ironic, and that manage by suggestion to fit polarities of truth together by the comic means of exaggeration and the aesthetic means of color complementarity. What is required for this that is not required for true knowledge is the faculty of the imagination. Truth can be quite unimaginative. Art cannot afford to be unimaginative. The Australian artist Roy de Maistre (1894–1968) epitomized the act of imagination when he proposed that artists could paint music.¹ After the First World War he created a series of compositions whose color hues were a similitude of musical tones. The concept of painting music, using one medium to recreate another medium, is an adventurous example of what art does: it creates meaning by imagining one entity in the entirely different terms of another entity. This is what makes art fundamentally different from knowledge. This is why art is not knowledge.

We can expend thousands of pages of testimony in a court of law establishing “the truth of the matter” and the facts of a case. Did action X occur? In what degree did it occur? Is there evidence (facts) to support the contentions of the defense or the prosecution? Yet the classic artistic representation of legal justice is a blindfolded woman

¹ Zoe Alderton, “Colour, Shape, and Music: The Presence of Thought Forms in Abstract Art,” *Literature & Aesthetics* 21, no. 1 (June 2011): 236–58, <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/LA/article/view/5058/5763>; Heather Johnson, *Roy de Maistre: The Australian Years 1894-1930* (Roseville, NSW: Craftsman House, 1988).

holding a sword in one hand and measuring scales in the other hand. Artistic technique can be highly detailed and finicky. It can rely on a great degree of precision and the ability to get things “just right.” Yet without a feel for the ambidextral sword-scales-blindfold equations, technique by itself is lacking. It can impress with its virtuosity. Yet without a quantum dimension it will be unable to produce a sustainable meaning that will draw spectators repeatedly to it.

This does not mean that the generation of knowledge occurs without the aid of the faculty of the imagination only that often this is not the case. Knowledge is principally concerned with information and explanation. It is rarer that knowledge is significantly shaped by the analogies and metaphors or the patterns of contrast and similitude of the imagination. When it is, knowledge tends to reach a peak. Great works in the natural and social sciences, and the humanities have an imaginative dimension. They interpolate the kinds of antinomies, analogies, metaphors, topologies, fractals, symmetries, parallels, proportions and ratios that allow ingenious minds to discover interesting things because of the imagination’s unusual ability to allow us to see, hear, and feel one thing in terms of something completely different or opposed. Mostly though, the pursuit of true knowledge is more prosaic than this. This is because the way true knowledge is acquired is predominately “analytic” in approach or style. It concentrates on specifics, on details, on fragments of reality. It is a focused kind of cognition. It is

interested in the parts of what it observes or experiences rather than the whole.

Because truth or true knowledge is focused on details and specifics, it readily lends itself to codification. In principle knowledge may be descriptive, evidentiary, or explanatory in nature. But in practice the descriptive tends gradually to become prescriptive. Factual evidence slowly mutates into rhetorical insistence; reason turns into social or moral pressure, and knowledge is transformed into an orthodoxy that is reducible to rules, expectations, standards, and norms. Truth may start descriptively but it tends to end normatively. Almost invisibly and barely consciously, it segues from “is” to “ought.” The result of this is sedimented in disciplines, methodologies, techniques, schools, movements, currents, handbooks, and textbooks. This knowledge is empirical and yet it communicates through cognitive drills, regulations, training, castigations, and chastening. True knowledge may often begin as a form of dissent or a kind of heterodoxy. Yet its aim is to become accepted, then orthodox, and finally normative. Eventually codified, it becomes something that a person is not then supposed to disagree with. One technique for blocking such disputation is for codified knowledge to label itself as “critical.” This forestalls competing—that is, “dissenting”—descriptions and explanations by raising its own flag over the putative space of dissent. The “critical” label also expresses the bad conscience that often accompanies the institutionalization, codification, and consequent calcification of knowledge.

For sure art as an institution organizes itself in schools, movements, and styles. It has disciplines, norms, and expectations. But these can't by themselves produce meaning. For that, the artist needs an imagination that "sees" ("hears" etc.) one thing in another thing, that "sees" three dimensions in two dimensions, one shape as a fractal of another shape, one transformation as a topological continuity, one polarity reflected in a mirror polarity, a still motif that suggests motion, or a pivot chord that modulates between two musical keys. The detailed focus, the rational evidence for and explanation of statements, and the methodological rigor that are involved in the pursuit of truth have great value and application in many departments of life. Truth focuses on specifics. The characteristic metaphors of truth are precision and rigor. The truth-seeker asks did event X happen and what explains the event? The value of truth guides procedural and methodological, step-by-step epistemologies. It unveils the various sequences of human behavior and natural occurrences. It specifies the what, how, and why of events.

Art may have an important ancillary or corresponding truth dimension. Take the case of architecture. Architecture sits halfway between engineering precision and artistic ambidexterity. It must adhere to demanding structural building methods with highly detailed building specifications while creating works like Frank Gehry's *Dancing House* (1996) in Prague that appeal to the ambidextrous imagination. Works of art admit of delightful ironies, seductive paradoxes,

appealing incongruities, fascinating conundrums, beguiling mysteries, compelling antinomies, gorgeous forms, and attractive patterns. Without these, art is reduced or reduces itself to an institution of truth.

Art and Education

Truth ruins art education when it asphyxiates the imagination. It does this because the nature of truth is different from the nature of meaning. Society at large needs both of them. But the society in miniature of the art school needs truth only in relatively small doses. In over-sized doses the injection of truth is toxic for the imagination. This is why it is puzzling that so many contemporary art schools have been captivated by the regime of truth in the form of the “research practice” PhD. This relatively recent form of the doctorate allows students to create artworks and exhibit them while combining this with written work such as the short thesis.

The short thesis is a piece of writing. Historically writing has had a close relationship with the communication and contestation of truth. Writing makes it easier to test whether something is correct or incorrect and easier to assess the rigor of an argument and the accuracy of facts. However, writing is secondary as a medium of art. Artists are more likely to work in the media of tones and shapes than words unless they are novelists. Universities have laboratories and researchers conduct surveys and collect statistical data of all kinds. But these ultimately serve the purpose of the

production of papers, articles, and books. That is a fine purpose, but it is not one to which art is properly dedicated. So why add the written thesis to the practice of graduate art?

In part the answer to this question lies in the convergence between modern institutions and analytic styles of the written word. Analytical writing has acquired an institutional mystique. It lends itself to institutional self-representation and self-justification. The clarity of truth claims, their methodological and procedural validation, the accuracy of their detail, the exactness involved in achieving a true measurement or descriptively precise statement—all of these phenomena parallel the working of institutions. They are all, in a manner of speaking, parables of institutionalization. Accordingly, true knowledge has become an allegory of modern procedural institutions. Those institutions see themselves and what they do as “valid” or “legitimate” or “correct” because of their analytical “methods” of working and organization. What is key is not so much the knowledge that has been created—after all a tsunami of knowledge is created every year and most of it is ignored—but rather the generic methods or procedures for creating it.

This has occurred within a specific historical and social context. The nineteenth century saw the emergence of a new kind of university, the “research university.” There were a small number of these first in Germany and then in the United States. The term “research university” was not widely used until the 1960s. After 1964 the use of the term took

off.² It reached a peak in 2004. This was a historical irony given that the incidence of the term tracks the rise of the mass university. What occurred was that the label of “the research university” was applied indiscriminately to a broad spectrum of universities. Most of these in reality were teaching institutions with only a modest, minor, or an indifferent research profile. The driving force of this was not knowledge but rather status. “Research” is a high-status activity not just in contemporary universities but in institutions more generally and society as a whole. Its status derives from several sources. One is the prestige of writing, one of the most difficult of all human arts to do well. Second is the procedural demands of research and its accompanying rigors. Third is the elevated reputation of knowledge in the post-industrial age. After 1970, the prestige of knowledge, already quite high, rose further as the mythology of the knowledge society gained ground.

In this post-industrial social context, two phenomena collided. First, tertiary-level arts teaching institutions that were traditionally located outside of universities were amalgamated with universities. Second the “research university” was widely perceived as a high-status institution that drew its status (at least in part) from widely-dispersed images of and myths about the processes and procedures for creating knowledge. As universities expanded they absorbed many stand-alone institutions of higher education, including

² Google N-gram analysis.

art schools. Those art schools in turn assimilated themselves gradually to the norms of universities. Many of those norms are truth norms. Universities have highly articulated regimes of truth with numerous disciplines, procedures, methodologies, and expectations. In the post-1964 period, the word “research” became a symbol and signifier of these. For art schools, one of the consequences of the collision of art teaching with an institution of truth was the pressure to produce PhDs, the elementary signature product of the “research university.” This meant eventually adopting the written thesis, in some form even a minor form, as an obligatory model for the objectivation and assessment of research. As a consequence, the hybrid arts “research practice” PhD has become common in recent decades. Yet, the question remains, to what end?

Art’s purpose is to create meaning not truth. Contemporary graduate art education seems to have lost sight of this. In undergraduate art education it is appropriate that art students be exposed to humanities and social science accounts of the arts, whether these be art history or the study of creative industries. True knowledge of that kind is useful and important. But this curricula has limits. The propensity of all knowledge disciplines is to expand and colonize other domains of human experience. The trouble with this, especially for art, is that, for the most part, the average work in the humanities or social sciences does not offer much in the way of imagination. And even in the cases of the best of these kinds of works (the ones that manage to

be imaginative as well as knowledgeable), normative truth claims invariably are extrapolated from them and these end up overdetermining the imaginative synthesizing of the original works. Across the spectrum of art, the humanities, and the social sciences, different combinations of analytic cognition and synthetic imagination are appropriate. It is easy enough for one blend of analysis and synthesis to contort another blend.

Both analysis and synthesis (truth and meaning) have their limits. No matter how arresting they might once have been, all creative metaphors and images get tired. First, they surprise and challenge. Then, as they are accepted, they become routinized and imitated. Eventually they become clichés. Something similar applies to truths. All truths eventually become calcified orthodoxies even the most nominally unorthodox truths. They arise out of observation, investigation, and various kinds of testing. They then enter the textbooks, get canonized, and eventually become normative. Analysis can usefully accompany a mind-tickling pattern that bridges antinomies and binds contrasts and similitudes together. Normative truths on the other hand offer reasons for art students to be chastened and regimented. School X, movement Y, and artist Z are presented as how art “ought” to be done. The irony is that normative truths are often cast as the harbingers of some kind of disruptive “emancipation” or “transgression” depending on the rhetorical fashion of the day.

The difficult relationship of art and truth is evident in the case of the medley-style “research-cum-practice” doctorates. These salmagundi-type PhDs allow students to create art works and exhibit them while combining this with written work such as a short thesis. In principle this mixes the production of works of art with “a discursive component that critically reflects on the project and documents the research process.”³ Yet in practice it does this without a bridging nexus or tie that is capable of generating a whole (the doctorate) that is greater than the sum of its parts (the art work and the written thesis).

Art aspires to imagination; knowledge aspires to truth. How often do the twain meet? In the humanities and the social sciences, it is possible to combine truth and meaning, reason and imagination, but it is difficult. These are contrary, differently-abled mind-sets. They can cooperate but it requires considerable cognitive effort to move comfortably or regularly between one and the other. In graduate art “research practice” PhDs, the polarity that suffers most is usually the imagination. This is because, among other things, truth is very demanding. Truth is combative. It readily arrogates. Its reflex is to justify itself and refute its opponents. In addition, truth is analytical. Its predisposition is to sever and divide cognition into ever smaller, more

³ Andrea Braidt, “The ‘Florence Principles’ on the Doctorate in the Arts,” a position paper on the PhD in the Arts presented during the 14th ELIA Biennial Conference, Florence (European League of the Institute of the Arts, 2017), 9.

focused units of information and provide explanations of those units utilizing logic and reason. The nature of meaning is different. It is synthesizing, integrative, combining, amalgamating, and blending. Meaning requires parts to be integrated into a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. It is an exercise in creating unity out of variety and singularities out of diversities—without, in so doing, erasing the variety or the diversity. It is the faculty of the imagination that combines mustard and plum, salmon and powder blue, mint and pink hues in pleasing ways. The art of this is to find the right balance between the colors so that the opposing parts are transformed into complementary wholes. The pleasure that is generated by the resulting work arises from the artful equilibrium between the parts and the ingenuity with which that is achieved. The bricolage-style “research practice” PhD is pulled between the poles of truth and meaning. Mostly truth wins or meaning suffers. This is because by its nature the impulse to truth is very insistent. It is always arguing its case. It is demanding, imperative, unrelenting, and often monotonous.

The “research” component of a hybrid arts PhD is often a textual account of the artist’s methods, materials, biography, thematic journey, or worldview. On the surface of things, the truth claims of the thesis is the artist’s “truth-for-me.” But this nominally existential truth is in reality usually a borrowed one. The graduate artist’s self-reflection typically borrows heavily from the readily accessible institutional stock of socially codified and recently calcified

“truths.” Rarely if ever does the thesis work probe or recapitulate the artist’s act of creation, for that act is hard to describe. Art historians and culture critics often take fifty years or more to come up with satisfactory descriptions—that is, true knowledge—of a famous artist with a lifetime of completed works. There is little chance of a beginning artist ever providing a useful systematic account of their own artwork, which is barely at a conscious stage. While there are exceptions, few mature artists’ autobiographical accounts of their own work are very illuminating. But why should they be? That’s not their job. Their business is meaning not truth.

The aims of a university doctorate in the arts—namely, furthering “artistic competence” and generating “new knowledge”—are directly in conflict with each other.⁴ One defeats the purpose of the other one. The third aim of such doctorates, namely advancing “artistic research,” is a contradiction in terms. Many interesting things in life emerge from antinomies that the imagination bridges. Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* recognized the importance of such antinomies in the generation of the most important kinds of knowledge.⁵ Similarly the imaginative bridging of antinomies is central to artistic creation. What university doctorates in the arts expect is that the antinomy of knowledge and art can be bridged. That this is assumed naively without any reflection on how difficult such an

⁴ Braidt, “The ‘Florence Principles’ on the Doctorate in the Arts,” 9.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965).

ambition is indicates that the idea is not serious. In reality it is an institutional presupposition. It suits universities to colonize all tertiary teaching. It suits art schools to have the status of a university. It suits art firms and art institutions that universities sort potential employees for them by granting them degrees.

Research, even the minimal self-research kind, is an unnecessary and pointless burden on the demanding effort of imaginative artistic creation. Yet contemporary universities expect this. So do arts industries. So why then subject graduate school artists to regimes of truth? Universities today function to sort people into jobs. The key sorting mechanism is the qualification. Art institutions in turn expect those they employ to have an arts credential. Post-industrial societies love credentials. Credentials are the modern equivalent of the gentrified title. That is, they convey status. Certified knowledge is a symbol of status. Codified textbook truths, the kind of true knowledge that typically populates university curricula, provide the basis for certified knowledge. Status is different from function. The function of art is to foster creative acts of imagination. But that is not very useful for post-industrial societies in which qualifications not imaginations convey status. So the imagination has to be sacrificed in creative arts education in order that status-enhancing qualifications rather than meaning-generating imaginations rule the roost. If that means desultory mini theses offering the thinnest veneer of true knowledge, that is a cost that universities seem more than willing to pay.

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