

Do artistic masterpieces really exist?

I was recently looking around Europe's largest bookshop: Waterstones in Piccadilly, London. It's a spacious, six-story old art-deco building, housing nearly a quarter-of a million books. Looking around a large real-life bookshop is an increasingly rare pleasure; so many have them have closed-down. It gave me a strange feeling though. As I walked around the fiction department I felt somewhat lost. I have become accustomed to searching through books on Amazon, where one is constantly guided by recommendations of similar books. Here, in a large bookshop, all I can see are endless spines of books. It tells me almost nothing. Why are they even on display? You have to physically reach in and slide one out to even see the cover. On Amazon you see the cover instantly, the reviews, similar titles that buyers of this book have also bought etc. You get a great deal more context. The only thing you can do with this display of thousands of book spines is search alphabetically or see if a particular book title piques your interest. It's a painfully low-bandwidth search display, taking up an extremely expensive area of real estate in one of London's most expensive districts. Although I've spent many hours in the past in libraries and bookshops, not having been in them for some time recently this suddenly struck me as strange.

We usually need some context before we're willing to invest the time and effort into experiencing something creative or artistic. The effort of watching a TV show is low. If we own a TV it doesn't cost anything, it doesn't require much energy, and most TV shows are less than an hour. The barriers to entry for getting a show on TV are reasonably high too, so we assume it's 'good' (or at least other people think it is). Similarly, with new music. We'll spend a minute or two listening to a new

track, the risk is low if we don't like it. Movies require a bit more effort. There's double the time investment of a typical TV show, and if you're seeing the movie at a cinema it costs money and we have to make the effort to get up and go out. The barriers to entry for getting a film exhibited in a cinema are, however, even higher, so we're probably more likely to assume a film at the cinema, picked at random, will be perhaps better than an average TV picked at random. Nevertheless, most of us will struggle through more hours of TV that we end up not enjoying than hours of great films in a cinema.

However, a novel requires more effort, maybe \$10 and 8 to 10 hours of our time. There's also more mental effort to experiencing it. Reading is a more active activity than watching TV or listening to pop music. You have to visualise the characters and events, you have to remember the names of the characters and their earlier descriptions. We need even more context to reassure us that reading a particular novel will be enjoyable. Hence most of us tend to stick to reading novels from authors we've previously enjoyed, recommendations from friends, or the latest 'hit' novel that we hear everyone else has enjoyed. So people watch more TV than they go to the cinema, and read novels. Even if, in theory, there are more 'high quality' films and novels out there, it requires context and recommendation to find them and overcome the risk to spend time and effort consuming them.

Paintings and poetry needn't require as much time and effort to access. Yes, in the past you have to visit a gallery to see paintings, but in theory people could browse paintings online. Yet this isn't a popular activity. Paintings and poetry are even less popular art forms than TV, movies and novels. Their meanings are usually less accessible. Unless you are experienced at decoding and experiencing them you are left struggling to know what you are supposed to think or feel. They lack the reassurance of context.

Most painters who are now considered geniuses who painted masterpieces were unrecognised as such during their own lives. It's only later that the public picks up on them. It's often some 'hook' that drives the spotlight of attention on to them. A story, perhaps, such as how Van Gogh was mad and cut off his own ear. Some extreme personality trait like this makes an artist more memorable and hence they loom larger in the public's imagination. Van Gogh sold only one painting during his lifetime, but now he's considered a genius and his paintings are sold for millions of dollars. Our brains seek context in evaluating geniuses and masterpieces. Our memories are limited. We only have so many available 'slots' in our memory for the top geniuses in any particular category. If there is something very memorable about a person – be it an extreme story, or they are very easy to visualise – they earn a place in the public's memory more easily. For example, if asked to name a genius scientist, the average person will come up with names like Newton (the story of an apple falling on his head), Einstein or Stephen Hawking (both having unique, easily visualised appearances).

The concept of masterpieces is, by definition, an exclusive one. There can't be that many masterpieces, they are rare. And the context of who created them is clearly very important. The public doesn't remember the many genius scientists who made important breakthroughs yet lacked a distinctive life-story or personal appearance to make them memorable.

Our brains are also biased towards seeing a person's personality or inherent characteristics (such as intelligence, or creativity) as the source behind their actions. In psychology there is an effect called the 'fundamental attribution error', this is the tendency for us to assume that the reasons for other people's actions come from factors within them – such as their personality – rather than outside forces. If you trip over whilst walking down the street you blame it on an uneven surface, if you see someone else trip

you think they are a clumsy person. Hence we assume that creators of prominent works of art are greater geniuses than the other, unknown artists. We think less about external explanations. Yet the genius may have only gained prominence over others because they were lucky: were born at the right time when the situation was ripe for making progress in their field, they had a wealthy or influential supporter, or they just made a random, lucky break-through.

Judging something as a masterpiece implies that we've surveyed all the other art out there and rated it as way above average. Yet we clearly can't do that. Take novels, for example, all the novels that have ever been published are like an unexplored ocean. We've only sampled a few drops from the surface of that ocean. And only from very narrow sailing routes across that ocean, that have been plotted by the context of recommendations. Even then, underneath the surface are the invisible volumes of out of print novels, and then the novels that were never published. We'll never experience these, amongst them may have been 'masterpieces', if only we knew them.

So maybe masterpieces don't really exist in the way we think they do. Our perceptions are so biased by context. Yes there is a certain level of 'gatekeepers' – the book publishers, film and TV studio executives and critics who are experienced enough to judge quality in their field, and push the best stuff in front of us. Yet we know they are also influenced by context. For example, book publishers and movie studios will ask themselves whether a particular author or actor is marketable. And the opinions of critics are often at odds with those of the audience.

So can we even say whether artistic masterpieces even exist in any objective way outside of our biased impressions of their context? In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet says "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so". Is artistic quality just in our heads? If so, is it all just personal

taste?

In a sense it's one of those big philosophical questions, such as whether we can find an objective set of rules for what's right and wrong morally. People in the past solved this problem to some extent by forming religious codes that appealed to the ultimate authority God. If you can say that a behaviour is good or bad according to the architect of the Universe, it feels more objective than if it's just an opinion of the majority of people. This is probably why the ancients were so keen on the idea that the Universe has an inherent visual harmony to it. That there is a mathematical and geometric order, that results in nature looking beautiful to us. Yet many modern thinkers would just say that we find the things we see in nature – forests and rivers and the star constellations – beautiful because we evolved that way. If we had evolved on a different planet, with a radically different environment, we'd find different things beautiful.

The problem gets worse. Even if we could crack the conundrum of what makes things universally beautiful, that doesn't solve the issue of judging an artistic masterpiece. Not all art is visual, and not all art is aiming to be beautiful.

I think the best we can do is say that a masterpiece can't be objectively measured on any one scale. Context is clearly very important to our judgements. We can probably get to some objective measure by breaking a work down into specific measures like:

Is it technically good? i.e. if it's a figural painting, has the painter demonstrated good skills in capturing the way something looks? Does a writer have a good grasp of their language and can they create prose that describe things clearly and have a good rhythm to them?

Does it move us emotionally?

Is it original?

Is it ground-breaking? And did it influence subsequent artists or creators?

All of these things can contribute to making something creatively great, but they aren't necessarily sufficient.

Maybe the whole question is futile? Maybe creative works are meant to be appreciated by the non-conscious and irrational parts of our minds. They don't have to make sense. They aren't fully amenable to the logical process of judging and measurement. They are a phenomenon like love. There is a certain distance we can go with explaining why we love who we do, but ultimately we can't fully, objectively measure and quantify it.

(Some of the thoughts that led to this post were provoked by this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWZBbrXnRQw>)