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Ellen Winner[1]

Emotions in the art museum

Abstract
In the paper, the author discusses what we know about emotional reactions to the visual arts, and considers why people report less powerful emotions to visual art than to music.

Keywords
Art, Music, Emotions

1.

What makes us call something art? Do we experience "real" emotions from the arts? Do aesthetic judgments have any objective truth value? Can we judge skill in abstract art? To what extent do our beliefs about the artist's mind and process shape our evaluations of works of art? What is wrong with a perfect fake? These are questions that philosophers have grappled with for centuries. Now psychologists have begun to explore these questions using the empirical methods of social science – interviews, observation, experimentation, data collection, and statistical analysis. In my book *How art works*, I examine some of the fascinating findings that have emerged from psychological studies of these questions.

In this excerpt I discuss what we know about emotional reactions to the visual arts, and consider why people report less powerful emotions to visual art than to music.

Stendhal (the pen name of Marie-Henri Beyle) was so affected by certain works of art that he has an illness named in his honour: the Stendhal syndrome. While in a chapel in Florence filled with beautiful frescoes – the chapel where Machiavelli, Michelangelo, and Galileo

[1] ellen.winner@bc.edu.

were buried – 34-year old Stendhal had a powerful emotional experience accompanied by strange physical symptoms. In his words:

> I was in a sort of ecstasy, from the idea of being in Florence, close to the great men whose tombs I had seen. Absorbed in the contemplation of sublime beauty […]. I reached the point where one encounters celestial sensations […]. Everything spoke so vividly to my soul. Ah, if I could only forget. I had palpitations of the heart, what in Berlin they call "nerves." Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling. (Stendhal 1959)

A psychiatrist in Florence, Graziella Magherini, noticed many similar cases of excessively intense and physiological reactions when viewing great works of art – rapid heartbeat, dizziness, confusion, fainting, and a feeling of disorientation (Magherini 2003). She suggested that this syndrome happens most often in Florence because this city has the greatest density of Renaissance art in the world, and because Renaissance art has a particularly powerful appeal. She insisted to an interviewer that far from being a pathological state, the Stendhal syndrome can be experienced by anyone who looks at works of art with an open mind and a desire to experience strong feelings (Barnas 2008). Could this reaction be due to the subject matter of the art – the religious figures in the frescoes that Stendhal was overcome by? Could it be due to place – knowing that Florence was the home of the greatest painters and scholars of all time? Stendhal wrote that, upon realizing he was in the presence of the tombs of Michelangelo, Machiavelli, and Galileo, "the tide of emotion which overwhelmed me flowed so deep that it scarce was to be distinguished from religious awe". There is apparently also a Jerusalem syndrome (just Google it) whereby travellers to Jerusalem become overwhelmed by being in such a religious site. So maybe this response is due to more than the artworks. Stendhal's experience may be overdetermined, or restricted to certain sites at certain times.

2.

Clearly, some people do have strong emotional responses to visual art. But how common is this kind of experience? One study presented people with nine emotions (taken from the Geneva Emotional Music Scale) and asked people to rate how often they experienced each emotion in response to painting and music (Miu *et al.* 2016).

While the findings looked fairly similar for both art forms, participants reported more often feeling wonder from paintings, and more often nostalgia, peacefulness, power, joyful activation, and sadness from music.

Recently, in my seminar on the psychology of art, I conducted an informal study in which I asked my 15 students to each ask three people to list the three strongest emotional responses they had experienced from music without lyrics and from abstract art. The students all knew that abstract art meant images that were entirely non-representational. I specified abstract art to make sure that any emotional responses were not to the content represented (e.g., responding to a painting of a death scene with sadness), but rather to the formal properties of the work. I also wanted to compare abstract art to something similarly non-representational but not visual – so I asked about music without lyrics. While I received rich responses to the music question (e.g., they reported bliss, peace, sadness, feeling energized), responses to the abstract art question were sparse, and mostly included responses such as "confused" or "annoyed". No one mentioned anything like the Stendhal syndrome!

What people usually mean when they say art affects them emotionally is that they feel strongly "moved". Feeling moved may not strictly be classified as an emotion, but this is certainly a kind of emotional state, one that is akin to feeling awe, admiration, amazement.

The feeling of being moved is not a clearly understood construct. Psychologist Winfried Menninghaus tried to clarify what we mean by this phrase (Menninghaus *et al*. 2015). He and his collaborators asked students to recall an emotionally moving (stirring or touching) event and to describe the event and their feelings. Sadness and joy were the most common emotions reported as experienced in moving situations; feeling moved was always rated as intense.

The most frequently listed causes of being moved were major life events – death, birth, marriage, separation, reunion. While art-related events were listed as one of six kinds of experiences that elicited the feeling of being moved, they were in the very distinct minority. The kinds of art experiences mentioned as moving were film and music, but no one mentioned the visual arts (Kuehnast *et al*. 2014). But when psychologists ask people to report on strong experiences from visual arts, we get a different picture. I have only found one study on this, and it is an unpublished dissertation in Swedish directed by Alf Gabrielsson.

The findings show that people commonly report feelings of amazement, astonishment, and surprise as they become absorbed by a work of visual art (Gabrielsson 2011).

Clearly, then, how the question is asked is key. If we ask people directly what emotions they feel from visual art, people list wonder and astonishment, which sound to me like feeling moved. But if we ask people to list the experiences that have moved them, they are much more likely to mention interpersonal experiences than they are the visual arts. Our social world dominates our emotional life.

3.

When we ask people to rate how strongly they are moved by specific works of visual art as they view them, people are also very willing to report feeling deeply moved. We know this from a collaboration between neuroscientists Edward Vessel and Nava Rubin and literary scholar Gabrielle Starr (Vessel *et al*. 2012). These researchers showed people 109 paintings, Western and Eastern, representational and abstract, from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. Respondents were asked to rate each one for how strongly the work moved them (works they found powerful, pleasing, and profound) on a scale of 1 to 4. Paintings were viewed while the observers lay in a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scanner, which would detect which areas of the brain were most activated, and whether the areas activated by an individual painting were predicted by the rating the person had given that painting.

On average, each painting strongly rated by one person was given a low rating for another. What moves people is thus deeply idiosyncratic. The interesting finding was that the researchers discovered specific brain areas that were most activated when people felt highly moved by the works of art – for the works of art they rated as 4's compared to all the others (rated as 1's, 2's, and 3's). The area activated when viewing the paintings rated as 4's was part of the default mode network, an area of the brain is associated with self-reflection, looking inward, and thinking about oneself (Gusnard, Raichle 2001).

Only those artworks experienced as most moving led to this kind of activation, though remember that what was most moving for one person was not most moving for another. Activation increased linearly as paintings moved from levels 1 to 3, and then there was a steep jump

in activation as paintings moved to level 4. This study expands our understanding of the experience of being moved in response to visual art. What these findings suggest is that works of art that move us most are works that prompt us to reflect about ourselves. Of course, to be certain of this we would need evidence that people are actually reflecting about themselves when their default mode network activates as they view works of art they find highly moving.

Are the visual arts less emotion-arousing than music or film or literature, including being less moving overall for the average person? We really cannot say at this point. From a scientific standpoint, we know far more about emotional responses to music than those to the visual arts. We need to do more of the same kinds of studies with the visual arts that people have carried out with music, asking people to report their strongest feelings while looking at works of art. Either we will find that reported experiences with the visual arts are as strongly emotional as those with music, or we will find them much less so. My intuition is that we will find them less so.

4.

Why might a painting evoke fewer reports of specific emotions like sadness, nostalgia, or joy than music? First, there is solitude. We need to be experiencing the work without being distracted by others having conversations around us. When we visit an art museum, we often come with others and we talk to our friends as we pass from painting to painting. People are unlikely to experience strong emotions in a crowded museum, or when chatting with the viewer next to them (Pelowski *et al*. 2014). We should study people visiting museums at empty, odd hours.

When we listen to music with others present, we do not chat; we listen. But as mentioned when we look at art with others, we are tempted to converse (Liljeström *et al*. 2013). People report stronger emotional responses to music when listening with a close friend than when listening alone. Thus, being with others may strengthen emotional responses to music, but weaken such responses to visual art.

Second, we need to feel enveloped by the work – surrounded so that we cannot easily escape it. Music surrounds us more than visual art does. Music feels more "inside our head" than a painting does (Thompson 2009). After all, the visual object that is causing a visual

percept is external to us; sound has no external analogue to see or touch. And we can always look away from a painting, or see something else in our peripheral vision, but we cannot turn our ears off to music. Perhaps the importance of feeling enveloped explains why, in comparison to viewing paintings, we may feel more powerful emotions when entering into certain kinds of architectural spaces – cathedrals or rooms constructed by the artist James Turrell. In one such Turrell construction, *Space that sees,* one sits and looks up at a rectangular opening in the ceiling, through which one sees the intense blue sky and the passing clouds. It is at first hard to tell whether the square is a painting of the sky or the real sky. The illusion is strange and powerful.

Third, we need to spend time with the work, not just the average 27.2 seconds that viewers spend with paintings at a museum (Smith *et al*. 2017*)*.

And finally there is the dimension of movement. Music makes us feel like moving – we move in synchrony to the beat – swaying, dancing, marching, moving our heads, tapping our feet (Janata *et al*. 2012*)*. Moving in these ways (called "entrainment" to music) may intensify the emotions we feel. My intuition is that we do not feel like moving when looking at art – certainly we do not see people swaying and clapping as they look at paintings!

While it is intriguing to compare the kinds of emotional responses to different forms of art, this comparison should not be taken as an evaluative comparison. There is no reason to assume that all forms of art will have the same effects on us. The greatness of a form of art is not measured only by the emotions it arouses in us. They also make us see and make us think and introspect.

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