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The End of Art?

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On the basis of data and Hegelian analysis, Martindale (2009) predicts (for poetry) and declares (for classical music, painting, and sculpture) the end of art. But (a) against his conclusion there is an underlying assumption – that of a steady-state culture – that weakens his analysis; (b) against his analysis of the incommensurability of communication and novelty, there appears to be no decline in the production of fiction; (c) and against his declaration of ends, there has been a burgeoning of artists in the 20th and 21st centuries. But on the other hand, in favor of his conclusion is (d) the overlooked distinction between high and popular culture that makes his claim nearly vacuous and, consistent with the sum of what many others have claimed, (e) everything else has already ended anyway.

Martindale (2009) suggests that all of art is coming, or has already come, to an end. Following Hegel's lead, he suggests that all new art must communicate while being recognizably new. These two criteria – communication and novelty – cannot provoke any Hegelian synthesis because eventually one of these criteria must be consistently violated. As arts evolve, the likelihood of communicative value in a particular new artwork decreases significantly if it is not sufficiently new, and newness is increasingly hard to obtain. Moreover, because art has continually sought out new venues, these venues will be at increasing distance from some norm. Thus, a particular new and novel artwork runs the risk of no longer communicating.

One might be skeptical of such a bold view but Martindale also summarizes much data – most of it his own – in support of part of his claim. He finds increases in unpredictability and/or novelty in French, British, and American poetry; English, French, and German music; Italian, French, English, and American painting; Japanese graphic works; and diverse sculpture – all over many centuries.

All of these data are entirely believable, and they are wonderful to have. And importantly, they support Martindale's (1975, 1990) view of the evolution of the arts. But do they also support their demise? Martindale has only predicted (for poetry) or claimed (for classical music, painting, and sculpture) such ends. How to assess?

If the arts have ended, such a conclusion depends entirely on what is meant by the two critical terms – the end and the arts. In response I offer five gambits: The first three suggest that the end of art seems not to be near; on the other hand, the fourth suggests that the end of older art is tautologically defined; and the last finds that everything has already ended anyway, with Martindale's conclusion adding nothing new.

1. Underlying Cultural Stasis?

Martindale (1975, 1990) has argued for the evolution of the arts. His argument is biological, stemming from Darwin. Thus, one should be able to apply his Hegelian criteria of communication and novelty back to biology. (a) All new species “communicate” with the earth. That is, they use up, recycle, and create resources that are part of a larger, general pool. (b) All new species, by definition, are novel. Thus, by the same logic in application of these criteria, evolution must eventually come to an end, and may be doing so now. But I would claim that evolution shows no tendency in that direction, nor is there any internal mechanism by which this might happen.¹

With no evidence for an end of evolution, should we suspect one for art? Perhaps not. The social world, like the biological one, is a dynamic plenum. Across time, the communication done by a given artwork changes. Its target is moving, not static. By analogy, since species live in niches and both evolve together, why shouldn't the arts live in niches and evolve together as well.²

Martindale discusses measures of evolution in each of the arts, but these are generally singular (or related) for each art. As a given measure approaches asymptote (the end of evolution for that measure), other measures might be near zero and only beginning to increase. Thus, Martindale's premise of the asymptotic evolution of art measures does not entail art's demise; it only presages the end of the value for that particular measure of evolution.

2. A Decline in Novels?

I was charmed by Martindale's use of the H. Rider Haggard quote. Haggard (1856-1925) was English and the author of *King Solomon's mines* and the Alan Quatermain series, among his almost 80 novels. Martindale warns us, through Haggard, that the availability of the plot lines, and all of the episodic events in a plot line, are ever diminishing. Alas, “romance writers” of the post-1926 future were doomed to plagiarism or worse.

But the Haggard passage, published posthumously, reads like the complaint of a tired old man. Consider: Machlup (1973) suggested that there were about 15,000 books published in the US in 1930. Milliot (2004) reported that 175,000 books were published in the US in 2003, about 17,000 of which were adult general fiction (another 10,000 were for children). If the ratio of adult general fiction books to all books were roughly the same in 1930 as in 2003, we would expect about 1,500 novels to have been published in 1930 in the US. Surely, the order of magnitude growth of fiction (~1,500 to ~17,000) in the US (with a likely parallel in England) between 1930 and 2003 does not bespeak a dearth of good story lines, the lack of communication, or desperation after novelty. Despite Haggard, books of fiction – even romances – show no sign of ending.

3. Population Growth

Underlying the upsurge in novels is demography, and the long-term trend of population growth. It is often said that half of the people who have ever lived are alive today (e.g.

UNESCO, 1998). Thus, one might think that half of all professionals and artists of all kinds are alive today. But no. Because of the growth of specialization, of wealth, of leisure time, and because of the near universality of education in the West, this is a striking underestimate. It is suggested that of all scientists who ever lived, 90% are alive today (Price, 1963), and the same may be true in each of the arts (e.g. Ernst, 1962) – composers, poets, novelists, playwrights, sculptors, architects, and choreographers. If the arts had truly ended, shouldn't at least some of these people have figured it out? On the other hand:

4. High Art and Popular Art

High art is dead art. It's art that gets show[n] in museums, played in symphony halls, buried in dusty tomes. It's worth preserving for the sake of the continuity of our culture, and because a self-selected elite loves it. But it's museum art, it's museum music, it's museum prose... [T]hey have a role to play in our culture, of course, but [they aren't] really very interesting.

Greg Costikyan, 2003

Matthew Arnold (1869) brought us the distinction between high culture and popular culture, and the distinction between high art and popular art is prudent in this context. T. S. Eliot (1949) furthered this idea suggesting that a full view of culture necessarily included both, and that they were interrelated. Blogger Greg Costikyan, above, would seem at least partly to agree. Except for a small foray into the lyrics of popular music, all of what Martindale deals with is high art.

High art serves as a cultural base. And the highest of high art, a canon of art, serves as a “legitimizing backbone of cultural and political identity” (Pollock, 1999, p. 3). It can serve as that backbone because it is unchanging and crystallized (Cutting, 2006). There is no new Gothic art, no new Renaissance art, no new Baroque art, and not even any new Impressionist or Abstract Expressionist art. In other words, these have all ended. It is popular art that continues to evolve and some of that popular art will eventually become the high art of the future. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Mozart, Dickens, Longfellow, Degas, Puccini, and Gershwin all took this route. But even so:

5. The End of Everything

Danto (1997) aside, Martindale's recognition that art has ended seems overdue. By now, everything else has gone away. Not only did the modern era end (Vattimo, 1985), but the post-modern era ended as well (Kaplan, 1988). Progress in science ended (Stent, 1978). Physics, linguistics, economics, psychology, and all of the humanities are now gone (Lindley, 1993; Halpern, 2001; Henderson, 1980; Ward, 2004; Warren, 1983). Religion died long ago (Nietzsche, 1882) and alas, despite my enthusiasm above, evolution ended too (Ward, 1995). Even culture and history have ended (Gans, 1985; Fukuyama, 1989).

In closing, there are parallels between Martindale's stance and that of Francis Fukuyama in his 1989 neoconservative manifesto “The end of history.” Fukuyama's argument was based on a reading of Hegel, and one of the commentators – Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1989, p. 27) – like Martindale (1995) – even found himself “mumbling on about the Second Law of Thermodynamics.” In communicating his ideas to us, Martindale has failed Hegel's criterion of

novelty. But I also note that, ten years later, Fukuyama (1999) recanted his views. He claimed that, although his argument was valid, his premises were wrong. Perhaps in the indeterminate future we can look forward to Martindale's second thoughts.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Of course, one must put aside the despoiling of the environment by humans, since it is a force quite orthogonal to evolution. And one obvious objection to my analogy is that the notion of “communication” is being used differently in the two cases – art and biology. Perhaps. But since Martindale does not tell us what “communication” in the arts might be, or to whom something is being communicated (the culture? the society? the public? other artists? the individual?), that objection has little force.
- ² The analogy between the arts and species is, admittedly, not perfect. There are only a few arts and there are millions of species (most are bugs). The analogy also falls prey to the notion that, since species can go extinct, why not the arts? A better analogy is between the arts and biological kingdoms, and no biological kingdom has gone extinct for a very, very long time.