

Introduction to Kinghorn Quantum

Between March and September 2012, I posted on my blog about Allen Fisher's use of ideas drawn from quantum mechanics. I wanted to see if concepts from physical science could be applied to poetry, not just figuratively but literally. I found that some physicists, most prominently Roger Penrose, had tried to apply quantum mechanics to the workings of the mind, which includes language and thus poetry. After all, the mind is composed of atoms and subatomic particles, so quantum events must occur.

Allen began to comment on the posts and this led to a discussion of uncertainty and decoherence. He referred to Charles Olson's comparison between Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and the uncertainty of John Keats' Negative Capability. Olson's poetry attempted to 'stay in the condition of things', in confusion and doubt, rather than 'reaching after fact and reason'. Fisher uses the quantum term 'decoherence' as an alternative to or a development of Olson's uncertainty. He refers to it as 'confidence in lack': a confidence in the truth of certain information which cannot be empirically verified; a confidence in the lack of possibility of coherence.

In the posts 'Decoherent Capability' and 'Confidence in Lack' I began to see that even the notion of materiality depends on a sense of truthfulness: the search for truth is rejected because being 'in the condition of things' is seen as more truthful. It becomes more truthful to focus on the material qualities of the poetry and deny the possibility of it having any true meaning, yet that suspicion of the poem as a vessel of truths itself depends on a sense of truthfulness.

This helped me get away from a relativism where all these theories and concepts from science and mathematics just become interchangeable analogies for plurality and multiplicity. These are not just theories that scientists make up; they are not interchangeable with just any other theory – those from religion or mythology, for example. Calculations and experiments have been conducted that allow them to say with confidence that this lack of any ultimate, essential truth is ‘true’. Not that they are fixed for all time, but they are the best explanations that can be given using the available data at this time.

It led me to Nicolas Bourriaud’s description of ‘micro-utopias’. A ‘micro-utopian’ perspective is utopian in that it believes in a better way of being in the world, but does not seek to change the totality. It does not seek to create an ideal image of that world, but to enact actual ways of living within the real world.

Micro-utopian seemed an appropriate description for Fisher’s concepts of confidence in lack and decoherence: a condition where, as totality is no longer sought, we can take confidence in a lack of coherence that is necessary to keep the discussion open. This micro-utopian sense of truth seems to offer a way out of the relativism of postmodern uncertainty, while leaving the postmodern critique of truth in place.

Steven Hitchins

Blog Posts from literarypocketblog.wordpress.com

by Steven Hitchins with comments from Allen Fisher

Kinghorn Quantum

We visited our friends Cathy and Simon in Kinghorn, Fife recently and while Hannah and Cathy went to look at Cathy's wedding dress, me and Simon went to the pub to knock out a quantum theory of poetry over a pint of Tennent's. Simon's a professional mathematician and quantum madman so I knew he'd be interested in my attempts to cobble together some sort of connection between poetry and quantum mechanics from popular science books.

It went like this. Allen Fisher wrote in *Necessary Business* on the poetry of Eric Mottram, J.H. Prynne and Cris Cheek: 'They are unstable arrays also, as physicists like Born and Heisenberg made clear, because the reader is not simply an observer but a participator and thus affects what is read.'¹

As far as I understand it, Max Born and Werner Heisenberg worked with Niels Bohr in the 1930s to produce the Copenhagen Interpretation. This offers an explanation for the quantum phenomenon where small entities such as atoms, electrons and photons seem to behave as both particles and waves. This is based on the idea of the 'collapse of the wave function'.

¹ Allen Fisher, *Necessary Business* (London: Spanner, 1985), p. 235

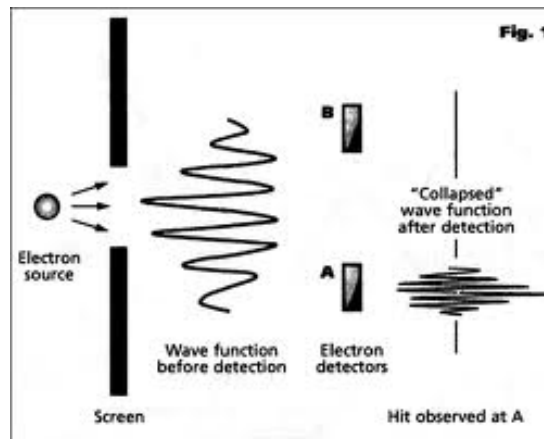


Figure 1: Wave function collapse in quantum mechanics

Source: www.csicop.org

According to Bohr, Born and Heisenberg, it is the act of observing and measuring that causes the wave function to collapse. Until it is observed, an electron or photon does not exist as a particle at any one point, but as a wave of probabilities that the observer might find it here or there. Quantum entities don't have properties such as position or momentum except when these are being measured. These properties are not of the entities themselves but of the whole measuring system.

John Gribbin's *Schrödinger's Kittens* helped me with that and Simon seemed to affirm it.²

Then I tried to relate it to poetry. Fisher seemed to be saying that meaning is not contained in the poem but is given to it by the observer (i.e. the reader). It's like when we talk to each other, each word can have lots of different meanings and we can't be certain that the words will have the same meaning for the other person. In my quantum analogy, then, the poem is a cloud of potentialities which the reader collapses into meaning. This meaning is 'unstable', unpredictable like the behaviour of quantum entities, because it will differ from reader to reader.

² John Gribbin, *Schrödinger's Kittens* (London : Phoenix, 2003)

A single Hydrogen Atom (Electron density model)

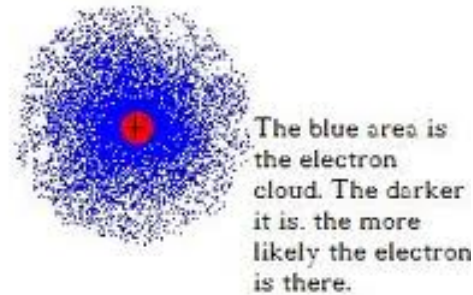


Figure 2: Electron cloud model of a hydrogen atom

Source: zekesfoodblog.blogspot.com

It might have been easier to just have done with it and call what we're talking about 'indeterminacy'. Then we wouldn't have needed to bring in quantum mechanics to make such observations. Indeterminacy is found in all kinds of language use, but in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* Marjorie Perloff says that it has been emphasised in certain kinds of poetry of this particular historical period (e.g. Rimbaud, Cage, Ashbery).³ These writers, like Fisher, Prynne, Mottram and Cheek, use various methods of collage and juxtaposition to leave the connections and associations between words suspended, so that the meaning of the text is constantly uncertain. It might be that the scientific discoveries of this historical period have led to changes in our awareness of indeterminacy and uncertainty and offered a different way of approaching language. In this sense, quantum mechanics might be seen as a useful model for poetry.

But I wanted to go further. Could there be an actual connection between poetry and quantum processes?

³ Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (Evanston, IL: North Western University Press, 1981), p. 4

A poem is made out of language, which is a function of the brain, and the brain is made out of neurons, synapses and axons, and these must be made out of atoms, electrons, quantum entities. So the words might pass from neuron to neuron by processes that could actually involve quantum activity.

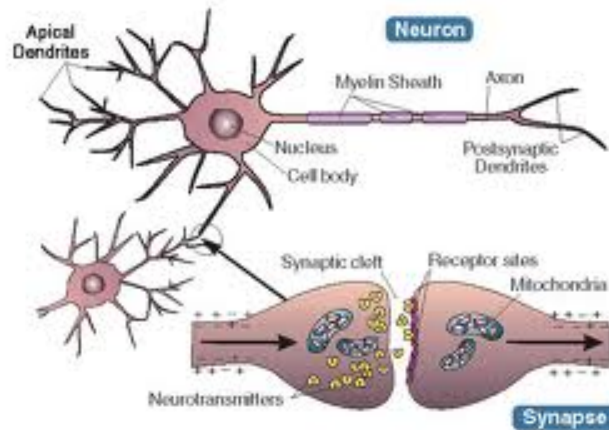


Figure 3: Neuron and synapse

Source: rapgenius.com

Simon recommended Roger Penrose and lent me his *Shadows of the Mind* for the flight home.

Penrose seemed to confirm my suspicions:

The chemical forces that control the interactions of atoms and molecules are indeed quantum mechanical in origin, and it is largely chemical action that governs the behaviour of the *neurotransmitter* substances that transfer signals from one neuron to another – across tiny gaps that are called *synaptic clefts*. Likewise, the action potentials that physically control nerve-signal transmission itself have an admittedly quantum-mechanical origin.⁴

⁴ Roger Penrose, *Shadows of the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 348

However, the stumbling block came shortly after:

Even if synaptic connections are controlled in some way by coherent quantum-mechanical effects, it is difficult to see that there can be anything essentially quantum-mechanical about nerve-signal activity. That is to say, it is hard to see how one could usefully consider a quantum superposition consisting of one neuron *firing* and simultaneously *not firing*.⁵

This had something to do with the wave function collapsing as soon as it is initiated due to the environment of the brain's material. Quantum effects would have to take place at a much smaller level than the neurons and synapses. But neurons and synapses are composed of 'microtubules' and these might well be capable of exploiting quantum effects.

So quantum activity is likely to be taking place at some level in the brain. But what sort of role would these quantum effects play?

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 355

other person already has some direct perception – or “awareness” – of what possible meanings there could be, so very inadequate explanations can suffice to enable that person to “latch on” to the correct one.”⁶

This seemed to defy the laws of my quantum indeterminacy theorem. ‘No, Roger,’ I cry from my easyJet windowseat, ‘it’s really hard to communicate what you mean and for me to “know” what you mean.’

Penrose seemed to want to attribute to quantum processes our ability to understand, while I was trying to connect them to poeries that seem to deliberately suspend understanding.

But perhaps we’re getting at the same point: that quantum processes in the brain are connected to the production of meaning; that meaning is not computable in the way the classical model of the brain might suggest; that it is not as simple as one person ‘means’ something and the other person ‘understands’. A properly quantum theory of poetry would be a new way of thinking about meaning and understanding, what goes on between the writer and the words and the reader.

‘Sometimes I dream in symbols,’ Simon says. ‘And I think I’ve solved it. Then I wake up and realise it was just something like, “November is half of summer”.’

⁶ Penrose, *Shadows of the Mind*, p. 53

Comments

1. allen fisher says:

I haven't seen the Penrose and hope to do tomorrow (Meanwhile I thought of this from John Bell in charge at CERN before he died)

'... observation, even when all possible results are averaged over, is a dynamical interference with the system which may alter the statistics of subsequent measurements.

Now although we would not wish to cast doubt on the practical adequacy of macroscopic morality, it is clear that if we leave it un-analyzed the theory can at best be described as a phenomenological makeshift. The fact already stressed that observation implies a dynamical interference, together with the belief that instruments after all are no more than large assemblies of atoms, and that they interact with the rest of the world largely through the well-known electromagnetic interaction, seems to make this a distinctly uncomfortable level at which to replace analysis by axioms.' [Bell and Nauenberg (1966), 1993: 25]

J.S. Bell and M. Nauenberg (1966) 'The moral aspect of quantum mechanics', J.S. Bell (1993) Speakable and unspeakable in quantum mechanics, Cambridge University Press.

I also thought about the Tucson discussions in Towards a Science of Consciousness (Hameroff, Kaszniak and Scott 1996), which I started to read in '97 and never got through its more than 780 pages.

I'll get back to this again.

I've been thinking of pursuing the problem of difference, perhaps I mean the potential contradiction, between the patterns of connectedness from one image element to another and the language used to describe the same image element and the element itself.

Imperfect Fits

'The Aesthetics of the Imperfect Fit', Glasfryn seminars, 25/2/12

Allen Fisher's all-day seminar on 'The Aesthetic of the Imperfect Fit', as part of the Glasfryn Seminars organised by Lyndon Davies and Graham Hartill in Llangattock, seemed like a good place to follow up the case of an observer-dependent art.

Like his poetry, Fisher's art often makes use of systems or procedures. For each series of works, he seems to devise a process, like a sort of mechanism, which he can set in motion. For example, his series of paintings *Meditation Traps*, which we saw recently in the exhibition at the Apple Store Gallery, Hereford.



Figure 5: Allen Fisher, *Meditation Trap #3 no. 1* (2003)

Source: Allen Fisher

Each work in this series is derived from shaped pieces of paper hung from a loose rope surrounding an Ainu figure in meditation.

What is the need for such bizarre and intricate systems? Are they necessary for the construction of art? Why not just get rid of them and paint whatever you want?

Leaning forwards in his chair, ankles hooked around the chairlegs, as if restraining himself from diving into us, Fisher guided us into a slideshow that began to reveal systems and procedures seemingly at work in all art. There were Golden Sections and Fibonacci series everywhere.

Let's look at the Golden Section first. It is a ratio that was first described in Euclid's *Elements*. The line below is divided into two sections according to the ratio of the Golden Section:

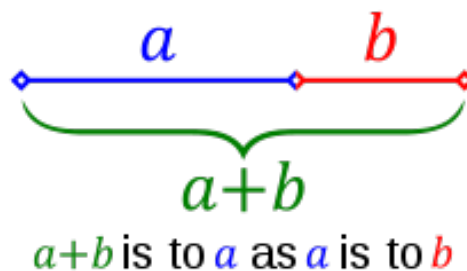


Figure 6: Line divided according to ratio of Golden Section

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Golden_ratio_line.png

The ratio of the whole line ($a+b$) to the larger section (a) is equal to the ratio of the larger section (a) to the smaller one (b).

The same ratio can be used to construct a Golden Rectangle, where the ratio of the whole rectangle ($a+b$) to the square (a) is equal to the ratio of the square (a) to the small rectangle (b):

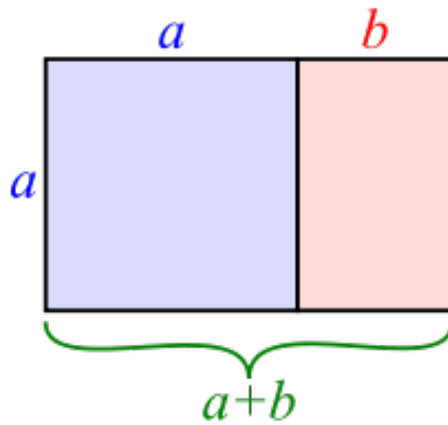


Figure 7: Golden rectangle

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:SimilarGoldenRectangles.svg>

It has been suggested that the ratio of this rectangle can be found frequently in art because its proportions are aesthetically pleasing. Many landscape paintings appear to divide the canvas according to the Golden Ratio, positioning an object of interest at the point where the larger section meets the smaller. Fisher showed us Thomas Girtin's *The White House at Chelsea*:



Figure 8: Thomas Girtin, *The White House at Chelsea* (1800)

Source: <http://www.andrewgrahamdixon.com/archive/readArticle/96>

At first, this looks like the sort of thing we might do if we got rid of those intricate systems that Fisher uses. There doesn't seem to be any adherence to an abstract system here. The artist has just looked at a landscape and painted it.

But then we see that the white house is situated around about where the two sections of the Golden Rectangle meet. There's nothing 'natural' about this seemingly realistic representation. Decisions have been made about framing – what bits to include within the rectangle, what bits will be nearer the edges and what will be nearer the centre – and a mathematical system has been used to do this.

The Golden Section is closely related to the Fibonacci series. Introduced into Western mathematics by Leonardo of Pisa, the Fibonacci series is formed by repeated addition of the previous two numbers:

0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 45, 79, 124 ...

If these are drawn as squares, with each square growing proportionally according to the sequence, you get a tiling of Fibonacci squares:

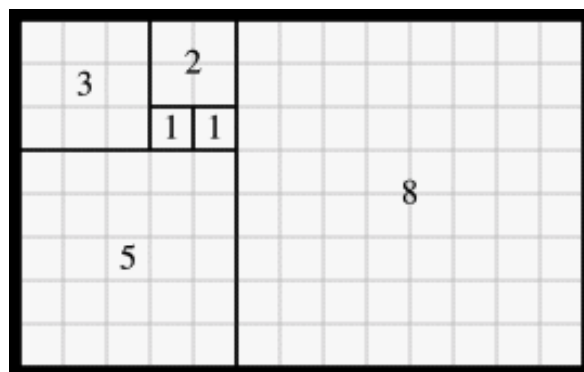
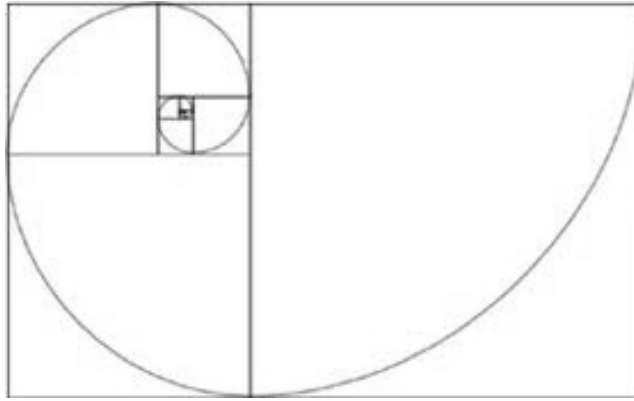


Figure 9: Fibonacci square

Source: <http://www.math.afterschooltreats.com/wfdata/frame119-1019/pressrel7.asp>

Draw a curve from one corner to the opposing corner of each square and it creates a Fibonacci spiral:



The idea of confidence in lack suggests an acceptance that the artist's representation is always imperfect and incomplete. Fisher drew our attention to artists who allow for this vulnerability through disruptions of order.

Cubists like Georges Braque would paint an object from many different perspectives simultaneously, the same object viewed at different times presented in a single space.



Figure 11: Georges Braque, *Still-life with Metronome* (1909-10)

Source: <http://pictify.com/159893/georges-braques-still-life-with-a-metronome>

The Cubists accepted that the object did not exist in any absolute form in some objective reality; that it changes according to the observer that experiences it. As the Cubist artists Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger wrote in *Cubism*:

An object has not one absolute form: it has many: it has as many as there are planes in the region of perception.... We seek the essential, but we seek it in our personality and not in a sort of eternity, laboriously divided by mathematicians and

philosophers.... If so many eyes contemplate an object, there are so many images of that object; if so many minds comprehend it, there are so many essential images.⁷

This can be seen in a painting such as 'Still-life with Metronome', above, where different perceptions of the object are presented as separate planes, which crowd the surface of the painting. The Cubists' heightening of the disparity of the planes by pasting cut-out materials to the canvas was taken to its logical extreme by Marcel Duchamp when he took found objects and presented them *as* the art work. He pointed out that the artist's intentions have no control over what the observer finds expressed in the art work:

This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realise and did realise, is the personal 'art coefficient' contained in the work. In other words, the personal 'art coefficient' is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.⁸

Duchamp's bicycle wheel and urinal showed that objects don't have any value or meaning in themselves but are given it by the observer. This can change depending on context: for example, when placed in a gallery.

And a painting is also an object, its value and meaning also dependent on observer and context. Fisher went on to show us Larry Rivers' *Washington Crossing the Delaware*:

⁷ Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 214

⁸ Marcel Duchamp, 'The Creative Act', 1957. Available online at: http://www.cathystone.com/Duchamp_Creative%20Act.pdf



Figure 12: Larry Rivers, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1953)

Source: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/ohara/rivers.htm

This is based on a work of the same title by nineteenth-century painter, Emmanuel Leutze, as Rivers explained in an interview with Frank O'Hara:

The last painting that dealt with George and the rebels is hanging in the Met and was painted by a coarse German nineteenth-century academician who really loved Napoleon more than anyone and thought crossing a river on a late December afternoon was just another excuse for a general to assume a heroic, slightly tragic pose.... What I saw in the crossing was quite different. I saw the moment as nerve-wracking and uncomfortable. I couldn't picture anyone getting into a chilly river around Christmas time with anything resembling hand-on-chest heroics.⁹

⁹ Larry Rivers, interview with Frank O'Hara, quoted in Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, on *Modern American Poetry*. Available online at: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/ohara/rivers.htm

The vulnerability Fisher mentioned is clearly apparent here, as Rivers undercuts the heroic image of Washington and makes it human. Similarly, the artist reveals his own fallibility with the tentative, unsure figures and patches of unpainted canvas.

Fisher's notion of the imperfect fit suggests that a painting can never be a perfect representation of the thing it depicts. It is always incomplete and requires the observer to complete it by viewing it and giving it meaning. Though not literally unfinished in the way Rivers' painting is, a painting such as Girtin's *The White House at Chelsea* (Fig. 8) is still an imperfect fit, an incomplete expression.

The white pigment near the middle of the canvas is not a house, but when we see it, we make it a house. Only when encountered by the observer does the inert matter of paint translate into a landscape. Even though it's arranged in line with ideal proportions, then, the painting is not a perfect, complete object.

This realisation leads to confidence in lack, in the lack of possibility of completion, perfection, of ever arriving at the finished work. If the art work is dependent on the observer, alternative ways of ordering the art work are needed, such as those bizarre, intricate systems at work in Fisher's *Meditation Traps*, ways of letting the art work escape the artist's control, to allow for what escapes the artist's perception.

Eurostar ramblings

I've been wondering how a quantum theory of poetry might apply to the Aesthetics of the Imperfect Fit discussed by Allen Fisher at the Glasfryn Seminars. Though the seminar didn't use quantum theories directly, it seemed to elaborate on Fisher's notion that 'the reader is not simply an observer but a participator and thus affects what is read'.¹⁰

In a previous post ('Kinghorn Quantum'), I discussed Roger Penrose's suggestion that quantum processes might be taking place in the brain. But what might be the effect of such processes?

Penrose's search for a quantum theory of mind is motivated by the question of how consciousness and free will are possible in the world explained by the deterministic mechanics of classical physics. If we understand the world as deterministic, consciousness doesn't seem to fit.

In *The Emperor's New Mind*, Penrose points out that 'Euclidean geometry is *not entirely accurate* as a description of the physical space that we actually inhabit' as demonstrated by Einstein's curved space-time under gravity;¹¹ and that the physics of Galileo and Newton only calculates reasonably accurate approximations because '...the accuracy with which the initial data can be known is always limited...'¹² The deterministic model itself is an imperfect fit.

Yet we still tend to imagine objects as existing without us in a static space that we just pass through. And the same tendency carries over into our understanding of how art and poetry works. We tend to think of an art work, like Girtin's *The White House at Chelsea* (Fig. 8), for example, as containing meaning within it, as if it is there without us.

¹⁰ Fisher, *Necessary Business*, p. 235

¹¹ Roger Penrose, *The Emperor's New Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 197

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 224

Could a poem or an art work exist if it was not observed by some consciousness?

One interpretation of quantum mechanics is that a particle can be ‘observed’ by its environment – when there are enough other particles in contact with it, the wave function will collapse. So the poem and the art work might exist without the conscious observer, but only physically and materially, as canvas and paint or marks on page, or the particles that compose these. What doesn’t seem to exist without the conscious observer is meaning.

But modern art and poetry repeatedly emphasise surface – the irreducible image – rather than depth and meaning. As the works of Braque, Duchamp and Rivers show, the art work is an object in the world. We can never quite say what these works mean, but instead remain suspended at the surface of the work. They are indeterminate: no explanation can entirely clear up their inscrutability. Though they emphasise the surface and materiality of the work as an object, then, they don’t necessarily deny the possibility of meaning but rather play on the impossibility of arriving at a single meaning.

What the quantum processes in the brain might do then is enable many possible meanings simultaneously. The wave function only collapses when a particular meaning is settled on. Indeterminate objects seem to keep the wave function from collapsing by holding the mind of the observer on the brink of understanding. They reveal the quantum functioning at work.

As objects in the world, such art works remind us that objects don’t have meaning in themselves. So the quantum effect that takes place when we experience art and poetry would also extend to how we interpret the world around us, the space we are in.

Comments

1. **allen fisher** says:

I don't want to overload the site, but wanted to add something about the significant difference between John Keats and his note in a letter about Negative Capability; Werner Heisenberg and his Uncertainty Principle and the term decoherence, so I had planned to leave an attachment from my forthcoming book, but that would be about 5 pages, so I'll have to rethink what I will do about this.

Decoherent Capability

In his comment on the post, ‘Eurostar ramblings’, Allen Fisher pointed out, ‘the significant difference between John Keats and his note in a letter about Negative Capability; Werner Heisenberg and his Uncertainty Principle and the term decoherence’. I hadn’t thought of Keats’ concept of negative capability, and I didn’t know what decoherence meant. Helpfully, Allen sent me a copy of an extract from a chapter of his book *Patterns of Connectedness: Aesthetic function, facture and perception in art and writing after 1950*, which includes thought about such things.

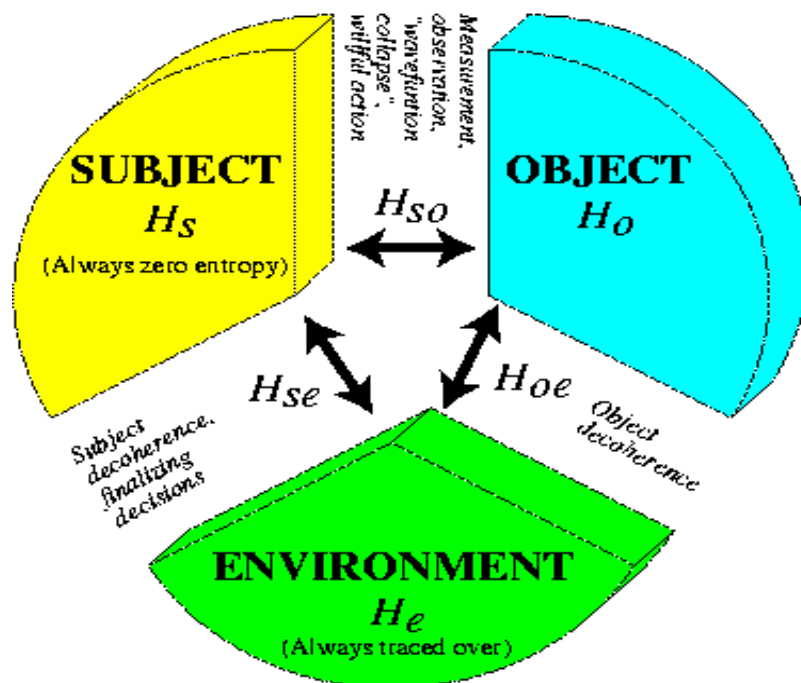


Figure 13: Quantum decoherence in brain processes

Source: <http://space.mit.edu/home/tegmark/brain.html>

Negative capability

In the extract he sent me, Fisher says of negative capability:

In 1817 John Keats articulated ‘Negative Capability’ as being ‘in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’ Charles Olson was to paste this against Werner Heisenberg’s 1927 ‘Uncertainty Principle’ to clarify his poetics in 1950 and 1956.¹³

I hadn’t realised that Olson made a connection between negative capability and quantum uncertainty. I had a Selected Writings of Olson out of the library so skimmed through that for references and came across the essay ‘Equal, That Is, To The Real Itself’.

Here, Olson restates Keats’ thinking as:

...all that irritable reaching after fact and reason, it won’t do. I don’t believe in it. I do better to stay in the condition of things. No matter what it amounts to, mystery confusion doubt, it has power, it is what I mean by Negative Capability.¹⁴

Olson’s phrase about staying ‘in the condition of things’ suggests that negative capability is about being as things are in the world. Like Fisher, he goes on to connect this to the non-Euclidean mathematics elaborated by Bolyai, Lobatschewsky and Riemann in the years following Keats’ negative capability letter. The references to mathematical developments come in response to a naturalistic interpretation of Herman Melville made by Milton R. Stern.

¹³ Allen Fisher, *Patterns of Connectedness: Aesthetic function, facture and perception in art and writing after 1950 (awaiting publication)*

¹⁴ Charles Olson, ‘Equal, That Is, To The Real Itself’, in *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 46

Olson argues that Melville's statement 'By visible truth we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things' is not a statement of naturalism:

It is rather quantum physics than relativity which will supply a proper evidence here, as against naturalism, of what Melville was grabbing on to when he declared it was *visible* truth he was after. For example, that light is not only a wave but a corpuscle. Or that the electron is not only a corpuscle but a wave. Melville couldn't abuse object as symbol does by depreciating it in favor of subject. Or let image lose its relational force by transferring its occurrence as allegory does.¹⁵

The point seems to be that naturalism describes reality from a distance. It makes the world its subject. Treating language as symbol makes it 'about' something, stand for something else. Olson sees it as outmoded by the work of mathematicians such as Riemann which showed that 'no part is discrete from another part', man is also an object, 'a thing among things', part of that world. For Olson, Melville's writing is to be taken as not a realistic representation of the world but a real thing in the world, like a stone or some other natural formation.

This helped me see what I've overemphasised or haven't been able to get away from in these posts. My attempts to articulate a quantum theory of poetry present the observer as somehow separate from the object and rely on a realm of 'meaning' somehow distinct from physical reality.

So the poem and the art work might exist without the conscious observer, but only physically and materially, as canvas and paint or marks on page, or the particles that

¹⁵ Olson, *Selected Writings*, p. 50

compose these. What doesn't seem to exist without the conscious observer is meaning. ('Eurostar ramblings')

This idea of the observer bestowing meaning on objects maintains a transcendent world of ideal forms where meaning exists removed from the objects of the world. Furthermore, my initial image of the wavefunction as a superposition of multiple meanings misses the concrete literalism that Olson points out in negative capability.

This is the literalism of Rimbaud that Marjorie Perloff refers to in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. The Olson-Rimbaud connection was emphasised to me in the introduction to the *Selected Writings* where Robert Creeley highlights Olson's quotation from Rimbaud in *The Kingfishers*: 'If I have any taste, it is only for earth and stones.'¹⁶ Perloff points out that Rimbaud's poetry differs from other Symbolists because Symbolism is about multiple meaning, whereas in Rimbaud 'fragmented images appear one by one ... without coalescing into a symbolic network'.¹⁷ She quotes Rimbaud, apparently asked by his mother what his poem *A Season in Hell* meant, replying 'I meant what I said, literally and in every sense'.¹⁸

My quantum analogy – '*the poem is a cloud of potentialities which the reader collapses into meaning*' ('Kinghorn Quantum') – retains the illusory transcendence of symbolic meaning, of the poem standing for something other than what it is. But indeterminacy resists the symbolic, takes language as concrete material. This is quite a difficult thing to imagine: if I think of a word as made up of a written shape, a spoken sound and a concept or idea, then the written and verbal forms of a word are more easily imaginable as physical things, but it's like the meaning seems to exist on some other plane – of consciousness, thought. How can we think of this as physical?

¹⁶ Creeley, 'Introduction', *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, p. 3

¹⁷ Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, p.10

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28

Jacques Derrida might say a word only refers to other words; meaning is made out of words. Look up the meaning of a word in a dictionary and you get directed to lots of other words. You never arrive at that seemingly ‘beyond’ level of meaning, concept, idea, but remain within the play of words referring to other words.

How does this relate to Roger Penrose’s theory of quantum consciousness? Is consciousness made out of language, like meaning is made out of words? Should we visualise it as a flat plane, concrete and physical, without any symbolic level? We need to know why the wavefunction breaks down when we try to measure for it, why when we look for it meaning disappears into words, why fact and reason collapse as we reach for them.

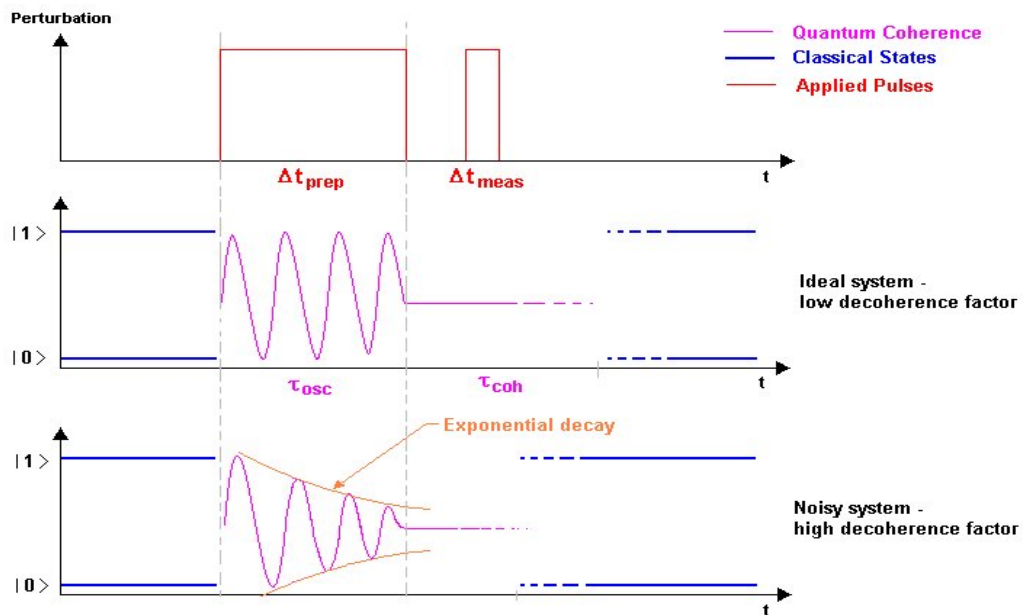


Figure 14: Decoherence in quantum computing

Source: <http://www.cm.ph.bham.ac.uk/scondintro/qubitsintro.html>

Decoherence

Googling ‘decoherence’ I found out that the term describes how a coherent superposition of states might be maintained at the quantum level but on interaction with the environment collapses into an incoherent mixture of these states. The quantum world is described here as ‘coherent’ and the so-called classical world as ‘incoherent’. I had been thinking of the quantum world as simultaneity and multiplicity, seeing it in this way as allied to the poetry of indeterminacy. But re-reading Penrose, I found that he explains how the evolution of the wavefunction remains deterministic and continuous at the quantum level and only becomes probabilistic and discontinuous at the macroscopic. Indeterminacies only appear when we try to magnify the quantum to the classical level.

Decoherence explains this collapse of the wavefunction through its interaction and entanglement with its environment. This is how Fisher applies it:

In a mobile situation, coherence is made vulnerable by the physics of the situation where participants are in danger of lost confidence and are subject to manipulation and exploitation. This situation has been named decoherence...¹⁹

What does decoherence mean for Fisher? How does he use it? And how does he view ‘coherence’? In *Patterns of Connection*, he says he’s looking for ‘alternatives to coherence’. He talks of ‘precedents that have for too long encumbered poetry. Expectations of centring, coherence and geometric prediction...’ Following developments in mathematics and physics

¹⁹ Fisher, *Patterns of Connection*

since the nineteenth century, ‘There is no requirement to be sure or coherent in the Western sense of logic and certainty’.²⁰

Coherences in geometry and philosophy are equated to coherent superpositions in the quantum world. As I understand it, quantum superpositions can be calculated but not observed. It’s impossible to isolate them in an ideal realm. It’s what Fisher referred to in ‘The Aesthetics of the Imperfect Fit’ seminar as ‘confidence in lack’:

In figurative terms, we are in a state of decoherence when we realise with confidence that some aspects of our knowledge are reliant on an interlocutor, a black box between us and the information. In descriptions of the cosmos or of sub-atomic particles, we are unable to use our perception, but must rely the information reaching us through machines that transform the data into a form we can then interpret. We can be confident in the truth of that data, but we are in a state of confidence in lack...²¹

Decoherence is about being ‘in the condition of things’, ‘in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts’. Beyond its figurative uses, we might even see this literally as a quantum effect: the collapse of the wavefunction gives rise to a situation where there can be no ideal, isolated meaning, only the indeterminacies that result through the interaction of physical things, words, in the situation, entangled with their situation, as Fisher says, ‘damaged by their own realisation and expression – damaged by understanding and communication.’

²⁰ Fisher, *Patterns of Connection*

²¹ Ibid.

Comments

1. allen fisher says:

There's a complexity regarding the concept of 'decoherence' that might benefit from further thinking. At one place in the literarypocketblog postings it notes that 'Decoherence is about being 'in the condition of things', in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts'. Yet, 'confidence in lack' is not a matter of being in this condition, it is recognizing that there has been a phase shift from the positions of Keats and Heisenberg and Olson, a shift that acknowledges elements of their efficacy, but also notes a different 'condition'. It is notable that there is variety in how 'decoherence' is defined, so it may be that my use and reuse of the vocabulary, which is figurative, may be encouraging a red herring (or even a kipper). I think of 'decoherence' as referring to a condition where I am confident in the information I have been provided with, through the use of interlocutors and expertise, which contributes to my experience of truth or a multiplicity of truths, but contemporary with this, I am unable to empirically confirm the truths or the information; I am unable to perceive, even with a very powerful telescope, a vast area of the cosmos, but can get information about it through the use of radio signals, the data from which are transformed into a model of what is there. A similar condition applies when I am involved in subatomic particles; aspects of what is being recorded at CERN are not perceptible, even with the most powerful microscope, except through data that is transformed into a model of what is there or, as is as often the case, proposed to be there. In these conditions I am in a state of 'decoherence', that empirically, proprioceptively, is a confidence in lack.

2. **stevenhitchins** says:

Thanks for your comment, Allen. It's a useful distinction and something I'll try to develop in further postings. It's worth thinking about the difference between your position and that of Olson, between decoherence and the uncertainty principle, and between confidence in lack and negative capability. Is this phase shift you mention an attempt to move beyond the postmodern do you think? I'm thinking of Bernard Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness* which you refer to in 'Confidence in Lack' (2006). The uncertainty principle might be seen as a relative of postmodern relativism. Decoherence seems to be an appropriate term because it's an alternative to the uncertainty principle. Do you think that there's been a shift in your own thinking since you wrote in *Necessary Business*, 'They are unstable arrays also, as physicists like Born and Heisenberg made clear, because the reader is not simply an observer but a participant and thus affects what is read'? The observer-participant view seems to say that the reader produces the text and that the text will be different for all readers, in a similar way to how the uncertainty principle suggests that the observer only finds a particle because a particle is measured for. The decoherence view seems to suggest that the 'classical', macroscopic world would exist without the observer; the wavefunction would break down anyway through its entanglement with the environment. Could your decision to use the term be related to a dissatisfaction with the relativism of observer-centered uncertainty?

3. **allen fisher** says:

I am not sure about the term ‘postmodern’, and need to unpack that. Olson’s use of the term seemed to me to herald a position that carried modernism forward. Subsequent ideas of the term from commentators like Lyotard might help here. His idea of the ‘nascent state’ of postmodernism (‘Postmodernism ... is not modernism at its end but in a nascent state, and this state is constant.’ [Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Bennington and Massumi, 1984: 79]) which he follows with ‘Yet I would like not to remain with this slightly mechanistic meaning of the word’. This usefully becomes, ‘The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself ...’ (1984: 81) So in answer to the first question, I think that my sense of ‘decoherence’ provides for a position shifted from Olson’s ‘postmodern’ whilst continuing to leave it in place. I do think there has been a shift in my own thinking since ‘Necessary Business’ and, thank you, that is a useful observation. I am weary of the relativistic position, and still want to reconsider what is re-articulated in Bourriaud (Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Pleasance and Woods, 2002), where the difficulty, not entirely Bourriaud’s doing, results from an over-simplified reading of him and leads to a weak aesthetic condition.

(I should say here, briefly, that I am critical of Bourriaud’s reliance on the idea of form as a ‘coherent unit’ (2002: 19), but haven’t fully thought through aspects of his work, much of which I am on board with. The conventional critique of a practice that still factures objects (such as paintings and poems), forgets to comprehend concepts and materials provided by them and appears ignorant of the position that aesthetic production requires aesthetic reception, and thus, in a rather simplistic way, rejects objects. I think Relational Aesthetics

falls short because it appears to propose compromise rather than resistance, but, to reiterate, 'haven't fully thought through aspects of his work'.)

Yet another matter comes to the fore, which I am in the process of trying to understand.

Aspects of this are implied by Lyotard when he writes at the end of his 'What is Postmodernism' essay, 'We have paid a high enough price for ... the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible ...' (1984: 81-82) I notice this after the fact, that is after my own failure and after articulation of my aesthetic positions, but apparently I want to develop this with the state of decoherence, in which there is an inherent critique of empirical possibility. I will need to think this through and I'm working very slowly on this. My initial note, which has only been developed in my artwork and not in retrospect upon it, says: 'further to the matter of decoherence is the matter of knowing, which for instance need not derive from empirical experience, but can derive from a mathematical understanding; is this in fact true? doesn't mathematical understanding require an empirical base? This apparent contradiction has been evident for some time in my work, for instance in the distinctions in my work, usually in the same piece of work, between concepts and materials, or better understood as between conceptual practice and the materiality of the work in production. This will become more pressing over the next six months as I engage in working with the formulation of a Portable Allen Fisher (which will need to be different from the typical 'selected poems'.)

Confidence in Lack

In his comment on my previous post ('Decoherent Capability'), Allen Fisher points out the difference in his position from Olson's condition of uncertainty:

I think of 'decoherence' as referring to a condition where I am confident in the information I have been provided with, through the use of interlocutors and expertise, which contributes to my experience of truth or a multiplicity of truths, but contemporary with this, I am unable to empirically confirm the truths or the information...

Unlike Olson, he is not in a condition of doubt and uncertainty; he is confident in the information he has been provided with, though he cannot verify it. To me, the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics seems similar to the relativism of postmodernism. My understanding of the uncertainty principle is that quantum measurement is dependent on the observer: if the observer measures for a particle, then a particle will be found, and if the observer measures for a wave, then a wave will be found. Similarly, postmodernism is characterised, to paraphrase Lyotard, by incredulity towards grand narratives. These are totalising theories of the world, such as Communism. Our scepticism towards such sweeping explanations would seem to dissolve the notion of a single, coherent truth into a multiplicity of language games. What we believe to be true would change over time and in different contexts; truth as provisional. I found it interesting that in proposing a confidence in lack of coherence, Fisher seems to allow for the possibility of truth.

In *Confidence in Lack*, he points out that despite the fact that most recent modernist poetry uses methods of fragmentation and multiplicity, much public discussion of poetry involves an aspiration for coherence. He suggests that poetry might be ‘at great variance’ to such expectations of logic and coherence. This has led to ‘a confidence in lack – a confidence that poetry, when it is at its most efficacious, cannot propose logic, as it is variously perpetuated in paternal and public thinking, and cannot aspire to coherence, as this is also prescribed.’²²

He follows this with examples of attempts to measure quantum entities using circuit quantum electrodynamics, a complicated set-up which, like cavity quantum electrodynamics, is a way of perceiving quantum activity. The point seems to be that human beings cannot perceive such activity except through such devices. He adds:

Since ancient times, thought in the west has debated the difficulties between direct perception and information derived from machines, between demonstrations of truth and informed presumption or speculation.²³

Fisher refers to Plato for examples, though these are examples of the debate not between direct perception and information derived from machines, but between truth and poetry. He quotes from Plato’s *Apology*:

So I took up those poems with which they seemed to have taken most trouble and asked them what they meant... Almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems better than their authors could. I soon realized that poets do not compose their

²² Allen Fisher, *Confidence in Lack* (Sutton: Writers Forum, 2007), p. 7

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 8

poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say.²⁴

I'm not sure exactly what connection Fisher is trying to suggest between experimental physicists' use of machines to perceive the activity of the quantum world and poets' inability to explain what their poems mean. The truth of physicists' descriptions of the quantum world might be dubious because it can never be verified with direct perception, only interpreted in informed speculation from data provided by machines. But the poet's poems don't seem to come from machines, so why are they removed from direct perception?

Fisher relates Plato's argument against poetry to Charles Olson. Plato thought poetry was 'the enemy of truth' (Eric Havelock) and that it 'obstructed the development of the abstract powers it was Plato's concern to nurture' (Charles Stein).²⁵ He banished poets from his utopia, *The Republic*, because in his desire for a more rational understanding of the world, the aesthetic experience of poetry was a 'psychic poison' (Havelock).²⁶ Olson, however, takes Plato's rejection of poetry as a basis for his poetics. His emphasis on the concretistic qualities of language and thought seeks to return poetry to the position which Plato's emphasis on abstract thought displaced.

Olson's poetics thus seems to promote empirical observation over abstract speculation. Olson's stance – 'all this reaching after fact and reason, I don't believe in it, I do better to stay in the condition of things'²⁷ – might suggest that there is no point in searching after truth, that it is better to reside in the concrete realm of empirical observation. I don't see how, in this sense, the poet can be compared to the physicist observing quantum activity via machines. The very point there is that such observation is never directly empirical.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 8-9

²⁵ Ibid., p. 9

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Olson, 'Equal, That Is, To The Real Itself', *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, p. 46

But poetry is not, for Olson, simply empirical, however, due to his insistence on the concrete qualities of language. It's not about naturalistic description of observed reality; the fact of the words themselves is the reality. Olson considers description abstract, an instance of the abstract powers that Plato recommended. So it might be said that language is the machine which, for Plato, obstructs direct perception. Plato criticises the poet's emphasis on the material aspects of language: 'Strip what the poet has to say of its poetical colouring and I think you must see what it comes to in plain prose'.²⁸

Fisher might, then, be pointing out the difference between the direct perception sought by Plato in a purely rational thought stripped of the material qualities of poetry, and the information derived from machines in quantum physics and from language in poetry. Though the latter cannot be empirically verified, Fisher can still feel confident in its truth.

Truth

It's useful to consider Roger Penrose's discussion truth in his quantum theory of consciousness:

What is truth? How do we form our judgements as to what is true and what is untrue about the world? Are we simply following some *algorithm* – no doubt favoured over other less effective possible algorithms by the powerful process of natural selection? Or might there be some other, possibly non-algorithmic route – perhaps intuition, instinct, or insight – to divining truth?²⁹

²⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, quoted in Fisher, *Confidence in Lack*, p. 9

²⁹ Penrose, *The Emperor's New Mind*, p. 129

Penrose's view is that there are aspects of conscious activity that are not able to be produced by a series of algorithms – things like 'awareness' and 'understanding'. He demonstrates this with Gödel's theorem. The theorem shows that any formal mathematical system must contain statements that are not provable by the system itself.³⁰ A system of rules can never be complete in the sense that the truth of any mathematical statement can be proved by the rules of the system.³¹

Linguistic parallels might be found in the liar's paradox: 'This sentence is false'. Inferring the truth or falsity of the statement involves stepping outside it. This is experienced in the insight that reveals the paradox. In a similar way, Gödel shows, mathematical statements also require us to use our understanding to validate them. You do a calculation but then you ask 'Is it correct?' Not every calculation can be proved solely using the rules of its own system.

Penrose believes that Gödel's theorem leads to a Platonic viewpoint. Gödel himself was a Platonist, Penrose points out. Plato believed that mathematical truths inhabited an ideal world of perfect forms, which is distinct from the physical world, but in terms of which the physical world must be understood. This is not to suggest that mathematical truths lie beyond human understanding:

Gödel's argument does not argue in favour of there being inaccessible mathematical truths. What it *does* argue for, on the other hand, is that human insight lies beyond formal argument and beyond computable procedures.³²

³⁰ Penrose, p. 133

³¹ Ibid., p. 137

³² Penrose, *Shadows of the Mind*, p. 418

It is this insight, this capacity for understanding or awareness that Penrose says provides a link to the Platonic realm of ideal mathematical forms. He claims it shows that consciousness involves processes that cannot be produced through algorithms of classical mathematics, so might be better explained using quantum mechanics. The quantum world becomes a portal to some Platonic realm of ideal forms.

Fisher seems to agree with Penrose that thought cannot be reduced to a formal system and he does seem to believe that some truths, such as our understanding of the quantum world, cannot be empirically verified by direct perception. Like Bernard Williams, however, he would seem to reject the Platonic notion that rationality consists of eternal, universal standards that can form the basis of a moral law. Williams says that in Plato ‘the concept of truth is itself inflated into providing some metaphysical teleology of human existence’.³³ While rejecting such assumptions, Williams, as Richard Rorty explains, ‘wants to show us how to combine Nietzschean intellectual honesty and maturity with political liberalism – to keep on striving for liberty, equality and fraternity in a totally disenchanted, completely de-Platonised intellectual world’.³⁴

Williams tries to abandon the Platonic realm as an eternal world of universal forms, but retains the belief that truth is intrinsic. This is what distances him from Rorty’s pragmatism: truthfulness escapes empirical observation.

In *Truth and Truthfulness*, he identifies ‘an intense commitment to truthfulness’ – or at least a ‘reflex against deceptiveness’ – in modern thought, which accompanies the ‘equally pervasive suspicion about truth itself: whether there is such a thing; if there is, whether it can be more than relative or subjective’.³⁵

³³ Richard Rorty, ‘To the Sunlit Uplands’, *London Review of Books*, [Vol. 24 No. 21 · 31 October 2002](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n21/richard-rorty/to-the-sunlit-uplands), pp. 13-15. Available online at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n21/richard-rorty/to-the-sunlit-uplands>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 1

He discusses the way that supposedly true accounts – of historical events, for example – have been revealed to be biased and ideological. This has led to a suspicion of any claims to objective truth, or to truth at all.

Williams makes an interesting point by suggesting that this position has come about through the desire for greater truthfulness. Claims to objective truth are interrogated for ideological bias in the aim of removing deception and attaining greater truthfulness. This leads to the current position where it is considered more truthful to reject truth.

Yet a rejection of any claim to truth, he says, depends on some other claim being taken to be true. For example, to reject a historical account as ideological deception, we have to believe in the truth of the information that shows the historian to be biased.

This reveals a paradox similar to Gödel's theorem or the liar's paradox: 'If you do not really believe in the existence of truth, what is the passion for truthfulness a passion for?', 'in pursuing truthfulness, what are you supposedly being true to?'³⁶

I began to see these themes in Olson's interpretation of Plato. While Olson seems to reject the rationalist search for truth, his rejection of it is in fact motivated by a desire for greater truthfulness: the concrete use of language is seen as more truthful than the abstract. He rejects Plato's claim to truth, but this is based on belief in the truth of Eric Havelock's interpretation of Plato and the concretistic linguistic theories of Edward Sapir.

It becomes more truthful to admit that you don't know what the poem is about. The pretence of logic is seen as deceitful. Yet this allowance for multiple truths is driven by a need for truthfulness. The admission of lack of truth becomes the new truth, and potentially a new coherence.

³⁶ Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, p. 1

Micro-utopias

How does this notion of truth apply to poetry? To think about this, it might be worth looking at the recent revival of utopianism in art.

In his essay *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud proposes that ‘Social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias’.³⁷ He cites examples of art works from the 1990s that he sees as ‘to do with interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts’.³⁸

This is exemplified in the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose art works take the form of social situations, often involving the preparation and consumption of food. He cooks soup in the gallery and serves it to visitors; he organises a dinner at the art collector’s home and provides the host with all the ingredients to make a Thai soup; he equips the gallery with a bowl of water on a gas burner and stacks of boxes of dehydrated Chinese soups which visitors are free to add the water to and eat; he turns the gallery into a replica of his flat, which visitors are able to use; he provides a relaxation area in the gallery, complete with table football and a fully stocked fridge.

We can see how these works have the qualities Bourriaud suggests: they are ‘interactive’ and ‘user-friendly’ because gallery visitors can actually use them, and they are ‘relational’ because they set up social situations that involve relationships between people and with the world.

The concept of micro-utopias interested me because of its connection to utopias and to Foucault’s concept of heterotopias. I wondered what the difference was between the micro-utopia and the heterotopia? And how did both differ from the utopia?

³⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2009), p. 31

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8

Utopias are ideal spaces, hypothetical perfect worlds. Heterotopias differ from utopias, Foucault says, because they are real, not imaginary, spaces. They are places that bring together different places and times in a single space, such as gardens, museums and libraries, and festivals. A heterotopia is not a perfect world according to a single set of values, but a mixture of many different ones.

A micro-utopia, meanwhile, is a localised, temporary utopia. It differs from the utopia in that doesn't claim to hold for all times and places. It sounds similar to the heterotopia and some of Foucault's examples, such as the festival, might be considered micro-utopias. Similarly, the micro-utopia might be said to create a heterotopian space. For instance, when Bourriaud describes the micro-utopia as 'a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns' it recalls Foucault's accounts of heterotopias as spaces removed from the rest of society.³⁹

The main difference seems to be the emphasis on how the space is used. While the heterotopia has both positive and negative aspects, a micro-utopia is constructed with positive, utopian hopes. The primary aim is to generate relationships with the world in a society 'where human relations are no longer "directly experienced",' Bourriaud says, drawing on Guy Debord, 'but start to become blurred in their "spectacular" representation'.⁴⁰ Bourriaud puts direct experience in inverted commas, suggesting some distrust of the notion, but there is still a sense here of the possibility of more truthful experiences and relationships.

Bourriaud sees the relational art of the 1990s as continuing the utopian aims of the Enlightenment project to 'emancipate individuals and people', 'to free humankind and usher in a better society'.⁴¹

³⁹ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 9

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 11-12

‘It is evident,’ he writes, ‘that today’s art is carrying on this fight, by coming up with perceptive, experimental, critical and participatory models, veering in the direction indicated by Enlightenment philosophers, Proudhon, Marx, the Dadaists and Mondrian.’⁴²

The *Art Intelligence* article on Bourriaud’s aesthetics makes an important distinction between these suggested utopian precursors and contemporary micro-utopians:

...the fundamental difference lies in the concept of totality. The notion of totality is evident in all of the precursors Bourriaud mentions... In short their utopian project was to change the world whereas the strategy as outlined by Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari is to proceed micropolitically.⁴³

The utopian project of modernity is continued in these art works, but without the aim for totality. ‘It is not modernity that is dead,’ Bourriaud says, ‘but its idealistic and teleological version.’⁴⁴ Micro-utopias are utopian in their aim of ‘learning to inhabit the world in a better way’, though the aim of the art work is ‘no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real’.⁴⁵

Bourriaud points out that the work of these artists is located ‘within the slipstream of historical modernity’ – there are clear echoes of Dada, Situationism and Fluxus – but they don’t repeat the same functions as their predecessors. He quotes Jean-François Lyotard’s description of postmodern culture as ‘condemned to create a series of minor modifications in a space whose modernity it inherits, and abandon the overall reconstruction of the space inhabited by humankind’.⁴⁶ The totalising utopian goals of modernism have been abandoned

⁴² Ibid., p. 12

⁴³ Graham Coulter-Smith, ‘On Nicolas Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics’, *Art Intelligence*. Available online at: <http://artintelligence.net/review/?p=845>

⁴⁴ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 13

⁴⁵ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 13

⁴⁶ Ibid.

and artists are left to make minor modifications to the forms the modernist project produced in the service of those goals. Bourriaud, however, doesn't see it as 'condemnation' but as an opportunity: the artist today inhabits a culture with a broader conception of art forms and no longer worries about constructing a total or final world, but instead 'dwells in the circumstances the present offers him, ... catches the world on the move: he is a *tenant of culture*, to borrow Michel de Certeau's expression.'⁴⁷

At the end of *Confidence in Lack*, Fisher quotes Williams' question, 'Can the notions of truth and truthfulness be intellectually stabilized, in such a way that what we understand about truth and our chances of arriving at it can be made to fit with our need for truthfulness?'⁴⁸

Artists and poets are currently trying to find a way to stabilise their desire for truthfulness with what has been learned from poststructuralist and postmodernist philosophy about truth's problems, its tendency to reflect ideological biases, its pretence to eternal and universal standards.

The rhetoric of postmodernism has at times conveyed a sense that there is no possibility of utopian thought, no vantage point from which to criticise the hegemony, because all truths can be shown to be relative, and the neoliberal capitalist system has, by Fukuyama at least, been heralded as the end point of history.

What Fisher describes is a condition where, as totality is no longer sought, we can take confidence in a lack of coherence that is necessary, to keep the discussion open, while a micro-utopian sense of truth or truthfulness tackles the disillusionment of an insistent relativism, pointing towards a way of being ethical in a postmodern world.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 13-14

⁴⁸ Fisher, *Confidence in Lack*, p. 17

Comments

1. [allenfisher1](#) says:

There is strength in this interpretation of the micro-utopian, the micropolitical and the potential towards a way of approaching ethical awareness. But in terms of the quantum world as a portal to the realm of idealism, I want it differently focused – could quantum ideas be a portal to the realm of the ‘natural’? I leave it there and pick it up in a different way through ideas of ‘reality’.

‘the possibility of truth’ seems a viable and sustainable position, one I would want to expand upon, with regard to the construction of the self and the concept of truth, in relation to, for instance, Michel Foucault’s late lectures titled *The Courage of Truth: The Government of the Self and Others II*, (1983-1984), but I don’t want to here divert from your comments into an area I’m still working into.

In response to ‘poet’s poems don’t seem to come from machines, so why are they removed from direct perception?’ I have a raft of matters to raise. For example, poems are removed from perception if they are transformations from that perception, transformed through language, through thinking and might involve speculation or supposition bereft of direct perception. I presume we can understand æsthetic reception as more than perception.

It is the case that ‘words themselves is [are] the reality’, in the sense of materiality, but what is named ‘reality’ might be variously decided upon. I have used that thought for sometime, so forgive me if I over-rehearse it here. I think it could lead to an extended idea about your discussion of truth. There are extensive reports on ‘reality’ and what it variously means; as an art historian I have been overwhelmed with the discussion of reality and actuality and the

machines of representation. In the nineteenth century, for instance, one debate might be about the real and the imaginary, another debate could be about the difference between the real and the natural. [In the anthology *Art in Theory, 1815-1900*, ed. Harrison and Wood, 1998, there is a 60+ page section of quotations headed 'Realism and Naturalism' pp.356-421. In the new edition of their volume *1900-2000*, 2003, there is an extensive index under 'Realism, realism', but I will not use these here.]

The painting by the 'Realist' artist Gustave Courbet, *The Artist's Studio*, 1855, was given a fuller exhibited title by Courbet, *A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in my Artistic and Moral Life*. Courbet wrote to Champfleury about *The Artist's Studio*, 'I am not yet dead, nor Realism either, because there is realism in it.' (Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, *From the Classicists to the Impressionists: A Documentary History of Art and Architecture in the 19th century*, 1966: 349.) He addressed a group of students in 1861, 'I believe that painting is an essentially CONCRETE art and can only consist of the representation of REAL and EXISTING objects.' (Holt, 1966: 349.)

Charles Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life* 1863, viewing work by Constantin Guys in 1859, 'Under the direction of nature and the tyranny of circumstance, Monsieur G. has pursued an altogether different path (different from earlier artists Van Dyck, Borgognone or Van der Meulen). He began by being an observer of life, and only later set himself the task of acquiring the means of expressing it. This has resulted in a thrilling originality in which any remaining vestiges of barbarousness or naïveté appear only as new proofs of his faithfulness to the impression received, or as a flattering compliment paid to truth. For most of us, and particularly for men (sic) of affairs, for whom nature has no existence save by reference to utility, the fantastic reality of life has become singularly diluted. Monsieur G. never ceases to drink it in; his eyes and his memory are full of it.' (Baudelaire, trans. Mayne, 1964: 15) This

could extend into a discussion of work by Eduard Manet in 1863, contradictory ideas of ‘theatrical naturalism’ in Emile Zola, and art historians on the subject from T.J. Clark on Courbet to Linda Nochlin on Realism, to Brandon Taylor Modernism, Postmodernism & Realism, but I divert too much.

There is one diversion that might be useful, that is Alfred North Whitehead. In *Process and Reality, An Essay in Cosmology*, 1929, he paid much attention to ideas of reality and truth, much of which are too technical to use here, out of the lecture’s context, but in view of Olson’s engagement with this book in the period 1955-57 it might be useful to give a taster. [I should add that Olson may have used Whitehead before this for the prose headed ‘The Resistance’, 1953 and Olson’s use of the book was extensive in his poetry, particularly *The Maximus Poems*, but also, for instance, *A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn*, 1955, ‘He’s the greatest, if you read only his philosophy. If you read him on anything else ...’ and in his lecture, *The Special View of History*, 1956.] Here are some fragments from Whitehead using the Corrected Edition edited by Griffin and Sherburne, 1978. In ‘Part II, Discussions and Applications’ he begins, ‘All human discourse which bases its claim to consideration on the truth of its statements must appeal to the facts’, but of course, ‘the record of facts is in part dispersed vaguely through the various linguistic expressions of civilized language and of literature ...’ and so forth. (1978: 39)

‘An actual entity is a process, and is not describable in terms of the morphology of a “stuff”.’ (1978: 41)

‘... a clear understanding of the “given” elements in the world is essential for any form of Platonic realism.’ (1978: 42)

‘The endeavour to interpret experience in accordance with the overpowering deliverance of common sense must bring us back to some restatement of Platonic realism, modified so as to avoid the pitfalls which the philosophical investigations of the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries have disclosed.’ (1978: 50)

‘... in framing cosmological theory, the notion of continuous stuff with permanent attributes, enduring without differentiation, and retaining its self-identity through any stretch of time however small or large, has been fundamental. ...’ (1978: 78)

‘But we must—to avoid “solipsism of the present moment”—include in direct perception something more than presentational immediacy. ... My process of “being myself” is my origination from my possession of the world. ... Those realists, who base themselves upon notions of substance, do not get away from the notion of actual entities which move and change ...’ (1978: 81)

The discussion about the real and the natural, the real and the actual, are partly to do with the idea that the real is constructed, but I don’t know if that’s part of what we are talking about here. The development of ideas of representation and simulation extended into ideas about how you see because of what you are or are becoming, or you only see what you want to and so forth. On another view, from Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey in 1974, and I don’t think this is becoming too tangential, ‘ “All fiction”, it seems, has a reference point, whether to “reality” or to “truth”, and takes its meaning from that. To define literature as fiction means taking an old philosophical position, which since Plato has been linked with the establishing of a theory of knowledge, and confronting the fictional discourse with a reality, whether in nature or history, so that the text is a transposition, a reproduction, adequate or not, and valued accordingly and in relation to standards of verisimilitude and artistic licence.’ (trans, McLeod, Whitehead, Wordsworth, in *Untying the Text*, ed. Young, 1981.) I am tempted to extend this into what Georg Lukács had to say about realism in fiction, but I think this is enough for right now, and please forgive my presumption by including so much in your webpage.