

WHY X > Y?

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To judge a work of contemporary art is almost an impossible task. However, it is often made possible by some ambiguous criteria, which never can be tested or verified. It is the nature or rather fate of the modern art that you cannot define a particular work in relation to the others. Because it defies both comparison and classification. To be precise the value of a particular work of art cannot be judged by comparison or classification. It is the uniqueness of a particular work that put value on it. Leo Steinberg had said about 30 years back that " modern art always projects itself into a twilight zone where no values are fixed." The discourse of evaluation of the works of art itself is an enigmatic and elusive subject. Why the X painting of artist A is better than the Y painting of artist B can never be settled by following any specific universal method or philosophical discourse of evaluation.

It is easier to give value judgement when we talk about Greek art, Roman art, Renaissance art or Gupta art. Because they were realised following certain specific rules and ideals specific to the respective schools. The rules and ideals were general for all the artists belonging to the respective schools. As such it is possible to make a comparison and a classification. So it is easier to say that pleasure we get by beholding the Venus de Milo is far more superior than what we get from many other Greek sculptures. Likewise it is easier to say that Saranath Buddha is esthetically far more superior than many other Gupta works. But we do not try to compare Venus de Milo with Saranath Buddha. Because it is simply not possible. Because for credible comparison some common criteria are necessary beside the pleasure principle. Even pleasure itself is also not entirely an innate quality separated from the social conditioning.

It has been argued by many that art gives us pleasurable experience. If we compare Bhimsen Joshi, Bare Golam Ali or Bismilla Khan with the music which are emitted from MTV we will find that MTV is more popular than the former. Does it put MTV music over the others ? How to settle the question without indulging in to snobbery? Is it just a social convention by which we designate a special status to the former? In spite of the post-modernists' claim that there is no distinction between high art and low art we still hold that the pleasure we get from the former is superior to the MTV. So there must be present other

ingredients, which make some pleasure superior to the others. But what are they? This still remains as unsolved as ever.

Suppose we encounter two works X and Y. To say that the pleasure we get from X is superior to Y entails that there are some superior elements in X which is not present in Y. But again a problem arises. To a great extent our judgement of superiority and inferiority is a social construct. It is less natural.

It is true that natural elements are the basic ingredients of any art. We have some basic inbuilt instincts regarding form, colour and sound. Without the aid of any cultural conditioning, just with the baggage of such instinct we can say that the colour and shape of a particular rose is more pleasing than that of a bamboo flower. But as soon as the nature is transformed into art it becomes a mythical phenomenon. The processes of transformation involve artificiality. Because whether it is the representation of the nature or the expression of the nature they can be presented only artificially. In its new artificial incarnation it acquires some new qualities, which are not present originally in the nature. And these new qualities are cultural constructs.

A rose from the nature can be appreciated anywhere in the world by anyone, irrespective of his cultural position, with just the innate natural impulses. But for the appreciation of its representation in art the innate natural impulses are not enough. Here the imbibed cultural ideas take the leading role. In other words cultural competence is essential to appreciate the work of art. A man who is capable of deriving pleasure by beholding a natural rose may not be capable of appreciating a representation of the same rose in a work of art if he is culturally not competent.

There is a significant difference between the beauty of nature and beauty of art. If we are to choose between a rose and a bamboo flower, for its beauty, invariably we all will definitely select the rose. But if we are to choose between two pictures representing a rose and a bamboo flower respectively, unanimity will be impossible. Here there will be several possibilities. Technical competence or the skill manifested in the representations may become one of the decisive factors here. This is purely an objective quality the excellency of which can be judged in mere technical consideration. On the other hand the perceptions and expressions of the artists reflected in their works may become even more vital. Here the visual perceptions of the artists have the possibilities of becoming discoveries, and their

expressions have the possibilities of grafting imagination in to them. It is definitely an intellectual as well as an emotional endeavour of the artist and as such demands similar intellectual and emotional competence for the appreciation of this particular element in a work of art. However, when we encounter any work of art the first and foremost thing is what we immediately see. First of all it is a visual experience. So mere form and colour themselves (in any work of art) have the possibility of becoming pleasurable before being significant. To some extent it is similar to the pleasurable experience of encountering a natural rose where our instinctual behavior play the part. But then there are our historical experiences too which are constantly diluting our instinctual behavior and at the same time also enriching us culturally. So it is rather the cultural behavior or cultural competence, which determines our visual experiences in any work of art. Of course in either case it is the visual pleasure that we derive from the work immediately.

So we have at least three different criteria to judge between the representation of a rose and the representation of a bamboo flower. Among these the first one relating to the technical competence or skill is the only element, which can be detected easily by any one irrespective of his cultural position, universally. The last one relating to the visual pleasure involving the form and colour of the work also seems easily discernible and simple. But in reality it is relatively more complex. Because the beauty lies on the eyes of the beholder. Because we see what we learn to see and then what we love to, and so what we want to see. Besides, here "We" too is not a homogeneous mass. It is constituted with people of diverse culture and diverse competence. So a consensus hardly seems possible. It implies that no universally accepted judgement is also possible. However, we enter the most complex aspect of the aesthetics when we confront a work of art and try to grasp from it the perception of the artist and its correlative expression manifested in the works. Because it does not reside on the surface of the form and colour. It resides mingled with the form and colour. One can gaze at it yet one may fail to see it at all. It is not an event of the optics or instinct or habit. It is an event of the culture, engaged in some kind of dynamic discovery; not simply with eyes but also with intellect and emotion. Here the visible may become the sign of the invisible and unknown, to be discovered by the viewers. However, the semiotics of art is something where sign itself become the meaning. Signifying becomes the signified. We do not have to look for the unknown something, which might be hidden behind the sign, lying to be deciphered. Because there is no "something" behind the sign. Any claim to the contrary will simply lead us only to algebra but not to art. The object of art itself is the sign and meaning. Itself is the manifestation of dexterity. Itself is the object of

visual pleasure. All reside in the same thing and at the same time constituting an organic whole.

But the dissolving of the meaning in to the sign has opened up a new vista in the nature of art in the modern period. It may be recalled that even back in 1898, in an article, August Endell had proclaimed "we are at the beginning of the development of an entirely new art, the art of forms which means nothing, represent nothing, and remind us of nothing, but which is able to stir our soul as profoundly and as violently as only music has done hitherto."

Of course it was Schopenhauer who first said that all art aspires to the condition of music. Actually what Schopenhauer wanted to explain was the essence of art. But it has been misinterpreted many times since then. This misinterpreted philosophy leads to a situation where object (of the art) itself becomes a kind of self-contained meaning (or rather meaninglessness) without any reference beyond its frame or pedestal. This ultimately lead us to a condition where we can only just 'see' and can not 'know'. Because knowing is possible with at lest some kind of reference only. Critic like Leo Steinberg, however, welcomes such predicament when he says " like Kierkegaard's God, the picture seems arbitrary, cruel, irrational, demanding your faith, while it makes no promise of future rewards. In other words, it is in the nature of original contemporary art to present itself as a bad risk. And we the public, artists included, should be proud of being in this predicament, because nothing else would seem to us quite true to life ; and art, after all, is supposed to be a mirror of life."

So the question of superiority between the representation of a rose and a bamboo flower itself has ultimately become irrelevant. Because there are neither any roses nor any bamboo flowers any longer. What remains is only the naked skill, and coloured forms without any *signified*. So the judgement that **X** painting is superior to **Y** painting will only mean that its colour and form are perhaps simply more pleasing, and the skill applied by its maker is of relatively higher order. It is exactly just like judging the beauty between a rose and a bamboo flower of the nature with the basic human instinct. It is just like returning from the threshold beyond which the culture begins, back to the nature where it becomes simply a creation like that of the nature, "which means nothing, represents nothing and reminds us of nothing"; a socially meaningless condition.

The Bourgeois establishment is happy with this condition, which it tries to equate with freedom, for its own convenience. Because such freedom renders art socially meaningless. According to Hans Hess "the illusion of creation out of nothing pleases the capitalist entrepreneur, and the concept of the uniquely endowed individual creator corresponds to his own claim and serves as a happy and hallowed model for his own masterful personality, it symbolises and justifies private enterprise and the mystery of profit." In such context it does not convey any meaning to claim that X painting is superior to Y painting. Because value itself becomes irrelevant, which is after all basically a socially constituted phenomenon. However every day in media, all over the world, claims and counter claims are made by critics or rather by so-called critics on the status of such works. Perhaps we are now really approaching a situation where it will be no longer possible even to say that Bhimsen Joshi, Bare Golam Ali or Bismilla Khan are superior to the MTV staff.

So the only task remaining for the genuine art criticism in today's post-modern world is to rescue art from the clutch of the so-called 'uniquely endowed individual creators' and their bourgeois mentors, and then restore it back in its true social perspective. It is obvious that it is the artist who is responsible for the creation of his work. But it is also equally true that his work too is not isolated from the world, which provides him the materials for his works, and from the society or the audience before whom the works are presented. So instead of claiming that X is superior to Y, endeavour should be made at the outset to find out actually what they are, what do they signify. Does the work justify itself in the context the long experience of the cultural history of the mankind that started about thirty thousands years back in some obscure caves of the Paleolithic period? Above all - does it have a heart? Carlos Castaneda once wrote "Any path is only a path, and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you..... Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone one question..... Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good ; if it doesn't it is of no use." I think this is the only stable criterion for the final mooring of the art criticism in the ever-turbulent ocean of the modern art. The critics as well as the public should also understand that the ocean of art is of infinite varieties. Our abstract system of conceptual thinking can never judge its value adequately. The special kind of gratification we experienced from that world can not be reduced to language, which is only an abstract generalization of the infinite varieties and qualities of the multidimensional world into a linear pattern of abstract symbols- the words. The artistic gratification is empirical by nature. If we try to understand and express it conceptually there is the danger of getting

into the confusion and misunderstanding. With language, and for that matter with art criticism, we can only try to minimize the distance between the signifier and signified of the special sign we call art. In other words it may help to reduce the distance between its objective and subjective manifestation. Anything more than that, like manufacturing meaning externally in the language and then imposing that meaning on the work in the interpretation, will be simply a big lie. It is one of the reasons for the alienation of art in our contemporary society.

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