

Connoisseurship and Criticism (2015)

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The art of Connoisseurship and Criticism

Connoisseurship and criticism are the foundations of art appreciation. Even though this essay was originally written in a scholarly manner as required by university graduate studies, it is (I trust) not difficult to read. Connoisseurship and criticism are emergent in the domain of communication as practices of hearing, seeing, understanding, and informative sharing.

Hence within this influential domain of communication, according to Craig and Muller, the response of phenomenology (the experience of communication) is to theorize about "concepts such as experience, dialogue, authenticity, interpretation, and *other-ness*." ¹ I have seen these concepts emergence as an inspirational form of art appreciation. Art appreciation is embodied in connoisseurship and criticism. This enriches the experience of creative freedom in art and spirituality which transforms the individual through positive pleasure or through pleasure as *positiveness*.

Connoisseurship and criticism as art appreciation are also essential to informed leadership, because connoisseurship and criticism enlarge one's capacity for critical thought. This capacity is inter-disciplinary as critical thought applies to all inquiries whether in art theory, theology, spiritual practices, or in professional practices. Connoisseurship and criticism also enlarge one's visual vocabulary for writing poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and editorial. The inter-disciplinary experience reveals the necessity of motivation as the process learning to appreciate art continues. I *must* therefore give voice to the phenomenon, I *must* communicate the observations of my experience. My experience as an artist includes both knowledge and practice of art appreciation.

In other words, I am compelled to express creative freedom even if, for example, the writing of epic poetry is not the most popular genre of contemporary literature, or according one poetry organization there are limits to creative freedom expressed in the organizations request for submissions.

"The word-length for our creative writing (submissions) is 850 words and the line-limit for our poetry is 32-lines or less. I don't believe we would be of any service in regards to the length of your writings." ¹

¹ The quote remains anonymous out of respect for the organization, because it was not intended as a criticism of my epic poetry. However, it does demonstrate that creative freedom must be prepared to step outside conventions and seek fulfillment elsewhere, especially outside the dictates of the marketplace.

I had of course chosen the wrong form of poetry. If my intentions had been to conform to someone else's idea of poetry, I might have generated some measure of art appreciation. However, my intentions were to experience creative freedom in the writing of epic poetry. The first epic, *Cerulean Odyssey*, (2004-2012) comprised 10 volumes totaling 27,548 lines and 148,518 words. The second epic poem, *Weatherstone*, (2014-2016), comprised 102,323 words. I bit longer than your average poem or haiku.

Yet, epic poetry continues to inspire me.

By inspiration I mean a positive experience that recognizes I have the discipline and professional skills with which to communicate effectively through my poetry. I am inspired by the positive and cognitive pleasures of art appreciation as proposed by Eisner's concepts of connoisseurship and criticism.ⁱⁱ

Needless to say, one need not be a writer of poetry (or artist) to experience these pleasures. The invitation is open to all who desire to immerse themselves in the aesthetic beauty of all art and to grow in their ability to share that pleasure using effective communication skills. That positive pleasure accumulates in the mind to form a density of affirmative self-awareness, sufficient to nourish the human spirit for years to come. Such accumulation is the result of a dynamic process of self-awareness that gives aesthetic pleasure, that is, the pleasure of all things beautiful. Or as one artist wrote: the experience of "holiness of beauty and beauty of holiness."

Aesthetic pleasure is a function of processing dynamics. I posit that the experience of this dynamic adds to the experience of creative freedom to heighten the intensity of the phenomenon itself. This theoretical view emerges as *positiveness*. But, how can this *positiveness* be lived unless it is shared, that being the primary goal of interpersonal communication and the substance of shared ideas in relationships and in the community where we live? I share the lived experience of *positiveness* in what I have purposed to be my construct of a spiritually positive world. A positive world is an aesthetically pleasing world. It is a playful world.

It is a practice of Elliot Eisner's connoisseurship and criticism. "Art appreciation," she affirms, "has been and always will continue to be a source of pleasure."ⁱⁱⁱ Suffice it therefore to give a brief overview of this essential practice and how such appreciation contributes to my positive world.

Connoisseurship and criticism contribute to my positive world because the two are grounded in appreciation. Appreciation is a precursor to the experience of a phenomenon called creative freedom. I speak about the appreciation of art, specifically my appreciation of the creative process in writing epic poetry. Readers of this essay are free to substitute their own appreciated of art forms (music, dance, film, etc.) Connoisseurship and criticism applies to all forms of art.

They are the practices of art appreciation that result in motivation, inspired by art's aesthetic environment of beauty. That environment *speaks* to me in a vocative manner. "The vocative features of a text," says van Manen, "have to do with the

recognition that a text (like a work of art) can 'speak to us,' that we may experience an emotional responsiveness, that we may *know ourselves addressed*." ^{iv}

Art speaks to me as it speaks to the viewer. Writing speaks to me as it speaks to the reader. Therefore, my practice of art appreciation will always be experiences of awe and wonder. Awe and wonder *are* positiveness. In a critical-thought context of awe and wonder, appreciation is a measure of the positive value of beauty inherent in the artform itself. That's the thought. That's the criticism; they are critical thoughts.

I base that critical thought on the assumption that etymologically the word *criticism* is not the practice of being a *critic*, but a practice of disclosure of what I have learned about the artist in an appreciative manner. That appreciation is more than just visual appeal or an intellectual aesthetic. That appreciation is also spiritual when practiced as a devotional and motivated by Divine inspiration, because like art, God speaks to me.

Divine inspiration became Cerulean's experience of prophetic imagination in the *Valley of Dry Bones*, as his spiritual encounter was filled with awe and wonder.

I am here to speak to the bones
with a heart's desire for communion
my spirit with divine encounters
writing in tongues of angels
mana ra ma kiria ich no ste ²
che ta ria ma so krotto ma ne
ko to to tastia be di mara
banda mia ka to sha dotra
yet oft alone on my quest for meaning
no traveling minstrels to entertain
no show of Broadway Players
for company and banter along the way
I am alone in this valley
can these bones see my doubt
certainties and uncertainties
strengths and comforts abiding
endurance towards an assured finish
who will understand my odyssey
and retreat with me into the thrill of an adventure
a passion to discover
a joy of experience in holiness of beauty

² *Weatherstone*, Tableau 42. Note: lines 4-7 are my experience of writing *in tongues*. The interpretation is given in the last 6 lines of the tableau.

beauty of holiness and commitment
to learn more about myself
the excellence of craftsmanship
and the blessing of discipleship (42:4-7)

But, how do connoisseur and critic measure devotional and inspirational values of such a phenomenon as creative freedom? How do I measure delight and inspiration through art in my practices of connoisseurship and criticism? Is the measure actually immeasurable? Is the question even researchable?

Elliot Eisner answers, "It has little to do with measured variables, with factor analysis, with multivariate analysis, or the array of statistical procedures used to do 'real' research." ^v

Therefore, reasons for my judgments are based on quality (aesthetic) values and not quantity of data.

In the same manner, when I discuss the theoretical foundations of a spiritual experience based on connoisseurship and criticism, participants in the discussion can only measure their own understanding by the implicit value of their experience compared to mine. According to Eisner, connoisseurship is a *knowing* of teachers and their wisdom, and artists and their art. For example, connoisseurship is both a *knowing* of Cerulean as the principal character in the epic poem *Weatherstone*, and connoisseurship as a *knowing* of me as its author. I posit that same connoisseurship as implicit in a *knowing* of God.

Eisner also proposes that criticism, connoisseur's twin, is in fact a cognitive ability to "render what they come to know in a language that is accessible (and positive) to others." ^{vi} Criticism discloses what participants know or have heard and seen about Cerulean's quest *and* the lived-experiences of its author. From a greater perspective, criticism among communicative participants (readers and listeners) discloses what they have heard and seen in my art as well as in my spiritual practices. In other words, the inside story is validated by the outward evidence and visa-versa. This poses the question whether any such disclosure reveals a positive experience of my art? Similarly, does any such disclosure reveal a positive experience of my spiritual journey including whatever leadership initiatives I have taken?

Participants must decide for themselves.

Conversely, that same connoisseurship and criticism as disclosure of my experience of creative freedom, becomes an effective way of communicating with others. Because, as I tell my story I am also transformed, not just those who see and listen.

I often account for the *positiveness* of connoisseurship and criticism by using the metaphor of *walking in the footsteps of masters*. As the masters of excellence (*positiveness*) in art have inspired me to walk in their footsteps, so the Master of my spiritual quest

inspires me to walk in His footsteps. Positiveness is therefore paramount because it informs my (positive) worldview and deposits an aggregate of creativity that is spiritual, ethical, and moral, as well as playful, delightful, moved by awe and wonder.

Call it style or form, or call it cognitive fluency, or spiritual awakening and transformation, the outcome is effective communication enriched by the confidence and humility of lived experience. It is a return or rebirth of creative freedom that is eloquently shared in the stories of my artistic and spiritual journey beyond popular conventions and mere mark-making, and beyond spirituality as a confectionary process of self-help. I posit the evidence speaks for itself in connoisseurship and criticism of the footsteps I have created for me to enjoy and for other to follow.

To conclude is it actually possible to measure the immeasurable? Is the question even researchable? The answer to both is no. Creative freedom is a lived-experience that bears spiritual fruit that cannot be measured, that is, quantified; creative freedom is not an achievement or a process that bears material fruit regardless of qualifications.

ⁱ Robert Craig, Heidi Muller. *"Theorizing Communication: Readings Across Traditions."* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. 2007. p.217.

ⁱⁱ Elliot Eisner. *"The Roots of Connoisseurship and Criticism."* The Roots of Connoisseurship and Criticism: A Personal Journey. Ch.3. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 2004.pp.e1-e7. retrieved online.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elliot Eisner. *"The Roots of Connoisseurship and Criticism."* The Roots of Connoisseurship and Criticism: A Personal Journey. Ch.3. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 2004.pp.e1-e7.

^{iv} Max Van Manen. *"Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing."* Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. 2014. p.240. (brackets added)

^v Elliot Eisner. *"The Roots of Connoisseurship and Criticism."* The Roots of Connoisseurship and Criticism: A Personal Journey. Ch.3. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 2004.pp.e1-e7.

^{vi} Ibid. p.e2. (brackets added).