

The Anatomy of Art: Communicating and Interpreting Meanings

How does one have a thought, feeling, or an experience and communicate it to another person? St. Augustine was vexed by this question, and his answer helps us understand not just basic communication, but how arts are an important part of our communication. This session will explore the meaning of art and how the performance of art shapes its meaning and interpretation.

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I. Jesus and communication

A. Jesus and inductive teaching: the parables

1. Jesus uses parables to correct assumed beliefs
2. Parables invert assumed truths
3. The first will be first becomes the last will be first
4. The wealthy are the blessed becomes the poor are the blessed
5. Example: Luke: 25-37 – the Good Samaritan

B. Jesus as performer

1. Jesus and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus
2. Luke 24:28 – Jesus acts “as if” he is going on
3. Jesus uses his actions for force the issue of his separation from the two disciples.

II. Augustine and communication

A. Before the Fall

- B. After the Fall
- C. Need for bodies
- D. Signs, Words, Gestures
 1. All require bodies to send and receive
 2. Sound/music is not well defined in Augustine's thought

III. "How" is just as important as "what"

- A. It is not just what you do, but how you do it that has meaning
- B. This will vary from culture to culture, which makes cross-cultural communication and art challenging
- C. Think of how the gestures of greeting differ from culture to culture
- D. Tools, Signs, Symbols
- E. Art functions in a world of symbol
 1. Religion mostly functions in the realm of symbol, as God cannot be reduced to one thing
 2. The exclusive use of sign in religion speaks to fundamentalism and propaganda
- F. Example from the Sound of Music
- G. Meaning is found in dialogue with convention
 1. Does it meet expectations?
 2. Does it play with convention, teasing out new meanings?

IV. Praxis and Poiesis

- A. Sandra Levy (following Coleridge) suggests there are two imaginations
- B. The primary imagination that allows us to receive, organize, and categorize the world
- C. The imagination that allows us to transcend the primary imagination
- D. Aristotle call the first Praxis and the second Poiesis
- E. Poiesis is poetic, artistic

1. It points to the truth beyond the truth
2. It speaks of transcendence
3. Theologian Paul Tillich says that anything that deals with issues of “ultimate concern” is ‘religious’
4. This is the connection between art and religion

V. Techne

- A. Not everyone is an artist
- B. Some may have an artistic vision, but may struggle to find ways to express it
- C. Anyone with a smart phone can take a picture
- D. Not every photograph is a work of art
- E. A person with artistic gifts and insight can help us see what we overlook
- F. It requires technique, skill, or craft
- G. It requires practice
- H. This is the unique place of the artist in the world
- I. Artists help us pay attention
- J. Artists help us see the truth beyond the truth and beauty
- K. Truth and beauty
 1. The opposite of “beauty” in English is not “ugly
 2. The opposite of beauty is ‘glamour’
 3. Beauty can be harsh and honest, but not glamour
- L. Communicating beauty takes techne or skill

Suggested Readings:

- González-Andrieu, Cecilia. *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty*. Baylor University Press, 2012.
- Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. Baker Academic, 2009
- Levy, Sandra. *Imagination and the Journey of Faith*. Eerdmans, 2008.