

Seeing More or Seeing Less

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William James (1890) famously referred to the experience of our world as a “blooming, buzzing confusion”. Over time we learn to make sense of this experience in a variety of different ways. We learn to pay attention to some things and not to pay attention to others. We learn to tell our selves and others stories about what is happening that link things together in narrative chains of events. We learn causal theories that explain why something happened. The need to make sense of things is strong in humans, such that it is common place to say, “everything happens for a reason.” Weick (1995) famously stood this idea on its head and suggested that the reason often comes afterwards as we make up a reason for everything that happens after the fact.

Stories and causal theories are examples of two rather different ways that we make sense of the world. Stories are an example of how we make sense of the world with art, while causal theories are examples of how we make sense of the world with science. Good art dwells with the particular in a way that connects with the audience. We see it and we understand in a way that allows us to understand our world a little differently, a little more. That understanding tends to be embodied, felt, and individual. In contrast, good science offers us a generalized theory that explains how some aspect of the world works in a cognitive, intellectual way. Artistic sensemaking is divergent, subjective, and embraces contradiction and paradox. Scientific sensemaking is convergent, objective, and strives for reliability and validity. Artistic forms seek essence. Scientific forms seek prediction and control.

Both artistic and scientific approaches to sensemaking focus our attention on some things and thus not on others. Both frame our experience, in the sense that the frame limits what we pay attention to and provides a way of understanding. If I frame an interaction between two people as a conflict, I see the differences and tensions. If I frame the same interaction as a game, I see the ways in which they are cooperating and the ways that they each are enjoying the interaction. Many years ago, a friend of mine told me that he wasn’t having enough fun in his life. I asked what he was going to do about it. He replied that he was going to redefine fun. Changing the frame changes everything.

In a previous editorial (Taylor, 2013) I suggested that the ability stay with your senses and not-know is at the heart of artistic practice. But this does not mean that there aren’t frames guiding that artistic practice. I think it is impossible to engage our world without some sort of framing, without some sort of interpretive schemes that guide what we pay attention to, what we see, what we hear, what we notice, and how we make sense of that information. The idea of not-knowing is itself a frame – and a damn difficult one to hold at that. However, there is an important difference in artistic frames and scientific frames.

Scientific frames are meant to allow us to select the important pieces of data about our world and then manipulate that data to arrive at the truth (McGilchrist, 2009). Once we have

selected the data, we don't need to pay attention to the ongoing evidence provided by our senses, we already have what we need. The problems with this sort of framing are well known – the tendency to not notice data that doesn't fit with the frame, confirmation bias, and so on (cf Kahneman, 2011). The power of this sort of thinking is also well known – modernity is built upon our ability to manipulate the world around us based in scientific research on how things work.

Artistic frames work differently. Mary Jo Hatch once said to me, “the more I paint, the more colors I see” (quoted in Taylor, 2012 p. 7). This captures the essence of the artistic frame. It is a way of seeing more, of making more and finer distinctions. When the artist looks at colors they draw upon analytic frames based in color wheels and the like, not to identify a color and move on, but rather to move beyond the analytic frame and see more than they have seen before. The difference between scientific frames and artistic frames is that scientific frames push us to see less of the world, while artistic frames push us to see more of the world. They are in this sense fundamentally different ways of paying attention to the world (McGilchrist, 2012).

It takes a lot of energy and work to keep looking, to keep listening, to pay attention to the continually changing evidence coming from our senses. It is easier to pay a little bit of attention, get the data you were looking for and rest secure in your understanding of the world. It is easier to see less than it is to see more. So, by and large that's what we do as humans. It is seductive to think you have grasped what is going on, that you have the essence of a situation. It feels good to believe that you have reduced the blooming buzz of confusion to something fairly simple and straight-forward.

Overly simple understandings are often problematic, not because they are simple but because they are simplistic. Quinn (2000) suggests that we often follow a path from a simplistic understanding to a more complex understanding and then on to a simple understanding of a situation. The simplistic understanding is naïve, while the simple understanding is wise. I would suggest that the way to move from simplistic to simple is to see more, not to see less. That wisdom comes from artistic frames.

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