

Pictopoiesis:

Convergent Trajectories Towards a Poietic Description of Painting

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Abstract

This paper proposes a poietic description of a painting's making in terms of poetry, neuroscience and philosophy. A comparison is made between the poiesis of painting and that of poetry with respect to their time-based modalities. William Kentridge's process is used to link the two. The neuroscientific theory of practopoiesis is introduced as a means of understanding painting as a manifestation of the formation of intelligence and the embedding of intelligent thought in a painting. The philosophical relationship between artificiality and nature is analysed in a dialectic that reconciles the use of a digital medium as a continuation of a painting's poiesis. Finally, a mixed reality (MR) scenario is envisaged which involves the viewer in a mind-body cognitive appreciation of the time-based narrative of a painting. This links poetry, practopoiesis and philosophical considerations in disclosure of the time-based narrative of the painting, otherwise largely hidden in its completed form. The role of state of mind with respect to creative production is also considered. The implications of this methodology extend to education, expressive arts therapy and neuroscientific research. It is argued that MR is not necessarily a vehicle to be used primarily for entertainment with respect to the arts. The paper concludes with the formulation of the term 'Pictopoiesis' which describes the process of making a painting in terms of an active adaptive system synchronous with the painting's gestalt presence. Pictopoiesis is the start of an evolving framework revitalising the place of painting in contemporary art practice.

Keywords: painting, poetry, poiesis, practopoiesis, pictopoiesis

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to formulate an understanding of a painting's making in terms of poetry, theory of mind and philosophy to find a new way of describing the process. A material and conceptual corollary of this shows how a painting's poiesis, hidden behind its completed presence, could be presented using digital technology.

Painting has undergone a radical transformation over the past century. Shifts in artistic paradigms have led to its changing position in contemporary art and becoming less central to artistic practice. This is even more the case since the advent of digital mediums. Yet painting's vitality persists, it has a mysterious silence which beckons inquiry. Looking at painting as an extendable poietic time-based act, could perhaps yield further insight into this, as well as an enhanced engagement with it. The question is, how to unveil the mystery of a painting's making in a way that will engage and inform in new ways.

The term poiesis (Ancient Greek: poiesis $\pi \omicron \iota \eta \sigma \iota \varsigma$ (poiesis), from $\pi \omicron \iota \acute{\epsilon} \omega$ (poieo), "to make") has been used as suffix to a number of words concerning production. In this paper it is used to denote the process of making a painting. Painting here is taken as that which is done in successive layers of adding or subtracting material; the outcome, the painting, is not by necessity predetermined by a fixed end result (an extreme example of a predetermined end result would be painting by numbers).

This research is qualitative in nature and takes both an inductive and deductive approach towards the analysis of painting's poiesis in the areas mentioned. Looking at textual and video evidence, poetry, theory of mind, and philosophy are brought together in a hypothetical scenario involving mixed reality (MR).

The first section deals with poetry, comparing its time-based modality with painting's poiesis, referencing in particular the poem 'Omphalos' (Gulig, 2016). William Kentridge's animation methodology is analysed as a primarily time-based graphic medium having a poietic correspondence with painting. Keats' (1817) negative capability is referenced as a state of consciousness in which poetic creativity can take place, leading on to the second section that deals with theory of mind.

Referring to Danko Nikolić's (2015) recent theory of practopoiesis, painting is seen as containing the physical traces, the embedding, of an intelligence-driven process which is largely hidden on physical completion of the work. This process can only be speculated on if simply viewing the end result. Fundamental concepts of practopoiesis are applied to the painting process including homeostasis, traversal and adaptation. This leads to a consideration of the consequent adaptive system that involves both body and mind and emergent learning, complex thinking and behaviour.

The third section takes on a philosophical perspective, firstly seeing contemporary art practice as an adaptive rebalancing with the digital world. The dichotomy between nature and artificiality is taken through a dialectical argument starting with Aristotle's (1902) 'Poetics', and including Paul Klee (2000), reconciling the synthesis of non-digital painting with digital mediums. The idea of a painting's process is also alighted on in terms of negative capability and the Tao.

Having analysed the nature of the poietic content of a painting and its potential disclosure as a sequential time-based narrative, the final section suggests how this might be done. The use of the Microsoft HoloLens is proposed as a digital tool for presenting a

scenario in which a painting's poiesis, is revealed in space and time. Practopoiesis is brought in again, along with the concept of ideasthesia which suggests uses for the digital tool beyond the utilitarian and entertainment (Nikolić, 2016).

1. Poiesis in Poetry and Painting

Painting and poetry have long been considered to have a close affinity.

Twentieth-century poets such as W. H. Auden (1940) in 'Musée des Beaux Arts', and John Ashbery (1975) in 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror', have written ekphrastic descriptions of paintings as did Keats (1820) in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', over a century earlier.

In response to images of a group of paintings by the author of this paper, contemporary poet Nicholas Gulig has followed in this tradition with the poem 'Omphalos':

...What is it then in each of us we've kept apart to say is singular, assured of origin, a self supposedly, a nationality, a song? Stranger, are you near me?

Despite discrepancy, no sun, nor salt, nor sky can cease enough to render what's interior. Is it wrong to make this up, to speak the world of things without a means to sing that one is listening?... (Gulig, 2016)

Gulig describes the sense of disorientation of the self within the complex contemporary world, its alienation from the source of poetic inspiration and formation in relation to other selves. However, taken as a whole, the poem 'Omphalos' goes beyond a typical ekphrasis, it recreates the making of the painting in poetic form. The poet unifies painting as action with painting as being. The poem could be seen as an analogy for the

place of non-digital painting in today's digital world. A question arises, could the gestalt perception of a painting and its time-based making, or poiesis, be synthesised using digital means? It would make a painting readable in a new way, but what would be the impact of doing so?

A Contemporary artist whose poietic process is evident in his final work is William Kentridge. He works with charcoal, capturing each stage of his drawing photographically, compiling sequential narratives in the form of animations (SFMOMA, 2010). His process involves musings between drawing stages that inform the content of the work. This approach generates outcome from within the poietic process. The materiality of his working is comparable to that of painting in that charcoal is a medium with a fluidity and re-workability akin to that of paint. However, it fundamentally differs in that the reception of the final animation is time-based. Although painting has an element of observation over time, it relies very much on a constructed gestalt at any moment during observation.

In the case of paint or charcoal, the material and its use form an integral part of the poietic and poetic narrative. Kentridge himself talks about this material aspect in his methodology (Louisiana Channel, 2014). The link between material and process is something Archibald Macleish (1926) alludes to in his 'Ars Poetica' when he says, "A poem should not mean But be". The suggestion that the form of a poem should convey a tangible sense of structure is something that a painting readily offers with its more physical presence. Contemporary poet and painter Etel Adnan (2018) demonstrates the affinities between painting and poetry oscillating between pictorial and word-based structures and combining both in her *leporellos*.

The shaping of outcome via the process of making is made manifest in Kentridge's approach. The openness of mind and receptivity to new and unexpected input during process was mused upon in 1817 by the Romantic poet John Keats (1817). He termed the frame of mind needed for poetic creativity, "Negative Capability". Keats' notion concerns the willingness to exist in uncertainty as a vital ingredient in poetic creativity. Uncertainty is something also talked about by Kentridge (Louisiana Channel, 2014).

In time-based mediums, uncertainty is mitigated during its reception in the form of surprise, denouement and other such devices. However, a painting does not behave in this way as its narrative is constructed primarily by the viewer as they infer meaning from the work. The actual poetic narrative of its coming into being, potentially revelatory, remains largely hidden in the final work. Seen this way, a painting is actually a form of uncertainty.

Attempts have been made to understand the extremely complex matter of how an audience recognises a painting. Research in the area of the cognition of emotional responses and visual scenes when translating poetry into painting has been done through a fuzzy approach but does merit further study (Chi-Long Lin et al, 2015). However, there is little or no literature for the converse, looking at how painting is turned into poetry.

2. The Intelligence of Poiesis

The recent neuroscientific theory, practopoiesis (Ancient Greek: $\pi\rho\alpha\tilde{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$ (praxis), meaning "action, activity, practice" and $\pi\omicron\lambda\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ (poiesis), from $\pi\omicron\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ (poieo), "to make"), describes how intelligent thought is not just a matter of neural activity in the brain but comes about as a result of the body constantly interacting adaptively with its surroundings (Nikolić, 2015). Central to the hypothesis are two

fundamental ideas, homeostasis and traversal. Homeostasis is the maintenance of the constant internal environment necessary for survival in a continually changing external environment. It involves different feedback mechanisms as in the endocrine, circulatory and motor-neural systems, amongst others, working in concert with the brain. It is a process by which feedback loops between the external and internal environments maintain the body in a state of dynamic equilibrium. In practopoiesis, internal neurophysiological responses constantly mediate the body's interaction with the external world. Intelligence is formed, not simply as an emergent property of neurological action and reaction to changes but through adaptive plasticity involving the whole body as a gateway to the environment. This adaptive response whether physiological, kinetic or perceptual informs subsequent responses and behaviours. In this way, the brain's neural organisation is constantly re-adapting. This adaptive process leads to a traversal from one level of neural activity to the next, the highest level intelligent thinking being a qualitative jump, a step up in kind from the lower levels of neural activity. It results in adaptive cognition and behaviour involving memory and hence re-learning, which in turn informs future cognition and behaviour. This process of re-learning is a whole new system working at a higher (meta) level.

A painting in the making, undergoing poiesis, can be seen as an adaptive system. It is capable of activation and adjustment across all its visible and conceptual planes. This is evident in Kentridge's cognitive-physical process outlined earlier. A painting in turn, evidences the intelligence that has gone into its making but much of this evidence is buried, erased, altered in the process. Neuroscientists are interested in addressing the explanatory gap between the brain and the mind; Practopoiesis is an explanation for how

the physical world of neural activity produces the mental world of perception and cognition (Nikolić, 2018). Painting could be used to track this process in terms of how a physical painting is formed from its materials by the thoughts and behaviour of the artist.

3. Poiesis and Philosophy

Everyday life is becoming increasingly bound to the digital. Our relationship with the digital world necessitates a balancing act between ourselves and the digital environment. This can be seen as a homeostatic process. Contemporary art practice contends with this dialectic in different ways. One such philosophical approach is through the idea of poiesis mediating between traditional and contemporary art practice and theory (Whitehead, 2007). As a corollary, poiesis also offers an appropriate means by which painting specifically can be navigated philosophically (Whitehead, 2003).

Reaching back towards an early origin in Western thinking, Aristotle in his *Poetics* drew out a relationship between art and nature (Butcher, 1902). Aristotle brought to light the fact that art, unlike nature, does not contain within itself its own impetus or immanent form. In this context, art is defined as artificial, human-made. However, if a painting is seen as a form of cultivation through the natural agency of the artist, then its poiesis could be seen as a natural derivative, occurring within the artwork itself, with artist and painting becoming one. Painting could then be argued to be a natural process. The important thing here is that there is no philosophical distinction made between artist and artwork. The impetus comes from within that union. In his 1923 pedagogical notes Paul Klee wrote, "For the artist communication with nature remains the most essential condition. The artist is human; himself nature; part of nature within natural space" (Klee and Moholy-Nagy, 2000). Klee's statement creates a situation in which the product of an artist's process is as

much a part of nature as they themselves are. His idea has correspondence with the view that painting is a natural product, the result of cultivation. The dichotomy in how an artwork is seen, as either natural or artificial, creates a tension. A way to mitigate this is to say that a painting is both natural and artificial, both a product of nature and human-made.

Poiesis embedded in the finished painting is largely hidden save for the visible elements. To explicate much of the poietic process is extremely difficult, and would seem impossible, at least to the casual observer, once the painting is separated from the artist. However, if details of the process could be unveiled, that would say something extra about the artist's relationship with the painting. It would give the receiver of the work the opportunity for a deeper and potentially empowering engagement through their additionally-informed inferences.

Whatever the case might be, the poietic relationships, thoughts and feelings that remain undisclosed in a painting do so as latent gifts from the artist which still have the capacity to reveal and be revealed. Painting "knows" of its own poiesis, otherwise hidden within it; it has a "knowing" silence, which characterises it.

Correspondences between the philosophy of Taoism and poiesis have been identified in the field of expressive arts therapy (Levine, 2015). In Tao philosophy, life's direction is maintained by a conscious openness to that which is encountered. This notion is consistent with Keats' negative capability which favours a process in uncertainty over one premised upon certainty. The Tao and negative capability are approaches to life which are reflected in the process of painting when its outcome cannot be known until it actually appears. Shaun McNiff's book, 'Trust the Process' comes to mind. It is this

wandering openness that could with regard to painting's process be later disclosed, as a poem disclosing its meaning through its narration.

A real concern today is the loss of solid connection with our past and origins; something palpably preserved in fine art practice which still uses traditional materials. Those who knew what it was to live in a world without digital technology are becoming fewer and fewer, and eventually there will be none. As society changes with greater urbanisation and increasing dependence on technology, there is the prospect of a reduction of access to sources of inspiration directly consonant with nature. Yet there is no reason why painting should not be extended further with digital technology. It only depends on seeing both as lying along a holistic natural-artificial continuum rather than being part of a conflicted duality.

4. Poiesis, Mixed Reality and the Microsoft HoloLens

Excitement in the immersive digital and virtual universe has led to an inability in the young to contemplate a single painting (Paglia, 2012). The digital media are primarily orientated towards sensorial experience and or entertainment to capture attention. Nikolić (2016), in 'Ideasthesia and Art' suggests that entertainment and science lie along a spectrum with extremes correspondingly characterised by sense experience (aesthesia) and meaning (idea). It is argued that only an art piece is consistently located in a gray area in between entertainment and science, where sensory experience and meaning are balanced out (Nikolić, 2016).

Appreciation of paintings using VR suggests that the viewer is stimulated to think not what they face but why and how something is in front of them (Antonietti and

Cantoia, 2000). Contrary to what might be expected in relation to an actual painting, virtual reality appears to enhance enquiry and abstract thinking (Antonietti and Cantoia, 2000). From this it can be conjectured that MR might help a viewer to read a painting and become more conversant with context and interpretation. Additionally, the combination of kinaesthetic and mental engagement newly possible with MR can be seen as presenting the opportunity for augmented experience amongst audiences more at home with the frenetic world of the digital. This full engagement with body and mind and the resulting behaviour corresponds to what would be expected from the standpoint of practopoiesis.

The HoloLens is essentially a holographic computer built into a headset that allows its user to see, hear and interact with holograms within real space. In effect, an actual painting could be juxtaposed with sequential holograms of the various stages of the painting's making. The viewer could walk around the holographic images interacting with them bodily. This would create a revelatory environment in which the developmental anatomy of the painting is opened out. The receiver would be able to engage directly with the poietic narrative as much as with the surface view of the real painting. This would offer the opportunity for inferences otherwise impossible for both artist and audience. Derek Whitehead (2003) considers the concept of poiesis as a space in which artist, artwork and receiver can enter into a relationship of unitary multiplicity; where the viewer is met and addressed in a poietic, non-exploitative manner. Encounters such as these would involve the viewer in an enhanced kinaesthetic experience. This would be different in kind to that which would otherwise be the case between painting and viewer. The disclosure of painting on terms such as these could open up an experimental poiesis, something referred to by Derek Whitehead (2003) in 'Poiesis and

Art-Making: A Way of Letting-Be'. The envisaged scenario is a potential case of facilitated decentering into the alternative world of the imagination, something referred to in expressive arts therapy (Levine, 2011). Implicit in a painting is the invitation to its audience to receive it, engage with it, recalling Nicholas Gulig's question, "Stranger are you near me?" (Gulig, 2016).

Conclusion

This research has explored a path of poiesis relative to painting. Along the way it has found intersections with other disciplines including but not limited to poetry, neuroscience and philosophy. A poietic description of painting begins to emerge.

As with poetry, painting contains a time-based narrative element in its making, one that is hidden in the painting. If painting is seen as a poem then it sets up a paradigm to find a way to display that poem. The MR scenario is one way of making that a reality. By showing poetically the poiesis of a painting using MR, light can be thrown on how a painting comes about. Practopoiesis gives an explanatory framework for visualising painting as a manifestation of intelligence in action. This potentially points to further neuroscientific studies on how intelligence is formed during creative processes.

A painting can be viewed as both artificial and natural and there is no conflict in principle in considering MR as a poietic continuum of painting linking the natural with the artificial, painting with the digital. Such a continuum would demonstrate the future as a matter of the continuously evolving past by maintaining its essential and traceable connection with origins throughout. This is significant for humankind as we are becoming increasingly detached from our source in nature. The MR scenario also

presents, an opportunity for engaging the viewer in a kinaesthetic experience that potentially broadens the perceptual and cognitive appreciation of a painting. Together with additional educational and therapeutic applications, the vitality of painting would be refreshed appropriately without loss or compromise of its history.

The ideas laid out form the basis for a new way of describing the making of a painting: Pictopoiesis (picto: picture and or painting; poiesis: making). Pictopoiesis means seeing the making of a painting as a time-based process analogous to the narrative of a poem. Pictopoiesis identifies an active and in motion adaptive system synchronous with the painting's gestalt in constant reciprocity with the artist. This paper lays the ground for further work in explicating pictopoiesis more fully. It also has the potential for extended applications across other mediums and disciplines.

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