“CERTAIN THINGS LAST”: A SKEPTICAL LOOK AT MARTINDALE’S DIRGE FOR THE ARTS

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Over the centuries, we have seen many theories of what something must do, be, or have to be considered art. For example, something must evoke subtle, sublime feelings; raise consciousness and foment class struggle; be beautiful; fail to serve a practical use; elevate the audience’s moral sensibilities; stimulate thoughtfulness and reflection; express emotion; attack complacence and confront traditional values; make no money; or be about something other than what it is (see Stecker, 2003). Although Martindale probably does not know it, his approach—art must be novel and communicate something—is old-fashioned and romantic because he assumes that art has innate, essential features than non-art lacks.

Martindale’s (2009) analysis of the extinction of art could be dismissed simply by contesting his definition of the essence of art: if we dispute his premises, then his analysis collapses. But this article takes his model at face value. If we accept that art must be novel and comprehensible, then must we accept the extinction of art? I propose that his model is too vague to support the sweeping claims about the extinction of the arts. In particular:

1. Martindale’s tacit usage of extinction ignores the complexities of applying concepts of species and extinction to human practices; and
2. Martindale’s view of novelty and communication as features of art, not as subjective features of diverse audiences, is misleading.

EXTINCTION OF ORGANISMS, WORKS, PRACTICES, OR AUDIENCES?

According to Martindale, poetry is near extinction, and painting, sculpture, and classical music are already extinct. But what died? What does it mean to say that a domain of activity is extinct? Two levels of vagueness appear here. First, it isn’t clear how Martindale carves the domains of art. He claims that classical music is extinct, but classical music is a lower-order category in a broader taxonomy. Is music, to go upward, extinct? Or, up another level, is creative action extinct? How about behavior itself? The question of what evolves, changes, or dies is a hard question that Martindale does not confront. In the domain of literature, for example, we have forms (e.g., novels, short stories, flash fiction), national traditions (e.g., American literature, Commonwealth literature), historical periods (e.g., early American modernism, interwar American modernism), genres broad and narrow (e.g., the “strike novels” of the 1930s, the Bildungsroman), and sociopolitical categories (e.g., censored works, propaganda novels). What part or parts of this domain die?

A second level of vagueness concerns what it means to go extinct. This question is unanswerable, given that Martindale hasn’t confronted the species problem that we just described. Nevertheless, we must ask what it means for a class of behavior to go extinct. Consider, as an example, early American literary modernism, a pivotal period in the history of American writing. Is this kind of writing extinct? Certainly, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Frank Norris have passed away, but is the literary practice dead? Living writers still write books that resemble Sister Carrie, Winesburg, Ohio, and McTeague in structure, theme, and purpose, so the enactment of this tradition persists. And, of course, the books themselves persist; collectors and casual readers still buy and enjoy them. Later writers have kept this tradition alive—literally alive, in Martindale’s model—over the last century. We see the influence of Sherwood Anderson’s landmark Winesburg, Ohio in the
work of his immediate descendants—William Saroyan’s *My Name is Aram* and John Steinbeck’s *Tortilla Flats* are good examples—and in the work of contemporary American writers such as Robert Olen Butler.

Here, then, is the problem: the period of history is gone, but the books themselves exist, the readers exist, contemporary instances of the tradition exist, and living writers working in the tradition exist. What would have to vanish for early modernism to die? To extend this point, what died to make classical music die? People still buy, sell, learn, archive, compose, perform, and enjoy classical music. And what died to make poetry die? (Perhaps someone clobbered it with a sculpture, which we now know to be more fossil than statue.)

I suspect that Martindale uses the term *extinction* as a proxy for a more trivial term—popularity, perhaps. His statement that poetry is practically extinct because few people read it, if taken seriously, reveals a lack of commitment to the evolutionary metaphor that undergirds the model. In evolutionary biology—the area in which evolution is an actual fact, not merely a model or metaphor for something else—extinction is forever. If all of the manatees die, they are gone for good. But if poetry dies, we can raise it from extinction merely by writing, reading, and appreciating it. If early American modernism dies, we can raise it from extinction by reading the old books and writing similar books.

In short, the concepts of species and extinction are more complex and more arbitrary in art history than in evolutionary biology: sadly, we cannot test the DNA of Robert Olen Butler’s *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain* to see if it is a distant relative of Sherwood Anderson’s *The Triumph of the Egg*. If we are to take Martindale’s evolutionary metaphor as seriously as he wants the field to take it, then we must have clearer connections between the metaphor’s concepts and the complex reality of the arts.

**NOVELTY AND COMPREHENSION ARE SUBJECTIVE AND VARIED**

Martindale’s tragedy comes from the interplay of two forces: the need for greater novelty, and the need for art to communicate something comprehensible. These forces oppose each other, he argues, so inevitably art will fail to be new or comprehensible. It’s revealing, I think, that Martindale talks about novelty and comprehensibility as features of the arts themselves, not as contextual or subjective responses of human audiences. Such nativist views have their recent roots in the Berlyne tradition: Berlyne (1971), too, viewed concepts such as complexity and novelty as stimulus features, although he was not always consistent.

In contrast, I contend that the novelty and comprehensibility of a work depends directly on the audience and only indirectly on the work itself. My own work on aesthetics (Silvia, 2005a, 2005b) is grounded in appraisal theories of emotion, which view emotions as caused by subjective appraisals of events (Lazarus, 1991). Decades of emotion research illustrate the vast between-person variability in emotional experience: for any given thing, people will have different appraisals and different emotions (Roseman & Smith, 2001). In fact, many studies illustrate individual differences in appraisals of novelty and of comprehensibility—works of art are not themselves novel or comprehensible.

In my research on interest (Silvia, 2006, 2008), for example, I have measured self-reports of novelty and comprehensibility in response to poetry, classical painting, and experimental visual art. Figure 1 shows responses to the semantic-differential item *unfamiliar*-*familiar* for a visual poem by Marcia Arrieta, an experimental artist and the editor of the poetry journal *Indefinite Space*. Obviously, people differed in their appraisal of the image’s novelty: it’s hard to say that this image has an inherent level of novelty that people directly apprehend. I have dozens of such histograms: some are skewed, some are normal, some are multimodal, and some are uniform. In all of them, there is large variability, and there is always at least a small group of people who find the work familiar, simple, and easy to understand.
Just as people differ at a point in time, people differ over time. Appraisals of novelty and comprehensibility change as people gain knowledge, expertise, and experience. Walker (1980) presents and reviews dozens of studies that show that perceptions of complexity and novelty shift with experience, age, and expertise. People can learn to get more out of art—art education works. Martindale may find the random poetry of the late 1990s incomprehensible, for example, but I get a lot out of it. During my years as an editor of *gestalten*—a small-press journal of experimental language art—I read thousands of poems and hundreds of small chapbooks, including random, visual, algorithmic, synthetic, mathematical, and generally weird poems. The work of Daniel Davidson, John High, and Jim Leftwich—three writers of challenging poetry—can be moving and powerful, but it takes some background in experimental writing.

Over history, audiences can become more sophisticated and educated. For example, Sherwood Anderson’s last two novels—*Beyond Desire* and *Kit Brandon*—were widely panned in the 1930s, but these experimental books have aged well. The subsequent years of progressive novels have made Anderson’s books seem straightforward and simple by comparison (Rideout, 2006). Audiences can also become more ignorant, making past works seem more complex and hard to understand. I would not say, though, that the audiences are evolving over time: not all change is evolution, a simple point that fans of evolutionary metaphors should copy on the chalkboard.

To conclude, I find it odd that Martindale views the arts as dynamic but the audience as static. Martindale’s concern is with inexorable change in the arts over time, but he ignores change and variability in the audience’s sense of complexity and comprehensibility. A psychology of art should not overlook the subjective psychology of novelty and comprehension. People vary in their experience of a work’s novelty and comprehensibility, so defining these as features of art is misleading.

**THE LONG VIEW**

Martindale’s thesis is interesting, in my opinion, but not compelling. His model uses the concepts of *species* and *extinction* loosely and tacitly, and his implicit view of novelty and comprehensibility as stimulus features is old-fashioned and easy for a psychologist to dismiss. But readers persuaded by Martindale, feeling glum about the
extinction of their favorite domain of the arts, can take comfort in the work of Sherwood Anderson, a writer interested in understanding why some work survives and other work is forgotten. In an undated story written early in his career, he depicts a struggling writer who reflects on everyday life and death as metaphors for creativity and art. “If you think I am sad, having these thoughts about the brevity and insignificance of a life, you are mistaken,” says Anderson’s (no date1992, p. 4) narrator. “‘Certain things last,’ I say to myself.”

REFERENCES