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Title: "Counterpoise and Morphic Resonance in Classicism"

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Abstract:

"Counterpoise and Morphic Resonance in Classicism"

This paper reflects the culmination of research and instruction for a general education, core-requirement course entitled "World of the Arts". Typically, this is a freshman course with approximately 90 students. The main objective of the course is to prepare the student to appreciate and participate in the arts with intelligent discretion. While the scope of this paper is beyond the applied curriculum for the students, it raises fundamental questions that underlie and ground instruction. For example, how to teach classicism and make it relevant to a media-savvy generation of learners, or how to impress upon students the importance of contemporary art for the perceptual terrain it defines rather than the accessibility of its content. Facilitating students to think abstractly about form and connectivity of the arts -- to events and culture throughout history, and ultimately to their own lives is the primary instructional objective in "World of the Arts".

Proportion, measure, balance, harmony and unity are all terms that contribute to a definition of classicism, yet they are all elements of objective perception and relatively static relationship. The notion of counterpoise, however, and its development in Ancient Greek figurative art (specifically statuary), introduced a dimension to classicism that is both dynamic and kinetic. Departing from archaic depictions of the body, counterpoise revealed the body in relation to, and in dialogue with itself, lending a spiritual and transcendent resonance that has continued to reappear through the ages. It is not the Greeks, or any other specific epoch, per se, that speaks to us when we appreciate a "classical" experience. We respond to the kinetic apprehension of form.

J.S. Bach's use of counterpoint in the fugue is a 16th century employment of the principle of counterpoise. Bach pressed this principle into a form compatible in the environment where much of his work was created and introduced: the Christian Church. (We might say this sartorially founded principle went "underground" through manifestation in music, as the church has not historically celebrated the body and its expressions in a general way.) Abstracted to pure form, Bach's multi-voiced, dialogic compositions are at once playful worship and reverent dance. Once again, we encounter form in dialogue with and to itself, offering a complete and dynamic experience resonating at a somewhat pre-conscious level.

In the 19th Century, classical ballet reached its apex with fulfillment of turn-out (en dehors) begun in 16th century courtly dancing. The "turn-out" of the body transformed and opened the dancer to the audience, allowing the body to display and reveal itself to the spectator. Yet, above the legs and feet, in the torso and head, another principle was at play. "Epaulment" (French for "shouldering") was another variant of counterpoise, lending a spiral élan to the body, allowing the body to convey the true story of its spiritual ascension.

It was the eradication of this counterpoise that produced such scandalous results when Vaslav Nijinsky choreographed his groundbreaking ballets "L'Apres Midi d'un Faun", and more decisively, "Le Sacre du Printemps" in the early years of the 20th Century. He returned to the flattened postures of two-dimensional archaic figurative art, and to the turned-in, flat-footed stomping of "primitive" ritual, shattering the idealization of an essentially Christian ascension along a vertical axis.

Nijinsky, however, did not actually destroy this notion of counterpoise; he simply stretched its limits, challenging its definition. Each subsequent experiment with counterpoise has implemented a more

extreme deviation from the vertical axis, or center, around which counterpoise is organized. Counterpoise, by definition, suggests equilibrium around the center, not inhabitation of the center. Through deviation from the center, counterpoise produces liveliness and interest that is not to be found in symmetry and perfect harmony. Much as dissonance and syncopation in music create interest and excitement from the tonic or downbeat respectively, counterpoise playfully challenges the essentially vertical nature of the human body.

The classical column parallels this verticality of the human body, and can even be regarded as a metaphor for the human spine, (among other notions of what it is to be "upright", "standing erect", or "reaching vertically"). Much like the classical column, our understanding of, and reference to this vertical nature will not be going away any time soon. In contemporary cultures, the simple phenomenon of verticality no longer manages to be compelling in and of itself. Yet the "mean" to which our contemporary models of counterpoise relate, continues to be useful. Through the expansion of the definition of counterpoise, the center is no longer apparent or even evident: yet its ghost is always hovering nearby, informing and defining what we do as some variant of counterpoise.

Rupert Sheldrake, in his "A New Science of Life" (1981), sets forth a theory of "formative causation" in which he asserts there to be a discreet field of "morphic resonance", to which all forms of life and organic organization contribute or draw from. He attributes the development and evolution of a morph to the habit or patterning of what has gone before. Once a new form is manifest, it establishes an easier path for subsequent achievement of its growth. (Sheldrake also recognizes that form changes as a result of the pull or "memory" of the future.)

Counterpoise then, may be viewed as such a process, ever expanding and evolving from the classical center recognized as the "standard", or "mean". The crucial question emerges then: does that center hold fast? Do we really continue to relate to a center recognized more than two millennia ago, or does the center imperceptibly shift and transform according to the pull of the counterpoise? Biologically speaking, two thousand years is a small increment on the evolutionary timeline. And yet culturally, we have seen such dramatic changes in those thousand-plus years, it is hard to imagine that the center could be the same. Having largely abandoned the classical model at the end of the 19th century, however, Western art no longer singularly recognizes the center as a crucial component of creativity and change. The pull now is consistently to the "future", with decreased emphasis on what has gone before and how the pathways traveled help to shape the form that is evolving.

Do contemporary arts stand to lose wide appeal by being too arcane for the general populace? Can the maintenance of a classical "center" help to reduce this effect? Is this classical center a static one, or one that should change according to the field that counterpoise describes around it? These, perhaps, are questions too broad and sweeping to answer in a definitive way. Yet they are ones that, through the very process of being posited, may help us keep in sight the purpose and resonance of art in contemporary culture.