Abstract

Art as communication:
Employing Gricean Principles of Communication as a Model for Art Appreciation

by

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How and why artworks elicit varied preferences and judgments among different individuals remains a topic with many unresolved issues. For instance, individuals with little artistic experience tend to show little appreciation for abstract art, even though such works often show a highly skilled organization of visual elements. A key aspect of a positive aesthetic experience concerns the ability of viewers to construct meaning. I propose that viewers attempt to make meaning of artworks due to a sense that art is a communicative process. Here I attempt an application of one intentionalist model of communication, the Gricean framework, to visual art. Here I examine a great deal of empirical psychological research on art appreciation and subsume the research under the Gricean model. A survey instrument was developed to capture artistic communication and assess its usefulness in predicting aesthetic liking. A key component to this model is the cooperative principle, the implicit agreement of those engaged in a dialogue are doing so with the intent to be understood. With the cooperative principle established four
maxims follow to facilitate meaning making in verbal discourse; quality, quantity, meaning, and relation. These maxims along with intent were operationalized according to prior literature and measured on a six point Likert scale. Using Rasch analysis over several rounds of testing with artist and non-artists, the survey instrument was refined; the interitem correlations for each construct were robust and reliable. Hierarchical liner modeling was used to assess the predictive power of each maxim and intent for aesthetic liking for both artists and non-artist for images that range in their level of abstractedness. The level one analysis showed significant effects for all variables with positive coefficients, indicating that maxim fulfillment (or understanding nonfulfillment as intentional) was related to increased liking. The level two analysis showed that all maxims with the exception of quantity maintained their relative weight in predicting liking; quantity was more effective in predicting liking as images became more representational. Artist and non-artist differences in maxim fulfillment, intent, and liking were examined for the four most abstract and representational images following the logic that differences seen in previous research for these two groups might be a function of understanding non fulfillment of the maxims to be intentional. There were no differences seen for artists and non-artists for the four most representational images. However, for the four most abstract images there were differences seen for all the maxims and liking but not for intent; the differences were in the direction of the artist having significantly higher mean ratings. The nonsignificant intent scores indicate that even with abstract artworks the cooperative principle is met for both groups therefore it can be argued that artists see intentional nonfulfillment whereas non artists see violations. In order to disrupt the cooperative principle in study two creator type (animal, child, and artist) was varied with the expectation that viewers would not expect an animal to communicate in a similar way as a child or an artist. Hierarchical linear modeling was done separately for each attributed creator
type for each maxim in predicting liking. All maxims and intent when looked at individually were significant predictors of liking for the attributed child creator, although the coefficient for quantity was negative indicating the less visual elements, or less fulfillment, the more images were liked; all but quantity were significant predictors for the attributed animal and artist. The disagreement of quantity from the first study could be a function of the abstractedness of the images, which was necessary for them to be plausibly created by any of the three creator types.

A follow-up ANOVA showed that intent did not vary as a function of creator type. A median split was performed to indicate those who are low and high in intent to examine patterns in the data. All follow-up factorial ANOVAs showed intent as a significant between subjects factor with results indicating those high in intent provided higher evaluations for each maxim and liking. These findings are interesting because they give support to the idea that those who are engaged in the process of wanting to understand or make meaning rate the maxims and liking different than those who are less engaged cooperatively. Also of interest is that there are high and low intent individuals in each of the three creator types; so the use of animals in this study did not push the limit of the cooperative principle quite far enough. Future studies would have to examine this issue. It could be that individuals automatically engage with art as a place to derive meaning and there isn’t a way to push this factor. The take home however is that the Gricean framework thus far has shown to be a fruitful means of capturing perceived artistic communication and how that contributes to liking. It is possible to create measurement tools for other art types, such as music, performance, or literature.