

Jon Paul Wheeler
Written Reflection

Categorical

I am an ENTP. This classification comes with a whole host of characteristics and predictions for professional success in certain fields; a failure in others. This classification implies my compatibility with those of similar or opposing personality types. I discovered this pseudo-scientific classification by answering a series of questions in the auspiciously named Briggs-Meyers test. The results of such a test were ultimately fascinating to me as it must be for many people who have a strong desire to know themselves, to understand their place in the world, to see themselves in the way that others see them. It feels like discovery.

Other systems have been designed to scratch that self-discovery itch. Briggs-Meyers personality classifications feel something like horoscope signs. Certainly, B-M is cloaked in the trappings of science while horoscopes (both Eastern and Western) are widely considered non-scientific. Astrology is superstition. But, the niche within such systems seems intrinsic to humanity. Knowing that I'm a Pisces born in the Year of the Ram is somehow comforting as it describes who I am; at least in the sense that it describes when I was born. Such birth signs also join me with others who share my astrological signs, suggesting that I belong to a community of humans with shared characteristics.

Modern personality tests like Briggs-Meyers is like a horoscope for those of us who claim to be beyond the irrational superstitions of our ancestors. We scoff at magic and religion while accepting that we belong to personality types designated by bright people with Ph.D.'s. I am not one to suggest that priests and witches have been replaced by doctors and professors, but this adherence to predetermination through survey certainly feels a bit like dogma. Being labeled by an authority, described as a type and joined with a group of other like-labeled humans certainly felt right, to me. The adjectives used to describe an ENTP apply to me. What does that mean? Ironically, that's exactly the kind of question an ENTP would ask.

Learning to become an actor requires no small amount of self-discovery. Initiates must learn how they are perceived in order to construct an intentional performance for any given audience. To that end, acting students perform exercises designed to help them understand how other people see them. One such exercise puts acting students in a crowded airport. Strangers waiting for planes are asked to fill out a survey that describes the student who is also sitting, seemingly waiting for a flight. At the end of the day, the acting student pours over dozens of such surveys which leads, hopefully to revelations about how they may come across to strangers. This information leads to the roles that these actors will pursue in their professional acting career. They get a better understanding of the roles they can play.

The importance of knowing which role to play may be as important in the real world as it is stage or film sets. As a teacher, I received training to play the role of a teacher who, in turn, design a curriculum that allows students to practice certain roles in art and design fields. Students pretended in my classes to be artists, designers, filmmakers, and photographers. Rubrics and lessons were applied to make the simulation as realistic as possible in a school setting and the stakes were low. Other teachers were playing their roles according to other academic subjects. Students played at being writers, mathematicians, and athletes. My hope, as a teacher, was that students would ultimately find a role that they could play throughout the rest of their lives. But I often wondered if I was shaping students to fit into roles when I should have been encouraging them to define themselves, to encourage them to change the parameters of the roles. Instead of fitting into a preconceived mould, I began to feel that students should be making brand new niches. Soon, I found that such an educational philosophy did not fit into the role of a teacher.

The practice of categorizing and being categorized is as old as civilization. Plato described a soul that was divided into three faculties: sensual appetite, spirited and rational. In each case, we can zoom out from the individual and apply the categories on a macro scale. We can use Plato's divisions, if we are inclined, to see manifestations of rationality in professions such as lawmaker or administrator. Merchants may lean toward the category of sensual appetite through their acquisition of wealth. Soldiers are spirited in their willingness to sacrifice themselves for a greater good. Plato even applied his categories to cultures, making the expected claim that Athenian Greeks represented the 'rational' third.

Freud separated the psyche into thirds, too: id, ego, and superego. But the psyche is not a soul, right? Psychological categorization is based on the scientific method, right? In 2000 years of civilization, did Freud just remake Plato's philosophical assumptions? There is a cultural component to the categorization of type. Plato's divisions of the soul and Freud's divisions of the psyche are products of their perspectives, embedded with the time and culture from which they each sprang. Freud had certain biases that made homosexuality deviant behavior and they each cultivated a deterministic view of culture that put their society at the apex of history. Such determinism can be dangerous, leading to beliefs that justify atrocity when co-opted by fascists who enshrine categories into law.

Aldous Huxley wrote about how such categories could be applied to create a caste system in his book, *A Brave New World*. The dystopian premise of his story described a future world where most of humanity was separated into stratified groups that defined the course of their lives. Influenced by industrialization, Huxley's fictional narrative used Henry Ford's assembly line as a metaphor: Humans were but cogs in the greater machine of the society. Lower caste workers were intentionally chemically altered to limit brain function and addicted

to psychoactive drugs provided by the administrative class. George Lucas explored a similar future in his film THX 1138 where workers were constantly monitored and forced into submission by robots. In both stories, the protagonist chafes against the role they are expected to play. What happens when an individual who has been categorized and labeled to fit into a deterministic mould decides to break the mould? How does society react to an anomaly?

Speculative fiction authors explore the possible ramifications of categorization, but we can also find several examples of caste systems in history from the feudalism of Europe to the Karmic system of caste in India. Organizing groups of people according to birth is central to a class system. If I am born to a 13th Century farmer in England, I will likely become a farmer who raises the next generation of serfs tasked with tilling the soil. Similarly, if I am born to a Brahmin family in 17th century India, I will likely lead the life of a royal. In both cases, if I play my given role correctly, I will find some posthumous reward in the form of a heaven or rebirth upgrade. Conversely, if I break from the accepted norms of my role, I will be punished in hell or reincarnation into a lower caste. Such systems are stable when the population accepts the social norms when they are indoctrinated from birth.

For those of us who accept science, who live according to a post-mythology philosophical model as atheists and humanists, such indoctrination is not absent. Our very acceptance of science can make us inclined to trust the outcome of a personality test because it looks rational. Such categorization is presented in a sort of science-like theatre which ultimately appeals to some primordial part of my emotional well-being. But I cannot accept a deterministic view of the universe. Fortunately, the Humanist Philosopher, John Dewey, offers some respite for my existential crisis. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey pointedly doesn't refute the existence of certain traits used to categorize individuals and groups of humans. But he does suggest that such traits are not monolithic.

Dewey admits that there are people and even groups of people who are more physically active or those who prefer intellectual inquiry. Some are more imaginative while others are more practical. Such divisions are not, he states, intrinsic to human nature. "In a badly ordered society, such divisions as these are exaggerated." Instead of finding roles for individuals to play, a well-ordered society will work to produce well-rounded citizens who manifest a variety of traits. Art, he goes on, can function to break down these lines of division by doing "away with isolations and conflicts among the elements of our being". He describes the wholesale categorization of individuals as the "extraordinary ineptitude of compartmentalized psychology". This model of a well-ordered society is based on a democratic ideal; that every human is born equal to every other human. Does that model exist in reality?

In reading the Humanist Philosophy of John Dewey, I find myself considering him sitting down to write it. As he picked up a pen or pecked at typewriter keys, what was his purpose?

I've imagined that his motivation for writing is not unlike those other writers of fiction that I've become familiar with throughout my life. But unlike sci-fi authors, Dewey considers the world he envisions as attainable, reasonably realized in his lifetime. The function of his philosophy (maybe every philosophy?) is to remake society, to make it more democratic and of greater benefit for those who live within the society. He uses a vernacular of reality in most cases, but he occasionally touches on the supernatural by invoking the name of his god. He also describes art as having some religious quality in its ability to generate communion among an audience. Such references to the supernatural suggest to me that Dewey was fully aware of the narrative, the story woven by his written works. He is working in a tradition of fiction writers that envision a world that is more democratic and governed by an omnipotent super-being.

Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, suggested that the divisions imposed upon an individual could "shut him off" from the environment. Psychological compartmentalization may account for many of the human practices that seem to ignore adverse ecological effects. If your main concern as a scientist, for instance, was to rid the world of mosquitos you might disregard the effects of insecticide on other creatures who live in the ecosystem. In Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, she explains in great detail how the chemical war waged on insects led to a world with far fewer birds. She rightly pointed out that spewing out poison to kill insects was incredibly stupid because poison designed to kill living things may have some negative repercussions on living things. In her writing, we could imagine a world without the sound of birds. Carson, like many sci-fi authors, was successfully constructing a narrative to paint a picture for readers. She was describing a version of the planet as the outcome of an environmentally devastating practice as a way to convince readers to change laws, to stop the poisoning of the natural world. Through careful observation and creativity, she saw the interconnectedness of the large systems and how seemingly small changes could have a cascading effect within an ecosystem. Moreover, she reached outside of her categorization as a scientist to bring her findings into the public consciousness.

Despite the historically relevant benefits of moving between compartmentalization and Dewey's suggestion that art can blur the barriers between arbitrary psychological categories, the Modern Art movement relies on clean, white walls to "artify" works of art. Brian O'Doherty (*Inside the White Cube*) describes the gallery space as a mystical place where artworks exist outside of time; patrons softly pad around in reverence. The space in which the work is displayed becomes a factor in the perception of art. "Once a wall became an esthetic force, it modified anything shown on it. (PP.29)" There is some irony that Fine Art can serve to reinforce the compartmentalization of social groups through practice and metaphor! The so-called progress of art can be seen as incrementally moving passed the plane of perspective, then the edge of a frame, then the corners of the gallery in a way that mimics fashion (pp.27). Progress

can also be measured by the silencing of oppositional viewpoints, easily slipping into the capitalist economic model by pitting stakeholders against one another.

Dewey's aspirational view of art and design cannot come into reality under the current system of fine art that acts as a stabilizing force for an economic establishment, a status-quo. The so-called revolutions or movements are more and more like PR stunts designed to market specific products rather than creative progress. The influence of capital can be seen in every aspect of art and design history, assuring us that we will only see the art that is funded which may not be the art that is relevant to historical/cultural progression. O'Doherty suggests that artists themselves have not questioned this "comfortable system" despite being its "key figure". The visual artists exist within a society that has a well-defined box for them to live. Those artists who choose to live outside of this niche or even outside of society as a whole are often considered "outsiders" or "Brut". Their work is relegated to obscurity in most cases unless a patron feels nostalgic for folk, or an artist becomes fashionable or curated by a foundation. In Wisconsin, the John Michael Kohler Art Center (under the direction of billionaire heiress, Ruth DeYoung) has made recent efforts to preserve the sites on which outsiders like Fred Smith produced hundreds of sculptures. Like so many artists working outside of the accepted mainstream, Fred Smith died long before his work was recognized.

Can artists act to change the current system? Banksy says we should "Think outside the box, collapse the box and take a fucking knife to the box (Wall & Piece)." But street art has been ingested by the Fine Art apparatus as wholly as Cubism. Banksy's work is sold for millions at auction. The next (and previous) generation of artists is heavily influenced by the perceived need to make money which may eclipse higher-minded pursuits. Indeed, the worth of art is measured by how much cash a patron is willing/able to shell out for a particular piece. Jeff Koons is widely considered successful. We can provide proof of this success by pointing to the sales of his work; we can point to a specific dollar amount. Wealth's influence in art as in the wider society can have a chilling effect on creative evolution, making a change in small increments that don't challenge the status quo. New artists are motivated to find work as designers rather than fine artists for reasons of 'practicality'. Art as a profession becomes almost mythical, seen as an unserious pursuit of a privileged class who need not worry about mundane issues like food and housing. Creativity itself is associated with madness or childishness. Again, categories are applied.

Some filmmakers have been able to start working outside of a larger film tradition. Stabilizing forces such as degree-granting post-secondary institutions have not yet completely taken hold of the reins of cinematic success. They have become places where burgeoning filmmakers can make connections to professionals working in cinema but passionate creatives can still produce films that reach audiences both online and at festivals. Stanley Kubrick,

Michael Moore, and Quentin Tarantino have all achieved a measure of commercial success without going to college to study film. The same could be said about a whole host of narrative filmmakers. In cinema, there seems to be some room for outsiders to contribute unique viewpoints that diverge from predetermined models in a way that is discouraged in visual arts. The traditions around cinema are in flux as those working in the medium are still able to influence the creation of new paradigms. Those of us working in cinema seem to more closely resemble Dewey's version of an artist. Barriers between categories are blurred, challenged by filmmakers in a way that was once true for fine artists of the past.

This erosion of social/psychological compartmentalization can be seen when we look at those creatives who are working in film as a medium. James Cameron was a truck driver before making films. Spielberg was an English major. Anyone with a story to tell can pick up a camera and make a movie that circumvents many of the stabilizing institutions that tend to stagnate creative expression. Technology has democratized both the production and distribution of cinema to a point where a wide variety of filmmakers can share the market. We can move beyond the white cube because our constructs can exist in a digital space. If fine art has become somewhat homogeneous and conservative in the last century, then it behooves artists to find ways to move beyond the proscribed borders of tradition. It is up to artists to re-define, re-interpret, re-invent art in a substantive, real way that does not mimic fashion. As an artist, I have moved into a researching cinema as a means by which to express my creative impulses. I want to construct narratives that reveal the ultimate folly of compartmentalization in a post-object reality. I want more humans to add their voices to our shared creative history.

References:

- Banksy, 2005. Banksy Wall And Piece. 1st ed. London: Century, The Random House.
- Carson, Rachel, 1907-1964. Silent Spring. Boston :Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Dewey, John. Art As Experience. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1980.
- Freud, Sigmund, and James Strachey. The Ego and the Id. New York: Norton, 1962. Print.
- Huxley, Aldous. Brave New World. New York: Harper Brothers, 1932. Print.
- O'Doherty, Brian. Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded ed., 1st University of California Press ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Plato. Plato's The Republic. New York: Books, Inc., 1943.

In reading *Inside the White Cube*, I found that I was moved to make some sculpture. I call it "Corners". It's approximately 20 feet long and 5 feet tall, stretched canvas: