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The Sword in the Stone: The Arts as Harbingers of Social Change

Raymond L. Forbes Jr. ¹

ABSTRACT

Artists have often been criticized by their scientific brethren for a lack of perceived current utility in their work. One potentially useful response to the issue of present value is through the use of historical analysis of art as a means for anticipating major social transformations. The thesis of this article is that Art, besides being representative of the Zeitgeist or spirit of its time, may well be an effective progenitor of coming significant social upheavals. The paper employs as a methodology comparison of historical waves of social change with pre-period artistic expression. Additionally, the legend of King Arthur's removal of the magic sword Excalibur from a stone is employed as an artistic and social metaphor for Art as providing an unconventional view of the future. Example findings include art as a portent of impending social change, current movement into a new transitional period of change, and the non-linearity of both artistic and social changes.

Keywords: Social change, art, Arthurian legend, change waves, Zeitgeist.

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"The essence of the avant-garde myth is that the artist is a precursor; the truly significant work of art is the one that prepares the future"

- *Robert Hughes*

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“There is in great art a clairvoyance for which we have not yet found a name, and still less an explanation”

- John Russell

1.0 Introduction

The essential idea of this paper is that Art, although intrinsically valuable in its own right, can also provide essential clues to currently inchoate social changes.

In the English legend of King Arthur, the young Arthur only becomes a king after he pulls the enchanted sword, Excalibur, from the stone in which it was firmly lodged. The prevailing myth was that only the rightful King of England could extract the shining blade from the rock in which it was so deeply embedded. Many strong, brave, and noble men before him had attempted this seemingly insurmountable task. It was only with the well-advised assistance of the wise wizard Merlin that Arthur was able to succeed.

In freeing Excalibur, Arthur was able to demonstrate with ease a prowess that he did not even know he possessed. Nor was he entirely conscious of the implications of what he had done. In the story of King Arthur, the freeing of Excalibur set motion a chain of events that eventually turned a naïve boy into a mighty sovereign. It also presaged the ascent of the idealistic Social values as exemplified by the righteous Knights of the Round Table’s quest for the Holy Grail and the rise of the fabled city of Camelot.

The sword-in-the stone story can also be considered a metaphor for the advance of potentially wide-ranging change that swept Europe following the middle ages. In more recent times, vascular surgeon and author Leonard Shlain has delved deeply into the role of art in anticipating major social change. In his work *Art & Physics* (1991) he quotes the writing of Jesuit priest, archaeologist and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin. “In short, art represents the area of furthest advance around man’s growing energy, the area in which nascent truths condense, take on their first form, and become animate, before they are definitely formulated and assimilated. This is the effective function and role of art in the general economy of evolution.” The idea of art as a possible indicator of social change was also explored by Sheldon and Moore (1968) in the book *Indicators of Social Change*.

2.0 Prologue to the future

Authors Margaret Mark and Carol Pearson (2001), wrote that the poet W.H. Auden found “people come in two varieties: Utopians, who imagine the perfect world in the future, and Edenists, who if life is not perfect now, believe it once was in the past.” Part of the work of historians may be to enable us distinguish between the two categories. If historians are at all correct in their assertion that those who do not understand history are somehow doomed to repeat it, knowing something about major turning points in art history can well serve the modern leader to anticipate major change initiatives.

Perhaps no one in recent memory has done a better job of connecting strategic change lessons with historical events than futurist Alvin Toffler. Forty-five years ago Toffler (1970), writing in his prophetic book *Future Shock*, described the major disruption in our expectations that result from major social and technical changes. In retrospect, the perception of a high level of present pain or the expectation of it in the future, did indeed force strategic organizational changes.

In a subsequent book, *The Third Wave*, Toffler (1980) suggested that human history can be characterized by the experience of three major patterns or waves of strategic change. Each of the three waves represents a significant turning point in human history. Each wave was generated by the build-up and interaction of powerful technological and social forces associated with important events in its time period. Like a cycle of ocean waves impinging on a sandy beach, each wave, in turn, leaves its imprint

and recedes, only to be replaced by the next incoming breaker. This wave cycle might also be said about the rise and fall of different periods of art throughout history.

According to Toffler, the first wave was agricultural and began more than five thousand years ago. During this initial change wave people moved from a nomadic existence in small bands and began to congregate in stable settlements around land used for farming crops and raising animals. This also marked the beginnings of regular commerce as surplus crops were traded for other desired commodities. Muscle power was the principal source of power. Control of territory was the main source of wealth. Some of the first large scale organizations were formed to manage and protect the wealth that came from the land. Warfare was mostly conducted with simple weapons used face-to-face. Existence was believed to be governed by strange and immutable laws as manifested by the cycle of the changing seasons. Heredity was believed to be destiny, and kings were kings by divine right.

The second major change wave arrived sometime in the 1800's with the advent of a new form of power driven by the controlled release of forces concentrated in natural resources. The energy contained in such substances as coal and oil was transformed by ingenious machines first into steam and later into electricity. Mass production of goods became possible on a large scale and supplanted the craft and agricultural products economy. Factories drew workers from farming and concentrated them into rapidly expanding cities. Work became more fragmented, standardized, and specialized. Thinking became separated from doing and the universe was conceived as a giant machine operating according to knowable and predictable laws. Power and wealth became associated with control of the means of production and the supply of raw materials for the industrial economy. Bureaucracy was the prevailing organizational form. Warfare became more sophisticated, civilian populations became targets, and machines for killing at a distance more common.

The beginning of the third wave or the information age, is often traced to the invention of the electronic computer in the 1950's. Within this change wave the velocity of change increased dramatically and its rate accelerated. Knowledge began to supplant the physical forms of power as the principal engine of the economy. Knowledge workers incorporated in themselves both the source and the means of generating wealth. Capitalism became the prevailing economic form.

Electronic connections enabled instant worldwide communications and the fueled the rise of extensive global business transactions. Institutions experimented with new organizational forms such as matrices, webs, networks and virtual organizations. Generational and other diversity-related issues became more pronounced. Geographic regions polarized into the financial haves and the have-nots. Technology enabled warfare to become more precise and lethal, permitting killing from beyond the horizon. A single super-power arose to dominate the political-military sphere.

3.0 Visions of a changed world

Many thoughtful observers believe that now, well into the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in the nascent fourth great wave of change. No consensus yet exists on what to call it or what its final form might take although some writers have used terms such as the "Knowledge Wave" or the "Creativity Period" to characterize it. What does appear to be clear is the fundamental reality of rapidly accelerating, widespread, non-linear change in an impressive range of fields. The effects of non-linearity on human, physical and biological processes are increasingly being explored by a wide variety of scientists under the guise of research into complex adaptive systems. Already some of the fruits of this research have been broadly applied in an attempt to better understand the behavior of economies, organizations, markets, and consumers.

Futurist John Naisbutt in his 1999 book, *High Tech – High Touch*, described his version of the newest change wave in terms of trading off technological progress with human connections. Rolf Jensen, the Director of the Copenhagen Center for the Studies of the Future, in his work *The Dream Society* (2001) described a world that had moved from information primacy to primacy of human imagination.

Researchers Maynard, Herman, and Martens in their 1993 work, *The Fourth Wave*, envisaged the future as being co-created by cooperating groups of stakeholders.

Ryan Mathews and Watts Wacker, in *The Deviant's Advantage*, write about a Post-Information Age. Their fourth wave began in 2001 and recognized Biology as the dominant science, biotechnology and sentient software as the dominant technologies, and the proof of reality in the ability to transfer data points into information. Mathews and Wacker foresee the convergence of biological science with information science with each informing and enabling the other. Writing in *The Organization of the Future*, noted strategist C. K. Prahalad (1997), characterized the movement into the next wave as being not about seeking efficiency in present circumstances but about transforming to a new and different game.

One of the more thoughtful views of the fourth wave comes from futurists, Christopher Meyer and Stan Davis. In their 2003 book, *It's Alive*, Meyer and Davis predict the convergence of information, biology, and business and suggest that we are already in the first stage of the fourth change wave. They propose that the major forces driving this convergence are previous investments in networks and autonomous software as well as the growth of molecular technologies such as nanotechnology, biotechnology, and materials science.

4.0 What does it all mean?

Considering strategic change as nonlinear change means giving up the notion of predictability and control. It implies that a given quantity of input does not necessarily produce a consistent measure of output. It means that for most organizations of the future, intangibles will count more than tangibles and results will be harder to quantify. Financial measures will become just one of a variety of yardsticks that organization use to gage their success or failure. It also means relinquishing single cause-single effect thinking for a more broadly based mutual cause and effect, ecological viewpoint.

Nonlinearity is not for the feint of heart. More courage and greater tolerance for ambiguity will be required. On the plus side, nonlinearity can provide the potential for great opportunity; with the possibility of huge payoffs from small investments. There is also an enhanced downside possibility of insignificant or even negative results from large resource expenditures. Timing and initial conditions become ever more sensitive determinants of the end result as non-linearity feeds upon itself.

However, research from complexity theory tells us that even within apparent chaos there are islands of relative stability. These stable patterns are called "strange attractors." It may well be that the successful change leader of the future will be to recognize and utilize organizational strange attractors found in works of art and in the literature of the humanities in the midst of chaotic change conditions.

Long recognized in the arts and humanities, it is probable that the fourth-wave world will be characterized by its interconnections. The distinguished Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker (2011) introducing Denis Dutton the founder of Arts & Letters Daily noted "Many people believe that this consilience between the arts, humanities, and the sciences represents the future of the humanities, revitalizing them with a progressive research agenda after the disillusionments of postmodernism. "The edges between science and art as well as intuition and rationality will become less distinct and more negotiable. The differences between physical and virtual reality will become ever more blurred. Successful change will require leaders taking their organizations to the boundary between chaos and stability and operating there. For, it appears that the best possible results occur when an organization is precariously balanced on the razor's edge just shy of going out of control.

For the effective leader, it may well be that managing context or situational conditions will become as central to their work as managing resources and processes. Selectively disrupting entrenched stability will become as critical as attempting to rein-in runaway organizational systems. Given the speed of

technological and societal change, discerning adaption to external change forces will likely produce better results than extensive background research, benchmarking or studying and adopting the best practices of leading organizations.

5.0 Some potential consequences

In *Tomorrow's Organizations* authors (Susan Mohrman, Jay Galbraith, and Edward Lawler, 2008) propose that the planning horizon for strategy is shifting from decades to months. They also suggest that strategic competitive advantage is moving from an emphasis on avoiding competition, sustaining advantage, and erecting barriers towards confronting competitors, disrupting others advantages, changing the rules, and developing the organization's internal capabilities.

It looks very much like the turbulence of constant change is unlikely to abate any time soon. At least one author, using a river rafting metaphor, has called this condition a state of "permanent white water." The fourth wave reflects the difference between the Newtonian world of predictable outcomes arrived at in accordance with fixed laws and the chaos of quantum physics where light can be either a wave or a particle, depending on how you look at it. Or, perhaps, even better, it is the difference between conceptualizing change using the idealized precision of mathematics as expressed in classical physics equations or the experimental messiness of biological evolution.

What remains constant amidst all the turmoil is that effecting strategic change is essentially still about impacting an organization's people or its intellectual and social capital. Writing in *The Creative Priority*, author (Jerry Hirshberg, 1999) reflects on the role of the leader in the fourth wave. Hirshberg, former founder and president of Nissan Design International, has thoughtfully considered the role of the leader in a world grown more ambiguous and uncertain. He states that, "Leading and creating are intimately connected activities, both being involved with initiation, forward movement, and action at the edge of the known." In essence, leading strategic change is about leading self and people change by helping others to alter the way they see, think, feel and act.

6.0 Summary lessons

- Changes in art have often portended and led major social and technical changes.
- Historically, we seem to be transitioning into a fourth major change wave, different from the Information Age, whose dimensions are still being sorted out.
- Change in human systems tends to be nonlinear; small inputs can produce large and unpredictable effects.
- The perception of pain (current or anticipated) drives change in most organizations.
- Most organizational change tends to be in reaction to external events or forces.
- The human aspects of strategic change usually turn out to be much more important than the technical aspects in determining outcomes.
- Strategic change that is effective recognizes multiple causality and multiple effects.
- Organizations which operate on the boundary between stability and chaos are much more likely to be survivors than those who do not
- New tools are available to assist the strategic change leader in becoming a more effective agent of change.

7.0 Conclusion

Like the ancient Roman coins depicting the two-faced god Janus, art and social change seem to be two different but complementary aspects of the same reality. Janus was known as the god of beginnings, transitions, and endings. In today's world he would likely be called the "God of Change." According to Roman mythology the two countenances of Janus also face toward the past and the future

simultaneously. In historical retrospect it would appear that hidden reflections of future social and scientific discovery were, in fact, presaged by prior artistic creations.

The findings of this paper suggest that it well may be a worthwhile endeavor for leaders of today's organizations to pay attention to the current art world for hints of upcoming social change. Finding recurrent themes and patterns in today's art products may well provide insight into emergent social and technical changes and the opportunity to become a first mover in capitalizing on them.

At the end of the Arthurian saga, Arthur lies grievously wounded and dying from injuries suffered in his battle with his estranged kin Mordred. He is saddened by the deception of his wife, Guinevere, and betrayed by his chosen champion Lancelot. As one of his final acts Arthur consigns the magic sword Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake. Most of all Arthur seems to lament the loss of his trusted advisor Merlin and wonders how things might have been different if the wizard were still available to him.

In reflecting on the meaning of life events a modern day Merlin, like Harvard professor Max Bazerman (2014), might have counseled Arthur, "Whenever something seems too good to be true, it is often useful to consider what events did not happen. We need to notice the dogs that don't bark in addition to those that do." Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional detective Sherlock Holmes in his story the "Hound of the Baskervilles" couldn't have said it any better.

Finally, through the filtering lens of metaphor, this paper has looked at art and social change, discussed change waves, and provided visions of a changed world. This work has also explored possible meanings, identified potential consequences and summarized lessons learned in its explication. So, where do we go from here? Visionary thinker Howard Bloom (2010) suggests a possible direction. "Give us new metaphors with which to puzzle out our mysteries- mysteries that range from private insecurities to the wheeling of the cosmos-as the first shepherd and the first explorers did."

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