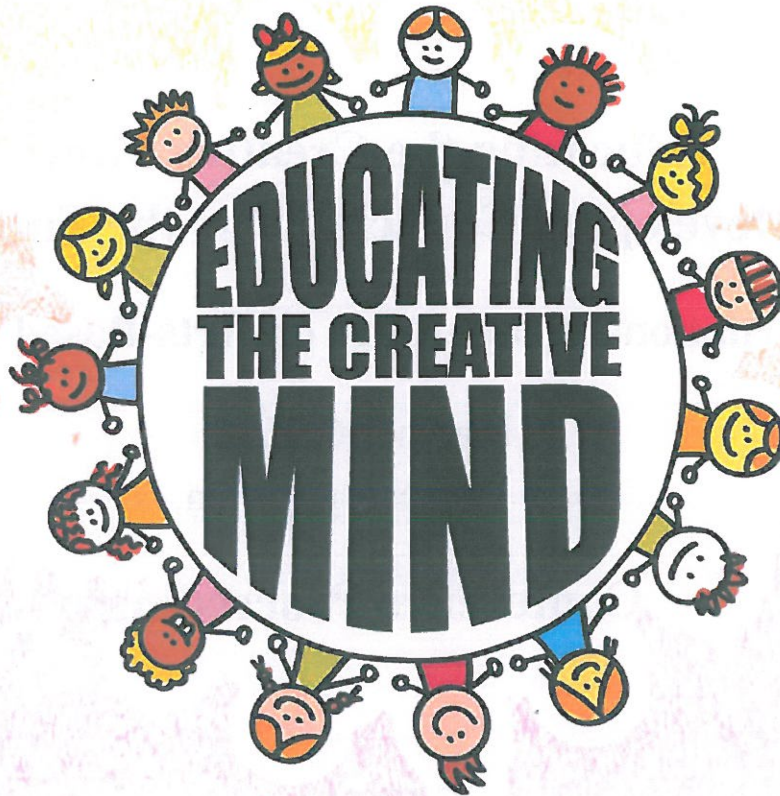

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Creativity, Comedy, and Composition

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ABSTRACT

From a child's first "knock-knock" joke to a Beethoven concerto, creativity involves the setting up of expectation and its resolution through unexpected means. The nature of creativity is explained in this paper as the discovery and exploitation of "distant" or uncommon relationships in the fulfillment of expectation. Commonly dismissed, distant relationships share few characteristics with prototypical ones. The distance of a relationship changes both through historical time, and through personal time, as knowledge is acquired. Educators of creative students must balance such knowledge with the naïve discovery of our students. As once-distant relationships are encountered more frequently, they lose their status as unusual outcomes and instead become alternate prototypes. This normalizing of outliers causes audiences to "expect the unexpected". Consequentially, in a stylistic "arms race", the artist must discover and exploit ever more distant relationships, and conversely, reliably recognize the ever-changing norms, developing an ability to "unexpect the expected"—in order to use distant relationships they must first recognize the range of commonly anticipated results.

WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

Ask a hundred different people what creativity is, and you'll get seventy-three different answers. Many of these will mention originality, discovery, uniqueness, invention, difference, novelty—above all, doing or making something that has not been done or made before. Often this mysterious "doing" will come from nothing—"making something out of nothing" "making something that never existed before" or "making something completely new". Ironically, "breaking the rules" will certainly be mentioned more than once, as will the phase "thinking outside the box." My personal favorite is "creativity is the origin of copycats." Creativity is often associated with positive feelings, such as, "It makes you happy," "it's fun," and "it makes you think "Wow!" and sometimes with less charitable ones: "People may think you are crazy."[1] Unlikely answers might be "creativity is the red bud of a rose creeping out from a late spring snowfall" or "forty-two" or "a flaming phone book"[2].

It is clear that creativity is rare, poorly understood, and unobtainable by conventional approaches. If thinking outside the box leads you to believe that breaking the rules is creative, you're more likely to end up jobless or in jail than hailed as a genius. Daniel Clarke, a Hong Kong comedian, asks, "How is thinking outside the box going to help? "I see your company as a giant rabbit on a unicycle. In phase one of the new ad campaign we'll paint monkeys on the surface of the sun."

If something is completely new, with no relationship to anything previously existing, how are we to comprehend it? Such drastic breaks with the past have lead the field of contemporary art music in the 1950s to a sad state of almost complete audience rejection, a state from which recovery is slow and by no means certain.[3] And attempting to make something from nothing is beyond even the most creative minds—a task of Godhood, not man. Rather than looking at creativity as breaking from the past, we must look at it as building upon the past. Instead of considering that creation comes from nothing, it can more accurately be understood as a recognition and exploitation of relationships among existing things. It is in the unique quality of the relationship or its exploitation that creativity is found.

[1] Answers quoted are from the question "What is creativity" asked primarily to students, university colleagues, and various artists/comedians, etc. in the US and Hong Kong and mostly supplied anonymously. By no means was there any scientific rigor to the project, nor is the "statistic" of 100:73 accurate. It is, instead, a creative improvisation.

[2] These three quotations have not been supplied to me as answers. The first is my own invention, forty-two is Douglas Adam's answer to the question of the meaning of life, and the flaming phone book is attributed to Salvador Dali's lament that "So little of what can happen does happen."

[3] Traditional methods of musical organization (melody, harmony, pulsed rhythm) were rejected in their entirely in the approaches of total serialism and chance operations. Music organized according to total serialism replaced tonal and metric concerns with mathematical ones and attempted to organize every aspect of music, including dynamics, instrumental sound, and registral placement in addition to pitch and duration according to one or more mathematical sequences. Chance music replaced traditional organization with randomness—the toss of a die to indicate the next note, rhythm, or dynamic, for example. The result was music that was indeed new and unrelated to tradition in any way other than the instruments upon which it was played, but consequentially it was music that was literally incomprehensible to the audience, who abandoned it to all but the most academic of concert halls.

CREATIVITY AS AN EXPLOITATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

A simple demonstration I've used in various creativity workshops illustrates the point. Ask people to provide any relationship to a particular word, setting no limitations on the kinds of relationships, but offering no prompting either. Immediate responses will most likely be lexical in nature, although not necessarily synonyms. When the word "BLUE" is suggested, common responses are "sky" "ocean", "jeans", "eyes", "topaz", "water" and the like: things that are blue in color. "Depression" and "sadness" are associated with "feeling blue". There are several of these alternate lexical meanings that each generates their own set of responses, such as "the blues" generating "12-bar blues" "Muddy Waters" or "Rhapsody in Blue". A chain of associations can lead to responses that might not be immediately obvious—from "blue" to "Rhapsody in Blue" to "George Gershwin" to "An American in Paris" to "An American Werewolf in London"—and if we wish to take it full circle, to the song in the latter movie's soundtrack, "Blue Moon". Less common, but still easily recognizably lexical in nature, are antonyms such as "happy". It should be noted that there might be multiple approaches to a single answer. "Happy" may be related to "blue" as an antonym of depression; but it might equally be related through "baby blue" or "blue skies" and the like, and their connotations of happiness.

Categorical and Sonic Relationships

Common responses such as "color" "red" or "music" are more categorical in nature. While an ability to provide a wide range of these types of responses—lexical and categorical--is admirable, it is more reflective of a broad knowledge base or vocabulary than of creativity.

Still more relationship types exist, but these, not being lexical or categorical, are less frequently suggested. "Blew" is a homonym that blew my mind when it was first suggested years after trying this experiment, and it represents one of many types of sonic relationships beloved by poets: rhymes such as "glue" and "threw" and even "through", alliteration such as "brain" or "blade", assonance and the like.

Structural Relationships

Another type of relationship, still less frequently offered, is structural. "Lube", an anagram, is a specific type of relationship in which the particular contents of the word, but not their order or meaning, are integral to the relationship. "Free" is in a yet more abstract structural relationship with "blue," where the first two letters are consonants and the last two vowels; "care" still more so, with two vowels and two consonants but without any particular relationship of order; and finally "this" is even more abstractly related as merely another four-letter, one-syllable word. While I have never had the response "2 12 21 5" or "aktd", this lack is probably only a consequence of the fact that I have never asked the question of a cryptographer[4]. Again, multiple pathways to a single response are possible, and these different pathways often involve different types of relationship—not only is there an obscure structural relationship of "care" to "blue", but also a fairly straightforward lexical association through "Blue Cross" exists. "Blue blood" is not only lexical, but also sonic.

Distant Relationships

Such a conception of relationships may be met with skepticism. In *Categories and Concepts*, Smith and Wedin reject this conception *ex cathedra*, claiming that concepts must have some constraints on the features that define them, saying, "If any property, no matter how arbitrary or complex, could serve as a feature, we would soon be faced with all kinds of difficulties. For example, one could have a "concept" that consisted of the pseudo-features "saw all of Tuesday Weld's movies in one week".... Such a "concept" seems totally unnatural and points to the need to constrain features." (p. 15). And yet, why not have such a concept? These relationship types are not only the very heart of the work of poets, dramatists, comedians and the like; they are also the lungs, viscera, skeleton, and thyroid.[5] The story of a couple meeting at a Tuesday Weld retrospective whose relationship grows, climaxes, and dissolves into pathos during that week sounds not only possible, but like the next Woody Allen screenplay. These outlier relationships are not *unnatural*, but merely uncommon and unexpected. Either the relationships themselves or possible means of exploitation of those relationships are simply not prototypical and so may be thought obscure to the point of irrelevance. Any concept can generate an immeasurable number of relationships—imagination *is* the only truly infinite resource—but the majority of commonly recognized relationships, as we have seen in our "blue" example, cluster around basic lexical or categorical groupings. The outliers, less commonly recognized relationships—sonic, structural, and even obtuse lexical or categorical ones, I will call *distant relationships*.[6] It is

[4] 2 12 21 5 is a simple number cipher in which each letter of the word is replaced by its numerical position in the alphabet. AKTD results from transposing each letter of the word BLUE back one position in the alphabet.

[5] The skin and hair of the work of these artists is technique, to stretch a metaphor beyond redemption.

[6] There is a decided similarity to the "mental spaces" of blending theory in cognitive linguistics. My emphasis, though, is on the uncommon qualities that lead to creativity, not primarily the process of conceptualization itself, and I write not as a linguist but as a creative artist.

through the discovery and exploitation of such distant relationships that much of creativity is found.[7]

"What did Mike Tyson say to Vincent van Gogh? "You gonna eat that?" This simple joke demonstrates the concept of distant relationships beautifully. The set-up juxtaposes one of the world's greatest painters, a man who dedicated his life to creating beauty, with his polar (or perhaps bi-polar) opposite, a professional boxer who has dedicated his life to hitting people harder and faster than anyone else. Van Gogh was Dutch and died in France some seventy-six years before Mike Tyson was born in America; even had they met, van Gogh wouldn't have understood a word Tyson said. By every logical standard there is no relationship between the two; but the joke actualizes the most tenuous of categorical relationships—men who behave violently toward ears—and thereby parodies Tyson's brutality and van Gogh's insanity.[8] The individual acts are horrific and there is no humor in either one, but placed together in an absurd relationship we comprehend these behavioral extremes in a way that empowers us—we *don't* fall into the category of men who behave violently toward ears. Once the joke is analyzed to the extent that all the humor has been sucked out of it, we realize that the societal message has nothing to do with ears, but with how unacceptable such violent behavior is.

Of the distant relationships mentioned, structural relationships are met with the most skepticism. Often structure is considered to be the box we are supposed to be thinking outside of—that is, if structure is considered at all. But structure is a very powerful creative tool. The classic "knock-knock" joke is one of the first encounters we have with manipulating structure. Children almost always recognize and are fascinated by the *pattern* of the joke long before they understand the wordplay that is supposed to make it funny. Most American parents will have had the "joy" of hearing over and over again, "Knock, knock" "Who's there?" followed by nonsensical lines such as "Billy" "Billy who?" "I'm hungry. Ha ha ha ha ha!" Surely much of the fascination of such simple and pointless repetition is the power and control given the child who initiates it. They have discovered a way to force their parents to respond completely predictably, to meet their expectation precisely and consistently, perhaps for the first time in their lives. And when the necessary wordplay is understood and added to the structure, the additional payoff of laughter is a prize beyond measure. I still vividly recall, some forty-seven or so years later, my discovery of the "boo-hoo" knock-knock joke and the almost hypnotic attraction it held for me as I tortured my parents with its immediate and constant repetition.

Distant Relationships in Comedy

The consideration of such simple joke forms might seem out of place in a discussion of creativity, but it brings up an important point that is vital for educators to understand. The distance of a relationship varies with historical change and personal growth. What may be "old-hat" for a society or group can still be considered creative for an individual. For example, in 1975 a word association game that linked "apple" with "computer" would have left most people completely perplexed at the distance of the relationship; today that same response would be considered entirely mundane. So too with the acquisition of knowledge on a personal level. In fostering creativity it is crucial that this type of naïve discovery be valued, rather than unappreciated because it represents no new discovery for the world.

As a child masters the structure of a knock-knock joke, its regular deployment is no longer creative; instead, the child's focus changes to the inclusion of wordplay and the emphasis of the joke normally remains there. The classic "banana-banana-orange" joke is an exception, where structure again becomes a vital element, although not entirely replacing wordplay. A new structural relationship, the "rule of threes" is added in this variant of the typical knock –knock joke.

> "Knock, knock"
> "Who's there?"
> "Banana"
> "Banana who?"
> "Knock, knock"
> "Who's there?"
> "Banana"
> "Banana who?"
> "Knock, knock"
> "Who's there?"
> "Orange"
> "Orange who?"
> "Orange you glad I didn't say 'banana'?"

The "rule of threes" is well known to writers, composers, and comedians. Although there are various ways it may be deployed, the basic idea is that any statement with two

[7] An excellent example of extreme and multiple distant relationships came to my attention as I was preparing this paper. In his composition *Placing a Star Near A Sky*, So Ka-wai, a Hong Kong composer, uses a complex procedure to compose rhythms in certain sections of this elegy for a deceased friend. His friend's birth date, May 22, lead So to the idea of the constellation Gemini, or the twins Castor and Pollux. So then rotates the character sequence of the names by different amounts, getting PNFGBE for Castor and FEBBKN for Pollux, and then translated these sequences into Morse code to create the rhythms used in certain sections of the piece.

[8] In a boxing match between Tyson and Evander Holyfield June 28, 1997, Tyson bit Holyfield on both ears so severely that a small piece of Holyfield's right ear was found on the ring floor after the fight. Van Gogh, in a bout of mental illness, cut off a piece of his own left earlobe on December 23, 1888. What is so wonderful and challenging about this joke is that it requires so much of the listener—the historical context of events over one hundred years distant from each other and areas as diverse as painting and boxing.

variants form an extremely satisfying whole—more so than a pair of statements or a statement with three or more variants. Its power lies in the recognition of pattern—while one statement is just an incident, and a statement and a variant may be merely a coincidence, a statement and two variants definitely form a pattern. In other words, twice is not enough, four or more times are too much. Comedians play with the expectation that the third variant will follow the established pattern of variation and so disrupt it to comic effect, as in "banana-banana-orange". The "rule of threes" is so much a subliminal part of our experience that a comedian may play upon recognition of the structure itself. While doing a bit on jet lag during my stand-up act at TakeOut Comedy I initiated the "rule of threes" by telling two jokes about jetlag, and concluded with, "There should be a third joke here, but I'm too jetlagged!" The significance and power of the triple structure was so great that its very absence became the joke.

Distant Relationships in Composition

Composers, too, are aware of the "rule of threes". In art music, one manifestation of the rule is a reservation against sequencing an idea more than twice without change.[9] Despite the name, these types of reservations, as in all music (and indeed all art forms), should be considered guidelines and not unbreakable rules or laws. Such limitations on sequencing have been commonly observed at least since the Baroque period, as can be heard in this example from the c minor fugue of J. S. Bach's Well-tempered Clavier, book 1, measure 5.

The idea beginning with the second note of the upper part, Eb-D-Eb-G-Ab, is immediately repeated at a higher pitch level, beginning on F, and again on G. Following these three statements, the pattern is dropped and the music continues on.

As particular musical relationships become heard more frequently, audiences come to expect them in the same way that the structure of a knock-knock joke is known and expected. Awareness of the "rule of threes"—and of the audiences' awareness of the rule--allows composers to play against it. In the first movement of his Piano Sonata in C major, K. 545, Mozart deliberately breaks the rule not only once, but also begins a *second* "extra" statement of this utterly banal material—merely a scale up and back down. The psychological effect of the structure here is very sophisticated (with very unsophisticated content). In measure 8 the "rule of threes" is denied by an unanticipated additional sequence and so the listener's sense of expectation is confused.[10] When, in measure 9, what is apparently the *fifth* statement of the scalar material begins, the audience meets it with almost utter disbelief. The initiation of this fifth statement, a second denial of the "rule of threes", creates a new expectation—that the sequence will continue to its completion, but Mozart denies the denial by breaking this repetition half-way through (measure 9, beat 3).

The effect of breaking these falling sequences in order to change direction and rise to the climax, further compounded with the chromaticism of C# and "ending" on the incomplete closure of a half-cadence, makes for a very striking and curiously unconventional opening theme.[11]

The result of the interplay between artist and audience, in which creative ideas eventually become normative and the unexpected becomes expected, is a sort of historical "arms race" of aesthetics, and a major driving force of stylistic change in historical terms. Once audiences anticipate the new, it is no longer new. It remains for the artist to respond by pursuing ever more distant relationships—so to speak, to "unexpect" the expected. No Classical composer was a greater master of this ability than Ludwig van Beethoven. In his Piano Concerto #5, in Eb major, Op. 73 (the "Emperor"), Beethoven achieves one of the most remarkable moments in all Western music, when he forces his audience to reconsider, *in retrospect*, the importance of a seemingly insignificant arpeggio. Normally Western tonal music points forward in time—a motive or theme is presented and we have knowledge and awareness of the idea as something to be developed. But Beethoven reverses this process at the conclusion of the second movement of this concerto. The movement has been ending for some time with quiet descending piano arpeggios signaling closure, and the audience is lulled into believing that everything of significance is over. Although a sudden and unexpected tonal shift from B major to Eb major occurs, the calm mood remains undisturbed and the final measures reverse the descent. Pattern reversal is a commonly used closure signal, and so the listener interprets the ascending piano arpeggio (measure 81, shown below) as nothing more than just such a signal—a mere tag with no more melodic

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[9] A sequence is an immediate repetition of a musical idea—melody and/or harmony—at a new pitch level.

[10] For an excellent discussion of the role of expectation in music, see David Huron's seminal work *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation*, MIT Press, 2008.

[11] Composer/comedian Peter Schikele (aka PDQ Bach) parodies this theme to great effect by continuing the sequence down off the very bottom of the piano.

significance than any of a thousand similar passages in Classical music. But the insignificance of this arpeggio is a lie—by leading directly into the final movement without pause, and repeating the rising arpeggios much faster and louder, Beethoven "unexpects" the expected and transforms what is seemingly an incidental, inconsequential closing tag into the rousing first theme of the Finale.

In a curious mirror-image of this passage, Johannes Brahms uses a similar awareness of structure and expectation to *hide* what is normally a climactic moment, at the recapitulation of the first movement of his Symphony #4 in e minor, Op. 98. Beethoven, in his first symphony, had established a structural relationship between the climax of a movement and its recapitulation—the moment when the first theme returns in the home key of the piece. This relationship was so effective and satisfying that subsequent composers adopted it almost without considering other possibilities. But Brahms, in his final symphony, came to "unexpect" the expected, too. Rather than give yet more bombast, Brahms hides the beginning of the recapitulation in a rather surprising way. The example below shows the opening theme as it first appears in measure 1.

Beginning in measure 246 this passage occurs.

The pitches of the two passages are almost exactly the same, but the rhythms are different. Brahms has augmented the rhythm of the opening theme, doubling and more the original note values. What is most remarkable about this idea is that augmentation had previously been associated with *increasing* the profile of a theme—augmented themes are traditionally more noticeable, not less. But due to the extreme lengthening to which Brahms has subjected his original idea, and the fact that the original two note groupings are now subsumed into a four note group without the divisive rests, many audience members don't recognize this as a recapitulation at all. Only in measure 258, when Brahms restores the original rhythmic values, do they realize they have heard this all before and are already well into the recapitulation. Like Beethoven's piano concerto, the audience is forced to reassess what they have already heard.

CLOSING

As a performing and creative artist, I would like to close with my own distant relationship to this discussion. In thinking about creativity, we often stress the importance of intent. "What are you trying to express here?" and "Why did you do this here?" are common questions to ask students engaged in creative tasks, and these are indeed valid and important questions. But intent should not blind us to serendipity. The "happy accident" is not to be scorned simply because it is unintentional. The recognition of a fortuitous result is an important ability, and is in fact a vital portion of the creative process involving distant relationships I have been describing here. If we are unable to judge the value of a particular relationship, the quality of our work will progress no further than the nonsensical knock-knock jokes of early childhood. Without judgment, that infinite number of monkeys typing on an infinite number of typewriters might just finish the complete works of Shakespeare one day, and no one would notice.

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