

# Form and chaos

**By John Garvey**

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I am not the first to notice that ideas and styles spread across the fine arts, regardless of medium or genre. In the middle of the 19th century, orchestras grew to 100 or more musicians, and symphonies were lush and tuneful.

Think of Wagner, Tchaikovsky and Saint-Saens. Novels had as many characters as orchestras had musicians. Their prose was lush and their stories absorbing. Think of Dickens, Tolstoy, Melville and Hugo.

Architecture expressed similar thoughts in stone and steel. The Paris Opera, where Saint-Saens was played, has beautiful lines and lots of ornamentation.

A different thread runs through the arts today. Poetry no longer matters because it's a word game for an elite intellectual subculture.

The rest of us can't recite any contemporary poems because we can't remember them. They don't rhyme, they have no rhythmic structure and they're not about anything. Often, they're just jumbles of words.

John Cage's music is a jumble of sounds. And sometimes not even that. His piece 4'33" is four minutes and 33 seconds of nothing at all.

Jackson Pollock represents the jumble style in painting. He didn't use an easel or a brush; he just dripped paint on the canvas. And while he was working, he once said, "I'm not aware of what I'm doing."

Mark Rothko represents the nothing-at-all style. His Black-Form paintings are a series of eight black canvases.

This kind of anarchy - no story, no cadence, no song, no organized sense of shape, perspective or color - has not arrived in architecture, because buildings have to stand up and we need to live in them.

But there is a deconstructivist movement that has elements in common with it. Architects like Frank Gehry (Walt Disney Concert Hall), Rem Koolhaas (Seattle Public Library) and the Coop Himmelb(l)au (Gasometer in Vienna) design chaotic and unpredictable buildings with odd surfaces.

In my more cynical moments, I have suspected that all of these artists (except Frank Gehry, whom I kind of like) are playing a joke on us. My rule of thumb about art is, if I can do it, it's not art. And I could paint a canvas black; or not play my instrument for four minutes. Heck, I could do five minutes.

But to be fair, there is a deeper idea at work. John Cage once described music as "a purposeless play." It's "not an attempt to bring order out of chaos ... but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living."

Traditional artistic forms impose an order on the world, and offer us a way to understand it and appreciate its beauty. The point of postmodern art is to dispense with these structures and bring us face to face with brute reality.

Cage is right to speak of chaos. That's exactly how Ovid describes the primal state of things: "the face of Nature in a vast expanse/ was naught but Chaos uniformly waste./ It was a rude and undeveloped mass/ ... congested in a shapeless heap."

I've been thinking lately about creating a Fine Arts Council at the university, whose charge would be not to appreciate this representation of the world, but to rebel against it.

In the Catholic imagination, the God who created the heavens and the earth brought an order out of primordial chaos. Or in Ovid's words, "God, or kindly Nature, ended strife - / ... he bound the fractious parts in tranquil peace."

Perhaps if we can bring together enough people who see the world this way, they can inspire one another to a distinctively Catholic vision of the arts. I'm not sure what it would be. (I have already confessed to being no artist.) But I know it has to start in a different place than where the culture is today.

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