

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 61 – Lynne Conner – Dionysus to The Apollo

Making Meaning

And now a personal word,

At the heart of Lynne Conner's scholarship about social interpretation of the arts—or the role the audience plays in the value assigned to a work of art—is the assertion that audiences coauthor meaning. Her work explores how audience participation in meaning-making has changed over time and why it matters. She notes that the audience experience shapes the expression and perception of art. But what does it mean to make meaning? What does meaning mean?

Here is how I interpret what Lynne means by meaning-making: the audience is involved along with the artist and critic in authoring what is said and understood about the art that is produced and experienced. The more the audience is involved in interpreting the art, the more the audience finds the art experience meaningful. So goes her assertion.

Language here is important: the art experience and the art object are two different things. An audience can find great meaning interpreting a work of art they find meaningless. For example, they can enjoy talking about a play they didn't very much like. An audience can also find meaningless what is said about a work of art they find meaningful. They can dismiss what is said about a play they love.

This happens all the time in sports: think of sports talk, which Lynne invites us to do when imagining what arts talk could be. Sports fans can find meaning talking about a team that is meaningless to them. The Cleveland Browns may mean nothing to them, but they will talk about the Browns. The talking is meaningful, not necessarily the object of what they are talking about. They also can find no meaning whatsoever in what is said about a team that is quite meaningful to them. The Carolina Panthers are meaningful, not what critics might say about them.

This is true of our lives as well: there are the lives we lead and what we say about our lives. Our lives are meaningful in our existence. Our lives are further meaningful to the extent that we interpret and value them. Any existentialist philosopher will tell you the same.

Just as there is arts talk and sports talk, so there is life talk. The more we think and talk about our lives, the more meaning we make and the more meaningful our lives. We give our life meaning in the consideration of it.

How might we consider our lives? We can curate our experiences. We can share our memories. We can discuss what is happening. We can learn about other lives led. We can be grateful. We can state goals and aspirations. We can live with greater intention.

Of course, we can let all thinking go and just be. We can be silent, and our lives are just as meaningful. (Some philosophers of language may disagree.)

We can say this: meaning-making is what humans do. We make meaning in response to existential concerns. We declare what is significant so that we get on with our days.

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