

# Swirls of Sensation and Metaphor

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Graduate school begins with expectations, excitement, anti-procrastination tactics, and above all love. Only someone with an all-consuming, passionate love of learning would undertake a master's in liberal studies. I have lost count of the number of times I have had to painstakingly explain my degree to my family and friends, and even fight a certain amount of embarrassment that I do not fit into their tidy definitions of success. Fortunately, at the end of my two years in MALS, I have come to realize that I am the brave one. I have chosen a degree in which there is no hiding, as all of my flaws, insecurities, and strengths were brought forth with each new course. My worldview was continuously poked, prodded, and eventually deconstructed to reform into that of an academic, continuously asking questions and searching for answers. As the reader will see, the myriad of viewpoints presented to me in MALS opened the doors of metaphor and story to create a new macrocosm of understanding. Far and above the most valuable lesson MALS has taught me, is finding comfort in the unknown. My undergraduate self was paralyzed with indecision, whereas my graduate self relishes in the subjective possibilities.

While it seems logical to proceed chronologically, I must break this rule of logic right here in the beginning to provide you with a very important disclaimer. Thomas Kuhn, a historian of science, offers valuable insight into the nature of all knowledge in his game-changing book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Discoveries do not occur on a clean timeline, extending from the beginning of time to the end, despite what my elementary, middle, and high school textbooks had me believe. Instead, new discoveries are integrated into the entire existing paradigm, which creates something new every time. In science, this generates an illusion of

non-progress; in other fields it creates a similar situation. In the context of an individual me, it means writing a reflective essay requires taking into account my complete current paradigm of perceptions. It is impossible for me to describe my first MALS course without the coloring of every course following it. The knowledge I have gained has been integrated with, and sometimes without, my permission, and exists chronologically only on a transcript for the convenience of an institution.

My very first course in the MALS program was titled “Emerging Powers,” discussing the end of American exceptionalism, increasing globalization in all areas of operation, and the rise of a few budding countries progressing to fill the gap America was and is leaving behind. It must first be said that I had not taken a class on government since the tenth grade, and while I was a staunchly domestic democrat, my understanding of international politics was beyond limited; miniscule would have been a fitting description. The material was foreign, and therefore difficult to understand, but fascinating. At the time, I was delighted to hold an intelligent conversation about why India may be a better offshore investment than China, but now I am left feeling hollow about the charade. I am proud of the quality of work I produced, included here in a creative brochure and video project, however I was ignorantly operating under a story I no longer believe.

Instead of America versus other countries, I see a unity and equality with other people of the world. Frivolity should not be attached to this statement and it is not a philosophy that is merely hoped for. In other words, many people say the words “equality” and “unity” because it sounds nice but secretly believe it has no

practical or reasonable purpose. In fact, this statement and the philosophy it suggests may be the very progress that seems to be hiding behind the illusion.

My first glimpse of a new story came in the latter part of my first semester under the name “Modern Problems of Belief.” With this new story came pure, unadulterated fear. Zygmunt Bauman was one of many authors to poke holes in my comfort zone, and with this invasion of my mind came, in my humble opinion, one of the best breakthroughs included in my portfolio. It begins with the individuality shoved down our consumerist throats. To quote, “I’s can only stand shoulder-to-shoulder with other ‘I’s without any true interaction, compromise or negotiation” (“Bauman Essay 2”). Modern communities provide a false sense of togetherness by looking at superficial similarities to justify their groupings—and any who deny their appointed communities are shunned by all communities. Put another way, the current model of both individuality and community are no longer useful but persist like a disease to an addicted population of shoppers, shopping around for goods, services, and people. “Why are we trapped in a system that is constantly changing, but defies logic in looking identical to the one that was just replaced?” (“Bauman Essay 2”). While it is impossible not to think of Khun’s paradigm model here, this question is different. I am asking why it seems impossible to break free from the current story and create a new one. One technological advance after the other creates an illusion of progress as it operates within the same model, not creating a need for integration—there is no shift. The answer eluded me at the time, but is now slightly more within reach.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am a recovering shopaholic for any and everything. Many make light of this addiction or disease, but this only serves their denial and attempts to make light of an ugly picture of America and a globalized market. During “Simple Living in a Complex Age,” I discovered my disease of affluenza, defined by John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor as, “a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more” (2). The most common reaction following this discovery is guilt—an unproductive but valid reaction. The authors and my classmates in this course allowed me to take the theoretical and make it real. Becoming a downshifter allowed me to gradually explore the new story, cautiously pushing my comfort zone. The practical steps mentioned in “Becoming a Downshifter” illustrate the importance of time over money, stepping back from the trappings of consumerism, and handling the fear and guilt uncovered in “Modern Problems of Belief” in an effective manner.

I learned the true value of stories in the formidable “Religion and Ecology,” with Professor Headington. Religion was portrayed remarkably as a story, and a mutable one at that. The influential Christian writer Sallie McFague insists science is quite close to philosophy and theology in the sense that it is metaphorical (93). This statement is earthshattering. This may seem counterintuitive at first, for example the human genome is as much a metaphor as God? Fear not, that is simply the old story condemning a view of equality among fields of knowledge—for all knowledge is a metaphor. The question then becomes, what story improves the quality of all matter, life included. McFague may help clarify again, “...no absolute distinction

exists between the living and the nonliving, for life is a type of organization, not an entity or substance” (106). Any story with value and utility in our time must take into account the power and importance of metaphor side by side with equality.

A story that truly took me on a literary ride was Doris Lessing’s *Memoirs of a Survivor*. While I did not realize it at the time, “Literature and the Religious Imagination” was a rather poetic synthesis of concepts. Lessing very subtly inserts a God figure to watch over a dystopian future while emphasizing the simultaneous importance and non-importance of the narrator. She is never named and stands for every reader, but is made special within the novel by her communication with “Her.” Further, the cause of the dystopian disaster remains unnamed, referred to only as “it,” creating accessibility in any era. “‘It,’ ...was above all, a consciousness of something ending” (Lessing 151). “It” is an elegant way to describe a paradigm shift, a new metaphor, and a new story.

A subject that is directly applicable to my calling as an artist and an academic is art theory. During “Global Arts: Windows into the HeARTs of Other Cultures,” I was introduced to the idea of “making special.” The esteemed scholar Ellen Dissanayake, to differentiate ritual and play from art, originated this concept. In essence, art and “making special” seek to embellish reality, or the experience of reality, so that it appears additionally real (Dissanayake 95). Dissanayake, perhaps unintentionally, creates a metaphor for the accumulation of knowledge and a new story. A story’s purpose is to “make special” that which is happening, answering the ancient and ultimate questions of existence and purpose. A believer in a particular story must be convinced that their story is more real than other story options. Of

course any worthy intellectual leaves the door open for additional accumulations and shifts, but one must feel authentic in his or her current convictions.

A beautiful example of a contemporary artist making reality additionally real is the inimitable Marina Abramović. She has begun construction on her very own institute to create researchers of the real and artists of the future. For six hours, committed participants eye gaze, slow motion walk, crystal room meditate, view performances, and sleep, among other things. This intense introspection invites the participants to lay their ideologies bare. “Art...is an open variable which, when applied to any culturally bound thing, will liberate it to direct experience,” creating that which is additionally real (McEvelley 293). The real is what we are after; consciously accepting that language, science, or philosophy will only ever come close. This is the most real, admitting that it will always, and can only be a swirl of sensation and metaphor.

Is reconciliation possible among all of these ideas? The answer is, of course, yes. As I write and you read, these ideas are already coalescing into something unique and beautiful, complete with a few paradoxes and contradictions—which may be the most fun of all. Believing that embodying a new story or metaphor will bring about change without knowing the specifics involves a bit of faith. Faith in the sense that I do not hold all of the answers and will never truly know the answers no matter how many books I read, degrees I hold, or how wise I may be deemed; but the saga continues. It is impossible for me to have an objective view of anything and my admittance of this supposed flaw means my story is progressing, as it should.

MALS has helped me find my subjective because the possibilities are endless. Not knowing any of the answers leads me to the best questions.



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