

This Paper Has Not Been Named

Monica Zilioli

Since this paper is titled rather ambiguously, it is difficult to tell the nature of its subject. This was purposely done to illustrate how titles usually provide a certain degree of topical information about a piece of music, literature, visual artwork, etc. However, there have been notable examples of artists who purposely chose to flout this traditional approach to titling. Perhaps James Whistler is most infamous for this as a result of his 1872 painting “Variations of Flesh Colour, Blue, and Grey” (Martin, 1966). As this painting depicts the artist’s mother, Whistler was ridiculed for his choice of title, “I know that many good people think my nomenclature funny and myself ‘eccentric’” (Martin, 1966, p. 252). For many years, the public simply refused to use Whistler’s title, referring to it instead as “The Princess.” Yet, with the dawn of the twentieth century, Whistler’s ideas about titling art have since achieved more widespread acceptance.

With unfettered growth of title creativity, greater attention has been paid to its importance. Although most aestheticians and philosophers agree that “What a work is titled...has a significant effect on the aesthetic face it presents and on the qualities we correctly perceive in it” (Levinson, 1985, p. 29), relatively little has been done to determine the extent of this influence. One of the earliest experiments to study this examined the effect of titles on painting perceptions (Franklin, Becklen, & Doyle, 1993). In this experiment, participants were shown two paintings: Arshile Gorky’s “Agony” and Claude Monet’s “Terrace at Ste. Adresse” (Franklin et al., 1993). Participants were presented with each painting twice (once with the correct title and later with a fake title)

and asked to describe them. For “Agony,” the fictitious title shown was “Carnival,” while “Terrace at Ste. Adresse” was shown as “The Coming Storm.”

Franklin et al. (1993) created four title orientations to objectively analyze participants’ painting descriptions: *framing by title*, *dialoguing with title*, *not attending to title*, and *metaphorizing*. *Framing by title* is when title words may direct painting meaning and be present in the description, but viewers do not explicitly use the word “title” and/or highlight the title with quotation marks in their description. *Dialoguing with title* occurs when viewers explicitly re-state the title in their description in quotation marks and/or mention the word “title.” This orientation also involves a judgment about whether the title matches or does not match its image. *Not attending to the title* is when viewers show no evidence that the title influences their descriptions. Finally, *metaphorizing* occurs when viewers create novel ways to interpret title meaning.

Based on the title orientations, Franklin et al. (1993) strongly suggested that the title of a painting affects how it is described. Specifically, the descriptions for “Agony” and “The Coming Storm” were rated significantly different than when these paintings were presented as “Carnival” and “Terrace at Ste. Adresse.” However, while this experiment is a seminal example of research on this subject, it had a few potential problems. For example, although “Carnival” and “Agony” appeared to be completely opposite titles at first glance, neither could conjure up images of peace or tranquility. Therefore, the novel experiment presented here strived to make the contrast between the real and fabricated titles more defined.

Franklin et al. (1993) also did not show either painting without a title as a control. Yet, few have studied the meaning behind works termed “untitled” or ones identified by a

string of numbers and letters, as these are products of the twentieth century (Petersen, 2006). This dearth is further fueled by the fact that the number of artists who label their art as such is relatively small. While it might be easy to conclude that untitled works indicate a lack of linguistic meaning, this may not be the case: numbers in a title could represent weather conditions, the date the work was finished, or a date of personal, cultural, or historical significance. Even the decision to use Roman instead of Arabic numerals could be interpreted. One aesthete summed up this complex situation, “a completed work without a title seems unfinished and devoid of an essential element, so much so that artifacts that are intentionally ‘untitled’ have to be titled thus!” (Symes, 1992, p. 23). Hence, in addition to including two distinct title groups, this new experiment added an “Untitled #3” group to see if the lack of a title with a readily discernible meaning affected painting descriptions.

This experiment also positively differed from that of Franklin et al. (1993) in other ways. For example, instead of one traditional and one modern painting, only one modern painting was shown. This was done to allow for more experimental control, as having two different painting styles increases the number of potential variables. Participants were also randomly assigned to only one of the three aforementioned title conditions, rather than the same participant being presented with two different titles. This was done in the hopes of strengthening the results. Finally, unlike the survey in Franklin et al. (1993), this experiment asked participants if they found the painting disturbing and if they had previously seen the painting. These questions were added in an attempt to pinpoint subjective opinion more closely and eliminate possible confounds.

Other changes were made to further generalize the results of Franklin et al. (1993). For example, this experiment replaced the paintings used in the previous study with Arshile Gorky's painting, "Water of the Flowery Mill." This painting was purposely picked because it is a portrayal of a mill that is so abstract that it creates ambiguity. In addition, while the title is fairly neutral and bucolic, the colors and some of the shapes in the painting are brightly colored and somewhat frenetic. Hence, the fake title was "Agony," while the control title was "Untitled #3." In this experiment, participants' typed descriptions were also recorded via computer, instead of having their spoken words recorded. Finally, there was a change in the painting presentation: unlike the slide presentation in the original experiment, paintings were displayed on a computer screen. Such modifications were made to increase the generalizability of the results reported by Franklin et al. (1993).

Other than these minor changes, the experiment presented here closely followed the structure of Franklin et al. (1993). As such, it was predicted that descriptions would vastly differ, based on the title. However, it was assumed that descriptions from the "Untitled #3" group would not be influenced by the title. Although some aestheticians and philosophers believe an untitled work can contain meaning, they have mostly mentioned this in the context of multiple numbers. Since "Untitled #3" only included one number, it was thought unlikely that participants would glean any information from it. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that the most participants would say "Agony" was disturbing, with "Untitled #3" having the next most, and "Water of the Flowery Mill" with the least, seeing as its title had a generally pleasing connotation.

## Method

*Participants.* 44 undergraduate students from Goucher College volunteered to participate. Four participants were eliminated from the final data analysis for previous exposure to the presented painting. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three title groups: “Water of the Flowery Mill” (11 students), “Agony” (15 students), or “Untitled #3” (14 students).

*Materials.* Stimuli were presented via computer. Participants’ typed responses to four questions were collected using the website SurveyMonkey. The first and last questions reflected the title manipulation, making them group dependent. However, the second and third questions were identical for all groups (see Appendix).

*Procedure.* Before starting the survey, participants were asked to refrain from discussing the experiment, as the results were contingent on successful title manipulation. After reading these instructions, participants completed the survey. Settings were created to insure that participants answered every question and were only allowed to complete the survey once on their personal computer. Upon completion of the survey, subjects were thanked for their participation and debriefed about the true nature of the experiment. Due to this explanatory section, the survey was also designed to prevent participants from going back and changing any answers.

## Results

Using the title orientations created by Franklin et al. (1993), it was clear that titles guided participants’ descriptions of paintings. Only 27% of participants’ descriptions of “Water of the Flowery Mill” appeared to have been affected by the title. In contrast, 60% of participants in the “Agony” group referred to the title in some way in their

descriptions. No participants in “Untitled #3” indicated an influence of title on their descriptions.

Even if the numbers had not been so strong, individual participants’ descriptions were what truly supported the idea of title power. For example, one participant described “Water of the Flowery Mill” as “goopy, watery, struggling, weeping, beautiful, flower petals, dripping.” This is a *framing by title* orientation because the title appeared to direct how the painting was observed. Indeed, all of the words in the description dealt with water or flowers, similar to the title. In contrast, an “Agony” participant had the following framing by title description, “‘Agony’ is an abstract painting in which splotches of color are used to evoke a disturbing image.”

Sharp distinctions were also seen in *dialoguing with title* descriptions. A “Water of the Flowery Mill” participant wrote:

what would seem, from the title, to be the spirit of a variety of different flower types...the piece leaves me with a feeling of disorganization which makes me wonder if the piece is actually trying to represent something emotional, or human – intangible – and less literal than a rendition of flowers.

This is an excellent example of the aforementioned title orientation because it included the word “title” and the participant judged if the title matched the painting. Not surprisingly, participants from “Agony” had very different dialoguing with title descriptions. One such was, “I’m sure it is meant to depict torture or something terrible, maybe a level of Hell or the agony on the garden, but it’s just lovely to me.” While this participant did not write the actual painting title or the word “title,” it is strongly implied and the description also contains a mismatch judgment. Another said, “to me, the title represents the agony of the artist as he/she puts the paintbrush to t[h]e canvas.” Perhaps

the best example of this title orientation was, “Without the title, I may not have know[n] that it [was] meant to depict something disturbing.”

Out of all of the participants in this experiment, only one used the title orientation of *metaphorizing*. He/she was assigned to the “Water of the Flowery Mill” group, “Perhaps i[t] is a skewed reflection of flowers in the water that represent the artist’s mental state of unrest; that something so beautiful and serene could seem so confused.” Clearly, this participant thought outside of the box to write such a description.

Further analysis revealed that specific title words and asking if participants found the painting disturbing seemed to influence descriptions. 33% of “Agony” participants used the word “agony,” while “Water of the Flowery Mill” had 18% of its participants use the word “flower” and 27% use the words “water” or “watery.” Although the word “disturbing” was not observed in any of the “Water of the Flowery Mill” or “Untitled #3” descriptions, 27% of “Agony” participants included it in their descriptions. One participant even remarked, “I didn’t find it disturbing until asked.” Collectively, these results suggest that title words and questions can shape descriptions.

Results for participants finding the painting disturbing were mixed. No participants in “Water of the Flowery Mill” thought the painting was disturbing, while three participants in “Agony” and three participants in “Untitled #3” considered it to be disturbing.

### *Discussion*

Paintings descriptions were greatly influenced by the title, providing evidence that the first hypothesis was correct. While both “Water of the Flowery Mill” and “Agony” showed an effect of title, this effect was stronger for the latter title condition. This makes

sense because “agony” is a much more inflammatory word with the potential to sear itself into memory than “Water of the Flowery Mill.” Finally, as predicted, the title “Untitled #3” did not directly affect descriptions.

Although the influence of titles was the primary variable of interest in this study, descriptions that did not attend to the title proved to be extremely fascinating. Despite the fact that titles did not directly color these descriptions, they still seemed to help create an overall vibe or mood. For example, participants from “Watery of the Flowery Mill” used adjectives like “pretty” and “lively,” both of which seem to have more positive connotations. This fit with the idea that “Water of the Flowery Mill” conjures up a more pleasant image. In contrast, “Agony” participants who did not attend to the title generally had more negative descriptions like, “try to stop a developer from bulldozing a community recreation center.”

Additionally, the lack of a title seemed to fuel negative perceptions in “Untitled #3” participants, possibly stemming from the discomfort of ambiguity. One participant wrote that “[the colors] do not go together well,” while another deemed it “uncoordinated...It’s definitely not pleasing to the eyes.” A third participant opined, “it [the colors] makes the work uncomfortable to look at.” However, while “Untitled #3” tended to elicit negative responses, it also challenged some viewers to look more deeply at the painting and its individual visual components, “The shapes and color cause me to search for meaning and I get a vague impression of fucking or fighting and all the emotions that either of these activities could imply.” Another stated, “It seems to be more about the color than the subject matter.”



Despite strong support for the first hypothesis, the second hypothesis was only partially supported. Although it was correctly predicted that “Water of the Flowery Mill” would have the least participants say the painting was disturbing, “Agony” and “Untitled #3” had an equal number of participants report that the painting was disturbing. There are several possible reasons why more “Untitled #3” participants than originally predicted found the painting disturbing. Most likely, the lack of a title caused these participants to feel unfocused and less able to interpret meaning. Ultimately, these sentiments surfaced in their descriptions: one participant said the painting was “full of uncertainty,” while others wrote, “I am not entirely certain I guessed right” and “I’m not sure.” Another participant suggested that the lack of a guide created chaos, possibly paralleling the lack of a directive painting title, “[it] depicts the randomness and chaos of a world without God.” All of these quotes offer insight into how “Untitled #3” could appear as disturbing as “Agony.” As one especially perceptive “Untitled #3” participant said, “It is difficult to decipher the tone of the exchange/image as the colors can lend themselves easily to many different feelings and moods.”

Clearly, the presence of a pointed title or a vague untitled one influenced the descriptions of paintings. Results for the “disturbing” question were not as solid, but still provided some data worthy of further investigation. Descriptions also revealed that merely using the word “disturbing” in a question primed peoples’ perceptions of paintings. Since word choice had such an effect in this experiment, it is logical to assume that it would also affect things outside of the visual art realm. Thus, words should always be picked with extreme care. In conclusion, words powerfully shape how we perceive, or do not perceive the world.

## References

- Franklin, M.B., Becklen, R.C., & Doyle, C.L. (1993). The influence on titles of how paintings are seen. *Leonardo*, 26, 103-108.
- Levinson, J. (1985). Titles. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 44, 29-40.
- Martin, F.D. (1966). Naming paintings. *Art Journal*, 25, 252-256.
- Petersen, G. (2006). Titles, labels, and names: A house of mirrors. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 40, 29-44.
- SurveyMonkey. (1999). Retrieved May 12, 2009, from <http://www.surveymonkey.com>
- Symes, C. (1992). You can't judge a book by its cover: The aesthetics of title and other epitextual devices. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 26, 17-26.

Appendix

Linguistics Project

This survey has three different groups. Therefore, please do not discuss this with others unless you are sure they have taken it. Thank you!

Untitled #3, 1944 (Arshile Gorky)



1. What is the title of this painting (the answer is above the painting)?

2. Do you find this painting disturbing?

\_\_\_ Yes.

\_\_\_ No.

3. Have you seen this painting before?

\_\_\_ Yes.

\_\_\_ No.

4. In your own words, please describe "Untitled #3" in a few sentences.

The end!

All of you were presented with the same painting. However, 1/3 of you were informed that the painting's title was "Water of the Flowery Mill," 1/3 of you were informed that the painting's title was "Agony," and 1/3 of you were informed that the painting's title was "Untitled #3." Although the real title of this painting is "Water of the Flowery Mill," I purposely manipulated the title to see if it could change your subjective judgments and descriptions.

If you have any questions or want to know the general results, please e-mail me at [monica.zilioli@goucher.edu](mailto:monica.zilioli@goucher.edu). Thank you very much for participating!