The Power of Expectations and Frustration

You see and hear it every day.

Something isn't quite what you expected.

You perk up. Your attention is engaged.

Something wasn't part of the normal pattern.

Developing the skill of creating patterns, establishing expectations, and then deliberately disrupting them can revolutionize your art.

What I want to open your eyes to today isn't a trick. It's not a formula. I want to make you aware of a principle so that you can begin to recognize it in the art around you. Once you understand how it works, you can begin using it deliberately in your own creative work.

It's kind of like Neo in *The Matrix*. Once you know what's going on, it's hard not to see it everywhere. And once you can see it, you can begin to bend it to your own will.

Art, Time, and Expectations

For the purposes of this discussion, I want to divide art into two broad categories: art that unfolds over time and art that exists as a relatively fixed object.

Let's call them ***linear art*** and ***static art*****.**

Linear art is revealed over time. Music, theatre, novels, and poetry are examples. There is a beginning, a progression, and an end. The artist has considerable control over the order in which the audience experiences the work.

Static art, on the other hand, includes things like paintings and sculptures. The work itself doesn't normally change over time. It stays the same, even though your perception of it, your attention to different details, and your emotional response may change.

Both forms of art make use of patterns and expectations, but linear art gives us a particularly interesting opportunity: we can control *when* something happens.

And that is enormously powerful.

Our Brains Are Pattern-Seeking Machines

Our brains are pattern-seeking machines.

Think about how you suddenly start noticing a particular model of car everywhere after you've been considering buying one.

Or imagine one of our distant ancestors learning what time of day a particular animal would emerge, where it would go to drink, and how it behaved. Recognizing those patterns might have meant the difference between eating and going hungry.

We're built to recognize patterns, learn from them, and use them to anticipate what happens next.

And we do this constantly, often without even realizing it.

Linear art thrives on patterns.

Your music thrives on patterns. Your lyrics thrive on patterns. Rhythm, melody, harmony, rhyme, phrasing, and musical form all rely to varying degrees on our ability to recognize something familiar and anticipate what comes next.

But here's the kicker.

We can get bored remarkably quickly.

Give us too much of the same thing, and our attention begins to wander. We've figured out the pattern. We know what's coming.

Next!

This presents an interesting challenge for the artist.

We need patterns to establish familiarity and expectations, but we also need to maintain interest.

One of the most powerful ways to do that is to establish a **pattern**, encourage the audience to anticipate its continuation, and then do something **unexpected**.

But there's more to it than simply breaking a pattern.

Sometimes we fulfill the expectation. Sometimes we challenge it. Sometimes we delay its fulfillment. And sometimes we refuse to fulfill it at all.

The real artistic power lies in understanding what the audience expects and deciding what to do with that expectation.

Surprise, Tension, Frustration, and Satisfaction

Let's start with something very simple.

Suppose I do essentially the same thing twice in a row.

What is your brain expecting the third time?

Probably more of the same.

I've established a pattern, and you've begun anticipating its continuation.

But what happens if I do something different the third time?

Your brain suddenly says, "**Hey! Hold on there! What are you doing?**"

Your attention sharpens.

Something has happened that wasn't supposed to happen, at least according to the expectations you've developed.

That's surprise.

But depending on what I've done, something else may happen as well.

You may begin wanting the original pattern to return. You may feel that something is incomplete, unsettled, or unresolved.

That's tension.

And if I continue withholding the thing you're expecting, that tension can develop into a kind of frustration.

Now, frustration sounds like a negative thing, doesn't it?

But in art, a **carefully controlled amount of frustration** can be enormously effective.

Think about it. If you're waiting for something to happen, and I keep making you wait, your desire for that thing can become stronger.

And when I finally give it to you?

Satisfaction.

Sometimes enormous satisfaction.

The important thing is that the satisfaction has been made more powerful by the **expectation** and the **delay**.

Of course, there's a balance. Withhold the expected resolution for too long, or without sufficient artistic purpose, and the audience may simply lose interest.

But get the balance right, and you've created an emotional experience rather than merely presented a sequence of events.

And very often, after disrupting an established pattern, the artist returns to something recognizable from the original pattern.

It might not be identical. In fact, it can be more interesting if it isn't.

But it's familiar enough that the audience recognizes the return.

The tension is relieved. The expectation is satisfied.

And the experience of returning can be more rewarding precisely because we've been taken away from it.

So, How Does This Manifest Itself?

Consider the following.

The classical rounded binary form:

||: A :||: B A' :||

We establish an idea, move away from it, and then return to a recognizable version of the original material.

Or consider the familiar AABA song form, found in songs such as ***Yesterday*** and ***Over the Rainbow***.

We hear an A section. We hear it again, perhaps with some variation. By now, we've developed a strong sense of familiarity.

Then comes B.

Something different.

A departure.

And then?

A section returns.

But now we're hearing it after experiencing something else. The familiar material can take on a different emotional significance because of what happened in between.

The return itself becomes an **event**.

Not doing it for you?

How about the form of a limerick?

A **limerick** typically has five lines, with an AABBA rhyme scheme. The first two lines establish a rhythmic and rhyming expectation. The third and fourth lines are shorter, creating a noticeable change in the flow.

da Dada da Dada da Dada
da Dada da Dada da Dada
da Dada da Da
da Dada da Da
da Dada da Dada da Dada

Then the fifth line returns to the longer rhythmic pattern and completes the rhyme established at the beginning.

The structure is so familiar that we can often sense where the joke is heading before the punchline arrives.

And that's part of what makes the punchline work.

We're **anticipating a resolution**, and the writer has an opportunity to satisfy that expectation in a surprising or amusing way.

The principle isn't limited to large structures like verses, choruses, or entire compositions.

It can happen within a single musical phrase.

It can happen in a melody, a rhythmic figure, a harmonic progression, or a line of lyrics.

And here's where things get particularly interesting.

It can happen in several of those elements at the same time.

Patterns Within Patterns

Consider Pink Floyd's ***Mother***, from ***The Wall*.**

Listen to the opening questions Roger Waters sings to his mother.

The first two lines establish a **recognizable lyrical pattern**. The **third expands and disrupts that pattern**, before the **fourth takes us somewhere different again**.

But listen carefully to what the music is doing.

The phrasing and musical structure also play with our expectations. The changes in the length and shape of the musical phrases reinforce what's happening in the lyrics.

The pattern isn't operating in just one dimension.

It's happening in the words and in the music.

And those two elements are working together.

Arguably, this increases the emotional and artistic weight of the disruption. We're not simply hearing an unexpected lyric or an unexpected musical phrase. We're experiencing both as parts of the same expressive gesture.

When One Extra Line Changes Everything

Now have a listen to Sheryl Crow's ***Soak Up the Sun***.

Here's a wonderful example of an artist **establishing an expectation** and then **dramatically disrupting it** with one seemingly simple change.

In the second verse, there's a highly rhythmic passage leading directly into the chorus.

Listen to the rhythm.

DA da DA da DA da DA
da DA da DA da DA da DA

DA da DA da DA da DA
da DA da DA da DA da DA

It's insistent. It's infectious. And by the time the chorus arrives, you've become thoroughly accustomed to the pattern.

You're in the groove.

Now, **when that same passage returns** in the third verse, something interesting happens.

Crow brings you right back into that familiar rhythmic pattern. You recognize it immediately. You already know where it's going.

Or at least you think you do.

The rhythm unfolds just as you expect.

And then she drops the hammer.

One extra line.

Suddenly, the pattern you've been following takes an unexpected turn.

The line itself isn't particularly complicated. But because the musical expectation has been so firmly established, **the disruption is impossible to miss**.

And that's what makes it so effective.

Think about it. The extra line wouldn't have nearly the same impact if you hadn't already heard the original passage.

It's the familiarity that gives the change its power.

Crow doesn't need to introduce an entirely new musical idea or make some enormous dramatic gesture. She simply changes something you've already learned to expect.

And because you've been anticipating what comes next, that small change commands your attention.

The surprise isn't just in what she adds. It's in what you expected her not to add.

Now Consider The Possibilities.

What happens when the rhythm establishes one expectation while the melody suggests another?

What happens when a lyric seems to be reaching an emotional conclusion, but the harmony refuses to resolve?

Or when the music becomes increasingly intense while the singer becomes quieter and more restrained?

Sometimes the different elements reinforce one another.

Sometimes they contradict one another.

And sometimes the tension between those elements is precisely what makes the artistic statement so compelling.

Once you begin recognizing these relationships, you'll start finding them everywhere.

In the music you love. In films. In poetry. In storytelling. Even in the way a good comedian sets up and delivers a joke.

And the more you recognize them, the more deliberately you can begin using them.

Because the objective isn't simply to surprise your audience.

It's to understand what they're expecting, what they're hoping for, and what they're waiting to experience.

Then you can decide when to give it to them, when to change it, and when to make them wait just a little longer.

That's the power of expectations and frustration.

Originally published by Darryl Wood and reproduced with permission. Visit Mastering Alliance for additional articles and resources.