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**Reconciling Difference: Art as Reparation and Healing**

**Estelle Barrett**

Deakin University

This paper demonstrates the way shamanism and psychoanalysis are deeply related as first signalled by Claude Lévi-Strauss. It then creates a context in which the question of body and mind, creativity and healing is discoursed in an interdisciplinary manner. An exposition of thinkers emerging from disparate disciplines will be used to show how aesthetic experience (both the production and the reception of art) results in reparation and healing. This relationship is not only relevant in therapeutic terms, but can also be extended to aesthetic practices which involve possible reconciliation of inner and outer conflict. The therapeutic involves an understanding of ways in which aesthetic practices recast western notions of the relationship between body and mind.

The role of the body and primary processes involved in artistic practices can be understood through various medical and psychotherapeutic processes. These approaches incorporate theories of how the human organism processes the physical and social environment. This is concerned with reconnecting modes of producing meaning to the subject's vital biology and unconscious processes. As Gerda Alexander (1995) notes, it involves therapies which incorporate music, dance, the visual and verbal arts and which focus on bodily and sensory awareness as integral mechanisms of reparation.

**I.**

The implied methodology suggests that creativity has survival value which implies that aesthetic practice is a striving for technical mastery, not for its own sake but as a function which extends the individual's capacity for change and growth. Michael Samuels and Nancy Samuels assert that what has been designated as "art" is a manifestation of a more inherent and profound tendency of living processes, an intensification of what cybernetic science describes as processes which, at a primary level, operate as an "automatic creative mechanism" (1990: 146).

In "The Effectiveness of Symbols" [first published 1958], Claude Lévi-Strauss (1972) examined the complex interrelationship between symbols, thought and bodily processes through a comparison of the shamanistic cure and Sigmund Freud's "talking cure" or psychoanalytical method. It may be argued that physiological reparation and healing involve processes that closely parallel and correlate with reparative processes that result in psychological reintegration. This has been demonstrated through therapies involving the use of language, imagery and other forms of symbolisation or modelling of experience, including dance, performance and music. Art has long been recognised as serving a crucial role in assuaging loss and facilitating emotional reconciliation.

Aesthetics provides a space for inter-subjective production of meanings and experience of the world. Lévi-Strauss explains how the representations of the above therapeutic practices bring about a modification of organic, psychological and social functions. In his comparison of the two modes of healing, he demonstrates how both shamanism and psychoanalysis involve myth (imagery) and action. Lévi-Strauss further suggests that:

> In both cases the purpose is to bring to a conscious level conflicts and resistances which have remained unconscious owing to their repression by other psychological forces or to their own specific nature which is not psychic, but organic or even simply mechanical (1972: 198).

Both psychological and physiological trauma can be restructured and resolved if they are given form, thereby making them accessible to conscious thought. In childbirth, for example, the shaman provides the patient with the myth—the symbols or language to express otherwise inexpressible psychic states. This "induces the release of the physiological process, that is, the re-organisation in a favourable direction of the process
The process of the physiological cure is shown by Lévi-Strauss to correspond to "abreaction," understood in psychoanalytical terms as the process by which real or alleged knowledge of psychological conflict is brought to consciousness through language leading to its resolution (Lévi-Strauss, 1972: 198). Because pain is the relationship between the thing and its symbolic mode, the expression of painful experience through narrative, myth or other aesthetic means such as dance and performance results in a re-organisation of the experience and subsequent release of symptoms. Both psychological and physiological trauma occur because the subject experiences them immediately as living myth or language in action. Consider, for example, descriptions of pain as "burning," "stabbing," or "shooting." Lévi-Strauss (1972: 201) asserts that the inductive property of myth reflects the effectiveness of symbols in triggering physiological responses. In psychoanalysis, the healer performs the action and the patient supplies the myth whereas, in shamanism, the healer supplies the myth and the patient performs the action.

II.

However, the link between shamanism and symbolism can also be understood in terms of the structure and function of the unconscious and its implication in somatic processes. Words or symbols strike the body not only as ideas or concepts, but also as objects. The work of Julia Kristeva explores the complex, but inextricable relationship that exists between language and the body through the notion of the semiotic or the bodily dimension of language. Broadly, this refers to the sensory rather than the semantic dimension of language—sound elements such as rhythm and onomatopoeia, for example, as opposed to conceptual content. Such elements relate to the operations of what Kristeva calls the "chora." This can be described as organic motility or set of kinetic rhythms made up of drives, "distinctive psychical marks or traces" which, in turn, precede the acquisition of language and organise pre-verbal space (Kristeva, 1984: 24). These operations involve drives or energy discharges of the human organism, initially oriented around the mother's body, which continue to function after the subject has entered language. They articulate a continuum between the body and external objects. Kristeva (1984: 27) stresses that, though the semiotic is tied to physical drives in the body, it is nonetheless heterogeneous in nature since it is subject to societal mediation through contact with the maternal body. These semiotic functions are a precondition for the symbolic, which invoke an aesthetic textual practice involving "jouissance" or what Roland Barthes (1975) has described as the pleasure of the text—and derived from the physical or material aspect of language, revealed in certain combinations of letters, rhythms and sounds. The creative production of the text is thus described as the "semitization of language," a notion prefigured by Mallarmé in his definition of art and literature as "rhythm made intelligible by syntax" (Kristeva, 1984: 30).

III.

Kristeva's theory of the semiotic aspect of language accords with Lévi-Stauss' explanation of the shamanistic cure in its suggestion that bodily processes are continuous with, rather than separated from, signification. Creative textual practice contrasts what is established in the symbolic realm and other unrepresented realities. It can thus be argued that symbolic objects have the potential to transduce human experience and alleviate both emotional and physical pain. Their potency depends on the extent to which they affect an interplay between different realms of reality as discussed in Lévi-Strauss' account of the shamanistic cure. Words and other symbols are invested with this quality, and hence the word or symbol can be said to operate as a transitional phenomenon having a direct or indirect link with an original and inexpressible object or referent.

Kristeva's re-evaluation of the healing capacity of poetic language applies to other forms of "poetic" expression such as painting, music and dance. The denial of such language is the denial of the symbol's potential. Unable to express emotion or affect through signs, the subject becomes melancholic. This condition is not limited to the psyche, but correlates in the various physiological conditions labelled psychosomatic. It is in this dimension that art has a capacity to ward off the negative symptoms of violence, pain and melancholia. This orientation towards an alternative code implies a desire for language, a desire for an active meaning-making which constantly negotiates the realm of the "other" or the realm beyond conscious thought.

Kristeva extends Freud's explanation of the unconscious as a structuring element which operates beyond or beneath the level of content. According to Kristeva, the unconscious structures sensations and stimuli, enacted as language. This idea supports Lévi-Strauss' assertion that the vocabulary and content of myth matters less than its form. Hence, the healing power of symbols can be derived from myth created by the self or other:

It is a matter of stimulating an organic transformation which would consist essentially in a structural reorganisation by inducing a patient to instinctively live out a myth either received or created by him (Lévi-Strauss, 1971: 201).
Lévi-Strauss notes that, at the time of expounding his psychoanalytical theory, Freud recognised that the description of psychosis and neurosis in psychological terms could be replaced by physiological or even biological concepts. More recent work in the field of therapy has born this out.

The work of Gerda Alexander adds credence to the connection between psychoanalysis and shamanism made by Lévi-Strauss. Alexander explains the relationship between bodily or muscular activity, emotions, and creativity through notions of "tonus" and "eutony" (1995: 259). Tonus is the system by which one feels and reacts. It is the capacity for fibre muscles to change in response to effort required for various levels of action. Tonus changes not only with physical effort, but also with every emotional change, and is also the basis for all artistic creation and experience (Alexander, 1995: 260). Einstein and Nietzsche amongst others have been explicit in describing muscular and visual elements as essential to their creative thought processes. Einstein claimed that only when these had reached an adequate level of "combinatory play" was he able to search for the words to describe the discursive or conceptual content of the process (Rose, 1991: 133).

Alexander (1995: 261) extends the explanation of tonus in creative practices through the notion of eutony. Eutony involves a level of awareness of the body's reactions and responses in relation to the environment. It requires a sense of "presence" or neutral attitude that permits observations to occur which are not affected by mediated or prior expectations of results. Eutony produces a state of unity and integrity that liberates creative forces. This understanding of the body's intrinsic involvement in creativity is supported by Elizabeth Grosz's view that the body is the centre of perspective, reflection, desire, and agency, "the very stuff of subjectivity" (Grosz, 1994: 13). Subjectivity may be posited not as fixity, but as perpetual interaction between the chaos and flux of internal and external environments. Dynamic integration is required for effective functioning of the organism. The processes involved are not exclusively biological. Grosz points out that "biology must be understood as psychologically pliable" (1994: 28). The lived body can be explored through creative practices which allow stored sensory information to interact with immediate experience. This process is central to the development and constant renewal of body image:

The biological body, if it exists at all, exists for the subject only through the mediation of an image or series of (social/cultural) images of the body and its capacity for movement and action (Grosz, 1994: 141).

**IV.**

The denial of the body is derived from a general suspicion of the body as the source of irrational and undesirable behavior, a view that has been carried over from Victorian society and Freudian notions of subjectivity as repression and antagonism. Shaun McNiff suggests that the incorporation of expressive arts in psychotherapy is a way of overcoming the denial of the body in conventional psychotherapeutic practices. Pragmatic and normative demands of everyday interactions limit possibilities for expressive play and communication. This constraint negates a fundamental dimension of thought which is dependent on the body's movement (McNiff, 1981: 111). McNiff adds that the term psychotherapy itself may prove inadequate because it perpetuates the mind/body split. The inclusion of the arts in therapy is believed to be a means of overcoming effects of this split:

The arts offer a valuable operational polarity to the use of discursive language in psychotherapy, and allow us to communicate with the emotions in their own language. Their multi-sensory rhythms must be kept intact rather than be absorbed within the more conventional verbal exchange of psychotherapy (McNiff, 1981: xii).

Emotional crises and other conflicts disrupt and fragment the perceptual process, and one of the goals of introducing the arts to therapy is to restore a sense of order within the sensory modalities. All of the arts, including visual arts and poetry, are a means of extending kinesis and inner movement. The same may be said of poetry and its relation to body kinesis via synaesthetic responses. Hence,

All of the arts in therapy must repossess the body if they are to actualise their healing powers fully. The denial of body... is but symptomatic of the lack of mind-body integration within society at large (McNiff, 1981: 111).

The work of McNiff and others discussed here highlight the close connection that exists between body and mind and the way in which image-making or artistic modelling of experience reveal it. Much of this work has been extended to conventional medicine and applied to therapies that focus on physiological symptoms.

**V.**

New York therapist Jeanne Achterberg's use of visualization processes in healing is an example of this approach.
New York therapist Jeanne Achterberg’s use of visualisation processes in healing is an example of such application. Achterberg (1985) suggests that imagery produced in creative practices integrate mind-body processes promoting both mental and physical well-being. She describes imagery, or the stuff of the imagination, as the “communication mechanism” between perception, emotion and bodily change. Again, this view of imagery is not confined to notions of visualisation, but implies particular phases of sensory activity. Imagery has profound and multiple effects on the body. For example memories of a lover’s scent may simultaneously cause the release of hormones and other chemicals associated with emotions. Visualisations of stressful situations such as presenting a speech or of competing in a physical event, for example, are accompanied by muscular change, activation of sweat glands, increased blood pressure and alteration of brain waves. It can be said that the image represents a phase of intensity that occurs in processes that mediate between verbal or conceptual thought and physiological change. The process of image production may be viewed as an intermediary phase of complex processes influenced by various parts of the brain. Whilst such processes are not fully understood, the advent of electrode technology and chemical trace techniques have provided a theoretical framework by which these processes may, at least provisionally, be explained (Achterberg, 1985: 116). Achterberg’s framework demonstrates how images are inextricably woven into the fabric of the brain and the body. Her model presents an outline of the transformations that occur between mind and matter. This view avoids casting the imagination in mystical terms or positing its operation in a purely biological framework. An understanding of imagination in this context has been applied in well-documented forms of medical treatment and therapy. Achterberg’s own successes with bio-feedback and visualisation techniques in the treatment of cancer and other patients are evidence of the complex role of imagery in therapeutic practices and cast retrospective light on Lévi-Strauss’ elaboration of the shamanistic cure. These applications provide a basis for understanding the flow between physiological processes, visual imagery, emotion, thought and language. In simple terms, one can conceive of a multi-dimensional flow between physiological processes, images and words or conceptual thought: body —> image —> word.

VI.

Algirdas Greimas and Julien Fontanille (1993) explain the centrality of myth and incantation in shamanistic healing. They suggest that affect or feeling cuts across normal discourse producing rhetoric, “that amorous code” or emanation which is a trace of the writer’s body and its mediation of language. In states of feeling or emotion, when the subject cannot resort to a constituted category or reference in textual practice, it will opt for aesthetic discourses. This results in a dissolution of the subject/object or self/other boundary. In such instances, the subject confronts language as a “natural” object that is without pre-emptive value. “Aesthetics” or the dissolution of the subject presents two possibilities. Firstly, if nothing opposes the dispersive forces, chaos settles in or the principles of scission and fusion will produce categorisations or recategorisations of the objects and closure. Affect or passions produce “aesthetics” (dissociation and dissolving of the subject) in textual practice. This relation corresponds to Kristeva’s explanations of the intra-uterine and neonatal relation of the infant and the maternal body, a relation of difference that does not operate as antagonism. The dissolution of the self in aesthetic discourse has the potential for recreating such a relation. As Roland Barthes asserts, “In the text of pleasure, the opposing forces are no longer repressed but in a state of becoming: nothing is really antagonistic, everything is plural” (1975: 31). Secondly, in feeling states, beliefs are suspended: subject/object, reader/writer, subject/subject are placed in the same space of operations and there is at least a potential for the re-organisation of discursive elements to merge as consensual, inter-subjective meanings. This underpins the potency of story-telling or myth as well as other art forms for healing and reparation and the reconciliation of difference.

REFERENCES


