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Bridging the Black Hole of Trauma: The Evolutionary Significance of the Arts Part 2: The Arts and Evolution - What is Art For?

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ABSTRACT *The second part of this two-part paper, originally written in the mid 1990s, continues to make the case that art has developed as a response to and a transformation of trauma. It discusses the mimetic and ritual sources of art, and the concept of catharsis, and relates artistic expression to neuroscientific work on the cerebral hemispheres. It concludes by discussing struggles and contradictions around the role of art in modern culture.*

Key words: art, trauma, ritual, catharsis, neuroscience

> There is a deep longing to create that resides within the soul of humanity. (Fritz, 1991, 3)

Unequivocal evidence for the artistic nature of man dates back at least forty thousand years to Cro-Magnon man, and survives in the form of cave paintings, statues, necklaces, flutes and other musical instruments (Diamond, 1992). We cannot say for sure when such expressions of creativity began, although the groundwork for such organized behavior, as we will discuss, can be seen in our primate relatives. But actual artistic expression appears to originate with our primal ancestors and pre-dates language. Certainly, as the art historian Edward Lucie-Smith has said:

> The cave paintings in particular, hidden in darkness for many millennia, and perhaps unseen previously by any but their original creators, give us a new perspective on the story of human culture taken as a whole. They seem to supply confirmation of the fact that the activity of making art, prompted by whatever impulse, is central to the existence of the species. The story of humankind now begins unequivocally with men's and women's activity as artists, and it is art which supplies the strongest threat of continuity as the tale develops. (Lucie-Smith, 1992, 18)

The long-standing history of artistic achievement compels us to look at art from an evolutionary perspective. What evidence is there that art has anything to do with human evolution? Dissanayake (1988, 1992) has noted three important criteria for attributing

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evolutionary importance – and therefore selective survival value – to any trait or behavior. The first criterion is that artistic expression is universal. There is no human group existing today or ever known to have existed that did not engage in creative expression. In evolutionary theory it is generally accepted that if a behavior is found throughout an entire species, it must have contributed in some way to evolutionary fitness.

The second characteristic is that in most societies the arts are integral to many activities of life and not to be omitted. This is particularly true the closer we come to being able to find cultures more similar to our hunter-gatherer evolutionary heritage than our own. Again, we can assume that an evolutionary mechanism is at work if a great deal of effort is expended by individuals or by groups in performing certain activities.

Third, the arts are sources of pleasure and Nature usually associates pleasurable affect with advantageous behavior. Diamond (1992) has made three relevant observations about the relationship between art and evolutionary survival. He notes that art often brings direct sexual benefit to its owner and that artistic performances are common preludes to sex; that art is a quick indicator of status in most cultures, and that art helps to define human groups and is therefore a significant force behind group survival. As Grudin has said, 'We can call creative vision the edge of freedom, the evolutionary faculty by which, down through history, we have redefined our world and ourselves' (Grudin, 1990, 7).

There was a time when there was a much closer union between the arts and other forms of human behavior than is evidenced in our culture. For us, artistic expression has become specialized and marginalized, even dissociated, made into a commodity like everything else – a subject we will turn to later. But in other cultures the situation is quite different. For Native Americans and other tribal cultures even today, creative expression through ceremony and dance, in which everyone plays a role, remains the focus of communal life serving the combined purposes of worship, healing, education, building of group cohesion, confirmation of group identity, and entertainment.

For the ancient Greeks, the root source of Western culture, there was no such thing as 'autonomous art'. There was, instead, a unity of cultural practices. To talk about what the citizens of ancient Athens did we must simultaneously discuss religious worship, tragic and comic theater, architecture, sculpture, painting, poetics, dance, and music. They cannot be separated as we would today. For the Greeks, art was always simultaneously personal and political (Dubois, 1994).

Artistic endeavors have served an important organizing function for human beings throughout our history: '. . . creation of new aesthetic forms, including those of worship, has been the most fundamentally productive of all forms of human activity. Whoever creates new artistic conventions has found methods of interchange between people about matters that were incommunicable before. The capacity to do this has been the basis of the whole of human history' (Young, 1971, 519). So let us look next at *how* this organizing function came to be. How did art become so important to the human species?

MIMETIC ABILITIES

Mimesis is defined as the ability to produce conscious, self-initiated, representational acts that are intentional but not linguistic (Donald, 1991). Because mimesis is utilized to accomplish a specific purpose it is not just mimicry. Through mimesis we are able to re-enact

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

or re-present an event or relationship. The mimetic level of representation pre-dates language both in the evolutionary sense and as it unfolds in the individual. This level of representation, in fact, underlies all culture and forms the basis of human communication. If my thesis is correct, that artistic performance is a vital evolutionary development, then we should be able to see the beginnings of artistic behavior in our primate relatives. Sure enough, when apes communicate, they throw their entire bodies into it, indicating that this ability did not just evolve solely for hand control but that using one's body to re-enact entire events required higher and integrated control centers in the brain. As in humans, apes communicate through vocal expression, facial expression, gesture, and posture (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989). Human babies as young as two months are giving their mothers intentional smiles aimed at communicating an affect and eliciting a specific response (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989).

From infancy on, mimetic behavior forms the core of all human communication, remains a central factor in human society, and forms the basis of the arts. And as we have discussed earlier in reference to emotional contagion, it happens quickly, largely outside of our conscious awareness, and automatically. We synchronize to each other's movements, gestures, vocal patterns, and expressions. And we do it in groups as well. Before we had a verbal language we had another nonverbal language. Before we had a culture based on verbal symbols, we had a culture based on nonverbal expression.

USES OF RITUAL

One of the important consequences of our development of mimetic skill was that we were able to develop a voluntary, public communication system which helped promote the development of shared social customs, beliefs, and behaviors. Group mimesis became the basis for ritual, our earliest attempts to begin to control nature, and ritual provided us with an entirely new way of ordering reality. It has been said that our remote ancestors were creating rituals before we were even human and that ritual became the pathway to the human condition: 'Ritualization is a way, an experimental way, of going from the inchoate to the expressive, from the pragmatic to the communicative . . . it is not as true to say that we human beings invented rituals as that rituals invented us' (Driver, 1991, 31).

Besides helping us to order reality, ritualization began to provide a way for human beings to maintain attachment bonds over time and space, a fundamental stabilizing need in a species so dependent on each other for survival. Studies have been done on human infants and leave-taking from mother in which leave-taking with the usual ceremonial gestures of a farewell ceremony were differentiated from leave-taking without any ceremony. Without ceremony, the children were far more distressed than with mother left with the proper rituals (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989).

Rituals help us anticipate a safe or safer future and thereby lower our level of emotional and physiological hyperarousal that accompanies the unknown. 'The human need to put order in daily, yearly, and life cycles by means of ritual is no doubt a very strong one. Even small children invent their own conventions which they maintain during play. Rituals put order into daily life, providing a certain security, and it is not in vain that people are devoted to custom and feel that with shared customs they are part of a community and protected against the unforeseeable . . . Cultural ritualization is required to establish sequences of behavioral patterns in humans' (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989, 519–20).

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

The development of ritualized behavior also served the purpose of helping us – and our mammalian ancestors – manage aggression. It is well known that many animals engage in ritualized contests with others of their species. In most mammalian populations the ratio between ritualized aggression and injurious aggression is a relatively stable evolutionary strategy. In a discussion of baboon and chimpanzee infanticide and aggressive escalation, Eibl-Eibesfeldt observes that:

> They lose control in encounters characterized by strong emotional arousal . . . It is possible that this tendency toward emotional instability and behavioral pathology might be associated with the rapid evolution of group life, which, in part, is characterized by a rapid growth of the brain. It could well be that the fine structuring of the brain, by which critical points in social behavior get controlled, did not keep pace with the rapid quantitative growth of the brain and that selection is still in progress. The same might hold true for humans. (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989, 95)

Rituals also have traditionally served vital roles in group life, providing what Driver (1991, 132 ff.) has termed the 'social gifts of ritual': ordering a chaotic, unpredictable, and therefore terrifying world, providing an opportunity for emotional union with others, and providing means for social transformations, for moving from one stage of life to another with enough emotional and material support from others to make those transitions possible without individual collapse or social disruption.

THE RITUAL ORIGINS OF ARTISTIC PERFORMANCE

Ritual is accompanied by the rudiments of behavior that eventuate in what we consider art. Musical rhythms synchronize specific physiological processes, even in lower vertebrates. A metronome can be used to slow or speed up the rate of gill motion of fishes and lullabies slow pulse rate and breathing in diverse cultures (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989, 212). Different rhythm patterns activate different emotional states and thus induce specific moods, although the mechanism is not yet precisely known. Numerous studies have been performed on the effects of music on humans showing that music can decrease depression, distress, pain perception and tolerance, anxiety, heart rate, cortisol levels after stress, and respiratory rate, while improving performance and self-esteem (Heitz et al., 1992; Whipple and Glynn, 1992; Hanser and Thompson, 1994; Miluk-Kolasa et al., 1994; Palakanis et al., 1994). However, it is also well known that music can exert its effects on entire groups, probably as a result of the combined effect of the rhythms on each individual brain as well as the effect of emotional contagion. In doing so, music profoundly alters the state of consciousness of the listeners, increasing the chances that the entire group is in the same state of openness to suggestion (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989; Schumaker, 1995).

'Dance is music expressed in movement' (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989, 694) and is a frequent part of structured ritual in tribal groups. Dance combines music with gesture and postural behaviors which further amplify the signal content of the ritual, expanding the range of the communication between dancers and to an audience. Group dances demonstrate unity and consolidate group identity and group purpose to the dancers themselves as well as to any onlookers. 'This aspect of the dance – its public nature – reaches back to the many forms and functions of dance in tribal, nonliterate societies' (John-Steiner, 1985, 170). Like music, dance also induces altered states of consciousness. While dancing, the entire group enters the

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

same state of emotional arousal; the rhythms induce the same physiological state, all of which allows each member to enter a trance state in which they will be more open to the suggestions of the leader or the group (Schumaker, 1995). 'Good choreography fuses eye, ear, and mind', says well-known choreographer and dancer, Arlene Croce (1976, 322). And from Katherine Dunham, 'The emotional life of any community is clearly legible in its art forms and because the dance seeks continuously to capture moments of life in a fusion of time, space, and motion, the dance is at a given moment the most accurate chronicler of culture pattern' (Dunham et al., 2005, 519).

WH Auden observed that 'Human beings are by nature actors, who cannot become something until first they have pretended to be it. They are therefore to be divided, not into the hypocritical and the sincere, but into the sane, who know they are acting, and mad who do not' (Auden, 1947, 109). To perform means 'to do' and 'to pretend'. Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989, 581) has pointed out that animals that must learn a great deal after birth develop a behavioral category that we call 'play'. One of the chief characteristics of play is that motor acts that are associated with instinctual drives become liberated from the drives that usually activate them.

In play, animals – including human animals – can combine different categories of behavior that could not appear together if the behavior were 'serious'. It is also possible to shift rapidly from one form of behavior or category of behavior to another, a shift that could not happen if there were intense emotional involvement. This allows the playing animal to experiment with a new and wider range of behaviors alone and with other animals. As with sex, eating, and drinking, playing is associated with powerful positive feelings indicating the important survival value of this kind of experimental behavior for complex, intelligent and social species. Some preliminary work indicates that performance may have a positive physiological effect on our pain threshold and immune system as well (Moyer, 1993; Zillman et al., 1993).

Children begin fantasizing at a very early age, even before they are able to understand that other people have states of mind different from their own. Between the ages of three and six, 30 percent of children have imaginary playmates, the creation of which appears to be triggered by loneliness, sadness, and distress. These negative feelings are neutralized through fantasy in which the imaginary playmate becomes companion, scapegoat, or expressor of forbidden activities (Rue, 1994). Adornment, makeup, and costume are the human development of the display aspect evident in many animal species that evolved as forms of complex communication between potential mates and others (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989). But in human ritual play, from childhood on, costumes provide a concrete and enacted way of entering a different role, becoming another animal, mythical being, or person in the enacted drama.

On a group level, theater – the universal playground of fantasy – is thought to have its origins in a similar attempt at resolution of negative feelings – the mourning ritual. 'The religious ritual out of which it is thought tragedy grew – the dance of mourning . . . was in itself an action, a response to a condition . . . an answer in terms of gesture and action rather than language and represents man's first attempts to deal creatively with pain and fear. Any action at all was better than nothing' (Sewall, 1990, 6). Rituals were created as 'social dramas' that were initiated by some breach of social custom, law, or ritual propriety, precipitating a crisis which could only be resolved through a ritual drama (Turner, 1975, 1982). Part of the drama involved the individual or the entire group entering the 'confessional mode' in which

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

suppressed thoughts, denied behaviors, and withheld emotions could be shared with others (Driver, 1991). In these group mimetic events, from which our theater derived, individual thoughts, feelings, and beliefs could be turned into coordinated social efforts, with different individuals playing different roles, experimenting with different behaviors, but all the while sharing the same global cognitive model of their society (Donald, 1991).

'The grave is the birthplace of tragic drama and ghosts are its procreators' (Cole, 1985, 9). Tragedy, in particular, has played a vital role in the evolution of human social experience. Death is humankind's greatest mystery and our awareness of our own mortality our greatest burden. Our profound and innate need to bond to others of our kind makes the unvarnished inevitability of loss unbearable unless we can alter the reality in some way, unless we can transform the tragic into some kind of shared meaning on an intellectual, but more importantly, an emotional level. As George Steiner has said:

> Tragic drama must start from the fact of catastrophe. Tragedies end badly, The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither by fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence . . . Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance. There is no use asking for rational explanation or mercy. Things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd. We are punished far in excess of our guilt. (Steiner, 1961, 8)

The effect of tragic drama was to be wrought not just on the players but on the audience as well. 'It is not in the tragic characters that pity and fear manifest themselves – but rather in the spectators. Through those emotions the spectators are linked to the heroes . . . because, as Aristotle says, something undeserved happens to a character that resembles ourselves' (Boal, 1985). Aristotle held that 'Tragedy is thus a representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself and of some amplitude . . . by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of such emotions' (*Poetics*, Ch. 6). This purgation of emotions was called 'catharsis'.

Catharsis is not a simple, unitary phenomenon, but a complex process, involving body, mind, and emotions, and is most effective when it includes both components (Nichols and Zax, 1977). It has observed that the formula for successful ritual is the same as that for successful drama: the ritual or the drama must reawaken collectively held distress which is unresolved in everyday life, but this reawakening must occur in a context which is sufficiently safe so that the distress is not experienced as overwhelming. Under such conditions, catharsis occurs (Scheff, 1979). This is important for the individuals and for the group because unresolved emotional distress gives rise to rigid or neurotic patterns of behavior. Thrill-seeking can be seen as an attempt to relive, and therefore resolve, earlier painful experience and catharsis dissipates these dangerous patterns. As Geoffrey Gorer has cautioned, 'a society which denies mourning and gives no ritual support to mourners is thereby producing maladaptive and neurotic responses in a number of its citizens' (quoted in Cole, 1985, 5).

Augusto Boal, the originator of 'Theatre of the Oppressed' and a trauma survivor himself, has stated that 'theatre is a vocation for all human beings; it is the true nature of humanity . . . theatre is a therapy into which one enters body and soul, soma and psyche . . . He practices in the second world (the aesthetic), in order to modify the first (the social)' (Boal, 1985, 14). In our distant past, all of these nonverbal practices – music, dance, visual display, role-playing – allowed us to change our physiological states and in doing so allowed us to enter states of

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

consciousness within which we could alter reality and make the unbearable bearable. But our capacity to alter reality was still bounded: 'What is a human being? The human being, first and foremost, is a body. Whatever our religious inclination, I am sure that we would all accept that there is no human being without a human body' (Boal, 1995, 29). We still had to contend with the limitations of the natural world and our own bodies as a part of that world.

Our mimetic abilities kept us firmly rooted in the realities of everyday life, the touch, the smells, the sounds, the feel of other things, creatures, and people around us. All of these skills are so tied to our primitive affect states, rapid physiological responses and to our underlying needs, that they are extremely difficult to falsify. And we were limited by how much information we could pass on and how quickly and for how long. Nonverbal expression is time-consuming, takes tremendous coordination, can convey a limited amount of data per unit time, and is gone if the expressor is gone. To liberate ourselves from the constraints of time and space, to pass on large amounts of knowledge, even in our absence, we needed to develop speech (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989).

LANGUAGE

It is probably not a coincidence that the right hemisphere of the brain is dominant for the emotional aspects of communication, for music, drawing, singing, poetry, cursive writing, and spatial construction as well as for the experience and expression of negative emotions (Joseph, 1988; Mesulam, 1985). The left hemisphere specialized for language later in our evolutionary history than the right, just as the right matures earlier in childhood than the left and the part of the brain that connects the two hemispheres, the corpus callosum, does not mature until the age of ten. As a consequence, young children function as though their right and left hemispheres are not fully interconnected (Joseph, 1992). In our evolutionary and our individual histories, we 'speak' the language of the nonverbal before we speak verbally. Nonverbal behavior, the roots of all artistic performance, preceded the development of language.

In fact, according to Donald, it is quite likely that the development of mimetic skill laid the essential social and semantic groundwork for the later development of language:

> On anatomical grounds, high-speed vocal language was a relatively recent invention, unique to Homo sapiens . . . Prior to the evolution of a system as revolutionary as human language, the cognitive stage had to be set. There had to be an immediate rationale for the emergence of language; the mechanisms of evolution do not possess foresight. The immediate adaptive pressure for this new trait had to be closely tied to structures already in place in the preceding culture. (Donald, 1991, 164)

Once language developed, the two modalities seemed to serve different communicative purposes and carried on in parallel (Donald, 1991). We see evidence of this today in everyday human speech in which the actual verbal content of the message runs in parallel with the prosodic aspects of speech – the intonation, facial and postural expression, and vocal tone and rhythms that convey other information that may be congruent with the verbal message or completely incongruent. It is harder for us to lie nonverbally because we usually exert so little control over the mimetic aspects of our interactions. Skilled actors still must train for years to even begin exerting that kind of control.

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

Various hypotheses have been suggested to explain the evolutionary pressure for the development of language. Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989), in studying various tribal groups, has noted that most words do not center on work which was hypothesized to be the impetus for the evolution of language among hunter-gatherers. Words center on food, on giving and taking, on sharing, on leave-taking and reunion, on other attachment bonds like marriage and other exchanges that fulfill bonding functions. 'It was with the help of speech that time and space were bridged so that bonds could continue across such barriers . . . Planning for the future and the building of alliances could scarcely occur without speech' (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989, 526).

Language allowed us to 'make infinite use of finite media' (Pinker, 1994, 56). By pairing a concept with an infinite number of other concepts, we could convey volumes of information to each other with a minimum of effort and maximum speed. Speech could replace action and thereby serve as a control over our aggressive and sexual drives (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989). Speech allowed us to pass information on to each other and to later generations in abstract form, without having to have at hand the actual objects or people to which the speech referred.

But, according to Eibl-Eibesfeldt:

> The fulfillment of social functions was the decisive impetus for the development of speech. Social themes continue to dominate everyday talk in preindustrial societies. Indeed, a certain amount of material knowledge is transmitted during such conversations, but this function in tribal societies is much less important than the social ones. A change in thematic content occurred only with the development of technological civilization . . . I am of the opinion that the need to ritualize social behavior functioned as the most important selection pressure in the evolution of language. In particular, the ritualization of aggression finds its ultimate achievement in verbalization, since a tongue may be sharp as a dagger, but it rarely draws blood. (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989, 526–7)

It is possible that language originated, in part, as a defense against overwhelming negative affect arising from right hemisphere stimulation and could be related to the triggering of positive affect more typical of left hemisphere activation. In an overwhelmingly traumatic environment, this development would have great survival value since negative affect can produce paralysis and the inability to self-protect or protect the young. This would be extremely important, particularly in the female of the species since her ability to protect her young would hinge on her ability to mobilize herself in the face of danger.

With speech, we could more easily distance ourselves from emotion than we could with nonverbal behavior, thus increasing the possibilities of decreasing social tensions. But because of this emotional detachment provided by speech, we also became much more able to lie – to each other and to ourselves. Speech allowed us the capacity for increasingly abstract thought and such abstractions. While allowing us to build complex cultures, religious beliefs, and philosophical systems, language also drew us further and further away from the grounding in the immediate sense of reality and contact with the natural world that was more typical of nonverbal, bodily based, nonverbal expression and communication.

Cerebral integration

'Whereas the left hemisphere might appreciate some of Groucho's puns, and the right hemisphere might be entertained by the antics of Harpo, only the two hemispheres unified

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

can appreciate an entire Marx brothers routine' (Gardner et al., 1983, 188). Under optimal conditions of human functioning, the two hemispheres of the brain, the verbal and the nonverbal, are designed to function in an integrated way.

In the course of evolution, integration between the two hemispheres must have been a challenge, particularly as they became so different in structure and content. Neuroscientists have speculated about four possibilities for how the two hemispheres could interrelate. One possibility is that they could operate in alternation: one off, the other on. Another possibility is that the dominant hemisphere could use part of the other and turn off the rest. A third possibility is that one dominates but can only disconnect from the other, but cannot turn it off – the other hemisphere remains independently conscious. The final possibility is that the two hemispheres could function in an integrated way, both fully active (Galin, 1974). This last possibility can be expressed as a definition of creativity. This is consistent with one psychiatrist's description of creativity as the fusion of the mental activity of the verbal and nonverbal brains (Tinnin, 1990). The magic in this process is the preservation of the nonverbal mental output in spite of the conscious illusion of unity and against the force of cerebral dominance.

The role of writing

Joseph (1988) has proposed that the evolution of written language suggests the possibility of an initial right hemisphere dominance since writing began as pictures, not signs. Writing may serve as some kind of integrating mechanism between the two hemispheres since it requires a combination of verbal and nonverbal skills.

Research is currently demonstrating some support for this hypothesis. For the last decade, James Pennebaker and his colleagues (e.g. Pennebaker, 1993) have been studying the relationship between writing, emotions, trauma and physical health. In study after study, students who are given the task of writing about their most emotionally provocative experiences for 20 minutes at a time, four days in a row, show significant improvement in their physical health months after this brief trial, compared to a control group who are instructed to write about innocuous events. These results have recently been replicated with asthmatics and people suffering from rheumatoid arthritis and in both groups there was significant and measurable physical improvement (Bloom, 1999; Dienstrey, 1999).

TRAUMA AND ART

Earlier we reviewed the effects of traumatic experience on the victim. 'Disintegration is the expression of mental ill-health. . . Mental health, like physical health is a matter of balance, of all the different parts of us operating harmoniously together. Disease and disorder mean that the balance is upset. . . If one part of us gets split off, denied, lost to us our health is gone' (Skynner and Cleese, 1993, 308). Overwhelming hyperarousal produces dissociation, a disconnection. Dissociation has been defined as 'a psychophysiological process whereby information – incoming, stored, or outgoing – is actively deflected from integration with its usual or expected associations' (West, quoted in Schumaker, 1995, 38). Under conditions of stress, the victim experiences 'speechless terror'. This loss of language function is frequently profound and extremely important. The traumatic experience and all associations to it cannot

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

be incorporated into a cognitive framework, cannot be ordered, partly because the brain system that accomplishes this task is shut down under the impact of extreme stress.

Elaine Scarry has vividly talked about this deconstruction of language under the influence of pain:

> Physical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not of or for anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language . . . So, for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that 'having pain' may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty', while for the other person it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt' . . . Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed. A great deal then is at stake in the attempt to invent linguistic structures that will reach and accommodate this area of experience normally so inaccessible to language; the human attempt to reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing pain itself into avenues of objectification is a project laden with practical and ethical consequence. (Scarry, 1985, 5)

The victim experiences and remembers the trauma in nonverbal, visual, auditory, kinesthetic, visceral, and feeling ways, but is not able to 'think' about it or process the experience in any way. Since cognitive processes are dependent on language function, without words we cannot 'think'. As we have seen, trauma produces a disconnection syndrome, a functional 'split-brain' preparation in which the two hemispheres appear to function separately and autonomously, at least as it concerns the traumatic experience, much like Galin's third possibility mentioned in the previous paragraph.

The traumatized person becomes possessed, haunted by the theater in his mind. He cannot control the intrusive images, feelings, sensations. They come into consciousness unbidden, terrifyingly vivid, producing a vicious cycle of helpless self-revictimization. The intrusive images trigger a level of hyperarousal similar to that of the original trauma and dissociation escalates instead of diminishing. Any efforts he took to protect himself or others at the time of the trauma were by definition, a failure since they failed to prevent the trauma, and yet images of what he could have done or fantasizes he could have done – 'failed enactment' – continue to obsess him. Pierre Janet believed that traumatization resulted from failure to take action against a potential threat. The resulting helplessness gave rise to 'vehement emotions' which, in turn, interfered with proper memory storage. He thought that successful integration of memories depends on successful action of the organism upon the environment (Van der Kolk et al., 1989). Early in the study of the effects of trauma, Breuer and Freud (1957) noted the important connection between traumatic experience and language:

> Each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words. (Breuer and Freud, 1957, 6)

Freud wrote that in order for feelings to be experienced and become conscious, and therefore able to be shared with others, words had to be linked to them (Sashin, 1993). Patsy Rodenburg, a well-known acting coach, has noted the same connection: 'When we need a word – really connect with it and release it in a brave, and physical sense – the experience is not just an act of intellect but a feeling act felt throughout our entire being' (Rodenburg, 1993, 3). So too

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

has Howard Barker, the playwright: 'Attempts to restrict vocabulary are inevitably attempts to restrict emotion' (Barker, 1989, 30). But no one has made the point more effectively than William Shakespeare:

> The weight of this sad time we must obey,
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
>
> (*King Lear*)

> Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak;
> Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break
>
> (*Macbeth*)

Failed enactment, traumatic reenactment, enactment

Here we are faced with a dilemma: the victim of trauma is trapped within the silence of unwitnessed memory. To heal, he must speak, he must feel, and hearing the words, he must incorporate the experience into some kind of cognitive framework that allows him to make meaning and finally put the experience behind him so he can go on. But the biological responses to trauma inhibit and prohibit such speech. The brain is disconnected from itself and perceives any attempt to reconnect as a dangerous threat to survival. As a result, intrusive sensory experiences and negative feelings predominate and behavior becomes increasingly separated from the social meaning system. The person disconnects from other people as they actively avoid listening or participating in a dialogue with the victim.

Trapped in time, while the world moves on around him, the victim is neither alive or dead. He cannot escape the trap alone, the biological reverberations have set up a snare which grabs at him and refuses to let go. So, he does the only thing left to do – he speaks in the only voice he has – in the language of the nonverbal brain. He acts.

Victims of trauma look mad because we have largely put aside our abilities to translate nonverbal to verbal messages. Victims of interpersonal violence demonstrate ritual and performance gone amok. Just as the capacity for dissociation is biologically based, so too is the response to dissociation – the ritual signal – and it too happens automatically, hard-wired into the brain chemistry itself.

In earlier days, cultures provided for healing rituals in which trance was induced, emotions expressed, the trauma could be relived and the pain integrated into a meaningful whole consistent with a larger mythical system. The ritual would involve music, dance, drama, performance and the entire social group would be involved. In this way, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional change and transformation could occur, social relations and subjective experience could be brought into harmony. Trauma and terror, pain and grief could be transmuted into the joy of performance, the creation of beauty, the healing rhythms of dance and song, story and poetry. Not forgotten, but changed and changed together. No longer a recurrent terrifying fantasy of the solitary victim, but the newly transformed addition to the culturally shared reality, another chapter in the culture mythical system.

But we have lost our awareness of the true nature of human existence, of tragic consciousness, of the 'tragic sense of life' (De Unamuno, 1954). Now we largely and erroneously choose to believe in a just world, where each person gets what he or she

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

deserves, a world of inevitable progress in which the just are justly rewarded. Sickness is the problem of the individual, probably genetically and biologically based and the concern only of the medical and psychiatric experts assigned to ameliorate it or simply tolerate it. Poverty is the fault of the impoverished. Crime warrants punishment. Within our segregated, individualized, demystified, and fragmented lives we avoid resonating with the suffering of others; we are not 'our brother's keepers'. There is very little sense of the need for integration, the 'process of developing the parts in the service of the whole' (White, 1919, 21).

As a result, the victims begin to signal their distress in the only way left open to them, through the repetitive, often ritualized, seemingly bizarre signal, symbolic and emotionally charged behavior of the nondominant hemisphere. One man tries to jump off a building, another woman repeatedly runs razor blades across her breasts, another buys an assault weapon and sprays bullets across a crowded street.

These culminating acts of destruction are acts of desperation and helpless rage, the ultimate response to years of misunderstanding and misinterpretation on the part of the victim's social group. The play is performed over and over, often developing into such pervasive life themes that all that is apparent is pathology. In displaying a performance, traumatized people are doing what they are biologically evolved to do: engage their social group in a healing dialogue, a shared experience of pain.

The problem does not lie with their body, which is just doing what it is supposed to do. The problem resides within the culture which has failed to serve its socializing function for the individual. It is the corporate body which has become impaired. It is the corporate body that refuses to hear the meanings in the messages, the cries for help and healing that are consistently ignored. We cannot afford to hear their cruel secrets or their guilty confessions because we would have to respond, we would have to resonate with their pain, we would have to help them find a way out of their prison. Trapped within the tragic circumstances of their lives, the silenced victims of trauma are bereft of the shared experience of tragedy.

> Madness, in its wild, untamable words, proclaims its own meaning; in its chimeras, it utters its secret truth; its cries speak for its conscience . . . The crime hidden from all eyes dawns like day in the night of this strange punishment. (Foucault, 1971, 30)

THE ARTIST AND SOCIETY

Over the years, many questions have arisen about the connection between creativity and madness, the artist and the madman. There is a connection, but not necessarily because you must be crazy to create. Both the artist and the madman speak a tongue that has become foreign to the rest of us. The mad person is to his or her family what the artist is to the culture, containing what is hidden, secret, denied, and dissociated and trying with more or less desperation to reveal the vital secrets to us all. The artist is to society as the right hemisphere is to the left.

There have also been, within the practice of the arts, problem-posing aspects of artistic behavior. In many social groups the artist has been the *provocateur*, pointing out hidden, suppressed, and contradictory aspects of the culture, attempting to make conscious what is unconscious and denied. 'The more that is hidden and suppressed, the more simplistic the

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

representation of daily life, the more one-dimensional and caught in the dominant ideology the society is, the more art must reveal . . . Art may be focused directly on the issues of daily life, but, because it seeks to reveal contradictions and not obfuscate them, art works which should spark a shock of recognition and effect catharsis actually appear alien and deliberately difficult. Art easily becomes the object of rage and confrontation' (Becker, 1994, xiii). Jean-Pierre Vernant wrote about Greek tragedy but his words can just as well apply to modern art as well: 'Although it appears rooted in social reality, that does not mean it is a reflection of it. It does not reflect that reality but calls it into question. By depicting it rent, divided against itself, it turns it into a problem' (quoted in Becker, 1994, xiii). The social group does not always take kindly to the artist's tendency to reveal its inner contradictions. In referring to the theater, which has historically been 'the most dangerous of all arts' (Wickham, 1985, 11), the British playwright Howard Barker (1989) has written that:

> A theatre which dares to return the audience to its soul . . . will experience the hostility a wrecked ship feels for the gale . . . We require a different form of tragedy in which the audience is encouraged, not by facile optimism or useless reconciliation, but by the spectacle of extreme struggle and the affirmation of human creativity. (Barker, 1989, 23)

The artist frequently provokes a negative response from members of his social group because an essential role of the artist has been denied and dissociated by the larger social group. Art is meant to be an 'investigation' (Becker, 1994, xiv), to tell us something about our inner contradictions, to illuminate what is in darkness, to assist us to integrate the split-off parts of our socially constructed consciousness. But in our modern culture, we resist facing these contradictions. We do not want to face up to the reality we have created. Art is only acceptable if it entertains and amuses. In discussing censorship, Becker has observed that:

> The art that has been targeted for attack in each case reflected social concerns. It was work that would never allow us to believe that we all lived in the same America, shared similar desires, or were equally committed to maintaining the elaborate psychological, philosophical, economic, and sexual repression necessary to sustain Western Civilization as we have known it . . . Those who spend their time analyzing such events understood that if the national international art police were to have their way, art would be forced to lose its uniqueness and social value to become innocuous entertainment or else run the risk of losing its often minimal government support. (Becker, 1994, xiv)

As we have discussed above, the culture joins together to distort and alter reality in a way that makes life bearable and in doing so creates 'positive illusions' that promote health. But sometimes the culture goes too far, or for too long, distorts reality to the point of danger. The function of the artist is to stay in touch with the other truth, the truth of the less distorted, nonverbal, nonrationalized part of our consciousness. The part of us that still sees some vital importance in trees, and animals, and water and fish. The part of us, that despite deception, verbal gymnastics, elaborate rationalizations, and malignant propaganda realizes that we are organic parts of an organic whole and that the whole cannot remain intact without all of its parts. The part of us that resists epidemic robopathology, the attempt to turn us all into machines (Yablonsky, 1972). The part of us that always remains in touch with primary, natural reality, no matter how much we choose to distort our personal and cultural reality. Through their paintings, sculptures, photographs, poetry, plays, songs, music, and stories,

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

artists attempt to show us, remind us, of what we are missing, what we fail to see, or have forgotten, or fear too much to know.

It is no wonder we want to marginalize and silence the artist. Orwell (1989) knew that with language you could exert virtual control over an entire population:

> The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. it was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that it, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. (Orwell, 1989, 247)

But this strategy will only work if the culture does not get too much disturbing input from the other reality, from the artists and the mad. Rosler has asked the question, 'What is the responsibility of the artist to society? It is an open question what role art might play in a society that has all but ceased recognizing the existence of a public arena in which speech and symbolic behavior address important questions for the sake of the common good' (Rosler, 2004, 349).

Physical pain has no voice, but Scarry tells us that when it does finally find a voice, it begins to tell a story, but that story is a political as well as a personal one. 'All drama is a political event: it either reasserts or undermines the code of conduct of a given society' (Eslin, 1976, 29). Barker points out that:

> It is a simple task to persuade an audience of a character's evil. The important task is to persuade the audience of its potential or actual participation in evil. . . . We are reviving a medieval social theology in which human nature is deemed incurably corrupt in order to reconcile the poor with poverty, the sick with sickness, and the whole race with extermination. (Barker, 1989, 23)

If we are to survive as a viable species on a viable Earth, then we must become grounded once again, in the values of the Earth. To do this, we must be willing to remember and feel our social past, just as victims of trauma must remember and feel their personal past. We must confess our wrongs, give voice to our sorrows, resolve our contradictions. Marcuse has said that the artist has a responsibility to help society deal with its hidden conflicts and contradictions and must embody hope in any way possible. To do this we must be able to share in a vision of what does not, but still could, exist. He said that 'if art cannot change the world, it can help to change the consciousness and drives of the men and women who would change the world' (Marcuse, 1978, 32–3).

The bad guys have always known how to manipulate and exploit the power of the other brain, the shadow self. The purpose of the Nazi parades, ritual discipline, marching, banners, symbols, music, art, literature, architecture, slogans, and mass gatherings was to allow the expression of mimetic behavior (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). By staging art only to entertain, we do not protect ourselves in any way from this recurrence. It simply makes it more likely that we will find ourselves vulnerable to the manipulation of some religious or political demagogue who can use all available techniques to alter our consciousness so that we become available for his suggestions of destruction.

Instead, we need to face the truth of our social past. Speaking of his home ground, the theater, Vaclav Havel insists that 'The theatre must be something more, a living spiritual and

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

intellectual focus, a place for social self-awareness, a vanishing point where all the lines of force of the age meet, a seismograph of the times, a space, an area of freedom, an instrument of human liberation' (Havel, 1990, 40).

> We are barbarians, yet we have the possibility of producing a genuine culture in the future. But language, the most important tool with which to further this, almost entirely fails us. Perhaps other means will appear later which are more useful for the spirit and for truth. (Groddeck, 1977, 264)

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