



## EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY: A CALL FOR DIALOGUE

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Encouraged by Robert Landy's call for dialogue between different disciplines in *The Arts in Psychotherapy* (Landy, 1996) and by the thoughtful responses to the articles on psychodrama and drama therapy that followed in that same issue, I would like to take this opportunity to respond to Frances F. Kaplan's review of *Minstrels of Soul: Intermodal Expressive Therapy*, by Paolo J. Knill, Helen Nienhaus Barba and Margo N. Fuchs (Kaplan, 1996). I am glad to see that books on expressive arts therapy are being noticed and reviewed by creative arts therapists. At the same time, I wonder what a perspective from outside a field needs in order to do justice to the essence of that discipline. At the very least, the outsider must practice that "nonattachment from views," which Stephen Snow, quoting Thich Nhat Hanh, recommends in his article as a precondition for dialogue (Snow, 1996).

It seems to me that there are two views in particular that the review is attached to: (a) that understanding the therapeutic nature of the arts is to be modelled on the analytic procedures of the natural sciences, and (b) that interdisciplinary work is questionable and needs justification. I would like to challenge both of these views.

With regard to the first position, the reviewer consistently uses pejorative terms like "opaque," "fuzziness of thought" and "mystical" to describe the method of understanding used in the book; instead, she welcomes the parts that are "more concrete," have "welcome clarity" and are "more accessible." One might think that this was merely a temperamental preference were it not that she recommends an alter-

native method of understanding based on "research in evolutionary psychology" to overcome our lack of understanding "about art and aesthetics."

Citing an article that purports to show that there is "evidence for a genetic component in aesthetic preferences for certain landscapes," the reviewer goes on to state that "this research suggests that our fascination with mystery—or the exploratory urge—may itself be biologically determined." I wonder how many readers of *The Arts in Psychotherapy* believe in this so-called "genetic component" for aesthetic preferences. What would that make of the history of art? When perspective was introduced into Western painting, was there a genetic mutation involved? Does the specific character of Chinese landscape painting result from a different "genetic component"? Would a Westerner who has a passion for classical Chinese landscape (as I do) be violating his genetic code and, if so, how is this even possible?

I think the absurdity of these conclusions stems from a mistaken theoretical premise: the notion that art can be understood from the perspective of the natural sciences. I will not go into the history of epistemology or the basic theoretical distinctions between the explanatory methods of the natural sciences and the method of understanding used in the *Geisteswissenschaften* or human sciences that have been developed over the last century. Suffice it to say that no respectable philosopher of science, to my knowledge, has ever claimed that there is a "genetic component" to "aesthetic preferences," for the very good reason that this violates a basic scientific premise: the

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method of understanding must be appropriate to the object-field in question.

If art can be understood at all (and I do believe that we should always be aware of the mystery at the heart of all human creative endeavors), it can only be from an aesthetic perspective. In fact, the reviewer embraces this same position when she states that the book is to be recommended for emphasizing “the importance of including a deeper understanding of aesthetics—the heart of art—in our respective creative disciplines.” If aesthetics is the heart of art, then we need a method of understanding that is appropriate to this heart; we need, in James Hillman’s words, a “thought of the heart” (Hillman, 1993). This is, I believe, what *Minstrels of Soul* (Knill, Barba & Fuchs, 1995), provides a way of thinking that treats the aesthetic in an art-full manner.

Standing firmly within an aesthetic perspective, the authors seek to understand how art manifests itself in our experience. This is, as the reviewer correctly identifies, an essentially phenomenological position: to consider art in its own terms, as it shows itself to us, not from a point of view alien to its nature. And when art is considered in its own essence, then it reveals an essential connection with soul. This is the connection of phenomenology with archetypal theory that the reviewer finds “verges on the mystical.”

I would ask, rather, that if we do not believe that art touches the soul, why are we involved in this field at all? Why not restrict ourselves to the clinical frameworks that the established psychotherapies offer? In our practice, if not always in our theory, I sense that both expressive and creative arts therapists experience an essential connection between art and soul. *Minstrels of Soul* dares to make this connection into the basis of its theorizing. There is nothing “mystical” about this, unless “mysticism” is understood in its original sense as respecting the mystery. Then, perhaps, the word would be a badge of honor rather than a term of abuse.

In my experience as a teacher and trainer within this field, I have noticed that both students and practitioners often show an understandable insecurity about the theoretical bases of their work. Faced with the demands for justification and explanation that come from both internal and external sources, both expressive and creative arts therapists often look to more established frameworks to find a secure foundation for their work. What I find fascinating about the thinking of Knill and his co-authors is that they dare to stay within the field of aesthetics and art-

making. In a way, they are stating the obvious: the arts therapies need to be grounded in the arts. But to make such a statement requires a tremendous faith in art-making as a fundamental way of being and becoming fully human. How many of us would be willing to stand on the ground established by this faith?

At the same time, the book is informed by a sophisticated philosophical and psychological perspective that enables “the heart of art” to become visible. I would point particularly to the discussions of “effective reality” and “aesthetic response” that are at the core of the authors’ thinking. The reviewer finds the distinction between imaginal and literal reality “obvious,” but she finds the notion of effective reality to be “difficult to comprehend.” The concept of effective reality is, in fact, adapted from the notion of “effective history” used by H. G. Gadamer in his magisterial work on understanding in the human sciences, *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1975). In that book, Gadamer distinguishes between mere historical knowledge and the kind of historical understanding that has an effect upon our very being. The latter he calls “effective historical understanding.” An example of this might be the difference between the routine practice of memorizing the names of the Kings of England, on the one hand, and understanding the unique and horrifying event of the Holocaust on the other. Only “effective history” really matters to us.

In the same way, a work of art or an image is only important if it has effective reality for us. These are the art-works that touch our souls: the books we read that make us see the world differently, the paintings that transform our vision, the plays that render us transfixed in the theatre, the music or dance that stirs us to our depths. Is this not the kind of effective reality that we are looking for in our artistic work with clients, the kind that, to use Rilke’s words in the poem, “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” gives us the message: “You must change your life” (Rilke, 1984)?

Similarly, the notion of “aesthetic response” (not mentioned in the review) is at the heart of the authors’ thinking about art. Aesthetics, in their perspective, is not a matter of formal understanding (Kant’s “disinterested interest”); rather it concerns the very senses themselves, the sensory way of being in the world that is our fundamental experience of being human. As Hillman (1993) writes in his chapter on “The Heart of Beauty” in *The Thought of the Heart* (which I recommend for anyone interested in the convergence of phenomenological and archetypal thinking), “*aesthe-*

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