Art performances and religious rituals:
How transformative experiences can foster knowledge

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Abstract

In this chapter, we explore parallels between art and religion through culture and symbolic systems, drawing from past sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and current cognitive research. We argue that the creation of the arts and religion – as particularly important human cultural phenomena – allowed for subjective knowledge to become represented in symbols and artefacts, the latter serving as material anchors. This rendered the subjective knowledge concrete, memorable and importantly, shareable. Thus, art and religion are considered symbolic systems which express subjective understanding. These systems serve as repositories of meaning, encapsulating emotions, experiences, and beliefs in efficiently memorable forms. The self-transcendent nature of art and religious experiences enhances symbol significance, effectively conveying rich meanings that surpass descriptive language. Our ideas align with aesthetic cognitivism's assertion that art offers unique cognitive contributions beyond decoration. The strength of art and possibly religion lies in their existence within imagination. The profound impact of symbolic systems on human experience and interaction - preserving and disseminating subjective knowledge beyond language's confines - underscores the centrality of meaning-making in shaping societies.

In this chapter, we address the parallels and divergences between art-making and ritual, and what they might suggest about the relationship of art to knowledge and spirituality from the perspective of both classical anthropology and more recent research from cognitive science. In order to disentangle the myriad relations between art, and religion, culture, and symbolic systems, we draw on the insights of earlier sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers. Such insights are now finding support in, and will here be combined with, current cognitive, neuropsychological, and experimental psychology and studies of religion (Geertz, 2013). We will restrict ourselves to brief discussions of key concepts before moving on to more detailed discussions of subjective knowledge and providing an example.

Culture

There is no generally accepted definition of the term "culture". Baldwin et al. (2006), in their content analysis of 313 definitions from a wide variety of scholars in the humanities and social sciences, abandoned the idea of providing a synthetic definition (Geertz, 2023). We draw on anthropologist Clifford Geertz's semiotic understanding of culture as "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). These webs of significance are symbols that can be any "object, act, event, quality, or relation" that serves "as a vehicle for a conception" (Geertz, 1966/1973, p. 91). Cultural patterns, i.e., symbolic systems, provide models for and models of social and psychological reality (Geertz, 1966/1973, p. 93); in other words, models to show how to behave, and models to show how the world is. Geertz argues that the transposability "of models *for* and models *of* [the world] which symbolic formulation makes possible is the distinctive characteristic of our mentality" (Geertz, 1966/1973, p. 94). This transposability is especially evident in religious symbols and symbol systems.

For Geertz, art and religion, as well as much else, are cultural systems. Religion, he defines as: "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz, 1966/1973, p. 90).[1] Here, we argue that this definition can also be readily applied to other symbolic systems, such as those resulting from the arts, especially given the lack of reference to belief in supernatural beings in the definition.

Long before Geertz, sociologist Émile Durkheim emphasized the social and psychological significance of religious rituals. Durkheim posited that the human realization of invisible, anonymous forces outside of themselves and their influence on human society are conceived through tokens or symbols of totemic animals and vegetal beings. This, what he calls the "totemic principle," is at once a physical force and a moral power that provides psychic pressure on individual consciousness

[1] There is nothing peculiar to "religion" in this definition as it does not point to what we most often find in the religions of the world, namely, ideas about supernatural and other-than-human beings. But, as with the term culture, there is no generally accepted definition of the term "religion" either (Smith, 1998; Geertz, 1999; Jensen, 1999; Platvoet and Molendijk, 1999; Jensen, 2017).

(Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 192). This principle consists of a social pressure that makes itself felt through mental channels (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 211) and connects individuals to the collective body. It transfigures them, not only, but especially, in the context of religious ritual. Through the emotional stimulation of such rituals, a moral society is continuously renewed and fused with the forces that influence them. This happens by the emotional effervescence resulting from such rituals. The symbol and the idea of the greater thing or being behind it are united during the ritual (Durkheim, 1912/1995, pp. 221-222). Durkheim distinguishes between collective effervescence, as the emotional charging force, on the one hand, and what he calls "dynamogénique", which generates social and psychological identity within the framework of religious ideals and practices, on the other hand. As he and Marcel Mauss noted, "it gives the individual forces that allow him to transcend himself, to raise himself above his nature and to master it" (Mauss & Durkheim, 1913; Miller, 2005).

A contemporary of Clifford Geertz, anthropologist Victor Turner, was also a symbolic anthropologist, but unlike Geertz, he was interested in the performative aspects of ritual, thus helping establish processual anthropology (Turner, 1969). In drawing on Arnold van Gennep's analysis of rites of passage as consisting of three stages: rites of separation, margin, and reaggregation (van Gennep, 1909/1960), Turner focussed on the middle phase, which van Gennep also called the "liminal" phase (from Latin *limen*, "threshold"), that is, the "betwixt-and-between" moment in religious rituals, during which participants are physically and symbolically outside of the normal social order (Turner, 1967; 1985a, p. 292).

During the liminal phase, the participants are simultaneously confronted with the sacred symbols of their society visually with objects, masks, costumes, and by performances that enact and express these symbols, and by formal and informal instructions (myths, riddles, teachings). They are also subjected to the ludic deconstruction and recombination of cultural models, and, indeed are in a state of "anti-structure", by which social and structural relationships are mirrored and, ultimately, confirmed. They are confronted by what Turner called the "root paradigms" of their culture (Turner, 1985b, p. 167). Participants become transformed into a transcendent dimension, which produces a sense of collectivity (termed *communitas*). In this phase, participants come away from the ritual with a renewed sense of identity and purpose. Ritual is, for Turner, a transformative performance that reveals the values and categories of a cultural system, but also, not unlike Durkheim, the "generative source of culture and structure" (Turner, 1985b, p. 171).

Stage drama, Turner argues, is the inheritor of preindustrial ritual dramas, and they have similar effects in complex societies: Not only in theatres but also in the cultural dramas of carnivals, movies, television shows, and literature. Stage dramas are often metacommentaries on society and the social order, similar to the ludic rituals in the liminal phase of preindustrial ritual processes. In complex societies, the same threefold structure, noted by van Gennep, is observed in, for example, theatre performances. The middle phase Turner termed the "liminoid" during which the sacredness of preindustrial liminality is greatly reduced, but still somewhat present, in these "dramas of life"

(Turner, 1985a, pp. 296-301). All societies, he argues, need to restabilize and "actually *produce*" the cosmos through such performances whether religious or secular (Turner, 1985a, p. 301).

Which brings us back to art and aesthetics. As mentioned, Clifford Geertz considered art and religion, as well as much else, to be cultural systems (see also, Newheiser, this volume). It is a way of being-in-the-world as expressed through "aesthetic force" (Geertz, 1976/1983, p. 97). "The means of an art," Geertz argues, "and the feeling for life that animates it are inseparable" (Geertz, 1976/1983, p. 98). In other words, art is a sensibility that is essentially "a collective formation … as wide as social existence and as deep" (Geertz, 1976/1983, p. 99) which serves, like any other sign system, as vehicles of meaning. Art makes these meaning systems visible, audible, and tactile (Geertz, 1976/1983, pp. 118-119), even though such systems can vary from culture to culture. They are conceptions that people have "about the way things are" (Geertz, 1976/1983, p. 120).

Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their treatise on the social construction of reality argue that societies provide meaningful existence for their members through "nomic constructions" or meaningful symbolic universes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 119), in other words, worldviews. These symbolic systems consist of signs as an index of subjective meanings that have been objectified and, thus, become objects of internalization for members of a society through socialization in everyday life. Social order exists as a product of human activity that is institutionalized, legitimized, maintained, and transmitted throughout society and transgenerationally (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 70). Thus, individuals are, as Geertz noted, caught in webs of significance that give meaning, subjective plausibility, and cognitive validity. The symbolic universe encompasses all of society and every individual in it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 114). The symbolic universe, Berger and Luckmann argue, quite simply "puts everything in its right place" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 116).

Subjective knowledge

Human culture (including but not restricted to art and religion) is the most straightforward example of the idea of subjective knowledge of reality. Subjective knowledge is based on the idea that subjective cognition together with the capacity for imagination allows us to endow entities in the physical world (objects, persons, but also relationships) with culture-specific properties, such as certain roles or functions, with associated rights, duties, and activities (Searle, 1995), which are not empirically observable in the physical world, but which exist in our 'imagination'. We suggest that subjective knowledge is mobilized by the arts and religion.

The idea that the arts have a significant cognitive contribution is a central tenet of *aesthetic cognitivism* (Graham, 2005). This branch of philosophy argues that the arts are not just for diversion (pleasure, entertainment) or decoration (beauty, enjoyment), but provide *understanding*. This is not to suggest that all art does this, just like not all scientific hypotheses significantly enhance our understandings. 'Understanding' should be taken here not as a type of belief, but as a cognitive

achievement not reliant on the knowledge of verifiable facts (Baumberger, 2014). It is holistic (cannot be broken into discrete bits), is gradual (there are degrees of understanding, rather than knowing something or not), and varies in breadth, depth, significance, and accuracy (Baumberger, 2014).

It is one of the strengths of works of art that they are not constrained by verifiable facts, but that they exist in imagination. That is not to say that the sciences do not have grounds in imagination, but that the ontological status of subjective knowledge – existence in imagination – reflects the lack of a direct empirical counterpart of the work of art in the world (see also, Eikelboom, this volume): its connotational rather than denotational status (Rennie, 2020, p. 278). If it is not accuracy of representation that is the (main) function of the arts[2], then how does it convey its understanding? First, we need to understand what cognitive advancement is. Baumberger argues that if we take cognitive advancement to just be growth of (verifiable, propositional) knowledge, then learning trivial or irrelevant facts would constitute cognitive advancement, even if the learning of these facts are irrelevant. Instead, we may be better served here with an epistemology of understanding, which suggests that cognitive progress can be achieved through a number of ways which do not provide factual propositional information and which are directly relevant to the arts and religion: the cognitive advancements of understanding are (1) to enable us to grasp connections between what we already believe; (2) to provide new cognitive categories and perspectives; (3) to raise important questions; (4) to provide knowledge of what it is like to have certain experiences or emotions; (5) to develop elaborate thought experiments; and (6) to enhance our cognitive abilities (Baumberger, 2014).

Providing a new perspective may be the main cognitive contribution of the arts; rather than directing the mind through a progression of thought such as in scientific experiments, historical narratives, or philosophical arguments (Graham, 2005). Indeed, seeing the world 'anew' as a result of experiencing art is a common idea, as French-Cuban-American author Anaïs Nin wrote: "It is the function of art to renew our perception. What we are familiar with we cease to see. The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and, as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it" (Nin, 1968, p. 25). Another, similar cognitive advancement that artistic experiences can provide is that they can result in the asking of new questions. In this case, progress can be achieved through the clarification rather than the solution of problems. Besides, sometimes the questions do not have a single, true answer, such as moral questions. Fiction – whether books or films or literature – appears particularly apt at inducing such questions. The British dystopian science fiction anthology television series *Black Mirror*, created by Charlie Brooker, is a prime example of how complex moral situations can be presented from various perspectives. Religion is of course well-known for its involvement in moral questions. It may appear that religion provides clear answers to moral questions, but the history of Christian theology suggests otherwise (Greene, 2013).

[2] Though the evaluation of the accuracy or faithfulness of descriptions and representations is often important to an aesthetic evaluation of art: works of art often do not work if there is not sufficient similarity with the real world (Gaut, 2004).

Cognitive progress can also be made when an artwork or experience allows the experiencer to become directly acquainted with certain sensory or emotional qualities, which provide us with knowledge of what it is like to have certain emotions or experiences (e.g., to be in certain situations). Works of art can supply imaginative apprehension of experience whether through visual, tactile, emotional, or mental means. The value of this apprehension may be directly related to how deficient or able we ourselves are in engaging such experiences, but by making these aspects salient, art becomes a source of (new) understanding, beyond our own, previous experiences. Gaining new understandings of experiences seems very particular however, and that particularity of works of art appears to be counter to general understanding. It need not be, though: for example, while indigenous knowledge, or 'traditional ecological knowledge', is embodied and particular, and not theoretical and universal, it can be more appropriate than scientific knowledge in certain situations, because of its motivational role and its deep emotional links to specific objects and places (Asma, 2022). Sometimes cognitive progress is not made by learning more facts, but by developing new connections between ideas (including new hierarchies) and new categories, in particular within a domain appropriate to our cognitive goal (Baumberger, 2014). Thus, domain particularity is not necessarily a weak aspect of knowledge or understanding.

Symbols

We believe that the symbolic systems, such as art and religion, as we described them in the first section of this paper, have evolved to fulfil the functions of memorizing and sharing subjective knowledge (van Mulukom, 2021). Indeed, it has previously been suggested that the initial utilitarian trigger of the arts was the symbolic representation of experiences (Zaidel, 2018), as a well as feelings and beliefs, as we have argued here. We suggest that symbols are able to capture many meanings (which subjective cognition deduces from feelings and experiences) in an efficiently packaged, tangible, and memorable form (Alcorta, 2013), which allows for better learning and transmission of, and thinking about, these feelings, experiences, and ideas (Deacon, 1998).

Events or moments which are loaded with emotion, in particular of high arousal, constitute *experiences*, which, with sufficiently high levels of meaning, can become transformative. Experiences occur when an emotion becomes linked to the internal or external stimuli in a memory (e.g., natural setting). The memory of such a stimulus saturated with certain affective states can also be purposely created (e.g., ritual settings). Since in memories of ritual or artistic performance, the memory of experience becomes associated with emotions, the memories become secondary reinforcers and symbolic representations, evoking similar emotional and motivational responses when the memory is recalled as when the event was experienced. Religious and artistic artefacts can be considered an additional step of abstraction: the artefact is a symbol for an experience, but the experience may not have happened to the current witness of the religious or artistic artefact (Rennie, 2020, p. 199).

The resulting symbolic artefacts may be material (e.g., visual artworks), but need not be (e.g., music, plays, or religious rituals). Subjective knowledge (feelings, experiences, beliefs) is expressed symbolically through simplification, formalization, repetition, exaggeration and elaboration of ordinary materials (Boyer & Lienard, 2006; Dissanayake, 2009; Liénard & Boyer, 2006; Rappaport, 1979), illuminating important aspects of the subjective knowledge and providing new perspectives (Baumberger, 2014; Graham, 2005). Artistic or religious experiences – particularly self-transcendent ones – further imbue the symbols with personal and social significance (Alcorta, 2013), and elevate the status of the symbols to the extraordinary (Dissanayake, 2009). The surges of dopamine and endorphins that accompany such experiences (Savage et al., 2020) further boost the significance, motivational force, and memorability of the resulting symbols.

The symbols are created in a way that attracts and sustains attention and interest, and that creates, shapes, and activates feelings and experiences in the symbol creator and/or witness (Dissanayake, 2009; Rennie, 2020, pp. 274-275). This facilitates their mnemonic retention, social and cultural transmission, and therefore cultural selection (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004). Here we argue that through cultural evolution, those symbols that maximize their memorability and shareability are the ones that are selected for and survive (Mesoudi, 2011).

Notably, declarative memories that are formed during profound artistic or religious experiences may often be reduced as a result of the self-transcendent state in which they are formed (van Mulukom, 2017). However, as we have previously argued, memories of significant experiences such as those of high-arousal religious rituals need not be accurate in terms of empirically verifiable facts (i.e., objective knowledge)(van Mulukom, 2017). Declarative memory crucially relies on language to be able to convey in a descriptively accurate way what has happened, but memories of significant events should instead capture the experience and its many associations, whether music, settings, movement, sensations, or even the mystery of the ritual (Alcorta, 2013; Deeley, 2004). Thus, as Alcorta (2013) has also suggested, from a logical perspective it may be difficult to make sense of the ritual, but (sacred) symbols within the religious experience (‘eternalized’ in the memory of the experience) connect and condense many meanings, in a connotational and non-propositional way.

Example

One example whereby the experiencer becomes directly acquainted with both sensory and emotional qualities that expand or break down the usual boundaries of self-other, is ‘MASS’ or the *mirror fusion performance*, developed by the choreographer Robert Clark, a co-author of this chapter (http://www.robert-clark.org.uk/project/mass/). In this performance, two individuals sit opposite each other while two performers engage in a mirrored choreography, mostly performed behind each individual so that they see the performer’s gestures towards the person sitting opposite. After some minutes this stimulates a ‘mirror fusion’ effect whereby one starts feeling that the person sitting

opposite them is an extension of oneself. This can include vivid sensations of feeling touched when the performer gently touches the person sitting opposite (https://vimeo.com/312294835).

Clark's aim with this performance is to break down the rigid boundaries that one finds in individualistic cultures and allow the individual to have an experience of an altered sense of self which involves a communion with another (unknown) individual. The original name of this performance was 'MASS', which in its multiple meanings alludes to a physical mass (a body), to the Christian ritual where one sits together with others with the aim of moving beyond the self and closer to God, and to the human collective as faceless masses.

This brief example highlights how through an artistic experience of choreography one can experience a variety of inputs (sensorial, affective, cognitive) which propitiate a new understanding (knowledge) of oneself — as more than just an atomistic, bounded self. In this sense, it also breaks down the boundaries between experience and knowledge., in a way which reminds us of anthropological depictions of indigenous knowledge where there is no separation between science, the religious/transcendent, or even between what is human and animal/natural (Grim, 2008).

Conclusions

The interplay between art and religion, symbolic systems and culture, as it has been articulated by past sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers, as well as current cognitive and psychological research, is a delicate one. By exploring the transformative nature of rituals and the performative aspects of art, we have here suggested a model for how societies create and transmit meaning through complex systems of symbols.

The presented ideas are in line with aesthetic cognitivism, which suggests that the arts offer a profound cognitive contribution, distinct from mere diversion or decoration. While not all art achieves this, 'understanding' may occur as a cognitive achievement independent of verifiable facts. These cognitive achievements include offering new perspectives, posing significant questions, acquainting us with various emotions, and fostering cognitive growth through novel connections between ideas and categories. The distinctive strength of art and religion is their existence within imagination, an ontological status that does not fundamentally rely on empirical elements.

Subjective knowledge is inherently resistant to propositional descriptions, and instead relies on art and religion, examples of symbolic systems which enable memorization and transmission. These systems serve as repositories of meaning, encapsulating complex emotions, experiences, and beliefs within efficiently packaged, memorable forms. Remarkably, these symbols provide an avenue for conveying significant experiences, rich in associations and sensations, effectively communicating multifaceted meanings that go beyond mere descriptive language. Thus, the evolution of symbolic systems represents a profound adaptation of human cognition, facilitating the nuanced preservation and dissemination of subjective knowledge in ways that conventional language cannot fully capture.

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