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Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art

Gregory Bateson

Introduction

This paper consists of several still separate attempts to map a theory associated with culture and the non-verbal arts. Since no one of these attempts is completely successful, and since the attempts do not as yet meet in the middle of the territory to be mapped, it may be useful to state, in non-technical language, what it is I am after.

Aldous Huxley used to say that the central problem for humanity is the quest for *grace*. This word he used in what he thought was the sense in which it is used in the New Testament. He explained the word, however, in his own terms. He argued – like Walt Whitman – that the communication and behaviour of animals has a naïveté, a simplicity, which man has lost. Man's behaviour is corrupted by deceit – even self-deceit – by purpose, and by self-consciousness. As Aldous saw the matter, man has lost the 'grace' which animals still have. In terms of this contrast, Aldous argued that God resembles the animals rather than man: ideally he is unable to deceive and incapable of internal confusions. In the total scale of beings, therefore, man is as if displaced sideways and lacks that grace which the animals have and which God has.

I argue that art is a part of man's quest for grace; sometimes his ecstasy in partial success, sometimes his rage and agony at failure. I argue also that there are many species of grace within the major genus; and also that there are many kinds of failure and frustration and departure from grace. No doubt each culture has its characteristic species of grace towards which its artists strive, and its own species of failure. Some cultures may foster a negative approach to this difficult integration, an avoidance of complexity by crass preference either for total consciousness or total unconsciousness. Their art is unlikely to be 'great'.

I shall argue that the problem of grace is fundamentally a problem of integration and that what is to be integrated is the diverse parts of the mind – especially those multiple levels of which one extreme is called 'consciousness' and the other the 'unconscious'. For the attainment of grace, the reasons of the heart must be integrated with the reasons of the reason.

In the previous chapter Edmund Leach (1973) presents in a compelling form the question: how is it that the art of one culture can have meaning or validity for critics raised in a different culture? My answer would be that, if art is somehow expressive of something like grace or

From Anthony Forge (ed.), *Primitive Art and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 235–255. Reprinted by permission of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc., New York.

psychic integration, then the *success* of this expression might well be recognizable across cultural barriers. The physical grace of cats is profoundly different from the physical grace of horses, and yet a man who has the physical grace of neither can evaluate that of both. And even when the subject-matter of art is the frustration of integration, cross-cultural recognition of the products of this frustration is not too surprising.

The central question is: in what form is information about psychic integration contained or coded in the work of art?

Style and Meaning

They say that 'every picture tells a story' and this generalization holds for most of art if we exclude 'mere' geometric ornamentation. But I want precisely to avoid analysing the 'story'. That aspect of the work of art which can most easily be reduced to words – the *mythology* connected with the subject-matter – is not what I want to discuss. I shall not even mention the unconscious mythology of phallic symbolism, except at the end.

I am concerned with what important psychic information is in the art object quite apart from what it may 'represent'. '*Le style est l'homme même*' (Buffon). What is implicit in style, materials, composition, rhythm, skill, and so on? Clearly this subject-matter will include geometrical ornamentation along with the composition and stylistic aspects of more representational works. The lions in Trafalgar Square could have been eagles or bulldogs and still have carried the same (or similar) messages about empire and about the cultural premisses of nineteenth-century England. And yet, how different might their message have been, had they been made of wood! But representationalism as such is relevant. The extremely realistic horses and stags of Altamira are surely not about the same cultural premisses as the highly conventionalized black outlines of a later period. The *code* whereby perceived objects or persons (or supernaturals) are transformed into wood or paint is a source of information about the artist and his culture. It is the very rules of transformation that are of interest to me – not the message but the code.

My goal is not instrumental. I do not want to use the transformation rules when discov-

ered, to undo the transformation or to 'decode' the message. To translate the art object into mythology and then examine the mythology would be only a neat way of dodging or negating the problem of 'what is art?'. I ask, then, not about the meaning of the encoded message but rather about the meaning of the code chosen. But still that most slippery word 'meaning' must be defined. It will be convenient to define meaning in the most general possible way in the first instance. 'Meaning' may be regarded as an approximate synonym of pattern, redundancy, information, and 'restraint', within a paradigm of the following sort:

Any aggregate of events or objects (e.g. a sequence of phonemes, a painting or a frog or a culture) shall be said to contain 'redundancy' or 'pattern' if the aggregate can be divided in any way by a 'slash mark', such that an observer perceiving only what is on one side of the slash mark can *guess*, with better than random success, what is on the other side of the slash mark. We may say that what is on one side of the slash contains *information* or has *meaning* about what is on the other side. Or, in engineer's language, the aggregate contains 'redundancy'. Or, again, from the point of view of a cybernetic observer, the information available on one side of the slash will restrain (i.e. reduce the probability of) wrong guessing. Examples:

The letter T in a given location in a piece of written English prose proposes that the next letter is likely to be an H or an R or a vowel. It is possible to make a better than random guess across a slash which immediately follows the T. English spelling contains redundancy.

From a part of an English sentence, delimited by a slash, it is possible to guess at the syntactic structure of the remainder of the sentence. From a tree visible above ground, it is possible to guess at the existence of roots below ground. The top provides information about the bottom. From an arc of a *drawn* circle, it is possible to guess at the position of other parts of the circumference. (From the diameter of an *ideal* circle, it is possible to assert the length of the circumference. But this is a matter of truth within a tautological system.) From how the boss acted yesterday, it may be possible to guess how he will act today. From what I say, it may be possible to make

predictions about how you will answer. My words contain meaning or information about your reply.

Telegraphist A has a written message on his pad and sends this message over wire to B, so that B now gets the same sequence of letters on his message pad. This transaction (or 'language game' in Wittgenstein's phrase) has created a redundant universe for an observer O. If O knows what was on A's pad, he can make a better than random guess at what is on B's pad.

The essence and *raison d'être* of communication is the creation of redundancy, meaning, pattern, predictability, information, and/or the reduction of the random by 'restraint'. It is, I believe, of prime importance to have a conceptual system which will force us to see the 'message' (e.g. the art object) as *both* itself internally patterned *and* itself a part of a larger patterned universe – the culture or some part of it.

The characteristics of objects of art are believed to be *about*, or to be partly derived from, or determined by, other characteristics of cultural and psychological systems. Our problem might therefore be oversimply represented by the diagram:

[Characteristics of art object/Characteristics of rest of culture]

where square brackets enclose the universe of relevance, and where the oblique stroke represents a slash across which some guessing is possible, in one direction or in both. The problem, then, is to spell out what sorts of relationships, correspondences, etc., cross or transcend this oblique stroke.

Consider the case in which I say to you 'it's raining' and you guess that if you look out the window you will see raindrops. A similar diagram will serve:

[Characteristics of 'It's raining'/Perception of raindrops]

Notice, however, that this case is by no means simple. Only if you know the *language* and have some trust in my veracity will you be able to make a guess about the raindrops. In fact, few people in this situation restrain themselves from seemingly duplicating their information by looking out of the window. We like to prove that our guesses are right, and that

our friends are honest. Still more important, *we like to test or verify the correctness of our view of our relationship to others.*

This last point is non-trivial. It illustrates the necessarily hierarchic structure of all communicational systems: the fact of conformity or non-conformity (or indeed any other relationship) between parts of a patterned whole may itself be informative as part of some still larger whole. The matter may be diagrammed thus:

[('It's raining'/raindrops)/you-me relationship]

where redundancy across the slash mark within the smaller universe enclosed in round brackets proposes (is a message about) a redundancy in the larger universe enclosed in square brackets. But the message 'It's raining' is itself conventionally coded and internally patterned, so that several slash marks could be drawn across the message indicating patterning within the message itself. And the same is true of the rain. It too is patterned and structured. From the direction of one drop, I could predict the direction of others, and so on.

But the slash marks across the verbal message 'It's raining' will not correspond in any simple way to the slash marks across the raindrops. If, instead of a verbal message, I had given you a picture of the rain, some of the slashes on the picture would have corresponded with slashes on the perceived rain. This difference provides a neat formal criterion to separate the 'arbitrary' and digital coding characteristic of the verbal part of language from the *iconic* coding of depiction. But verbal description is often iconic in its larger structure. A scientist describing an earthworm might start at the head end and work down its length – thus producing a description iconic in its sequence and elongation. Here again we observe a hierarchic structuring, digital or verbal at one level and iconic at another.

Levels and Logical Types

'Levels' have been mentioned. It was noted: a. that the *combination* of the message 'It's raining' with the perception of raindrops can itself constitute a message about a universe of personal relations; and b. that when we change

our focus of attention from smaller to larger units of message material, we may discover that a larger unit contains iconic coding though the smaller parts of which it was made are verbal: the verbal description of an earthworm may, as a whole be elongated.

The matter of levels now crops up in another form which is crucial for any epistemology of art:

The word 'know' is not merely ambiguous in covering both *connaître* (to know through the senses, to recognize, or perceive) and *savoir* (to know in the mind), but varies – actively shifts – in meaning for basic systemic reasons. Something of what we know through the senses can be re-coded to become knowledge in the mind.

'I know the way to Cambridge' might mean that I have studied the map and can give you directions. It might mean that I can recall details all along the route. It might mean that when driving that route I *recognize* many details even though I could recall only a few. It might mean that when driving to Cambridge I can trust to 'habit' to make me turn at the right points, without having to *think* where I am going, and so on.

In all cases, we deal with a redundancy or patterning of a quite complex sort:

['I know...'/my mind]/the road]

and the difficulty is to determine the nature of the patterning within the round brackets or – to put the matter another way: what *parts* of the mind are redundant with the particular message about 'knowing'.

Last, there is a special form of 'knowing' which is usually regarded as adaptation rather than information. A shark is beautifully shaped for locomotion in water but the genome of the shark surely does not contain direct information about hydrodynamics. Rather the genome must be supposed to contain information or instructions which are the *complement* of hydrodynamics. Not hydrodynamics, but what hydrodynamics requires, has been built up in the shark's genome. Similarly a migratory bird perhaps does not know the way to its destination in any of the senses outlined above but the bird may contain the complementary instructions necessary to cause it to fly right.

Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point. It is this – the complex layering

of consciousness and unconsciousness – that creates difficulty when we try to discuss art or ritual or mythology. The matter of *levels* of the mind has been discussed from many points of view at least four of which must be mentioned and woven into any scientific approach to art:

1. Samuel Butler's insistence that the better an organism 'knows' something, the less conscious it becomes of its knowledge, i.e. there is a process whereby knowledge (or 'habit' – whether of action, perception, or thought) sinks to deeper and deeper levels of the mind. This phenomenon which is central to Zen discipline (cf. Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, London, 1953), is also relevant to all art and all skill.
2. Adalbert Ames' demonstrations that the conscious, three-dimensional visual images, which we make of that which we see, are made by processes involving mathematical premisses of perspective, etc. of the use of which we are totally unconscious. Over these processes, we have no voluntary control. A drawing of a chair with the perspective of Van Gogh affronts the conscious expectations and, dimly, reminds the consciousness of what had been (unconsciously) taken for granted.
3. The Freudian (especially Fenichel's) theory of dreams as metaphors coded according to *primary process*. I shall consider style – neatness, boldness of contrast, etc. – as metaphoric and therefore as linked to those levels of the mind where primary process holds sway.
4. The Freudian view of the unconscious as the cellar or cupboard to which fearful and painful memories are consigned by a process of repression.

Classical Freudian theory assumed that dreams were a *secondary* product, created by 'dream work'. Material, unacceptable to conscious thought, was supposedly translated into the metaphoric idiom of primary process to avoid waking the dreamer. And this may be true of those items of information which are held in the unconscious by the process of repression. As we have seen, however, many other sorts of information are inaccessible to conscious inspection including most of the premisses of mammalian interaction. It would seem

to me sensible to think of these items as existing *primarily* in the idiom of primary process, only with difficulty to be translated into 'rational' terms. In other words, I believe that much of early Freudian theory was upside down. At that time many thinkers regarded conscious reason as normal and self-explanatory while the unconscious was regarded as mysterious, needing proof, and needing explanation. Repression was the explanation, and the unconscious was filled with thoughts which could have been conscious but which repression and dream work had distorted. Today we think of consciousness as the mysterious, and of the computational methods of the unconscious, e.g. primary process, as continually active, necessary, and all-embracing.

These considerations are especially relevant in any attempt to derive a theory of art or poetry. Poetry is not a sort of distorted and decorated prose but rather prose is poetry which has been stripped down and pinned to a Procrustean bed of logic. The computer men who would programme the translation of languages sometimes forget this fact about the primary nature of language. To try to construct a machine to translate the art of one culture into the art of another would be equally silly.

Allegory, at best a distasteful sort of art, is an inversion of the normal creative process. Typically an abstract relation, e.g. between truth and justice, is first conceived in rational terms. The relationship is then metaphorized and dolled up to look like a product of primary process. The abstractions are personified and made to participate in a pseudo-myth, and so on. Much advertising art is allegorical in this sense, that the creative process is inverted.

In the cliché system of Anglo-Saxons, it is commonly assumed that it would be somehow better if what is unconscious were made conscious. Freud, even, is said to have said, 'Where id was, there ego shall be,' as though such an increase in conscious knowledge and control would be both possible and, of course, an improvement. This view is the product of an almost totally distorted epistemology and a totally distorted view of what sort of thing a man, or any other organism, is.

Of the four sorts of unconsciousness listed above, it is very clear that the first three are necessary. Consciousness, for obvious mechanical reasons,¹ must always be limited to a

rather small fraction of mental process. If useful at all, it must therefore be husbanded. The unconsciousness associated with habit is an economy both of thought and of consciousness; and the same is true of the inaccessibility of the processes of perception. The conscious organism does not require (for pragmatic purposes) to know *how* it perceives – only to know *what* it perceives. (To suggest that we might operate without a foundation in primary process would be to suggest that the human brain ought to be differently structured.) Of the four types, only the Freudian cupboard for skeletons is perhaps undesirable and could be obviated. But there may still be advantages in keeping the skeleton off the dining-room table.

In truth, our life is such that its unconscious components are continuously present in all their multiple forms. It follows that in our relationships we continuously exchange messages about these unconscious materials, and it becomes important also to exchange meta-messages by which we tell each other what order and species of unconsciousness (or consciousness) attaches to our messages.

In a merely pragmatic way, this is important because the orders of truth are different for different sorts of messages. In so far as a message is conscious and voluntary, it could be deceitful. I can tell you the cat is on the mat when in fact she is not there. I can tell you 'I love you' when in fact I do not. But discourse about relationship is commonly accompanied by a mass of semi-voluntary kinesic and autonomic signals which provide a more trustworthy comment on the verbal message. Similarly, with skill, the fact of skill indicates the presence of large unconscious components in the performance.

It thus becomes relevant to look at any work of art with the question: What components of this message material had what orders of unconsciousness (or consciousness) for the artist? And this question, I believe, the sensitive critic usually asks, though perhaps not consciously. Art becomes, in this sense, an exercise in communicating about the species of unconsciousness. Or, if you prefer it, a sort of play behaviour whose function is, amongst other things, to practise and make more perfect communication of this kind.

I am indebted to Anthony Forge for a quotation from Isadora Duncan: 'If I could tell you

what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it.' Her statement is ambiguous. In terms of the rather vulgar premisses of our culture, we would translate the statement to mean: 'There would then be no point in dancing it, because I could tell it to you, quicker and with less ambiguity, in words.' This interpretation goes along with the silly idea that it would be a good thing to be conscious of everything of which we are unconscious.

But there is another possible meaning of Isadora Duncan's remark: if the message were the sort of message that could be communicated in words, there would be no point in dancing it, but it is not that sort of message. It is, in fact, precisely the sort of message which would be falsified if communicated in words, because the use of words (other than poetry) would imply that this is a fully conscious and voluntary message, and this would be simply untrue.

I believe that what Isadora Duncan or any artist is trying to communicate is more like: 'This is a particular sort of partly unconscious message. Let us engage in this particular sort of partly unconscious communication.' Or perhaps: 'This is a message about the interface between conscious and unconscious.' The message of *skill* of any kind must always be of this kind. The sensations and qualities of skill can never be put in words and yet the fact of skill is conscious.

The artist's dilemma is of a peculiar sort. He must practise in order to perform the craft components of his job. But to practise has always a double effect. It makes him, on the one hand, more able to do whatever it is he is attempting; and, on the other hand, by the phenomenon of habit formation, it makes him less aware of how he does it. If his attempt is to communicate about the unconscious components of his performance, then it follows that he is on a sort of moving stairway about whose position he is trying to communicate but whose movement is itself a function of his efforts to communicate. Clearly, his task is impossible but, as has been remarked, some people do it very prettily.

Primary Process

'The heart has its *reasons* which the reason does not perceive at all.' Among Anglo-

Saxons, it is rather usual to think of the 'reasons' of the heart or of the unconscious as inchoate forces or pushes or heavings – what Freud called '*Trieben*'. To Pascal, a Frenchman, the matter was rather different, and he no doubt thought of the reasons of the heart as a body of logic or computation as precise and complex as the reasons of consciousness.

(I have noticed that Anglo-Saxon anthropologists sometimes mis-understand the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss for precisely this reason. They say he emphasizes too much the intellect and ignores the 'feelings'. The truth is that he assumes that the heart has precise algorithms.)

These algorithms of the heart, or as they say, of the unconscious, are, however, coded and organized in a manner totally different from the algorithms of language. And since a great deal of conscious thought is structured in terms of the logics of language, the algorithms of the unconscious are doubly inaccessible. It is not only that the conscious mind has poor access to this material, but also the fact that when such access is achieved, e.g. in dreams, art, poetry, religion, intoxication, and the like, there is still a formidable problem of translation. This is usually expressed in Freudian language by saying that the operations of the unconscious are structured in terms of *primary process*, while the thoughts of consciousness (especially verbalized thoughts) are expressed in *secondary process*. Nobody, to my knowledge, knows anything about secondary process. But it is ordinarily assumed that everybody knows all about it, so I shall not attempt to describe secondary process in any detail, assuming that you know as much about it as I.

Primary process is characterized (e.g. by Fenichel) as lacking negatives, lacking tense, lacking in any identification of linguistic mood (i.e. no identification of indicative, subjunctive, optative, etc.) and metaphorical. These characterizations are based upon the experience of psycho-analysts, who must interpret dreams and the patterns of free association.

It is also true that the subject-matter of primary process discourse is different from the subject-matter of language and consciousness. Consciousness talks about things or persons, and attaches predicates to the specific things or

persons which have been mentioned. In primary process the things or persons are usually not identified and the focus of the discourse is upon the *relationships* which are asserted to obtain between them. This is really only another way of saying that the discourse of primary process is metaphoric. A metaphor retains unchanged the relationship which it illustrates, while substituting other things or persons for the relata. In a simile, the fact that a metaphor is being used is marked by the insertion of the words 'as if' or 'like'. In primary process (as in art) there are no markers to indicate to the conscious mind that the message material is metaphoric. (For a schizophrenic, it is a major step towards a more conventional sanity when he can frame his schizophrenic utterances or the comments of his voices in an 'as if' terminology.)

The focus of 'relationship' is, however, somewhat more narrow than would be indicated merely by saying that primary process material is metaphoric and does not identify the specific relata. The subject-matter of dream and other primary process material is, in fact, relationship in the more narrow sense of relationship between self and other persons or between self and the environment.

Anglo-Saxons who are uncomfortable with the idea that feelings and emotions are the outward signs of precise and complex algorithms, usually have to be told that these matters, the relationship between self and others, and the relationship between self and environment are, in fact, the subject-matter of what are called 'feelings' – love, hate, fear, confidence, anxiety, hostility, etc. It is unfortunate that these abstractions referring to *patterns* of relationship have received names, which are usually handled in ways that assume that the 'feelings' are mainly characterized by quantity rather than by precise pattern. This is one of the nonsensical contributions of psychology to a distorted epistemology.

Be all that as it may, for our present purposes it is important to note that the characteristics of primary process as described above are the inevitable characteristics of any communicational system between organisms who must use only iconic communication. This same limitation is characteristic of the artist and of the dreamer and of the pre-human mammal or bird. (The communication of in-

sects is, perhaps, another matter.) In iconic communication, there is no tense, no simple negative, no modal marker. The absence of simple negatives is of especial interest because it often forces organisms *into saying the opposite of what they mean in order to get across the proposition that they mean the opposite of what they say.*

Two dogs approach each other and need to exchange the message: 'We are *not* going to fight.' But the only way in which fight can be mentioned in iconic communication is by the showing of fangs. It is then necessary for the dogs to discover that this mention of fight was, in fact, only exploratory. They must, therefore, explore what the showing of fangs means. They therefore engage in a brawl; discover that neither ultimately intends to kill the other; and, after that, they can be friends. (Consider the peace-making ceremonials of the Andaman islanders. Consider also the functions of inverted statement or sarcasm, and other sorts of humour in dream, art, and mythology.)

In general, the discourse of animals is concerned with relationship either between self and other or self and environment. In neither case is it necessary to identify the relata. Animal A tells B about his relationship with B and he tells C about his relationship with C. Animal A does not have to tell animal C about his relationship with B. Always the relata are perceptibly present to illustrate the discourse, and always the discourse is iconic in the sense of being composed of part actions ('intention movements') which mention the whole action which is being mentioned. Even when the cat asks you for milk, she cannot mention the object which she wants (unless it be perceptibly present). She says, 'Mama, Mama', and you are supposed from this invocation of dependency to guess that it is milk that she requires.

All this indicates that primary process thoughts and the communication of such thoughts to others are, in an evolutionary sense, more archaic than the more conscious operations of language, etc. This has implications for the whole economics and dynamic structure of the mind. Samuel Butler was perhaps first to point out that that which we know best is that of which we are least conscious, i.e. that the process of habit formation is a sinking

of knowledge down to less conscious and more archaic levels. The unconscious contains not only the painful matters which consciousness prefers not to inspect but also many matters which are so familiar that we do not need to inspect them. Habit, therefore, is a major economy of conscious thought. We can do things without consciously thinking about them. The skill of an artist or rather his demonstration of a skill becomes a message *about* these parts of his unconsciousness. (But not perhaps a message *from* the unconscious.)

But the matter is not quite so simple. Some types of knowledge can conveniently be sunk to unconscious levels but other types must be kept on the surface. Broadly, we can afford to sink those sorts of knowledge which continue to be true regardless of changes in the environment, but we must maintain in an accessible place all those controls of behaviour which must be modified for every instance. The lion can sink into his unconscious the proposition that zebras are his natural prey but in dealing with any particular zebra he must be able to modify the movements of his attack to fit with the particular terrain and the particular evasive tactics of the particular zebra.

The economics of the system, in fact, pushes organisms towards sinking into the unconscious those generalities of relationship which remain permanently true and towards keeping within the conscious the pragmatics of particular instances.

The premisses may, economically, be sunk but particular conclusions must be conscious. But the 'sinking', though economical, is still done at a price – the price of inaccessibility. Since the level to which things are sunk is characterized by iconic algorithms and metaphor, it becomes difficult for the organism to examine the matrix out of which his conscious conclusions spring. Conversely, we may note that what is *common* to a particular statement and a corresponding metaphor is of a generality appropriate for sinking.

Quantitative Limits of Consciousness

A very brief consideration of the problem shows that it is not conceivably possible for any system to be totally conscious. Suppose that on the screen of consciousness there are

reports from many parts of the total mind, and consider the addition to consciousness of those reports necessary to cover what is, at a given stage of evolution, not already covered. This addition will involve a very great increase in the circuit structure of the brain but still will not achieve total coverage. The next step will be to cover the processes and events occurring in the circuit structure which we have just added, and so on. Clearly, the problem is insoluble and every next step in the approach to total consciousness will involve a great increase in the circuitry required.

It follows that all organisms must be content with rather little consciousness and that if consciousness has any useful functions whatever (which has never been demonstrated but is probably true), then *economy* in consciousness will be of the first importance. No organism can afford to be conscious of matters with which it could deal at unconscious levels. This is the economy achieved by habit formation.

Qualitative Limits of Consciousness

It is, of course, true for the TV set that a satisfactory picture on the screen is an indication that many parts of the machine are working as they should; and similar considerations apply to the 'screen' of consciousness. But what is provided is only a very indirect report of the working of all those parts. If the TV suffers from a blown tube, or the man from a stroke, *effects* of this pathology may be evident enough on the screen or to consciousness, but diagnosis must still be done by an expert.

This matter has bearings upon the nature of art. The TV which gives a distorted or otherwise imperfect picture is, in a sense, communicating about its unconscious pathologies – exhibiting its symptoms and one may ask whether some artists are not doing something similar. But this still won't do.

It is sometimes said that the distortions of art (say Van Gogh's 'Chair') are directly representative of what the artist '*sees*'. If such statements refer to 'seeing' in the simplest physical sense (e.g. remediable with spectacles), I presume that they are nonsense. If Van Gogh could only see the chair in that wild way, his eyes would not serve properly to guide him in the very accurate placing of paint on canvas. And, conversely, a

photographically accurate representation of the chair on the canvas would also be seen by Van Gogh in the wild way. He would see no need to distort the painting.

But suppose we say that the artist is painting today what he saw yesterday – or that he is painting what he somehow knows that he *might* see. 'I see as well as you do – but do you realize that this other way of seeing a chair exists as a human potentiality? And that that potentiality is always in you and in me?' Is he exhibiting symptoms which he *might* have, because the whole spectrum of psychopathology is possible for us all?

Intoxication by alcohol or drugs may help us to see a distorted world, and these distortions may be fascinating in that we recognize the distortions as *ours*. *In vino pars veritatis*. We can be humbled or aggrandized by realizing that this too is a *part* of the human self, a *part* of Truth. But intoxication does not increase skill – at best it may release skill previously acquired.

Without skill is no art.

Consider the case of the man who goes to the blackboard – or to the side of his cave – and draws, freehand, a perfect reindeer in its posture of threat. He cannot *tell* you about the drawing of the reindeer ('If he could, there would be no point in drawing it'). 'Do you know that this perfect way of seeing – and drawing – a reindeer exists as a human potentiality?' The consummate skill of the draftsman validates the artist's message about his relationship to the animal – his empathy.

(They say the Altamira things were made for sympathetic hunting magic. But magic only needs the crudest sort of representations. The scrawled arrows which deface the beautiful reindeer may have been magical – perhaps a vulgar attempt to murder the artist, like moustaches scrawled on the Mona Lisa.)

The Corrective Nature of Art

It was noted above that consciousness is necessarily selective and partial, i.e. that the content of consciousness is, at best, a small part of truth about the self. But if this part be *selected* in any systematic manner, it is certain that the partial truths of consciousness will be, in aggregate, a distortion of the truth of some larger whole.

In the case of an iceberg we may guess, from what is above surface, what sort of stuff is below; but we cannot make the same sort of extrapolation from the content of consciousness. It is not merely the selectivity of preference, whereby the skeletons accumulate in the Freudian unconscious, that makes such extrapolation unsound. Such a selection by preference would only promote optimism.

What is serious is the cross-cutting of the circuitry of the mind. If, as we must believe, the total mind is an integrated network (of propositions, images, processes, neural pathology, or what have you – according to what scientific language you prefer to use), and if the content of consciousness is only a sampling of different parts and localities in this network; then, inevitably, the conscious view of the network as a whole is a monstrous denial of the *integration* of that whole. From the cutting of consciousness, what appears above the surface is *arcs* of circuits instead of either the complete circuits or the larger complete circuits of circuits. What the unaided consciousness (unaided by art, dreams, and the like) can never appreciate is the *systemic* nature of mind.

This notion can conveniently be illustrated by an analogy: the living human body is a complex, cybernetically integrated system. This system has been studied by scientists – mostly medical men – for many years. What they now know about the body may aptly be compared with what the unaided consciousness knows about the mind. Being doctors, they had purposes: to cure this and that. Their research efforts were therefore focused (as attention focuses the consciousness) upon those short trains of causality which they could manipulate, by means of drugs or other intervention, to correct more or less specific and identifiable states or symptoms. Whenever they discovered an effective 'cure' for something, research in that area ceased and attention was directed elsewhere. We can now prevent polio but nobody knows much more about the systemic aspects of that fascinating disease. Research on it has ceased or is, at best, confined to improving the vaccines.

But a bag of tricks for curing or preventing a list of specified diseases provides no overall *wisdom*. The ecology and population dynamics of the species has been disrupted; parasites have been made immune to antibiotics; the

relationship between mother and neonate has been almost destroyed; and so on. Characteristically, errors occur wherever the altered causal chain is part of some large or small circuit structure or system. And the remainder of our technology (of which medical science is only a part) bids fair to disrupt the rest of our ecology.

The point, however, which I am trying to make in this paper is not an attack on medical science, but a demonstration of an inevitable fact: that mere purposive rationality unaided by such phenomena as art, religion, dream, and the like is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life; and that its virulence springs specifically from the circumstance that life depends upon interlocking *circuits* of contingency, while consciousness can see only such short arcs of such circuits as human purpose may direct. In a word, the unaided consciousness must always involve man in the sort of stupidity of which evolution was guilty when she urged upon the dinosaurs the common-sense values of an armaments race. She, inevitably, realized her mistake a few million years later and wiped them out.

Unaided consciousness must always tend towards hate; not only because it is good common-sense to exterminate the other fellow, but for the more profound reason that, seeing only arcs of circuits, the individual is continually surprised and necessarily angered when his hard-headed policies return to plague the inventor.

If you use D.D.T. to kill insects, you may succeed in reducing the insect population so far that the insectivores will starve. You will then have to use more D.D.T. than before to kill the insects which the birds no longer eat. More probably, you will kill off the birds in the first round when they eat the poisoned insects. If the D.D.T. kills off the dogs, you will have to have more police to keep down the burglars. The burglars will become better armed and more cunning... and so on. That is the sort of world we live in – a world of circuit structures – and love can survive only if wisdom (i.e. a sense or recognition of the fact of circuitry) has an effective voice.

What has been said so far proposes questions about any particular work of art somewhat different from those which have been conventionally asked by anthropologists. The

'culture and personality' school, for example, has traditionally used pieces of art or ritual as samples or probes to reveal particular psychological themes or states.

The question has been: Does the art tell us about what sort of person made it? But if art, as suggested above, has a positive function in maintaining what I called 'wisdom', i.e. in correcting a too purposive view of life and making the view more systemic, then the question to be asked of the given work of art becomes: What sorts of correction in the direction of wisdom would be achieved by creating or viewing this work of art? The question becomes dynamic rather than static.

Analysis of a Balinese Painting

Turning now from the consideration of epistemology to a specific work of art, we note first what is most general and most obvious. With almost no exceptions, the behaviours called art or their products (also called art) have two characteristics: they require or exhibit *skill* and they contain redundancy or pattern. But those two characteristics are not separate: the skill is first in maintaining and then in modulating the redundancies.

The matter is perhaps most clear where the skill is that of the journeyman and the redundancy is of comparatively low order. For example, in the Balinese painting (figure 4.1, by Ida Bagus Djati Sura of the village of Batuan, 1937²), skill of a certain elementary but highly disciplined sort was exercised or practised in the background of foliage. The redundancies to be achieved involve rather uniform and rhythmical repetition of leaf forms, but this redundancy is, so to speak, fragile. It would be broken or interrupted by smudges or irregularities of size or tone in the painting of the successive leaves.

When a Batuan artist looks at the work of another, one of the first things he examines is the technique of the leafy background. The leaves are first drawn, in free outline in pencil; then each outline is tightly redefined with pen and china ink. When this has been done for all the leaves, the artist begins to paint with brush and brick ink. Each leaf is covered with a pale wash. When these washes are dry, each leaf receives a smaller concentric wash and after this another still smaller and so on. The final

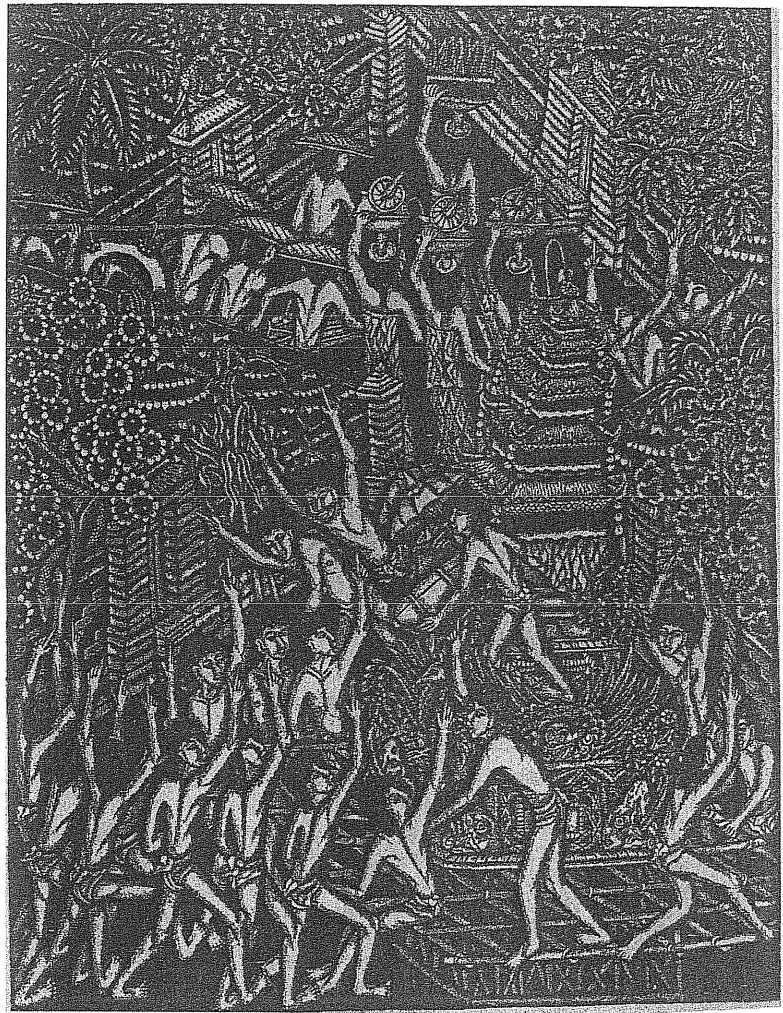


Figure 4.1 The start of a cremation procession, Bali. By Ida Bagus Djati Sura of Batuan, Bali, 1937. Reproduced by Permission of Lois Bateson.

result is a leaf with an almost white rim inside the inked outline, and successive steps of darker and darker colour towards the centre of the leaf. A 'good' picture has up to five or six such successive washes on every leaf. (This particular painting is not very 'good' in this sense. The leaves are done in only three or four steps.) The skill and the patterning so far discussed depend upon muscular rote and muscular accuracy – achieving the perhaps not negligible artistic level of a well laid-out field of turnips.

I was watching a very gifted American carpenter-architect at work on the woodwork of a house he had designed. I commented on the sureness and accuracy of each step. He said:

'Oh, that. That's only like using a typewriter. You have to be able to do that without thinking.' But on top of this level of redundancy is another. The uniformity of the lower level redundancy must be modulated to give higher orders of redundancy. The leaves in one area must be *different* from the leaves in another area and these *differences* must be, in some way, mutually redundant: they must be part of a larger pattern. Indeed, the function and necessity of the first level control is precisely to make the second level possible. The perceiver of the work of art must receive information that the artist *can* paint a uniform area of leaves because without this information, he

will not be able to accept, as significant, the variations in that uniformity. Only the violinist who can control the quality of his notes can use variations of that quality for musical purposes.

This principle is basic and accounts, I suggest, for the almost universal linkage in aesthetics between skill and pattern. The exceptions – e.g. the cult of natural landscapes, ‘found objects’, ink blots, scattergrams, and the works of Jackson Pollock – seem to exemplify the same rule in reverse. In these cases, a larger patterning seems to propose the illusion that the details must have been controlled. Intermediate cases also occur: e.g. in Balinese carving, the natural grain of the wood is rather frequently used to suggest details of the form or surface of the subject. In these cases, the skill lies not in the draftsmanship of the details, but in the artist’s placement of his design within the three-dimensional structure of the wood. A special ‘effect’ is achieved, not by the mere representationalism, but by the perceiver’s partial awareness that a physical system *other* than that of draftsmanship has contributed to determine his perception.

We now turn to more complex matters, still concentrating attention upon the most obvious and elementary.

Composition

1. The delineation of leaves and other forms does not reach to the edge of the picture but shades off into darkness so that almost all around the rectangle there is a band of undifferentiated dark pigment. In other words, the picture is framed within its own fade-out. We are allowed to feel that the matter is in some sense ‘out of this world’; and this in spite of the fact that the scene depicted is familiar – the starting out of a cremation procession.

2. The picture is *filled*. The composition leaves no open spaces. Not only is none of the paper left unpainted but no considerable area is left in uniform wash. The largest such areas are the very dark patches at the bottom between the legs of the men.

To occidental eyes this gives an effect of ‘fussiness’. To psychiatric eyes, the effect is of ‘anxiety’ or ‘compulsivity’. We are all familiar with the strange look of those letters from cranks, who feel that they must fill the page.

3. But before trying too fast to diagnose or evaluate, we have to note that the composition of the lower half of the picture, apart from this filling of background space, is turbulent. Not merely a depiction of active figures, but a swirling composition mounting upwards and closed off by the contrasting direction of the gestures of the men at the top of the pyramid.

The upper half of the picture, in contrast, is serene. Indeed, the effect of the perfectly balanced women with offerings on their heads is so serene that, at first glance, it appears that the men with musical instruments must surely be sitting. (They are supposed to be moving in procession.)

But this compositional structure is the reverse of the usual occidental. We expect the lower part of a picture to be the more stable and expect to see action and movement in the upper part – if anywhere.

4. At this point, it is appropriate to examine the picture as a sexual pun and, in this connection, the internal evidence for sexual reference is at least as strong as it is in the case of the Tangaroa figure discussed by Leach (1973). All you have to do is to set your mind in the correct posture and you will see an enormous phallic object (the cremation tower) with two elephants’ heads at the base. This object must pass through a narrow entrance into a serene courtyard and thence onward and upward through a still more narrow passageway. Around the base of the phallic object you see a turbulent mass of homunculi, a crowd in which

Was none who would be foremost
To lead such dire attack;
But those behind cried ‘Forward!’
And those before cried ‘Back!’

And if you are so minded, you will find that Macaulay’s poem about how Horatius kept the bridge is no less sexual than the present picture. The game of sexual interpretation is easy if you want to play it. No doubt the snake in the tree to the left of the picture could also be woven into the sexual story.

It is still possible, however, that something is added to our understanding of a work of art by the hypothesis that the subject-matter is double: that the picture represents both the start of a cremation procession and a phallus with vagina. With a little imagination, we

could also see the picture as a symbolic representation of Balinese social organization in which the smooth relations of etiquette and gaiety metaphorically cover the turbulence of passion. And, of course, 'Horatius' is very evidently an idealized myth of nineteenth-century imperial England.

It is probably an error to think of dream, myth, and art as being about any one matter other than relationship. As was mentioned earlier, dream is metaphoric and is not particularly about the relata mentioned in the dream. In the conventional interpretation of dream, another set of relata, often sexual, is substituted for the set in the dream. But perhaps by doing this we only create another dream. There indeed is no *a priori* reason for supposing that the sexual relata are any more primary or basic than any other set.³

In general, artists are very unwilling to accept interpretations of this sort, and it is not clear that their objection is to the sexual nature of the interpretation. Rather, it seems that rigid focusing upon any single set of relata destroys for the artist the more profound significance of the work. If the picture were *only* about sex or *only* about social organization, it would be trivial. It is non-trivial or profound precisely because it is about sex *and* social organization *and* cremation, *and* other things. In a word, it is only about relationship and not about *any* identifiable relata.

5. It is appropriate then to ask how the artist has handled the identification of his subject-matter within the picture. We note first that the cremation tower which occupies almost one third of the area of the picture is almost invisible. It does not stand out against its background as it should if the artist wanted to assert unequivocally 'this is a cremation'. Notably also, the coffin, which might be expected to be a focal point, is appropriately placed just below the centre but, even so, does not catch the eye. In fact, the artist has inserted details which label the picture as a cremation scene but these details become almost whimsical asides, like the snake and the little birds in the trees. The women are carrying the ritually correct offerings on their heads, and two men appropriately bring bamboo containers of palm toddy, but these details, too, are only whimsically added. The artist plays down the subject identification and thereby gives major

stress to the contrast between the turbulent and the serene mentioned in section 3 above.

6. In sum, it is my opinion that the crux of the picture is the interwoven contrast between the serene and the turbulent. And a similar contrast or combination was also present, as we have seen, in the painting of the leaves. There too, an exuberant freedom was overlaid by precision.

In terms of this conclusion, I can now attempt an answer to the question posed above: What sorts of correction, in the direction of systemic wisdom, could be achieved by creating or viewing this work of art? In final analysis, the picture can be seen as an affirmation that to choose either turbulence or serenity as a human purpose would be a vulgar error. The conceiving and creating of the picture must have provided an experience which exposed this error. The unity and integration of the picture assert that neither of these contrasting poles can be chosen to the exclusion of the other, because the poles are mutually dependent. This profound and general truth is simultaneously asserted for the fields of sex, social organization, and death.

NOTES

- 1 Consider the impossibility of constructing a television set which would report upon its screen *all* the workings of its component parts, including especially those parts concerned in this reporting.
- 2 Three photographs of this artist at work have been published in G. Bateson and M. Mead, *Balinese Character*, New York, 1942, Pl. 23.
- 3 Cf. Gregory Bateson, 'Sex and Culture', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, vol. XLVII, 9 May 1947, art. 5, pp. 647-60.

REFERENCE

- Leach, Edmund, 1973. 'Levels of Communication and problems of Taboo in the Appreciation of Primitive Art.' In Anthony Forge (ed.), *Primitive Art and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.