

## Psychoanalytical Theories about Dance and Art

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### Abstract

*With the recent trend of crossing academic boundaries and integrating the humanities with social and abstract sciences in contemporary times, this article focuses on the role of art in the school of psychoanalytical thought and by extension, modern medicine. In the process, it explores the relationship between Aristotle's concepts of art and catharsis as associated with Freud's concept of psychoanalysis as the base of modern psychotherapy. This article attempts through a descriptive methodology analyzes historically, artistically and psychologically and establishes the concept of catharsis as central to Dance, Art and psychoanalytical theories. Ultimately, research identifies as problematic that catharsis has only been prominently focused on in medical related health care and research as opposed to art related health care strategies. However, catharsis provides a valuable base line for influencing both artistic and medical based healing, especially as related to the art of psychotherapy.*

### Definitions of Terms

**Art:** Art is symbolization of human experiences. As a tool of social cohesion, it is a medium through which human experiences may be reflected and shared. As a expressive communication in sound, speech, gestures, movement, lines, colours, or sculpture, it created extrinsic, symbolic, and meaningful transformation of human imaginative consciousness.

**Psychoanalysis:** Within the contexts of interactive communication and integrative therapy, psychoanalysis as a medical tool involves understanding and interpreting of unconscious, emotional processes. It is assessing of background emotional as well as external forces that operate within an individual, and containing and utilizing such to effect healing.

**Catharsis:** Is an indepth tool in art and psychoanalysis. Simply described, it is purgation or release of pent-up emotions and bodily tension, especially when the human body is considered as a psychic instrument.

**Psychotherapy:** As a concept, this involves exploration of verbal and non verbal creative processes. In this case, psychotherapy is gaining awareness and

understanding as well as exploring, reflecting upon and identifying patterns and flows of creative processes and facilitating unconscious, unrestricted communication with the aim of enhancing body/self integration and growth.

**Dance movement therapy (DMT):** This creative art therapy entails specialist knowledge, strategies, and expertise in handling movement communications. It an innovative means of connecting with embodied movement in very profound ways, as we experience ourselves, via thinking (emotion), interacting and acting.

### **Introduction**

The nature of art makes it a relevant instrument of mental and physiological wellbeing. In its purest form, “art is concerned with the communication of the infallible”, with transformation at the root of its essence (Fagg, 1999).

Through the ages philosophers, art scholars and historians and artists alike, have attested to this therapeutic nature and function of art (Ehreinriech, 2006). For instance, 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Susan Langer and prominent movement and communication theorist , Rudolf Laban have both stressed the theory and nature of the dance art as the “language of movements beyond aesthetics”, fundamentally transcending art for its own sake and into the many dances or embodied, symbolic movement utterances of life itself (Bartinieff, 1970).

Further, Langer defined dance as an autonomous art which avails opportunities for healing, through understanding and coming to terms with expressed feelings states in human conditions. Fundamentally, she acknowledged that art as symbols (for example, produced, organized perceivable and identifiable sounds, movement, lines, colours etc) of human feeling forms assume their functional roles and essence by the virtue of:

Their common logical form, i.e.... growth and attention, flowing and slowing, conflict and resolution, speed, arrest, terrific excitement, calm or subtle activation and dreamy lapses... the greatness and brevity and eternal passing of everyday vitality felt (Langer, 1953).

In all works of art as obtained in real life, are found perceivable cohesion, divisions and creativity as a fundamental expression of human existence. Thus, Laban posited that the dance and ultimately, art as symbol has the “power of exerting, of causing tension within itself”, as a reaction to the chaos and disequilibrium created in the real world or universe beyond it, and is capable, via the exploration of unconscious materials, of “evoking feelings through sensory perceptions”.

As a mediator of the creative process, every work of art is a 'feeling symbol'

which produces change. Art is also believed to possess an illusionary quality. For instance, dance and creative symbolization of movements is believed to be a transitional object which bridges interpersonal gaps. Consequently, it becomes a sheer image, almost of deceptive picture, abstracted from the physical or casual environment which produced it, and exists in a purely virtual object, (Langer, 1953; Robins, 1989).

It cannot be controverted that art incorporates diverse opinions and meanings. Among other opinions, art has been defined as; play, beauty, illusion or representation of life, imitation, pleasure , intuition , imagination, willpower, catharsis, skill , creativity etc,. Its product and process of creation are equally complex. Among other variables, the process of art making is believed to develop perception of the process of health, illness and healing. Expressing and experiencing a therapeutic art medium provide outlets to interact with various existential processes bothering on health and psycho-social environments of the human person.

An art creation as a symbol consists of several and seemingly unrelated ideas or illusionary realms organized together in one kind of image which is utilized to illuminate and explore virtual space, time and creative force of both the artist and the audience.

Within psychotherapeutic alliance as a creative shaping process, art gives form to conflictual internal structures and unconscious realms. As imaginative symbolization of unconscious backgrounds, it reconstructs past experiences and integrates them to present contexts and realities within a potential space. (Robins, 1989; Lavine, 1997; Meekums, 2002).

As a psychoanalytic process, art, including dance is a reflection or semblance of feeling states and events. In creative processes and explorations, it provides symbols, metaphors or qualitative language and communicative, cathartic experiences (Aristotle, 335 BC) that are ways of seeing, thinking, expressing and exploring states of being and mustering control over psychological domains of existence (Halprin, 2003).

In this sense, art is central to psychoanalysis - a school of psychology, founded and developed by Viennese physician, Sigmund Freud (Lahey, 2004), and by extension modern psychodynamic theories and practice. This is because it exerts tremendous influence on the human body/self and psyche and seeks through the creative process to analytically reconstruct troubled patterns of existence, for the wellbeing of the individual and society.

### **Art, Dance and psychotherapy: A historical, artistic and psychoanalytical analyses**

That innate and cultural ideas and development concepts are linked to art- its content, composition and expression can never be overemphasized. The production, performance and or exhibition of any art form showcases component features of creativity adapted in imaginative, originally woven symbols (or synthesis of knowledge) that can be perceived, captured and experienced. However, the inner meanings of any artistic symbol are restricted to specific variables derived from authentic realities of time and space of diverse social and psychological environments.

Generally, raw materials of any artwork are grounded in perceivable conflicts, which the artist/performer harnesses and organizes into symbols and themes. The audience identifies with conflicts embodied in artworks presented in culturally acceptable forms. Little wonder art therapies, including Dance movement therapy assume cultural dimensions, as therapists help clients /patients generate their hidden thoughts into identifiable images.

Through cultural evolutions, any form of art, including the creation of dance is an attempt of understanding internal and external nature of existence through symbols. Ellfeldt (1976) asserted that “art began when function ceased” as offshoot of motif of practical roles. And for Collingwood, (1958), art for art sake is that art which is hinged on societal judgment about aesthetic excellence and competence, which extend beyond the material function of art. Thus, theories, origin and nature of art are hinged on two sorts of artistic expressions and experiences which have emerged globally. These two models are social art and magical or ritual (therapeutic art).

Mythological, ritualistic accounts and functions of art linked to spiritual quests and worship are rooted in sacred religions magical and psychological motifs. Conversely, social art creations are performed or exhibited on social occasions marking significant passages into the individual or community life. This form of art thrives on specific inventions and techniques designed and developed by its inventors; while the art which techniques of creation contribute to understanding an individual body/self functioning and human experiences is said to be therapeutic.

In the therapeutic/ healing art, the artist is not particular about aesthetic and technical judgments. Rather the artist presents the work of art as elaborate system of body culture and encourages healing of the body self in psychological and physiological states.

The human body is a 'theatre of passions' with ingrained conflicts which can affect bodily connection and cohesion. All over the world, the body is inarguably the focal point of health construction. Against the background of everyday experience of health and reality of diseases, it becomes individuality and socially problematic (Saltonstall, 1993), hence, the paramount agenda to enhance the quality of individual and invariably, societal life.

In a bid to safeguard the body/self against forces of emotions that breed ill health, the arts, including the dance art form, offers human beings the 'voice' to articulate, via diverse techniques, challenging circumstances which they encounter. In the process it becomes an identifiable cognitive and behavior modification therapy, either speculatively or scientifically grounded. For instance, scientifically positioned, dance movement therapy as a psychotherapeutic technique is believed to have evolved from the traditional, speculatively therapeutic dance, particularly of the modern dance genre (Akunna, 2008; Ehrenreich, 2006). Without doubt, the body, through life span changes, is subject to ageing, deterioration and diseases. This explains the importance of maintaining the body. It also explains the reason why the theme of rescue resonates in every human being as it is in the arts and psychotherapy as extensions of human creativity.

As a field of modern medicine, psychotherapy has been employed to alleviate mental and emotional turmoil. It operates within verbal and non-verbal communication, and we hasten to add, artistic strategies which aid individuals solve emotional conflicts arising from health problems.

It was Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), a Viennese neurologist, who in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century strongly projected the ideology that the mental life of an individual lay behind the dark spheres of unconscious domains. Freud worked closely with fellow physician Josef Breuer (1842-1925), who also shared a keen interest in the subject of unconscious process and hypnosis. Both physicians made an important discovery that patients under hypnosis or induced trance like states (a fascinating concept founded and popularized by Austrian physician, Franz Mesmer (1734-1845), who were encouraged to voice their problems encountered a release of emotion called catharsis.

Under hypnosis and within a therapeutic alliance which incorporated the factor of free association; less censorship of patient's narrations occurred than when in conscious realms. Communicating freely without inhibitions under diagnosis allowed patients gave out valuable data and made it possible for therapists to easily gain insight into and explore diverse environmental spaces and retrieve relevant psychological data on patients health condition.

In 1895, Freud and Breuer co-authored “On the psychical mechanisms of hysterical phenomenon”. This work substantiated their scientific discusses about “hypnosis and the unconscious and therapeutic value of catharsis” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004). It also laid the foundation for the development of psycho analysis - the study of unconscious domains.

Freud was in Clark University, in America in 1909, at the invitation of one of the founding fathers of American psychology, (G. Stanley Hall) to introduce his psychological intervention. In following years, he wrote more articles and books explaining the theory of classical psycho analysis and internal world of fantasies and repressed impulses emanating from anxiety and depression, which as he asserted, were grounded in social interactions with significant others (Goldberg and Goldberg, 2000). Based on the wide acceptance and popularity psycho analysis, and its pivotal role in establishing and defining the nature of psychotherapy as a mental therapeutic (Sinder, 1998). Freud rose to become one of the greatest creative scientists in the fields of psychiatry and psychology (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004).

Freud's psychoanalytical theory incorporates notions of personality and psychopathology, a method of investigating the mind and a form of treatment for psychopathology or diseased states. As such, it is a common belief in psychoanalysis that mental disorders symptoms caused by stress and trauma arising from conflicting relationships necessitated by primitive drives and the constraints of such desires.

Psychological theories of mental disorder appear to focus on the human person, his or her ways of thinking and perceiving inner and outer environments, unconscious conflicts, and concepts about body/self, attitudes and behavioral patterns. However, long before Freud and the theory of psychoanalysis, Greek philosopher Aristotle (354-322 BC) had propounded the theory of catharsis, which significantly, formed the basis of Freud's psycho analysis.

In the Poetics (335BC), Aristotle linked catharsis to tragedy, which he described as imitation of serious actions. According to Aristotle, the effect of tragedy on human beings, stimulates, arouses or regurgitate buried feelings of irrational fear and pity and invariably produces catharsis or emotional purgation.

As Aristotle alluded, consciously engaging with and exhibiting fundamental hidden 'terrors' of existence via symbolic non-verbal forms, such as dancing communicates deep meanings, and is ultimately a personal journey. The experience illuminates hidden, fearful terrains of the unconscious, reflects

identities and conveys authentic realities about the body/self in diverse relationships. In the process of such active communication, the body/self is relieved of hideous burdens of guilt and fear and awareness is created as the individual gains perception of his or her universe (Dukore, 1973).

Aristotle's ancient propositions on catharsis in human experience, unlike Freud's in his modern context of psychoanalysis, adopted a psychological framework that is art based and which shares a relationship with and is more compatible with philosophy, the humanities and the arts, than with biology, medicine and natural sciences (Kavanaugh, 2000).

Aristotle's perspective of analysis derived origin in the arts via the “psychic theatre of the mind”. His theory of art as imitation suggests that mind-fullness or metallization – an ability, not only to see ourselves in the light of the experiences of others – is a vital part of art engagement or performance.

By inducing metallization, art aids in the appreciation of all human experiences, perceptions and desires which are all provisional and changing. However, metallization and emotional arousal are not compatible as stress interferes with the ability to mentalize efficiently, such as in the case with mental illness patients whose metallization capacity is impaired. So also is their ability to make responsible decisions hampered.

Art, like psychotherapy, whether cognitive or psychoanalytical, aims at enhancing mentalization, skills and identification with conditions, for the better handling of them.

Metallization is a basic tool in the arts therapies, but particularly in Dance movement therapy. DMT is a component of psychotherapy. Just as intuitively accepted, it is also scientifically proven that participation in DMT interventions guarantees avenues to confront and express real inhibiting emotions and displace such. In the process, life sustaining neuro chemicals, for example, endorphins are rejuvenated and released for facilitating flexibility of thoughts and boosting bodily connection and cohesion. (Goodil, 2005). Consequently, dance activities can help to overcome the challenge of impaired metallization in patients with mental illness, because the artistic ability it incorporates involves the ability to generate abstractions and to capture and relate with the contents (of abstraction) in the symbol system of dance.

The creative and artistic processes of dance therapy help to move an individual or group towards “expression, individuation, empowerment socialization and catharsis” (Schmais, 1998). The therapeutic dance as well as all creative arts

therapies employs assorted symbols to stimulate catharsis. As psychotherapy, the essence of its performance is joy- to provide much needed physical, emotional upliftment and aesthetic satisfaction in times of deep emotional turmoil.

In this perspective, Aristotle's thought on catharsis differed from “medical psychologies of psychoanalysis” with variables of “symptomatology, etiology and psychopathology”, which are situated in 'metaphors operationalized within the “healthcare profession', such as, health, diseases, treatment and cure” (Kavanaugh, 2000).

As Aristotle further suggested, the therapeutic/and cathartic nature and features of the art as a body of symbolic communications aid exploration of human existence and experiences in all ramifications and at all levels of growth. As a means of transformation and personality, behaviour development in sociological terms, it is necessary to constantly rethink psycho analysis, and by implication psycho therapy, beyond borders of pathologies and science driven healthcare model and its concern with diseases, deficiencies and disorders'.

Consequent upon these thoughts, it is important, as this article reflects, to keep exploring the relationship between 'psychoanalysis and the arts as based on its analytical/psychotherapeutic conceptualization in the arts. Operating in the multi-disciplinary action in psychotherapy is both beneficial and necessary at this point in African/Nigerian history, when the fact is considered that Freud's invention has become a dominant ideology in psycho therapeutic discourses and practice for the modern world, particularly in the Western perspective. The psychodynamic perspective of psychotherapy 'derived from Freud's psychoanalytical model' is a pointer to this fact.

### **Conclusion**

The arts are collective products of psychological, historical and sociological conditions under which they are established. As symbolic communication objects, they reveal different records and perceptions or emotions which are amazingly integrated and intense.

The arts are not mere ornamentations or distractions, but are organized means of giving form and sense to life. Consequently, as means of diagnosis and healing, Dossey (1999) acknowledged that the arts go beyond entertainment to affect the body in diverse forms and cannot thus be divorced from medicine

As a creative process, art making is an innate ability in human beings to find meanings and expression and integration in themselves as both individuals and groups. It also marks passages into life and commemorates existential

conditions. As symbolic enactment, it can help to facilitate consciousness and knowledge through catharsis and in the process heal or integrate body and mind. Through explorations of creative psychotherapeutic process involving, for instance, role-play within the group, it generates awareness and insight into conditions and resolves psychological conflicts, thus helping the individual to find resolution with the self in the now.

It is important to note that the creative technique (Hanna, 1990) is emphasized in all arts therapies, particularly, dance movement therapy. Usually, traumatized individuals are consciously encouraged to create and execute their own authentic movement expressions (Chodrow, 1990). Themes of varied projections of such individuals, may not only be connected to biological and moral constructs of peculiar states of trauma, but are also linked to interpersonal relations, cultural values, social, political and historical prevalent mental states.

A great deal of communication occurs within any psychotherapeutic session. In non-verbal arts psychotherapies, communication levels are deep and multiple, continuous and constantly changing, so that any model of art therapy, no matter how carefully organized, needs to be made simple and easy to comprehend. This is because; the end product of psychotherapeutic interventions focus not much on technical and aesthetic details and appeal as much as it does alleviating human suffering. As such, there is the need to effectively harness and present crucial themes, concepts, theories, verbal and non-verbal communication and artistic creative interactions and present them as essential creative aspects of psychoanalytical based psychotherapy.

These thoughts on the function of catharsis in the dance and art as well as in the healing art of psychoanalysis have been presented in this article, which serves as a beginning inquiry to the ongoing debate on the role of dance and art in modern medical practice, particularly on the African continent, where the creative arts therapies are virtually nonexistent in healthcare system.

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