

Unification Theory of Art

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All phenomena that we humans can perceive can be appealing or repugnant to different degrees. It's a continuum, and beyond the senses, culture also plays a role in defining what is appealing and what is not. This is the aesthetic spectrum. "Like" or "Dislike" is not an either/or issue. But as a concept, Art is assigned to the positive section of this spectrum, and it is generally associated with behaviors and the products of behaviors that humans create – from narrative, to music, to song, to dance, to drama, to game, to graphic and sculptural art – all of the genres of expressive culture. All of these genres exist in the stream of living as "Time Outs" from instrumental pursuits but with reference to different aspects of the subject matter of life. They are formal metaphors – allowing for the safe/contained exploration of the issues/concerns of life. In short, all generic forms of Art are symbolic expressions, and while they invite an identification form of "inclusion" by participants and observers alike, they are understood as real only in a secondary sense.

In modern complex culture, I argue that within expressive culture and each of its sub-types, are two other continua 1) from Entertainment to Art and 2) from Ceremony to Ritual. Entertainment is oriented to exploring and commenting on the secular material domain while Art provides access and promotes the perspective of the spiritual realm. Ceremony functions to provide formal acknowledgment of important events and people while Ritual again provides access and promotes the perspective of the spiritual realm. This identification of the Art-Ritual category reflects the fact that in the 96% of human history when humans lived in relatively small hunter-gatherer societies, art and ritual were fused – performing the united function of accessing and exploring the spiritual dimension of reality, there being no "separate" institution of religion with its own belief complex and specialists. As religion arises as an institution in more complex societies, Art provides an avenue separate from religious Ritual for accessing the spiritual, and Entertainment arises from Art to allow for probing secular issues. As continua, there are many cases where features and functions are mixed.

I argue that humans possess two different mental modes for understanding and interacting successfully with reality – intellect serving the material orientation and intuition serving the spiritual orientation. Both are active most of the time but to different degrees depending on the demands of the particular situation. Everyday, instrumental, competitive, survival oriented activities are served by the analytical Intellect while social, cooperative, ecologically sensitive activities

are served by the synthetic Intuitive. These two orientations and their associated mentation modes account for the dynamic that humans must manage and balance to live successfully for the long term. Material perspective domination – with its assumptions that all organic “things” exist as separate entities with free will – risks excessive individual and social aggression and ecological destabilization while spiritual domination risks inadequate security and provision. Balance must be the goal of human societies of all types.

In this context, what function does Art-Ritual serve? My contention is that Art-Ritual is the part of the expressive culture complex that provides a major behavioral avenue to the spiritual understanding and experience of reality. Art-Ritual allows for the “Time Out” domain of story, song, dance, etc. that when experienced at its deepest level, reveals reality to be totally unified – thereby unifying the self with all “other” and promoting the principle of cooperation and respect both socially and ecologically. Of course, reaching this unification experience is a matter of degree with much exposure to art-ritual carrying the creators/participants/observers only to a point of what can be called “harmony.”

Very importantly, the unification perspective is confirmed by science in its discovery of the fundamental role of immaterial energy as responsible for the integration of all of reality. In short, immaterial energy connects and integrates everything in reality – including all material reality – into ONE phenomenon; and Art-Ritual in human societies functions to carry humans to this understanding. The consequence of incorporating that unification awareness is that the “ME Only” competitive orientation that emanates from the separation principle of the material perspective is countered to promote the “WE Together” perspective. When these two perspectives are appropriately balanced, human societies of all types achieve a state that is sustainable.

Unfortunately, this overall perspective balance has been significantly weakened in modern complex society where 1) art has been largely overwhelmed by entertainment, 2) intellect/analysis has rejected the legitimacy of intuition/synthesis, 3) the spiritual basis for religion has been drowned by extensive religious dogma and ecclesiastical structure, and 4) competitive individualism, nationalism, and autocratic orientations are encouraged by global capitalism and the prevailing secular materialist perspective. Additionally, the negative effect of all of this is compounded by an out of control rate of change and a lack of veracity in public communications/media. Without much needed input from Art-Ritual and the restraint provided by the unification perspective in general, modern society is tottering on a three legged stool. Add uncontrolled artificial intelligence and genetic engineering into the mix and the legs are gone!

Potential Positives? Unification awareness can take us to energy field physics and human global unification at the social and political levels, breaking the strangle hold of materialism with its assumption of competitive separation. Recognizing the common obstruction of dogma in our religions can restore spirituality, intuitive integrity, and true creativity in Art-Ritual. Imagine energy field medicine – understanding the body as a manifestation of an integrated energy field system, itself susceptible directly to disease imbalance and health restoration. Balance is health materially, immaterially, socially and ecologically! The possibilities are endless, if humanity can get its act together.

For details on any and all of the above statements see my website under the relevant topic: <http://www.dynamic-humanism.com>

References

There is an extensive literature on the theory of art, ritual and spirituality. For valuable overviews with extensive citations, see:

Patricia Leavy, editor, Handbook of Arts Based Research, 2nd edition, 2025.

Jessica Gullion et. al., “An Overview of Arts-Based Research in Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology,” in Handbook of Arts Based Research, 2nd ed., 2025, pp. 515-532.

Lisa J. Miller, editor, Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality, 2nd ed, 2024. [834 pages, 50+ well documented overview essays by researchers establishing the scientific importance of the spiritual perspective on reality]

Pablo Tinio and Jeffrey Smith, eds. The Cambridge Handbook of the Psychology of Aesthetics and the Arts, 2014.

Mariano Longo, et. al. eds., Creativity and Sociology, 2025. [Overview Introduction with extensive references]

Jensine Andresen, ed., Religion in Mind: Cognitive Perspectives on Religious Belief, Ritual and Experience, 2001. [considers religious experience based on altered states of mind]

Harris L. Friedman, et al. eds., The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology, 2015. [altered states and spirituality]

Peter Sedlmeier, The Psychology of Meditation, 2022. [altered states and what constitutes enlightenment]

Miguel Farias et. al., eds, The Oxford Handbook of Meditation, 2021. [multiple essays reviewing the scientific results in meditation research, 969 pages]

Kirk W. Brown et.al, eds, Handbook of Mindfulness, 2025. [positive psychological and sociological results of meditative altered states]

Sara Malou Strandvad, et.al., Sociology About Art: An Introduction to How Sociologist Study the Arts, 2025. [Introduction with references]

Howard Morphy et. al. edits., The Anthropology of Art: A Reader, 2006. [see non-evolutionary views of “primitive” art]

David Hicks, ed., Ritual and Belief: Readings in the Anthropology of Religion, 2010.

I have assembled a bibliography of literature relating art to the key variables in my unification theory: spirituality, ritual, insight, imagination, altered states of consciousness, creativity, intuition, society, energy, and reality. The title of this bibliography is “Art-Ritual, Spirituality and Unification, Bibliography,” and it is available on my website under the Art topic.

In all of this literature, I find no theory of art or ritual that combines the key variables in my “Unification Theory of Art” in the manner I have outlined above. Francis Sparshott gets part way there in his derivation of what he calls the “Mystic Line” of art interpretation in his The Theory of the Arts, 1982, pp. 371-414. Missing in all of this literature is any reference to the key confirming principle of energy unification from physics.

Conclusion

The Unification Theory of Art-Ritual does not fit into any one of the standard art theory categories; rather it spans across categories. I suggest this theory is at root psychological and functional while incorporating important social, anthropological, and ontological variables. In this regard, the unification theory of Art-Ritual rests on the synthetic/subjective function of the human intuitive mental mode to provide individual and/or group access – to varying degrees – to unification awareness and experience of reality. Traditional communal dance to music/rhythm is perhaps the quintessential art-ritual form exemplifying this focal condition and function. The “Whirling Dervish” tradition is a specific example from the meditative realm. All art-ritual forms invite the individual/group into their special “time out” context [suspension of disbelief and safe opportunity to shift into an alternative mental mode]. Participants pursue this option to different degrees. Most will experience unification at least as increased togetherness at the social level. Some will dive deeper and realize to some degree the unification core experience of self as All and All as self. A few, specific modern arts and entertainments take advantage of this invitation of the art-ritual context to engender the opposite – the total loss/isolation of self, very risky!

Conceptually Art-Ritual is one category of behavior that language attempts to capture and differentiate out of the universal whole. No surprise, there are many different ways to artificially carve up this whole in behalf of our analytical effort to describe and understand this whole as if it exists in separate pieces. I suggest that Art-Ritual itself carries us to the realization that the separation principle – so fundamental to language and science – is an illusion with limited usefulness! I recognize that as a social scientist I am a full participant in this contradiction!