Unification Theory of Art-Ritual

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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 major 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-Ritual are symbolic expressions, and while they invite participants and observers alike to relate to them "as if" they are real, they are understood as real only in a secondary sense.

In modern complex culture, I contend 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 to and promotes the spiritual perspective and experience. 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 unified 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 specific cases where features and functions of Art and Entertainment are mixed.

I argue that humans possess two different mental modes for understanding and interacting successfully with reality – 1) intellect serving the material orientation and 2) 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 more by the analytical Intellect while social, cooperative, ecologically sensitive

activities are served more 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 "things" exist as separate entities with free will – risks excessive individual and social competition/conflict as well as 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 provides a major behavioral avenue to the spiritual understanding and experience of reality. Art-Ritual allows humans to access the "Time Out" domain of story, song, dance, etc. that when experienced at its deepest level, reveals reality to be totally unified – thereby integrating the self with all "else" 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 categorized as "harmony" or "togetherness" [social function].

Very importantly, the unification perspective is confirmed by science in its discovery that immaterial energy is responsible for the integration/unification of all of reality. This statement requires some explanation. In the physical sciences, it is now commonly understood that immaterial energy in the form of waves and fields is: 1) everywhere all the time, 2) the primary component in the origin of reality, 3) at least 70% of all reality, and 4) the foundation element and integrating base in everything material. As an infinite web of connectedness, energy unifies everything in reality into ONE phenomenon. But this unified condition has some special characteristics with important implications. First of all, our reality is enormous, consisting of hundreds of billions of galaxies with at least quadrillions of planets. Second, while this material/physical domain of reality is huge, it constitutes only about 5% of reality. Third, our universe is an open system that is constantly expanding. Fourth, everything at every scale in this open system from micro to macro is in a perpetual state of change. Fifth, because of its vast size, its open condition, and its constant state of change, our universe is relatively flexible – especially at smaller scales which include our tiny planet which does not amount to an atom in a grain of sand in the larger context.

At what is the more tiny human species scale, and the even smaller individual human "particle" scale, this flexibility is perceived to be so great that it seems to support the concept of "free will." When we add into this situation the fact of the extraordinarily limited condition of human perception [99% of energy is not perceived], we discover the source of the human assumptions of both separation among all things and free will to pursue goals independently. Very

importantly, these two core assumptions are fundamental in the material perspective on reality that is very prominent in all human cultures. At tiny human scale, we fail to discern for the most part both the unification principle in reality, and the fact that our commitment to the material perspective is an illusion. Still, given huge system flexibility, in large measure, we get away with it [until we finally encounter larger scale phenomena like climate change]!

Very significantly, this combination of separation and free will illusions is supported by our basic communication tool – Language. Language is derived from the differentiation of separate sounds combined into separate words which stand for separate things – actions and entities. What is more, Intellect as our primary mental thought process is language dependent – language based thought. And importantly, language based thought is the basis for the analytical thought process in science. Language, then, functions at a primary level to support both the separation and free will illusions of the material perspective.

In this context, why is Art-Ritual so important? Because, as suggested in the opening section of this essay, Art-Ritual serves the critical function of providing humans with an avenue to the unification understanding of themselves and their reality. Unification awareness reveals that the "ME Only" competitive orientation, which derives from the separation principle of all "things" in the material perspective, is significantly countered by the "WE Together," all as One, spiritual perspective. When these two perspectives are appropriately balanced, humans can at least constrain their illusions based on the assumed principle of separation and achieve an overall societal state that is sustainable.

Unfortunately, material-spiritual 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 highly inflated ecclesiastical structure, and 4) competitive individualism, nationalism, and autocratic orientations have been promoted by global capitalism and the dominant 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 all but gone!

Potential Positives? Unification awareness can encourage us to formulate and implement human global unification at the social and political levels, breaking

the strangle hold of materialism with its commitment to competitive separation. Additionally, ecognizing the common obstruction of dogma in our religions can restore spirituality, intuitive integrity, and true creativity in Art-Ritual. In the health domain, imagine energy field medicine – understanding the body as a manifestation of an integrated energy field system, itself susceptible directly to imbalance and health restoration. Full Balance in perspectives promotes health physically, energetically, socially and ecologically!

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 both psychologically and socially functional. 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 awareness and experience of reality unification. 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 the alternative intuitive 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. Unfortunately, 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, and comparable to pursing the Void in meditation!

Conceptually Art-Ritual is one category of behavior that language attempts to capture and differentiate out of the universal whole as if reality exists in separate pieces. I suggest that Art-Ritual itself carries us to the realization that the separation principle, which is so fundamental to language, language based thought, and science, is not a fundamental reality imperative, however useful it may seem to be. I recognize that as a social scientist, who depends on language based thought for scientific communication, I am a full participant in this rudimentary contradiction!

For explanatory details on any and all of the above statements see my worldview conception: Dynamic Humanism: Balancing Complementary Human Perspectives And Mental Faculties, 2nd Edition, 2026. Available on my website: http://www.dynamic-humanism.com

Reference Section

Opening comment: In all of the following literature, I find no theory of art and/or ritual that combines the key variables in my "Unification Theory of Art-Ritual" as I have outlined above. Missing throughout is any reference to the confirming principle of energy unification from physics and cosmology. 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.

References

The following Overview References provide access to the key research which collectively connects Art-Ritual to the spiritual perspective of unification:

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.

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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. edts., 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., edts, The Oxford Handbook of Meditation, 2021. [multiple essays reviewing the scientific results in meditation research, 969 pages]

Kirk W. Brown et.al, edts, 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.