

## International Congress of Aesthetics 2007 “Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”

### JUNGIAN AESTHETICS – A RECONSIDERATION

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Psychoanalysis has now been established as another aspect of art criticism. Amongst many writers who attempted to create a theory of Aesthetics is the Swiss psychiatrist, and father of analytical psychology, Carl Jung. Unlike Freud, Jung did not see art structured along sexual lines but in archetypes, which may be those of the collective or personal unconscious. For him art was a creative process not a neurosis. In his theory of aesthetics Jung established that the artist expresses archetypes consciously or unconsciously.<sup>1</sup>

An important aspect of Jung's system is his theory of symbols. He argued that “man also produces symbols unconsciously and spontaneously, in the form of dreams.”<sup>1</sup> He treated dream images as symbols intent on bringing “healing to the psyche.” He based this on the fundamental split in psyche, which is common in varying degrees in all of us. By observing many dreams of his patients Jung discovered that not only dreams were relevant to the life of the dreamers but that there exists a pattern of psychological importance which he termed “the process of individuation.”<sup>2</sup> He believed that the unconscious was purposely trying to communicate through consciousness, in order to bring forth a sense of wholeness and added meaning to our lives. In his *Confrontation with the Unconscious*,<sup>3</sup> Jung began to develop further his ideas regarding fantasies and their meaning when relating them to artistic activity. He started exploring this in 1918-19 when he painted his first ‘mandala’.<sup>4</sup> The mandala is a basic circular form, which could be found in nature and many other places such as plants, elements of matter, and the animal world and images created by man and his psyche. It goes back even to Palaeolithic times, before the invention of the wheel – circular patterns carved in rocks often interpreted as sun wheels. In Buddhist meditation the mandala symbol called *yantra* is composed of nine linked triangles. “Traditionally, this shape symbolizes the union of Shiva and Shakti, the male and female divinities, a subject that also appears in sculpture in countless variations.”<sup>5</sup> In psychological terms it represents wholeness. In the Christian mandala, Christ occupies the centre, surrounded by the four Evangelists and their symbols. The rose windows in Gothic cathedrals are abstract or cosmic mandalas. This circular shape of the mandala was also used in architecture especially in sacred buildings and plans of cities and piazzas. For example, the principle of a structure built around a centre is commonly found in Buddhist stupas, in Muslim mosques and Christian cathedrals. Jung interpreted the mandala as a symbol of wholeness or as self-representation of the process that he called ‘individuation’ - becoming a single, homogenous being, self-realization.<sup>6</sup> In other words individuation consists of the bringing together of the conscious and the unconscious.

By means of the spontaneous circular drawings Jung produced each day, he was able, as he said, to "acquire a living conception of the Self."<sup>7</sup> He saw that all paths and all steps lead to a single point – the centre of the mandala. The centre for Jung was individuation. It is the unifying element of consciousness and the unconscious, in other words psychic wholeness. Jung believed that all individuals have a creative potential to find this psychic wholeness, but to achieve it one has to eliminate the conflicts between the conscious and the unconscious. Unfortunately, modern history provided, he believed, a disruptive factor that repressed the unconscious for long periods and individuals put faith only on science and neglected the natural instinctual needs and urges of the unconscious.<sup>8</sup> I argue that the role of the artist performs precisely this function of bringing back lost instinctual needs through the creative act. As we know many different artists are striving to achieve a psychic wholeness not just to 'heal' themselves but also society.

Jung tells us, "Symbols serve as a link between the archetype and consciousness and in a like manner between the artist, the work, and the audience, and the unconscious."<sup>9</sup> There is a connection between his concept of the symbol and his "theory of individual psychology to the considerations of aesthetics, and to the relations between aesthetics and epistemology."<sup>10</sup> "Like the complex, the symbol has a private component and an unconscious component. It might be described as having a personal shell with an archetypal core."<sup>11</sup> The living symbol evokes a fundamental archetypal formation that gives it a universal meaning. It creates an associated chord in every psyche. As Jung stated:

Since, on the one hand, the symbol is the best possible expression of what is still unknown – an expression, moreover, which cannot be surpassed for a given epoch – it must proceed from the most complex and differentiated contemporary mental atmosphere. But since, on the one hand, the living symbol must embrace and contain that which relates to a considerable group of men for such an effect to be within its power, it must contain just that which may be common to a larger group of men. Hence, this can never be the most highly differentiated or the highest attainable, since only the very few could attain to, or understand it; but it must be something that is still so primitive that its omnipresence stands beyond all doubt. Only when the symbol comprises this something, and brings it to the highest possible expression, has it any general efficacy. Therein consist the potent, and at the same time redeeming, effect of a living, social symbol.<sup>12</sup>

Certain symbols have the same significance for the individual as the social symbols have for a larger group of people. Such symbols "never have an exclusively conscious or unconscious source."<sup>13</sup> They are derived from both sources. Jung gave a significant meaning to the word 'symbol': "it is the possible expression of an unknown thing."<sup>14</sup> There is always an archetypal response from the unconscious when the symbol is living and pregnant with meaning. When the unconscious calls forth archetypal images into consciousness the individual finds it difficult to understand its meaning but it carries with it strong emotional affect.<sup>15</sup> Jung stated that "as a general rule, the unconscious aspect of any event is revealed to us in dreams where it appears not as a rational thought but as a symbolic image."<sup>16</sup> Jungian analyst, Donald H. Mayo, acknowledges how symbols reveal meaning to us:

Dreams, myth, and works of art through symbols can convey a sense of meaning, living meaning, laden with affect, which relates us organically to life as a whole.

The symbol provides meaning not in the abstract, objective way such as that conveyed by a sign.<sup>17</sup>

The meaning conveyed by the symbol is not easy to explain; it is the unconscious that expresses a kind of living meaning.<sup>18</sup> As we shall see in specific examples, "art evokes archetypes of the collective unconscious by the use of symbol."<sup>19</sup> A work of art is like a dream that produces archetypes, which arise from the collective unconscious.

The Jungian approach to art is more psychological in nature than aesthetic. In Jung's approach the significance of a work of art is what he calls, "psychological phenomenological."<sup>20</sup> In other words, his treatment of art helps to inquire into the psychic significance of art. Jung suggests that his study of artistic creativity was only 'observations' to a psychological approach to poetry. He never claimed to have written a completed theory of artistic creativity.<sup>21</sup> But Jung created an interest in the importance of psychological analysis of works, which include not just literature but also painting, sculpture and other forms of expression. Jung argued:

the human psyche is the womb of all the arts and sciences. The investigation of the psyche should therefore be able on one hand to explain the psychological structure of a work of art, and on the other hand to reveal the factors that make a person artistically creative.<sup>22</sup>

When analysing a work of art we may quickly understand that "we are confronted with a product of complicated psychic activity."<sup>23</sup> It is above all "apparently intentional and consciously shaped."<sup>24</sup> Jung suggests that if we want to consider the artist as a human being, we need to deal with his psychic make-up, but if we want to analyse him as a creative person, it is totally different. Although they are "intimately" related "neither of them can explain each other."<sup>25</sup> We may understand the psychic qualities of the artist from the work of art and vice versa but they never give us a complete interpretation of his work. Jung argues: "The personal psychology of the artist may explain many aspects of his work, but not the work itself. And if ever it did explain his work successfully, the artist's creativity would be revealed a mere symptom."<sup>26</sup>

A work of art is a result of a very complicated psychic activity. When one judges a work of art little can be discerned about the artist. Psychology can only establish connections by chance in the realm of psychophysical instincts and reflexes.<sup>27</sup> But, as Jung says, it is "possible to draw inferences about the artist from the work of art, and *vice versa*, but these inferences are never conclusive."<sup>28</sup> When creativity is accepted as an activity where the beginning of true psychic life begins, that is, the unconscious, we may only describe the psychic processes in a very limited way. Psychology, by itself, cannot fully explain how a work of art is produced and determine the complex psychic processes involved in an artistic creation. Even aesthetics cannot be left out. "Psychology and aesthetics may be of help to each other, but the one will not invalidate the other."<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to understand and define the causalities in a work of art. Jung stated:

All conscious psychic processes may well be causally explicable; but the creative act, being rooted in the immensity of the unconscious, will forever elude our attempts at understanding. It describes itself only in its manifestations; it can be guessed at, but never wholly grasped.<sup>30</sup>

In his theory on the psychology of art, Jung writes primarily about two modes of artistic creation, the 'psychological' (collective) and the 'visionary' (personal). The psychological mode, he says, "remains within the limits of psychological intelligibility":

Everything it embraces – the experience as well as its artistic expression – belongs to the realm of the understandable. Even the psychic raw material, the experiences themselves, have nothing strange about them; on the contrary, they have been known from the beginning of time – passion and its fated outcome, human destiny and its sufferings, eternal nature with its beauty and horror.<sup>31</sup>

These experiences are drawn from the realm of human consciousness that is, emotional shocks, lessons of life, passion, and crises of human destiny. According to Jung, most art is derived from a 'psychological mode', which simply means that it is an attempt to interpret and express the content of the individual's consciousness. The other mode, which Jung explains in his seminal work: *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, (1933) is the 'visionary mode'. This is a higher mode of creation. When operating in this mode the artist is not simply accessing his or her individual consciousness, but also accessing the collective unconscious of the whole human race. He defines the 'visionary mode' as material which:

derives its existence from the hinterland of man's mind, as if it had emerged from the abyss of prehuman ages, or from a superhuman world of contrasting light and darkness. It is a primordial experience which surpasses man's understanding and to which in his weakness he may easily succumb.<sup>32</sup>

Jung continues to describe visionary art as a revelation "whose heights and depths are beyond our fathoming, or a vision of beauty which we can never put into words."<sup>33</sup> This 'visionary mode' in contrast with the 'psychological mode' derives material from the contents of the primordial realm of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. The result of the 'visionary mode' of art is astonishing, frightening, confusing and at times disgusting. The presumption here is that the 'visionary artist' is seeking the 'Divine'. Its subject matter is coming definitely out-of-the-ordinary.

One may show out the difference between the two modes of creation, which "is a difference of degree."<sup>34</sup> This depends on whether the author or the artist "experiences more intensely his awareness of exerting conscious shaping control over his subject matter or his awareness of being controlled by the subject matter – he will present his idea of the process by which he created the art-work as active or passive."<sup>35</sup> The vision that is experienced by the artist cannot be reduced to a personal experience. It arises directly from the unconscious, activated by archetypes. Jung gives William Blake's paintings and poetry as an example of visionary art.<sup>36</sup> In fact Blake "presses into his service the phantasmagoric world of India, the Old Testament, and the Apocalypse."<sup>37</sup> He created a visual symbolism with which he expressed his spiritual visions. Most of his works were inspired by his dreams, and thus the unconscious played an important part, at times expressing terrifying imagery. "What appears in the visions is the imagery of the collective unconscious"<sup>38</sup>, is what Jung gives as a description of visionary art. Therefore, the visionary artist delivers a 'collective' message to the audience. Another visionary artist is the Swiss painter Peter Birkhäuser. He derives his inspiration mostly from dreams. His "images resemble less and less the shapes of the external world."<sup>39</sup> They are at times very frightening and his mysterious figures symbolically transcend the mundane.

Jung undoubtedly gave a much higher judgement of visionary art than psychological art. The artist who creates visionary art "catches a glimpse of the psychic world that terrifies the primitive and is at the same time his greatest hope."<sup>40</sup> Here the artist becomes the clairvoyant for all of humanity. He transcends his personal fate, and through his work begins to speak to humankind. His message is passed on to receptive individuals in response to the needs of the entire race. The collective unconscious described by Jung binds the psyches of humanity together; creativity thus includes an expression of the needs of the human race, not solely of the individual. Creativity in this model becomes a function of the whole of humanity: the 'creative individual', becomes the collective man person. Jung argued that "Art is a kind of innate drive" that makes human beings its "instrument."<sup>41</sup> He emphasised that great artists are not persons endowed with freedom of will to seek their own ends. Rather they allow art to flourish and realize its function through them. Artists are 'vehicles and moulders' of the unconscious psychic life of humanity.

It is worth reconsidering today other possibilities of art criticism, especially using theories of depth psychology to try to understand the artist's intention and experience when he/she produces a work of art. "Jung has provided the best explanation of the aesthetic experience that produces the inspiration of the artist and unites the work with the audience."<sup>42</sup> Through his serious study of the great philosophers like Plato, Plotinus, Kant, and Schopenhauer, and his research on old texts of mythology, and the great world religions and cultures, Jung demonstrated that he could originate a new theory of art criticism based on sound psychological principles.

Jung had a firm position on the "*image of man* which stands as a touchstone for his consequent reflection on the nature of symbols and his suggestions concerning the nature of art."<sup>43</sup> His writing on the nature of symbols and symbol formation provided a useful tool to recognize the dynamics of the human psyche and aesthetic experience. The collective nature of symbolism is in fact the foundation stone for Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and thus supports his reflection on his analysis of the aesthetic experience. Through his evaluation of fantasy activity, comes the assumption that the collective contents of the unconscious are present. Furthermore, we have seen that symbolism has a tremendous power and it influenced artists in their creative journey. "Knowledge of how the symbols function is important for realizing the self and for individuation."<sup>44</sup> I argue also that the aesthetic experience, which most artists have throughout their lives, is in itself an individuation process. Jungian analyst Morris Philipson describes this process:

The process of individuation is the search for a pragmatic individual interpretation: for direct contact with the unconscious, steering the dangerous course between chaos and sterility. In effect the individual "in search of effective images" – the symbols that satisfy his need for "wholeness" – recapitulates in his own development, now undertaken consciously, the structure of the unconscious development of the histories of culture.<sup>45</sup>

Jung always felt that individuation and growth is a lifelong process. It is instrumental to learn how to use the unconscious in a creative manner. He lays great stress on how modern man placed an inordinate faith in science, which unfortunately repressed the instinctual needs and urges of the unconscious.<sup>46</sup> This resulted in critical conflicts between consciousness and the unconscious, which seem to be the modern psychological

problem of society today. Individuation therefore is Jung's creative, and we might say, aesthetic solution for this problem.<sup>47</sup> So it is up to the individual to help to bring this change. If we have witnessed that there is a connection between the inner world of a person (the artist) and his outward experience, might there be a connection between a collective (human beings) inner world and a collective outside experience? It is time to reconsider and restart an investigation of the value of these ideas. I believe that Jung's theory and philosophy of art, his reflections on the importance of symbol, myth and the instinct of the mind or the archetype lay down a strong foundation to further an examination of the great value of the psychological criticism of art so much needed today.

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<sup>1</sup> JUNG, C.G., *Man and His Symbols*, 1964, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> The individuation process is perhaps the central concept of Jung's psychology. It is a major original contribution and a deep study in analytical psychology. Found in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 1959, "Conscious, Unconscious, and Individuation", "A study in the Process of Individuation", pp. 275-354.

<sup>3</sup> "Confrontation with the Unconscious" was termed by Jung himself when he broke up with Freud 1912 and started to develop his own independent point of view. His concepts of archetypes and the collective unconscious emerged not only from his close observation of his patients, but also from his personal experience. Jung documents this episode in his work *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, first published in 1963 (1995 edition) pp. 194 – 225.

<sup>4</sup> Mandala means 'circle.' See JUNG, C.G., *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 1959, (2000 edition), p. 357.

<sup>5</sup> JAFFÉ, Aniela, *Symbolism in the Visual Arts*, in JUNG, C.G., *Man and His Symbols*, 1964, p.240.

<sup>6</sup> See chapter about the interpretation of Mandalas by JUNG, C.G., *Concerning Mandala Symbolism*, in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 1959, pp. 383, 384.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.221.

<sup>8</sup> MAYO, H., Donald, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience – The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration*, 1995, pp. 71, 72.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> PHILIPSON, Morris, *Outline of a Jungian Aesthetics*, 1963, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> MAYO, H., Donald, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience – The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration*, 1995, p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> JUNG, C.G., *The Basic Writings of C.G., Jung*, edited by Staub de Laszlo, 1959, The Modern Library, N.Y. p.346.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> MAYO, H., Donald, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience – The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration*, 1995, p 80.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> JUNG, C. G. *Man and His Symbols*, 1964, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> MAYO, H., Donald, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience – The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration*, 1995, p 81.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> PHILIPSON, Morris, *Outline of a Jungian Aesthetics*, 1963, p. 103.

<sup>21</sup> MAYO, H., Donald, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience – The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration*, 1995, p. 82.

<sup>22</sup> JUNG, C.G., *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, 1967, p. 86.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.87.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.86.

- <sup>29</sup> MAYO, H., Donald, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience – The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration*, 1995, p. 83.
- <sup>30</sup> JUNG, C.G., *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, 1967, p.87.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.90.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> PHILIPSON, Morris, *Outline of a Jungian Aesthetics*, 1963, p. 111.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> JUNG, C.G., *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, 1967, p. 91.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 97.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> BIRKHÄUSER, Peter, *Light From Darkness - The Paintings of Peter Birkhäuser*, Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, 1991, p.14.
- <sup>40</sup> JUNG, C.G., *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, 1967, p. 96.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.101.
- <sup>42</sup> MAYO, H., Donald, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience – The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration*, 1995, p. 6.
- <sup>43</sup> PHILIPSON, Morris, *Outline of a Jungian Aesthetics*, 1963, p. 7.
- <sup>44</sup> MAYO, H., Donald, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience – The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration*, 1995, p. 76.
- <sup>45</sup> PHILIPSON, Morris, *Outline of a Jungian Aesthetics*, 1963, pp. 11, 12.
- <sup>46</sup> MAYO, H., Donald, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience – The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration*, 1995, pp. 71, 72.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 72.