THE SOFT POWER OF CULTURE

Art, Transitional Space, Death and Play

Jonathan Sklar

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About the author

Dr Jonathan Sklar, MBBS, FRCPsych is an Independent training and supervising psychoanalyst of the British Psychoanalytical Society. Originally trained in psychiatry at Friern and the Royal Free Hospitals, he also trained in psychotherapy in the adult department of the Tavistock Clinic, London. For many years, he was consultant psychotherapist and head of the psychotherapy department at Addenbrooke's and Fulbourn hospitals in Cambridge.

As well as lecturing widely across the world, he has taught psychoanalysis annually in South Africa for over ten years, and termly in Chicago for ten years until 2018, as well as regularly across Eastern Europe and in Peru.

From 2007 to 2011, he was vice president of the European Psychoanalytic Federation, with special responsibility for seminars for recently qualified analysts as well as the development of new analytic groups in East Europe. He was a board member of the International Psychoanalytical Association from 2015 to 2019. He is an honorary member of the South African Psychoanalytic Society and the Serbian Psychoanalytic Society, and established and chaired the Independent Psychoanalytic Trust.

He works in analytic practice in London.

Prologue

Serendipity is the great finder. As I was assembling and editing these chapters I chanced upon the so-far undiscovered title of this book in an extraordinary quote by Simon Schama.

Schama wrote about his 2022 BBC2 television series *History of Now* as

> the fruit of sombre, late-life reflection that the History of Now was prefigured in the History of Then; that what we had imagined to be things of the past have returned to shadow the present and the future. Shrieking, whether online or on platforms, is back; hate is sexy and stalks the world as 'disruption'.

Schama quipped the phrase "art against tyranny"—

> *the soft power of culture*—poetically charged words, images, music, all of which can, in some circumstances, exert a force beyond the workaday stuff of politics. Culture can do this because it can connect with human habits, needs and intuitions in ways that expose the inhuman hollowness of official propaganda. (Schama, 2022)

So those old battles need to be refought, and with the help of the unlikely weapons that once opened eyes and changed minds; I will add to his quote the *unconscious* as another place that is part of the human habitat where we can seek and find further reflections of history then and now, as well as those well-known particulates of psychoanalysis—Freud's free associations and the return of the repressed. And as such, psychoanalysis is another different and valuable tool to add in between the sciences and the arts to the already formidable array of human knowledge—history, economics, sociology, sexology and those humanities—painting, poetry, opera, music, dance, sport, and I will include as well as fiction, the depths of storytelling (which has its own long and ancient traditions of the imagination). All of these subjects contain unconscious hidden depths that can become insight and understanding and contribute to our human humanity as culture.

Cultural displays in art show multitudinous views of humans within their environment, and as time passes, how artists express and develop new views of life. From early times the Catholic church has utilised art on the walls of churches to show conception, as in the annunciation to the Madonna that she is pregnant, the birth of Christ, and within its schema is a haunting into the future of a death foretold. The Madonna carries the baby Christ on her lap, and after his crucifixion his dead body once again lies supported there. Alongside depictions of religious life that the people are invited to follow are potent frescoes of the allegories of Adam and Eve in Paradise and their expulsion, with an underlying split between good and bad. These transform into pictures of a good religious life inviting entry back to Paradise, but now with its interlocutor dwelling in Hell for evermore. And thus paintings educated the people into how the Church desires the lived life.

Later art forms developed the concept(ion) of *momenta mori*, with depictions of skulls that concentrate reflection on death. Hans Holbein the younger painted *The Ambassadors* in 1533[1] standing in front of a table on which are a celestial globe, a sundial and other scientific and musical instruments. There is a strange object on the floor that is an anamorphic—an intentional distortion—image of a skull, which, by the viewer moving around the painting, can come into vision as a clear motif of death and of separating scientific and cultural objects from us when we die. They are, and continue to be, available for the living. Similarly, paintings of still life, which began in northern Europe from

the sixteenth century, contained the device of a vase of cut flowers beginning their decay from beauty and scent into death, and so back to earlier Christian paintings depicting the cycles of Christ's journey from birth to death.

There are architecturally special buildings containing culture that are seen to be important landmarks of a city or a country's achievements. When going abroad, these are places towards which tourists congregate, such as, in London, the British Museum, National Gallery, Royal Academy, the two Tates, opera, ballet and concert halls, and football stadiums. These are visited as some hallmark of cultural achievement and yet what has this got to do with us? Many citizens pass by or take for granted such cultural achievements. And the whole world adores football's World Cup, which is its own particular art form of skills leading to the "death" of the other team (and similar to the game of war, and chess, in the desire to win and be on the victorious side).

And when we cannot visit these special cultural places, as none of us around the world could during three years of Covid lockdown, people felt dismayed, emptier of purpose, sickly and depressed. The absence of culture was part of the emptiness of mind in lockdown. During the Second World War, London lived with the Blitz and its counterpoint the Blackout. Lunchtime concerts were played and organised by Myra Hess at the National Gallery a few weeks after the start of war. They were presented on Monday to Fridays for six and a half years without fail. If London was being bombed, the concert was moved to a smaller, safer room. Hess presented 1,698 concerts, playing in 150 herself. They were seen by 824,152 people.[2] Culture as valuable tool to boost morale.

And where are the origins of culture in the developing mind of the child? "The place where cultural experience is located is in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play" (Winnicott, 1966b, p. 433). Winnicott theorised that the start of the infant's transitional object, which he labelled the first not-me possession, is "both the first use of a symbol and the first experience of play" (ibid., p. 431). This takes place in the inner world of unconscious phantasy, whilst simultaneously it is in the presence of, and by the reinforcement of, the actual mother, coming and going, returning to offer and develop her maternal care. What the baby can manage by way of internal mental representations of the losing of mother gradually

extends in time, or the phantasy of mother develops a robustness and can be remembered as an image for when the object (mother) is gone. This can be observed in the longer periods for which a baby can play alone with his or her body or a toy. The length of managing this gradually extends if the mother is available in a good-enough way. The lack of mother for too long a period that is repetitive can eventually damage the baby's development of its internal mental representations of its objects, and leads in time to a profound lack of trust in the world.

As an exemplar of transitional space and play, Marion Milner, in conversation with Donald Winnicott, "conveyed the tremendous significance that there can be in the interplay of the edges of two curtains, or the surface of a jug that is placed in front of another jug" (Winnicott, ibid., p. 431). The act of looking at a painting means unconsciously being confronted with "something next to something else", which can resonate unconsciously with the observer. For example, look at the Cézanne still life *The Basket of Apples* (1893).

Figure 1. *The Basket of Apples*, Paul Cézanne, 1893

It is a strange picture to look at because the planes are vertiginous—if it were a mountain view one would be confronted with unsettling planes of view that seem to slip downwards (or upwards). Look at the table and trace its lines. One sees the upper right-hand corner as being much higher than the upper corner on the left, which is an unsettling surprise. The apples on the right-hand side of the table seem about to journey off it, down the plane of the higher corner—*but they do not.* They are in a state of suspension. This injects an uncanny element, as if by watching the canvas we are preparing for "the next second" of movement as the apples crash to the floor. Unstable certainly, as Cézanne is pointing out the singularity of that impending movement. He is taking hold of a movement in time and confronting the viewer with a *moment* prior to the fall. Who is about to fall? The apples, yes, but also the viewer may have to look at their impending next fall, like the moment prior to Adam and Eve having to leave Paradise. Or just when we see life being sort of level, the painting confronts us with the instability of

Figure 2. *Three Skulls on a Patterned Carpet*, Paul Cézanne, 1904

life's longitude. And perhaps the viewer, unsettled, just quickly passes by. And why not, as the unconscious play is an extraordinary comment about *momento mori*, which is true for all pictures of cut flowers in a vase or fruit in a basket, as they are but a moment on the path towards decay and death? Who now is unaware, as we emerge from our three impossible years of Covid lockdown, that life is unstable?

I think that is something that Milner was inviting us to notice in the banality of two opposing curtains meeting (or not) at an edge, or one object in front of the other, meaning that one object is *behind* the other. Would that, in a moment, be the baby in front of mother or mother in front? And how might that matter, depending on what has happened before that moment? Is mother more important than her baby for a moment or are there too many such narcissistic moments of mother leaving the baby in the shadows? As Schama (ibid.) states, "So those old battles need to be refought", but this time in one's unconscious object relational system, testing out if the world is still conforming to the earlier blueprint of life, or has developed away from a more nihilistic position to one containing trust and love.

In discussing that Cézanne painting, the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans writes in the catalogue for the 2022–2023 Tate Modern exhibition:

> the painting works as if it is being pushed to its breaking point. Here fragility becomes dangerous and obstinate—a moment frozen in time, purposely trying to destroy the unified image in order to recreate it … The painting functions as an echo chamber, incorporating the act of looking and separating the points of view of both eyes, combining the result into a single pictorial experience …
>
> All in all, I think Cézanne's quest was for the affirmation of his own eternity, driven by monumental persistence. The irony is that by using the most humble and unimportant subjects—such as an apple—Cézanne was able to crack depiction single-handedly. (Tuymans, 2022, p. 129)

Winnicott notes that "the use of an object symbolises the union of two now separate things, baby and mother, *at the point in time and*

space of the initiation of their state of separateness" (ibid., p. 430, italics Winnicott's own). The plane that mother and baby are on is, like the painting, a union of separate humble things—apples, bottle, cloth, plate and basket on a table. They are together and apart; and have movement that includes being on the edge of the next (minor) catastrophe. And that edge can include needing a bit more of a feed, losing the nipple or the departed mother or toy. Baby care is an edgy business. In a similar fashion, "Psychotic patients are all the time hovering between living and not living" (ibid., p. 433), forcing us to look at this problem. Winnicott, in a discussion of what life is about, argues that it is more than psychoneurosis and that the problems of being on the psychotic edge are also part of being a human in greater or lesser amounts.

> I am claiming that these same phenomena that are life and death to our schizoid or borderline patients appear in our cultural experiences. It is these cultural experiences that provide the continuity in the human race that transcends personal existence. I am assuming that cultural experiences are in direct continuity with play, the play of those who have not yet heard of games. (ibid., p. 433)

Cézanne plays earnestly with the potentiality of the object falling at any moment and is in touch with the life–death moment for the observer to visualise before our very eyes, by looking at the basket of apples ('Conversation avec Picasso', *Cahiers d'art* special edition 1935, cited in T. J. Clark, 2022, p. 75). Nonetheless, another story tells an opposite view. Alex Danchev in his biography of Cézanne, writes about the art dealer Vollard who nodded off when Cézanne was painting his portrait. The artist did not mince his words: "Wretch. You've ruined the pose! I tell you in all seriousness you must hold it like an apple. Does an apple move?" (Danchev, 2013, p. 79).

This links to a chapter in this collection about the Bloomsbury Group being an early culture carrier of psychoanalysis in London. Maynard Keynes had persuaded the British Government to have an allocation of £20,000 to spend on art in Paris, and went with the Director of the National Gallery, Charles Holmes, to buy from Degas' collection

following his death in 1918. The museum acquired a Corot, a Gauguin, a Rousseau, two Delacroix, two Manets and four Ingres, but to Keynes' immense frustration, not a single Cézanne. Keynes bought one Cézanne for himself and went directly to Charleston, the home of Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, where he revealed the small painting *Apples*, the first Cézanne to be in a British collection, and rapturously received by the Bloomsberries (Danchev, ibid., p. 128).

When we humans fall asleep, *the fall* is symbolic of falling back into mother and her womb where we originally lived. And there is an analogy in art and culture that connects womb and tomb, as if there is uncertainty that the place we surrender ourselves to return to each night will restore us the next day or will entrap us as the place of our death. This is a reason why so many people are too anxious to fall asleep, in case they never wake up again.

Dream: I am on the ocean in a box, a houseboat … We are drifting and I fall asleep. Then we land. I am onshore and awake. A woman is there.

Géza Róheim, the Hungarian anthropologist and psychoanalyst, interprets. Falling asleep in the box on the water simply symbolises the process of falling asleep, such as being in a box on the water with a woman(womb). Landing is being born, awakening, and to dream is a partial awakening … Falling asleep itself is a repetition of the womb situation but is sometimes symbolised by its opposite, being born. In this case we have both symbols: uterine regression and birth (Róheim, 1952, pp. 3–4).

And with the metaphor of birth there is its companion metaphor—death, linking womb and tomb. "A patient whose depression started at a very early age with the birth of his brother has the following hypnagogic fantasy: John and I are both in the grave. Even there I am trying to kill him" (ibid., p. 6).

Sleep and death are intimately connected, as are sleep and sex. The return to the inside of mother dream is so often about the return to mother *and* sex—being a reflection on the phallus that both enters and leaves the cave. The hero may die whilst falling asleep but is resurrected in the subsequent rising up, as the metaphor of the erection of the penis brings a return to being alive.

Or Winnicott quoting Tagore:

> On the seashore of endless worlds,
> Children play.

Winnicott then writes:

> When I first became a Freudian I *knew* what it meant. The sea and the shore represent endless intercourse between man and woman, and the child emerged from this union to have a brief moment before becoming in turn adult or parent. Then, as a student of unconscious symbolism, I *knew* (one always knows) that the sea is the mother, and onto the seashore the child is born. Babies come out of the sea and are spewed out upon the land, like Jonah from the whale. So now the seashore was the mother's body, after the child is born and the mother and the now viable baby are getting to know each other. (Winnicott, 1966b, p. 430)

All this description is to understand that this place is where play may begin to form, between Milner's two edges, now the primordial sea and the land—that evolutionary edge where Darwinian change happened, from sea creatures to those existing on land. And humans have a trace of that sea world as the foetus develops within the sea of mother's aquatic womb space.

Later Winnicott differentiates between *body functioning* and body *experience* (ibid., p. 434) in developing the idea of play and its continuum as a potential space: play *becomes* culture. And as language is being heard or misheard, its musicality and meanings are played and shaped into metaphor, as I will discuss in the first chapter of this book.

Hypnagogic states relate to immediately before falling asleep (from the Greek *Hypnos*—sleep and *agogos*—to lead). Hypnopompic states are the fleeting perceptual experiences from sleep to wakefulness. Róheim examines the sensations of falling or sinking that are typical hypnagogic sensations.

> In English we have the expression "to fall asleep", in Hungarian, *alomba merult*, "to dip under into sleep", as into water. But in German we have *einschlafen*, in French *endormir*, "to sleep in, to turn into oneself". If we condense these two ways of expressing sleep, we can say that the sleeper turns into himself and falls back into the womb, his own body being the material substratum of the dream-womb. (ibid., p. 7)

The Yukaghir shaman's drum is a lake into which he dives in order to descend into the spirit world (Czaplicka, 1914, p. 209). A patient reports a dream flash as "I am falling down a precipice into an endless depth". And Róheim related the falling into the womb dream at the start of *Alice in Wonderland* similarly as a falling asleep phantasy—"Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank"—as the white rabbit leads her to the rabbit hole. "Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next" (Carroll, 1865, p. 1).

Ideas associated with falling asleep and waking up, containing dream imagery of falling, felt in the body, caught up in words in our different languages and metaphors, are similarly found in the work of a Siberian Shaman, a late nineteenth-century French artist and a well-known British novelist. The hypnagogic thoughts as sleep returns us to the womb in our re-imagining falling into our origins, are expressed in our languages, imagery, and the novels of our culture, creating a soft power in linking to seemingly different things. Such capacities for unconscious linkage are made good use of in the invitation to the analysand to say whatever comes to mind without evasion or censorship. And what develops from a thread of two of these associations is a mycelium of interconnections, like the neurones themselves compacted into the brain.

These introductory remarks are by way of introducing the reader to the multi-layered chapters that follow. There are four long clinical descriptions of working with particular technical difficulties in analysing a heroin addict, a schizophrenic patient, reflecting on Freud's paper "A child is being beaten" (1919) to examine maternal cruelty; and an exploration of understanding Winnicott's "true and false self".

These provide a psychoanalytic matrix to think about human cruelty and nihilism, often dressed up as being "just a game". This is then reflected in a chapter on the violent apocalyptic times we live in and how psychoanalytic thinking can be seen as an essential perspective to examine our present "us and them" politics, with the world drifting into a vortex of deadly climate change as humans attack Mother Earth. Another chapter examines metaphor, particularly in the stranger who comes from beyond our comfortable life, and the present disdain for the past welcoming of the stranger into one's tent as we find ourselves in a paranoid politic.

And there are many interwoven reflections on art and society: a paper on Francis Bacon and the radicality of free association, and another on Velázquez and power, which leads into the tragedy of the collapse of psychoanalysis during Nazification in the Berlin and Vienna psychoanalytic Societies during the Third Reich and after. The latter is also about how Anne-Marie Sandler recovered depth analysis with those members, as well as re-finding her lost German tongue. Another chapter is on the art of William Tillyer via a free-associative examination of the painter's life through his art.

As T. S. Eliot wrote, "Birth, and copulation, and death. That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks" (1975, p. 115).[3] Cruelty, destruction and death stalk these chapters, and are found together in three small pieces of writing on our recent Covid times. There is also a thread running through the book about holding one's nerve, being alive in the moment, realising that enactment in clinical work can be another royal road to the unconscious. And Winnicott's observation of the child painting over their colourful picture by a total cover of black paint is a realisation that the death and destructive instinct as black is not the unconscious baseline, rather it indicates a necessity to descend beneath that clinical black layer to the colour and aliveness of the earlier true self, protected and still alive with the possibility of new creativity beneath the dark.