

## *Original Paper*

# A Journey in the Land of the Imaginative

## Art and Its Power to Defeat the Demons of Fear

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Received: June 1, 2021

Accepted: July 12, 2021

Online Published: August 15, 2021

doi:10.22158/sshr.v2n3p15

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sshr.v2n3p15>

### **Abstract**

*The world of art has always represented, among its functions, the search for an alternative world or universe to the real one, a parallel world where to take refuge both through production and through use, a world where to draw resources, fragments of imaginary space that represent aspects of reality, too disturbing and painful to be addressed.*

*This experience, if properly elaborated in the psychotherapeutic field, thanks to the resources offered by the imaginative world of art, can facilitate and accelerate contact, with some of the same brain areas involved in the experience of pain, loss, mourning and fear.*

*The deep emotional involvement that is experienced in front of a work of art, known as an aesthetic experience, allows the activation of brain areas that open the door to psychological experiences of growth and processing, with the language of the emotional mind.*

*The intertwining of creative and visual arts with mental health starts from psychoanalyst considerations, such as Freud and Jung ones, who considered the work of art an expressive form of the unconscious and a derivative of the process of sublimation of the basic instinct and continues up to modern times with several studies on how to use artistic material as a tool for interpretation and resolution of internal conflicts. It is easy to see the relevance of this approach in an era that is going to begin, that of the post-covid, in which the “demons of fear” have sharpened their weapons even more because of the aftermath of anxieties and uncertainties left by Covid- experience.*

### **Keywords**

*aesthetic experience, art, recovery*

## 1. Introduction

What role Art can play with respect to a person's psychological well-being? Why is it important to deal with creative production both as a user and as an artist? The various applications of art, ranging from medical-psychiatric contexts to those of education-prevention, up to rehabilitation situations, demonstrate the great opportunities that the "Art Experience", expertly optimized, can offer (Spurio, 2018).

For these reasons we can think of artistic production as a tool, a strategically effective means, to process pain, loss, grief, and, to deal with discomfort in general, using ways to process and express emotions in addition to the linguistic register (Denner & Malavasi, 2002).

During an experience of deep emotional involvement, as in the aesthetic experience, the same brain areas involved in emotionally relevant experiences are activated. This experience, if properly elaborated in the psychotherapeutic field, thanks to the resources offered by the imaginative world of art, can facilitate and accelerate contact, with some of the same brain areas involved in the experience of pain, loss, grief and fear.

The era we are going through is the setting, for a series of reasons deriving from the pandemic situation, of some fears and worries of various kinds, particularly intense and relevant, so the use of art in psychotherapy can contribute significantly to providing resources and tools to be used in healing, and as a means of support, mediation, and conciliation of emotional conflicts.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 *The Role of Art in Increasing the State of Well-being.*

The role of art as a tool for improving health and well-being can be referred to different sectors.

It can be used for example as a diagnostic tool, as some studies show that there are factors that favor aesthetic sensitivity (Jung, 1966). Also, the tolerance to conflict and incongruity can be detected using artistic artefacts (Bonaiuto, 1983; Bonaiuto, Giannini, & Biasi, 2002); tolerance of unreality, exploratory needs, independence of judgment, nonconformity, the ability to "regress at the service of the Ego" (Kris, 1953). Thanks to the diagnostic use of art, also, the degree of relative detachment from roles traditionally attributed to gender, forms of specific training (Cattell & Butcher, 1968; Bulley, 1934). The psychological consequences of aesthetic emotion also concern: a) Experience of comfort and related emotional, motivational, cognitive and decisional activations b) "Hypnotic" effect, suggestion, persuasion c) Psychic defense d) Attribution of importance. As mentioned in the introduction, research on the effects of the arts on health and well-being is important since there is more and more evidence regarding the potential impact of artistic production on both mental and physical health. However, in order to emphasize the awareness of the evidence of these effects, it is necessary to produce more reliable results.

A document of the World Health Organization "What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review", edited by Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn

(2019), has fixed the goal to map and systematize the available evidence regarding the impact of art on people's psychological and medical well-being. Over 900 publications were identified, including over 200 reviews, meta-analyses and meta-syntheses that included over 3000 studies and over 700 individual studies. The research projects included are different from individual case studies to longitudinal cohort studies, ethnographies, and randomized studies, as well as the methods of psychological scales, neuroimaging, behavioral observations, and the disciplines that offer reflections for theoretical elaboration. Overall, the results demonstrate that art has a potential impact on health, both mental and physical. In particular, in the area of prevention and health promotion, the results showed that art can influence the social determinants of health; can support the development of the person from childhood; encouraging preventative and health promotion behaviors; being supportive in care and assistance. As regards the sphere of management and treatment of the disease, the results indicate that art can: help people who suffer from a mental health point of view; be supportive in the care and assistance of people with acute conditions; be supportive in the care and assistance of people with neurological problems; support in the management of non-communicable diseases; be supportive in end-of-life care. The evidence mapped in the WHO report also provides various considerations, relating to both the cultural and health and social sectors.

#### 2.1.1 The Aesthetic Experience: Fragments of Imaginative Space to Reconcile Conflicts in Reality

"Art is a way to get in touch with one's own madness." (Susan Sontag)

The history of the creative and visual arts is intertwined, since ancient times, with that of mental health and well-being. From the Greek theater, which can be considered a sort of "therapeutic support-art", to psychoanalysts such as Freud and Jung, who considered the work of art an expressive form of the unconscious and derivative of the process of sublimation of the basic instincts, up to the one who is considered by many to be the founder of art therapy in America, Margaret Naumburg, who identifies the artistic material with an instrument of interpretation and resolution of internal conflicts (Spurio, 2018). The world of art has therefore always represented the search for an alternative world or universe to the real one, a parallel world where to take refuge both through production and through use, a world where to draw resources, fragments of imaginative space representing aspects of the real, too disturbing and painful to be addressed. But what exactly happens during an aesthetic experience? The aesthetic experience is the experience of deep emotional involvement that one feels in front of a work of art, in these situations it is as if a direct communication channel opens between the feelings and emotions of the artist represented in his work and those of the user.

During an aesthetic experience, certain areas of the brain involved in many emotional psychological experiences of growth and elaboration are activated. The irrational part of the mind, which is mainly situated in the limbic zone areas, is activated, and communication takes place through the language of the emotional mind. It is such an intense involvement that the cinema has often dealt with this fascinating theme ("The Best Offer" it. "La migliore offerta", Giuseppe Tornatore, 2014; "Vertigo",

Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) even taking it to the excesses of the pathology as in the “Stendhal Syndrome” (1996).

Through a different register from the rational and linguistic one, analogical expressive modes are activated, the same type of communication channel solicited, in the psychotherapeutic path by regressive therapies, guided fantasies, hypnosis and the dream world. The emotional experience is made up of images and emotions that are activated independently of the individual’s rational will, and drag one into an alternative world that has nothing to do with the world of reason, made up of deductive reasoning, logic and planning, processes instead typical of the associative cerebral zones. It is a bit like slipping into the upside-down world of “Alice in Wonderland”, a story by Lewis Carrol (1865), originally created for children, but also read and appreciated by adults. It is a brilliant novel that tells a fantastic and subtly satirical story, in which the masterful intertwining of linguistic inventions, reversals of meaning, logical tricks and absurd situations, stimulates the reader to look at reality from unusual points of view. Nothing is taken for granted, everything is possible, and social rules are overturned and upset. A world where the “mad hatter” celebrates his birthday party and, if the reader lets oneself be absorbed and slips down like Alice, passing through a large den under the hedge, one sinks into a seemingly bottomless pit. Just like Alice who, after following the White Rabbit into his lair, she must find the key to open the door to Wonderland. Thus, through the aesthetic experience, we abandon ourselves to an imaginative and upside-down world where everything is possible. This means, through psychotherapy and art, finding the access key to a parallel reality where, through the imagination, spaces for reconciliation can be found. Once reconciled, one can go back to the starting point, bringing with oneself other awareness, which can finally do reconciliation with the reality and pain of the losses suffered, with the anguish and fear of living. But for such experiences to take place it is always necessary that certain conditions exist.

First of all, the therapeutic support, because, even if it is true that art already represents a precious resource for well-being, in order to activate its potential, in a constructive and consequential manner, the presence of a therapeutic project is necessary. Art therapy can facilitate the creation of a space in which to meet oneself in an authentic way, managing to express one’s emotions to discover, compare and accept even the most profound and unconscious aspects of the personality. The importance of the role of the sensitive professional in this prepared and attentive work of accompanying the patient in the exploration of the self is evident, being able to use this tool intrinsically linked to the emotional sphere. A path made up of often unconscious individual expressive modes and careful observation to understand and analyze these concepts well (Spurio, 2018)

**“The difference between art and life is that art is more acceptable”. (Charles Bukowski)**

The artists can be considered great because they are able to impress in their creations the overwhelming emotional experience that pervades them, so that the common man success to enter into a sort of emotional symbiosis with the emotional world of the artist. (Spurio, 2018)

We can mention for example, Cézanne, that in last years of his life transformed his beloved Monte Sante-Victoire into a compulsion. The artist had always gladly represented the landscapes of Provence through his works. But the obsessive thought drags him in the end to represent the mountain in about fifty representations. Another example is Magritte, that, in “The collective invention”, a work of 1935, a naked woman, half woman in the lower part and fish in the upper one, was represented lying dead on the riverbank.

Magritte’s works are never of immediate reading, the objects portrayed are common and realistic, but often associated in such an unexpected and contrasting way, as to create an effect of disturbing amazement, justifiable with multiple interpretations.

Magritte’s works and life let us glimpse a great need and desire to find refuge through his art of a frightening and disturbing reality. Quite different from the brightness and linearity of the shapes and the reassuring image of any man well represented by his ubiquitous bowler hat.



**Figure 1. The Lovers**

Magritte’s work visible at MOMA is “The Lovers” (Figure 1), which depicts two faces covered by a white cloth, in the act of kissing. The image is disturbing and paradoxical. In addition to the traditional interpretation regarding the impossibility of intimately knowing each other, some critics have given a psychoanalytic interpretation of the work, linking it to a traumatic episode in the author’s childhood—that is, the mother’s suicide.

### 3. Result

As regards the aesthetic experience made possible by the work “The Lovers”, in addition to the traditional emotional implications mentioned above, the evidence for a direct connection to the memories and traumatic experiences, appear disturbing, as they are lived and still present in the collective pandemic experience. The isolation and social distancing imposed by the fear of coronavirus contact contagion, the phobic concern of rapprochement in human relationships offer many psychotherapeutic implications. Who is the other? What hides the funeral cloth that already wraps a face with the mouth stretched to convey the breath of death?

Through art therapy it is clear to glimpse incredible perspectives, both of processing the trauma and of developing the great possibilities of art and the aesthetic experience in conveying the impressive emotions of our time.

### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

#### **Art shakes the dust accumulated in everyday life from the soul. (Pablo Picasso)**

Artistically elaborating one’s own experience, educating to creative transformation, can mean lighting up the gray roads of rationality with the colors of emotions. (Spurio, 2018)

A landscape, a feeling, a face, can be depicted in different forms depending on the mood of those who want to give the world their most remote emotions. An artist allows us to delve into the depths of the world and does it in an original way, without constraints of any kind. The aesthetic experience as such is something personal and intimate that arises between those who observe and receive, and between those who create and transmit. The relationship is not simply directional because the receiver is not an empty container, on the contrary the user manages to merge. with the artist in a peculiar and specific way each time, transmitting and projecting emotions, moods and anxieties into the work.

As we have seen in several clinical cases, including that of Alice presented on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> WPA World Virtual Congress of Psychiatry “Art and psychiatry: emotions that heal” ([www.wcp-congress.com](http://www.wcp-congress.com)) through a work by Renee Magritte “The collective invention”, a kind of emotional connection is born between the experiences of death for the mother of the author and the viewer without anything in the representation being clearly explained.

In both free and conscious admiration of a work of art, always different emotions are aroused in those who draw nourishment from it, which can favor a sort of mirroring, of experiences that, like fragments of imaginative space thanks to the support of the professional, they can be accepted and re-interpreted in a functional way. And from here the union of art and psychiatry starts and is realized thanks to the great therapeutic value of the world of art. Therapeutic value that is sublimated in the strong emotions conveyed by the aesthetic experience, where thanks to the special and mysterious “connection” of souls it is possible to penetrate the extraordinary emotional world of the other.

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