

A World Loved by Moonlight: Tragedy, psychosis and the humanisation of art literacy

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Abstract

This paper delves into often-unspoken realms of human suffering – tragedy and psychosis – to uncover the role that art can play in understanding and overcoming experiences that defy conventional language. Dovetailing from Heidegger’s aesthetics, I explore the unique qualities that make the artistic process such a powerful medium for existential restoration, connecting otherwise disparate individuals to the wider tapestry of humanity. Ultimately, I argue for a new understanding of ‘artistic literacy,’ emphasising the benefits that unconventional modes of expression hold for the expresser, listener and humanity at large.

Key Words

Art literacy, existentialism, psychosis, humanisation, tragedy, Heideggerian aesthetics, transformative experience, phenomenology

Introduction: Alienation from language

The most profoundly transformative experiences are the ones that we do not have a choice to undergo. A fatal car crash, the horrors of war and the disorienting world of psychosis – in these cases, tragedy chooses us. Faced with this absurdity, one is left with a seemingly impossible task: to make sense of the insensible; to piece back the shatters of a world which no longer has any sensible unity. Even if the pieces no longer fit back together in any clear way, there remains a sense that, nevertheless, one must pick up the pieces and fit them back together. These are the kinds of experiences which undermine our humanity in the most egregious of ways. If this is true, and if we want to understand the full depth and nature of tragedy in human existence, then we must delve into the macabre without hesitation. However, such experiences tend to elude normative modes of understanding. When one is thrown into a world of absurdities, left without a choice in the matter, suddenly the normative lenses of rationality, agency, justice and so on become vastly insufficient. These ways of approaching tragedy do not provide us with the tools to arrive at the deepest understanding of what these experiences are like, what they mean to the person who experiences them or what they imply for humanity

at large. As I will argue, when words fail, art becomes a powerful tool.

Art has the unique ability to capture irrationality, represent absurdity and embody paradoxes, and yet also resolve and overcome these contradictions through its indefinite language. More than just a medium of expression, art provides a bridge over the linguistic abyss, connecting fragmented individuals to the shared human experience. Drawing from Heidegger's aesthetics, I explore this unique quality that art possesses; a power which can lead us to a deeper understanding of experiences which, by their very nature, escape all modes of rational thought. For individuals struggling with psychosis, these qualities of art can offer particularly unique and profound forms of solace. Through exploring great artists of psychosis and tragedy, this paper seeks to illuminate the role that art can play in giving new meaning to absurd and enigmatic experiences, not just for the individual who experiences these phenomena but for humanity at large. In doing so, we will arrive at a new understanding of 'artistic literacy' which emphasises a fierce humanitarian imperative to understand our fellow humans in the deepest and most profoundly empathetic ways possible.

The moon: Heidegger, art and truth

In the still of the night, lowly creatures stir. The branches of trees sway, leaves fall to the ground. The fog rolls in thicker; a light breeze, crisp morning air. Through the trees there is a meadow. The meadow invites the moonlight, gathering creatures around it, in the darkness and the light, into an intricate interplay of being. As I watch this scene unfold, my mind begins to wander; what lies beyond the dark tree line? We may imagine that this moonlight strikes the mouse with a sort of terror – is it not the same sort of terror which I feel looking into the abyss beyond the trees? And would I not feel a similar sense of power and confidence of the owl and cat if I were watching the world from the shadows? Surely I would. Yet I also dwell in this meadow in an entirely different way than these creatures; this meadow invites me to aesthetic contemplation. This meadow, draped in cold, calloused moonlight inspires a sense of sublimity. The unique presence of these feelings is something that artists have long sought to capture. Artists seek to capture this essential experience of moonlight, while the physicist might deny the existence of such a phenomenon altogether.

Moonlight is often shining down upon us throughout the day. Yet this seems strange to say. During the day, is the light from the moon really 'moonlight'? Does it illuminate the world in the same way that it does at night? We may feel tempted to understand the light of the moon quantitatively; there is always a measurable amount of light that the moon reflects to Earth's surface whether it is day or night. But the 'light reflected from the moon' is not moonlight. Rays of the sun may have happened to fall upon this meadow at night, but it was the moonlight that revealed this unique

experience to me. The sunrise invites us to hopefulness, the sunset invites us to reflection – but, in the dead of night, the moonlight invites us to a sense of uneasiness. What is it that makes this unique experience what it is? This meadow, the meadow draped in moonlight, the meadow that inspires terror, dread and angst – and a sense of calm, acceptance and sublimity – what is it that makes this meadow what it is, for me?

Heidegger takes this question to be one of the central issues of philosophy. How do phenomena appear to us in a meaningful way? What is the essence of the phenomenon in question, and how can we arrive at the most meaningful understanding of what this phenomenon truly is?¹ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that human beings are not merely born into this ‘world’ in an empirical sense, they are also born into a world of significance and meaning. This idea is illustrated nicely in Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*:

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet, the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight.

(1972: 1)

When we ‘see’ something, it makes sense to us; as Heidegger remarks in *Pathmarks* (1998), “the wonder of all wonders: that things make sense”. How truly strange it is that the world does make sense to us, even before we have the time to explain it through language. It is in these ways that Heidegger takes meaning, understanding and interpretation to be *a priori* features of our Being; both in a temporal sense and a primordial ontological sense. We are always already interpreting the world, as that which it is for us.

So, how do we get to this more fundamental, essential understanding of things that is, as it were, before and beyond language? In *The Truth of Alētheia and Language*, Watts (2011: 164) chronicles Heidegger’s journey to overcome the natural limitations of language. Inspired by the poetry of Hölderlin, Heidegger endeavoured to “think the unthinkable” championing poetry’s semantic flexibility as having “the greatest potential to express the ‘genuine Being’ of language”. However, to Heidegger, all artistic pursuits possess a similar ontological character to poetry.² In his terms, truth reveals (*alētheia*) itself to us; it is ‘illuminated’, ‘disclosed’ to us, ‘unconcealed’. Where the ‘truth’ or ‘falsity’ of propositional statements does not necessarily

reveal anything ‘true’ about the phenomenon they seek to describe, art reveals (*alētheia*) truth in a unique way: art discloses and preserves a shared sense of meaning between humans. We can see this again in the example of the moon.

If we look through history, we find artworks in every culture that embody profound reflections upon the moon. In this way, Heidegger thinks of art and truth as living, breathing things, which are inextricably “linked to cultural contexts and historically evolving interpretations” (ibid: 163). For example, we may admire the Roman goddess Luna, the enchanting and mysterious deity who acts as a counterbalance to her brother Sol (the sun). We may also appreciate the thematic use of the moon as a symbol of enlightenment in Buddhist art. Even today, the legacy of the moon continues to pervade our culture, where many people still believe that “the mystical powers of the moon induce erratic behaviours...” (Arkowitz & Lilienfeld, 2009: online). In response to this mysticism, scientists have gone to great lengths to show that there is no correlation between the presence of full moons and the prevalence of crimes, suicides, psychiatric problems and crisis centre calls (Rotton & Kelly, 1985). This fact is obvious and valid. Yet as the validity of this claim becomes apparent to an increasing amount of people around the world, the uneasiness we feel in the presence of the full moon does not seem to subside.

In response to this, Heidegger would provoke us to question: the validity of these scientific facts may be apparent, but – are they yet true? Something is ‘true’ when it plays a role in actively shaping the way that humans meaningfully understand, behave and interact with each other within the world of their shared experience. Thus, in these scientific explanations, Heidegger would say we are getting farther away from understanding the phenomenon of moonlight itself within our distinctly human experience. The world that the moon illuminates (*alētheia*), the world that the moonlight reveals to us, is true in the ‘truest’ sense of the term. To Heidegger, this is the strange power that art holds in the human experience: art can embody and produce a shared understanding of the world that is more fundamental to our human experience than any other mode of inquiry. For Heidegger, art and language are “seen as the condition of the human world being disclosed. The disclosure is not intrapsychic, but occurs in the space between humans; indeed, it helps define the space that humans share” (Taylor, 1992: 442). However, for those struggling through situations of profound suffering, we find this fabric of shared understanding begins to break down. For these individuals, this ‘space between humans’ grows to an insurmountable distance. As we will come to see, the enigmatic, absurd experience of tragedy and profound mental illness alienates individuals from any sense of shared world-hood with others. As these experiences continue to escape all rational modes of inquiry, how can we repair this fabric of these people’s

world back into a sensible unity? As I will argue, this is where art becomes a uniquely powerful medium to overcome the natural limitations of language.

Tragedy: Art, existentialism and becoming

In his journal, John Hull (1990) describes going deeper and deeper into blindness. The experience of going blind itself is transformative. However, Hull describes a further transformative process – what he calls, deep blindness. In deep blindness, one actively reframes the way they ‘see’ the world; they abandon their previous notions of the world acquired through sight in favour of creating a new host of concepts (based in other senses) to understand and explore their world through. This active exploration of one’s blindness – learning, inquiring and actively redefining how one understands themselves and their world – is the kind of introspective pursuit which Callard (2020) calls a transformative activity. In this process of introspection, one actively chooses to transform themselves through their engagement with their experience. This is the sort of introspective, meaning-making process that is also exhibited in artistic expression.

The artistic process is not something that is distinct from the unfolding of lived experience. Rather, art is intricately intertwined within the meaningful unfolding of life, both for the human who creates it and those who witness it. This is especially true for artists of tragedy. In the process of reflecting on their tragic experience, the artist gains new ways of understanding what this experience means for them – actively creating meaning and discovering new ways of thinking about their world. In doing so, these artists allow others to confront these profound human realisations which they themselves have never, or perhaps cannot, experience. This is why, to Heidegger, art is so important to human experience. The relationship between art and humanity is not that of disparate subjects and artistic objects. Rather, artworks and humanity evolve together in an intricate process of becoming what they are. This process can be seen clearly in the works of Francis Bacon.

Born into an authoritarian English family in 1909, Bacon was thrown into a world of war and conflict. His childhood was marked by struggle and strife, where he was beaten, abused and eventually disowned by his family when he was found trying on his mother’s clothes. At sixteen, he began travelling through Europe, where he eventually discovered his passion for painting. As a gay Jewish man surviving the horrors of both world wars, Bacon’s paintings give us a remarkable window into his experience of tragedy. For example, in 1944, he shocked the world with his triptych *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (pictured on the following page).

Distorted figures, reminiscent of bodies, half-human half-animal, contorted, mangled, crying in agony, somewhat floating in non-space. The rational mind is overwhelmed by any attempt to make sense of these figures and the space they are in. This feeling of shock, horror, and absurdity is the essence



Francis Bacon, 1944. *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. Tate Museum, © Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. / DACS, London / ARS, NY 2024. (Reproduced with permission from the Tate Museum and the Artists Rights Society).

of tragedy. But for Bacon, the act of creating these paintings was not simply a means of expressing these emotions: “Bacon needs to renounce natural logic and upset it in the act of painting in order to reveal and transform [it] into comprehensible terms...” (Ficacci, 2003: 17). As with ruins of a city, ruins of a self and the ruins of one’s world, painting is a way of picking up the pieces and giving it intelligible form (Amselle, 2012).

Bacon’s struggle to find meaning and reason in his tragic experience is captured and overcome through the act of painting itself, where “the reality of a transpired fact is resolved in the reality of the artistic act” (Ficacci, 2003: 7). It is this unique artistic ability that Bacon utilises to gain a greater understanding of his tragic experiences, engaging in an active learning process where “the doing and the learning are not distinct from one another” (Callard, 2020: 154). For example, in his collection of self-portraits, we see a desperate attempt to “bring unity to [his] fragmented self” (Amselle, 2012: online). His face is amorphous; swirling, changing, and congealing into a form of something that is neither understood nor definite. Bacon’s self-portraits read as a sort of autobiography, revealing his sense of self as it transforms through time. However, where a written biography runs the risk of over-determining how we think of the author, Bacon’s paintings leave us with a clearer understanding of his transforming sense of self: something ambiguous, unstable and tortured. His self-portraits allow us to share in his struggle to understand himself; together, we attempt to give intelligible form to his fractured sense of identity. Through his paintings, Bacon allows us into his world. A world of his experience – and of his own creation.

Through painting, Bacon gives definite form to his experience of being transformed by the horrors of war and, in doing so, also captures the experience of humankind as it was transformed by these atrocities. As

Ficacci writes about *Three Studies*:

They are the traces of a tragedy that is identified with the progress of history, in the innermost way, not in distinct episodes, but with the same rhythm: the terrifying and vital rhythm of the transformation of man and his culture.

(2003: 17-18)

To Heidegger, this is the ontological character of art. If the artwork is ‘working’, then it is functioning as that which brings people into a shared sense of understanding.³ Together, this shared experience of tragedy is representative of the shift of human thought towards existential anxiety. Existentialism arose as a response to tragedy, and out of necessity for a fierce humanitarian call to action. In the face of a cold, indifferent and unreasonable universe, these writers challenge us to rise from the ashes to give our lives value and meaning. It is here that Bacon arises as our absurd hero. Through the transformative process of painting, Bacon gives meaning, value and intelligible form back to a world ravished by war, both for himself and for humanity at large. One must imagine Bacon happy.

It is in these ways that we must appreciate the existentialist role that art can play in humanity. Art is not just a way of representing one’s experience. Rather it is a medium through which the artist participates in a process of becoming; actively giving new depths of meaning, value and understanding to their otherwise absurd world of experience. In doing so, the artist may find another layer of humanistic importance as others begin to engage with their art works. As Dreyfus (2007: 415) writes, “each time a culture gets a new artwork, the understanding of being changes and human beings and things show up differently”. This is the role that great artworks play in humanity; they reconfigure the way that humans meaningfully relate to each other and their shared world of experience. In these ways, art can be a powerful humanistic tool toward connecting alienated individuals into the shared human experience. As we will see in the next section, this unique power of art takes on newfound depths of humanistic importance within the experience of those struggling through psychosis.

Psychosis: Art and the failure of language

In her book *Incandescent Alphabets*, Annie Rogers (2016) draws from her struggles with psychosis, as well as her clinical experience as a psychoanalyst and psychologist, to elucidate the strange and enigmatic ways that psychosis disrupts embodied linguistic processes. Faced with this disruption, psychotic individuals often create their own languages, codes and alphabets, to make sense of their otherwise absurd and incongruous experience. As she writes:

The psychotic...not only invents something new, but also bears an enigmatic language concerning lived experiences outside of any social link that could recognize the terms of her language or invention. The new language, created to repair a flaw in language itself, to put order back into a world in which the perverse Other has wreaked havoc...

(ibid: 127)

This striving for new linguistic modes of expression is often employed in artistic terms. More than just a medium of expression, art provides a therapeutic avenue, a bridge over the linguistic abyss, connecting fragmented individual experiences to the shared human experience.

This is apparent with art like Adolf Wölfli's, who spent the latter half of his life in a psychiatric hospital. In his works, we find music notes swirling in and out, around and from, within and without, the *axis mundi* of a faceless religious figure. This faceless religious figure, and the visual symphonies which oscillate from him, become a structural theme in the architecture of his artistic worlds. In observing these works, we gain a remarkable window into Wölfli's world of experience which normative language could never capture. However, it is important to recognise that these works are ultimately representative of a world of experience that no one else can truly participate in. The signifiers that I interpret as 'a religious figure' and 'musical architecture' cannot be fully understood so long as I am imposing my own conceptual landscape onto them. For this reason, this style of psychotic art is often considered 'outsider art'; these works necessarily lie outside of the normative world of artistic interpretation.

Here we can see the limitations of interpreting a piece of art in terms of semiotics. We cannot understand the being of these works as a collection of symbols and signs; the work of art is something far beyond the sum of its parts. In great works of art, we gain a window into

...something which could not be thus 'translated.' It opens access to meanings which cannot be made available any other way. Each truly great work is in this way sui generis. It is untranslatable.

(Taylor, 1992: 441)

Art has a unique ability to express something beyond symbols; a quality which lends itself kindly to those who experience phenomena beyond representative language.

In *Celestial Alphabet* (see following page) we can see Rogers employing language in this very way. These works are a profound reflection upon the enigmatic language that had inhabited the psychotic episodes of her early

adulthood; a language which, following her psychoanalytic journey, she no longer has access to. These artworks are a recreation of a language lost – the ghosts of linguistic structures imposed upon her from a mysterious Other – and an intimate part of her lived, embodied journey toward lucidity. She spent her late teens and twenties attempting to transcribe, decipher and represent this language into a coherent lexicon. In doing so, she writes:

The psychotic subject...might succeed in establishing a new subjective position by adopting speech elements or autonyms that have been imposed, using them to identify a meaningful task, mission or purpose. In this way, building delusions not only works to stabilize the experience of psychosis, but also to create a new position for the subject.

(2016: 82-83)

In this act of creation, psychotic individuals may establish a new subjective standpoint to meaningfully navigate their world through. This process itself can be transformative, where psychotic individuals may integrate these experiences into their everyday life in functional ways, making for the possibility of living a meaningful life through psychosis.

This use of language can function as both a bridge and a barrier. On one hand, it allows them to express their thoughts and feelings, fostering connections with others and enabling them to share their subjective experiences. On the other hand, their unconventional use of language can also be isolating, as it may be misinterpreted or dismissed by those who lack the empathy or understanding to engage with it. This is why, for Rogers, it is so important that we listen to people who experience psychosis: listening to these unusual forms of expression provides important benefits to the speaker and the listener. Listening to these individuals with authenticity, empathy and compassion is the first step toward integrating these humans back into a shared sense of reality with others; thus, listening also provides a deeper form of existential restoration than any



Celestial Alphabet 1987. Watercolour and ink on Fabriano paper. (Reproduced with permission from the author).

medication alone may be able to accomplish. This is not to say that anti-psychotic medications are not a necessary step to recovery. Rather, it is to say that we must recognise the limits of what medication can do for these individuals. Medication may bring an individual back from a state of crises, but listening to these individuals can help combat a deeper sense of existential alienation; a sense of alienation that can only be cured through the caring, compassionate understanding of other loving people in their lives.

Listening also has distinct benefits for the listener. Perhaps the best example of this is the case of Daniel Paul Schreber, a German supreme court judge who developed paranoid schizophrenia, spending many years in psychiatric institutions throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While he was hospitalised, Schreber wrote his book *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903), which gave a profoundly lucid and detailed account of his psychotic experiences. The incredible clarity of thought communicated in this book inspired Jung, Freud, Lacan and many others to write extensively on this text, giving it the reputation as the greatest case study on schizophrenia in human history. The book itself reads as a great work of metaphysics; it is a detailed analysis of the otherworldly forces that preside over Schreber's world. While this analysis is paranoid and delusional – for example, he writes about the existence of a nerve-language which his psychiatrist (Dr. Flechsig) used to telepathically invade his mind – it is astonishingly detailed and remarkably self-consistent. Ultimately, Schreber presented this book to the jury at his appeal and was subsequently freed from his incarceration. *Memoirs* – and the legal correspondence it inspired – motivated century-long re-evaluation of how we think of 'madness' and how it is treated within the legal system (Lothane, 2010).

Can you imagine, now, what our world would be like if Schreber's words were simply disregarded as 'madness' and never given the attention they deserve? If this were the case, he would have never regained a sense of control over his life or returned home to his family and, additionally, the world of psychiatry would have been gravely impoverished. Moreover, as Foucault (1965) illustrates in *Madness and Civilization*, 'madness' serves as a mirror for society, reflecting its fears, anxieties, and contradictions. By studying the ways that society understands and treats madness, one can gain insight into the underlying values and power dynamics of that society. In these ways, art can serve as a bridge connecting otherwise alienated individuals to the collective human experience, which provides inherent benefits for the expresser and the listener. Together, art and humanity shape each other in the unitary process of becoming; a process in which mentally ill individuals should play an intimate role.

If we limit ourselves to thinking of humans as 'rational creatures', then

we effectively exclude the range of enigmatic experiences that truly make humanity what it is. It is not our rationality that defines humanity, but the shared struggle to find meaning and reason in an otherwise absurd universe. As Rogers (2018: 202) illuminates, “how we each play with this problematic, cope with it, forms what we become”. Together, humans share in the struggle to meaningfully exist in the world, a process in which art plays an intimate role shaping beyond the capacities of normative language. To conclude, I would like to share the closing insights of Rogers’ book:

Psychosis is a coat I still carry; and though its shape has been altered almost beyond recognition through my own analysis, it is still my coat. It becomes me...You cannot analyse the coat itself. Speaking or singing to me, it knots, furls, wheels, and turns back to silence, supported by the roaring void. I carry it, it floats behind me. It has written this book with me...This coat is all I have to offer my fellow psychotics, if I am invited to accompany them – whether as a friend, or an ally, or as an analyst.

(ibid: 202-3)

Rogers’ book serves as a beacon of the artistically examined life, illuminating new ways that, together, we may proceed toward a more meaningfully world of shared humanity: a world of absurdity; struggle; overcoming; and, most of all, love, compassion and empathy.

Conclusion: Artistic literacy is a humanism

As humanity finds itself moving farther from the ideals of modernism, it has been claimed that art criticism has become a dying field of inquiry. Instead of artistic interpretation being controlled by a comparatively small group of educated art historians/theorists, we now find ourselves in a self-publishing renaissance fuelled by an abundance of independent media. Art is coming from every direction, everywhere, all at once. Amongst art critics there is fear that, through this transition into post-modernism, we are beginning to find ourselves in a world of artistic interpretation that has washed out into pure ‘subjectivity’. If we allow ourselves to be carried by such reasoning, we might begin to wonder what this understanding of subjectivity really entails, and what this might mean for humanity’s relationship to aesthetics.

Heidegger’s vision of aesthetics provides an interesting lens to view this problem through. In his eyes, art is not ‘subjective’ or ‘objective’ in the senses expressed by these art critics. Rather, art arises from (and gives rise to) the union of the subject (artist) and the object of their experience (aesthetic phenomena). In this way, art is not something that can be understood in terms of critical judgment or analytical evaluation. Instead, art is something

that, when it works, plays a fundamental role in the ongoings of human affairs. In this understanding, every individual plays an integral role in shaping the meaningful interpretation and perpetuation of art – not just for themselves but for all of humanity. Through this decentralisation (and democratisation) of artistic meaning and value, we come to bear a sort of Sartrean burden. That is, every individual possesses the power – and thus, the responsibility – to help shape the way that humans understand themselves, the world they share and how these elements intertwine.

This understanding of aesthetics provokes us to redefine what ‘artistic literacy’ entails for humanity. Under this Heideggerian vision of art, artistic literacy is a matter of being able to competently shape the meaningful space between otherwise disparate humans. In other words, a Heideggerian vision of artistic literacy could be thought of as a fluency in expressing our world and interpreting the worlds of others. In this understanding of artistic literacy, we move beyond art theory as a mere practice of gamified intellectualism. Rather, in this Heideggerian understanding, artistic literacy is a humanitarian imperative; art literacy is the embodied practice by which humanity can come to understand its most enigmatic, profound experiences in ways that rational modes of inquiry could never accomplish. Through this understanding, artistic literacy is not just an intellectual pursuit, artistic literacy is a humanism.

Upon first inspection, this vision of artistic literacy may sound idealistic. It might sound appealing to romantic lovers of art, but what would it look like in practice? And, to an extent, it is an idealistic vision. However, as I argue, it does have clear practical applications for humanity. In practice, the cultivation of humanising artistic literacy is the honing of one’s ability to skilfully implement these unique characteristics of art, that is, the cultivation of a fluency in expressing our world and interpreting the worlds of others. As I have argued, these unique characteristics of art are:

- (i) ***Transformative:*** Artistic inquiry is a process of becoming. In this process, the subject becomes their inquiry; actively creating and discovering new ways of meaningfully inhabiting, understanding and relating to their otherwise enigmatic world of experience.
- (ii) ***Communicative:*** Art opens new possibilities for communicating one’s enigmatic experiences in a way that normative language fails to capture.
 - a. ***Benefits for the expresser:*** Gives the artist tools through which they may navigate, understand, and give meaning to their otherwise absurd, enigmatic, and/or tragic experience.
 - b. ***Benefits for the listener:*** Allows others to share in these experiences in intimate ways, providing the grounds for empathetic engagement between otherwise alienated individuals.

- (iii) **Existential:** Art has the unique ability to capture irrationality, represent absurdity and embody paradoxes, yet also resolve and overcome these contradictions through its indefinite language; effectively giving new meaning back to otherwise absurd and abysmal experiences.
- (iv) **Ontological:** Art plays a central role in shaping the co-constitutive relationship between individuals and the world that they meaningfully belong to. Every individual plays a role in creating and interpreting what this relationship looks like – for themselves and for humanity.

While this is by no means an exhaustive list, I argue that these are some of the essential features of the artistic process which make it a unique, powerful medium for humanitarian insight. As such, I offer them as a foundation which both reflects the philosophical underpinnings of many successful arts therapy practices, and a foundation which may serve as a guide for future practices to be developed.

An example of such a practice is captured well in a *New York Times* article (Lombardi, 2003) detailing an artist's twenty-five-year battle with psychosis, who eventually found recovery through her artistic journey with a talented therapist. As her therapist (Dr. Klagsburn) recalls, "I told her, 'If you can't speak your way to me, why don't you draw, and let me speak to what I see'." This process had the effect of opening new horizons of meaningfully understanding and communicating her otherwise ineffable experiences, effectively humanising this patient to a wider realm of therapists and doctors who had previously only seen her in terms of medical diagnoses. As this patient recounts:

The art clearly helped to bring me through and out of the illness, because when you think about schizophrenia, it's really an illness that creates isolation. Art served as a means of communicating through a universal language. I truly believe in the power of art and its ability to transform us all.

This is just one instance of many remarkable tales of transformative artistic journeys that have led to individuals leading more meaningful, healthy and socially connected lives through psychosis and/or profound mental suffering.

How these therapeutic practices are developed and employed are a matter of the creative implementation of psychologists, psychoanalysts and existential therapists. However, most importantly, these practices – and the philosophical foundations they rest on – should also guide a wider social practice of humanising artistic literacy. In other words, humanity (in so far as it values itself) has an imperative to cultivate a greater proficiency in navigating the meaningful space between humans that is beyond language, whether through formal education or private practice. This vision of

humanising artistic literacy is a vision of empowering humans to better understand – and have greater agency over – themselves and their respective (and shared) world(s). While art criticism centralises art’s significance, humanising artistic literacy embraces the decentralisation of art’s significance into an individualistic imperative: everyone has a stake in deepening humanity’s understanding of itself.

To conclude, we will return to the example of the moon. Something that unites all human beings is that we all gaze upon the same moon. Yet, there is also a sense in which we each gaze upon a very different moon from one another. As the moon paints our world in various shades of truth (*alētheia*), artists paint the various worlds which this moon illuminates. If I could gather Francis Bacon, Adolf Wölfli and Annie Rogers with me on my dishevelled porch, I am sure we could all look up at the moon and agree that we are looking at the same ‘thing’. However, if we were to return inside and spend the evening sharing our various artistic interpretations of the moon with one another, we would gain an entirely different, profound understanding of what the moon truly is within our now shared world of experience. Art and language help fill in the gaps of understanding between human beings. Where language cannot fill in these gaps, art plays an important role in meaningfully bringing humans together. When I gaze up at the moon, I see my moon – and it gazes back at me. However, if we all learn to share our artistic moons with one another, we might arrive at a more profound, beautiful, and empathetic world: a world loved by moonlight.

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Endnotes

1. “Heidegger’s term ‘essence’ has nothing to do with the traditional idea of essence of a single, covering definition; instead, this concept refers to ‘that which makes something what it is’, in other words Being” (Watts, 2011: 147).
2. “All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry.” (“The origin of the work of art” in Heidegger, 2013: 70).
3. In Heidegger’s words, if the artwork works, then the “world worlds, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home” (ibid: 43).

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