

# CULTURE AND NATURE: THE PLAY OF ECOPOIESIS

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***DOI: 10.24234/scientific.v2i45.91***

## **ABSTRACT**

The two main factors, culture and nature, are inseparable. The mutual connections of the latter, on the one hand, are clearly reflected in the poetic works, on the other hand, the natural and geographical location of the place, combined with the specifics of a certain culture, affects the cultural life of the given place, its manifestations. It should be noted, however, that in the modern world, as a result of urbanization, globalization and technocratization, the connection with one's own body, the natural world, traditional cultures and natural creativity is being disrupted. We believe that the practice of expressive art therapy can contribute to the establishment of connections with the nature. It can increase body awareness and promote understanding of the body as a thinking and feeling system. The body then becomes a creator of meanings, ideas that lives through the creation of art forms. They can be used in the context of expressive arts therapy, both nature-oriented and culture-oriented expressive arts therapy.

**Key words:** art, nature, art therapy, natural environment, mutual connections.

## INTRODUCTION

Human beings have two parents: nature and culture. Just as a person cannot exist without nature, with which we are in constant exchange, inhaling and exhaling, consuming food and sunlight, dependent on weather and slight fluctuations in temperature, neither can she exist without culture, that invisible space of human meanings and ways of being and perceiving the world that makes a human human. It is not enough to be born in a human body to become a human, you need to grow up in the field of people.

We can imagine nature without a person and without cultural influence, but we can't imagine a person without nature and culture—our body is a part of nature. Were it not for the field of culture we would not become human beings. We live in bodies permeated by cultural values and meanings, world-views, internalized in the process of communicating (Выготский, 2005). Our semantic vectors are determined both by human culture that is common to us all and by the specific characteristics of a particular culture. Each person develops in a specific cultural environment, rooted in the physical features of the world, its geographical features and the landscape that is seen and felt<sup>1</sup>.

## METHODOLOGY

This interplay between nature, culture and human beings is the subject of several areas of scientific knowledge such as cultural anthropology, psychological anthropology, ethnosemantics, ethnolinguistics, and even geopsychology. We can say that visible geography creates internal geography, the geography of the soul of the people (for example, Berdyaev and Podoroga connected the vastness of the Russian soul with the vast landscapes of Russia)(Бердяев, 1990; Подорога, 1993, 1995). In a similar vein, Claude Levi-

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<sup>1</sup>Different sources report about the many shades of green that people from the Amazon jungle can differentiate, and the many words for snow and white color that people living in the far North have.

Strauss considered mythological coordinate systems as classification grids, where the dimensions are formed and fixed by specific features of the physical environment, thereby creating a version of the physical world as a text (Левин-Стросс,1999).

## DISCUSSION

The problem is that we cannot establish direct contact with nature without the mediation of conceptual “cultural glasses.” We cannot go back to primitive thinking or primitive perception, but we can try to look at the nature and ourselves as a part of the nature, through the prism of ideas that are free from the demands of consumerism and aggressive expansion, and are instead built on the foundation of co-creation. Following Wendell Berry, an American farmer and poet, we can flip the traditional view to one where nature, the surrounding world, or a specific landscape, do not belong to us, but we and our bodies belong to it, and thus move away from anthropocentrism (Berry,2004). This co-creative interaction with nature can be experienced through the expressive arts, because they involve a creative act that is inherently renewing and fresh, allows us to go beyond our limited perceptions and establish our own, subjective, poietic contact - not in a conceptual way, but as a living and embodied experience, free from utilitarian purpose.

Since we cannot get rid of cultural mediation in our relations with nature, why not use it more consciously, by drawing on the experience of those cultures in which different traditions to the body of nature have been preserved? Art forms created in the bosom of similar cultures can act as mediators, and offer a kind of *framing* (Knill, Nienhaus & Fuchs, 1995) for understanding the practice of expressive arts and directing the work of consciousness, as any art form does. At the same time, these art forms can allow for a subjective, creative encounter with the *third* (Knill, Nienhaus & Fuchs, 1995), a process which involves not conceptual, but bodily experience.

I want to emphasize the complex and multifaceted nature of the interaction and mutual influence of culture and nature, and to call it “ecopoietic interaction.” (Levine, 2012). We can say that the play of ecopoiesis takes place in ourselves, in our consciousness-body, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, in the visible manifestations of culture.

During various stages of the development of humanity, there have existed different relationships between nature and culture. For a long time, there was a kind of invisible contradiction between the culture of civilization - something cultivated and developed - and nature, which was perceived as wild, hostile, chthonic, subject to impulses, and so on.

At the same time, many cultures preserved the myth of a certain Golden Age. According to Mircea Eliade, this myth dates back to the time of the Neolithic Revolution, and can be considered a reaction to the emergence of agriculture. In the myth of the Golden Age, before the beginning of agriculture, human beings lived in complete harmony with nature. Nature was depicted as a garden of Eden, and human beings were natural, innocent, and unencumbered by internal contradictions and social conventions. The people of the Golden Age were imagined to be able to control the elements and animals or to speak to them without feeling separate.

In traditional cultures, the land and nature were perceived as living organisms. Nature was treated as a living body, was revived and personified, and the land and spaces around were endowed with sacred qualities, giving rise to a sacred geography. In Russian traditional culture, characterized by an emphasis on relationships and family ties, Mother Earth and Father Heaven were perceived as a part of a large family. In Indian culture, the entire embodied world was represented in the form of the Sacred Cow.

In many traditional cultures where protoshamanism and primitive animism are not lost (for example, in the traditional culture of the Indians of South America and the indigenous peoples of the North) the land and the nature are perceived as "a gigantic sentient being influenced by the same force that influences us" (Mindell, 2007). That is why many indigenous peoples identified themselves with the land they lived in, even taking personal names that reflected natural phenomena or places in the surrounding landscape, for example, "Moving Cloud", "Low Mountain", or "Deep River". In such names, we see an expression of identity that is based on the merging of oneself with the surrounding world. For example, the Australian aborigines of the Yimithirr tribe connected the parts of the body with

the cardinal directions, feeling and defining their bodies in relation to the large body of the earth. (Mindell, 2007).

The way of interacting with nature is largely determined by a specific culture. We see differences even in the European view and attitude towards nature. Stephen K. Levine, in his article on ecopoiesis, gives examples of the English and French garden as ways of organizing the space of nature, where, in the first case, a person leaves the possibility of naturalness as part of the landscape, and in the second, forms a garden with greater order and regularity (Levine, 2012). We can also recall Japanese and Chinese gardens, the pinnacle of the human ability to connect nature and spiritual experience, combining man-made and natural things. Europeans and Russians very often make a clear distinction between the spiritual and the material worlds, and consider them total opposites. The material, objective world is perceived as not worthy of much attention. Our research into Russian culture confirmed that this opposition is deeply rooted in the minds of the people (Сидорова, 2005, 2012, 2017). There is no such metaphysical opposition in many Eastern countries. The source of the ancient Japanese views of the world, for example, is Shintoism, which is based on pantheism and primitive animism - the idea of the soul of the world living in every object, of the animate nature of things as they are in nature<sup>2</sup>. Hence the astonishingly careful attitude of traditional Japanese culture to the external objective-natural world, the aversion to violence, the refusal to change nature and the cult of the natural, the untouched, that which is not made by human hands.

It is worth noting, however, that the relationship between nature and culture in Japanese culture is not as simple as it might seem at first glance. The traditional consciousness of the Japanese makes a kind of U-turn, from nature to culture and back to nature again

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<sup>2</sup>Almost all manifestations of nature were represented in the pantheon of Shinto gods. So, in the Kojiki "an account of Ancient Matters", we find a list of gods, among which there are: Amatsuhiko - hikonagisatake-ugaya-fu-kinaezu-no mikoto - Heavenly Youth Valiant God of the Cormorant Roof Not Finished at the Seashore; Ame no-sagiri-no Kami - Heavenly God of Mists in the Gorges; Michi-no-Nagatiha-no Kami is the God of the Long Roadside Stones, Suhijino-Kami is the Goddess of the Settling Sand. (Kojiki, 2000, pp. 64-67)

(Nature - Culture - Nature). We can say that the main trait of Japanese culture is placing artful emphasis on the natural character of a natural object. Such external and internal work of consciousness gives the natural object a specific cultural content that only emphasizes and manifests its nature - without transforming or violating it. Examples of this include Japanese gardens or the Japanese art of admiring *suseki* stones. Untouched, uncultivated nature in itself is not an object of interest and admiration of the Japanese, but a Japanese garden, carefully cultivated and conveying the beauty of wild nature in its ideal form becomes a focus of attention for them.

Cultural attitudes to the body and nature gave rise to a clear division between spirit and matter, which in turn, lead to the separation between them that we observe in the modern world. Despite all the differences in views of nature, in the modern Western world, the dominant attitude stems from the Judeo-Christian worldview. According to this belief system, nature is perceived as matter, which is passive, not feeling, can be subjected to violent manipulation and disregarded and wasted by human beings if it is profitable.

In the modern world, as a result of various factors caused by culture, urbanization, techno-cratization, and globalization, we can see four main points of rupture. These are: 1) broken connections in relationships with our body, 2) loss of connection in relation with nature, 3) rupture of connection between people (e.g., the loneliness people experience in a metropolis), and 4) loss of the connection with traditional cultures. Feelings of separateness and isolation are, in fact, the cause of many mental illnesses and internal conflicts of people living in the modern world. Therapy with expressive arts aims to bring back these lost connections, helping clients to restore subtle contact with their bodies, with nature, with others, with the wisdom of traditional culture, ultimately leading to a renewed sense of co-creativity with the entire world. The pandemic has greatly deepened these aforementioned divisions, but at the same time, it has outlined new trends, such as the need for closeness to nature, which strengthens the processes of attunement to it.

## **Body of Nature - Nature of Body**

We live in bodies that are essentially a bridge between the natural world and the cultural world. The body contains the senses, but the philosophical question remains: what does a rose smell like? Without our senses, we cannot perceive this; and the senses can also be compared to “glasses” that are necessary for perception but not without their limitations. At the same time, we must remember that our physical body consists of the same chemical elements or the same primary elements as nature, the earth.

In speaking about the body, we first of all speak about “the body felt from the inside, about the mobile, pulsating, changeable element of internal sensations, impressions, excitements” (Васильюк,1993). The body “turns out to be that space that hosts in its living elements an interference and integration of the external objective world, the world of language, the world of culture and the inner world of man”. Many areas of modern psychotherapy (body-oriented therapy, dance-movement therapy, process-oriented therapy, and others) as well as expressive arts therapy, pay attention to subtle bodily reactions, perceive the body as a highly organized entity that stores the memory of all events and is constantly in a state of responsiveness to external and internal stimuli. However, unlike many other forms of therapy, expressive arts deal with living expressive corporeality, with a body filled with meanings and sense; a speaking, thinking, feeling body; a body that turns into a sounding pipe organ. We look at the experience of creating things here and now, not trying to interpret this language, but simply staying in it, offering a kind of translation into another language that speaks for it. We cultivate this ability of the body to respond, to experience any content of consciousness, to be both feeling and expressing and to give voice to the knowledge of the body.

Our basic ideas about the world are rooted in the body and our feelings. They are formed in early childhood and are based on the experience of the exploration of the physical world, which later becomes material for constructing metaphors and describing the world. For example, an angular, spiked figure will be perceived as dangerous and, therefore, evil, while a soft and round figure will be perceived as kind (Артемяева, 1980). According to R. Arnheim, to understand the depth of mind you have to understand physical depth.

(Arnheim, 1969). Familiarizing herself with the physical world through sensory impressions and experience, the child masters a certain primary language. We return to it while working in the territory of the expressive arts, but at a new level, remembering the polymodal foundations of consciousness and connecting it to our higher functions, the ability to see beauty and to create. Nevertheless, any kind of language or art, be it music, drawing, or poetry, is still experienced at the bodily level. The body is the integrator within which psychic intermodal life takes place (Василюк, 1993).

Metaphors, on the other hand, allow us to identify the features of bodily experience in a cultural context. Metaphors can be mediators and messengers in the therapeutic process; using the methods of intermodal expressive arts therapy, they can give rise to an image or a drawing, and can be expressed, explored, and transformed in dance or music.

The body and the engagement of bodily experience play a substantial role in these psychotherapeutic paths. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that movement and bodily experience are at the basis of cognitive functions as well, such as categorization, metaphor, and mathematics. Primary metaphors (e.g. top = strength, lightness = joy) come from bodily experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Direct sensory perception is categorized and can subsequently be stored in memory in the form of images, which in turn are the material for creating basic and complex metaphors, as well as new images that can contribute to the *crystallization embodied in an art-work* (Knill, Nienhaus & Fuchs, 1995). The body plays a defining role in our understanding of reality, as the body is the key to understanding what is happening to us, while metaphors allow us to identify the features of bodily experience in a cultural context. “The fact that we express our state using metaphors, and that others understand us, is, in fact, a cultural phenomenon and involves the combination of different references, positions and forms of experience”(Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Culture shapes physicality as a set of methods of treating the body, its appearance and internal manifestations, the relation to the body and its parts, the placing in space, the interaction of its parts, the nature of the movements, and so on. So we can talk about the culture of the body and of different bodies: the Russian body, the Latin-American body, the



Chinese body, etc. We can talk about the impact that not only cultures, but also subcultures, have on the body, for example, we can examine the post-Soviet body, or urban or rural bodies. The experience of the expressive arts creates awareness of the cultural meanings that fill the body, thus reviving the repressed and colonized body. At the same time, expressive arts offer a different view of our larger Body of Nature.

We can draw parallels between how a person treats their own body and how they treat the Body of the Earth or the Body of Nature. Expressive arts and other modern psychotherapeutic approaches offer a new perspective on corporeality, wherein the body is not inanimate, passive matter, but a living, feeling, and thinking body, filled with cultural meanings while being part of nature (a body-mind approach). This view of the nature of the body causes a tectonic shift in our relations to the Body of Nature and the Body of the Earth: they, too, are no longer viewed as inanimate objects but as living organisms, complex and meaningful, and our bodies are part of them. Stephen K. Levine proposes to move the body out of the control of conditioned attitudes, formed primarily in European culture and subjected to Christian influence, according to which the body is sinful, dirty, and defiled. He asks us to decolonize our own body.

Such action requires great inner work of restoring our integrity and unity with spirit and the matter on the one hand, and on the other hand, the return of a pure view of the body and nature that has been repressed by Christianity. Shaun McNiff called intermodal art therapy a kind of neoshamanism, and shamanism has always played a large role in establishing and recovering connections (McNiff, 1981). We can say that expressive arts therapy and expressive arts in all their manifestations are becoming a new anthropological practice, actively using the languages of art and the bodily dimension to return to and maintain the integrity of human existence in the modern world.

### **Establishing a connection**

Art-forms and the process of creating a work of art are mediators, conductors, and means of adjusting consciousness, which allow one to establish a connection with various levels of external and internal reality, including the body, nature, and others. Art, household items,

rituals, ceremonies, language and etiquette are a set of culture-specific means of tuning consciousness. Art, literature, and religion are canonized states of consciousness, internalized by culture's ways of tuning consciousness and dealing with one's mental life. L.S. Vygotsky, in his book, *The Psychology of Art*, regarded art as a “social technique of feelings” (Выготский, 1998).

In virtually all cultures that have preserved the traditions of animism and protoshamanism, the attitude to the body of nature and the nature of our bodies is different: they are not perceived separately. The use of traditional art forms, born in the bosom of similar cultures, and used in the context of expressive arts, makes this tuning possible. Such practices can include, for example, talking with nature, the earth, and the elements through natural objects, the practice of exchange, the offering of ritual food, the practice of ritual offerings, and so on.

Working with natural found objects is one of the methods of modern eco-art and nature-oriented therapy with expressive arts, which, in fact, brings back an ancient way of talking with the world. In many traditional cultures, we find this way of speaking through found objects or through the manipulation of objects.

Art from different cultures in its various forms may be made therapeutically within *culture-oriented expressive arts therapy* (Сидорова, 2020). For example, the Russian round dance, like many circular dances, offers to our experience the cyclical nature of things, their connectedness, unity, movement in a circle, offering a culture-specific way of living cosmogonic processes at the individual and collective levels. There are a huge number of traditional patterns of the round dance; each of them has a specific meaning and sense. Another example is the traditional Indian drawing of mandalas and patterns on the ground, called *kolam* or *rangoli*. It is an invitation to the deity, serves as a connection with the ground, and, at the same time, helps us to experience volatility and impermanence, as the patterns made with rice flour quickly disappear under the feet of passers-by, are blown by the wind, or are eaten by insects. This art form allows one to live, through dialogue, an experience of unity with the external world.

The art forms of a particular culture used in the context of intermodal expressive arts therapy become both the *framework* and *the means* of adjusting the work of consciousness, which “*expand[ing] the range of the play*” (Knill, Levine S. & Levine E. 2005) and allow us to build new relationships with the body, with nature and with others. Any act of poetry, of creating something new, whether a drawing, dance or some other art-form, becomes a mediator that helps to establish a connection with certain realities through the body. We are not limited to using traditional art forms for such work, but in them we can find collective meanings that seem to be wired and encrypted within us. These meanings begin to be assimilated and experienced on a subjective level, as if discovered again during the act of poetry, through interaction with the particular art form and co-creation with others.

In the context of expressive arts, the art form itself can also be modified. For example, instead of using a ritual Tibetan drum, where the text of a prayer is written on a round surface and then repeated when the drum rotates, I suggested my clients to write poetry on circular sticks, rolled and polished by sea-waves and bleached by the sunlight. The text is written in a spiral; it could be read many times like a mantra or a prayer. I called them “poetic sticks.” Paolo Knill gives the example of using sculpture like a sentinel or a guard in the garden, which refers to the tradition of ancient boundary deities, placed at the borders as patrons (Knill, Nienhaus & Fuchs, 1995).

In the modern context of expressive arts therapy, we can use art forms born in the bosom of a culture or even subculture, which may include digital culture. We can use photos, Instagram stories or any form of social network presence that represent a modern manifestation of the invisible network of the god Indra, which enables people to feel resonance and contact.

Our experience has shown that distance and separation do not impede such work. For example, one of the ways of ritual tuning in to each other while working on Zoom is to show your ritual meal, a fruit or a sweet. It becomes a kind of offering. The fact that we have mirror neurons and intermodal brain memory ensures that we can taste and smell the strawberries, even if we only see them on the screen, and thus we can experience belonging.

Even more surprising is the fact that others understand us even when we communicate remotely using computers and amplify our verbal language by the language of movement or by making images or drawings that generate an emotional response. The most adequate way we can describe this experience is by using the concept of multiple resonances. In creating resonances on different levels, we can experience a sense of connection and unity, even in online work: “collective resonance” (Rogers), “aesthetic resonance” (Sidorova), “interpersonal resonance” (Selvam), “somatic resonance” (Rand).

In the pandemic age, modern technology also serves as a conduit that helps to establish a link between our minds and bodies, since any movement of consciousness is experienced on the bodily level. Even when we are sitting at the computer, our body feels the involvement. Here we have a new phenomenon of remote communication, experienced through other means developed in our culture. Digital technologies and means of remote communication are, in fact, instruments of culture that help us to establish the connection both literally and figuratively. In our remote work on the seminar "The body of nature - nature of the body," we established a connection with nature, with our bodies and with each other. The technical equipment – essentially aspects of our culture – served as a mediator for finding a connection with nature.

## CONCLUSION

Nature and culture exist in the constant interaction of eco-poerty. A person cannot exist outside their cultural and natural context. We can use cultural mediators and the language of arts to create a situation of phenomenological presence and a subjective experience of belonging, which removes the neurotic division responsible for many problems of modern individuals. In the context of intermodal expressive arts therapy, we can cultivate the body's capacity for expressive dialogue by postulating the unity of body-consciousness. The human body, like consciousness, is saturated with cultural meanings and moreover, with the meanings of a particular culture. In the context of *nature-oriented expressive arts therapy* (Atkins & Snyder, 2018) we can understand the body as a manifestation of the wisdom of nature, mediated by culture, and restore the connection with the body and nature, proclaiming the

unity between the Nature of the Body and the Body of Nature. The way of relating to nature in a particular culture can be used in the context of *culture- and nature-oriented expressive arts therapy* through traditional art forms, which are conductors, mediators, and means of tuning consciousness and providing a space for the encounter.

Expressive arts restore our connection with our bodies, with nature, and with traditional cultures, bringing ancient wisdom back in a modern context, using modern forms and the infinite possibilities of consciousness to create something new, even through the medium of modern technology.

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## ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ

### ՄՇԱԿՈՒՅԹ ԵՎ ԲՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ. ԷԿՈՂՈԵԶԻՍԻ ԽԱՂԸ

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Երկու հիմնական գործոնները՝ մշակույթն ու բնությունը, անբաժանելի են: Վերջիններիս փոխադարձ կապերը, մի կողմից՝ ակնհայտորեն արտացոլվում են բանաստեղծական ստեղծագործություններում, մյուս կողմից՝ տեղանքի բնական և աշխարհագրական դիրքը՝ զուգակցված որոշակի մշակույթի առանձնահատկությունների հետ, ազդում է տվյալ տեղանքի մշակութային կյանքի, դրա դրսևորումների վրա: Նշենք, սակայն, ժամանակակից աշխարհում նկատելի է ուրբանիզացիայի, գլոբալիզացիայի և տեխնոկրատիզացիայի արդյունքում սեփական մարմնի, բնական աշխարհի, ավանդական մշակույթների և բնական ստեղծարարության հետ կապերի խաթարում: Մեր համոզմամբ, բնության հետ կապերի հաստատմանը կարող է նպաստել էքսպրեսիվ արվեստի թերապիայի պրակտիկան: Այն կարող է բարձրացնել մարմնի իրազեկությունը և նպաստել մարմնի՝ որպես մտածող և զգացող համակարգի ընկալմանը: Այնուհետև մարմինը դառնում է իմաստ ստեղծող, որն ապրում է արվեստի ձևերի ստեղծման միջոցով: Դրանք կարող են կիրառվել էքսպրեսիվ արվեստների թերապիայի համատեքստում՝ ինչպես բնության, այնպես էլ մշակույթին ուղղված արտահայտչական արվեստի:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** արվեստ, բնություն, արվեստի թերապիա, բնական միջավայր, փոխադարձ կապեր:

## РЕЗЮМЕ

### КУЛЬТУРА И ПРИРОДА: ИГРА ЭКОПОЭЗИСА

#### *СИДОРОВА ВАРВАРА, СААКЯН КАРИНЕ, КАРАПЕТЯН ВЛАДИМИР*

Два основных фактора, культура и природа, неразделимы. Взаимные связи последних, с одной стороны, ярко отражаются в поэтических произведениях, с другой стороны, природно-географическое положение места в сочетании со спецификой

определенной культуры влияет на культурную жизнь данного Места, его проявления. Однако следует отметить, что в современном мире в результате урбанизации, глобализации и технократизации нарушается связь с собственным телом, миром природы, традиционными культурами и природным творчеством. Мы считаем, что практика экспрессивной арт-терапии может способствовать установлению связи с природой. Это может повысить осознанность тела и способствовать пониманию тела как системы мышления и чувств. Затем тело становится создателем смыслов, идей, которые живут посредством создания художественных форм. Их можно использовать в контексте экспрессивной арт-терапии, как природно-ориентированной, так и культурно-ориентированной экспрессивной арт-терапии.

**Ключевые слова:** искусство, природа, арт-терапия, природная среда, взаимные связи.

Հոդվածը ստացվել է՝ 02.04. 2023

Հոդվածը ուղարկվել է գրախոսման՝ 08.04.2023

Հոդվածը երաշխավորվել է տպագրության՝ 15.06.2023