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The art of orality: how the absence of writing shapes the character of tribal, 'primitive' art

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This contribution aims to identify a clear link between whether a culture is oral or literate and their distinct styles of visual art. It looks with particular interest to the interconnectivity between the theories of two thinkers from disparate fields: the American philosopher and theorist of linguistics Walter J. Ong and the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer. It considers what we can learn from the intersectionality of their principal theories: the conception of orality and literacy as delineated by Ong and the conception of abstraction and empathy as elucidated by Worringer. It will be shown how the characteristics of oral peoples as explicated by Ong (that is, people entirely detached from literacy, with no written language, sometimes derogatorily called 'primitive', or sometimes tribal peoples) are driven by the same 'urge to abstraction' which is identified by Worringer in *Abstraction and Empathy*. In turn, the reason for certain characteristics of oral art is specifically related to their being detached from literacy; as Ong famously proposed, 'writing restructures consciousness.' It will be shown how this is verified by the fact that the movement away from universal styles of oral, abstractive art (such as a constraint to two-dimensionality, use of repeated patterns and symbolic counterparts of figures and objects) towards immersive, empathic art (the mimetic, representational, realistic rendering of space and figures) is historically concurrent with a shift from universal orality to widespread literacy. The implication of this theoretical synchronicity is rather radical, allowing for new theoretical alignments between these fields. It also sheds light on the reason behind concurrent characteristics in the visual art produced by disparate societies across time and cultures: their art is reflective of their status as an 'oral' culture.

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In his 1962 study *Primitive Art: Its Traditions and Styles*, the art historian Paul Wingert speaks about what characteristics unify 'primitive' societies, identifying one particularly important feature as being that 'they all lack a written language. Ideas and events cannot be recorded … a fact that seriously interferes with any concrete, scientific developments' (Wingert 1962, 6). This paper delves further into this vastly unexplored area and attempts to demonstrate a distinct correlation between a detachment from literacy and emergent features of visual art by bringing art theory into dialogue with more recent studies of orality and literacy.

Two particularly important theorists engaged with here, who are both significant figures within their respective fields, are Wilhelm Worringer, whose influential theory of aesthetics was put forward in his 1908 *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style,* and Walter J. Ong, who revolutionised the study of orality and literacy with his 1982 study, Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word. Before detailing how these two principal works can illuminate and augment one another, it is important to outline the historical contexts out of which they were emerging.

Worringer published *Abstraction and Empathy*, his doctoral dissertation, in 1908, mere months following the emergence of Picasso's epochal 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon' (1907), which was sending shockwaves through the art world and would soon forever change the trajectory of art history. The book quickly found great and widespread acclaim, and as Rudolph Arnheim states, the study 'turned out to be one of the most influential documents in art theory of the new century' (Arnheim 1986, 50). The book could not have emerged at a more opportune moment, this being a time when the art of so-called 'primitive' cultures (an enormously geographically diverse group encompassing cut-off societies of 'central and southern Africa, the Americas and Oceania' [Rhodes 1994, 7]) were having a major influence on the trajectory of Western art, and were seen by many of the time as being borne a purer, more essential mode of human expression. Worringer's thesis promised much needed insight into the motivation for such radically 'new' (to the then-audience at least) and convention-crippling styles of art, which often seemed to bear a rather serendipitous stylistic cohesiveness in many ways, despite massive diversity in cultural origins. The book was thus perhaps the earliest serious attempt to set out a theoretically grounded basis for the innate stylistic resonances of 'primitive' art as well as the clear contrasts with the typical modes of Western art since the Renaissance.

Worringer went on to write influential studies of Gothic art (1911) and Egyptian art (1927), frequently drawing upon the ideas set forward in the

original study, and exploring how these are reorganised within different cultures and epochs. The repeated negative emphasis on the word 'primitive' I hope is by now clear, this being a dated and pejorative term which is now more progressively referred to as 'tribal art', which is also the term being used henceforth throughout this essay.[1] This no doubt foregrounds the inherently problematic nature of Worringer's book, which in many ways, in simply suggesting such a clear-cut division and cognitive estrangement, emblematises the endemic Eurocentrism and colonial underpinnings which mark and indeed mar this historical moment of aesthetic upheaval (Rhodes 1994, 142). In many ways, my essay here is to reevaluate and resituate Worringer, by bringing his ideas into a more modern and progressive framework, particularly by way of an engagement with fields of orality and literacy.

In *Abstraction and Empathy*, Worringer does not gesture towards any relation between the people who exhibit an urge to abstraction or empathy and people of an oral or literate mentality, and the reason for this is very simple: a solid theorisation of oral-literate cognition would not emerge for a great many decades to come. Due to this lack of insight into the oral-literate conceptuality, there are a great many holes in Worringer's thesis for the contemporary reader. Some initial clarification of how his key ideas tie into orality and literacy studies is first of all necessary. Worringer's dual structured conceptualisation of empathy and abstraction drew upon two critical and highly influential predecessors. First, there was Theodor Lipps, who presented a series of aesthetic traits which 'may be characterised by the broad general name of the theory of empathy' (Worringer 1997 [1907], 4). Second, there was Alois Riegl, who explicated upon the motivation for a process of 'abstraction' by tribal cultures and also proposed that 'the stylistic tendencies of past epochs are … not to be explained by lack of ability, but by a differently directed volition' (Worringer 1997, 9). Worringer's polarisation of these two modes of artistic volition, his unification of disparate aesthetic theory, was a critical intervention. Indeed, Arnheim concludes that 'by describing the two concepts as antagonists, Worringer sharpened and restricted their meaning in a way that has remained relevant to their discussion in psychology as well as in aesthetics' (Arnheim 1986, 50).

With his theoretical framework in place, Worringer began to expand upon and incorporate Riegl's ideas with those of Lipps. Lipps proposed a thesis of art being driven by either positive or negative empathy, which is, to grossly over summarise, 'self-activation' or volition in comprehending an object from a position of freedom (positive) or from a forced, uncontrollable influx (negative). With positive empathy, as Worringer explains, I 'give myself over to the activity demanded of me without inward opposition, I have a feeling of liberty … of pleasure' (Worringer 1997, 6). But with negative empathy, which is adopted and reformulated

as 'abstraction' by Worringer, 'there arises a conflict between my natural striving for self-activation and the one that is demanded of me … a sensation of unpleasure derived from the object' (Worringer 1997, 6). Clearly the term 'pleasure' is not used in any ordinary sense here. Rather, it is used to designate the inner mindset of those who are situated either within a harmonious relationship with the outer world or within a much more mutable, chaotic and even trauma-inducing one. I want to propose that we now think about this in a very different way: as a mind which is situated either within or outside of literacy. They are not so much caught in a constant state of 'displeasure', as may be implied, but rather, they reside in an entirely different order of sensory awareness.

Worringer thus takes the core elements as outlined by his theoretical predecessors and reformulates them into the opposing urges of abstraction and empathy. He summarises that whilst:

> 'the precondition of the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship between man and the phenomena of the external world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions. We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space. When Tibullus says: prinum in mundo fecit deus timor, the same sensation of fear may also be assumed as the root of artistic creation' (Worringer 1997, 15)

In this understanding, tribal man's 'abstracted' art is thus motivated by the need to contain the trauma-inducing arbitrariness of space, and its central aim is essentially *enclosure*. Empathic, Western art on the other hand is, for the most part, driven by the impulse to create the illusion of space, and an immersion within that very space, which denotes a very different and more tranquil, more empathic relation to one's surrounding world. Hal Foster and colleagues have identified that this oppositional, antithetical structuration is the most controversial aspect of his thesis: 'this notion led Worringer to construct a problematic hierarchy of culture', but they go on to point out that, 'the modern, however, was not placed at the top: on the contrary, "slipped down from the pride of knowledge"' (Foster et al. 2011, 86).

At this point another theoretical grounding becomes necessary in order to bridge the question as to why the "urge" to abstraction would emerge. What drives this inner unrest, and results in a unifying set of aesthetic characteristics in very specific categories of people? Moreover, who are the categories of people affected by this impetus to abstraction?

To answer this, we have to look to the art of an enormously diverse range of cultures and people who all share such distinct aesthetic characteristics: from the pre-classical, archaic ancient Greeks and Egyptians to the Mayans and Mesoamericans, as well as to modern, secluded tribal

societies such as those of South America or the Aboriginals of Australia. These groups share many key traits, including an almost uncanny artistic constraint to two-dimensionality, a universal compulsion to create symbolic counterparts of objects and figures, a strict adherence to geometrical shapes and patterns, and all-in-all exemplify an impetus to abstraction, as defined by Worringer. We can also note two other categories in whose art we observe very similar distinctive features, characteristics, forms and patterns in the form of outsider art and child art. This particular consanguinity between such disparate groups has simultaneously captivated and confounded critics for the best part of a century. I would like to suggest a more direct answer to what unifies this vast and diverse category of people who all demonstrate in their artwork the impetus to abstraction: these are all people who, in an Ongian conception, can be categorised as oral peoples.[2] These seemingly disparate groups are all non-literate (whether that be pre-literate in the case of egocentric children or post-literate in the case of the psychotic), and it is for this reason I contend, that they all share in a unified set of aesthetic characteristics.

Before looking to the potential cause of this 'great inner unrest inspired in man' mentioned by Worringer, some further elucidation on the core characteristics of orality is necessary. To very briefly define these terms, orality denotes the mindset of cultures who reside in a purely spoken world, who have never known the written word, whilst literacy represents the mindset of those cultures in which the written, phonetic text is fundamental to everyday thought and reality. The terms are more freely adopted within fields of anthropology and linguistics, yet they are also terms deeply rooted in (and reliant upon) literary theory and aesthetics. Indeed, in most cases orality is only identifiable by looking to a culture's art and literature, whether it be in that left behind by the ancients and transitional stages of literacy and orality or in the art of more modern preliterate societies. The renowned classicist and theorist of orality and literacy Eric Havelock estimates that the Greeks were entirely non-literate between around 1100 and 700 BC (Havelock 1976, 4), and that we can see a transition stage, moving from a predominantly oral to predominantly literate peoples, right around the time of Plato and Aristotle (approx. 500–300 BC). Orality has played a seminal role in the development and trajectory of art history, playing a particularly key role in the late 19th and early twentieth century, when the art of more secluded oral societies began to be shown globally and influence many of the artists of the time. The art of oral cultures was seen as bearing a more truthful, essential, even primal rendition of human experience, stripped of all the falsity and pomp of built-up civilisation, whose art had been shackled up by centuries of strictures and elitist expectations. This holds true of course, in the sense of the speaking world being the universal mode of thought for many, many millennia before the late emergence of literacy. Indeed, literacy is a strikingly recent invention

(relatively speaking) which Havelock (1976, 6) summarises as wearing 'the appearance of a recent accident.' Yet whilst oral cultures are vastly dispersed, from thousands of years BC right up to the modern day, their aesthetic traits maintain a profound coherence and unity, a clear set of unifying patterns and characteristics. Ong's conception of orality and literacy gives us a much clearer definition of these mentalities, and even a motivation for this great transition in volition, which can also, as will be seen, be evidenced by contrasting the art of oral and literate peoples.

John Hartley has spoken of the great revival of Ong's ideas in recent years, emphasising 'the continuing importance of the topic, which has if anything increased since the book was first published in the 1980s' (Ong 2012, 205). In *Orality and Literacy* (1982), Ong elaborates on the crucial 'psychodynamics' of orality, distinguishing between 'primary' orality, which is utterly absent of literacy, and 'secondary' orality, which denotes a partial return to a more oral-focused mentality (though it should be made clear that this is still a radically different mode of cognition to primary orality). One of the most fundamental traits Ong expands on is how oral peoples 'relied upon the formulaic constitution of thought … knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost' (Ong 1982, 23–24). Moreover, 'thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions and antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions … in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone' (Ong 1982, 34). This follows neatly on from Havelock's history-redefining polemic of *Preface to Plato* (1963), in which he elucidates on how oral peoples, typified and exemplified by the Homeric Greeks (whose literature shows us the evidence of an alternate, more formulaic way of thinking) used poetry as a kind of encyclopedic databank: 'the whole memory of a people was poeticised, and this exercised a constant control over the ways in which they expressed themselves in casual speech' (Havelock 1963, 134).[3] Later, after the advent of the Greek alphabet, this necessity would fade with the emergence of writing, which is an externalised, exteriorised, non-oral means of prolonging knowledge, and so negates the need for a patterned, repetitive, poetic substitute for memory (more on this shortly). The forms and structures of poetry are thus revealed as being innately tied to the deepest, most primal and unconscious parts of thought, for such 'mnemonic formulas' (Ong 1982, 24) are essentially poetics. In preliterate peoples, poetry is thus not produced primarily for enjoyment or to be aesthetically pleasing (which is the primary purpose from the empathic perspective) but is above all *functional*: indeed, it is the only means of storing, sharing and prolonging knowledge. But Worringer proves that the art is similarly motivated by functionality, in terms of their being 'dominated by an immense need for tranquility' (Worringer 1997, 16). Indeed, many theorists of tribal art draw attention to the fact that it is above all

functional as opposed to having been created to be aesthetically pleasing in a more traditional, 'Western' conception. As Richard Anderson expresses, works of tribal art are 'seldom completely without function in the society that produces them' (Anderson 1979, 23).

The intense focus on repetition and formulaic patterns is also something clearly central to the art of oral cultures. Expanding upon the ideas of Riegl, Worringer discusses how geometric, symmetrical, rhythmic styles are perfected in the art of primitive peoples: 'the style most perfect in its regularity, the style of the highest abstraction, most strict in its exclusion of life, is peculiar to the peoples at their most primitive cultural level' (Worringer 1997, 16).[4] He goes on to say that 'the urge is so strong in him to divest the things of the external world of their caprice and obscurity in the world picture and to impart to them a value of necessity and a value of regularity. To employ an audacious comparison: it is as though the instinct for the 'thing in itself' were most powerful in primitive man' (1997, 18). In other words, for Worringer, the need for geometric regularity in art reflects the need for poetic regularity and rhythm in oral speech. The geometric regularity of oral art is thus an aesthetic result of this deep inner need for regularity, which Worringer pitches as being the result of them being situated closer to the thing in itself (he jokingly reflects on this as 'audacious', though in fact it is anything but). This closeness to the Real, to that which lies beyond the Symbolic order, to *the thing in itself*, is what spurs this need for geometric regularity and harmony. It is an instinctive reversion back to mathematical harmony and stasis.

This reversion requires us to think back on a key question raised by Worringer's thesis. What is the reason for this 'great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world'? I propose that this great inner unrest can be directly tethered to the innate trauma of those who are situated outside of the pre-existing framework of logic and coherence offered by literacy; or to put it another way, a fully formed 'Symbolic order'. As seen as Worringer is proposing a 'psychology of style', it is necessary to adopt a more psychoanalytic perspective. A thinker who sheds a great deal of light onto the psychological implications of acquiring language and entry into a language bearing literacy, is Jacques Lacan.

Lacan was famous for his reevaluation of Freudian theory, and a newly focused approach in terms of language as being the very core infrastructure of subjective reality; his best-known dictum was that the unconscious is structured like a language. Lacan theorised a tripartite structuration of the unconscious which is made up of the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real orders, the former being 'the pact which links subjects together in one action. The human action par excellence is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol' (Lacan and Miller 1988, 230). He further explains that 'the emergence of the symbol creates, literally, a new order of being in the relations between men' (Lacan and Miller 1988, 239). Entry

into the Symbolic order is exclusive to those who obtain an advanced level of language, and not just any language, but an abstracted, literate language. Lacan further states that 'the child transcends, brings on to the symbolic plane, the phenomenon of presence and absence. He renders himself master of the thing, precisely in so far as he destroys it' (Lacan and Miller 1988, 173). This 'destruction' is the critical process which leads to the submergence of the Real and the emergence of the Symbolic order or 'pact'. But the oral subject never undergoes such a crucial process, and so for him the Real remains ever present. There is no fundamental severance or detachment, and it is, I posit, this which leads to their innate need for abstraction as identified by Worringer. Worringer's empathy *with* or abstraction *of* the chaos of space is thus essentially the core driving principle in the establishment of what Lacan defines as the Symbolic order, which, in short, is the order of literacy. To enter into the Symbolic order is to conceal or enclose the traumatic Real, which is essentially what Worringer identifies as 'arbitrary space', and without this crucial establishment, which is common to all literate societies, they remain in the 'chaotic' world of the Real. This is also why, as Worringer identifies, 'it is as though the instinct for 'the thing in itself' were most powerful in primitive man' (Worringer 1997, 18). The critical intervention then is that Lacan's model brings psychoanalytic theory into a linguistic framework, this exemplified by way of his expansion of the Saussurian conception of signifier-signified (which Lacan adopted into his well-known theorisation S/s) which was reformulated as the Symbolic order.

To summarise, the emergence of the Symbolic order thus equates the emergence of literacy and the abolition or eradication of orality in infancy. This is a process which is, I argue, mirrored by, or rather synonymous with, a transition to an 'empathic' relation to the surrounding world. Those situated outside of the Symbolic order are not engaged in such a 'pantheistic relationship [with] the phenomena of the outside world' because they are still in the presence of the trauma-inducing Real. It is only with the emergence of the Symbolic order of literacy that the urge to abstraction recedes, 'making way for the urge to empathy' (Worringer 1997, 15). Lacan's Symbolic order is also useful in terms of its being a phase borne out of an ensuing trauma: it is driven by the need to cover up the Real, which is here used in a much more general sense of that which lies *beyond Symbolic comprehension*. The emergence of the Symbolic order of literacy essentially subdues the onslaught of the Real, covers it up in a façade of language which entirely abstracts Real 'reality' and the 'things themselves' and instead shows us a vast and intricately woven web of existing concepts and logic and, crucially, an established, alternative, communal means of navigation.

T. E. Hulme summarises the geometric character of abstractive, oral art in comparison to literate, empathic art in the following way: 'you have

these two different kinds of art. You have first the art which is natural to you, Greek art and modern art since the Renaissance. In these arts the lines are soft and vital. You have other arts like Egyptian, Indian and Byzantine, where everything tends to be angular, where curves tend to be hard and geometrical, where the representation of the human body, for example, is often entirely non-vital, and distorted to fit into stiff lines and cubical shapes of various kinds' (Hulme 1958, 82). These latter examples of historical oral art are drawn directly from Worringer (1997, 14) who uses such cultures as prime examples of peoples driven by abstraction. They are also, critically, all from eras and cultures entirely detached from universal literacy. When it comes to Greek art this distinction is somewhat complicated, partly in that there is simply so much of it and the Greeks cover such a vast, historical period. A great deal of pre-classical, archaic Greek pottery and murals shares a resonance with the art of oral cultures, but there is also much Greek art which feels distinctly empathic and immersive. But, oddly enough, this very uncertainty in itself makes a great deal of sense for our thesis: for the Greeks are considered to be the markers of the historical transition/turning point between a majority oral world, and a majority literate one. Indeed, following Worringer's model of naturalist sculpture as a fundamentally empathic form[5], you can look to the evolution of Greek sculpture as a direct indicator of the transition from orality to literacy rendered in art.

Most notably of all perhaps, the timeline in terms of the departure from abstractive art wholly fits in with the timeline of the transition from orality to literacy. For example, looking at what is often considered among the oldest examples of three-dimensional Greek sculpture, 'The Lefkani Centaur' (Figure 1), which is estimated to be from around 1050–900 BC, one can see a clear non-naturalist, abstractive impetus. This is also seen in works like 'Kleobis and Biton', or 'The Moschophoros', which date to around 600 BC and overtly show very similar abstractive traits (much like the geometric pottery of the era also which is exemplary of abstractive art and deeply correlative to ancient Egyptian reliefs and pottery).

Now compare these works to sculptures such as 'Hermes and the Infant Dionysos' or 'The Atemisian Bronze' of around the 5th century BC, or the later 'Laocoon and his Sons' (Figure 2) which is dated at around 200 BC, in these we see an entirely natural style of sculpture adopted; or in Worringerean terms, an *empathic* mode of sculpture. This adheres with the proposition of Havelock who, to reiterate, estimates that the Greeks were mainly non-literate between around 1100 and 700 BC (Havelock 1976, 4).[6] The fact then that here we see such a close approximation is, in itself, striking: the moment we see an epochal shift in styles of art this is directly reflected by an epochal shift in terms of how the masses are moving towards literacy.

Figure 1. The Lefkandi Centaur, *c.* 1050–900 BC. Terracotta. Archaeological Museum of Eretria. Photo by Jebulon (Creative Commons CC0 License).

A critical point I wish to note is that the emergence of literacy does not mean a society in which everyone is reading books. Rather, it is a society which has built up language to an extent whereby the surrounding world is navigable, logical and approachable without the trauma of 'the thing in itself' emerging at every turn (this is why Worringer adopts the term). This is an essential point: that someone who cannot read and write can still be 'literate' in the sense of being immersed within a literate culture,
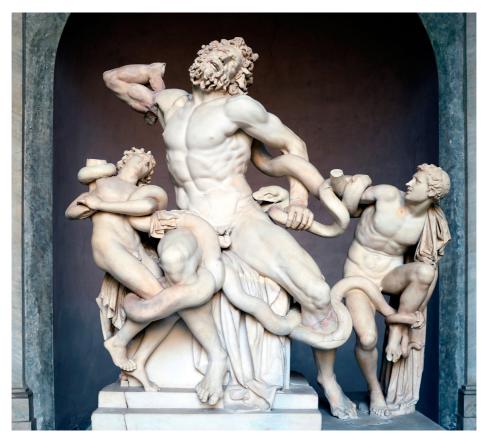
Figure 2. *Laocoön and his Sons*. Copy after an Hellenistic original from *c*. 200 BC, Museo Pio-Clementino. Marble, height 2.4 m. Photo by LivioAndronico (Creative Commons CC-BY-SA-4.0).

and thus have their surrounding world cloaked in a veil of written words and so still bearing a logical means of navigation. To grossly oversimplify, literacy is – and this is how it is being used throughout this study – at its base, a state emerging from a specific moment whereby the outside world becomes covered up to a degree which enables a new mode of volition.[7]

This may help explain the resonance between tribal art and child art. Lacking a reality-encompassing veneer generated by the framework of words, they reside in an instinctual, *abstractive* mode of volition. Then, at some moment in childhood (entry into the Symbolic order is typically estimated to be around 18 months old), this volition fades and gives way to an empathic rendition of space. The fact that the Greeks mark the transition of the masses from orality to literacy therefore means that we see elements of both abstractive and empathic art in these volition overlapping centuries. This societal transition in consciousness is a predominant thesis of Havelock's *Preface to Plato*, in which he proposes that

Plato was a literate mind lashing out at the predominantly oral world in which he lived. Plato is thus, if Havelock was right, a kind of critical marker in terms of the historical juncture in orality-literacy: not just as a philosopher, but as the marker of a point in time where literacy begins to overtake orality as the norm. And so, as Greece expanded and developed, and the emergence of a more universalised literacy came about, the oral world began to falter. The masses came to build up a much larger degree of literacy to cover up the surrounding world as information begins to be stored externally, and this leads to the gradual emergence of a Symbolic order. The world swiftly becomes vastly more comprehensible, the populace capable of comprehending, essentially through a process of labelling, a great deal of their surrounding reality with very little education. With that, memory and volition, and its expression through visual art, experiences a dramatic shift.

At one point, Worringer explains how, with a somewhat confounded tone, that 'the style most perfect in its regularity, the style of highest abstraction, most strict in its exclusion of life, is peculiar to the peoples at their most primitive cultural level … that which was previously instinct is now the ultimate product of cognition' (1997, 17–18). Worringer is commenting on how mathematical perfection and the capacity it allows in terms of abstracting the chaos of reality and enabling for detached logical comprehension, has come to be seen as the apex of intellectual thought. And yet this is an apex which is entirely *instinctual* to oral peoples.

Worringer is rather vague with his surrounding commentary on this point, and yet it is an idea which is yet again illuminated when paired with theories of orality-literacy. The instinctual urge towards repetitive formulas and patterns (Ong 1982, 33–34), the abstraction of concepts and ideas, the mythologisation of the everyday in order to prolong ideas in the absence of literate memory, are all foregrounded by Ong as crucial characteristics of orality. Ong shares the view of figures like Havelock and Cedric Whitman, who build upon the ideas of Milman Parry, in terms of the mnemonic function and tendencies of oral texts like Homer's *The Iliad*, which is considered the archetypal 'text' of oral culture.[8] In the late 1920s, Parry made the ingenious, history-redefining discovery that Homer's text is entirely made up using repeated formulas, an almost quasi-mathematical structural make-up so as to be accurately retained and retold with the chance for only minor shifts in content; a kind of musico-numerical poetic system using hexameter which allowed those without literate memory to store and prolong information. Parry describes it as a strikingly simple but effective system, a 'poetic device which consists in joining certain types of verbs with certain types of noun – epithet formulae', and explains that the reason the lines are often 'not richer and easier to find than they are is a consequence of

the limited number of combinations of verb and subject expression which the poet had occasion to make with the help of this device' (Parry 1971, 44).

I believe there is a significant resonance here with the kind of dispositions we see in oral visual art, which similarly displays a bounded set of, often geometric, stylistic tendencies, which appear likewise as a result of mnemonic practices. Indeed, E. H. Gombrich speaks of the formulaic style of archaic Greek art in *Art and Illusion*, expressing how 'there are a restricted number of formulas for the rendering of figures standing,
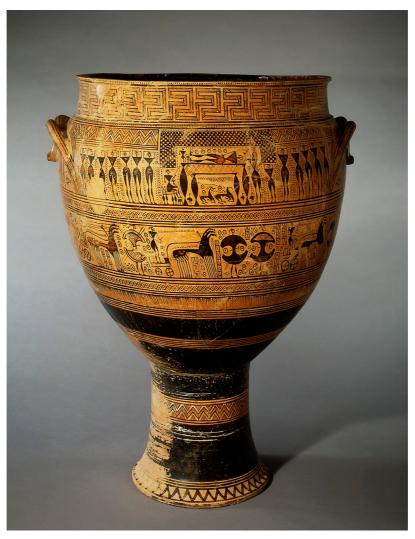
Figure 3. Krater. An example of the archaic Greek 'Geometric' period, *c*. 750–735 BC. Terracotta, height 108.3 cm, diameter 72.4 cm. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art (Creative Commons CC0 1.0).

running, fighting, or falling, which Greek artists repeated with relatively slight variations over a long period of time' (Gombrich 1992 [1959], 122. See Figure 3, for example). To return to the earlier quote by Worringer, a little way on from his point on abstraction as the 'ultimate product of cognition' in modernity, he goes on to say that 'precisely because intellect had not yet dimmed instinct, the disposition to regularity, which after all is already present in the germ-cell, was able to find the appropriate abstract expression' (Worringer 1997, 19).

There is a radical insinuation here, as he points towards the wider implications of this repetitive urge to abstraction. The germ-cell reference posits a simple and yet seismic question: if the outer world is driven by an ongoing process of trial and error repetition, then why would the human mind not follow suit? The use of the term 'instinct' is similarly critical here; used synonymously with the urge to abstraction, with 'the disposition to regularity'. We might think of instinct as essentially that which is ingrained through an ongoing process of unconscious repetition. Something which is ingrained by repetition to the point of retention, and which has found its place by a sustained usefulness outside of conscious thought. Thus, this disposition towards regularity is reflective of this trial and error repetition; all 'geometric' resonances and inclinations can be tied to this innate impetus.

In order to give further clarity to the geometric prevalence of oral artworks, as well as their seeming avoidance of immersive, 'empathic' methods we must consider the temporal dimension in more depth. Ong expresses that one of the most notable characteristics of the oral mindset is that it is one strictly *confined to the present*. The effects of this, aesthetically-speaking, are truly radical: this is a mentality in a constant state of galvanic flux and dynamism, a state of pure impulsivity, a flurry of instant thoughts and acts and sensations.[9] Ong states that in orality 'word meanings come continuously out of the present' (Ong 1982, 47), and moreover it 'never exists in a simply verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation' (Ong 1982, 67). The vocalising act then, the sound of speech itself, falls into this category, in that, unlike vision and abstractive, visual, phonetic language, 'I am at the centre of my auditory world, which envelops me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence' (Ong 1982, 72). This crucial idea of presentism to orality thus lies in the immediacy of sound: for 'sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent' (1982, 32). The consequences of this are truly profound, for without literacy there is no linear memory in any ordinary sense, meaning that one can reside only in the present from moment to moment. In orality everything is only cognisable by immediate, ephemeral, spoken word sounds, which is why there *can only be present*. Marshall McLuhan, an important

influence on Ong, gives further insight into the cause of this transition in his playful faux manifesto text *Counterblast*, explaining how:

'with phonetic writing, the visual enclosure of acoustic space, there occurs the arrest of the flux of thought that permits analysis … the initial abstraction of sight (phonetic alphabet) from sound so upset the equilibrium of oral culture that henceforth they existed only in the mode of rapid change. Yet all cultures strive to return to the integral inclusiveness of the oral state … the oral is the world of the non-linear, of all-at-onceness and ESP. There are no lines or directions in acoustic space, but rather a simultaneous field.' (McLuhan 1970, 82–83)

The detachment of the visual from the other senses by writing thus enables for 'the arrest of the flux of thought' which is innate to oral peoples, and from there, linear time becomes the norm. As McLuhan furthers 'the reduction of speech to sight by the phonetic technology gave the eye an ascendancy over the other senses which is anything but natural to man' (McLuhan and Staines 2005, 27). Ong confirms as much in saying that 'though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever' (Ong 1982, 12). What is critical is that this sensory redistribution is something which Worringer also identifies, and he specifically ties the absence of this isolation of the visual sense as being a chief cause for the 'dread of space' in oral peoples. He explains that those driven to abstraction are 'not yet able to trust entirely to visual impression as a means of becoming familiar with a space extended before him, but was still dependent upon the assurances of his sense of touch' (Worringer 1997, 16).

This is also why there is a much closer tie between orality and tactility, which is owing to their visual realm not yet being concealed by the web of words upon entering the Symbolic order. Entry into the visible, Symbolic, literate world, wherein words *stand in for things*, allows for a linear structuration of time, and transforms our memory into something much more 'flowing', through which we can move forwards and backwards, as previously indicated by Ong. This is, of course, in direct opposition to the oral mind in which memory is substituted for a 'trial and error' process of immediate feedback and repetition to the point of retaining that which is perceived as important.

Expanding on the 'redundant or 'copious', which is one of the 'psychodynamics' of orality, Ong clarifies this inability of oral peoples to think back and recall in any ordinary sense:

'Thought requires some sort of continuity. Writing establishes in the text a 'line' of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which emerges the material I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text

> selectively. Backlooping can be entirely occasional, purely ad hoc. The mind concentrates its own energies on moving ahead because what it backloops into lies quiescent outside itself, always available piecemeal on the inscribed page. In oral discourse, the situation is different. There is nothing to back-loop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered' (Ong 1982, 39)

So how do we unify this idea of an eternal present with the specific aesthetic tendencies to be found in oral art? For this we need to look to Worringer's description of abstractive art's aversion to render three-dimensionality, in that this 'calls for a succession of perceptual elements that have to be combined: in this succession of elements the individuality of the object melts away' (Worringer 1997, 22). This is a profoundly strik-ing point of juncture between Ong and Worringer. 'Succession' is essen-tially used here to mean *time value*, meaning that those driven by abstraction do not render three-dimensional objects because it presup-poses a literate predisposition to move forwards and backwards in thought as explicated by Ong. Abstraction is, as we have seen, all about the extreme isolation, symbolisation and abstraction of the object, in order to remove it from the trauma of space and its interrelations. Worrin-ger explains in greater depth, 'it is precisely space which, filled with atmos-pheric air, linking things together and destroying their individual closedness, gives things their *temporal value* and draws them into the cosmic interplay of phenomena' (Worringer 1997, 38. My emphasis). The critical point here then is that *the urge to abstraction necessitates atemporality, whilst empathy necessitates temporality*. Empathy and empathic space links things together, destroys the 'closedness' of objects and introduces a temporal value. If one were to reside in an eternal present such as those of orality (following Ong), then, as Worringer here explicates, three-dimensionality is quite simply impossible. This is a pivotal point of juncture between these two thinkers, for arguably the most overt and notable characteristic of much oral art is the lack of three-dimensionality.

How can someone be situated in space but have no conception of three-dimensionality? The point here is not a lack of capacity to situate oneself 'in space', nor that they reside in a two-dimensional reality. It is, rather, that they do not often render space *beyond the present moment*. An analogy perhaps can be seen with the process of creating an old film: if you take thousands of photographs of an object from different angles whilst moving around it, then space these apart at tiny intervals, and then combine them together, you will end up with a moving three-dimen-sional image. But if you were confined to the present moment, as Ong says of oral peoples, this means that you are only capable of seeing the individ-ual pictures and you simply cannot piece them together. This is a process

which the literate mind takes for granted. If you think about every object around you in your immediate surroundings, each and every one of them is only perceivable from one singular perspectival angle. In that moment the object only exists only in that exact form, with that exact shape, from whatever angle you happen to perceive it from: for the object is now *confined* to that perspective in the present moment. It is in the practice of literate thinking retroactively, and of combining a series of different perspectives (or photographs following the previous metaphor), by comparing the object from one angle at one moment with another, that one is able to form a three-dimensional whole.

For a mind oriented to the present, this combinatory capacity may not be relevant. If one were to be situated in such an 'eternal present' (a drastically different mode of volition to our own), then it would make a great deal of sense that this would result in a recurrent and highly recognisable set of aesthetic characteristics. It would also make sense that in an 'oral' mind, the pathway to render three dimensionality would be reconfigured so that the images would instead attempt to capture and detain something of the galvanic, fluctuating, ever-shifting surrounding world by way of repeated patterns and colours and shapes which together simulate a sense of movement and transition. In his second book, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, Worringer returns to this problem, explaining that 'the third dimension, the dimension of depth, makes up the real corporeality of an object. This is what offers the strongest resistance to grasping and fixing an object in a unified, compact way. For it sets the object in space and therefore in the undefined relativism of the phenomenal world' (Worringer 1919, 32). Depth and three-dimensionality thus oppose the urge to abstraction in the utmost.

In order to test the validity of the theory that Worringerian abstraction is activated by being situated outside of literacy, we must look to the artwork of people beyond those of historical cultures. As aforementioned, links between ancient oral art, tribal-primitive art, child art and the art of the insane (often labelled under outsider art, 'Art Brut' or sometimes 'Naive Art') are well known and frequently discussed by theorists. Yet up to now the specific reason for this correlation is often overlooked or simply put down to their being 'detached' or 'isolated' from society. As Colin Rhodes explains, Primitivism 'represents an attempt on the part of Western artists to retreat from 'reason' and thereby gain access to the very sources of creativity itself, which they believed was exemplified in its most authentic and liberated form in the minds of children, tribal peoples and the insane' (Rhodes 1994, 133). But a corroboration of orality-literacy and art theory, accounts for this deficit: what unites these mentalities is their unified disconnection from the Symbolic order of literacy. Following the Lacanian theorisation of a necessary immersion into the Symbolic order of language in childhood, before entry, the child is

in a pre-Symbolic state, or in other words, an 'oral' state. Meanwhile, the 'insane' mind, following Lacan, has been dislocated or detached from the Symbolic order of language (usually following some extreme, world-shaking trauma), or sometimes they never entered it at a crucial stage during childhood, and thus once again are situated outside of literacy, in the realm of the trauma-inducing Real. Indeed, Ong says as much when he describes the affinities between orality and bicameralism as elucidated by Julian Jaynes (Ong 1982, 30). Psychosis is, to grossly simplify Lacan's theorisation, simply the inability of language to contain the chaos of the Real. The impulse to 'abstraction' once again emerges, now that literacy is not the orienting framework.

Looking at outsider art I find that there is a deep resonance with tribal, oral art in terms of the prevalence of patterns and repetitions and the absence of three-dimensional, immersive space. We see a similar penchant for 'regularity of geometric style … built up strictly according to the supreme laws of symmetry and rhythm' (Worringer 1997, 17). In *Madness and Modernism*, Louis Sass (2017, 28) underlines some of the features of psychosis, which are very often strikingly close to the features Worringer describes under the urge to abstraction: 'a world pervaded by a sense of illimitable vastness'; 'objects normally perceived as parts of larger complexes may seem strangely isolated, disconnected from one another and devoid of encompassing context' (2017, 30); how consciousness is '"flooded with an undifferentiated mass of incoming sensory data"' (2017, 34). A great deal of clarity may be gained by viewing those who adhere to certain styles of art as being down to a detachment from Symbolic literacy, and a much longer study is needed to fully explore its insights and implications.

One of the most frequent contentions levelled against both Ong and Worringer's ideas is their 'all too simple' suggestion of a binary structuration of volition. John Hartley stresses this hard-to-swallow notion that there can be such clear-cut oppositions with such an enormous amount of mediatic variability at play, noting Ong's ironic reference to the binary thinking of some of the structuralists (Hartley, in Ong 2012, 211). Thinkers are right to contest the idea of a perfectly binary mode of thinking, and indeed to push those who adopt such stances to bypass the challenge of empirical proof (Hartley, in Ong 2012, 213). I would contend that, by bringing the art of non-literate cultures into the discussion, there is a very stark opposition in styles: two-dimensionality vs three-dimensionality; geometric vs naturalist; abstraction vs immersion; symbolism vs realism. By bringing orality and literacy (back) into art historical consideration, a clearer perspective to view and explain these large-scale oppositions, I believe, can emerge. Major thinkers, both modern and classical, all posit a clear, stark division between these mentalities, something I might characterise simply as those before, and those after writing.

Perhaps *this* then is the true binarism which lies at the very heart of the ideas put forward by these thinkers.

To finish I want to briefly return to that key trait exhibited within empathic art: immersion. The customary lack of depth and the visual disinterest in immersive space very often characterise what I have been characterising as 'oral' art. As I have noted, this may be tied to the visual-centric world of Symbolic literacy. In most empathic art, we recognise a perspective being adopted, something like an imagined viewpoint or perspective, and we see through this and onto the objective world presented before us. We are *immersed* within the work itself. In abstractive art, meanwhile, we instead see an abstracted rendition of an object: a kind of contained icon or symbol which stands in place of the real thing. This is an act driven by, as Worringer explains, 'the possibility of taking the individual thing out of its arbitrariness and seeming fortuitousness, of externalising it by approximation to abstract forms ... finding a point of tranquility and a refuge from appearances' (Worringer 1997, 16). Only in the literate volition have the chaos and arbitrariness of reality been covered by a harmonious veil of Symbolic logic, allowing one to gaze upon the world, and into a three-dimensional, immersive space, without the urge to abstraction raising its head. But the very idea of empathic immersion is also perhaps a fine metaphor for our deep and intrinsic inability to remove ourselves from our literate perspective. As Ong freely admits, 'freeing ourselves of chirographic and typographic bias in our understanding of language is probably more difficult than any of us can imagine' (Ong 1982, 77). But if we begin to view art in light of our linguistic differences, I contend that a clearer idea of what motivates these alternate modes of cognition arises, applicable to contexts of the distant past as well as the present. By bringing Worringer's theory into dialogue with the more recent ideas put forward by Ong and a number of interrelated thinkers in fields of orality and literacy, we can gain new insight into how art can be used as a means to expose profound changes in human consciousness, whether ancient or contemporary.

Notes

1. Victor Li notes, however, that even terms which knowingly depart from the overtly pejorative label of 'primitive' – such as 'tribal', 'traditional', 'premodern' and 'archaic' – often harbour a similar 'chronopolitical' baggage, but that this is unavoidable for studies which approach the subject (Li 2006, viii). When it comes to my own approach, the term 'tribal' is chosen as the best-suited of these alternatives, purely because it is a term commonly used to distinguish these particular art styles and forms in wider studies of art and art theory.

2. In the case of child art, the child must be of an age which Piaget calls the 'ego-centric' stage, which is essentially a state of pre-literacy, whereby they have a grasp of language, but not to a significant enough degree that they can be considered literate. In the case of the psychotic producer of 'outsider art', they are essentially in a state of post-literacy, wherein language no longer serves its usual function of covering up the world in a veil of words. Ong gestures towards this idea when he draws attention to the similarities between oral and 'bicameral' peoples (Ong 1982, 30).

3. Havelock (1963) argues that this shift occurs after Plato, who is considered to be the marker of the historical transition from a principally oral mentality to a largely literate one within built-up societies. Havelock evidences Plato's staggering awareness to this epochal transition, and how he was hostile towards the earlier, poetic form of prolonging knowledge which he saw as threatening to higher, more abstracted, scientific forms of thought.

4. Taking his cue from Riegl, Worringer expands by quoting Riegl's *Stilfragen*, in which he states 'from the standpoint of regularity the geometric style, which is built up strictly according to the supreme laws of symmetry and rhythm, is the most perfect. In our scale of values, however, it occupies the lowest position, and the history of the evolution of the arts also shows this style to have been peculiar to peoples still at a low level of cultural development' (Worringer 1997, 17).

5. 'A rendering in the round of the natural model in its three-dimensionality afforded no satisfaction … this reproduction, in its unclarity to perception and its connection with infinite space, would inevitably leave the spectator in the same anguished state as vis a vis, the natural model' (Worringer 1997, 38). Some clarity should be given here in terms of the mention of 'three dimensionality', in that oral sculpture can be three dimensional, as with the Lefkani Centaur, but the critical point is that they are still an abstraction from any real, naturalistic rendition: they are still archetypal, iconic.

6. Havelock also explains why the term 'non-literate' should be uttered with caution: this is a culture which is, for an incredibly long time, entirely non-literate, and yet they were still advanced enough to create cities, great temples, smelt iron, and produce of the greatest art and literature of all time, as well as solve some of the most profound problems in philosophy, science and mathematics.

7. Ivan Illich writes lucidly on this idea of a much more overarching transition of volition, shifting towards 'a distinct mode of perception in which the book has become the decisive metaphor through which we conceive of the self' (Olson and Torrance 1991, 28).

8. The geometric, mathematical structure of *The Iliad* is discussed by Whitman (1965). Havelock (1963) too discusses its mathematical and formulaic nature in *Preface to Plato*. The two Homeric texts are seen to represent a key point of opposition in terms of the oral vs literate consciousness. *The Iliad* is borne of an oral society, whilst *The Odyssey* comes from a literate one, and this is reflected by a gulf in terms of style and characteristics.

9. Worringer signals a clear unity of mindset when he describes how those driven by the urge to abstraction 'experience only obscurity and caprice in the inter-

connection and flux of the phenomena of the external world … the urge in him is to divest the things of the external world of their caprice and obscurity in the world picture and to impart to them a value of necessity and a value of regularity' (Worringer 1997, 18).

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