The Expansion of
Meaning and the
Transpersonal Paradigm

“A Journey to the heart of
Madness – a Journey to the Heart
of God”

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Research Statement

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1. INTRODUCTION

Explanations and theoretical background

All these accidents that happen, follow the dot...
Coincidence Makes sense, only with you. You don't have to speak, I feel emotional landscapes, They puzzle me, then the riddle gets solved And you push me up to this state of emergency, How beautiful to be, state of emergency.

—Bjork; Joga; 1997

This statement as well as being an exposition of the background motivations and intentions of my work presented through the MA in Virtual Realities course, is also an attempt to articulate a set of principles pertaining to an artistic practice that is simultaneously fixed in both individual personal experience and social action. In this sense I will be making explicit the idea of an arts practice that is grounded in transpersonal awareness and directed towards a social action and the transformation of the habitus. The first section of this statement comprises of an explanation of the these terms (transpersonal and habitus) and their relevance to resolving the split between subjectivism and objectivism which characterises contemporary discourse. Following this an account of the process which led to the current direction of my practice and a subsequent analysis of the issues I have engaged with primarily through the tools for social critique developed by Pierre Bourdieu. In this, the theoretical side of my practice, I am attempting to synthesize transpersonal methodology with the sociology of Bourdieu and in doing so, contribute to the task set by Habermas of developing a truly emancipatory hermeneutics while retaining tenable objective foundations.

The habitus is an ‘internalised socially produced cognitive structure composed of a
system of bodily operations that generate practical action in the world’ (Lizardo; 2004, p398). It is through the habitus that our perceptions are filtered and our meaning derived which produces the actions that in turn serve to reproduce the habitus. It can be better understood when one looks at the origins of the word meaning to live or reside and in this sense is similar to the concept of the Lebenswelt (life world) of phenomenology, but with the vital distinguishing feature in that it provides for the explanation of variation according to class and cultural disposition and how the generative action of the habitus acts to reproduce itself. It is the result of the internalisation of objective social structures (arrangements of different material and symbolic resources) which are translated in the process of socialization into embodied social structures. It can be viewed as the result of adaptation and gives rise to patterned ways of understanding, judging and acting in response to specific social circumstance and trajectories which come to dominate our cognitive faculties. Thus the habitus acts as an agent of a groups self-recognition and self-reproduction, making a virtue of necessity. The systems theorist, Gregory Bateson notes that increasing adaptation in both biological worlds and human society leads to increasing pathology. Involved in adaptation and consequently the formation of the habitus is a narrowing of perception and a restriction of awareness as to what unifies all phenomena. The habitus is an active generative matrix of action; the self perpetuating and continuous structuring of our cognitive structures. Thus Bourdieu's formulation of the habitus as structured structure.

Also of use to the task at hand will be Bourdieu's concept of the field the objective hierarchy of durable social institutions and symbolic orders which exert a force upon all those who come within its range, yet those who experience its influence are not
generally aware of its source. This idea will become clearer as the concrete example of the juridical field is explored below. Where field and habitus intersect is the biography of specific individuals or populations as they are socialized into specific fields at certain points in their structural development.

The transpersonal is a concept which was pioneered by Stanislav Grof, M.D., still arguably the leading scientist in this field. It builds upon the work of William James, Abraham Maslow and Carl Jung in acknowledging and attempting to articulate and utilise in psychotherapy, experiences of a transcendent nature that are beyond the normal ego boundaries of consciousness. Sometimes referred to as the "fourth force" in psychology, succeeding psychoanalytical, behaviourist and humanistic fields, the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology defines it as the ‘study of humanity's highest potential and with the recognition, understanding and realization of unitive, spiritual and transcendent states of consciousness’ (Lajoie and Shapiro, 1992, p91). According to Grof, transpersonal psychology is an attempt to depathologise the inner psyche, and differentiates between functional psychosis and mental illness which can be interpreted as symptoms of natural transformative crises which are part of a healing and evolutionary process, that is termed spiritual emergence. It was William James who first argued in the realm of modern science for the value what we have come to refer as transpersonal experience in his 1901-02 lectures at Edinburgh entitled The Varieties of Religious Experience, when he investigated the experiences normally associated with various prophets, saints and “holy men” of religious movements. He critiqued the neurological reductionist interpretations of his day which decry such experience as psychological pathology and asserted instead its human benefit. Jung himself, toward the end of his life attributed all his most mature work to transpersonal
experiences, first reported in *Seven Sermons to the Dead*, 1916 (Grof, 1993 p85).

Today, transpersonal psychology owes its greatest debt to the myriad of indigenous traditions across the world which have retained their practices and beliefs despite the severe oppression and even genocide at the hands of imperialism. Indigenous animistic beliefs, displaying remarkably similarities across enormous geographical and historical divides are essentially the earliest surviving forms of religious experience (thus the saying in transpersonal anthropology “before there were gods there were shamans”). For transpersonal psychology they represent a highly advanced awareness of the nature of transpersonal experience and the ensuing fostering of a sustainable relation of the individual to the community and environment. It has been the task of transpersonal psychology to develop from such beliefs and world views, a new scientific paradigm which ceases to propagate the fragmentation characteristic of the psyche of Western civilisation and the ensuing pathological destruction of the environment that sustains us. We can gain an important insight to this fragmentation by examining one of its core causes and symptoms inherent in many fields of human endeavour today; i.e. the split between subjectivism and objectivism. This dilemma is devoid from an animistic perspective which offers in my opinion the best possibility for transcending these problems which, combined with the tools of analysis proffered by Bourdieu that also address this divide, allow for the development of alternative ideologies and social institutions to those proffered by the growing global hegemony of imperialism.

Where objectivist accounts of culture and practice repress the intentionality and individuality (i.e. what is referred to as *agency* in sociological terms) of how we
inhabit and negotiate objective reality, subjectivist accounts on the other hand edit out
the objective structures which lie behind the formation of our subjectivity. Thus
neither is sufficient for the development of emancipatory practice. It is a problem of
*hermeneutics*, i.e. the science of interpretation and meaning of our surroundings;
whether the meaning we acquire can be objectively processed and acted upon with
independent agency or if it is already dictated by the existing social conditioning. The
nature of our cognitive structures is of vital importance for comprehending this
dilemma and thus we can realise the importance of Bourdieu's cognitively formulated
concept of habitus.

Turning to the animist perspective, objective meaning and symbolic significance are
complementary and to an extent, almost on equal terms. The world is not separated
into society and nature but is rather perceived as one whole environment, every aspect
of which is suffused with personal significance that embraces their fellow human
beings, the plants, animals, and phenomena of their environment which they depend
on and the language in which they live and move (Ingold, 1992, p42). From a
cognitive perspective it has been suggested that animismessentially the
anthropomorphisation of animals and what we would consider inanimate objectsarose
when, during the evolution of humanity's linguistic abilities, language, originally a
skill confined to social intelligence, “invaded” other domains of intelligence. The
capacity of language to facilitate self-reflectivity allowed it to enter other domains of
human thought resulting in the integration of these domains via language. It is
suggested that the of invasion of the “social intelligence” by non-social information
would have, triggered the cultural explosion of roughly 40,000 years ago from
whence we have the first evidence of cave paintings, rock engravings, beads,
necklaces etc. The collapse of this cognitive barrier between the social and the natural world allowed for the conception of therianthropes; i.e. the representation of animals as anthropomorphic depicted on rock art from the period, which is essentially the first evidence of animism. What we see from this integration of the discrete forms of intelligence is the ability to think of the natural world in social terms, the basis of animism (“The Bricoleur”, 2006). We are witnessing the development of analogical thinking; the ability to make associations and to form metaphors. This notion of forming metaphors and its cognitive relationship to objective meaning and symbolic significance is of vital importance to my concept of artistic practice, for it allows for appreciation of the potential of the artist to affect the habitus, which to a considerable extent is necessarily composed of metaphors. The example of my own personal methodology for these effects be outlined in the following section.

We are now in a position to contrast animistic and contemporary orthodox positions to hermeneutical understanding and habitus formation. It is my contention that the latter is tragically prone to the acceptance of hierarchical domination and the legitimation of pathological behaviour regarding the distribution and the utilisation of capital (used in the broader sense as developed by Bourdieu to include the various forms of symbolic capital which are termed cultural capital, as well the traditional forms of material and economic capital). Exactly how we came from an animistic world view to contemporary prevalence of the subjective/objective divide is an enormous discussion, though the dawn of the scientific age can be seen as the concretisation of the world view that maintains this divide. It was then with the formation of a mechanistic world view that we can see the metaphor change from one that imbues the environment with spirit to that of a machine: the universe is effectively no longer
animated.

The next section relates subjectively significant events in my own life and how a transpersonal or animistic interpretation of them has led to the current form of my artistic practice. In this sense this paper is an instance of a *participant-observer* research methodology, which explores the adoption of an animistic/transpersonal world view in a contemporary context.
2. PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Synchronicity and transpersonal hermeneutics

The process which has led to the current direction of my practice began from a particular approach to personal narrative developed primarily from research and experience of transpersonal psychology which I was first introduced to by the Dunderry Transpersonal Centre. It is essentially a spiritual approach which gives significance to the synchronistic principle in the unfolding of one’s own personal narrative. Synchronicity is a concept developed by Carl Jung and the physicist Wolfgang Pauli which proposes that there exists an acausal connecting principle between apparently disparate causal events in one’s life. It is a principle which is acknowledged in many indigenous, animistic and eastern world views and which can give rise to such notions as the Anima Mundi or the “World Soul” (a concept which in the latter half of the previous century found a substantive scientific and ecological parallel in the “Gaia theory” of J.E. Lovelock, and psychological parallel in Jung's own concept of the collective unconscious). Synchronicity is usually associated with pathological or “primitive” and magical thinking, and occurs in the ‘varieties of religious experience’ referred to by William James above. Jung described synchronicity most basically as meaningful coincidences but in the context I am invoking here the term needs to be expanded to cover the subjective interpretation of one's life narrative with regards to the concurrence of synchronistic events and numinous experiences with its thematic evolution. This idea was explored to an extent by Kant but I will not enter here the resulting and perhaps irresolvable debate regarding the existence of first origins in the universe. The intention is to illustrate a manner by which engagement with such phenomena accords to the task of the
development of an artistic practice detailed in the previous section. It is in essence linking Jung's *individuation* with social evolution and illustrating the complementary process by which one facilitates the other, developing in the direction of a society where the free and enlightened state recognizes ‘the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly’ (Thoreau, 1849).

What follows an account is of how I came to this particular instance of the process described above. I am not contending that such pseudo-mystical phenomena are pivotal to such a process of social evolution; it is simply an honest account of one individual journey to such a position which, it is my hope, may shed some light on the debate referred to above regarding the relevance of indigenous and animistic beliefs embodied in transpersonal psychology with respect to social evolution.

In my painting practice (presented two years previously for the BA Fine Art in NCAD) I explored the notion of removing all possible narrative from the work in an effort to allow the medium to speak for itself and subsequently developing processes which exaggerated and emphasized the actions of the medium. It became an almost scientific process and achieved in my mind a degree of success as the freedom endowed to the materials allowed the viewers consciousness to be transported simultaneously to both micro and macroscopic worlds. The resulting work then became for me representations and metaphors for the physicist David Bohm's theory of the *Implicate Order*, which has become an important component in the argument for the scientific validity of transpersonal psychology.
As I investigated further what other elements of narrative remained in the work I was forced to acknowledge the persistence of that narrative which pertains to the author themselves (or rather ‘myself’). The next logical step was to review one's personal and ongoing history in light of what insights and possibilities are offered through transpersonal psychology and the associated animistic world views, which at this this stage I was researching and practising increasingly. What comes to prominence in this process is events and experiences of a numinous nature more often than not coinciding with times of pivotal change or crises in one’s life intersections, in a manner of speaking, on one’s life path. Such events and experiences may come in the form of synchronistic occurrences and encounters, dreams or a number of methods for exploring *non-ordinary reality* employed in transpersonal practice or anywhere there appears to be, paraphrasing one of Jung's definitions of synchronicity; a transmission of information without any empirically verifiable medium of transmission. This proposition implies that there exists a relationship of affective relevance between these subjectively felt phenomena and the objective circumstance which they occur with apparent respect to and thus is an instance of the complementarity of objective meaning and symbolic significance experienced through animistic belief referred in the previous section.

Personally, such subjectively felt phenomena were a series of numinous and synchronistic events surrounding a period of unexplained physical illness. It was believed by doctors at the time, given the symptoms and the high risk category of my age group, to have been a probable case of lymphoma; a cancer of the immune system. Biopsy results impending, I and my family had come to expect the worst but hoped for the best. During this time, a miscarriage of justice which befell my family
several years before I was born and my parents married, had begun to increasingly resonate with me. What follows is a brief account of the events of this injustice as conveyed to me by family sources, which is in conflict with official history that continues to be propagated and defended by state and elements of the media. Since efforts to overturn the state ruling on the case are ongoing and my aim now is only to provide an understanding of how I arrived at a particular form of artistic practice, I have chosen not to divulge the specific location, time nor the identity of persons involved (save those operating within the apparent impunity of state powers).

A young civil servant; a cousin and neighbour of my father is abducted as she walks home on a small quite rural lane. Given the nature of her disappearance it is assumed by the Garda Síochána that she has been murdered and three local men ranging from their late teens to early twenties, including my uncle from my mother's side of the family are brought into questioning. The Garda Murder Squad of the time, often referred to as the 'Heavy Gang' take charge of the investigation and are led by the now retired Detective Inspector John Courtney, probably most well known for his involvement in the Kerry Baby's case of 1983. The three suspects are tortured at Trim Garda Station, through intimidation and severe physical assault including the stripping naked of the youngest and the use of a red hot poker on the side of another. Two of the young men including my uncle through the pressure of torture, sign statements implying their guilt. About one and a half months after the abduction the remains of the young woman are discovered some twenty miles from the location that was "confessed" in the Garda statements. Yet Gardaí assured her family that they knew who the guilty were (all of whom were also known very well by the family, given the close-nit nature of this rural community) and that they had confessed to the crime and
would be brought to justice. As a result and also partly by way of Garda negligence, events took another tragic turn when two brothers of the murdered woman and another man abducted the youngest of the suspects. He was later found dead not far from where the remains of the young woman had first been discovered, with an incision made in his inner thigh which the coroner concluded was a posthumous castration. The two remaining suspects were later tried, convicted and served time in Mountjoy prison. To this day efforts to overturn the verdict and clear their name and that of the deceased are ongoing.

The circumstances surrounding my above mentioned illness, such as the actual location of the biopsy incision and persons accompanying me to the operation, so closely echoed aspects of the events described above, that it acted to leave an indelible impression in my consciousness and something of an insight into the subjective experience of what befell those families and their community from which I am born. There is no doubt of course that my interest in and openness to synchronicity and transpersonal awareness focused and enormously magnified such associations and numerous interpretations of (seemingly) related dreams and other synchronous occurrences which my mind made. My point therefore is not to give an example in order convince of the reality of synchronistic pseudo-mystical phenomena but rather to demonstrate in the spirit of William James, the pragmatic effects of what I call an expanded and deep hermeneutics.

Sometime prior to events of my encounter with possible lymphoma, a close family member who is also engaged in transpersonal practice confided in me symbology encountered in an ancient “sacred site” in county Meath, which spoke to them of the
Four Courts in Dublin and the oppression perpetrated therein. While awaiting the results from the biopsy I attended the World Social Forum 2005 in Porto Alegre, Brazil and while there I witnessed the screening of a powerful documentary on police brutality and the oppression of impoverished communities in the favelas/slums of Rio de Janeiro. The film followed the efforts of people as they make a stand for justice and against state violence and oppression; people who had lost loved ones to police bullets or had witnessed such murders and executions, and risk their lives by speaking their truth. Following the screening, mothers of those murdered by the police spoke further of their experiences, driving home the messages of the film and testifying to the courage, determination and human necessity of their struggle. I had the opportunity to meet them personally and this was to prove to be an intensely moving experience which touched deep to the core of the motivations and intentions of my artistic practice. The symbol which they used for their movement along with a grave and ominous slogan, was the very same as that encountered here on Irish shores several months previously which resonated so strongly of injustice and oppression. It seemed in my mind that an incredible power in the coming together of people through empathy and compassion to fight for what is truly righteous, had been revealed and that the ultimate end of this power is healing and emancipation. Upon returning to Ireland I was to find that within 24hrs of this event, results had been disclosed by the hospital which proved negative for the presence of lymphoma in my system.
Returning to the cognitive aspects of objective meaning and its relation to symbolical significance in a transpersonal perspective, the metaphorical content of this experience can be explored and expanded, so its informative role in the shaping my artistic practice may be comprehended. First we need to examine the role of metaphor in cognition a little more closely.

It is a widely held and now cognitively substantiated view that metaphors are crucial to the formation of knowledge. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999 and 1980) have written extensively about the implicit metaphors shaped by the nature of bodily experience that underpin our conscious flow of thought and reason. Thus reason is not the abstract spark which makes humans uniquely rational as Western philosophy has maintained, but is in fact part of our biological evolution and a continuum with other species. Arthur Keostler points out that creative acts involve the perception of an analogy where none was perceived before. For the transpersonal approach the analogy is less perceived than it is experienced more powerful than the knowledge of something is the experience of it. It was through this process that I came to correlate my subjective bodily experience to an objective and external situation. It was effectively this process which lay at the foundation of my artistic practice. Examined in terms of Bourdieu's habitus, what occurred was what I can best describe as a sympathetic resonance which enabled to an extent (though to how great an extent can never be realistically quantified) the experience of another habitus. More than a just a comprehension of an objective situation, it is an allowing of oneself to be formed by
And so I have endeavoured to create an art capable of communicating even fraction of this resonance that simultaneously opens and explores the means for transformation of the situation. It is a practice that necessarily takes different forms, and is intended to build solidarity, to disseminate information, to become politically active, and to create representations and metaphors of the objective and hierarchical structures which reveal their nature as instruments of the dominant with the contention that doing so can transform the receptive habitus.

It having become my objective to confront issues of injustice through my practice, I turned my attention to some of the particulars of the experiences described in the previous section, to extract latent meaning from the metaphor that arose through synchronicity. As the title of the show states, injustice was conceived of as a cancer, and more specifically a cancer of the immune system. The immune system is being seen more and more as a function in the body that is as complex as the brain itself, to the extent that it is sometimes referred to as the body's second brain in a part of the medical field that is known as cognitive immunology. Just as the brain is responsible for maintaining the psychological identity of the individual, the immune system is responsible for maintaining his/her molecular identity. Lymphoma involves the overproduction and thus unsustainable dominance of one particular facet of the system. The judicial system is similarly responsible for the maintenance of our social identity, it having been granted by the state the responsibility of dealing with those actions and agents in society which do not confirm to what the state has deemed tolerable in its system. In cases of injustice, the police or the courts and the state in
general has over-extended their presence and exerts a pathological dominance ultimately detrimental to the whole of the system. Finally, just as the genetic information that predisposes an individual to cancer is hereditary, the burden of official history (since the judicial system holds the monopoly on the production of truth) is shared with family and passed on to succeeding generations, who are then, given the fundamental and inherent character of justice to human nature, obliged to either struggle against the state and the dominant or knowingly partake in a damning collective lie about themselves, their family or kin.

Applying Bourdieu’s "technologies" of social critique to the juridical field, it becomes apparent that injustice is an inevitable outcome of our current system, since its interests are self-serving. It has at its core a fundamental imbalance tipped in favour of the dominant; i.e. the professionals and specialists of the field. As Bourdieu points out the “honour game” (i.e. a struggle for symbolic capital) that is played out in the juridical field is not one between equals. All the trappings of juridical field; the hierarchical structures, the architecture of the court, the specialized language acts to inspire awe, respect and even fear which is not only intended for the guilty party but for all those subject to the power of the field. It is symbolic violence; a principle of division which acts to dominate the disadvantaged who have little choice but to accept it. This power (and that of the political field also for that matter) is legitimised in the eyes of those subject to it, through what Bourdieu terms miscognition: i.e. power relations which are failed to be perceived for what they objectively are, but are understood instead as the natural and only possible workings of the field. Such miscognition, it can be argued is fundamental to preservation of social order, which without it, would become intolerably conflicted. However if the interests of the social
order are in maintaining the status-quo and consolidating the capital (both in the economic and symbolic sense) of the dominant, the juridical field can (and so often does) act as an instrument to, in the words of Father Niall O'Brien, ‘*bludgeon the innocent or the merely ignorant...And the unkindest cut of all*’ he goes on to say ‘is that all this appears to be fair’ (1985, p42).
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