

Catharsis: The Common Goal of Storytelling and Life

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1. Classical Catharsis

The term “catharsis” has been in circulation long before the times of Aristotle but nowadays we all accept that he is its reputed author. Unfortunately, the pages in *Poetics* containing its explanation though, have been irrevocably lost. On the other hand, we still have the passages in *Politics* where Aristotle defines the same term in respect to emotions and/or physiology, and those in *Nicomachean Ethics* from which an ethical interpretation could undeniably be derived.

It is both impossible and unreasonable to try and trace all interpreters' ideas in this short text. Therefore, I have chosen to roughly group them in **three major trends**.

1.1. Ethical or/and Aesthetic Catharsis

The **ethico-aesthetic** interpretations probably started in 1634 with the presentation of the official rules of the French Academy for dramatic composition, which were centered on the notion of the audience's emotional purgation (i.e., catharsis) as the main function of tragedy. For this to happen though, the public had to absolutely believe in what they saw on stage. By rationally comparing it to their own life (and finding out other people experienced the same and even worse situations) the audience, then, could feel relieved from their painful emotions. But this could *only* be achieved if the author used the rule of the three “dramatic unities” (those of action, time and place) attributed to Aristotle. The dogmatic view imposed on all dramatic works started the 200-year epic battle of “*des anciens et des modernes*”. It divided French (and European) thinkers into two camps, according to whom they thought superior – Greek/Roman authors or contemporary ones. René Descartes vs. Blaise Pascal and Pierre Corneille vs. Jean Racine are just a few of the examples of that “war of the titans” which ended in the obvious victory of the “*modernes*”.

Although in the 18th century Denis Diderot, in *Encyclopaedia* (1751-72), and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in *Laocoon* (1766) and in *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767-9), ardently argued with the Academicians' model, their ideas *de facto* coincided with the rationalistic interpretation of “catharsis” and even enhanced it. They were deeply convinced that not only is catharsis an emotional release from the unhappy feelings one has acquired while watching the play but that it also leads to the absolute **moral transformation** of the hidden vices of that same person into virtues. This view became so popular throughout the next 200 years that even nowadays it is still the credo of many theoreticians (especially the ones whose background is Marxism).

Parallel to the ethical one, an opposite trend of thought sprang from the Academicians' formalist interpretation. In his essay on tragedy in *Four Dissertations* (1757), David Hume suggested that catharsis is actually a purely **aesthetic** effect which flows from the concrete play's perfection of form thus inducing a revelation in the audience's minds. This idea was heartily embraced by many great 19th century German writers (who were better dramatists but lesser theoreticians than their predecessor Lessing) such as Friedrich Schiller, in *Theater Considered as a Moral Institution* (1784) and in *On the Tragic Art* (1792), and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in *Re-reading Aristotle's Poetics* (1827). Because it obviously gave them a better reasoning of their artistry, they saw it as at least an explanation of “catharsis” equal if not prevailing over the simplistic moralistic one.

1.2. Physiological Catharsis

While most theorists were fighting over the above dilemma, there were a few voices (the earliest one probably being Antonio Minturno in his *L'Arte Poetica*, 1564, followed by John Milton in his preface to *Samson Agonistes*, 1671) that maintained “catharsis” should be dominantly understood in its medical sense of purgation. The most solid argument for such an understanding was found in Aristotle's own reference on musical catharsis in *Politics*.

The best interpretation of this kind is given by Jakob Bernays in *Aristotle on the Effect of Tragedy* (1857), who explained catharsis as an ecstatic-enthusiastic **physiological** process which first, leads the audience to a bodily disorder, and then, to a bodily relief. With the rapid development of all sciences at the end of the 19th century, and having in mind that Aristotle's father was the famous Asclepian physician Nicomachus ("catharsis" was a key word in the Asclepian therapeutic procedures), the idea soon became popular and acceptable.

1.3. Spiritual/Religious Catharsis

Any cult in human history states that the unpermitted actions/thoughts of man against the cult's divine orders lead him/her to spiritual uncleanness. An active participation on the side of the sinner is needed to establish back the harmonious relationship. In most religious texts it is often called "catharsis", and even in the beginning of Sophocles' play "*Oedipus Rex*" the protagonist uses a form of the same word when he asks how his stricken city may "cleanse" itself.

Many authors before Friedrich Nietzsche mention in their research that in its very origin Greek drama starts from the Dionysian rituals but it is he, who in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), underlined the importance of that fact and equated the presence of an irrational **spiritual/religious** purification with the rational ones of ethics, aesthetics and physiology.

2. Catharsis and Dialectics

Using his revolutionary philosophical **dialectical approach** to every process and event in our Universe, in his lectures on *Aesthetics* (read in 1820-29 but published in 1835) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel attributed to "catharsis" a greater importance than any other interpreter before him. By reaching the respective dialectical harmony of the two conflicting forces in the plot, "catharsis" became also the final attainment of cosmic harmony in the audience's consciousness. Dialectics paved the way for further exploration of the possibility for simultaneous existence of some or all of the classic aspects of the term (albeit contradictory on the surface) and opened the minds to seek for its existence in fields other than dramatic poetry.

2.1. Catharsis and Art

Surprisingly enough, it was Berthold Brecht's striking **anti-cathartic theory** that started the "process of enlargement". In his early interviews and writings after 1926 (and later in *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, 1949) Brecht presented himself as a person so unhappy at the *exclusion* of the playwright (director) from the "actor-audience" communication process that he directly asked the public to alienate themselves from feelings while watching the "*reproduction*" of real life on the stage and appreciate the same real life problems through their abstract development by the dramatic text instead.

Meanwhile, Lev Vygotsky, in *Psychology of Art* (1925), and Georg Lukacs, in *Heidelberg Aesthetic* (1917), and later in *Aesthetics* (1963), vigorously tried to remind that Aristotle's own focus on "catharsis" was much broader than the field of tragedy (drama) and actually included **any communication through Art**. Although their arguments came mainly from their predecessors' *aesthetic* (re: Vygotsky) or *ethical* (re: Lukacs) domains, this re-enlargement of the scope was of great help for future thinkers to make the inevitable comparative jump from the area of human creativity to that of human life itself.

2.2. Catharsis and Therapy

But the aestheticians were already a little late. After many years of practice, in 1917 Sigmund Freud finally published his fundamental *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* in which he *transferred the focus* from Art to **Reality**. The treatment of psychological deviations by liberating the patients' repressed emotions through in-depth conversations with their doctors was a truly radical idea for its time. Looking for the "catharsis" in the **individual** patient (the "actor" on his improvised stage), and thus ranking second the

passive voyeuristic audience, Freud (more subconsciously than rationally) simply went back to *the roots* of the term in the Dionysian rites when everybody present were such “actors”.

Soon after that, in *The Theater of Spontaneity* (1923) but more importantly in *Psychodrama* (1946), another doctor, Jacob Moreno, combined the core existing explanations on the nature of “catharsis” with less known writings of the Far and Near East religious cults in which the future saviours of humanity were first required to purify and save themselves. He also aimed at catharsis as the final goal of his curative theory but explored the path *beyond* the Freudian work with the individual patient – towards a **group** catharsis through a psychodramatic performance in which both the “actor patients” and the “audience patients” had to take an active part.

3. Catharsis and Mass Communication

It may appear that “catharsis” works *only* for some kind of *potentially* sick “tempted audiences” who are cured through their contact with the arts of theatre, music, dance, painting, sculpture, etc., or for *truly* sick people in real life who must undergo medical treatment, using artistic methods. But let us now turn to how the “**mass**” audience reacts to the development of the latest genre: **the TV reality show**.

According to statistics the audience share of most reality shows is bigger than that of any TV drama or even of many theatrical box-office hits. “*The Amazing Race*”, “*Project Runaway*” and “*America’s Next Top Model*” rank in the top of all DVDs sold on Amazon.com. Lots of the shows’ winners become so popular that after the shows’ ends they build amazing careers in all spheres of life. And a 2007 UK survey* demonstrates that every seventh teenager hopes to gain fame by appearing on reality TV. (Economist, 2007) In other countries this number is even bigger.

What all of these shows portray are the relations and reactions of **real ordinary people in abnormal situations or/and locations**. More rarely, celebrities in normal situations as in “*VIP Brother*” or “*The Simple Life*”. But this formula (plus the visuals, acting, directing, etc.) defines the success of good scripted drama, too.

Why, then, huge groups of people nowadays prefer to watch “*Big Brother*”, “*Survivor*”, “*The Fear Factor*”, “*American Idol*”, “*America’s Next Top Model*”, etc. than such classic plots and characters as those in “*Casablanca*”, “*12 Angry Men*”, “*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*”, “*Taxi Driver*” or “*Thelma and Louise*”? (Ironically enough, one anthological film is even titled “*Ordinary People*”.) And if you want celebrities, please, come and choose “*Citizen Kane*” or “*Amadeus*”.

How did unscripted life become more compelling than its “masterful” portrayal? Isn’t it because both its “plots” and “actors” (even if being planned, directed, edited, etc.) are much more nuanced, diverse and unpredictable than those of scripted drama? And isn’t it because **the “live” catharsis** they evoke is much stronger than the predestined one has ever been? - I think so.

4. Catharsis and Initiation

Very soon after its publication in 1949, Joseph Campbell’s book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* turned out to be such a revelation to social sciences as Aristotle’s *Poetics* was once for drama theory. This is no wonder as Campbell’s description of the main character’s quest and striving for **Initiation** after he has chosen to cross the threshold to the underworld completely corresponded to Aristotle’s account of the main character’s path of ordeals towards achieving **Redemption** for his disastrous mistake in the beginning of the tragedy.

* “*Jaded*”, The Economist, January 27, 2007, p. 57

There are two important differences, though. *First*, Campbell traced the above paradigm through many folklore examples* and almost all world mythologies and thus proved it to be **universal** for all times and cultures; and *second*, the empiric examples he produced clearly showed that the paradigm works not only for some kind of superheroes but for **anyone** faced with the multiple special moments of personal growth which he experiences during his lifetime.

On the other side, Campbell's reports on how the person feels **after** achieving the initiation ("*enlightened*", "*reborn*", "*purified*", etc.), and how *the whole tribe (family, clan)* behaves while celebrating his return (experiencing physiological, emotional and rational relief), astonishingly correspond to the multi-faceted (dialectical) interpretations of Aristotle's "catharsis" both in the individual and in the group.

And it doesn't matter if we would connect that **all-embracing liberating state of mind and body** and compare it either to the frenzy of the Dionysian mysteries, or to the happy team and audience at the end of each night's theatrical performance, or to the cured patients' eyes after experiencing their psychodrama, or finally, to the amalgamated ecstasy of every bunch of fans, contestants and creators in any reality TV. It is still the same paradigm.

5. Conclusion

Storytelling and life are interwoven because catharsis is the actual goal of *communication* itself. Artists or not, we all tell stories to communicate with other people and to help others communicate through our stories. And every story builds upon fragments of our life, and each fragment of our lives unfolds like a structured story.

And would I then be wrong to say that all our lives are stories, and that all our stories are mere copies of our lives?

Or, in Shakespeare's concise and poetic wording,

*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players:
they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time
plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.*

(*As You Like It*, II, vii)

* Scientific correctness demands that it be admitted that many of Campbell's findings appeared 20 years after similar research had been conducted by Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp and published in his *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928). The latter work though, was translated in English only in 1958 which makes it very unlikely being used by Campbell as a source or even inspiration for his research.