



Worship as transformational object: Aesthetic experience and the “unthought known”

Dreyer, Yolanda

University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
Yolanda.Dreyer@up.ac.za

Abstract

Meaning is formed where an evocative object and the unconscious meet. Such an object can be a thing, a person, a place, art, word, sound or atmosphere. This way of forming meaning does not depend on thinking. Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas calls it the *unthought known*. It is a form of knowing that is perceived through imagination – that capacity that mediates between thinking and sensing. The aim of the article is to explore worship as transformational object in discussion with Johan Cilliers’ *A space for grace: Towards an aesthetics of preaching*. In a worship event a rich variety of elements can contribute to aesthetic experience: from space and architecture to art, colour form and symbols, to sound, music and singing, bodily participation, and the spoken word. The article explores how these can function as evocative objects that have the capacity to affect the psyche and transform the self.

Keywords

Worship; transformational object; unthought known; aesthetic experience

1. The story begins

In response to the inevitable question with which friendly adults try to make conversation with a child, “What would you like to be when you grow up?” the four-year-old girl answered: “I want to preach like my grandfather”. The adults laughed. The little girl took this as a sign of approval. Little did she know that they were laughing because it was such an impossible idea. The child would soon learn what the “real world” looked like. In the real world in the 1960s in that country, in that culture, in that church, women did not preach. Women were not pastors and would never be. However,

that statement of the little girl was probably the first expression of an “unthought known” that guided her life for the next nearly sixty years.

From the age of four she and her father went to church on foot. From their home halfway up Table Mountain to the church in downtown Cape Town was quite a distance. Her father loved to walk. She was proud to be called “the only one who could keep up” with his long athletic strides. She gave three to four steps for every one of his. The mother and father took turns to attend Sunday service while the other one minded the baby boy. When it was the father’s turn to go to church, he and the little girl would walk down the mountain together. On a Sunday morning the streets of Cape Town were quiet. Occasionally they would come across the brass band of the Salvation Army on a street corner. They would stop and listen to the solemn hymns sounding in the silence of the sleepy city. Sometimes there would be another person or two who would also watch and listen. Often there was a “bergie”¹, mostly a thin older white male with tattered clothes and unkempt long hair. The “bergies” were not scary. Their faces were gentle and sad. They made the little girl feel sad. She was glad that they too could hear the beautiful music. Maybe that could make them happy for a while.

The church building in downtown Cape Town did not look like a church. It fit in with the buildings of the city. Adjacent to the church was a factory that produced dough. But the inside of the church was a magical place. Above the high pulpit was a thick concrete sound board. It reached into the space of the building like outstretched arms. The sound board, the niches on either side of the pulpit and the huge arches were painted in rich colours of gold, turquoise and burgundy. For the little girl that sound board looked like God’s huge outstretched benediction over pastor and congregation as the pastor beneath spread his small human black-robed arms to send the people away with God’s blessing.

The high-walled church was dark. The family would always sit on the right side of the sanctuary were the windows were. There was a small garden between the wall of the dough factory and the windows of the church.

1 “Bergie” is an Afrikaans word from the word “berg” (mountain) that denotes a homeless person who lives on Table Mountain.

Between the high-walled buildings it was fairly dark, but some rays or specks of sunlight did filter in to brighten the large leaves of the delicious monster. Sandwiched between the huge concrete constructions built by human hands was the little garden of green and light – God’s work. For the little girl the Creator-God was present in that garden.

The candelabra in the church were in the form of a cross with candle-shaped lights on the eight corners. The cross was black with a thin gold line tracing its shape. The candle-lights were white. The little girl new of Jesus and the cross. It was a sad story. The solemn black of the cross-shaped candelabra was the colour of that sadness. But there was another side to the story. The gold lines on the black and the white of the candle-lights were the colours of the hope and joy side of the story.

The little girl also knew of the Holy Spirit. In those huge outstretched arms of the sound board she pictured God sending the Spirit out to fly to the people, to twirl and swirl around them where they sat or stood in the pews, and to accompany them out of the dark building and into the bright sunshine where the city was just waking up.

There was not only the see-magic in that place. There was also hear-magic, especially the magic of the mighty organ. The organ pipes were at the back of the church and could only be seen when leaving the church, but the console was in front next to the pulpit. The head and shoulders of the Dutch organist were visible as she peered at the sheet music and her body moved to the sound she produced. Bach’s Toccata in D was the most special magic of all. The organ could speak many languages: a light happy fluty language, the sad lament of a horn, the strong steady presence to accompany the human voices lifted up in praise of God, talking to God in more than language, being with God in sound and space. And, of course, the grandeur of the mixture – a sound so big and mighty it was worthy of God.

Another sound-language was even more awesome than that of the big organ: the sound of silence, the stillness, the quiet of that space. In between the sound of the organ, the sound of the singing, the sound of voice, it was the stillness that infused the atmosphere of the place, filled the space and touched the depths of her being. The little girl knew: in that stillness was God.

2. Transformational object and the unthought known

Infants and small children’s “way of knowing” is not cognitive, but through experience. When they later acquire language that gives them the possibility to also articulate experience. A transformational object is something in the external world that changes a child’s self-experience and her internal world. British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas (1987:14–16) is known for having applied these ideas also to adult life. Adults too experience objects that facilitate the growth and transformation of the self.

For many religious people faith is transformational. It changes their self-experience. Religious faith is a form of knowing and a source of wisdom that coexist with other forms of knowing and sources of wisdom. In the non-religious world people also search for transformational objects that can change both their outer reality and inner states. This, they hope, will improve their lives. Advertisements promise external and internal change: if people buy and use the product, it will improve their life and make them happy.

The constant search for an object that will change people’s inner states and outer reality for the better is, according to Bollas (1987:16), the recurrent enacting of a pre-verbal memory. In an “aesthetic moment”, the person feels a deep attraction to an aesthetic object such as visual art, poetry, music or the beauty of nature which evokes an inner experience of “early psychic life”. Bollas (1987:16) calls such a positive aesthetic experience “a psychosomatic sense of fusion” with the memory of something which functioned as a transformational object in the person’s past. Such moments have an “uncanny quality”. The person is reminded of something they never knew on a cognitive and conscious level but know deeply on an existential and experiential level. The profound experience of transformation stimulated by an encounter with an object brings about an attitude of reverence, awe and wonder.

An encounter with an object that evokes early experiences serves to structure what Bollas (1987:17) calls the *unthought known*. With this term Bollas “captures some of the elusive, paradoxical quality of human mental activity. What we know may not yet exist in thought” (Cornell and Landaiche 2008:205). When an adult relives the intense affective early experience of a transformational object, this memory is not cognitive but

existential. It is in the combination of memory, affect and experience that the self is transformed and a “powerful metamorphoses of being” takes place (Bollas 1987:17). In adult life the transformational object is symbolised. An example of such symbolisation is faith in a deity whose way of being absent and present in a person’s life are both important to the person’s being. On a non-religious level transformational objects are pursued in a variety of ways. Some people see themselves as the transformational object. It is they who should bring about changes in their external environment in order to transform their inner states and improve their life.

The aesthetic moment is often facilitated by a person’s experience of art. Earlier memories of transformation in their life is evoked by the art. It is in the aesthetic space that a creative transformational experience takes place. Certain objects have the capacity to evoke memories that create “profoundly radical moments” in a person’s life. The arts provide the space for the intense memories of the process of self-transformation (Bollas 1987:28–29). However, for Bollas the “aesthetic” is about more than the human response to the world and art. It is about ways in which human beings organise their own experience and by doing so, create something new. “Art” is also created when human beings make sense of their world. Meaning is discovered in the aesthetic organising of experience. Through the aesthetic people can find satisfaction and meaning in their work and in their “own processes of becoming” (see Cornell and Landaiche 2008:208).

3. Aesthetic organising of experience

A significant part of human life and experience involves nonconscious processes. The way in which people organise their inner life takes place largely outside of conscious awareness. The nonconscious includes “remnants of past experiences”. Psychoanalysis often focuses on the negative remnants of past experiences such as trauma, loss or helplessness. However, remnants of past experiences can also be positive. Though nonconscious experience does contain elements of a person’s history that include difficult and traumatic experiences, “our minds and bodies also constantly inform, shape, and enrich our lives in nonconscious, fully healthy ways” (Cornell and Landaiche 2008:201–202). *Implicit memory* is the nonconscious memory of experiences that cannot be articulated in language. *Emotional*

memory is where the brain stores recollections of emotions from a child's earliest experiences of the environment (Mancia 2007:32).

Berne (1977a:30) calls the “series of perceptive processes which work above and below the level of consciousness in an apparently integrated fashion”, *intuition*. Sensory perceptions are processed automatically (Berne 1977b:94–95). This culminates in intuitive knowledge. Intuitive knowledge therefore comes from experience, is acquired through the senses and is a form of knowing that cannot be formulated in language. It is preverbal, unconscious or preconscious. Though a person is unaware of what she or he knows and may not even know that they know, they operate as though their reaction is based on knowledge (Berne 1977a:4–5). Intuitive knowledge is legitimate and valid knowledge even though a person may not be able to put it into words (Berne 1977a:28). From the basis of this “knowing” nonconscious life decisions are made. Berne's idea of intuition is similar to Christopher Bollas's (1987) *unthought known*.

The *unthought known* is not only a function of infants and small children, but is a lifelong function of human beings. Nonconscious experiences play a significant role in how people grow and mature as human beings (Cornell and Landaiche 2008:205–206). From birth a human being has the potential to organise and give form to experience. This potential is what Bollas (1989) calls *idiom*. He made it his life's work to come to a deeper understanding of *idiom* as a person's individual “truth” or self-knowledge.

4. **Idiom and the aesthetic of being**

“Idiom” is Bollas's (1989:212) term for the unique defining essence that every person has. If life circumstances are favourable this unique nucleus will grow and be expressed freely. People will be able to speak with their own voice and create symbols that are unique to them. *Idiom* reveals a person's “aesthetic of being” – that is their unique response to things on account of their personal preferences (Cornell and Landaiche 2008:207). Developing one's own *idiom* through becoming and maturing, formation and transformation, is a life-long process. Objects that stimulate transformation can serve to facilitate a person's growth and maturation. An external transformational object is internalised in a “transformative interpersonal encounter” (Cornell and Landaiche 2008:209).

People instinctively and unconsciously look for transformational objects that can stimulate them to grow and develop further. Bollas (1987:14) describes it as: “The object is pursued in order to surrender to it as a medium that alters the self.” This search for a “fuller sense of self” is outside of a person’s awareness. It is a lifelong pursuit. Human beings’ sense of destiny drives them toward their own unique expression of their potential in order to become who they can be, their “true self” in the language of Winnicott (1965:140–157) or find their “idiom” in the language of Bollas. In contrast to a person who lives a *fated* life, a person of *destiny* lives out “the natural course of the true self” (Bollas 1989:34). Destiny is not a solely individualistic or internal matter, however. Bollas (1989:34) describes it also in terms of the person’s environment and relationships: “A sense of destiny is a feeling that the person is fulfilling some of the terms of his [or her] inner idiom through familial, social, cultural and intellectual objects.”

In *Being a character* (1992) and *Cracking up* (1995) Christopher Bollas explains the process of change and growth. New psychic meaning is formed when an evocative object and the human unconscious meet. The unconscious experiences the object and is affected by it. The object can be a person, place, word, image, thing, event, artwork, or the like. The unconscious arranges and orders the elements of the experience and brings the mind to new perspectives. The person then begins to think differently about the world and themselves (see Beck 2009:9–10).

Where conscious thinking can be subjective, objective, logical or imaginative, unconscious thinking is always subjective. Where conscious thinking begins by the thoughts of others, unconscious thinking requires the facilitating presence of an evocative object. The aim of both conscious and unconscious thinking is to find truth. The difference between these truths is that consciously people tend to conform to what is, whereas unconsciously they seek the truth of idiom, the truth of the self (Beck 2002:35). In this sense the unconscious, intuitive and aesthetic can open up a more unerring way to “the true self”, the “idiom”, the personal “truth” of an individual than conscious cognitive thinking could. For Bollas some characteristics of conscious and cognitive thinking are relevant to his exploration of the dialectic between the conscious and unconscious mind (see Beck 2002:11).

Thinking is normally seen as a cognitive, non-intuitive process in which concepts are formed. This kind of thinking is a construct (Heidegger 1962). Cognitive thinking is defined by Brugger and Baker's *Philosophical Dictionary* (1972:417) as "the non-intuitive mode of knowing that is ordered to the existent and its essential relationships". Aspects of cognitive thinking that are useful to Bollas's work include:

- that cognitive thinking requires solitude in which the self can be with itself (see Arendt 1978);
- that conscious thinking takes place in the form of inner dialogue – the self talks to itself;
- that conscious thinking requires turning away from concrete reality and reflecting on it on a more abstract level, for instance in the form of memories, opinions, hypotheses, imagined things, concepts and ideas;
- that the metaphors generated by abstract thinking and which are used to express thoughts, are derived from concrete reality.

Conscious thinking is a function of the complex self which is able to reflect on things, where unconscious thinking is a function of the "simple self" which projects itself onto objects. The object onto which the simple self has projected itself then carries an aspect of that self. This lies beyond the reach of conscious thinking (see Beck 2002:15). When the focus changes from the external to the internal reality of a person, memories, instinctual responses and emotions are awakened (Bollas 1995:52). When a place, object, another human being or an event is experienced as significant, personal meaning is attached to it. The person loses her- or himself in the experience (Bollas 1992:22). The object can be experienced through the senses, as a structure (a thing), as something that evokes a memory, as an idea, or as a symbol. An object that evokes a memory, an association, can transport a person to another place, time or experience (Beck 2002:16). It is a person's idiom, truth or core that is spontaneously attracted to some objects and experiences, is indifferent to others and is repulsed by yet others. A particular person would find meaning in experiences in particular ways, whereas another would find it in different ways. Each person gives unique form to their experience.

Healthy human beings have the capacity to lose themselves in an object, to immerse themselves in it. Those who do not have this capacity, lack sufficient basic trust and a functioning unconscious (Beck 2002:23). The unconscious is receptive and generates meaning. Objects that create interest, serve to provide a vocabulary for articulating meaning (Beck 2002:24; see Bollas 1992). The process of unconscious thinking in an encounter with an evocative object is as follows: the object is observed; a moment of hesitation is experienced; the person withdraws from reality and gets lost in thought. The self then reacts by projecting a part of itself onto the object in order to give meaning to it.

Meaning is the relationship between the object and the context. One “understands” the meaning of something when one intellectually grasps something *as* something (Beck 2002:24). Meaning is grasped in an act of understanding. Context confers meaning on experiences and provides a framework for organising the information. Bollas’s theory explains how the mind creates new contexts and changes perspectives. The unconscious is creative and produces new insights. It organises experience (Beck 2002:29–30). In the process the unique nucleus of the individual evolves and articulates itself (Bollas 1989:212). That which is articulated is the person’s individual truth.

Intuition provides a new perspective on what is (Beck 2002:31). For Bollas (1992:91) intuition is the ego’s ability to know “what to look at, what to look for and how to do both beneficially”. The unconscious is not restricted by the limitations of logic and habit. New insight derived from the unconscious can lead to inner transformation, to a new form of individual truth. Such new insight can seem to have appeared suddenly, as an “aha moment”, but actually new insights are the accumulation of much unconscious work (see Beck 2002:33). Bollas (1992:88) describes the feeling: “Suddenly the person develops a fundamentally new perspective which is the manifestation of a new psychic structure ... This moment often *feels* revelatory”. The new psychic structure is truth in the form of “a new intuition about revealing, a new ‘seeing’ of what is there” (Beck 2002:34) – a new aesthetic of being.

5. Worship as transformational object

In his 2016 work, *A space for grace: Towards an aesthetics of preaching*, Johan Cilliers approaches preaching from the perspective of aesthetics precisely because aesthetics represents a different way of knowing than cognitive and scientific knowing. It is knowing through sensory experience. He does not exclude cognitive understanding, but searches for a larger aesthetic framework, “a multi-sensory (re)discovery of space and time, within space and time” (Cilliers 2016:6). What he applies to preaching is also true for the worship experience as a whole. Though it takes place in space and time, it also “penetrates and disperses space and time” (Cilliers 2016:7). It happens in time and space but transcends time and space, filling them with grace, meaning and hope.

Soja’s (1996:72) notion of “thirdspace” that refers to lived or existential space, emphasises the historical and socio-dynamic characteristics of space. The mood of a space “is determined *inter alia* by the attitude, perspective and expectation of those that view this space” (Cilliers 2016:10), in other words by the inner states of those who enter the space. Cilliers adds a “fourthspace”, anticipated space in which transcendent encounters can take place. This space is accessed *through faith*. It is a “spiritual space, calling for a spirituality of anticipation” (Cilliers 2016:11). Spiritual encounters with God in space, transcend human space and have the capacity to *transform* a person’s *identity* (Cilliers 2016:15).

Individuals experience God in such a way that they discover themselves. When space is transcended in this way a transformation of identity takes place “from that which is a known (continuity) to that which correlates with a new ethos (discontinuity)” (Cilliers 2016:15). If space is transcended, “one sees God, oneself and reality with different eyes” (Cilliers 2016:16). Holy space is liminal and fluid. New possibilities open up. The existing reality, the way things are, is transcended and transformed (Cilliers 2016:16–17). The God who is encountered is also liminal, moving through human time and space, changing whatever is touched by God. Where this constant transformation takes place a new identity comes into being, a transformed and liberated new being (see Cilliers 2016:19–20). Closed space is opened up, fixed identities are transformed. It becomes a transcended, fluid, sacred space.

The transformed space, the new temple, the Body of Christ, is where the risen Jesus appears (see Neyrey 2002:69). God moves through life, through the “seemingly mundane realities of life” and becomes present in a fragile in-between space, in what Cilliers (2016:21–22) calls a “street liturgy”. Liturgical space is often thought of as a building, a sanctuary, a carefully designed space where the architecture and artefacts should facilitate an encounter between God and worshippers. However, in the sense of “street liturgy” the space where God is encountered is a much broader place. This broad place is filled with possibilities “to reimagine and rediscover meaning and life” (Cilliers 2016:31). Spiritual spaces can be found everywhere and meaningful experiences and encounters can take place anywhere, in the sanctuary or on the street.

The liturgical space of a building, a sanctuary, where the Body of Christ gathers to worship according to the ways and customs of their particular tradition and culture constitutes a “fixed place of worship”. Neither the space nor the event guarantees an encounter with God, not even for those who approach the service with a “correct” attitude of anticipation of a spiritual encounter. However, God *is* present. It is a presence that can be discovered, felt, perceived and recognised even by those who come without a particular sense of anticipation or without a prior cognitive construction of the event – even by a child.

Where an encounter with God takes place, be it in the liturgical space of a sanctuary or in a street liturgy, the person relinquishes control and loses her- or himself in God. The person becomes wholly dependent on what is received, with an attitude of waiting and listening as the mode of *being*. Even before listening there should be quiet, silence, stillness (Cilliers 2016:43). However, “to be silent in God’s presence ... does not mean to be inactive; on the contrary, it could be described as a focused awe and an attentive silence. We need to listen before we speak – because God often speaks to us not in words, but through silence” (Cilliers 2016:47). In this stillness, waiting in silence all the human senses are awake and alive, actively participating in the creating and receiving the experience. Aesthetic space is created by the Spirit (Cilliers 2016:51). It is the Spirit who enlightens the senses “to hear, see, taste, touch and smell those dimensions of space and time that unlock meaning and a Beauty of a different kind”.

In the liturgical space sound contributes to a powerful sensory and spiritual experience: the sound of music, the sound of voices, the sounds of silence. For adults words and the cognitive understanding of their meaning is maybe a large part of their experience of a worship service. But when reflecting on “words, words, words” Cilliers (2016:62) asks: “From what space do they come; in what space do they linger, and what space do they create?” Even sermons do not only contain words. Rather there is “another dimension, a deeper mystery beyond” the words. Beyond the words and their meaning *voice* “contains a personal element; the speaker creates an acoustic space” (Cilliers 2016:65) in which the speaker’s identity is expressed and received. Through, between and maybe even in spite of all the words, Gods voice can be heard as “a *divine echo* of all these voices”.

The sound of music in worship contributes to the atmosphere and creates a sound-space for the experience of what lies beyond the reach of cognitive thinking. For Cilliers (2016:78) this is where intimacy is experienced: “The most intimate moments of life cannot be articulated only in words; they must be expressed – and heard – in sounds.” Music creates an existential experience. Singing, participating in the music making, is a way of expressing a wide range of emotion from joy to lament. It is a way of expressing meaning, of symbolising. It is a ritual. It is a form of communion with others and with God. For Cilliers (2016:78) “singing is clearly linked to religious experience and expression.” The other side of acoustic experience is the sound of silence, what Cilliers (2016:81) calls “a different form of musical *Dasein*”.

Liturgical space, be it in the sanctuary or on the street, is not only a space for the human sense of hearing, but also for that of seeing. Paul Tillich (1955:17) describes it as follows:

Seeing creates, seeing unites, and above all seeing goes beyond itself
... We see the mysterious powers which we call beauty and truth
and goodness. We cannot see them as such; we can see them only in
things and events ... Seeing is seeing with and through beings into
their depth, into the good and the true and into their holy ground.

The worship service takes place in a physical space of building and architecture. It is an existential space of experience. It “also aims at recreating and transcending these forms of space to become imaginative

and anticipatory space ... a *charistopia*, because the ‘otherness’ of this space lies fundamentally in the grace through which it is constituted. It is a strange and alternative space” (Cilliers 2016:140). It is aesthetic space not only in the sense of art, beauty and sensory experience, but also in the sense of being the space for the aesthetic moment of human transformation and the formation of new meaning. It is here that God enters into human time and space, moves time and space to create a new understanding and experience. It can be called a *kairos* event (Cilliers 2016:159) – the right, critical, opportune moment.

6. The story continues

Human bodies sojourn in time and space. With their senses people experience their surroundings. With others persons community is formed and experienced. God is encountered “in shapes that are particular to each time, space and culture” (Cilliers 2016:160). The unique character of a person is formed through a process of “evocation”. Things “evoke” a reaction in people and stimulate change. In an interview with Anthony Molino (1997:11–60) Christopher Bollas describes “character” as an aesthetic:

If our way of being refers to our very precise means of forming our world, both internal and intersubjective, then each of us is a kind of artist with his or her own creative sensibility. We know that the distinctiveness of that creation is the particular form we have brought to it. We will share many contents with other beings; we share many phenomena in common, but we render them differently, and it’s the rendering of a life that is so unique to us.

The world, for Bollas, is “a kind of aesthetic tool-kit” and the person “the unwitting artist of his [or her] own life” (Philips 2002:54). The objects of the world carry the potential of transformation for the individual: “The subject employs the object, and simultaneously thereby defines and extends itself” (Mann 2002:58).

The little girl grew up to learn all about the real world and “the place of woman”, which was definitely not to preach. She saw that the designated place of woman was a restricted space and a boring place. Cognitively

she understood the realities of life and what was needed for survival. Psychologically she was a pleaser – create a friendly environment, do as you are told, and all will be happy. But somewhere from the depths of her soul and psyche emanated a quiet, strong, determined “almiskie”! This rather archaic Afrikaans word is the short response of a person who is presented with all the best and most logical arguments in the world but has a different inner truth and refuses to budge. Her different inner truth derived from a form of knowing that preceded cognitive and conscious knowing, that was transformed by aesthetic experience, and was touched by God. This truth was too strong for her to concede to a *fated* life. It simply had to pursue its *destiny*. The little girl grew up to study theology and, against all odds, to be ordained. So she did preach like her grandfather and she is still preaching today.

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