The Artist's Mind

A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Creativity, Modern Art and Modern Artists

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SAMPLE CHAPTER
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Chapter 2

A new psychoanalytic model of aesthetic experience

When the artist passes from pure sensations to emotions aroused by means of sensations, he uses natural forms, which are calculated to move our emotions, and he presents these in such a manner that the forms themselves generate in us emotional states, based upon the fundamental necessities of our physical and physiological natures.

(Roger Fry, 1909, in Frascina & Harrison, 1987)

This chapter presents a new psychoanalytic approach to aesthetics and creativity from the perspective of contemporary psychoanalytic theory, and clinical practice and research. It includes recent advances in psychoanalytic thinking and self psychology, especially an appreciation of the relational context of aesthetic experience and the role of relatedness and intersubjectivity in aesthetic experience. Several of the most important points of this new perspective are highlighted, specifically: 1) that the source and enduring core of aesthetic experience is found in early childhood; 2) that the special, idealized quality of aesthetic experience has its source in early experiences of mother–infant interaction; 3) that the sense of beauty is an aesthetically organized selfobject experience, tied to specifically maternal aspects of this initial relationship; 4) that the intense aesthetic experience known as the Sublime is tied to the relationship with and experience of the father; 5) that the violation of aesthetic organizations of experience is experienced as a sense of ugliness; and 6) that all aesthetic experiences and artistic efforts possess three dimensions of subjectivity: the intrasubjective, the intersubjective and the metasubjective.

I will start with a brief review of the issues of intersubjectivity and self-experience in the psychoanalytic literature on aesthetic experience. I will then discuss the work of Gilbert Rose, Daniel Stern and Ellen Dissanayake, which links aesthetic experience to the intimacy of parent and child. This idea will be extended to recent psychoanalytic ideas about idealization, beauty, the Sublime and ugliness. I will close with a brief overview of the multi-subjective model of aesthetic experience.
The intersubjective source of aesthetic experience

Psychoanalysts have studied art, aesthetic experience and the dynamics of the creative process for generations. Initially creativity and art were viewed as sublimations, defending against forbidden sexual wishes (Freud, 1908, 1910, 1925a, 1925b). Hence Freud’s approach to the study of art was interpretive in that the symbolic forms of artistic expression were unmasked, revealing hidden fantasies and wishes. This view of the psychology of art and creativity as a type of dream work or defensive operation has been the center of classical psychoanalytic aesthetics. Later analysts viewed art more progressively, with the ego harnessing the resources of the unconscious for the purpose of self-expression (Kris, 1952). This ego-psychological perspective continued to emphasize symbolism, but now saw regression as being at the “service of the ego” rather than the other way around. Eventually analysts such as Gilbert Rose (1980) and Jerome Oremland (1997) would elevate creativity to the status of a complex developmental accomplishment resulting in a higher level of human experience. In keeping with the classical analytic perspective on the mind as a self-regulating system, most analysts have approached the psychology of art and the artist from a primarily intrapsychic viewpoint, only tangentially related to other people (for example the potential audience). This is consistent with contemporary culture’s myth of the artist as a solitary rebel who defies convention and critical judgment. However, some recent thinkers have argued that the artist is a far more social being than has generally been admitted to (Rotenberg, 1988; Dissanayake, 2000; Press, 2002; Hagman, 2005). I believe that the major limitation of the analytic approach has been its focus on the intrapsychic dynamic of the individual artist’s mind. This shortsightedness has become increasingly obvious given the recent revolution in psychoanalytic thinking which views human psychology as more relational and intersubjective than previously thought.

Given that Freud saw art as a compromise formation between conflicting parts of the mental apparatus, the issue of the relational and developmental sources of art was not relevant to him. Freud viewed art as one of the many manifestations of the defense mechanism of sublimation, which, despite cultural trappings, was at heart an intrapsychic phenomenon. The ego psychologist Ernst Kris viewed art as resulting from regression in the service of the ego whereby earlier forms of mentation and instinctual life are temporarily allowed access to consciousness, permitting aesthetic expression for the purpose of mastery (Kris, 1952). However, once again the source of art lay in the functions of the ego, which made use of infantile modes of thinking, but these early forms of mentation did not constitute aesthetic experience itself. Ultimately the notion of the elaboration of the products of regression during the later phase of the creative process placed the heart of successful creativity in the mature emotional and mental capacities of the artist.
Gilbert Rose, in his monograph *The Power of Form* (1980), argued that artists seek through their art to recover lost ego states, specifically early experiences of fusion with the ego ideal as well as the archaic mother. Rose believed that artists as part of their normal capacities have a greater ability to merge with reality and then to disengage. They immerse themselves in an unconscious psychological process in which there are rhythmical disintegrative and integrative states. Unlike Kris, Rose viewed these regressive processes as capacities which, rather than just being at the service of the ego, have progressive, creative potential in and of themselves. He wrote regarding the artist’s creative process:

Later in life, a person’s ego may scan back over unconscious memory traces of early fusion states. Unconsciously reliving these memories of dissolving and reforming early ego boundaries is an attempt at mastering the potential traumas of the original situation. It is often accompanied by unconscious birth fantasies. They signify the re-establishment (rebirth) of ego boundaries from the fusion of primary narcissism. The re-emergence from narcissistic fusion and the re-establishment of ego boundaries carry the possibility of altered, perhaps even innovative, arrangements of the building blocks of reality.

(Rose, 1980, p. 70)

Rose described this scanning back as an *autonomous capacity of the ego* to which some aspects of reality are readily available as “malleable or plastic material to be adaptively reintegrated in the light of more customary aspects of reality” (Rose, 1980, p. 77). Creative imagination restructures reality and deepens and expands our understanding of the world. The production of art is according to Rose essentially an enhancement of normal capacities and processes by which all people test and master reality, “relating inner and outer in repeated fusion and separations” (Rose, 1980, p. 78). Ultimately the goal is an externalization of the early ego ideal that the artist has endowed with all the perfection of the parents. “By creating it, and loving it and being loved by the world for making it the artist is rematriated” (Rose, 1980, p. 64).

Through this notion of rematriation Rose moved towards a more relational view of creativity in which the core of aesthetic experience could be said to contain an intensely interactive component, the mutual engagement of artist with artwork and audience, resulting in the emergence of an archaic state of self-experience associated with the early bond with the mother.

The psychoanalyst and infant researcher Daniel Stern (1984) supported the notion that mature creativity involves the activation of archaic affective states and cross-modal perception. In the following quote Stern emphasized the emergent organization of the infant’s subjective world as a template for aesthetic creation:

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Infants are not lost at sea in a wash of abstractable qualities of experience. They are gradually and systematically ordering these elements of experience to identify self-invariant and other-invariant constellations. . . . This global . . . domain of human subjectivity . . . is the ultimate reservoir that can be dipped into for all creative experience. . . . That domain alone is concerned with the coming-into-being of organization that is at the heart of creating and learning.

(Stern, 1984, p. 67)

Stern supported Rose's argument that early regressive ego states and experiences play a part in creativity but additionally he stresses that it is the progressive organizational capacities of the infant, not just regression, that underlie the creative processes in later life. Surprisingly, Stern did not emphasise the relational context of these archaic processes. However, one would assume that these organizational capacities emerge and are elaborated within an interpersonal context. Mature forms of creativity involve the type of rematriation discussed by Rose, but additionally the self-experience-in-relation-to-other which Stern's research highlighted.

From a self-psychological perspective Charles Kligerman (1980) explored this area in his discussion of the motivation of the artist to recapture the experience of an archaic selfobject tie. In his formulation Kligerman speculated that the prototypical artist is someone who experienced consistent mirroring of his or her grandiosity in childhood. Eventually this selfobject experience fails and the artist-to-be is cast out from this state of perfection. Kligerman wrote how the artist confronted with selfobject failure possesses:

the need to regain a lost paradise – the original bliss of perfection – to overcome the empty feeling of self-depletion and to recover self-esteem. In the metapsychology of the self this would amount to healing the threatened fragmentation and restoring firm self-cohesion through a merger with the selfobject – the work of art – and a bid for mirroring approval of the world. We can also add a fourth current to the creative drive – the need to regain perfection by merging with the ideals of the powerful selfobjects, first the parents, then later revered models who represent the highest standards of some great artistic tradition.

(Kligerman, 1980, pp. 387–388)

For Kligerman art is linked to the recreation of early experiences of relationship with important caregivers and involves the expression and embodiment of psychological processes of idealization and merger associated with selfobject experience. This self-psychological perspective while clarifying the psychological function of art and creativity in self-experience does not capture what we now know to be the intensely relational nature of
infantile experience. In light of recent insights in infant research and the intersubjective nature of human psychological experience, some authors have started to consider how the fundamental drive for and experience of mutuality and intimacy plays a part in aesthetic experience and the creative process.

In her book *Art and Intimacy*, the anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake (2000) argued that the source of the arts lies in the intimate mutuality of mother and child, specifically in the affective and behavioral attunement between the members of the dyad. Referring to the burgeoning field of infant research, which has elucidated the complex interpersonal relatedness of the human infant, Dissanayake highlighted the affective interplay that characterizes the infant–parent dyad. She argued that the infant is born expecting rhythmic-modal behavior from its caretakers and its exercise becomes the bedrock of the aesthetic forms, values and experiences that eventually develop among people in a culture. In fact, Dissanayake believed that one could find the intimate aesthetics of mother and child in the rituals and art forms of the larger culture, which seeks to increase connection and coordination among members through the evocation of developmentally early experiences of attunement. Dissanayake wrote:

> It is in the inborn capacity and need for (1) mutuality between mother and infant (the prototype for intimacy and love) that four other essential capacities and psychological imperatives are enfolded and embedded and gradually, in their time, emerge. Mother–infant mutuality contains and influences the capacities for (2) belonging to (and acceptance by) a social group, (3) finding and making meaning, (4) acquiring a sense of competence through handling and making, and (5) elaborating these meanings and competencies as a way of expressing or acknowledging their vital importance.

(Dissanayake, 2000, p. 8)

Dissanayake believed that the creation and valuing of art derives from one of the most important human imperatives – the need for relatedness and self-experience. She felt that communities create artistic culture as a means of coordinating individuals and thereby contributing to individual and group survival, and that individuals work within the given artistic culture to achieve experiences of meaning and personal competence. But her idea of *elaborating* emphasized how meaning is not just in terms of everyday realities; rather, individuals as artists seek to create works that possess special power, authority and beauty so that the importance of the work in the experience of the community is made manifest. Dissanayake argued that underlying even the most idiosyncratic creative efforts is the evolved impulse to elaborate biologically important concerns, using the “rhythms and modes” of these archaic experiences of self with other.
Beauty, ugliness and the sublime

In an earlier book I defined beauty as the formal aspect of the experience of idealization (Hagman, 2005, p. 87). The self psychologist Charles Kligerman claimed that the artist idealizes beauty and that "by and large the artist is concerned with exhibiting a beauty that was originally his own (or that of the idealized maternal selfobject)" (Kligerman, 1980, p. 386). It is the experience of perfection that is at the heart of the sense of beauty. Beauty is an invariant characteristic of anything that is experienced as ideal. We all value and seek beauty as an opportunity for selfobject experience. When we are in the presence of something beautiful we are enlivened, we feel whole and happy. Beauty is a special element in the aesthetic experience in which the investment of reality with subjectivity creates an experience of that reality as both ideal and harmonious with our inner life (see also Lee, 1947, 1948, 1950; and Hagman, 2002). George Santayana described a similar experience:

The sense of beauty is the harmony between our nature and our experience. When our senses and imagination find what they crave, when the world so shapes itself or so moulds the mind that the correspondence between them is perfect, then perception is pleasure, and existence needs no apology.

(Santayana, 1896, p. 269)

Santayana described what he believed characterized the general human experience of beauty that could occur spontaneously and without obvious effort. For the artist this experience is something that he or she seeks to bring about through his or her own creative efforts. While in general artists do not make the creation of beauty a conscious goal, nonetheless a characteristic of all successful artistic efforts is that the result evokes the experience of beauty, which often transcends the artist’s intention. With this in mind it makes sense to say that beauty can never be produced (except by imitation) but only evoked as a result of the pursuit of perfection and the memory of a lost ideal. Jacques Maritain in his monograph Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry stated: “Art engenders beauty, it does not produce beauty as an object or a thing contained in a genus” (Maritain, 1953, p. 173). In the same work Maritain quotes the artist Robert Henri: “Things are not done beautifully. The beauty is an integral part of their being done” (1953, p. 174). In a similar sense the artist does not make or produce a selfobject experience, he or she through the creative process brings about an opportunity for selfobject experience, and thus the experience of beauty, whether in the experience of the external attributes of the object or in the interrelationship among the ideas that are concretized in the work.

Art cannot be limited to what is considered beautiful. In fact I would argue that art is not primarily about aesthetic experience; rather, the artist as he or she works to perfect the forms of expression in the artwork evokes
aesthetic experiences such as beauty. In fact The opposite of beauty, ugliness, may actually be the outcome of many works of art, especially in the work of modern artists who systematically deconstructed and transformed accepted cultural standards of aesthetic value, artistic practice and art products. In ugliness many modern artists found a world of alternatives which permitted the expression of highly personal and at times forbidden aspects of self-experience and relatedness. Ugliness was a means to directly challenge many of the restrictions that artists felt were blocking the development of new forms of art and new ways of being an artist (Higgins, 2002).

In the experience of ugliness, the expectation of beauty is radically disrupted. Instead of resonance, there is dissonance. The ideal is replaced by corruption and degradation. Harmony and wholeness are replaced by conflict and disintegration. For example, from a classical analytic perspective, it is not just the observation of the primal scene or the female genitals that evokes a sense of ugliness; rather, it is the expectation of one thing (loving affection between the parents and the presence of a penis, respectively) and the shock of encountering a form of violation of that expectation that results in anxiety, revulsion, and the sense of ugliness. In object relational terms, it is the expectation of unity and wholeness that is violated by the encounter with chaos and disintegration. In other words, the experience of ugliness is that aspect of an experience that leads to the disruption or shattering of the formal/aesthetic structure of experience. Hence, ugliness offered an alternative means of aesthetic organization that disrupted established aesthetic standards and therefore liberated the artist’s mind and skills to permit the expressions of formerly hidden and denied psychological states and experiences.

While beauty is the aesthetic of maternal preoccupation, the organization of the ideal elements that composed the formal sense of the interaction between mother and infant, and ugliness is the disruption of maternal order, meaning and balance, the Sublime is the paternal dimension of aesthetic experience, characterized by power, formlessness, obscurity and immensity.

Psychoanalysts have rarely discussed the problem of the Sublime. However, we may be able to approach the subject through its accompanying affect – awe. Several decades ago, the psychoanalyst Phyllis Greenacre (1953, 1956) argued that awe before the Sublime was derivative of the child’s first encounters with the father’s phallus. Its strangeness, size and power (all inseparable from fantasy) became the prototype of all experiences in which we perceive the Sublime and extraordinary. Building on Greenacre's view, awareness of the Sublime develops as the infant moves outward from the enclosed and managed aesthetic space of the mother, into an open, dynamic and uncontrolled engagement with the world as introduced by the father. The father’s relative size; the child’s fantasies of the father’s power, aggressiveness, and perhaps even omnipotence; the perception of immense
and obscure reality beyond and outside dyadic experience, all these combine in the first aesthetics of awe and astonishment. Many of us are drawn to seek out and cultivate such experiences. The Sublime functions to bring a number of different terrors within a containable, ordered universe (normally the father is experienced as protective and containing, as well as exciting). Through its powerful discharge of desire and aggression without catastrophe, the sublime experience can allow the result of discharge without the destruction of self or loved one. Death, sexuality, aggression, loss of self, vulnerability and isolation are embraced and overcome, although not by being negated or denied. Paradoxically, the experience of these terrors in the sublime experience is vitalizing and self-confirming, not disorganizing. There is an emotional state of arousal/tranquility. What is internally threatening is safely put outside the self. There is an externalization of fantasy, desire, and fear.

In other words, the Sublime is the experience of vulnerability from a position of safety. It begins with the father as observed from the arms of the mother, and continues with the world surveyed from within his firm grasp. It is the rawness of affect, the passion of fantasy, and the shock of the new, contained and expressed within a formal structure that is experienced as astonishing and ultimately transcendent.

Mature forms of aesthetic experience often involve the simultaneous apprehension of the beautiful and the Sublime. It is that aspect of our experience in which the sense of quality, formal value and beauty combine with the recognition of failure and mortality. Aesthetic experience is pleasurable, vitalizing, and accompanied by a feeling of “fittedness” and positive self-experience, but in addition the person encounters the reality of disjunction, transience and even death. It helps us to live with the recognition of our vulnerability, our tragedies and our mortality. Aesthetic experience can range from the transcendent (as in a visit to the Sistine Chapel) to the commonplace (as in the gleam of rain on a city street, or the sound of rain on the roof at night). In the experience there is recognition that these transcendent things are temporary, limited and will ultimately fade and be lost. For mature adults it can be said to be an ever present aspect of all experience; however, in instances such as art appreciation, aesthetic experience achieves a heightened, even ideal level. In other words, aesthetic experience is an aspect of a mature level of self-organization. The sense of reality is organized according to processes of idealization amalgamated with the recognition of the other in the world. Otherness includes acceptance of the inevitability of the failure of reality to meet the needs of the self in fundamental ways – failure, loss and death. Great works of art possess great beauty and contain terrible truths. Oedipus Rex is the best example of the Sublime and the tragic.

There is a mature level of awareness of the tragic nature of life and of one’s own humanity, but this awareness is articulated in a form (visual,
verbal, linguistic, musical) that is of such a refined quality that tragedy is
given expression beautifully. Thus tragic man transcends his or her vul-
nerability and mortality through aesthetic experience. In this way great art
offers an opportunity for extended dialogue – it evokes a response,
enhances self-experience and recognition. The great work never intimidates
but elevates the self-experience of the viewer.

The aesthetic experience of the artist

Because it combines the sense of fusion with the sense of object-
otherness, we might say that art is an emblem of the state of being in
love: this seems true if we emphasize the infantile projections and
reparative attitudes that are strengthened by the state. These attitudes
are the font of Form. When the artist joins them in the creative process,
infantile psychic tensions concerning sense-data renew in him some
freshness of vision, some ability to meet, as for the first time, the
phenomenal world and the emotion it carries.

(Adrian Stokes, 1957, p. 407)

The viewer of art often comes upon it unawares and the aesthetic experi-
ence is thus surprising and spontaneous. The artist on the other hand must
work to achieve aesthetic experience through the incremental perfection of
his or her craft as well as the often arduous struggle to perfect a specific
piece of artwork. In fact, the artist’s aesthetic experience is attenuated and
exceedingly elusive. If creativity is like love it also shares many of the
characteristics of a love affair in which vulnerability, anxiety and doubt
accompany, or perhaps shadow, the joy of discovery. True love often
involves an unsettling recognition of the other as a real person with flaws
and limitations (especially to one’s own fantasies). Thus the reparation of
art and love is not easy or safe; rather, it is often tragic and incomplete.
When the Kleinians talk about the reparation of art it may be at times the
rush of idealization, but for the artist especially the reparation comes at the
cost of hard work, personal vulnerability and even fear.

There is a dialectic within the artist’s mind between the imminence of
aesthetic experience and of anxiety. While aesthetic experience involves
feelings of harmony and balance, anxiety results from the experience of
malattunement. The artwork and the individual’s systems of meaning are in
disjunction. For the artist there are two options: 1) accommodation to the
new aesthetic experience through change and expansion of personal meaning
systems; or 2) rejection and/or withdrawal whereby the artwork is expelled
from one’s life world through denigration or exclusion. Even as she marks
the canvas with the first tentative brush strokes, the artist appraises the
forms, their textures, relations, relative intensities, resonance. She feels
within her a stirring of aesthetic experience coupled with anxiety (or the
potential for anxiety). As the artist works the tension between anxiety and aesthetic experience acts as a form of signal affect, guiding her towards increased refinement, balance and perfection. She might even seek to increase her anxiety towards some unknown or uncertain expressiveness or new formal order. Anxiety may even suddenly convert to joy and expansiveness, as a new aesthetic form is discovered and elaborated.

Art appreciation is enhanced when one engages the artwork, attending to one’s critical attitudes as well as one’s sense of resonance and conjunction. The art appreciator “meets” the artwork. There ensues a process of implicit, preconscious procedural knowing in which the formal, visceral and representative aspects of the work, which are the concretized subjectivity of the creator, impact on the viewer eliciting a response on multiple levels. Archaic, self and other experiences are activated during the encounter with the art object. In the best of cases this experience of meeting is intensely affective and profoundly moving – a perfect experience. In the language of first relationships, the good feed becomes the ideal feed in which all is idealized and made well again.

**Festival**

If we ask ourselves what the true nature of art is, then obviously we must reply that it consists in an experience of community that is difficult to define in precise terms. We celebrate inasmuch as we are gathered for something, and this is particularly clear in the case of the experience of art. It is not simply the fact that we are all in the same place, but rather the intention that unites us and prevents us as individuals from falling into private conversations and private, subjective experiences.

(Gadamer, 1986, p. 40)

The festival that Gadamer is referring to above is not any specific group of activities but the continual human engagement in the unfolding dialogue of art and aesthetic experience. The festival is the dynamic hubbub that has characterized creativity and the discussion of creativity throughout history and across societies. The individual creative act occurs within the present confluence of meaning and dialogue, but also arises out of the historical context of the society’s vital art history. But in the end Gadamer is uncertain about the ultimate purpose of the art festival. However, in this chapter I have argued that aesthetic experience is fundamentally tied to the archaic infant–parent relationship; therefore I would argue that the communal institution known as Art would also be linked to the way in which a society as a whole attempts to elaborate the aesthetic experience (and thus the archaic selfobject tie) across the social landscape, structuring and giving value to the most intimate as well as the most public of human relationships and institutions.
In her book *Art and Intimacy*, Ellen Dissanayake (2000) argued that there is a fundamental connection between the archaic sources of art and the larger cultural activities of a community. She wrote:

The arts evolved not as stratagems for male competition . . . but as physical correlates of psychological concern. The inborn rhythmic-modal sensitivities of mutuality, through cultural elaborations, became adaptive means for arousing interest, riveting joint attention, synchronizing bodily rhythms and activities, conveying messages with conviction and memorability, and ultimately indoctrinating and reinforcing right attitudes and behaviors. . . . As rhythmic-modal sensitivities and capacities evolved to enable the emotional dispositions by which mothers and infants engaged in mutuality, so could elaborations of these sensitivities and capacities become vehicles for social coordination and concord, instilling belonging, meaning, and competence, which are feelings that comprise psychological well-being.

(Dissanayake, 2000, pp. 139–140)

Art is one of the means by which human communities extend and infiltrate these archaic interpersonal processes of shared experiences of self, relationship, community and world. The arts are the activities that reflect and embody these archaic aesthetic experiences – creating and enjoying art are the occasions for the shared experience of attunement, vital engagement and mutual regulation. In this sense art is conservative and transformative. It holds and preserves communal subjectivity in the face of mortality and change, and provides opportunities for new experience and the facilitation of social development.

Aesthetic standards are the formal configurations that the group establishes as the optimal and expectable embodiment of metasubjective attunement and mutual regulation. They are social ideals in which communal subjectivity is concretized and given form and value. However, art is also responsive and evolving. The artwork allows for the sense of mutual creation and recognition. Art is intersubjective; there is always a sense of interaction, of dialogue between subject and object.

Some analysts have claimed that art is biologically based and has an adaptive function. However, if art is adaptive, then there must be a way for art to change in response to new developments in society and the environment. This is where the three dimensions of subjectivity come into play, the cultural standards of society are reworked through dialogue and new artists and new forms of art emerge and innovate. The creative churning of the festival, the ongoing tension between iconoclasm and conservatism in art, between social institutions, creative dialogue and individual artistic struggle, is the beating heart of culture. But the deciding process is the way in which society finds its group subjectivity reflected in the multifaceted,
perfected mirrors of experience whereby they are both confirmed, confronted and changed.

**Conclusion**

By means of aesthetic experience we are held psychologically by the formal perfection of the work, object or experience. The real is conjured and confronted in an ideal form. It is at once beautiful and also terrible. Our fearful imaginings are reconciled with the dreadful truth – they are merged within the perfect image. The fragments of our inner lives, of our self-experience, are brought together, coordinated and held together in and by the aesthetic experience. The terrors of unconscious fantasy and desire are made manifest to consciousness and enter into communal life. We are a crowd of vulnerable human beings as we enter the Sistine Chapel together, whereupon we become like gods. The most powerful and terrible fantasies of our culture are expressed through forms of such an ideal nature that we may believe that we have transcended our fragile humanity, at least for a moment – together.