

Homo Poeticus and the Art of Culture



Bill Sharpe

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Bill Sharpe, May 2007

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Prelude

Try the following experiment, at least in your mind's eye. Take some money in your hand and go out into the garden (I hope you have one, or at least somewhere you keep a few tubs of flowers). Now try and give the money to the flowers to help them grow. Or perhaps you can bury it and it will nourish them; or, ...this is plainly futile. Pick some of the flowers and bring them in. Arrange them in a vase and put them on the table to make it look attractive and invite a close friend round for dinner. Discuss a favourite book, film, or whatever and let the conversation flow. What made the conversation flow? Was it the dinner or was it the history and current content of shared experience. Where did your ideas, and your friend's, come from? Now take the flowers back to the compost heap – that will help the garden – and remember to tell so-and-so about that new idea you just had while talking to your friend.

Homo Ecologicus and Homo Economicus

The move to ecological thinking is one that sees the properties and behaviours of parts as determined by the pattern of the whole. Rather than look at an individual species, we look at the interactions of all the organisms, and how they are maintained by, and themselves maintain, the overall flows of resources. Thus the trees on a mountainside themselves create the clouds and rainfall that maintain them and that contribute to the viability of other species around them. Lose the trees and the cycle of rain is lost, and the heat of the sun dries the ground, and the whole ecosystem moves to a much lower level of fecundity.

In the case of natural resources it is very clear that the ecology 'works' without the need for any money to circulate; it is the input of energy from the sun, and the flow of resources such as water through rainfall, and other material exchanges that sustain it. When an ecosystem interacts with an economy then an additional dynamic is set up. If you want to log a forest for timber sustainably then you must understand the ecology that maintains its viability, or you will be in danger of taking too much from it, and tipping it into decline – as is happening all over the world. Likewise, if you want to harvest the value of the arts for economic benefit then you must first understand the essential nature of the artistic ecology and ensure its health, or there will be nothing to harvest.

What is this economic dynamic – what happens when an ecosystem becomes entwined with economic activity? At the simplest level, some components of the ecosystem become detached from their systemic role in which they and the system maintain each other through their mutual and original properties, and get put to some 'other' use, which bears no systemic relationship

to the health or viability of the original system. I cut down a tree and take it away to make furniture. Two things happened here: the tree came down, and it was removed. The first would happen naturally at some point, but its removal inevitably changes the ecosystem. The pattern of resource circulation that was a part of the system that produced the tree has been disturbed. The cutting down might also matter because the seeds might not yet have been produced; or they might need fire to germinate, and felling may change the undergrowth such that the conditions for fire and germination are lost, etc etc.



The basic point is that ecosystems do not exist ‘for’ any purpose – they just are what they are, and they develop along certain paths based on the conditions they are in. Once we start to connect them with economies, in which parts of them are ‘for something’ that lies outside that ecosystem, then we perturb them, and thereby we become instrumental in their continued viability. We create a mutual dependence between our own needs and the needs of the ecosystem. If we need it for something, to make furniture or whatever, then it also needs us to ensure that our perturbations don’t destroy its essential system properties. At the most basic level our responsibility is to ensure we do not draw down too much resource at once, and that we allow the system time to ‘recover’; in other words, we rely on some self-maintaining, homeostatic process to put back the things we are removing, or remove the things we are dumping.

A more sophisticated understanding of the mutual relationship of an economy and the ecosystems on which it depends would be to start to think of the economic activity as an integral component of one larger ecosystem, so that the cycles of activity all become mutually

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sustaining. This is the approach of some (not all) traditional cultures and of sustainable agriculture, in which resources are returned to the soil in closed cycles. This mindset is in the vanguard of thinking about the economic sustainability of modern economies under the general notion of 'industrial ecology' which seeks to see all economic activity through the pattern of mutually self-maintaining systems, just like natural ecosystems, and in balance with those natural ecosystems on which they depend. It is our failure to think in this way as a species that has given us climate change, in which we take from one part of the system (fossilised carbon under the ground) and dump in another part (the atmosphere) creating an open loop system – there is no natural process in the planetary ecosystem that reconnects the atmosphere with captured carbon to rebalance and restore the system at a speed equal to our perturbations. We can take two paths from this point: either to maintain the imbalance and take an ever increasing responsibility for maintaining the system within the economic pattern of activity, or try to bring the economic behaviours back into ecological, closed loop systems which are in balance with available natural processes. This is not an essay on climate change, so we can leave the question of what path we take at this point and turn to the Arts.

Homo Poeticus: Cultural Ecology

When we thought of the relationship between ecology and economy we immediately found ourselves placing an ecosystem in a relationship with other activity for which it was a resource – it became 'for' something. To discuss the artistic ecology we must find the boundary between what artistic systems are, in themselves, and what they might be seen as for – where is the boundary?

What is the natural wilderness for in our lives? For many people the health of the natural world in its pristine state, or as close to undisturbed as it can be, is deeply important. Many would express this as a value that stands in opposition to seeing the natural world as a source of resources for ourselves, and seeing it as important just for what it is, without regard to our needs and wants. In doing so, its value is seen as standing apart from the instrumental values that come from bringing it within economic activity that perturbs it in any way. When we do connect the natural world with economic activity, when it becomes for something in our broader economic lives, then from this perspective there will still be an imperative to protect and preserve the properties of the system on which we depend, not only for self-interest so that it is not exhausted, but out of a sense that it is important to us just for what it is.

Just so with many other aspects of our lives – love, family, friendship, fulfilment, music, dance, fun, games, laughter. These are not 'for' anything, they are rather what life is for; we seek to sustain them through the broader pattern of our lives. In this case it is easier to see than in our natural world example; we are working to live, not living to work. While some people might not regard the preservation of the natural world as having a demand upon us equal to the health

of our economies, there can be few who take the same view of the relationship of human fulfilment and economic well-being.

The ‘arts’ have found themselves perpetually pulled by this tension between being for themselves (intrinsic value) and for something else (instrumental value), and are also constantly struggling to find the right relationship with the economic system in which they must live. The proposition we explore here is that we can make some progress on these questions by making the ecological shift to understand what makes the ecology of the arts work in its own terms, and then seeing how it should relate to economic systems, just as to sustain our physical lives we must place our economic use of natural resources into its broader ecological setting.

This exercise is going to be quite hard, and our initial forays into thinking this way have quickly stumbled on a difficulty that needs to be identified up front so that we can avoid it as we go along. If we return to our forest example and we started to discuss traditional village economies then we would soon find ourselves describing the way the different occupations all support each other – the expert in carving produces the canoes and spears that help the hunters, while the basket makers enable the gathering of fruits and building of huts, and the domestication of wild animals depends on this and that, and various bartering goes on between all these different types of expertise, and so on. In other words we would start to describe the village economy, rather than its ecology. An ecological picture would start with the boundaries between the village and surrounding ecology and understand the ecosystem in which they operate, see what it was drawing down, how those things were replaced and so on – perhaps they clear areas of forest, use them for a while, and then move on. Within this understanding of ecosystem embedding we would then reveal how the economic system was working with or against the grain of the surrounding systems – whether they were mutually supporting as one overall ecosystem, or in fundamental imbalance.

When we first get people together to use ecological concepts to model artistic ecology we find ourselves falling into the same trap. For instance, we describe a model of a thriving community arts centre that attracts people who want bars and restaurants, and then the business community will start to move in, and that helps generate more traffic to the arts centre, and so on. This is all good, but is getting ahead of ourselves. To get the power out of ecological thinking we first need to understand the inherent nature of the ecology of the arts whose health we care about, regardless of its economic embedding, and *then* place it into the economic context. Our goal is to understand the nature of the arts in our lives as a system that can be understood in and of itself, whose health matters, and then to see how we can place it into a sustainable relationship with economic systems.

The idea that is developed in the rest of this paper is that we can understand the ecology of the arts by placing them within a broader cultural ecology of meaning, whose health can be discussed and promoted in its own terms. With this understanding we can then see what relationships with economic activity create a healthy and sustainable larger ecosystem of mutual

enrichment. Of course, it is a hypothesis that this way of thinking about the arts will be useful (or even possible).

Before embarking on this attempt a few caveats are needed. This exploration requires that we conjure with some very heavyweight terms such as meaning, culture, art, and so on. This is a conceptually vertiginous experience, especially for this author who claims no particular knowledge of any of them. However, it is also an attempt to make some fresh connections with concepts that seem capable of doing some heavy lifting in other areas (such as ecology) and that might help us here. Another analogy might help. In order to build a cathedral or a skyscraper you need to understand and work within an understanding of gravity and mechanics (and the early cathedral builders had some big problems because of a lack of such). For the purpose of building, these realities dominate. Once the cathedral is built then what it 'is' goes way beyond its mechanical properties. In this essay it is necessary to pick up some concepts that can give us some equivalent to gravity and mechanics to understand culture and arts and how they 'work', and this will be what is intended when sweeping statements are made such as 'art is meaning' – this is a bit like saying 'architecture is mechanics'; it is intended to create a particular way of coming at the subject with a particular purpose: we want buildings to stay up, and we want the arts to thrive.

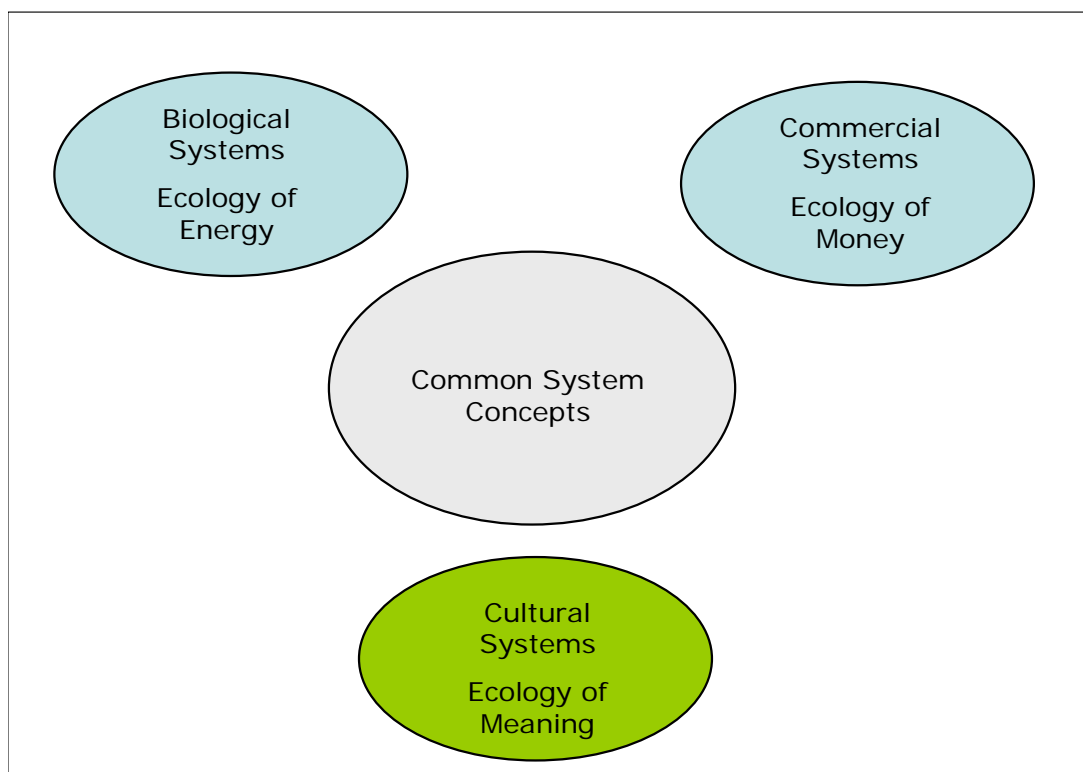


Fig 1: Our inquiry may be seen as the search for the common systems concepts that underpin the biological system based on a flow of energy, the commercial system based on a flow of money, and the cultural system based on a flow of meaning.

Ecology of Meaning and the Art of Culture

Our ecological model rests on three foundational concepts: culture, meaning, and art.

This is first built up intuitively through a series of quotes, all taken from people who are either within the arts or who have created the concepts of meaning and culture used here.

Believing, with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs...

Culture is public because meaning is.

...it is through the flow of behavior – or more precisely, social action – that cultural forms find articulation. They find it as well, of course, in various sorts of artifacts, and various states of consciousness; but these draw their meaning from the role they play...in an ongoing pattern of life, not from any intrinsic relationships they bear to one another.

To look at the symbolic dimensions of social action – art, religion, ideology, science, law, morality, common sense – is not to turn away from the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realm of de-emotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them.

Whatever else modern anthropology asserts...it is firm in the conviction that men unmodified by the customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed, and most important, could not in the very nature of the case exist.

Undirected by culture patterns – organized systems of significant symbols – man's behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless. Culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but – the principal basis of its specificity – an essential condition for it.

Without men, no culture; but equally, and more significantly, without culture, no men. We are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture – and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it...

The Interpretation of Cultures, Clifford Geertz

Art doesn't tell "the truth," it makes truth.

Art itself is our language for expressing the understandings of the heart, the body, and the spirit

Reading is a passionate act

Ursula Le Guin

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Meaning never belongs to the past. It can be checked in each person's own present experience

Peter Brook

The artist is not a special sort of man, every man is a special sort of artist

Eric Gill

We are born artists

Picasso

Theirs [the Elizabethan poets] is the word coining genius, as if thought plunged into a sea of words and came up dripping.

To understand Aeschylus it is necessary to take that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words ... for words, when opposed to such a blast of meaning, must give out, must be blown astray...

Virginia Woolf

Artists do not create objects, but create by way of objects

James Carse

Art first meant skill, and still does...it means human skill, the skilful doing which results in making...the power so to direct acts that the result of thought and action is a thing made

Eric Gill

So, the foundational concepts are that:

- Culture is composed of systems of significance which are sustained by everyone's engagement with them;
- The health of our culture rests on the richness and liveliness of the processes that create, sustain, and evolve these webs of significance;
- Culture is not unitary, it is a system of systems, it is always in motion; art keeps our culture in play.
- Artistic 'making' is the coining of meaning through artistic artifacts and expressions which take their place in the cultural web of symbols
- Just as an ecology has species, such as the oak tree, that create a context of life for hundreds of other species, so in our culture, artists – those for whom 'making' is their vocation – create 'trees of meaning' around which many species of individual meaning can flourish
- Art can only be understood as contributing to the complete cultural system in which everyone participates, including other major sources of meaning such as religion, science, philosophy, law, politics, everyday life...

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- Every person participates in culture as a condition of being human; everyone is an artist of everyday life, and we should strive for every person to play their full part in ‘the art of culture’ by which meaning is constantly renewed in society

Cultural Ecosystems

Let’s start with a book reading circle – a simple component of a healthy ecosystem in which literature circulates. They have got together to discuss the draft of a new book by one of the members. The book itself is the result of a ‘making’ – the sustained use of the imagination on the part of the author to bring forth a world. Each word put in its place conscious of how it ripples out to bring meanings and echoes of meanings together from the entire cultural context, both private to the author and shared with the surrounding society. As the book is read and commented on, meaning is made in the room, with each participant bringing their unique response to the book into the conversation, bringing shades of meaning into play. Everyone who joins the conversation changes the conversation. Each utterance is itself a fleeting ‘making’ – it brings together strands of meaning and weaves them into the emerging shared pattern in the room. Perhaps one relates the book to a personal anecdote, another hears similarities with the technique of another writer, a third finds a psychological inconsistency in the plot, and so on.

As meaning is made, transformed, woven, the cultural world of each person is further enriched. The next conversation in this or another book circle will be different because of this encounter. The author will have become aware of ripples of meaning that change the course of their imaginative journey. Perhaps one of the members was a teacher and goes back to the classroom with a refreshed understanding and a new approach to the works to be taught. Another finds the story quite haunting, throwing a fresh light on life, and uses it as an example in a discussion with a friend facing a challenge in their life. And so the ripples spread, reflect, interfere, add and cancel, reverberating through the cultural ecosystem of meaning.

Why is it helpful to view this as an ecosystem? Because, in the account we have just given the meaning both enriches and is enriched by the encounters of all the actors in the system; it circulates amongst them. It is traded in its own terms rather than translated into any proxy. There are several ways to see this.

Firstly, the only way to enhance the conversation was for each member to engage with it as deeply as possible, bringing to it their own capacity to build on and enrich the meaning in the room. The only inputs of importance were their own experience; their own webs of significance and the connections they could make between them and the conversation. Just as you cannot make the flower grow by giving it money, you must give it air, light, water, so you cannot make the conversation grow by giving it anything except the meaning from which it is formed.

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Secondly, although there were ‘outcomes’ in the lives of the people who took part, these were incidental and unplanned to the event itself. No-one could be responsible for these outcomes except the people who created them post facto. This is just like saying that as a flower grows in the garden it is constantly interacting with all the other plants and insects around it, and with the weather, and each interaction plays its part in creating the conditions of growth for this particular plant in this particular place – growth however which only it can do.

Thirdly, any attempt to turn the meaning into being ‘for’ something will, like taking a tree for wood from a forest, change the basis of the ecosystem. Suppose the author takes the comments and quotes them on their website to promote the book. Or go further, and suppose that the friends were invited round and given a meal to discuss the book just for this purpose. Then there is no reason to suppose they will not have a good and stimulating conversation. However, by connecting the conversation to this extrinsic goal there is a breaking of systemic connections. It is likely that just like taking a tree from a wood, the reading circle can regenerate, but if time after time the circle is used purely to harvest promotional quotes, then it will probably degrade and lose its vitality. This process is simply the result of connecting the functioning of an ecosystem to some other process that deflects some of the essential circulation of energy and resources to some other purpose.

These are initial thoughts exploring some of the foundational thinking that might underpin our substantive inquiry into the ecology of the arts and culture. Further papers will follow over the coming two years. If anyone would like to contribute to or comment on the intellectual journey then please contact editorial@internationalfuturesforum.com.

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