

A Justification For the Inclusion of the Arts in the Educational Curriculum

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With the educational curriculum suffering from overcrowding, along with the recent "back to basics" movement, the arts programs in many schools have suffered considerably. If the arts are to avoid the impending "knife," a strong justification for their inclusion is required. In this paper, I will argue that the strongest justification for the inclusion of the arts in the educational curriculum lies in their potential to foster understanding on the part of the participants of artistic activity. I will further argue that the understanding attained through participation in the arts is a particular sort of understanding; a rich understanding. In proposing that understanding can be attained through participation in the arts, I will have to respond to the criticism that I am viewing participation in the arts as instrumentally as opposed to intrinsically valuable. I will suggest that, although art may be intrinsically valuable, the strongest justification for the inclusion of the arts lies in the potential of aesthetic activity to foster a rich understanding of the human experience.

I will argue that it is a focus on the form of artistic expression which results in the potential for attaining a rich understanding. The possibility of attaining understanding presupposes that aesthetic activity has a certain degree of objectivity. I will examine the sort of "objective" reasoning involved in appreciating and creating works of art and will conclude that the reasoning involved in aesthetic activity has the potential for fostering a rich understanding on the part of the participants of such activity.

INTRINSIC VERSUS INSTRUMENTAL?

Aesthetic activity has often been justified based on the intrinsic value inherent in such activity. Proponents of the "art for art's sake" point of view suggest that participation in aesthetic activity is valuable in and of itself; that is, appreciating and creating art is valuable for its own sake. This may be the case but two points must be made in response to the "art for art's sake" position. First, if by "art for art's sake" we mean that appreciating and creating a work of art is pleasurable for its own sake, we must question this justification in an *educational* context. Justifying art for the pleasure it elicits could lead one down a slippery slope. What if students find encounters with comic books, or worse, pornography, to be pleasurable; do we thereby justify *their* inclusion in the educational curriculum? Rather than justifying the inclusion of the arts for their pleasure-giving potential, I would suggest that it would be more prudent to examine their potential for expanding students' understanding. Ironically, Richmond (who is a strong advocate of the intrinsic value of art), suggests that "art so distinguished is (uniquely) worthwhile educationally in as much as it provides inspiration for creativity and *reveals for our understanding* and appreciation imaginative and insightful images of reality in aesthetically significant visual form" [italics added].¹

The second point I wish to make is related to the potential for expanding students' understanding through art. I want to argue that there cannot truly be "art for art's sake" but rather, in Abb's words, "art for meaning's sake."² By art for meaning's sake, I am referring to the potential for students to derive meaning from encounters with art. I will explore this possibility in more detail in the next section. At this point, I propose that to the degree to which works of art express content, to that degree they are instrumentally, not simply intrinsically, valuable. This contention is not concurred with by Richmond who makes the distinction

between those who argue for the study of an apolitical, aesthetically autonomous art and those who see art in education as an avenue for asserting certain socio-political concerns, for example, marxist or feminist, and various kinds of community action while denying lofty aesthetic ideals in favour of more popular and accessible art images.³

Richmond's description of "those who argue for the study of an apolitical, aesthetically autonomous art" requires further analysis. Is it possible to have "apolitical, aesthetically autonomous art?" Although all art may not be political, I would suggest that all art expresses some content. Richmond would agree with this notion, for in an earlier paper he states that "content is necessary to art and to our pleasure in it in that artistic expression *always expresses something*, however abstract" [italics added].⁴ It is the expression of content in art, I would argue, that negates the possibility of "aesthetically autonomous art." This content need not be a blatant political statement but it may be, depending on the "things that matter" to the artist. Richmond himself suggests that the educational value of art "resides in the discipline's capacity to develop the skills, sensibilities, and language of form needed to help students aesthetically express ideas and feelings about *the things that matter to them and to others in the community*, and to understand and appreciate the art around them" [italics added].⁵ Marcuse emphasizes this notion of "things that matter" when he suggests that

society remains present in the autonomous realm of art in several ways: first of all as the "stuff" for the aesthetic representation which, past, and present, is transformed in this representation. This is the historicity of the conceptual, linguistic, and imaginable material which the tradition transmits to the artists and with or against which they have to work.⁶

The "stuff" for aesthetic representation may be political, religious, cultural, etc.

The question which is certain to arise at this point is "what then separates art from propaganda?" My answer to this question brings us back to the flip side of the dichotomy which I am attempting to dissolve. Recall the description by Richmond of "those who see art in education as an avenue for asserting certain socio-political concerns, for example, marxist or feminist, and various kinds of community action while denying lofty aesthetic ideals in favour of more popular and accessible art images."⁷ This description aptly illuminates the underlying dichotomy; on the one hand, there are "popular and accessible art images" and on the other, "lofty aesthetic ideals." However, these are not always, and need not be, exclusive. Part of the problem is a misunderstanding of the concept of aesthetic ideals. These need not be "lofty" and inaccessible to the general populace. In fact, if one understands the aesthetic in the manner defined by Abbs, that is, "a mode of apprehending through the senses the patterned import of human experience,"⁸ the distinction between the aesthetic and the accessible appears much less obvious. Although some people may require assistance in noticing the "patterned import of human experience," once some "tools" have been provided by pointing out features such as line, design, color, etc., I am suggesting that anyone who can "apprehend through the senses" can access the aesthetic.

The key to answering the question regarding the distinction between "popular and accessible art images" and propaganda also lies in an understanding of the aesthetic in the terms proposed by Abbs. Critical in the definition of the aesthetic is the notion of "the *patterned import* of human experience." Apprehending the "patterned import" involves apprehending the aesthetic features of the work of art. Not any sharing of the concerns of human experience can be apprehended aesthetically. There must be some pattern or form. Richmond points out the importance of form in aesthetic experience.

Under the aesthetic perspective, art is never considered simply as the communication of literal meaning, as the vehicle of social ideologies, or as text. What principally matters is an artwork's unique qualitative character, and this leads inevitably to an interest in form, in relationships, in the way something is structured and shaped.⁹

Thus, I would suggest that what distinguishes art from propaganda is this "interest in form, in relationships, in the way something is structured and shaped." I must emphasize that I am not

propounding a sharp distinction between content and form. In fact, one cannot have one without the other. As Bailin points out "the manner of expression in art constitutes a part of what is expressed, and it is impossible to totally isolate either form or content."¹⁰ However, I am suggesting that greater or lesser attention might be paid to the form of an expression and what distinguishes propaganda from art is that with propaganda the message or content is considered to be more important than the form in which it is expressed.

Returning to the original division "between those who argue for the study of an apolitical, aesthetically autonomous art and those who see art in education as an avenue for asserting certain socio-political concerns," I hope that I have shown how the dichotomy underlying this division is false. There is no such thing as "aesthetically autonomous art" if art is seen as an expression of human experience. On the other hand, art cannot be viewed as simply "an avenue for asserting certain socio-political concerns" if it is at all concerned with form; that is, how the content is expressed. The dissolution of this dichotomy by illuminating the emphasis on both form and content in art is necessary for a justification of aesthetic activity based on its potential for fostering understanding.

FOCUS ON FORM

The preceding discussion was intended to demonstrate that to the degree that works of art express some content, to that degree they may be instrumentally, not simply intrinsically, valuable. However, a distinction had to be made between art and "propaganda" and that distinction concerned a focus on form. The suggestion that the form of art works is essential to attaining a rich understanding through participation in aesthetic activity is related to what Abbs refers to as the *sensuous* when he describes the aesthetic as "a particular form of sensuous understanding."¹¹ I propose that the apprehension of the *sensuous* as it pertains to experiences of the senses is a necessary condition for having an aesthetic experience. However, such perceptive experiences, be they visual, oral, tactile, etc., are not sufficient for an aesthetic experience to occur. Also needed for an aesthetic experience is the involvement of feelings on the part of the participant. This involvement of feelings is part of the *sensuous* in the definition of aesthetic as *sensuous understanding*. It is interesting to note the linguistic connections between sensation and feeling. Abbs provides some illuminating illustrations. "To keep in touch' is both to keep in contact and to remain close in feeling. To *touch* an object is to have a perceptual experience; to *be touched* by an event is to be emotionally moved by it. To have a *tactile* experience is to have a sensation in the finger-tips; to show *tact* is to exhibit an awareness of the feelings of others."¹²

I am suggesting that both the employment of the senses and the experiencing of feelings are necessary for an aesthetic experience to occur. The final condition necessary for an aesthetic experience involves understanding, namely, Abb's "*sensuous understanding*." I am suggesting that the apprehension through the senses (including feeling) makes it possible to attain *sensuous understanding* of human experience. I propose that apprehension of works of art lead to greater understanding of human experience. This "understanding through apprehension" is similar to Russell's "knowledge by acquaintance." Russell suggests that "we have acquaintance with anything of which we are directly aware."¹³ This notion of "direct awareness" is reminiscent of Abb's definition of the aesthetic as "a mode of apprehension through the senses."¹⁴ In fact, Russell suggests that sense-data supply the most obvious and striking example of knowledge by acquaintance. However, we are directly aware of more than just sense-data. According to Russell,

all knowledge of truths, as we shall show, demands acquaintance with things which are of an essentially different character from sense-data, the things which are sometimes called "abstract ideas," but which we shall call "universals"...that is to say, general ideas, such as *whiteness, diversity, brotherhood*, and so on.¹⁵

I suggest that such universals can become known by acquaintance with works of art. For example, an audience of a modern dance performance could come to understand the "universal" of *diversity* through being "acquainted" with the image of dancers moving in different and diverse ways. I must

emphasize that, although the audience may be becoming acquainted with *universals*, this acquaintance is a result of an encounter with a *particular* work of art.

Suggesting that knowledge is attained through acquaintance with the arts ushers in the question of whether this is simply private knowledge, not amenable to public debate. Hirst seems to hold this view when he states that he is interested in "knowledge by description" not "knowledge by acquaintance."

I am not here interested in the character of such personal experiences. It is rather the sense in which there is a content communicated in artistic expressions, and the legitimacy of talking here about knowledge of a propositional or statement kind that I wish to pursue. What is involved in the acquisition of any such knowledge is a further question.¹⁶

However, it is this "further question" wherein, I am suggesting, lies the most promising justification for aesthetic activity. Hirst, in introducing his paper "Literature and the Fine Arts as a Unique Form of Knowledge" suggests that "this [art as a unique form of knowledge] may be the least interesting, indeed the least important or valuable, aspect of the arts."¹⁷ I would agree with Hirst, if by knowledge we focus only on a propositional kind. However, this narrow focus does not do justice to a discussion of the understanding which can be attained through acquaintance with the arts. Hirst attempts to discuss the possibility that works of art can be regarded as statements of a unique kind, but he sets aside questions about the nature of artistic experience. I would suggest that it is not possible to consider works of art as unique statements *without* questioning the nature of artistic experience. Hirst avoids discussing the very thing that makes artistic statements unique. "Artistic knowledge is autonomous because it involves elements over and above those derived from elsewhere, but no particular character for these elements is being suggested other than that they are essentially artistic."¹⁸ A discussion of the character of these "elements" is necessary if a justification based on understanding is to have any strength. I would suggest that the primary character of artistic elements is their sensuous nature -- involving both sensations and feelings.

Talk of sensations and feelings is sure to be criticized as involving only private knowledge. Underlying this criticism is a perceived dichotomy between private and public knowledge. However, I would suggest that this dichotomy is not as rigid as it is typically perceived to be. Hirst refers to artistic concepts and their role in a public language.

An area of experience arises with the development of the concepts it employs and they in their turn develop in the use of the appropriate public language. Just as our experience of the physical world is determined by and limited by the concepts we have learnt in public discourse about that world, so our artistic experience will be limited by the mastery we have of the language that is art. But what is more, it is an essential part of this thesis that works of art are not conceivable as expressions of essentially non-artistic experience. The type of experience concerned and the type of discourse necessarily go together as they share the same concepts.¹⁹

Ironically, Hirst has "hit the nail on the head" regarding the dissolution of the private/public knowledge dichotomy. Artistic experience and artistic discourse "share the same concepts." Although artistic discourse may be public, artistic experience involves private feelings and sensations. However, these private sensations and feelings are understood and expressed through concepts which are part of a public language. For example, if I am viewing Picasso's *Guernica*, I visually sense "harsh" lines, distorted figures, anguished features, etc. The concepts of "harsh" lines, etc., have been developed through a public language. The visual sensations described by these concepts, however, are inseparably tied to my feelings in viewing the painting. I feel distressed, disgusted with what people do to each other through war. My understanding about war is enriched through my experience with the painting. This understanding is different than the understanding attained when I am simply told that war has ugly consequences. By *feeling* the anguish in the faces of the figures represented, I understand the ugliness of war in a richer sense than if I am simply told this. However, this understanding is not confined to the private sphere. I can point out the distorted features (using public concepts) and others may feel what I feel. However, there are some who may

not feel the same disgust. I am suggesting that these artistic concepts are necessary but not always sufficient for the attainment of a rich understanding.

INTERPRETIVE REASONING

Having suggested the necessity of shared artistic concepts for the attainment of a rich understanding, it is important to clarify how these concepts lead to enriched understanding. These shared artistic concepts are based on a body of knowledge involving aesthetic features which is independent of particular people experiencing works of art. I would suggest that there is a sense of objectivity when people utilize this body of knowledge. That is, this body of knowledge makes it possible to provide reasons for making aesthetic judgments which are not purely subjective. However, the charge of subjectivism is typically leveled against the arts because the arts are contrasted with the sciences. This charge has lost some of its force in recent years since contemporary philosophers of science have called into question traditional views concerning scientific verification and objectivity.

A scientist cannot *by* himself explain something *for* himself alone. In order even to know "what" he is to explain, he must already have come to an understanding with others on the matter...Now, such an agreement on the intersubjective level can never be replaced by a procedure of objective science, precisely because it is a condition of the possibility of objective science.²⁰

I concur that intersubjective agreement makes it possible to have "objective" science and I would argue that intersubjective agreement makes it possible to have "objective" artistic experience. However, this "objective" artistic experience requires a different form of verification than is involved within science.

More flexible forms of verification involve an exploration of different forms of reasoning. Besides the deductive and inductive reasoning which are characteristic of mathematics and science, reasoning can also be used to give an interpretation of a work. A prime example of interpretive reasoning occurs in literary criticism where textual evidence is given to support an interpretation of a text. Different interpretations can be argued for as a result of using the "shared concepts" of literary features, (for example, dramatic irony, figurative language, etc.). Thus, if people have acquired some knowledge of aesthetic features, they are able to convey their interpretations in such a way that others, although they may not agree, can at least understand the reasons for the interpretation. If the reasons are convincing, people may change their interpretation upon reflection of the various reasons presented. The question which may be raised at this point is how people's feelings play a role in this process of reasoning. For example, if someone does not interpret Picasso's *Guernica* as expressing anguish, this person will not "feel" the distress felt by the person who does interpret the painting in this way. However, if the person changes his/her interpretation, that is, if someone points out the "harsh" lines and distorted figures, the person may come to "feel" the anguish expressed in the painting. In this situation, the person's feeling changes with a change of interpretation. Thus, the feeling is connected to the understanding and I am suggesting that the understanding is richer because of this affective dimension.

It may be tempting to suggest that one interprets a work of art and as a result of this interpretation, has a certain feeling. However, it must be emphasized that this process of reasoning is not dichotomous from the feeling evoked. The two are integrally connected. A person may experience a work of art and "feel" something but he/she may not have consciously formulated an interpretation of the work. However, upon reflection, an interpretation may be formulated and this interpretation would account for the feeling evoked. Although I am suggesting that someone might "feel" something through an encounter with a work of art and not have consciously worked out an interpretation, I do not think someone who has some knowledge of aesthetic features and is in a "normal" emotional state, could experience a good work of art without "feeling." By delimiting the work of art as *good*, I am suggesting that the work has the aesthetic features necessary for the audience to interpret the subtle nuances which result in the attainment of a richer understanding of the human experience.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the strongest justification for the inclusion of the arts in the educational curriculum lies in their potential to foster a rich understanding of the human experience. It is a focus on the form of artistic expression which results in the potential for attaining this rich understanding. The possibility of attaining understanding presupposes that aesthetic activity has a certain degree of objectivity.

This "objectivity" is bestowed upon aesthetic activity as a result of "shared artistic concepts." These shared artistic concepts are based upon a body of knowledge involving aesthetic features which is independent of particular people experiencing works of art. I suggested that there is a sense of objectivity when people utilize this body of knowledge. That is, this body of knowledge makes it possible to provide reasons for making aesthetic judgments which are not purely subjective. In proposing that understanding can be attained through participation in the arts, I responded to the criticism that I am viewing participation in the arts as instrumentally as opposed to intrinsically valuable. However, I conclude that, although art may be intrinsically valuable, the strongest justification for the inclusion of the arts lies in the potential of aesthetic activity to foster a rich understanding of the human experience on the part of those participating in aesthetic activity.

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 14. Abbs, "Aesthetic Education: An Opening Manifesto," 1.
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