

Aesthetics

Shifra Schonmann

What Comes to Mind upon Hearing the Word *Aesthetics*?

In everyday language, the word is used to suggest pleasing qualities, events, or objects. It can refer to a field of words such as: the arts, beauty, taste, senses, feelings, creativity, sentiments, joy, pleasure. In academic language, the word is used to suggest a particular branch of philosophy. It refers primarily to our perceptions of the attractive qualities in events or objects and our pleasure in the form of their presentation. For some people, aesthetics is considered only as a synonym for the philosophy of art while for others it is the philosophical notion of beauty and taste associated with truth and with morals and ethics that pertain to all aspects of life.

In leading dictionaries and scholarly resources, one can find various definitions and an abundance of issues dealing with aesthetics, such as aesthetic attitudes and perceptions, aesthetic judgments, judgments of sentiment and taste. The word, *aesthetic*, has come to be used in a variety of ways and, because of a lack of a precise definition, is sometimes used in a way that obscures significant distinctions. For example, *aesthetic* is sometimes used as a synonym for *artistic*. Although the two ideas are related, each one is quite distinct. Dewey interprets the term, *artistic*, as referring to the act of creation while the term, *aesthetic*, refers to the perception, reception and enjoyment of a creative act. There are many theories of aesthetics that are designed to stress the often radical differences between *artistic* and *aesthetic*.

The point of the above comments is to make it clear that *aesthetics* is an elusive concept. Due to the lack of clarity and the range of its uses, it has a potentially threatening effect on those, for example, who want to integrate arts into the

curriculum. Hence, in order to find justifications for paying attention to aesthetics in the curriculum, we need first to deal with its ambiguity and only then can we continue to search for a possible common denominator or acceptable patterns in diverse experiences that would enable us to understand its essence as well as its profound potential in education.

Etymology and Development

The concept of the *aesthetic* was introduced into the philosophical lexicon during the 18th century. It descends from the concept of taste. The term *aesthetic* derives from the Greek term for sensory perception, and so preserves the implication of immediacy carried by the term 'taste' (*see: Aesthetic in: The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Kant employed both terms, though not equivalently. However, he was not the first modern to use *aesthetic*. The German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten used it as early as in the first half of the 18th century. He believed that as logic helps to research and organize scientific thinking, aesthetics should help in researching and organizing sensory absorption by human beings (Baumgarten, 1750). Aesthetics is a relatively late term in the development of leading disciplinary concepts. It was only in the 19th century that the term was accepted into the academic English language, defined as an academic branch in the field of philosophy dealing with "beauty" (Williams, 1983). Recall that the study of the essence of "beauty" began in the western world in the fourth century BC. The two greatest Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, shared a sense of the importance of aesthetics (*aisthetikos* in Greek, meaning "of sense perception"), and both regarded (in different ways) music, poetry, architecture, and drama as fundamental institutions within the body politic.

The collection of Friedrich Schiller's letters, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, is among the most important works written in the field of aesthetics. It contains letters in which Schiller relies on Kant as a starting point and talks with an unknown recipient about beauty and the sublime, beauty and freedom, pleasure and enjoyment, and gives expression to the two schools of thought of his time: sensualist aesthetics and rationalist aesthetics (Schiller, 1794).

Ideas from the field of aesthetics began to seep outside the realm of philosophy, and formed part of the discussions in various disciplines including education, but the practical grasp of aesthetics in educational thought came across only at the beginning of the 20th century with the writings of Dewey, who fitted into place the *aesthetic experience*.

Aesthetic Experience

Dewey wrote: "No experience of whatever sort is a unity unless it has esthetic quality" (Dewey, 1934, p. 40). Jackson (1998) detailed Dewey's ideas and explained that "the difference between aesthetic experience and ordinary experience lies in the relative predominance of the imaginative element . . . it predominates in aesthetic experience" (p. 29). This explanation only scratches the surface of the deep structures of knowledge on which Polanyi (1966) said that "we know more than we can tell." Aesthetic aspects of experience complicate and even defy explanation because people experience some things in ways that cannot be communicated in words. Polanyi states not only that there is knowledge that cannot be adequately articulated by verbal means, but also that all knowledge is rooted in tacit knowledge. The concept of aesthetics refers to the values and relationships that are interlinked with tacit knowledge.

Malcolm Ross (1982), in his edited book, *The Development of Aesthetic Experience*, used the idea of *aesthetic experience* as a building block among curriculum issues in arts education. The claim was that arts education, developmental theories, and aesthetic assessment all are involved in the development of aesthetic experience; all have to do with the development of appreciation of the world.

In the writings of Elliott Eisner and Maxine Greene, leaders of aesthetic education in the 20th century and in the first decade of the 21st, there is an expansion of Deweyan thought as well as original interpretations of its implications.

Eisner's thesis is that the function of the aesthetic is to modulate form so that it can, in turn, modulate our experience. The forms that we are able to experience, he claims, shape our internal life (Eisner, 1998, p. 34). He constantly argues that form and content cannot be separated: how something is said or done shapes the content of the experience. Eisner develops the notion that the aesthetic lives in the nuances such as: how a word is spoken, how a gesture is made, how a line is written (Eisner, 2002).

Greene emphasizes that it is not enough to be surrounded by artistic objects in an artistic environment nor is it enough to attend a concert or a play but rather one should be consciously aware of sensory absorption to obtain the sense of pleasure derived from aesthetic perception (Greene, 1991; 1995; 2001). In an interview she gave to Miller, Greene expanded on Dewey's thinking, stating: "Experience itself is just one thing after another, and you try to pattern it by organizing and to make sense of it by reflecting . . . you ask yourself: How does this world present itself to me? Against my own background, my own biography?" (Miller, 1978, p. 2).

Elliott Eisner and Maxine Greene express different directions in appreciating aesthetic experiences, but both believe that *aesthetics* is essential for the spiritual and the fully human existence of society.

Aesthetics and the Curriculum

Questions such as: Why is it that aesthetics and the arts play a powerful cultural role in society but are not required as part of the compulsory school curriculum? Why do they have to battle to secure a legitimate place in the curriculum? continue to trouble educators. One possible direction to look for answers may be found in developing the understanding that much depends upon proving that arts in education have a positive impact on cognition. Aesthetic knowledge is supposed to complement other fields of knowledge such as scientific and moral knowledge, in order to deepen the spiritual experience. Aesthetic modes of knowing are motivated "by our own need to give order to our world. To form is to confer order. To confer aesthetic order upon our world is to make that world hang together *to fit*, to feel right, to put things in balance, to create harmony" (Eisner, 1985, p. 29).

For aesthetic education to be more than decorative expression, it must be achieved in a conscious probing of aesthetic essence as relevant to education. Adjusting aesthetic concepts to cultivate educational processes can be a possibility: for example, the concept of *aesthetic distance* and the concept of *catharsis*.

Aesthetic distance is a psychological entity and it contains a general aesthetic principle that, for Bullough (1912), who coined the term, is intrinsic to all art forms. He found distancing to be a variable affected by the object being viewed and the manner in which it is perceived by the subject. Aesthetic distancing can be lost to "under-distance" or to "over-distance." The subject can decrease distance to the point where s/he loses appreciation for the object, or increase distance to the point where s/he can no longer meaningfully experience it. Optimal aesthetic distance can

guarantee an aesthetic pleasure needed to control experiences (Schonmann, 2002); it can be activated to enable significant exposure and reflection.

Catharsis, taken from Aristotle's *Poetics*, can stimulate “cognitive emotions” (term coined by Scheffler, 1977/1991) and play a significant role in curriculum and in teacher education (Schonmann, 2005). *Catharsis* refers to a release of emotions that can lead to renewal or restoration. An orientation to pedagogic behavior that recognizes a place for *catharsis* allows for uncertainty, for doubt and for chaotic possibility. It perceives curriculum as a living exploratory process between teacher and students that invites unpredictable possibilities to arise. Admitting the concept of *Catharsis* into the curriculum is an aesthetic endeavor.

In *Key Concepts for Understanding Curriculum*, Marsh suggests: "to encourage *aesthetic reflections* which help students to gain some intrinsic coherence about the body, the spirit and cosmos . . . giving a higher priority to music, fine arts, drama, dance, poetry, speech, bands, painting and to use these sources to encourage interdisciplinary integrated inquiry" (Marsh, 1997, p. 305). In helping to better conceptualize the role of the arts in contemporary society, Mantie suggests providing arts educators with a strong theoretical basis for action. He elaborates on: "how the ideal of leisure might serve arts educators as a galvanizing force for resisting neoliberal discourses and for promoting dignity and well-being" (Mantie, 2015, p. 303).

Recalling Perkins's *Smart Schools* (1992), we may say that aesthetics meets the rational paradigm of a meta-curriculum when it speaks to levels of understanding (kinds of knowledge), language of thinking (verbal, written, auditive, visual and graphic languages) and intellectual passions (feelings and motives) that stimulate the mind toward good thinking and learning.

Two Closing Notes

Firstly, using the idea of aesthetics as a key concept in curriculum is actually reclaiming the place of the aesthetic and the artistic as an intrinsic essential power in education. For those who call for a well-rounded education dealing with the intellectual, physical, moral, spiritual, social, vocational, and more (Noddings, 2015), it is offered here to consider aesthetics as an inclusive concept that pertains to each of the above and thus should be central in the curriculum.

Secondly, as we live in a digital age, where “touch screens,” visual and vocalized, are a constant experience of daily life, it is imperative to understand aesthetics in its ultimate and approved forms. In Dewey's language: "One must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens" (1934, pp. 4-5). To be engaged with the world aesthetically makes life really worth living.

References

- Baumgarten, A. G. (1750/2007). *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*. In D. Mirbach (Ed.), 2 volumes. Partial translation in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Hans Rudolf Schweizer, *Ästhetik als Philosophie der sinnlichen Erkenntnis: Eine Interpretation der "Aesthetica" A.G. Baumgartens mit teilweiser Wiedergabe der lateinischen Textes und deutscher Übersetzung* (Basel: Schwabe, 1973). Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.
http://www.ciando.com/img/books/extract/3787320083_lp.pdf
- Bullough, E. (1912). 'Psychical distance' as a factor in art and as an aesthetic principle. *British Journal of Psychology*, 5(2), 87-118.
- Dewey, J. (1934/1980). *Art as experience*. New York: Perigee Books.

- Eisner, E. W. (1985). Aesthetic modes of knowing. In: E. W. Eisner (Ed.), *Learning and teaching - the ways of knowing* (pp. 23-36). Chicago: The National Society for the Study of Education Yearbook.
- Eisner, E. W. (1998). *The kind of schools we need*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Greene, M. (1991). Blue guitars and the search for curriculum. In G. Willis & W. H. Schubert (Eds.), *Reflections from the heart of educational inquiry* (pp. 107-126). New York: SUNY Press.
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essay on education, the arts, and social change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a Blue Guitar*. New York: Teachers college Press.
- Jackson, P. W. (1998). *John Dewey and the lessons of art*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ross, M. (Ed.) (1982). *The development of aesthetic experience. Curriculum issues in arts education*, Volume 3. Elmsford, New York: Pergamon.
- Mantie, R. (2015). The impression of privilege or an exercise in freedom? In S. Schonmann (Ed.), *The wisdom of the many - key issues in arts education* (pp. 303-307). New York: Waxmann.
- Marsh, C. J. (1997). *Planning, management & ideology: Key concepts for understanding curriculum*. London: Falmer.
- Miller, J. L. (1978). An interview with Maxine Greene. In W. C. Ayers & J. L. Miller (Eds.), *A light in dark times: Maxine Greene and the unfinished conversation* (pp. 1-2). New York: Teachers college Press.

- Noddings, N. (2015). *A richer, brighter vision for American schools*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Perkins, D. N. (1992). *Smart schools: From training memories to educating minds*. New York: Free Press.
- Polanyi, M. (1966). *The tacit dimension*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
- Scheffler, I. (1977/1991). In praise of cognitive emotions. In I. Scheffler (Ed.), *In praise of cognitive emotions*, (pp. 3-17). New York: Routledge.
- Schiller, F. (1794/2004). *On the aesthetic education of man*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.
- Schonmann, S. (2002). Fictional worlds and the real world in early childhood drama education. In L. Bresler & C. M. Thompson (Eds.), *The arts in children's lives: Culture, context, and curriculum* (pp. 139-151). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Schonmann, S. (2005). Theatrical representations of teaching as performance. In J. Brophy & S. Pinnegar (Eds.), *Learning from research on teaching: Perspective, methodology, and representation (Advances in research theory)* (vol. 11, pp. 283-311), Oxford: Elsevier.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2009/2017). The concept of the aesthetic. Stanford, CA: The Metaphysics Research Lab, Center for the Study of Language and Information (CSLI), Stanford University.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetic-concept>
- Williams, R. (1983). Aesthetic. In: *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (pp. 31-33). New York: Oxford University Press.

Suggested Readings

Budd, M. (2008). *Aesthetic essays*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Feagin, S. L. & Maynard, P. (Eds.) (1997). *Aesthetics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Goldman, A. H. (2006). The experiential account of aesthetic value. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64, 333–342.

Iseminger, G. (2003). Aesthetic experience. In J. Levinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (pp. 99–116). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Schonmann, S. (Ed.) (2015). *The wisdom of the many – Key issues in arts education*, International yearbook for research in arts education. New York: Waxman.

Bio Note

Dr. Shifra Schonmann is Professor Emerita and holder of the Bar-Netzer Chair of Education, Society and Theatre for Young People, University of Haifa, Israel. Areas of research include aesthetics, theatre-drama education, theatre for young people, curriculum, and teacher education. She has published numerous articles as well as books, among them: *Theatre as a medium for children and young people: Images and observations* (Springer) and (Ed): *Wisdom of the many: International yearbook for research in arts education* (Waxmann). She has been a visiting professor at a number of universities, serves on editorial boards of several leading journals, and is a member of the International Network of Researchers in Arts Education's steering committee.

E mail: shifras@edu.haifa.ac.il

Affiliation:

Faculty of Education

University of Haifa

199 Aba Khoushy Ave., Mount Carmel

Haifa 3498838

Israel

Tel. +972 4 833-6613

ORCID ID:

0000-0002-1212-5180