

Investigating the reflective opportunities of aesthetic experience in education

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts an in-depth exploration into the educational possibilities of art. Initially, through an attempt at a bibliographic investigation, an analysis is made of the way in which, through works of art, we understand the world around us and we perceive reality. Subsequently, the criteria that important theoreticians raise for the educational exploitation of art, are explored. Then, based on this theoretical framework, through a longitudinal research, we investigate the reflective opportunities offered by the aesthetic experience in education. This research, took place in a pedagogical department of the University of Patras and consists of two phases: a) an initial research involving the systematic application of the 'Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience' method during their studies; and (b) a second survey of the same participants, six years after their graduation, through semi-structure interviews. The findings of the research not only reveal important information about the potential of using art for reflective activation, but also a critical analysis of a didactic subject, still on one condition though: to use, first of all, the appropriate, according to the theoretical criteria, works of art, and second, a well-organized methodological approach, such as the TLAE.

KEYWORDS

Critical Reflection, art in education, teachers' education, university pedagogy, transformative learning

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude tente d'approfondir sur les possibilités éducatives de l'art. Initialement, à travers une tentative d'une recherche bibliographique, on fait une analyse du mode selon lequel –à travers les œuvres d'art- on donne sens au monde qui nous entoure et on aperçoit la réalité. Ensuite, les critères des théoriciens importants, portant sur la valorisation éducative de l'art, sont recherchés. En plus, en s'appuyant sur ce cadre théorique, on examine les opportunités de réflexion qui sont offertes par l'expérience esthétique à l'éducation, à travers une recherche dans le temps –réalisée au département pédagogique de l'Université de Patras-et qui est constituée de deux phases: a) une recherche initiale qui comprend l'application systématique de la méthode "Apprentissage Transformatif au moyen de l'Expérience Esthétique" pendant leurs études et b) une deuxième enquête chez la même équipe de participants, six ans après leur obtention de diplôme, au moyen des interviews semi-structurés. Les résultats de la recherche révèlent, pas seulement des informations importantes par rapport aux possibilités de l'art pour une activation de réflexion, mais encore une analyse critique d'un objet didactique, sous néanmoins une condition de base : en premier lieu, l'exploitation des œuvres d'art appropriées,

selon toujours les critères de théoriciens, et en deuxième lieu, une approche méthodologique bien structurée, comme celle de ATEE.

MOTS-CLÉS

Réflexion critique, art dans l'éducation, formation des enseignants, pédagogie universitaire, apprentissage transformatif

ART AND CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

The way we perceive the contribution of art and its value has preoccupied and still continues to preoccupy important theorists over the centuries. Aristotle in *Poetics*, by unfolding his thoughts on the tragedy, argued for the value of art and how it familiarizes us with the midline, the measure, which constitutes a basic principle of his philosophy (Sykoutris, 1936/2004). Similarly, Dewey at the beginning of the 20th century regarded art as the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity, describing its central role in philosophy. At the same time, he also referred to its moral function, as well as its ability to explain in a lively and concise way experiences referring to a more comprehensive dimension (1933, 1934).

According to the American philosopher, for man to manage the complexity of everyday life he has invented some compartments, which are habits of thought, useful in solving problems. Based on this thought, Dewey sees art as one such compartment, created for pragmatic reasons, in order to facilitate the construction of meaning and the understanding of the world around us (Hildebrand, 2008).

Along the same line of thought, Greene (2000) emphasizes the catalytic role of art in understanding the world. She believes that the complexity and diversity that surrounds us can be interpreted and understood more easily through works of art, because they provide the opportunity for varied constructions of meaning, revealing –often unpredictable, dimensions. The contact with a work, with which there has been no previous experience, leads us to capture and re-visualize reality. Greene associates critical thinking with the imagination that develops through artworks, which she considers to be an alternative way of thinking, understanding, and interpretation that urges a more energetic way of being. For this reason, she characterizes every contact with art as a “discovery”, which gives us the opportunity to review and renew the conditions we live with (see p. 5).

Similarly, Castoriadis regards art as a ‘revelation’ of the world and the creation of meaning, a meaning that is “organized without being ‘logical’ and which makes his own reference as more ‘real’ than anything ‘real’ could be ‘represented’” (2007, p. 29-30).

The association of the unreasonable element with logic and the real was also dealt with by Dewey several decades earlier. In an effort to deepen the intellectual process of contact with art, Dewey links art to logical thinking, considering it as the regulation of observation, assumptions and tests that we do in a natural and spontaneous way, while not forgetting to highlight the vital role of education in the development of reflective thinking: “Any thinking that is intended to reach a conclusion that is to be accepted and believed in is logical, even though the actual operations are il-logical. In the narrowest sense, ‘logical’ signifies that which is demonstrated, according to certain approved forms, to follow from premises the terms of which have clear and definite meanings; it signifies proof of a stringent character. Between the two lies the meaning, which is educationally vital: systematic care to safeguard the processes of thinking so that it is truly reflective. In this connection, ‘logical’ signifies the regulation of natural and spontaneous processes of observation, suggestion, and testing; that is, thinking as an art” (Dewey, 1933, p. 85).

According to Dewey (1933), thought can be specific when it is aimed at reaching an end, or abstract, when used only as a means of thinking more. Therefore, for the American philosopher art is associated with the abstract form of thought, since for an artist thought is complete only when it is involved in the extension of some interest in life, the extension of life itself, an approach that refers to the Aristotelian perception of art, as described below.

Although art refers to the abstract way of thinking, the work of art is the concrete proof of that thought. In other words, abstract thinking is formed through art. Its role for man is vital, because through a conscious process it helps him maintain his unity and regularity as being: “Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature. The intervention of consciousness adds regulation, power of selection, and redistribution” (Dewey, 1934, p. 26).

Dewey's aforementioned thoughts of regularity and regulation refer to Aristotle's reasoning about the tendency of man to measure, to balance, find harmony again, both emotionally and intellectually. The ancient Greek philosopher believed that this meditation can only be achieved with art and, in particular, with tragedy.

Tragedy, as a higher form of art, has a common anthropological background. It mobilizes the viewer's emotion and through pity and fear he identifies himself with the heroes. If emotionally involved, the viewer feels the need for a solution, for catharsis. In other words, we would say that the tragedy pushes into a reflective process in order to get to purification, in a transformed form that balances it again and brings the emotion back to harmony and measure. Consequently, tragedy leads to learning, because, on account of our emotional mobilization, it teaches us to reflect on our ideas and practices that relate to these emotions.

For Aristotle, however, this is not simple learning, because through art we realize reality and the truth. It is deeper learning, a knowledge of the whole, the ecumenical, and it can happen according to nature or logic (Nikoloudis, 1995, p. 40-41). Art does not lag behind reality, nor is it dependent on history but is an extension and improvement of the world, nature and history, while its function is mainly anthropological (p. 41-42).

THE CRITERIA FOR THE EDUCATIONAL USE OF ART

Although Dewey was an ardent patron of art, he did not fail to underline its exploitation for political and economic reasons as a means of manipulating the masses (Hildebrand, 2008, p. 147-148). This issue was systematically dealt with by the Frankfurt School a few years later. Representatives of the Frankfurt School spoke about two types of artwork, depending on their characteristics and usefulness (Adorno, 1970/2000; Marcuse, 1977).

They were particularly involved in mass culture, contrasting their characteristics with the high forms of culture, which express the result of human creativity, criticize modern society, while offering an alternative vision of the existing reality. In contrast, mass culture works are distinguished by their standardization, the sense of security and intimacy they shape in order to make the recipient complacent, as well as the false reality they create. These are works that induce the illusion of the specificity and originality of meanings, as well as the freedom of choice, while cultivating a non-genuine sense of power and supremacy (Craib, 2014).

Over the years, however, other important theorists worked on this issue (Bourdieu, 2002; Castoriadis, 2007). Castoriadis, making a comparison of folk art with the works of civilization, refers to the latter as self-sufficient objects that resist time, even though they constitute a socio-historical creation. This resilience in time and its duration is what distinguishes them, and he considers it the most important characteristic, alongside the individuality and uniqueness of the work (2007, p. 31-32).

How could we then designate a work of art? The criteria of an exploitable -for learning-artwork are masterfully identified through the definition¹ given by Aristotle in his Poetics. By describing the tragedy as the highest form of art, we discover the characteristics that make it unique and give it value. Each element of the project is of particular importance and therefore cannot be removed without altering the overall meaning (Nikoloudis, 1995, p. 37). Nothing, therefore, is unnecessary in art, which is a scientific subject, since it is governed by rules that regulate it and make sense. The myth, which is the soul of the work, is characterized by an internal logic and resembles a natural organism, the parts of which are linked to each other and legitimize its whole structure. The whole coexists with the parts, both of which are key elements for the unity of the project: "The totality and unity of myth obliges us to make sense. The myth, assimilated to a natural organism, is governed by an internal logic that links its various parts to one another and, on the other, legitimizes its whole structure. Logic operates thus on two levels, at the level of the whole and that of the parties. The whole is confined to things of a certain class, the parties are connected with each other in a causal and deliberate manner" (op. cit., p. 103).

Art for Aristotle, as mentioned in the previous section, is in direct proximity to reality. It is a work of human nature, the function of which rests on one hand on the individuality and temperament of the creator, but also on the aesthetic susceptibility of the recipient on the other (see p. 49). The tragedy has a universal character, since there is a common anthropological basis in which viewers feel the likelihood that heroic sufferings will happen to them as well. Consequently, through emotional mobilization - fear and compassion - recipients find a place to identify with heroes.

However, fear and compassion, as mentioned in the definition of tragedy by Aristotle himself, coexist with pleasant elements in the work, in order to make the observation attractive (Sykoutris, 1936/2004). That is why we have the happy in the tragic, we have the struggle of opposites. A struggle that aims at purification, and consequently, in mediocrity, in measure, in emotional balancing. Therefore, for Aristotle, in art we find the measure, the essence of human existence. A work of art is characterized by unity and totality, by being conscientious and coherent, since there is nothing unnecessary and all are bound together in a lawful manner in order to reveal the truth, a universal truth, common to all people.

Dewey, who linked experience with art, was also in the same line of thought. According to his theory, "to have an experience is to undergo a series of events that hang together (have unity), exhibit character (have a theme or pervasive quality), and end with some drama (consummating, not just terminating)" (Hildebrand, 2008, p. 158). It is remarkable that the characteristics of art resemble those of experience. The unity of the elements, the quality, the thematic approach and the final impact on the participant, are reminiscent of what is depicted in Poetics.

However, it was mentioned above that, according to Aristotelian thought, the function of the work depends also on the aesthetic susceptibility of the recipient. According to Bourdieu (2002), the way of recruiting art is not for all people, as it is primarily formed by social factors. The French theorist refers to the correlation of aesthetic mood with the relation of distinction between the different social order of people, pointing out that "great art is not a direct enjoyment of the senses" (p. 75) but differentiates accordingly by social origin. Therefore, there can be no

¹ Definition of tragedy according to Aristotle: «Ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας, μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ, χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαινούσα τὴν τῶν τοιοῦτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν»: "Tragedy is, therefore, imitation (i.e., representation on a stage) of a meaningful and complete act, which has a duration, with poetic discourse (literally "sweet" or "splendid"), the parts of which differ in their form, that are actively portrayed and not recited, which causes the sympathy and fear of the viewer to redeem him from similar psychic feelings." (Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/arxaiaag/tragodies> on 19/3/2019)

“pure look” in the recruitment of great art, because “a pure look implies a rupture with the usual attitude towards the world, which is therefore a social rupture” (p. 76).

Freire (1977), describing the specifications that the known codifications should have in the educational process, states that it is necessary to present familiar situations to the participants so that they can easily recognize the situations and relationships they have with these. For the Brazilian educator, mysterious images lend themselves to a dialectical process through which individuals analyze an unusual reality that enables them to compare it with theirs and discover the limitations of the latter. However, this process, though valuable, must follow the most basic process in which “individuals, by analyzing their reality, perceive their previous distorted perceptions and thus arrive at a new perception of this reality” (op. cit., p. 137).

However, the necessity of having the element of intimacy does not mean for Freire that the thematic core of the work should be very clear and simple, because this poses the risk of it being self-evident and obvious, or, on the other hand, too enigmatic. It is important that these works are signs of simple composition, providing opportunities for decoding through critical reflection. At the same time, it emphasizes the need for the elements of codification to reflect an existential state and to constitute a totality, that is, “its elements should interact with one another in the composition of the whole” (op. cit., p. 137).

METHODOLOGY - RESEARCH RATIONALE

In an attempt to investigate the reflective opportunities offered by the aesthetic experience in education, we rely on a longitudinal research that was implemented in the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education at the University of Patras. The research consists of two phases: (a) an initial research of the systematic implementation of the ‘Transformative Learning through the Aesthetic Experience’ (TLAE) method, in the framework of a series of workshops for students in the pedagogical department during their studies (Raikou, 2016); and (b) a second survey in the same trainees group six years after their graduation, using semi-structured interviews (Raikou, 2019).

The TLAE method is based on the theoretical framework of transformative learning, the main aim of which is to activate the critical thinking of learners so that they reassess their assumptions (Raikou, 2014a, b, c). The six stages of the TLAE method include exploring the need for critical reflection on student assumptions about a topic and the selection of appropriate (and related) artworks for processing² (Kokkos, 2011, p. 97-100). Therefore, the main issue in the application of the method is the selection of works of art appropriate to both the trainee group and the subject under investigation (Raikou & Karalis, 2011a, b).

The aim of the initial research was to investigate the potential transformation, through the art-based TLAE method, of the trainees' views on a series of issues concerning the role of the teacher (Raikou, 2016). According to Mezirow (1997) the successive transformation of the point of view into a subject is likely to lead to the transformation of a habit of mind consisting of a set of related points of view.

In the recent second survey, it is interesting to look at the possible long-term effects on the participants of the previous educational intervention, which had been implemented in the

² The two stages associated with the selection and processing of artworks are the fourth and fifth. During the fourth stage, the selection of artworks is made. The selection is a result of the co-operation of the trainer with the team, while the works are selected from the full spectrum of art, with the criterion of containing elements that can act as stimuli for the processing of the subject, and especially of the view chosen to be analyzed. In the fifth stage, critical thinking is sought through the aesthetic experience, where the trainer coordinates a systematic observation process of the chosen works of art in order to critically approach the view in question (Raikou, 2016).

same group during their studies. Our aim is to study possible traces and effects six years after completing their studies. Besides, the university is an important area of reflective development and transformative potential, especially for future teachers (Liodaki & Karalis, 2013; Raikou, & Karalis, 2016; Raikou, Karalis, & Ravanis, 2017). In fact, by combining both the initial and the second research, we are attempting to monitor the development of the participants' educational perceptions and practices for about ten years. Focusing on the art issue, we should mention that one of the research questions raised was about the participants' perceptions of art and its educational use. During the interviews in the second survey, the eleven participants were asked to elaborate on some of the educational concepts of the original research, and they were given the works of art that had been used in the earlier research to comment on and relate them to the aforementioned concepts. These works included painting, sculpture, film, poetry and literature.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

One point to note is that while at the beginning of the interview the six participants (6/11) reported art as an element that had been impressed in the workshops during their studies, at the end and after observation of the works of art during the interview, almost all (10/11) enthusiastically mentioned the art. They underlined the usefulness of art and they perceived it differently after their experience in the workshops. It is likely that the interview process and the re-contact with the works of art would mobilize them positively, reminding them of the pleasant and constructive process. Besides, as it is pointed out in the analysis of the tragedy, it is important for pleasure to co-exist in a project along with the tragic, so that participation for the recipient is attractive (Sykoutris, 1936/2004). In other words, pleasure (such as that offered by art) acts as a motivation and means of mobilizing the participant in order to make learning happen (Illeris, 2007).

The works of art that the majority remember quite analytically were three: the Raphael's "School of Athens" painting, Gansel's film "The Wave" and Kazantzakis's excerpt from "A Bird in the Courtyard of the School". Taking into account the theoretical approach developed above, these projects are likely to have been captured more in the memory of the participants for the following reasons:

a) First of all, we refer to a trainee group, the majority of whom did not have any particular familiarity with and knowledge of art before this experience. What they point out has to do with representational works of art that are related to elements of culture familiar to the participants (ancient Greek philosophers for the "School of Athens", Greek countryside and traditional teaching approach for the Kazantzakis excerpt and contemporary school with the dangers it poses for each teacher for "Wave"). This view is confirmed by Freire (1977) and Bourdieu (2002). We recall that Bourdieu pointed out that the way of recruiting art is shaped primarily by social factors. On the other hand, Freire referred to the necessity of having the element of familiarity, so that it is easy for them to recognize the situations and the relationships they have with them. Characteristic are the words of a participant for Kazantzakis' excerpt: "*This I think is a clear document of our reality!*" (P3).

b) These works meet the criteria of art that contribute to the construction of meaning and the development of critical reflection, according to the literature. By providing the possibility of the 'revelation' of the world according to Castoriadis (2007), the participants find, with surprise, elements that they thought or that were in their reasoning unconsciously and through contact with art revealed, proceeding to 'discovery' (Greene, 2000) of their own meaning through these works. These are works which, without being obvious and self-evident in their meaning and not enigmatic (Freire, 1977), however, provide the possibility of

decryption through critical reflection. Their evidence is coherent while it is notable for their durability over time (not all works are modern).

c) It is about works that relate to existential situations that constitute a totality (op. cit.). Participants associate these projects with a clear message that is directly related to their experiences and what they have lived. Let's not forget that in the second survey the participants now have teaching experience. For this reason, they identify with the heroes of the above works, with the teacher's anxieties about effective learning and, feeling that all this should also concern them, are mobilized emotionally, which is in agreement with the Aristotelian approach to art. It is worth noting that in the most memorable works, the participants made most of the correlations with the educational concepts they were given. This means that the works of art, with which they feel more familiar and with which they have understood more deeply, can be related to more educational issues, because they can more fully identify the elements of the work by combining the morphological elements with the content and the theme of the project. However, we should not omit an element that emerges from the two surveys. The participants, who in the original survey had the most and most profound changes in their views, in the current survey remembered more artworks that correlated with the educational concepts. Whereas, while they mentioned art as an important element of their experience in the workshops, and their desire to use it educationally in the future.

As far as their relationship with art is concerned, almost all participants (10/11) perceive art differently, following their experience in the workshops. Seven (7/11) feel more familiar with the various forms of art and approach the works more critically. Also, seven (7/11) use it in their teaching approaches. *“The workshops helped me a lot because I was able to connect things we had learned in theoretical lessons, because they included everything that was more experiential. They also included audiovisual material that is very helpful in understanding things. So in the course of my studies they have helped me, during and after the course I turned back and I said we have done it before and now I find it again before me and you also realize that as you did with us different learning themes and self-assessment that lead to a change of views, I can do it with my children too. So, it was useful in all areas both for me and for what I would like to do to children”* (P1). *“I see artworks in a new light ... or films that have no educational content at all and they do not even show a reality of the class and have some messages about education”* (P8).

CONCLUSIONS

It is evident from the findings of the research that artworks have the potential to offer multiple reflective opportunities to trainees. Moreover, the present study makes clear the permanent and lasting impact of works of art that meet the criteria developed by the scholars in the literature. Art can act as a stimulus that activates thought (Raikou, 2018), while contact with it and the processing of its elements is a pleasant process. The pleasure of discovery and curiosity, therefore, stimulate and mobilize the recipient. Along the way, these feelings are reinforced by the revelation of elements of their own reality. Within the work the recipients find their own meaning, the personal way of understanding and interpreting the situations and the world around them. As a result, participants in a learning process that exploits art understand more easily and process more deeply the topics to be analyzed and thus they learn.

In order for learning to take place, it is important that artworks develop a sense of intimacy and activate the recipient's emotion. In addition, it is necessary to offer stimuli for deepening and analyzing the subject, in order to re-conceive meaning through critical reflection. However, for all this to happen, it is necessary, on the one hand, to carefully select a methodological approach that will meet the above requirements and strengthen the reflective

processes but at the same time create a sense of security for trainees on the other - whatever they say, there is no right or wrong but their own truth - and therefore a sense of acceptance by the group.

To sum up, we would say that art can play a catalytic role in learning. It can act as a reflective activation element but also as a tool for critically analyzing a teaching subject. However, a basic prerequisite for its optimum utilization, with the aim of developing students' critical reflection, is to use the appropriate artworks according to the theoretical criteria. At the same time, it is important that these artworks be integrated into a well-organized methodological approach, such as TLAE, and to connect directly to the subject being taught. Therefore, the role of the teacher in how to use art is decisive if she wishes to provide reflective opportunities to the trainee group.

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