

Educating Artistic Response: Understanding is Feeling.

A principal reason for the pervasive scepticism about the educational values of the arts is the persistent assumption that artistic experience lacks genuine intellectual content. It is assumed that, unlike, for instance, the sciences, learning in any substantial educational sense is not possible in and through the arts, since, it is believed, the arts are concerned with feeling, rather than with cognition or understanding which is a necessary condition for any legitimately educational activity. That is, the arts are taken to be unquestionably subjective, by contrast with the undoubted objectivity and rationality of the sciences, mathematics and other such disciplines. As an editorial in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* expressed the point some years ago:

It is thought that such subjects do not need to be taken seriously, since it is stated quite explicitly that creativity is an inspirational ... activity rather than a cognitive and disciplined process. As a result, the arts are often regarded as of low academic content, and hopelessly subjective.

As this editorial intimates, the most damaging aspect of such educationally fatal subjectivist assumptions is that they are asserted not primarily by the detractors of the arts, but as doctrinaire articles of faith by the supporters of the arts, who persistently fail to recognise that to deny the objective, rational, cognitive content of artistic experience is to deny any legitimate place for the arts in education. Thus these "supporters" defeat their own case. For it makes no sense to suppose that there could be learning in an educational sense if there can be no place for understanding and rationality. On the subjectivist, non-cognitive basis the only learning possible would be of the causal, stimulus-response kind of which an animal is capable.

Cognition - normal or supernatural?

It seems to me that what largely contributes to this syndrome of self-defeating conceptions is the continuing general influence of logical positivism or its heirs. By "logical positivism" I mean, to put it roughly, the unquestioned, axiomatic assumption that cognition, understanding, rationality and objectivity are the exclusive province of, to cite paradigmatic examples, the empirical sciences, and deductive logic. Thus genuine objective reasoning is supposed to be limited to the deductive, and to the inductive, as characteristically exemplified in the reasons citing evidence in support of scientific conclusions. Such kinds of reasons also apply, of course, to disciplines such as geography and history. The deeply seductive belief is that the only propositions which make any sense, are those which can be supported by such reasons. This may be a rather oversimplified outline, since logical positivism has been modified in some versions, but these do not concern me: it is the broad general position which is important for the thesis of this paper.

I said above that this is an unquestioned assumption, but 'assumption' is an understatement, since the notion is more of a foundation, which is in practice beyond questions: its deep and pernicious influence can hardly be exaggerated. Although it is well past its heyday in philosophy, its pervasive effects continue to influence many areas of life, and perhaps most importantly educational policy, not only in the arts, but generally, including the sciences. But that is beyond my present brief.¹

A profoundly significant consequence of this conception is that the arts, like morality and religious belief, are assumed to be non-cognitive, non-rational, and thus, as the *Higher* puts it, 'hopelessly subjective'.

Instead of exposing the deep and seductive fallacies of this conception most arts theorists implicitly accept it, and "support" the arts in terms which either repudiate cognition and rationality as characteristic of artistic experience, or, what is equally disastrous, posit supposed kinds of reason and cognition which refer to the occult or supernatural metaphysics. In both cases such proponents of the arts often do not recognise their implicit acceptance of the positivist foundation-assumption which holds that, for instance, whereas scientific propositions are supportable by normally intelligible reasons, the arts are outside the province of normal rationality. Hence the common cliché, which is a banner of educationally self-defeating subjectivism, that the arts are a matter of feeling, not of reason.

I am certainly not saying that the arts can be supported by scientific methodology, although there are some deeply misguided attempts of this kind, which again implicitly concede underlying positivism. What I am arguing is (a) that although there are obvious differences between the sciences and the arts, there are also very important similarities which are widely overlooked,² (for example, creativity is as important in science as in art); and (b) that the rationality, objectivity and cognition characteristic of the arts, even in the respects which differ from the sciences, are still intelligible in a perfectly normal sense. It is the common failure to recognise that (b), at least, is a crucial necessary condition for any attempt to provide a sound rationale for the arts as genuinely and importantly educational which has led to some of the prevalent excesses of wild subjectivism, whether explicit or implicit.

The arts will never be taken seriously while their proponents assert that, unlike the sciences, the arts are concerned with mysterious, unintelligible realms and/or are answerable solely to occult 'inner' feelings which give

¹ For a more extended account of the general damage caused in educational policy by underlying positivism, please see especially chapter 2, pp. 11-15, and Chapter 3 of my book *The Rationality of Feeling*, although discussion of the issue appears in various places throughout the book. See also 'Learning from the Arts' in *Reflections in Higher Education*, Vol. 2, No. 1 [1990].

² For a further account of the important similarities between sciences and arts, please see the works to which I refer in Note 1.

access to a transcendental Aesthetic universal. It is this kind of woolly, supernatural mystery-mongering which understandably gives the arts the dismissive reputation as airy fairy and educationally irrelevant. Small wonder that one philosopher referred to the Aesthetic as "the natural home of rapturous and soporific effusion." What is urgently required is to bring the arts out of the supernatural metaphysical clouds, and show clearly that their feet are as much on the normal, intelligible objective ground as any other subject.

Aesthetic Experience

A paper by Peter Abbs which appeared in *Curriculum* (1994), is unfortunately an only-too-clear example of the point. I refer to Abbs's paper not in a negative spirit, but (a) as a clear example of my general thesis, and (b) to offer by contrast, a brief outline of a crucially important alternative, which does give a sound, intelligible account of the significant and genuine educational possibilities of the arts. The contrast will, I hope, help to bring out sharply the constructive aspects of the thesis which I am proposing.

Abbs's attempts to locate the character of 'aesthetic' experience by reference not to the qualities of works of art, but to the subjective responses of spectators. This leads him to such bizarre conclusions that it is, at first sight, difficult to understand how he did not immediately suspect that the whole direction of his "experiment," and the research he recommends, is seriously misguided. He does emphasise that his is an initial exploration, and that more work is required. In this he is much more guarded than in his paper along similar lines in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* (1992a) perhaps because he has taken unacknowledged account of my criticisms in a subsequent paper in *The Higher*.³

To repeat, then, although Abbs warns us to accept his conclusions with care, and that further exploration is required, what I am arguing is that this whole method of approach is radically misconceived: from the point of view of understanding the character of artistic experience, and the contribution of the arts to education, this kind of approach is doomed from the outset, because it depends on deeply misconceived assumptions.

Bizarre Conclusions

Consider the conclusions which are so implausible that they should immediately have alerted him at least to the suspicion that the underlying assumptions guiding his exploration were fundamentally misconceived. Ten arts teachers, students on his MA course, were asked to describe any "memorable" aesthetic moment in relationship to the arts. He concludes:

³ This paper extends the general thesis I proposed, partly by contrasting my case with that of Abbs, in 'Minds at Work in an Empire of the Senses' in *The Times Higher [Educational Supplement]*, February 19, 1993.

"The first close analysis of the ten responses led me to the following formulation:

Aesthetic experience is 1) overwhelming
 it 2) engages powerful sensations
 it 3) involves feeling
 it 4) brings a heightened sense of significance
 but 5) it cannot be communicated adequately in words
 and it leaves one with 6) a desire for others to share it."

Overwhelming

I do not have the space to consider all of these claims adequately.⁴ I shall concentrate on the most obviously misconceived. A moment's reflection reveals the implausibility of this analysis -- and remember that Abbs claims that these characteristics are normal to aesthetic experience in general. It is patently absurd to claim that even the most enthusiastic devotee of the arts is always or even usually "overwhelmed" by every work of art he [or she] experiences. On the contrary, many works or performances are of indifferent quality, and boring. Only relatively rarely are artistic experiences so powerful that one is overwhelmed. Indeed, some artists and arts-educators tell me that they have never been overwhelmed by a work of art.

Ironically, despite Abbs's claim, in his *Higher* paper, that his conclusions strongly support the case for the arts in education, if, as he supposes, *every* artistic experience were overwhelming that would imply a *failure* or lack of education in the arts. To be overwhelmed by *every* work of art would reveal a lack of educated, discriminating response. Thus a clear consequence is that Abbs's thesis, contrary to his intentions, would make the *education* of artistic responses unintelligible.

Aesthetic/Artistic

I have not the space to deal with Abbs's failure to distinguish between the aesthetic and the artistic.⁵ To be fair to him I have heard him concede that there is a distinction between them -- he conceded this, too, presumably because of his unacknowledged recognition of the validity of my criticisms of the conflation. But he does not distinguish the two concepts in this paper, and even where he did, that would not avoid my objections. For, on that account, the aesthetic was wider than but included the artistic. In this paper he explicitly formulates his thesis in terms of aesthetic experience generally.

⁴ I invite my readers to consider the others, as an exercise in simple logical analysis. I hope that, if it be necessary, the methods I have employed with those which I have considered will indicate ways in which each of these claims can be exposed as fallacious. May I also suggest that one might reflect on whether, or to what extent, it is the underlying logical positivist assumption which leads Abbs astray.

⁵ For an extended account of the widely ignored distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic please see *The Rationality of Feeling*, Chapter 12.

The question I am raising is no mere verbal quibble: it has important educational consequences to which I cannot draw attention now.⁶ But my present point is that Abbs's reference to aesthetic experience generally makes his thesis even more obviously invalid and implausible; this conclusion would imply that one would be overwhelmed (have powerful sensations, a heightened sense of significance etc.) by every *aesthetic* experience, for instance of nature. Thus, according to Abbs, one would almost always be overwhelmed by shapes of trees, the stars, birdsong, autumn colours etc., etc., and also by e.g. décor, attractive and even ugly clothing and faces, elegant manners etc. Consequently, according to Abbs, anyone very aware of and sensitive to aesthetic aspects of life would be almost continually overwhelmed: one could not walk along a street, or sit in a room, or travel on a train, without being perpetually overwhelmed.

This position is so obviously untenable that one again wonders how he can have overlooked at least the grave suspicion that his exploratory direction was leading him into a foggy cul-de-sac.

But, despite the confused terms in which he formulates it, I shall continue to discuss his thesis in relation to the arts, which are obviously his main concern.

Distorting Assumptions

What has led to this obviously untenable position in relation to artistic experience? Apart from the underlying positivist assumption to which I referred earlier, there are several other fallacies. One is what is called in philosophy the essentialist fallacy, which is the fallacy of assuming, in this case, that, in order to discover what is characteristic of a kind of experience one needs to consider extreme ("memorable") examples. Note that Abbs specifically asked his students to describe a "memorable moment" or "memorable encounter." Therefore, *ipso facto* they would not describe *normal* experiences, but only *exceptionally intense* ones. Of course this will give no understanding of artistic experience *in general*.

The point is that artistic experience is immensely varied in character, and it leads to distortion and a diminution of the potentialities of the arts to suppose that its character can be located by concentrating exclusively on intense, "memorable" examples.

Flawed Empirical Model

Quite apart from the forgoing, Abbs's case depends upon far too small a number of cases for a valid inductive generalisation, even allowing for his insistence that this is an exploratory research account. There were only *ten*

⁶ For a discussion of the important educational implications of failing to recognise the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic, please see my paper 'The Dangers of Aesthetic Education' (1984).

subjects, reporting on only *one* artistic experience each, and that, at his request, a highly *unusual* one.

To put this in perspective, it is analogous to carrying out a political opinion poll by asking only ten people how they intend to vote. Worse, since these students were in a particular, specialised situation, it would, I think, be fair to liken it to conducting the survey of ten people in a local conservative club.⁷

Abbs's experimental survey takes no account of the immense range of different artistic experiences; it takes no account of the immense range of individual sensitivity; it takes no account of the immense range of artistic experiences even of the same person. Hence, as a generalisation based on empirical evidence, it carries no credibility whatsoever.

Religious

Abbs contends that "aesthetic" experience in general involves: being "ecstatic," "exhilarated," "elated," "tribally grounded in some universal," "transfixed," "spellbound," "mesmerised;" it characteristically involves "excited and tranced consciousness," "a form of transcendence," and is "very mysterious." From such supposed general characteristics he concludes explicitly in his *Higher* paper, and less clearly in this one, that "aesthetic" experience is religious, or at least quasi-religious. In support of this he cites an extraordinary aphorism from Novalis: "All absolute sensation is religious." The use of the term "absolute" here is very obscure, if not unintelligible, but in the most plausible interpretation, I suppose it refers to very intense sensation. But there are numerous counter-examples. There is nothing remotely religious about the vast majority of intense sensations, such as absolutely agonising toothache, or extreme cold. Just try listing all the intense sensations you can think of, and see how many, *if any*, are religious.

So far as one can make sense of it, Abbs adduces this bizarre quotation to support the argument of his paper as follows:

- (a) 'Aesthetic' experience in general engages powerful sensations (see his conclusion [2] above).
- (b) All (absolute) sensation is religious.
- (c) Therefore 'aesthetic' experience in general is religious.

But the major and minor premises, (a) and (b) are very obviously hopelessly untenable.

The vast majority of artistic experiences are not religious. Of course, some art expresses religious feeling, as for example Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, or, less explicitly, some of the profound spirituality of Arvo Pärt's music, such as

⁷ Or, in the United States, conducting the survey of ten people in a local Republican or Democratic organization [The Editors].

Tabula Rasa. But it is absurdly implausible to claim that spiritual/religious feelings are the norm or even intelligible in response to *Lady Windermere's Fan*, or a novel by P.G. Wodehouse, or at least an average production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *The Taming of the Shrew*, or *A Comedy of Errors*.

Implicitly he seems to concede that his case is hopelessly untenable, since his "defence," in a letter,⁸ is "I do believe that the arts, *at their most profound, can* both express and release in us a sense of transcendence" (italics added). Note carefully both the revised limitation to *the most profound*, and the word, 'can'. This is no defence at all for his claim that artistic experience *in general* is religious, mysterious, that it involves a sense of transcendence etc. One can only, with regret, assume that this is just an evasion; that he is unwilling to admit the obvious untenability of his general position. What a pity that he does not admit that openly.

Again, an analogy makes the point clear. Imagine someone's making the implausible generalisation: "Human beings have wooden legs," and when numerous counter-examples are adduced, of the vast majority of people *without* wooden legs, trying to defend his original assertion by saying: "I still think that human beings can have wooden legs."

Words

Abbs's fifth conclusion asserts that these "very mysterious states" of aesthetic experience cannot be communicated adequately in words: indeed he quotes one of his subjects as saying, much more strongly, "Words cannot be used." It is immediately obvious that this is mistaken, for what about poetry and literature generally? These artistic experiences are communicated *only* in words.

More importantly, Abbs rather startlingly claims in his *Higher* article, that an aesthetic experience is a "dramatic state of consciousness [which] holds its own educational justification." Yet this holds no education justification at all. How could one justify experiences about which "words cannot be used"? It is, of course, trivially true that experiencing a performance of Beethoven's *9th Symphony* is not the same as even the most complete and perceptive verbal description of it. If, as I assume, what he really means by saying that the experience cannot be adequately communicated in words is that no verbal account can ever completely capture, i.e. be identical to, the musical performance, then of course that is true. But to repeat, that is trivially true -- it amounts merely to saying that having an experience, any experience, not solely of the arts, is obviously not the same as a description of it. For example, drinking a cup of tea is not the same as describing the experience.

⁸ In *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 19 March, 1993. See, in the same issue, Leslie Cunliffe's letter supporting my criticisms of Abbs.

Nevertheless, there is a vitally important educational issue involved here, which Abbs appears, perversely, to be denying. For words can contribute enormously to one's understanding of and therefore more sensitive, discriminating response to, a work of art. A perceptive critical review can contribute considerably to greater *understanding*, and, inseparable from it, deeper feeling. A clear example is BBC Radio 3's *Record Review*, where a perceptive critic gives his response to various recorded performances of the same piece of music. Many of us have learned a great deal from this programme over the years. Verbal explanations are the most important source of artistic understanding, and therefore feeling.

From an educational point of view, what do teachers do to increase understanding of, and therefore possibilities of feeling-response to, non-verbal arts such as music, dance and visual arts? They talk about them, and the talk is usually interspersed with practical experience. For example, aspects of performance are pointed up by means of interspersed words and music. The vast majority of arts teaching and learning requires the use of words, although not exclusively.

This brings up again the main theme of my paper, for a main source of misconception here is the assumption that *normal* cognition and rationality are the exclusive province of, for instance, the sciences, whereas, by contrast artistic experience consists either in a non-cognitive feeling, or, as in Abbs's case, in cognition of a non-normal, supernatural kind, hence the reference to mysterious metaphysics, a transcendent universal Aesthetic (note the capital), etc. By contrast, what has to be recognised is that artistic feeling, artistic experience, *is* cognitive; it is inseparable from understanding, not in some supposedly mysterious supernatural sense, but in a *normal* sense. One can have an artistic response only if one has at least some understanding of the work of art -- for instance, a normal understanding of [a] tradition of music.

Abbs's failure to grasp this crucial point about the indivisibility of understanding and feeling in relation to artistic response is made abundantly clear in his *Higher* paper, which he begins by asserting that analysis is *inimical* to artistic experience or feeling. In another paper⁹ he asserts that a critical response is opposed to an aesthetic response. Yet, on the contrary, analysis can provide the deeper understanding which identifies deeper artistic feeling. Of course some analytical attitudes *may* be inimical to feeling, just as heart-on-sleeve excesses may be inimical to understanding. Nevertheless, artistic feeling is possible only with understanding, and that can be increased by analysis. The aim of criticism *is* understanding.

⁹ In the *Journal of Art and Design Education* (1992) I have written a refutation of Abbs's paper in 'Death of Generic Arts' which will be published shortly.

Introspective Subjectivism

Perhaps the principal source of confusion is to seek what is characteristic of artistic experience not in qualities of the *work* but in introspective accounts of subjective feeling. Of course this is understandable, especially in the positivist-induced subjectivism about the arts which is so dominant. For instance, it may be objected, is it not paradoxical to *base* an account of artistic response on objective qualities of the work of art? Surely any account of artistic response has to concentrate on the experience of the spectator -- after all, a work of art cannot feel anything. Yet it is precisely this notion of artistic response which is a main source of the deeply held subjectivist misconception. For an artistic experience can be *identified only* by reference to the understanding of a particular work. To put the point succinctly, I may be having the response, but the question of *what response it is*, i.e. the *character* of the experience, can be answered only by reference to the *work of art*. The criterion of an artistic response cannot intelligibly be determined by introspective, subjective reports, for such responses could be irrelevant associations, causally induced perhaps, but not an *artistic* response at all. To concentrate, as Abbs does, exclusively on the subjective experience of the spectator is to *separate* the experience from the work of art: the experience is in that case not *identified* by the work, in which case it could, logically, be *any* experience which *happened* to occur, and not an artistic experience of the work at all. It could, for instance, be induced by a drug. Indeed, the descriptions given by Abbs's subjects not only have little if any relationship to qualities of the work of art, but they sometimes sound remarkably like hallucinatory drug-induced experiences, when he writes of states of "excited and tranced consciousness." One of them even says *explicitly* that the experience is "Drug-like. Transcending."

It is because artistic response is, logically, identified by understanding of the work of art that it makes no sense to attribute an artistic response to animals. An animal can have a causal response to art, but it cannot have an *artistic* response because it lacks the understanding of the art form and cultural tradition which identifies artistic feeling. Of course there are individual differences of response to the same work of art: individual differences of response reflect differences in understanding.

Consequently, education in the arts should, and in practice almost always does, consist in helping students to develop discriminating understanding, or cognition. For deeper understanding, provided characteristically by perceptive critical reasoning or analysis, provides the possibility of deeper artistic feeling. Thus the work is primary, in that any intelligible account of artistic experience has to be grounded in objective qualities of the *work*, rather than subjective feelings.

There is much more to be said than space allows.¹⁰ I certainly do not deny that sometimes (not normally) there are intense and/or deep responses to the arts. I am offering an outline account of the necessarily cognitive character of artistic feeling, which, unlike the subjectivist-supernatural thesis, provides an intelligible basis for the educational credentials of the arts, and applies to artistic experience, whether intense or not.

Space does not allow adequate discussion of the other authors to whom Abbs refers in support of his thesis. I will just say, in relation to what Abbs says about Hargreaves, that if he is proposing the notion of (1) "conversive trauma" as *characteristic* of artistic response, then it is vulnerable to similar criticisms. A trauma in this context is an emotional shock, or disturbing emotional occurrence. It is wildly implausible to claim that such is *normal* for, or characteristic of, artistic experience. It can happen, but it is far from normal. The same applies, less obviously to Hargreaves other "key" characteristics:

- (2) A sense of revelation
- (3) inarticulateness (I have dealt with a major aspect of this)
- (4) The arousal of appetite

Walk round the average art gallery, and look at the conventional portraits, landscapes, still-life paintings etc., and I doubt whether you will experience any of these "key" characteristics; you certainly will not respond in this way to every work of art.

It is certainly an important possibility of artistic experience -- especially important educationally -- that some works can, as I prefer to put it, open new potentialities of understanding and therefore feeling. But it is certainly not true that this occurs in every artistic experience.

Thus a "conversive trauma", being overwhelmed, having powerful sensations, concentration of attention, a sense of revelation (Hargreaves), are certainly not *necessary* conditions of artistic experience, since there are numerous artistic experiences which do not involve them.

But neither are these characteristic *sufficient* for an artistic experience. That is, one can have an experience which is traumatic, overwhelming, involves concentrated attention, a sense of revelation etc., etc., which is not artistic/aesthetic at all. On the contrary, these aspects are characteristic of many kinds of powerful and intense emotional experience. There are numerous examples. Read, for instance, accounts of many highly significant scientific, mathematical, geographical, historical and archæological discoveries, which involved concentrated attention, overwhelming excitement, revelation etc. And, in a good school, students will experience

¹⁰ For an extended discussion please see my book *The Rationality of Feeling*, or at least its first chapter. Its central theme, as the title implies, is not that the arts involve both feeling and reason, but that artistic experience IS rational, cognitive, fully objective.

such characteristics themselves, in the sciences, history, geography etc. Not often, perhaps, but sometimes, they will have such memorable moments of experience.

So since these are neither necessary nor sufficient, they fail lamentably as purported "key" characteristics of artistic experience in general.

Cognitive Feeling

The difficulty of making absolutely clear the vital positive thesis for which I am arguing is created by prevalent unquestioned assumptions. For I am not in the least denying the central importance of individual feeling in response to the arts. Quite the contrary. What I am arguing is that such feeling is inseparable from understanding. Thus it not only makes no sense to suppose that the character of artistic response can be located in terms exclusively of subjective feeling, but isolating it from understanding denies any educational justification for the arts. And remember that Abbs explicitly rejects analysis and criticism as part of artistic experience. Since it is the function of analysis and critical discussion to deepen understanding and with it feeling, Abbs's statement that critical analysis is "at a profound distance from the experience of art" amounts to saying that understanding, cognition (and therefore education) is "at a profound distance from the experience of art." In short, Abbs's statement is a denial that artistic experience can be any legitimate part of education; his position is radically self-contradictory. There certainly can be nothing educational about inducing overwhelmingly tranced, drug-like states of consciousness.

With further strange inconsistency Abbs claims that his experiment supports the view that "the arts are, at their best, cognitive activities of the highest order," yet just examine the introspective, subjective reports he cites. He *claims* a cognitive status for the arts, while offering an account which on examination can be seen clearly to reject it. There is scarcely a reference to individual understanding (i.e. cognition) of the works of art, and even where there is such reference, it is cursorily general; there is no reference to *particular* objective perceptions of *particular* works of art.

Conclusion

This is the direction in which further research is urgently needed, for unless we can provide sound reasons to show unquestionably that, while centrally involving feeling, the arts are as fully and intelligibly cognitive, objective and rational as any subject in the curriculum, then the arts will continue to be marginalised, in education and society.

Once we have eradicated self-defeating subjective assumptions, then, in view of, for instance, the deeply personal, moral, social issues which can be the subject of the arts, there is a sound, in-depth case for arguing that the arts should be central in the curriculum. For in educating understanding we are

educating feelings, and those feelings are not supernatural, but offer insights into life generally.

It is surely only too clear, in our society, and many others, how urgently needed, yet widely ignored, is such education of the emotions.

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