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RELATIONSHIPS, INSIGHTS, AND VISIONS: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE AESTHETIC RESPONSE OF CHILDREN

Susan Hood

Introduction

The following is a re-examination of my own research paper written in the summer of 1982. In the spring of the preceeding year, while presenting an art history lesson to twenty-six fourth grade students, I asked them to list at least ten important things about the lesson and draw a picture of Mary Cassatt, the subject of the lesson. My original hypothesis was that the written comments would fall into several broad categories such as historical fact, comments about media, or terms associated with formal analysis. They didn't.

But there was a great deal of "agreement" among the students' comments, in that over half of them responded with the same ten items. These ten items were sentences and phrases which referred to the artist as a person, specifically, Cassatt's youth, background, family and friends, and vision problems in later years. I interpreted this as an indication of the students' desire to know the artist as a human being. Changar's inquiries (Hurwitz & Madeja, 1977, p. 260-261) confirm this with respect to what children want to know about living artists.

In examining the students' list more closely, two of the many items of reponse were particularly interesting. Almost half of the students included the Louvre and the Paris Opera in their lists of important things. While I found this pleasing, it was still difficult to explain why these two placess--so distanct in time and place as presented in Cassatt's work--should appear with such frequency in the students' lists.

It was this question which prompted the present inquiry. In attempting to answer it, a number of other questions arose--some seemed very far-removed from what happened in the classroom when the responses were collected. However, answering these questions was necessary to re-define the original question and find its answer. In this process, I was introduced to the interpretation theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer through Brooks' (1982) example. The reason why Gadamer's theory became meaningful to me is the real content of this paper--this becomes the answer to the original question.

Relationships

Reading for pleasure resulted in my introduction to two fictional characters who seem to represent differing ways of looking at and interpreting the events surrounding them. The first, Nekhludoff, in Tolstoy's Resurrection (1899) cannot understand why the heroine, Katushka/Maslova, does not wish to be rescued from her way of life and prison sentence. As the narrator explains, she has changed, because:

> Everybody, in order to be able to act, has to consider his occupation important and good. Therefore, in whatever position a person is, he will be certain to form such a view of the life of men in general which will make his occupation seem important and good. (p. 172)

Nekhludoff cannot understand how or why a prostitute sentenced to Siberia for murder could construct a world which he and his moral sense cannot penetrate.

The second character, Betteredge, in Wilkie Collin's The Moonstone (1868) has few problems of interpretation. Robinson Crusoe, as script and oracle, places the events of his life in perspective. Nothing surprises Betteredge, even the news brought to him by the young protagonist at the end of this remarkable tale. It was all there, in Robinson Crusoe. Betteredge cautions the reader in parting:

> You are welcome to be as merry as you please over everything else I have written. But when I write of Robinson Crusoe, by the Lord, it's serious--and I request you take it accordingly. (p. 364)

Somewhere between Nekhludoff's lack of understanding and Betteredge's comprehensive but exclusive understanding must lie a middle ground. We who seek this level of understanding are cautioned by the example of Nekhludoff and Betteredge. But Katushka/Maslova cautions us as well, because when we seek answers to our questions, we are operating within a construction of our own making, built upon our interactions with others (Schutz, 1970). This construction either becomes part of the question or part of the answer.

Or so I thought--that it might become both, and that this might be far more desirable than either alternative is a concept that grew out of my consideration of the relationships within which the original research took place. Burton (1978) summarizes these relationships and his attitude toward them when he states that art education "primarily (and happily) rests on the relationships of interaction and intersubjectivity" (p. 40). My own understanding of these relationships is tempered by an appreciation of their dual nature: their strength is almost literal, but their fragility lies in their potential for developing "knots" (Laing, 1970). It is understanding which directs me to approach the student with Beittel's (1979) words, "I am treating you as a whole so that you may become whole" (p. 19).

In this spirit, I cannot presume to understand everything each child in my classroom brought to the art history lesson, but it is important for me to seek a better understanding of the things each of us took from the lesson. For within the interlocking network of these relationships, each of us finds meaning. It is then, not incompatible with this spirit of thought to view the majority of student responses from an existentialist viewpoint--the students' desire to know the artist as a person may be a means of confirming their own existences. We're not supposed to be objects to ourselves.

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It is then, appropriate for me to turn to my own assumptions and beliefs to better understand the "unexplained" responses which involve the Louvre and the Paris Opera. The assumptions and beliefs are the things which I brought to the experience. I approach teaching with two of these: first, that "art knowledge is self-knowledge," and second, that "learning is learning to ask the right questions."[1] My first indication that Gadamer's (1975) interpretation theory might be meaningful to me was the following statement in the preface to Truth and Method:

> It is true that everyone who experiences a work of art gathers the experience wholly within himself: Namely into the totality of his self-understanding, within which it means something to him. (p. xviii)

The second indication was provided by Brooks' description of the underlying flow of Gadamer's process:

> Through the movement of question and answer the interpreter experiences the disclosure of the meaning of the text as a relative other, as well as the meaning of his or her own horizon and the stream of tradition in which the horizons mutually exist. (p. 45)

The "act of faith" in Gadamer's process is the interpreter's admission that he or she does not know the answer. From then on, the interpreter operates within a dialectic, "answers" are fusions or horizons--and in this way, the answer becomes part of the next question. Gadamer's interpretation theory can be a way of finding one's place within the network of relationships through which we interact. And what is one's "place"? Knowledge, as historical consciousness.

Realizing that my own conception of this may not necessarily be what Gadamer conceived, it is, nevertheless, this kind of knowledge that has become increasingly important to me as I continue to teach. Because insights and visions which arise from this knowledge are so seductive, it is difficult for me to imagine my existence as a person without the aspect of my teaching. Returning to my notes, transcript, and lists, I found a number of answers in my own commentary on Cassatt's images. I had communicated far more than I suspected to my students. In showing Cassatt's portrait of Lydia at the Paris Opera to them, I talked about why I had gone to France, as had my own teacher, to paint and to learn more about art. Having seen so many Impressionist paintings of similar scenes at Garnier's marvelous opera house, it was important for me to go there, too. Watching a performance from a tiered box overlooking the stage--the same setting Lydia occupied--became part of my experience.

In showing Degas' etching of Cassatt in front of the Etruscan sarcophagus at the Louvre, I told the students the "story" behind the print. Degas--in one sense a "teacher" of Cassatt--may have placed her there because he felt she belonged there, by virtue of her ability as an artist. This "story" may well not be authentic--but I would like to believe it--because it reminds me of one's "place" as historical consciousness and its relationship to teaching. As such, it is Degas' "interpre-

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tation;" while the portrait of Lydia is part of mine.

At this point, it is less difficult to understand why the Louvre and the Paris Opera appeared with such frequency. Part of what I communicated in my commentary was my own conception of the importance of historical consciousness--a relationship in itself, arising out of relationships which underlie the teaching and making of art. In this sense, even if the students wrote down the names of those distant places simply to please me, that's not such a bad thing, either.

Insights

What I possess that I view as historical consciousness has been acquired over a long period of time. The discovery of Gadamer is particularly pleasing to me because it seems to make the process of acquisition easier--it is very tempting to say that I wish I had been more aware of his work sooner. But this isn't really the case--the important step in the process for me was my work with elementary school children, even though my own search began long before that time.

My undergraduate education in studio art, while providing me with a strong foundation in the academic tradition, left me with little more than a few names and dates from art history. Some years later, returning for a graduate degree in art history, I began to gain an understanding of the nature of the questions. Art historical inquiry was open to a variety of modes of inquiry--there were alternative ways of knowing--one way wasn't necessarily better than another, but might be more appropriate in a given situation.

I can remember that upon choosing an area in which to work, I wanted to immerse myself as completely as possible in the historical period. At this point, Gadamer certainly would have been helpful, as I might have realized the fallacy behind this approach sooner. As it was, the teaching of art history and studio courses corrected my thinking and served to move it toward its present stance.

Teaching elementary school children may have been especially important for me becuase the making process is not separated from the "appreciating" process as it is in the college teaching--and rightly so, in each case. I would like to think that what I learned from teaching young children was some understanding of what children and their relationships with art represent.

Although I may appear overly critical of Betteredge in The Moonstone, I too have my "Robinson Crusoes" and they function for me in such a way that I am just as serious as Betterredge was about them. The ironic humor in a hermeneutic sense, as Robinson Crusoe was Betteredge's "Bible," is a useful check on my own intuition, imagination, and reflection. Even with this tempering effect of humor, Poincare's (1908) "Mathematical Creation" and Thomas Mann's (1903) novella, Tonio Kroger, still function as "Robinson Crusoes" in my own thinking.

In this sense, the following statement by Kroger expresses my own

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feelings about what I learned from working with children:

> There is such a way of being an artist that goes so deep and is so much a matter of origins and destinies that no longing seems to it sweeter and more worth knowing than longing after the bliss of the commonplace. (p. 132)

Kroger's statement is a disclosure, brought about through contact as an adult with the "realities" of his own childhood. I believe that the "origins and destinies" about which he speaks may be common to us all, not always as adults, but certainly as children. It is a shared seeking, and may be implicit in the process of finding meaning in our lives. I suspect that, for these origins and destinies to manifest themselves in a meaningful way, what Gadamer speaks of as knowledge is very important. Tonio Kroger's disclosure is very similar to Cassirer's (1944) statement about meaning:

> In language, in religion, in art, in science, man can do no more than to build up his own universe--a symbolic universe that enables him to understand and interpret, to articulate and organize, to synthesize and universalize his human experience. (p. xii)

In considering this, the most exciting insight which I have gained from this study is a much greater appreciation of research in art education which aims at discovering the ways in which children find meaning through symbolization.

Visions

I would like to imagine that one day, we will better understand this process and look beyond the one flaw in Poincare's thinking which Papert (1980) indirectly addresses. Papert's research with children and computers is intriguing both because it reaches its conclusion through structuralist pathways, and because Papert was working against the same kinds of cultural impediments that face art education, for:

> It is deeply embedded in our culture that the appreciation of mathematical beauty and the experience of mathematical pleasure are accessible only to a minority, perhaps as very small minority, of the human race. (p. 190)

Chapman's (1982) insights and arguments make this problem very clear. Perhaps some aspects of Papert's research may also be applied to inquiry in art education. Papert's use of the word "remembering" in the following statement seems particularly important:

> Not until Bourbaki's structuralist theory appeared do we see an internal development in mathematics which opens mathematics up to "remembering" its genetic roots. This "remembering" was to put mathematics in the closest possible relationship to the development of research about how

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children construct their reality. (p. 207)

If intelligences are "appreciations of appropriateness" (Gardner, 1983) knowledge as historical consciousness is a very important kind of knowledge. In a metaphorical sense, time "heals and cures," time "illuminates." It is appropriate for a certain kind of understanding. I can find similarities for what Cezanne does in his painting with some aspects of programming and interacting with a computer. Time and space are "bracketed" again and again to achieve a larger whole as Cezanne does "Poussin again after nature" (Canaday, 1959, p. 343).

It is for its possibilities that I value Gadamer's interpretation theory so much. It helps to clarify the pathway which my own thinking has followed. Ultimately, that pathway is circular, and must return to some "roots." I cannot help but think of Louis Sullivan's (1900) insertion into one of his theoretical writings: "Some of these words are very old--They still cry with the infancy of the race " (p. 218). Perhaps when they do, that is all the more reason to listen to them.

NOTES

[1]The first statement was expressed by Al Hurwitz in a talk for museum docents delivered at the UMC Museum of Art and Archaeology, and made an impression on me, because it was something I strongly believed; the second, was so often repeated by Edzard Baumann during my graduate work in art history, that it became an important aspect of my own teaching. Chapman integrates them.

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