

## **Social engagement of art and aesthetic education**

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It is one thing for artists to be socially engaged; it is quite another thing to realize the aims of that engagement, because such an ambition presupposes a responsive audience. To become responsive to (the social aims) of art the audience must be educated. However, there is little agreement among artists and aesthetic educators on the question of what aesthetic education actually is and, without doubt, this confusion is linked to the no less difficult question of what art actually is. In my lecture I shall try to shed some light on these questions, taking literature as an example. First, I shall discuss four basic conceptions of art - mimesis, expression, form and interpretation. Second, I shall discuss the implied social relevance of each of these conceptions. Finally, from a developmental perspective, I shall discuss the implications and justification of these four conceptions of art for aesthetic education in schools and museums. Although, for reasons of time, I will mainly concentrate on literature, I consider the presented typology valid for the different art forms, as well as for the production and reception of art.

### **Four conceptions of the literary work of art**

In the course of the history of Western culture a large number of theories concerning the nature of works of art have been developed. If we endeavor to survey the whole, it is possible to differentiate a limited number of basic types within this multiplicity. These basic types differ from each other because in each case a particular aspect of, or relationship to, the work of art lies at its heart. We might also designate these notions as ideal types, considering existing aesthetic theories always form variations of one, sometimes more than one, of these basic types. I shall discuss consecutively the mimetic, the expressive, the formalistic, and the interpretative conceptions of literature. The order in which I do this is not arbitrary, but broadly corresponds to the chronological development of these conceptions.

The relationship between the literary work of art and the outside world is at the heart of the mimetic conception of literature, which as the first was defended by Plato - though already with some reserve (Plato *The Republic*, book X; cf. De Mul, 1999, 35-74). In the mimetic conception the work of art is understood as a portrayal of reality, as a window, which offers a view of the world outside. The mimetic conception was the dominant conception at least until the end of the Renaissance, but still in the aesthetics of the past century many aesthetic theories have been or still are mimetic in nature. To give just one example: (neo)Marxist theories place a strong emphasis on the representational character of literary works, especially with regard to the representation of . The mimetic conception of the literary work of art also contains specific judgmental criteria. The better a work of art manages to portray reality, the more successful it is. Mimetic arguments, therefore, are always realistic arguments, although the notion of what 'realistic' is, shows a great variety in different cultures and historical ages.

In mimetic theories the nature of that which is portrayed is often the deciding factor in how a literary work of art is judged. This means that it is often difficult to separate the aesthetic and moral arguments in these theories. This applied to Plato (who reproached Homer for portraying the Gods as adulterous, lying and cheating creatures, and by doing so not only contaminated youth, but also lowered the tone of art), as well as to (neo)Marxist literary theories when they judge a work of art on its ideological content or class consciousness. In the often weighty discussions on the question of art censorship it is also often clear that political-moral and aesthetic arguments are closely intertwined - at least among those who believe in a mimetic conception of the work of art.

A second widespread conception of the literary work of art is the expressive conception. In theories based on this conception a work of art is first and foremost conceived as an expression of emotions and feelings. An early example of an expressive aesthetic theory is Aristotle's catharsis theory, in which tragedy is understood as something that embodies emotions and is able to arouse these emotions in the reader or spectator (Aristotle 1995, 52-55). From Romanticism on, that is to say after the heyday of mimetic theories, for a considerable time expressive conception assumed a central place in the forming of aesthetic theories. In Romanticism the way in which the emotions of the author were embodied in the literary work was of particular importance.

To Goethe, for example, the unique personality of the writer came first and foremost. Attention for the biography of the artist - which even today is still prevalent in the world of literature - is part of the legacy of the romantic conception of the author as a genius. In other expressive theories - that of Tolstoy, for example - the relationship between the personality of the writer and the literary work is less in the foreground; greater emphasis is placed on the fact that the literary work expresses general human emotions.

The expressive conception still has many adherents today. A good example is the Anglo Saxon 'expressionist school of aesthetics' of which Suzan Langer is a typical representative. "In a certain sense", Langer summarized the position of this school in 1971, "we might call a work of art a symbol of feeling, because as a symbol it expresses our conceptions of inner experience... A work of art expresses such conceptions as an immediate vision of vitality, emotion, subjective reality" (Langer 1971, 91). Just like the mimetic conception of literature, the expressive conception also contains specific judgmental criteria. It is not the precision of the portrayal, but the emotional powers of expression of a literary work that determines its quality. The better it portrays human emotions, the more valuable a literary work is. Authenticity and originality thus become important aesthetic criteria.

In the third, formalistic, conception the emphasis lies on the form of the literary work. The formalistic conception also has its roots in classical antiquity. We read in Aristotle's *Poetics*: "In determining what the extent of a plot must be, this is the starting point: all that is beautiful (this applies to a living creature just as much as for every other matter that is formed of parts) must not only have its parts coherent and in good order, but its scale must not be arbitrary" (Aristotle 1995, 41). In formalistic theories the autonomy of a work of art comes to the foreground. They are not so much concerned with what the work of art portrays or represents, as with its autonomous form. It is not surprising that the formalistic conception, which since the end of the 19th century has assumed a prominent place in aesthetics, has developed particularly in reflection on art forms which are not representational or are no longer representational (such as music, that has been interpreted from a formalistic perspective as early as the middle of the nineteenth century (Hanslick), and the non-figurative visual arts some decades later (Fry and Bell), respectively. But in modern literary theory, too, formalism has gained a prominent place since the beginning of the 20th century (cf. Bradley 1909). Influenced by the East-European formalistic school and - particularly in the Anglo-Saxon language regions - the New Criticism movement, by the 1950s the formalistic standpoint had become the dominant conception of literature (Hawkes 1977, 152).

The judgmental criteria for formalistic theories are concerned with the synthesis or construction of the work. This concerns criteria such as unity and variation, simplicity and complexity. If, in formalistic theories, one looks beyond the work of art, then at the most it concerns the relationship the work of art in question maintains with other works of art. Concepts such as style, which often appear in the vocabulary of the formalists, indeed only make sense when we compare a number of literary works with each other, when we analyze the work of art in terms of the world of art (cf. Danto, 1978).

I shall designate the fourth, and last, conception I wish to put forward the interpretative conception of literature. This conception has been particularly developed during recent decades, as a reaction to the formalistic approach. As opposed to formalistic theories, in interpretative theories the notion of timeless aesthetic form is rejected. The work of art, so argue representatives of this type of theory, first originates in the interpretative activity of the reader or listener. The reader approaches the work from a specific, historically determined, experiential horizon. For this reason, every interpretation is different than that of other readers. A literary work does not have a single fixed meaning, but - following the German philosopher Gadamer - something that might be designated as an 'effective history' (Gadamer 1960, 283).

Matters concerning the relationships 'literary work-reader' and 'work-viewer' are already found in classical literature - I point once more to Aristotle's catharsis theory. Equating the interpretation process to the actual work of art, however, is a typical characteristic of present day literary theories, sometimes designated as postmodernist. Here I am thinking in the first place of Gadamer's philosophical-hermeneutic conception, mentioned above, and also of post-structuralistic authors such as Barthes and the deconstructivists, elaborating on Derrida (cf. Norris 1982). Where in the mimetic conception the outside world, in the expressive conception the author, and in the formalistic conception the literary work itself, are central, in the interpretative conception the reader is in the foreground. The criteria that flow from this

conception of the literary domain are particularly related to the many-sidedness of the literary text, to which the reader continually attaches new interpretations.

## 2. Four forms of literary education and their justification

That is my brief typology of literary-aesthetic theories. Each of these four separate conceptions of literary work contains a specific social dimension and also has specific implications for aesthetic education and its justification. On the basis of the mimetic conception of literary work, in which in the first place the work is seen as a window on the world, aesthetic education is primarily interpreted as a light-hearted way of getting to know the world. If we had to summarize aesthetic education based on a mimetic conception of a work of art in a single question for a student, then that question would be: "What does the work represent?"

The social dimension of the mimetic conception of art is that of the correct reflection of the subject. Moreover, this does not only concern the epistemological correctness of the portrayal, but also a moral correctness. The justification of aesthetic education conceived in this way will be linked to the mimetic character of the work of art. This already applied to Plato's discussion of aesthetic education in *The Republic* cf. II, 376f.] and it also applies to present-day mimetic conceptions. A good example of this is Paul Hirst's *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (1974). In this work Hirst tries to show that art can be conceived as a form of propositional knowledge. This is not the place for a critical evaluation of the problematic aspects of this (and the following) attempts at justification. Here I restrict myself to indicate briefly the various qualitatively different grounds for justification.

In the expressive conception the literary work is first and foremost conceived as an expression of feelings and emotions, particularly as a mirror of human emotions. The fundamental question here is: "What does the artist actually express?" Here, the objective and, at the same time, the means of aesthetic education, is the experience of human emotions and feelings. Furthermore, the 'noncommittal character' of the aesthetic experience offers an opportunity to undergo many experiences which we do not choose to experience in everyday life (cf. Collinson 1973).

The social dimension of the expressive literary conception is particularly linked to the 'psychological' skills, which are central to this form of aesthetic experience. It allows the recipient to empathize with the experiences and feelings of other people in situations, which are often unknown to that recipient. Here, justification of aesthetic education can be linked to Aristotle's catharsis theory. Within this framework Aristotle argues that experimenting with emotions and experiences not so much engages us in ungovernable passions, but rather makes purification and rational treatment of them possible.

In formalistic conceptions, in which the literary work is primarily understood as an arrangement of linguistic elements, the fundamental question is: "How is the literary work constructed?" Here, the objective of aesthetic education is the learning of the 'language of aesthetic forms'. Therefore education is particularly directed at learning to recognize and appreciate aesthetic forms, in the above-mentioned broad sense; as well as in a narrower sense, such as in the various literary and stylistic genres.

On first consideration the social dimension of art in this conception is less evident. Within it art is often regarded as autonomous, unconnected with the existing social domain. Nonetheless, here, too, there is a social dimension. In his aesthetics Adorno points out that the form of a work of art at an abstract level forms a (more or less ideologically coloured) reflection of social relationships. For example, to Adorno the non-harmonic music of Schönberg was a reflection of social tensions and disharmony in his time. In this case, aesthetic education is particularly directed at the recognition of the formal properties of the literary work, already mentioned. Mindful of the autonomous character of the work of art, in the justification of this form of aesthetic education we might point especially to the intrinsic value of the aesthetic experience, although - as I have already said - this form can also possess a social dimension on a more abstract level.

In the interpretative conception of literature the pure intrinsic approach of the experience of the work of art is broadened again. The task which according to this conception is laid before literary works is less concerned with the concrete literary work than with the interpretation process taking place within the reader. Furthermore, this learning process is not confined to the purely aesthetic, but concerns the

'condition humaine' in its entirety, considering the human condition as a whole is characterized by an interpretative character.

In this case, too, aesthetic education will be particularly directed at the interpretation process that takes place within the reader, and which is difficult to bring to a halt at the limits of the strictly aesthetic. The justification of this form of literary education will lay particular emphasis on the relevance of the aesthetic experience for the interpretative dimension of the 'condition humaine'. Here, as in the mimetic conception of education based on literature, aesthetic education is once again a lesson in life; although here we are no longer concerned with an imitation of the existing culture, but rather with a creative and critical contribution to its continuation.

### 3. The development of aesthetic education and justification

Let me briefly summarize my argument up to this point. I have argued that a justification of aesthetic education from a social perspective presupposes a certain conception of what aesthetic education is, and this conception, in its turn, is grounded in a particular conception of art. Considering that at least four essential distinct conceptions can be distinguished, there are also at least four different grounds for justification for these four different forms of education. What does this mean for the practice of aesthetic education? Two possibilities seem to arise.

It would appear that those who wish to cling to the presumption of providing a justification valid for everyone are obliged to show that only one of the different conceptions of art and aesthetic education is correct. In my view, however, this strategy is doomed to failure, not only because the history of aesthetics has taught us that no single one of the conceptions mentioned has managed to banish the others from the stage on the basis of pure argumentation but, more particularly, because each of the different conceptions is linked with particular aesthetic practices or life forms (cf. Wittgenstein 1958, a.o. 363). The more different life forms a society consists of, the more mutually irreducible grounds for justification are present. This means that in any case in the context of the pluriform modern Western society belief in a single shared normative-aesthetic framework is not (no longer?) realistic.

The alternative is to endorse, enthusiastically or not, the acknowledged aesthetic pluralism. The consequence of this is that we must resolutely abandon every presumption of being able to provide a justification for a particular type of literary education that is valid for everyone. In practice this means that every educator either chooses, on the grounds of personal choice, what for him/her is the most appealing conception of art and aesthetic education arranged correspondingly, or make the more democratic choice of an eclectic approach. Expressed in a less friendly way, in the later case the choice largely means cobbling together a mishmash of different aesthetic conceptions - which often find themselves in conflict with each other. The confusion in the theory and practice of aesthetic education (Redfern, 1986) seems to be an indication that today many educators choose the eclectic approach.

All in all, the situation in literary education, with the two outlined alternatives, does not appear to be particularly rosy. Those who cling to the possibility of one single form of education are unrealistic; those who embrace pluralism are condemned to one-sidedness or confusion. However, I wish to argue that a third alternative is possible. This alternative states that while the four conceptions are indeed different from each other, there is nonetheless a clear developmental relationship between them.

This alternative can be substantiated by referring to the empirical-hermeneutic research by the American development psychologist Michael Parsons. The four conceptions of a work of art not only appear in a particular sequence historically, but - so Parsons' research suggests - also in the development of the individual. On the basis of extensive research Parsons, a disciple of the development psychology approach of Piaget and Kohlberg, has established that in the aesthetic judgements of individuals a number of qualitatively separate phases occur (see Parsons 1987 and 1988; cf. De Mul 1986, 1997). Parsons directed his research particularly at aesthetic judgements with regard to the visual arts; however, it seems to me that the results are without doubt relevant for the development of judgement concerning literary (and other) works of art.

Parsons differentiates five stages in the development of aesthetic judgements. Apart from the first, more or less pre-aesthetic stage, in stages two to five we recognize the four conceptions I differentiated earlier. According to Parsons, after the associative stage aesthetic judgement with regard to the visual arts is characterized consecutively by realism, expressiveness, style and form, and autonomy (this last stage is more closely described by Parsons as "the exploration of values in changing historical circumstances"; Parsons 1987, 26).

This has important implications for aesthetic education and accordingly for literary education, too, because each of the consecutive aesthetic stages forms a qualitatively separate learning level. Every stage (or rationality structure) can be regarded as a system of conditions of possibility that determine the limits of what can be learned. It conditions and legitimizes the content of learning. If literary education is to be adequate, then it must take into account the aesthetic level of learning of the student.

In my view an important element in the confusion in the theory and practice of aesthetic education flows from a neglect of the developmental character of the aesthetic experience. If one of the conceptions of the aesthetic experience is made absolute and the sole point of departure for all aesthetic education, then it would lead to a form of aesthetic education which overshoots the aesthetic experience of all those who are not in that phase on which the form of teaching in question is based. Parsons (s.a.) gives a striking example of this when he describes the efforts of young children, in the mimetic judgement phase, to acquire an aesthetic understanding of style (a typical phase four concept). Indeed, by means of an intensive training programme, based on feedback, children managed to learn to select paintings by a number of artists on their stylistic characteristics. The point, however, is that this acquired skill is a purely intellectual skill (a particular form of perceptual awareness), which on the whole had no connection with the aesthetic experience of those children at that time.

The 'ban on figuration' that has characterized drawing and painting education in recent decades appears to suggest the same misconception is at work in the field of aesthetic education. No matter with how much pleasure the paint is flung on the paper, and however aesthetic the 'abstract-expressionist' works of young children might be in the eyes of the art teacher (judging from a different conceptualization of the aesthetic domain), for the student it has little to do with an actual aesthetic experience. When a democratic option is chosen in order to combine different conceptions into a whole, in many instances aesthetic education also misses its target. When aesthetic education or aesthetic teaching is based on an eclectic (and therefore often inconsistent) ragbag of theoretical departure points concerned with the different phases of development, then there is a great danger the students are alternatively asked for too little or too much.

The coherence of development of the different conceptions of the work of art I have outlined, and following on from it the coherence of development of aesthetic education - and this is how I wish to close - means that although there are no coordinating theoretical reasons for choosing one type of literary teaching above another, and notwithstanding practical grounds, there is every justification for coupling each form of aesthetic education to a specific phase of the pupil's aesthetic development.