

In this paper I shall attempt to show that theorising, even of the most abstract kind, is, where appropriately tackled, of direct relevance to pressing practical problems in the teaching of the arts and design. This is not to say that every practitioner should be philosophising consciously and articulately all the time he is working — he would probably never finish anything — but I shall suggest that some study of aesthetics can be of great value to all *educators* in the arts and that it can help them to sort out some fashionable educational terms which are used all too often in a confused and confusing way.

I mean by 'aesthetics' the philosophy of art and would argue, given more time and space, that this can include (via the concept of 'form') the philosophy of design in a sense which reaches far beyond what we normally mean by the fine arts. There are also psychological and sociological aesthetics, but it is the philosopher's job to include these within the range of his enquiry.

Theorising is regarded by some art teachers as dangerous, since they fear that analysis destroys creativity; but older pupils and adults cannot be kept in a non-differentiating, infantile state and thinking about one's work — what one is trying to achieve and how to achieve it — is necessary to every practitioner, even though much of the thinking may not be verbal. The problem for the art educator is to find ways of helping pupils or students regain or retain the flexibility and fluidity of earlier stages of thought and feeling in their development, while also being capable of structuring them in meaningful, purposive ways.

The important thing for imaginative or creative thought is not to *regress* from the patterns of one's socialised thought to a chaos of 'booming, buzzing confusion' and 'undifferentiated mush', but to rise above stereotyped forms and *use* them in new ways. A painter, poet, sculptor, inventor all solve problems by using ready-structured

thought in a more free way than the unimaginative person. Occasionally they will significantly break a rule — not because they did not know about the rule, but because, understanding the reason for its existence, they decide it is not necessary to their particular purposes but an inhibiting influence. Thus the creative thinker makes some of his own rules as he goes along — not in an anarchial way, form miraculously arising out of chaos, but in a rule-recognising and purposive way.

Some study of aesthetics, then, can help teachers tease apart the confusions which arise in this highly complex and intelligent activity that involves feelings, emotions, manual skills and dexterity, sometimes sheer physical strength as well as penetrating intellectual enquiry. To illustrate the contribution that some study of aesthetics can make I shall give examples of a few concepts with which aestheticians have concerned themselves, showing briefly how further study in such areas could be invaluable to the art and design educator who wants to make clear to others, as well as to himself, just what he is about and just why his discipline cannot be treated in exactly the same way as other disciplines like maths or science, even though it will frequently draw upon and use both of those disciplines.

## 1. Expression

Expressive theories of art grew as alternatives to classical mimetic or representational theories. As criteria of truth and the demand that a work should be a 'good likeness' receded, especially during the Romantic Age, so the notion of art as expressing and communicating feeling and emotion came to the fore, and a similar change of approach is evident in educational theory. 'Self-expression' is currently regarded as self-evidently valuable, though how one evaluates such 'expression', or even decides whether it has taken place, remains



unclear. Modern aesthetics has been much given to showing the inadequacies of a purely emotive theory of expression and one way in which we can approach this is to differentiate between four very different senses of the word.

a) The first and most simple meaning is that of *physical expression*. A sneeze, for example, is an involuntary action to 'express' some foreign body from the nasal passage; waste matter is 'expressed' from the body.

b) The second is analogous to the first: *expressing* (or getting rid of) *emotion*. A child in a temper tantrum or an adult cursing and swearing may thereby 'work off' feelings of frustration: pent-up feelings have been released in hot air, like the steam from a pressure cooker. Some interpretations of Aristotle's notion of *catharsis* suggest that an analogy with physical expression is in mind, and Aristotle's use of the Greek word for 'purge' (he writes of the 'purging of emotion' in the *Poetics*) bears this out to some extent. *Catharsis* has also been linked with Greek mythico-religious notions of purification and this, too, suggests the expelling and washing away of moral guilt and pollution, that is, of something undesirable. It is probably not possible to determine exactly what Aristotle did mean, but seen within the whole context of his ethical theory and views on psychology we do know that he saw a healthy balance of emotion as necessary to motivate the soul and not to be eliminated as undesirable.

Unfortunately, an over-simple notion of 'expression', where it is understood as releasing emotion and nothing more, has led to a fairly wide and largely unquestioned view that the arts (which are certainly to some extent concerned with the emotions) function almost entirely as a useful and therapeutic channel of release for emotion. Branches of the arts may be included in the curriculum of a school almost entirely on therapeutic grounds, so that teaching and

learning in the arts is quite often not regarded as educative in itself, but as a useful safety-valve, on a par with going out to play, which reduces children to a fit state to get on with the serious business of education, or the non-arts subjects on the curriculum.

Both senses of 'expression' so far examined — physical expression and the release of emotion — can be regarded as expression which is symptomatic of a human condition. The expressive event (sneeze or tantrum) is a symptom by which one might try to diagnose the person's condition. The other two senses are not concerned with symptomatic meanings, but with symbolic meanings. Harold Osborne, in his book *The Art of Appreciation*, quotes from Peter Abraham's novel *Wild Conquest* to illustrate a person's struggle to raise his expression from the symptomatic expression of frustration to a symbolic communication which conveys conceptual meaning. A slave is trying to formulate his longing for a freedom that he has never known:

What is freedom? He tried to think about it. He knew it was something he felt, something deep inside him. Having it or not having it made all the difference to the way a man felt about the food he ate, about the words he spoke, about the wind and the rain on his face, about the way he looked at children in their play, about the way he kissed his woman and the way he walked and the look in his eyes. That he knew, but how to tell them that, how to make them understand that, that was the difficulty.

c) My third sense of 'expression' is *expression which structures thought and feeling in conventional ways*. The slave in Abraham's novel had no experiences and no framework of conventional meanings with which to formulate his intense but inarticulate feelings. Had he and his fellows known freedom, articulated it symbolically, but then lost it, they would still have had the social knowledge and the self-knowledge to understand (conceive of) their predicament and frustration and, perhaps, be more able to do something about it.



Conventional symbolic meanings are not only carried by verbal vehicles, though word-meanings are the most obvious. Religious and secular social rituals carry shared meanings, as do the recognised signals of a technological society like traffic lights and door-bells. Art, too, has a vast store-house of recognised meanings and associations of meanings and the more one has been initiated into the various frames of meaning the more one can recognise, say, the Miltonic allusions in Keats' poetry or traces of a master's style in the innovative painter.

d) Lastly, and perhaps most rarely, we have *expression which structures thought and feeling by using conventions in purposefully unconventional ways*. This is the kind of expression where an individual has a rich stock of conventional meanings and expertise and, far from being hide-bound by them, has the flexibility to turn them to his own ends. A part of such flexibility must involve the capacity to know what these ends are, and to choose between them, so the articulation (or putting into some kind of symbolic form) of feelings, preferences, perhaps conflicts, and intentions is essential. Abraham's slave was already groping after such articulation when he picked up the meanings and the images that he did know — wind and rain on his face, children at play — and tried to re-order them and see them from a different and as yet unknown point of view.

I suggest that 'expression' in senses c) and d) are the only senses in which the educator, as such, is primarily concerned. To the extent that teachers are also child-minders or therapists, and to the extent that purely physical or emotional expression may be relevant to symbolic expression, then we may also be concerned in schools and colleges with senses a) and b); but to limit one's concern to non-symbolic and symptomatic expression is to opt out of being an educator at all. For, as a part of his hope to bring about changes for the better in pupils

and students, the educator is concerned to help them find and make their lives meaningful.

## 2. Illusion

Another reaction against the classical view that art represents, or mirrors, 'nature' is the idea that it provides an escape from, or compensation for, the limitations of the unavoidable world of 'facts'. I believe that such a view under-rates the status of the arts (they tend to become a mere and meaningless frill to the more serious business of life) and forces a misleading distinction between the arts and the exploratory work of science and technology. Again, some analysis of different meanings of 'illusion' will help to clarify the issue.

a) Certain features in some art forms serve to trick us into believing what is not the case: *trompe l'oeil* effects, of which any number can be found in psychology textbooks on perception; the way in which perspective techniques can make us believe that a flat plane has, in fact, depth; arrangement of lines which give a still picture the appearance of movement; 'op' art — all of these do deceive the eye; but a complete aesthetic theory built upon such a concept of illusion soon fails. First, because it would be too wide: *any* deception of the eye would be a work of art; and secondly, because it does not begin to cope with questions about the overall structure of art forms. This aspect of 'illusion' remains a matter of technique which may, or may not, be used to aesthetic purpose and good effect.

b) Some illusionists are not so much concerned with the mere technicalities of a) but with the weird *fantasy and delusion* these techniques can conjure up. Psychedelic and mind-blowing experiences are regarded as desirable and valuable in their own right. Some of the romantics, William Blake, for example, regarded the empirical world as an unbearable prison of observable facts and



created their own worlds of fantasy and delight; but Blake still insisted that his mythical world was the reality while Newton, Boyle and Locke were deluding themselves within the narrow rut of empiricism. A person's view of 'reality' (and hence his conception of 'illusion') depends upon the 'language game' or meaning-framework he habitually uses. This is probably partly a matter of temperament and very much a matter of upbringing and socialisation. One's conception of the 'facts' of the world around one are necessarily tied to the symbolisms available with which one can think and talk about them. Get on the inside of a different set of cultural meanings and the 'facts' would look very different and cease to appear immutable.

c) *Semblance* — this term was used by Carl Jung in his writings on dream imagery, and he meant by it 'unreal by the measures of public fact'. One's expectations of events are based upon experience and the symbolisms used by which one interprets that experience, so inevitably conventional meanings help to define what one means by 'fact', 'real' and 'unreal'. In dreaming, the consistency of conventional language-games collapses and we move in a world which seems real but which, on waking and applying the consistency of criteria of conventional meaning-frames, we reject as nonsense. In some respects, meanings in art are similar to dream meanings in that they pick up conventions and use them in anti-conventional ways. Yet there is, or so most aestheticians would argue, a very significant difference between the confused ramblings of a dream and the significant ramblings of, say, King Lear or his Fool. I shall not attempt here to define that important difference.

It will be seen that this last kind of 'illusion', or semblance, may be relevant to the last type of 'expression', where conventions are used in unconventional ways. To think creatively may well demand the capa-

city to take conventional meanings into a thought-world of semblance: not with the critical mind switched off and unconscious, as in the dream, but active even while it holds its own tools and symbolisms under question.

### 3. Imagination

Coming, perhaps, only second to 'expression' in educational terminology in the arts, 'imagination' also needs unpacking.

a) Sometimes all that is meant by the term is the capacity to *form images* in the mind. So one person may be described as having a 'visual imagination', that is, he tends to think with visual images, while another may have an aural and another a tactile imagination. Yet another may claim to think almost entirely in words.

b) Secondly, we may mean that an 'imaginative' person has a rich and varied fantasy life. Indeed, he may be so absorbed in his compensatory dreams that he never comes to terms with the demands of everyday living at all, fantasy and ineffectualness growing together.

c) Rather differently, being 'imaginative' may mean being an independent thinker, and there is a toughness here lacking in (b). The 'difficult' pupil or student is often the one who refuses to accept stereotyped notions of 'fact' and 'real'.

d) Finally, and all too rarely, there is the person who is imaginative in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's sense, when he wrote in *Biographia Literaria* of the 'esemplastic power' of Imagination which is of a different order from mere fancy. 'Fancy', said Coleridge, 'plays with mere fixities and definitives'; it takes ready-formed concepts and jumbles them up in new ways; but Imagination questions and breaks down the concepts with which it builds, not just rearranging



them, but building anew, from the very foundations, aesthetic structures that are original, 'organic' wholes. The difference between 'imagination c)' and 'imagination d)' is that the latter moves on into that as yet undefined class where confused ramblings have become significant 'ramblings' and forms are built which have an aesthetic unity and integration which, to some extent, defy analysis. I would prefer to keep the term 'imagination' for this last sense, which may be described as *refusal to accept stereotyped notions of 'fact' and 'real', coupled with restructuring power*. There remain enormous problems about evaluation, appraisal and the criteria for deciding whether a structure has aesthetic unity, though I suspect the problems within technological design will not be so great, since at least the function and purpose of such a structure will usually be much easier to formulate.

#### 4. Integration

This 'hurrah' word of our educational times is used in a notoriously ambiguous fashion, and this is a pity, for a great deal of valuable practical work is being done under the 'integration' banner even though the rationale has not, in my opinion, been worked out in a clear and satisfactory way. Again, there are four very distinct senses of 'integration'.

a) *The integration of knowledge*, with which modern curriculum theory is much concerned, can be shown to have at least three separate possibilities. It is a little out of fashion now to talk of 'the seamless cloak of knowledge', as if all ways of knowing and all symbolisms could be ultimately fitted into one all-containing and logically consistent whole (a.1). Indeed, the more diverse a culture becomes the more it appears that some different specialisms work in a way that is definitely not consistent with the assumptions of other specialisms, so that fears about the fragmentation of knowledge

appear to have some point; but it has certainly not been proven that the creation of an all-embracing and consistent meaning-framework is logically impossible.

There is a vast difference, though, between an all-integrating system of meanings, fully articulated and clarified, and that kind of 'knowledge' sometimes called 'intuition', where a range of possible meanings are felt (as the slave felt his longing for freedom) as an undifferentiated and unarticulated whole (a.2). The young child's 'knowledge' is of this relatively undifferentiated kind; and so are the early stages of problem-solving and creative thought.

A third way of considering the integration of knowledge is to view all the ways of knowing that a society or a culture has developed as a set of distinct but relatable disciplines which do not necessarily relate into one consistent and coherent whole (a.3). Educationalists like Professor Hirst claim that an individual mind cannot develop without initiation into a balanced range of these logically distinct disciplines. In this way, treating the disciplines as autonomous, to some extent, is a necessary pre-requisite for any *meaningful* integration of the disciplines.

b) *Integration of the person* has a therapeutic ring about it, but is also linked with what is probably one of the foremost values of our society: that of individual autonomy. Now this sense of 'integration' can be seen to link closely with 'expression' in senses c) and d), for a person cannot formulate any knowledge or understanding of himself and his environment without some use of conventional meanings; and he cannot see himself as an autonomous individual, to some extent dependent on, yet also independent of, the community within which his mind develops, unless he can at the same time question those conventional symbolisms and attempt to build imaginatively with them.

c) Anxiety about fragmentation is not only directed at the fragmentation of know-



ledge. Closely associated with this epistemological problem is the problem of social fragmentation within a mass society, and often 'integration' as a pro-word refers to the *integration of social groups*. Some philosophers, notably Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer, have argued that the whole range of mythical meanings within a community performs a socially cohesive function. Both of these writers feared that in a society which favours differentiation of knowledge we are losing the capacity to think in mythical terms and that this is aggravating the problems about fragmentation of knowledge and of society. Not nearly enough of these very suggestive ideas have yet permeated into British educational theory, although P H Phenix in America would appear to have been influenced by Cassirer's thought to some extent.

d) Lastly, we return to art and design; and this is no accident. I believe that art and design education has a far more significant and fundamental part to play in education as a whole than has yet been recognised, for where it is done well it encourages skilled, purposive, independent yet integrating thought; and the final sense of 'integration' is that of a *particular design, whether art form, building, machine, etc.* Design education can help children and adults to think and make in experimental but purposive ways, and education which encourages various forms of adaptable, independent yet skilled and rule-recognising thought and behaviour becomes more and more a fundamental necessity.

It is possible to see a gradual progression, through an individual's development, of 'integration' in these different senses. 'Integration' in sense a) 2, which is undifferentiated rather than integrated, is syncretistic and 'whole' in a very limited sense. The small child experiences it and, somewhat similarly, the first relatively undifferentiated 'idea' for a design in art or technology is still felt as a whole, though the details are not

yet worked out. The problem for creativity is to translate 'integration' in sense a) 2 into 'integration' in sense a) 3, and finally, into 'integration' in sense d). The ways in which various skills and disciplined modes of thought are to be related will depend upon the *purposes* of the maker, and his formulation of these will depend, to some extent, upon his 'integration' in senses b) and c). If 'expression' in sense d) is to occur, the person must be capable of questioning the 'measures of public fact'; that is, to doubt that reality is tied to set forms of knowledge even while he *uses* the forms of knowledge that have been developed by his culture.

Having outlined an analysis of some key concepts in aesthetic education, I want to suggest now that this (very relevant) theorising is only a beginning, for some questions have emerged which, I think, demand further enquiry. Here are just four areas of enquiry which seem to me to demand investigation:

1. What techniques can teachers use to encourage skilled use of cultural frames of meaning even while they also encourage the limitations of these forms to be questioned?
2. What are the specific skills of working together in a team; whether as a group of teachers integrating their various specialisms, or as a group of pupils/students/artists/designers working together on a project?
3. To what extent are cultural forms of knowledge, techniques and technologies discrete and what are the logical links between specialisms which make for meaningful and relevant integration?
4. Contrast the kinds of purposes, or intentions, that are relevant to expression in the fine arts with the kind of purposes that are relevant in technological problem-solving. At what points do the two inter-relate?

*Continued on page 53*