

ALEXIS KOKKOS

THE CONTRIBUTION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND BILDUNG

INTRODUCTION

My purpose in writing this paper is to identify the convergence between transformative learning theory and Bildung, while exploring the way in which aesthetic experience – a notion understood as critical observation of works of art – may contribute to the educational process that are unfolded within these two theoretical frameworks.

IDEAS THAT ARE CONVERGENT IN TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND BILDUNG

Jack Mezirow's work is widely considered as the primary resource within the overall development of the theory of transformative learning. His basic idea (see, e.g. Mezirow, 1997; 2000) is that human beings uncritically adopt during their childhood – through the process of socialization – a system of habits of mind without being capable of evaluating its impact on their lives. In adulthood they may realize, through disorienting dilemmas that this system seems problematic, given that it contains distorted or fragmented assumptions. Adults need to be able to assess and challenge their problematic assumptions, and transform them, in order to understand new experiences that cannot be interpreted with their existing frame of reference. This involves learning “to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).

Mezirow's ideas have been enriched by various alternative conceptualizations (see Taylor, 2008). However, the theorists who work within the transformative learning theoretical framework share the idea that its main purpose is the fundamental change in learners' frame of reference (see, e.g. Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

The discourse that was developed within the framework of the International Conference *Transformative Learning meets Bildung* (Freiburg, June 2013) revealed that there is significant convergence between transformative learning theory and Bildung, a German concept which has its roots in the idealism's perspective of the late 18th century. Bildung is untranslatable into English. Arcilla (2013, p. 1) claims that “formation” captures some of the meaning of the term. According to Stojanov (2012, p. 1). Bildung cannot be precisely grasped by the English term “education”, while he adds that Humboldt did not really mark a

distinction between the two terms. Koller (2003) in his turn claims that there is a relatively great agreement that Bildung is considered as a category of educational science.

Moreover, there is not a universally accepted definition and conceptualization of Bildung within the literature. According to Wahlström (2010), for some theorists the concept is connected with the ideas of mysticism, while for some others it is related to the ideal of re-imagining God in oneself. However, it seems that there is a quite wide consensus among the researchers of Bildung that it consists a process of creating a self meaning-making system that is held to be valuable and implies transformation of the person's meaning perspectives. For instance, Biesta (2002) claims that Bildung is a permanent opening of the self's horizon to the world, enabling the individual to imagine and construct assumptions that are alternative to those that mirror her social-cultural experiences and that she takes for granted. Thus, the task of Bildung is to meet with what is unknown and encounter with the eventually different possibilities. Similarly, for Stojanov (2012) the concept of Bildung refers to a continuous attempt to reflect critically upon our own assumptions in order to transcend the limitations of our subjective experiences and perspectives. Moreover, Bildung is an ongoing process of designing and forming the self which does not have a *telos*, but the moment of contingency is inherent in it (Schneider, 2012).

These conceptualizations of Bildung as an open-ended process, through which the individuals advocate their own values and beliefs, are significantly convergent to Mezirow's view about the transformational process:

Autonomy does not represent a fixed goal to be achieved or an arbitrary norm, but movement in the process of transformative learning toward greater understanding of the assumptions supporting one's concepts, beliefs, and feelings and those of others. Emancipation in this context is no search for certainty and control through totalizing explanations and the elimination of difference.

(Mezirow, 2000, p. 29)

Furthermore, Schneider (2012) argues that there is a clear correlation between Bildung's fundamental perception – that becoming aware of the self “involves pressing into something opposed to oneself, and returning to oneself, reflecting to oneself” (p. 309) – and Kegan's view, one of the main theoretical conceptions related to Mezirow's perspective, stating that the process towards self-authorship consists in regarding ourselves as our own “object”, which we can look at, reflect upon and take responsibility for. Indeed, according to Kegan (1994, 2000), a transformational learning process may occur when our way of knowing moves from a “subject's” situation within which we are run by, identified with and captive of our thoughts and feelings, to an “object's” situation where we are critically opposed to the thoughts and feelings we say we have, exercise control over them and construct a relationship to them.

From the above review of the theorists' ideas regarding the texture of Bildung and transformative learning we might draw one more convergent point: The transformational meaning making process is extremely complex, thus, in order to

go through it, a set of mental prerequisites are necessary. According to Bildung researchers, some of the prerequisites regard the function of analysis (Schneider, 2012), namely the elaboration of all the parameters of a situation, as well as the process of giving and asking for reasons, moving back and forth between different perspectives towards the claimed (Stojanov, 2012, p. 5), examining of and reflecting upon all the possible consequences of a problem (Wahlström, 2010, p. 306). Respectively, according to Mezirow, “learners may be helped to explore all aspects of a frame of reference: its genealogy, power allocation, internal logic, uses, affective and intuitive dimensions, advantages and disadvantages” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 29). Moreover, for Kegan (1994, p. 286), the transformational process requires a “cognitive sophistication”, which is the ability to construct complex systems of generating, regarding and evaluating our own ideas as well as others’.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The stated conceptualization of transformative learning and Bildung as complex mental processes that require the learners to encounter all the aspects, possible causes and consequences of situations that they explore, and to challenge their relevant justifications, reveals the potential contribution of aesthetic experience to this task. As a great number of theorists of learning have argued (e.g. Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 1990; Greene, 2000; Perkins, 1994) the contact with art offers us the possibility to process a variety of symbols and views through which it is possible to articulate delicate meanings and to draw on reflective, affective and imaginative situations- thus leading to the exploration of perspectives which may not be easily approached through rational argumentation. Furthermore, Dewey and the theorists of Frankfurt School have stated the importance of aesthetic experience in triggering the revision and reformulation of meaning perspectives. More precisely, Dewey (1934) underlined the power of art to deny the numb, the imperturbable and unmovable and to “break through the crust of conventionality [...] reject the static, the automatic, the merely habitual” (p. 48). Moreover, the theorists of Frankfurt’s School

(Adorno, 1941/1997, 1986; Horkheimer, 1938/1984; Marcuse, 1978) have clearly stated that the works of art of high aesthetic value have an emancipatory dynamic in the sense that they can trigger a critical mode of thinking. This happens because the significant artworks have a holistic and anti-conventional nature, they are susceptible to multiple interpretations and they also explore the human condition in depth. Their texture contradicts the norms of status quo and, thus, challenges the stereotyped orienting predispositions of mind.

This happens in two interrelated ways. The content (the meaning) of an important work of art includes a large amount of well thought elements, shades and details, that are interconnected in various ways and offer the learner the possibility to obtain a multidimensional approach towards it. Moreover, the quality of the morphological elements of a work of art as well as the way in which they are interrelated to its content, also has a big impact on triggering critical reflection.

Indicatively, elements of the morphological structure in a film are the narration, the sound design, the montage, the handling of color, etc. Respectively, in a literary text, components of the morphological structure are the narration point of view, the time period; in paintings, the color, the shape, the lines; in music the rhythm, the melody, the tempo etc. Great works of art are characterized by the dialectically inseparable connection between their content and their morphological structure, as well as the high quality and the variety of their morphological elements. The content is deeply affected by its structure, but the structure also consists part of the content. Thus, works of art acquire a holistic dimension and their content cannot be fully comprehended without the understanding of their morphological components. On the contrary, contact with works of art which may not be considered as having high aesthetic value (according to the Frankfurt's School view) are characterized by a trivial texture acts as an obstacle to the growth of critical mode of thinking and reindoctrinates participants with the established schemata of interpreting reality. This process takes place in two complementary ways. Firstly, the works of art of this kind are not saturated by an authentic, dialectical explanation of life. In both interacting levels of content and structure, the meanings are one-dimensional, idealized, romanticized; shades and symbols are rare; contradictions are simplified; deviations are covered or smoothened; the complex reasons of certain situations are hardly exposed. And finally, as expected from the beginning, there is a "happy end" or an honorable justification of the hero. Secondly, works of art of low aesthetic value have a conventional texture: stereotypical symbols and well-known standard patterns prevail. Meanings are articulated in the ordinary way. The dominant, non-critical, structure of reasoning is not ruptured. Thus, participants are inducted into the repetition, confirmation, validation and reproduction of the prevailing systems of perception and behavior (see some examples in the following paragraphs).

Nevertheless, a literature review concerning the way in which a number of scholars of transformative learning incorporate the aesthetic experience in their work reveals that regarding the selection of artworks for educational purposes, they adopt one dimensional, thus not sufficient, view: the content of a work of art should trigger the exploration of an issue at hand. They undermine the role that the aesthetic value of works of art may have in contributing or not to the growth of a critical mode of thinking. As a result, they often suggest works which may have a "progressive" meaning but they cannot be considered as having high aesthetic value. For instance, concerning the use of movies, Roden (2005) mentions that she uses popular films such as *Chicken Run* and *Thelma and Luise*. Moreover, Jarvis (2012) mentions that "Burr's interviews with viewers, for example, showed how identification with the core characteristics of the central character in the popular horror TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* inspired women viewers and created a degree of self-belief, of confidence in their strength" (p. 490) and in another paragraph she adds: "Films with famous 'twists' like *Fight Club* and the *Sixth Sense*, remind us that we do not always know who we are; *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* confronts us with the way that we are constructed by our past" (p. 495).

Let's explore the case of the film *Sixth Sense* in order to find out whether it enhances the critical mode of thinking. On one hand, this film obviously may raise, as Jarvis claims (2012, p. 494) "questions of identity and illusion and reality". However, in order to do this, the film adopts the form of a commercial metaphysical thriller. What we mainly receive from the content is a suspense story concerning a boy's illusions or, sometimes, his 'real memories' regarding his relationship with ghosts. But finally, we discover through a tremendous turnover (a typical component of thrillers) that his therapist is himself a ghost! Furthermore, the film uses all the standardized morphological clichés of the movies of this kind. For instance, the use of music manipulates the audience's feelings: it is threatening when the ghosts arrive, soft and tender when the therapist tries to help the boy; the schoolteacher starts stuttering when he understands that his pupil sees ghosts; the ex-client, who seeks to take revenge from the therapist who failed to cure him, does it in an extremely pompous way: he suddenly appears naked in the doctor's house and kills while a very romantic scene takes place, just when he and his wife were about to make love... For all those reasons, I argue that although this film raises triggering questions, in the end of analysis it does not enhance the viewer's potentiality to construct a critical mode of making sense.

Another example of this underestimation of the fact that the romanticized texture of a work of art may contradict its intention to fully trigger critical exploration of issues, is Tisdell's and Thompson's (2007) view regarding the film *Philadelphia*. They state that a number of learners have been challenged by the film reviewing their own perspectives on sexuality and culture. In my conception, there is no doubt that this film questions the stereotyped prevailing assumptions concerning the issue of how we see people that suffer of AIDS). Nevertheless, it deals with this issue in a partial and idealized way: The hero wins the trial against the company he previously worked for and from which he was fired due to his disease (indeed, how possible would a respective 'positive resolution' be in the real world?) Moreover, the hero is not morally questioned by any of his relatives or his boyfriend, although he kept having sex with him without warning him to take precautions. Thus, it is evident that the film fails to explore all the aspects of the issue and deprives the learners from the opportunity to explore it in from a variety of points of view. The result may be that the learners would become more sensitive regarding discrimination, but on the other hand, the hard core of their ability to make an epistemological shift towards a more complex mode of knowing might not have been thoroughly developed.

Thus, there are number of reasons leading us to question the validity of the point of view according to which all works of art, regardless of their aesthetic value, could be considered productive material for Bildung and transformative learning. I don't object that a discourse incited by a not significant but challenging work of art could question, to a certain degree, problematic assumptions, namely *what* they know. But I claim that the very handling of its content and structure does not enable the participants to develop the form of *how* they know, namely the form by which they make a meaning. Participants are deprived of the opportunity to learn

ALEXIS KOKKOS

how to acquire a holistic approach of the issues, to discover the internal connections among various phenomena, to understand what lies beneath the surface, to perceive, often in a metaphorical way, what is not easily comprehended and, eventually, to be provided with various ways that will enable them to redefine their experiences. Consequently, the trivial aesthetic experience damages the potentiality of fostering critical form of knowing and weakens the dynamic of the whole learning process.

BOURDIEU'S WARNING

Is it possible for the vast majority of learners to have emotional and intellectual access to artworks of high aesthetic value? Moreover, which is the kind of artworks that are significant and at the same time can seem familiar to the widest possible range of learners? In response Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) contribute decisively to this issue. They have stated a significant warning concerning the danger for learners who are not familiarized with aesthetic experience to be excluded from it, given that they have been deprived of cultural qualifications during the process of their socialization. They claim that the learners who do not possess an "*artistic competence*" – schemata of conception and appreciation that are indispensable for the understanding of artworks- hesitate or refuse to come in contact with aesthetic experience. This happens particularly concerning a lot of works of art of high aesthetic value, whose complex content and form demand the capability of deciphering their codes- a capability which is hardly possessed by social groups of low cultural capital. In the final analysis, the richness of the reception of an artwork depends on the socially determined competence of the receiver to master the code of the message:

Considered as symbolic goods, works of art only exist for those who have the means of appropriating them, that is, of deciphering them. An agent's degree of artistic competence is measured by the degree to which he or she can master all the means of appropriation of works of art available at a given time: in other words, the interpretative schemata which are the condition of appropriation of artistic capital, that is, the condition of deciphering the works of art supplied to a given society at a given time.

(Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991, p. 39)

However, Bourdieu (1984), suggested two conditions under which those who have been deprived of cultural capital could form a positive attitude towards significant art. Firstly, they may formulate the disposition to investigate a work of art when its content is quite representational, in order for them to approach it based on their perceptual abilities. Secondly, learners who are not familiarized with the cultural practice, usually approach positively a work of art when they have an emotional interest. They seek human situations which are drawn from social life and are related to conditions that they themselves face and thus stimulate the expression of their feelings. They seek, through the work of art, to taste the joys

THE CONTRIBUTION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING
AND BILDUNG

and sufferings of the heroes, to penetrate their lives, to become identified with it and to live it.

Therefore, we could argue that if an adult educator takes into consideration the two suggestions of Bourdieu, it could be possible for her to suggest significant artworks which at the same time are appealing even to the participants who are not familiarized with aesthetic experience.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE USE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Based on the ideas which I mentioned in the previous part, as well as on the principles of liberal adult education, certain standards could be proposed relating to the selection of works of art in the context of transformative learning.

- The educators should use works of art of high aesthetic value. Additionally, they should try in every possible way to activate a positive disposition of all social groups towards this kind of aesthetic experience.
- Participants should be actively involved in the process of selecting the artworks. They should be invited to choose among the educators' suggestions. Alternatively, they should be provided with sources and criteria through which they may find artworks that are meaningful to them. For instance, during the Grundtvig European Project *ARTiT – Development of Innovative Methods of Training the Trainers* (2013) a relevant activity was organized in the following way: first the participants formed critical questions on certain issues. Afterwards, they visited the Hellenic National Art Gallery, where they, sought and chose among the paintings of the Gallery those that could be connected to the questions posed. Returning to the classroom, they searched for these works of art on the internet and used them as triggers in order to explore the critical questions. Another example could concern the process of selection of works of art as



Picture 1: *The Labors of Alexander*,
René Magritte, 1967

stimuli to explore the issue of the environment. To critically examine various points of view on this issue the learners could draw from works of art, such as, indicatively, Magritte's *Labors of Alexander* ([Picture 1](#)), Rousseau's *Walk in the forest* (see <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/henri-rousseau/the-walk-in-the-forest-1890>), Signac's *In the time of Harmony* (see http://www.histoire-image.org/site/zoom/zoom.php?i=405&oe_zoom=654), artistic photographs of Naoya Hatakeyama (see for example <http://www.lagalerie.de/hatakeyama9.html>), Beethoven's Pastorale, doctor Astrov in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* where he describes the gradual destruction of the environment, the film *Polluting Paradise* by Akin or *Tokyo Story* by Ozu and so on.

- Moreover, adult educators should consider that works of art of high aesthetic value are not only to be found in museums and encyclopedias, but sometimes within everyday's experience, such as songs we sing. See for instance the meaningful relationship that people have with songs of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, such as *Like A Rolling Stone* or *Suzanne*.
- Adult educators should deal with the structure of works of art to the extent in which the learners are interested. For example, concerning the art of cinema, the exploration of the morphological elements, such as the use of music, the camera's frame, placement and movement, the sound effects, the lighting, the décor, could encourage participants to watch films critically and develop an holistic understanding of the ways in which the various morphological elements contribute to their message. Through this process the participants might have the possibility to develop the core mental skill of thoroughly evaluating views that are not their own, by challenging and revealing some depth and complexity of the situations.
- If the educators face difficulties in dealing with the morphological elements they could engage in a self-directed procedure through e.g. exploring our archives of works of art, remembering feelings that have unearthed from our contact with art, being more informed about the morphological components of works of art – which is extremely creative– so they could gradually unlock more and more codes of meaning.

EPILOGUE

The Greek philosopher Kornelius Castoriadis (2008) stated that art is a “window onto the Chaos”- the Abyss which constitutes of our inner thoughts, desires, anxieties and unfulfilled expectations. We live at the edge of the Abyss, but we fear or cannot converse with it and we hide it under a decoy of conventional activities and meanings. The significant artworks, he claimed, can reveal the Abyss. They create a dialogue and therefore permit us to have insights which exceed what we take for granted and our usual way of organizing experience.

May this be the including statement of this paper. If we use art for transformational purposes, let's focus on works of art which not only question our distorted assumptions, but also trigger our mental modes of making sense, thus

THE CONTRIBUTION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING
AND BILDUNG

reinforce the process of our evolution to a next order of consciousness which is broader and more functional.

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ALEXIS KOKKOS

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AFFILIATIONS

Alexis Kokkos
School of Humanities,
Hellenic Open University