

The use of aesthetic experience in unearthing critical thinking

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Introduction

The contribution of aesthetic experience – as acquired to the systematic exploration of artworks – to the learning process has been increasingly recognized by adult educators. However, the way the aesthetic experience can be applied in the adult education framework, depends on the purpose we wish to serve. If the main purpose is to enhance the development of critical thinking and the challenge of the established norms of social reality -which is the position of the author- then the use of the aesthetic experience in the learning context is connected to the process of the critical approach of the status quo.

Many contributions on this subject can be found in the relevant literature, developed by Dewey, the Frankfurt School, scholars of critical pedagogy and transformative learning. However, there hasn't been a proposal of a comprehensive method in order to embody the aesthetic experience in various forms of adult education, aiming to critical consciousness. I have attempted to contribute by suggesting a method which I have named "Transformative learning through the Aesthetic Experience" (Kokkos, 2010). The method has been applied in several organizations in Greece, such as the Hellenic Open University, Second Chance Schools, Enterprises and the Therapy Center for Dependent Individuals (KETHEA). The method was also applied in Denmark, Romania and Sweden through the European Grundtvig Project "ARTiT: Development of Innovative Methods of Training the Trainers", for which I am the scientific responsible.

In this report, some basic theoretical approaches are presented concerning the use of the aesthetic experience in the perspective of the development of critical thinking. Subsequently, the aforementioned method is presented, followed by an extended discourse on the challenges that educators confronted during the process of the pilot application.

Theoretical approaches

Dewey set the foundations for the use of the aesthetic experience aiming to critical understanding of the established experience. He claimed (1934/1980) that the meeting of our old assumptions with the new, alternative ones, which emerge through our contact with art has as a result "*the reconstruction of past*" (Dewey, 1934 / 1980: 284), which strengthens the ability to challenge our taken for granted ways of comprehension.

The contribution of the scholars of the Frankfurt School is significant (Adorno, 1941 / 1997; 1970 / 2000; Horkheimer, 1938 / 1984; Marcuse, 1978). They claimed that the important artworks are in contrast to the instrumental rationality that is incorporated in the mechanisms of social reality. Therefore, the contact with great artworks makes

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possible the inversion of the alienating assumptions and regenerates the desire of human emancipation.

Additionally, Adorno (1941/1997; 1970/2000) and Horkheimer (1938/1984) determined the criteria which define a piece of art as important:

- *Holistic dimension*: The content (meaning) of a great artwork is functionally expressed through properly shaped morphological elements², which in their turn reflect the essence of the artwork. Through the dialectic relation of form and content an interaction takes place among the structural and contextual elements and among each of the elements and the entire work.³
- *The Truths which are contained express deep dimensions of human existence*.
- *Unconventional texture*: The content and form of the great works of art oppose to stereotypes, standard models, one-dimensional interpretations, non-dialectical approaches⁴.

The trend of critical pedagogy has also contributed to the use of the aesthetic experience as a means to enhance critical consciousness. Freire himself (1970,1978) used '*codifications*' (sketches created by important painters – see Freire, 1971:114) which contained stimuli in order to discuss critically various aspects of the oppressing reality. Shor (1980,1992) and others extended the Freireian method by using works of art including theatre, poetry and music.

Finally, during the last fifteen years the scholars who work for the development of the theoretical framework of transformative learning have suggested ways through which the works of art should be used during the learning process. Indicatively, Greene (2000) showed that the analysis of great works of literature allows us to perceive

² For example, concerning a film, some of the basic morphological elements are the mode of narration, the visual dimension (frame choice and composition, scale, perspective), the sound design, the editing (continuity, montage, rhythm, e.a.). Respectively, in a literary text some of the basic structural elements are the narration point of view, the moment or the incidents described, the time period of the characters' life: in music, basic structural elements would be the rhythm, the melody, the musical instruments used, the tempo, etc: in paintings, the color, the shape, the lines, the form, etc.

³ As an opposite example, Adorno (1941/1997) has stated the characteristics of music works of the cultural industry: there is no relation between the components; the beginning and the end of each part follow standard patterns; not much importance is given to the whole feeling of the music work – the emphasis is on individual elements, such as effect, style, volume, beat, refrain; the music work in general 'exempts from the effort to participate' (ibid.: 183).

⁴ As an example of the difference between a great work of art and a conventional one, we could compare the masterpiece by Kurosawa *The Seven Samurai* to *The Magnificent Seven* starring Yul Brynner and Steve Mc Queen. The two films are based on the same plot: Seven professional fighters agree to save a village from bandits. In the first film, there is a dialectical presentation of numerous diachronic situations of the human experience: The solidarity among the villagers is mixed up with the element of individualism; although they respect the Samurai, they don't trust them; heroism coexists with fear; the reason the Samurai agree to protect the village is to make a living, but at the same time they obey the code of the honorable warrior; love is massacred in this setting (a young woman is brutally punished by her father for having an affair with a Samurai, an action that violates the norms of the community). The second movie is full of stereotypes, typical of cultural industry products: the contradictions are simplified, the cowboy-saviors are fearless; for them fighting is entertaining; the reason they protect the village is their 'free rider' mentality (they find it more 'interesting' than working at a saloon). The love story has a happy end (the young woman has no father, she is free to live her life as she wants, and the cowboy lover gives up his reckless life to stay with her).

various issues in a different way than the one we tend to consider as given. Dirkx (1997) stated that contact with art is one of the key triggers that can engender the dialogue with the unconscious forces of our inner world. Kegan (2000) analyzed parts of Ibsen's *Doll's House* to show the way in which the heroine transforms her initial assumptions.

The method “Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience”

The method that I suggested refers to the way in which the aesthetic experience should reinforce the development of critical dimensions of the learning processes, and is based on the ideas of Dewey, Adorno, Horkheimer and Freire.

It involves six stages:

1. A determination of the need to critically examine an issue is activated.
2. The participants express their ideas about the points of view that need to be examined.
3. The educator negotiates with them about which points of view will be eventually put in critical examination and in what order.
4. The educators and the participants negotiate about the artworks that should be selected as triggers for the critical approach of the various points of view.
5. Critical reflection through aesthetic experience is activated. Within this stage, Perkin's model (1994) is used for the investigation of the meaning of the artworks⁵.
6. The educator facilitates a critical reflection on the previous steps.

In the following chapters I will present my reflections on two issues, which seemed to be most challenging for the adult educators participating in the pilot application of the method. The first issue concerns the criteria according to which the educators and the participants could choose the appropriate artworks for the development of critical learning processes. The second issue is related to the ways in which educators and learners can have access to high quality aesthetic experiences, especially those not familiar to it.

Criteria for choosing artworks for educational purposes

Adult educators often wonder about the criteria which reinsure that the artworks chosen are in fact appropriate. This is a complex issue. At the end of the 18th century, Kant (1790/1995) showed that the way we judge the value of artworks is subjective. Our judgment of art cannot be based on evidentiary principles or on universally accepted criteria, but it is defined by our frame of reference. This opinion is highly accepted by art theorists (e.g. Berger; 1972; Danto 1981; Gazetas, 2000).

Therefore, when an educator wishes to incorporate the goals of critical pedagogy and transformative learning in his or her frame of reference, the criteria for choosing

⁵Perkin's model discusses the way trainees are capable of penetrating, through a series of questions posed by the trainer, into the meaning of the artworks.

artworks in the learning framework must relate to the fact that the elaboration of those artworks enhances critical thinking.

Previously we examined the specific criteria on which the scholars of the Frankfurt School believe that some works of art may unearth emancipatory processes. Let's examine the examples they give in order to support their argumentation. Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970/2000), a compendium of his beliefs on the liberating role of art, includes numerous references of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, Picasso, Rembrandt, Klee, Baudelaire, Euripides, Goethe, Proust, Shakespeare. Marcuse (1978) refers to Beethoven, Aeschylus, Beckett, Baudelaire, Brecht, Goethe, Kafka, Proust, Rimbaud, Shakespeare.

We have also seen other theorists who connect the aesthetic experience to the development of critical thinking, referring to many of the aforementioned artists or to others equally acknowledged. For instance, Dewey refers to the works of Cézanne, Goya, Matisse, Rembrandt, Renoir, van Gogh, Keats, Mann, Shakespeare. Perkins (1994) analyses works of Klee, Matisse, Rembrandt, van Gogh, while Greene (2000) refers mostly to Beethoven, Cézanne, Goya, Monet, Picasso, van Gogh, Velázquez, Camus, Elliot, Flaubert, Joyce, Sartre, Woolf.

It seems like there is a significant convergence of theorists that the great works of fine arts, paintings, music, literature and theatre are those worth choosing in order to be used in an educational setting, as they can trigger critical reflection.

However, Pierre Bourdieu (1979,1985,1969/1991) approached the issue of attitude towards artworks from a different perspective. He highlighted the social causes of aesthetic criteria and preferences. He claimed that social groups with cultural qualifications which are obtained through education but also, imperceptibly, through the friction within the cultural environment, show a positive predisposition towards works of art considered to be of high quality from the dominant value system, as opposed to other social groups. They acknowledge the aesthetic value of those works of art and have the will to approach them. At the same time, they have developed the capability to decipher the codes of the messages that emerge from such artworks. On the contrary, those who were deprived of educational qualifications in their childhood, usually form a negative or a neutral attitude towards "significant" works of art, as they find it difficult to comprehend their meaning: *"The informational and audio content of the message actually received by the recipient have more chances to be weaker as poorer the educational background is."* Bourdieu, 1985:384). Therefore, those who do not possess a cultural capital avoid coming in contact with works of art which are considered significant⁶. Thus the assumption that non privileged social groups don't have the 'spiritual ability' of the cultivated ones is interiorized in the social consciousness and contributes to the reproduction of social inequality structures.

⁶ For instance, museums in France were visited every year in the 60's by 1% of farmers, 4% of workers, and 45% of "higher social groups" (Bourdieu, 1969/1991: 15). A recent study verifies that: Those who are actively interested in art, visit museums and are attracted by significant plays and movies, etc. are 9% of the population and of high educational background. Conversely, 41% of the population is remotely- if interested at all- in art, and come from social groups of low income and/or education.

Based on this rationale, Bourdieu went one step beyond; He listed the works of art in three categories of 'taste', that is the expression of aesthetic preference. In the first category, he enlisted the works of artists who correspond to the 'legal taste', meaning that they are considered in western contemporary societies to be of high aesthetic level (Bourdieu, 1979: 14-16). The French scholar enlists for example artworks of Bach, Mahler, Stravinsky, Braque, Goya, Kandinsky, Picasso, Flaubert, Beckett, Pinter. It is quite obvious that the works of art of the 'legal taste' category correspond to the works of fine art that scholars such as Dewey, Adorno, Marcuse, Perkins and Greene believe to trigger critical disposition.

Bourdieu enlists the rest of artworks in two more categories: a) Those corresponding to the 'medium taste', meaning works considered to be of lesser significance, although they derive from major forms of art (classical music, visual arts, literature), like for instance, Strauss's waltzes, paintings by Utrillo or Buffet, as well as significant works of art from inferior forms of art (mainstream songs, folk dancing, operettas etc), b) the creations corresponding to the 'popular taste', that is mass culture creations which don't wish to belong in the sphere of high level art (for instance, most 'entertaining' songs, melodrama, 'boulevard' theatre, music-hall, etc) and also works of art of the two previous categories whose value has been distorted as they were spread uncritically, through commercialized forms of consumption, without any consideration on quality. Examples of works of art being subject to such commercial exploitation are the *Traviata* and *The Blue Danube* (ibid.: 16).

Bourdieu's contribution on social predispositions towards works of art may be connected to the subject of choosing works of art for educational reasons in two ways. On one hand, it is obvious that if important works of art are used in the educational process, it is probable to reproduce inequalities among the learners, as these works of art attract those equipped with the corresponding educational background. On the other hand, Bourdieu's approach doesn't oppose to the argument of the scholars who claim that the works of art of high aesthetic value can lead to a process of emancipation against contemporary alienating challenges.

In conclusion, in the framework of adult education that adopts the principles of critical pedagogy and transformative learning, every possible effort must be made to give access to high quality aesthetic experience to the learners who were deprived of it. They should be positively reinforced towards great works of art in order for them to choose the appropriate ones to serve their educational goals. Through this process it is possible to empower their critical attitude towards social-economic norms, but also to diminish the educational inequalities amongst them.

How can this be possible? A comprehensive way needs to be described in order to familiarize educators and learners with the liberating force of art. In the next chapter some reflections are presented.

Access to the aesthetic experience

The literature shows that scholars who are concerned with the development of critical thinking through art-based learning (e.g. Dewey, Greene, Perkins) make suggestions, but do not offer specific educational conditions that would help those who are excluded from a high level aesthetic experience to gain access to it.

On the other hand, a literature survey on the educational activities that are rapidly developing in museums, art galleries and libraries, shows that although this movement aims to attract common people by highlighting the relationship of the artworks to their social experience, it doesn't emphasize on ways to develop their ability to perceive the meaning of works of art of high aesthetic value (e.g. Illeris, 2011; Sifakakis, 2007; Thompson, 2002).

Finally, the study of Bourdieu contains rare and vaguely formulated references to the way the educational system could reinforce the positive disposition of all social classes towards art. For instance:

Indeed, only an institution whose special role is to transmit the qualities that define the cultivated human being to most people through learning and practicing, only such an institution could counterbalance (at least partially) the lack for those, who don't find the motivation for cultural practice in the context of their families. (Bourdieu, 1985:383) [...]. It is known that with the same cost the increase of schooling years or the increase of the hours of teaching art would in the long term lead incomparably more people to museums, theatres and concerts (ibid:385) [...]. However, the ability of using the encrypted code of education can only be reached through the process of systematic learning, organized by an institution especially developed for this purpose (ibid: 385-386).

However, Freire's approach offers answers to the issue at hand. He realized that some groups of students found it difficult to study the significant philosophical-political articles in depth, and developed ways that would help them familiarize to that type of studying. He mentions for example (Shor & Freire, 1987):

Of course, most of the new generation of Brazilian students, don't know how to write in the way demanded by the universities. This is a problem. Some professors say, "I have nothing to do with this because my task here is to teach Hegel. If they are not able to understand Hegel, this is *their* problem *not* mine" (ibid: 83).

Then, my rigor and my political position lead me to help the students by teaching them to read. How can I do that? I do that *simultaneously* with reading Hegel! That is, instead of telling the students, you have to read the first chapter of this book by Hegel or this book by Gramsci, I read one chapter with them in the whole time of the seminar. I read with them, without telling them I am teaching them how to read, what it means to read critically, what demands you make on yourself to read, that it's impossible to go to the next page without understanding the page you are on, that if you don't understand some words you have to go to a dictionary. If a normal dictionary does not help you, you have to go to a philosophical dictionary, a sociological dictionary, an etymological dictionary! Reading a book is a kind of permanent research. I do that with the students (ibid: 84).

Freire states that it is possible to introduce high quality books to learners, as long as some principles are followed during the educational process, such as the persistent concern of the facilitator to support learners with difficulties, the inspirational and

participatory way of teaching rather than the sterile academic way, as well as the careful approach to the texts, gradually increasing the level of difficulty.

A series of experiences from the field of adult education has shown that following the above principles can allow participants to gain access to important artworks, even if they weren't acquainted to them in the past. For instance, in some educational programs for seniors, or at Second Chance Schools and Therapy Centers for Dependent Individuals, the participants seemed able to comprehend and enjoy fine artworks when the learning conditions were appropriate (Darrough, 1992; Gibbons, 1985; Myers, 1992; Gogou & Barlos, 2011; Giannakopoulou et al., 2011).

Therefore, I believe that Freire's ideas on accessing significant works of literature could accordingly be applied for learners to access works of fine art. Following are some suggestions, as well as practice examples from the project ARTiT.

Forming attitudes and capacities of adult educators

An issue that should be addressed firstly is how positive is the adult educators' attitude towards significant works of art and how capable they are of evaluating and elaborating them, in order to coordinate relative processes addressed to learners.

We attempted to explore this issue within the framework of the *ARTiT* program, with the contribution of Spyros Sifakakis. 21 adult educators from 6 different organizations take part in this project⁷. They accepted to answer the question "Which are your three favorite works of art from fine arts, literature/poetry/theater, movies and music? List the title of each artwork and the name of the artist." We evaluated the answers according to the criteria proposed by the Frankfurt School in order to determine if an artwork can unearth critical thinking. The artworks that were mentioned by the educators were graded with 3 if they fully met those criteria, with 2 if they met them fairly and with 1 if they hardly met them. Also graded with 1 was the failure of referring to any work of art, because we considered this to be a strong indication of lacking any familiarity with works belonging to the two previous categories.

The opinions expressed by 15 of the 21 educators mostly ranked around 2, while the average mark was exactly 2.0. It is also worth mentioning that significant variations were observed within the answers of each educator. For instance, some mentioned works ranked 3 but 1 as well.

This approach, although quantitatively limited, offers indications that several adult educators are fairly positive towards high quality works of art, but have not completely mastered the way of distinguishing them from trivial ones. This could possibly be a result of not being familiar to the cultural goods in the early stages of their lives. Therefore, the adult educational organizations should assist educators to develop a positive attitude towards significant works of art, as well as their ability to decipher and use them for educational purposes in a fruitful way.

⁷ Denmark is represented by Roskilde University and Vucfyn; Greece by the Hellenic Adult Education Association and the Hellenic Open University; Romania by the University of Pitesti and Sweden by ABF.

Development of training the trainers

It is crucial for educational organizations to train adult educators on criteria for the evaluation of works of art, as well as on techniques to use them during the learning process. Additionally, educators should learn how to use artworks to critically approach the issues at hand. At the *ARTiT* project, for instance, the educators were trained to elaborate critical questions on various issues using an archive of works of art we had developed. For instance, for the subject of “Relationships between genders”, critical questions were posed as:

- a. How do we perceive unpaid work at home?
- b. How do men perceive the inequality between the female-male role?
- c. What do men think when they realize their spouses actually work more than them?
- d. Why are there inequalities between male and female roles?
- e. What do we think of men taking over “female roles” (household chores, raising the children etc?)
- f. What do we think of the “female mystery” nowadays?
- g. Is manhood in danger in our days?
- h. How does the gender inequality affect sexuality?

Seventeen works of art were proposed in order to trigger the elaboration of the specific critical questions, as shown in the following table. The participants could select the critical questions they would like to address or create new ones. They could also choose which of the artworks would be used.

Proposed works of art								
	a	b	c	d	i	f	g	h
1. <i>Girl Peeling Vegetables</i> , Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin (FA)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
2. <i>The Laundress</i> , Ștefan Luchian (FA)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
3. <i>Rest in the field</i> , Camil Ressu (FA)		✓	✓	✓	✓			
4. <i>Life</i> , Pablo Picasso (FA)						✓	✓	✓
5. <i>The Wave</i> , Camille Claudel (FA)						✓		
6. <i>The Rape</i> , Edgar Degas (FA)				✓			✓	✓
7. <i>Diego and I</i> , Frida Kahlo (FA)				✓		✓	✓	✓
8. <i>Ali: Fear eats the soul</i> , Rainer Werner Fassbinder (F)				✓	✓		✓	✓
9. <i>Dogtooth</i> , Yiorgos Lanthimos (F)						✓	✓	✓
10. <i>Ginger & Fred</i> , Federico Fellini (F)						✓	✓	✓

11. <i>Reconstruction</i> , Theo Angelopoulos (F)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12. <i>The Bell Jar</i> , Sylvia Plath (L)						✓		
13. <i>The eyes of the poor</i> , Charles Baudelaire (L)				✓		✓		
14. <i>Freedom of love</i> , André Breton (L)						✓		
15. <i>Eveline</i> , James Joyce (L)	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
16. <i>Like a rolling stone</i> , Bob Dylan (M)						✓		✓
17. <i>Suzanne</i> , Leonard Cohen (M)						✓	✓	✓
FA:Fine Arts, F: Films, L:Literature, M:Music								

After the educators were familiarized with this method, they applied it in their educational settings. Learners worked in groups, forming critical questions on several subjects and choosing works of art to be used for the elaboration of those questions.

The participation of the learners

The active participation of the learners is fundamental in every adult education project in order to create an atmosphere of interaction, mutual understanding and emotional expression, which is a precondition for the development of the learning process. For increasing the participation during the process of choosing works of art, four alternative ways –or combinations of those- were suggested:

- The educators propose several different works of art and the participants choose the ones they prefer, as well as the order in which they want to work with them.
- The educators suggest resources for the learners to choose the works of art they prefer.
- The educators offer the criteria for searching and choosing artworks, followed by a discussion with the trainers on the works of art that will be used.
- First the participants propose the works of art of their preference, followed by a discussion with the educators on the works of art that will be used.

Whatever the process of choosing works of art was, the participants were encouraged to choose those which inspired them, expressed them and related to their experiences. For this reason, before discussing a subject, all the relative chosen artworks were presented to the participants, followed by a discourse on which ones would be chosen to be used and in which order.

Handling tensions

However, handling a discourse on choosing and elaborating works of art can be challenging. Some participants disagree with the proposals of the educators based on the criteria they affiliated during their socialization, and counter-propose works of art or interpretations which possibly embedded codes of the dominant cultural system. It is also possible that they strongly insist on their opinion, as they are emotionally attached to these artworks.

Several ways of handling possible tensions have been designed in the *ARTiT* framework.

Firstly, it was clarified to the groups of learners that great works of art are not only to be found in exhibitions or encyclopedias, but also many are already known to them from everyday's experience. For instance, works from folk poetry can be used, as well as folk dancing and paintings and songs of which the music and lyrics are of high aesthetic value.

Secondly, we made sure that the great majority of the artworks that we proposed are of high standards but also to be understood quite easily. In some occasions however, when it is not possible to find works with those characteristics to address an issue, we alternatively proposed other ones that we feel belong to the intermediate level of our 1–3 scale, either high standard works that would possibly require more effort.

Finally, given that the correlation between the content and the elements of the form of a work of art is quite complex, this approach did not take place in the first phases of the elaboration of an artwork, but in the latter ones. On the other hand, participants were encouraged to focus on the elements of the form, in order to give the approach an holistic dimension. The depth of this procedure that took place within the groups of participants depended on their mood, as well as on the level of confidence the educators felt they could efficiently support the attempt.

Some results

The *ARTiT* project gave the opportunity to apply these specifications. The archive portfolio given to the groups of learners consisted of 98 works of art. 77 of those ranked 3 on our scale and 25 ranked 2, with an average of 2.7. Almost all the groups showed a preference to works of art of high aesthetic value. Within the groups a total of 50 works were chosen, reaching the same average with *ARTiT*'s archive. This is clearly a positive sign, if we compare this data to the preferences the educators had expressed in the beginning of the project, with an average mark of 2.0. Therefore, we can presume that when some requirements are met, it is possible for both educators and learners to develop a positive attitude towards great works of art and prefer those to trivial ones.

Also, according to the observation task-sheet that the educators filled out after each day of implementation, it was noted that the educators themselves as well as the learners enjoyed the chosen artworks and used them creatively. More specifically, based on the 1-5 scale by Likert, the average ranks of the educators' comments were as follow: "The learners liked the lesson": 4,6, "I liked the lesson" 4,7, "The learners

appreciated the contribution of art to our discussion”: 4,7,. It is also evident that the use of the aesthetic experience contributed in unearthing critical thinking on the issues at hand (“I detected a positive change in my learners’ behavior – attitudes towards critical thinking after working with some specific works of art”). We hope this last finding will be verified by the results we expect to accrue in a month from the comparative content analysis of the essays composed by the participants in the beginning and at the end of the function of their learning groups.

Epilogue

Nevertheless, we must be alert against difficulties that may emerge. Critical reflection on taken for granted assumptions, combined with the understanding of art is a complex process. It requires persistence, patience and empathy to meet our goal – an attitude for life- in order to take the next steps. At the end of the journey the reward may be the empowerment of the learners, as they will be able to comprehend the issues they study more clearly and obtain a more open perception of the world. Even we, the adult educators, may encounter some creative sides of ourselves.

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