

NEEDED: A NEW VIEW OF ART AND EMOTIONS

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Progressives have often neglected or purposely ignored the role of art and emotions in their analyses. Recently, however, critical theorists like Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno have focused on the place of the "subjective" (which usually includes art and emotions) in the economic framework of society. That such individuals have attempted to include art and emotions in their broad political/economic dimension is especially important for progressive art educators to pursue at this point in history. Art therapy programs which do not include a political/economic analysis of the images produced or the emotions expressed are becoming a significant entity within our field. The emphasis in these programs is on the use of art materials as a vehicle for catharting emotions. Art materials are provided so that students may express (etymologically "squeeze out") their emotions.

The view of art as a form of catharsis and the absence of a political/economic analysis has definite societal consequences. In the article, "Aesthetic Consciousness: the Ground of Political Experience," Hilde Hein speaks of the political function of the 'art as a means for catharsis' view. Hein says:

The preservation of political power requires suppression of incipient opposition; but where domination is brutally and ruthlessly displayed, controversy within the political framework enlarges the controllable order. The social body is viewed as a complex and varied whole, enriched and harmonized by containable differences...The political function of aesthetic experience is then seen to be the conservative maintenance of the status quo--art is used in order to defuse² and diffuse disgruntled feeling and potentially revolutionary tendencies.

In this type of situation art becomes the blotting paper for dissatisfaction and potentially disruptive emotions. Instead of becoming educated about the political/economic source and depth of emotions and being encouraged to voice

dissatification and disillusionment, emotions are catharted through art and society proceeds as usual. Such a view does not, in my opinion, move us closer to a socially progressive society where people are encouraged to examine the political/economic roots of their existence.

Art therapy programs do provide a needed place for connecting art and emotions: their downfall is in the lack of political/economic analysis and the absence of presenting art materials as a means for constructing and furthering change rather than simply absorbing it. Again, Hein states it succinctly:

For the individual, aesthetic experience becomes a legitimate mode of expression, literally of expulsion of accumulated anti-social tendencies and impulses...The individual is permitted through art (and other forms of controllable aesthetic experience) to purge his feelings of anger, rage, unrequited love, personal inadequacy, and impotence--all feelings which, if vented in political action, would be disruptive and socially dangerous. Hence we have institutionalized "art therapy" for school children, hospital inmates, and patients in old age homes, and even ghetto inhabitants who are now invited to draw graffiti and wall paintings.³

In addition to the importance of developing a view of art and emotions to replace this catharsis view, a new conceptualization is also needed if we are to progress towards: 1) an analysis of the pervasiveness of the mass media and 2) an elimination of the view of emotions as irrational and, by association, the view of women as irrational.

Many of the images which we experience via television, film, and magazines involve emotions. Of course, the question is how they involve emotions. A common notion is that pictures of, for example, children in a park with balloons, evoke the emotion of joy. Here the emotion is a kind of physiological sensation which is evoked by the picture. However, if emotions are only physiological sensations it would be difficult if not impossible to differentiate between them. For example, we may twitch when we are angry or when we are in love; we may perspire when we are embarrassed or fearful; and so forth. Clearly there is

a cognitive or reasoning aspect to emotions as well as a physiological aspect. The emotion of jealousy, for example, consists not only of certain physiological sensations but also of the judgment that someone has something which rightfully belongs to me.

In addition, I propose that emotions have a visual aspect. Emotions consist of physiological sensations, judgments, and certain visual experiences. These visual experiences which are part of our emotions are derived from many sources. A primary source, however, is the mass media. The idea, then, is that images such as those of children and balloons do not simply evoke certain emotions--they present a visual aspect of an emotion.

This view of pictures and emotions stresses the pervasiveness of the mass media. That is, pictures from the mass media are not only influential at the time they are seen, they also shape the way in which we lead our entire emotional life. For example, the picture of two young people running down the beach into the sunset not only affects us while we are sitting in front of the television, it permeates the rest of our life as well. I shudder to think of how many people have tried to structure their day to day experience to fit this visual aspect of the emotion of love. Questions such as, "What are the political/economic implications of a visual aspect of love where the people involved are young and healthy rather than old and handicapped?" could provoke us to reflect upon the political/economic aspect of the images which pervade our day to day emotional life. A theory which stressed the visual aspect of emotions could provide the beginnings of a rationale for such an approach.

A reassessment of our conceptualization of art and emotions is not only essential to a thorough analysis of the pervasive influence of images from the mass media; it is also important to the elimination of sexism.

One of the reasons given for women's supposed inability to be competent intellectuals is that we are too emotional. On the one hand, we are praised for our emotional sensitivity and, on the other hand, we are told that we are too emotional to handle serious decision making. The typical retort to this is to deny that women are necessarily emotional. Instead of this tact, I propose that those of us who do have such insight (and all women do not) take credit for understanding emotions and work towards conceptualizing what this entails. Understanding the judgments, images, and sensations which make up emotions is an accomplishment in the sphere of rationality; it is not an irrational aspect of knowledge which should necessarily be discarded. Unfortunately, the view of emotions as irrational sensations and, by association, the view of women as irrational continues to exist in this society and is promulgated in film and other media. In a recent book on the portrayal of women in film the author states:

Directors, like Ingmar Bergman, whose films have been mystified into a cult, persist in depicting women as tortured, confused and incapable of rising above a repellent biological frailty. Because Bergman often has women as his subject matter and focus of attention, it is falsely assumed by many women that he has insight into or particular feeling for women...yet...his female characters are more complete in their degradation than are his men because they are out of place and uncomfortable in the world of the mind and the conscious pursuit of meaning...The world cinema today is unable to provide an image of women who achieve through their drives instead of by an unnatural distortion of them.⁴

In sum, I have proposed that a new conceptualization of emotions is needed if we are to progress towards: 1) a critical analysis of emotions rather than a catharsis of them; 2) an evaluation of the pervasive influence of images from the popular arts in our day to day emotional lives; and 3) an elimination of the negative connotations of women's knowledge of emotions. I have not argued why working towards these things is socially progressive. What I have argued is that if moving towards these things is seen as socially progressive, then art educators concerned with social progress must work on re-conceptualizing the existing views of emotions and the arts' place in relationship to them.

NOTES

1. See, for example, the essays in: Critical Theory, edited by Max Horkheimer, N.Y.: The Seabury Press, 1972; T.W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, The Authoritarian Personality, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969; and the many writings of Herbert Marcuse.
2. Hilde Hein, "Aesthetic Consciousness: the Ground of Political Experience," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 35, No. 2, 1976, P. 145-6.
3. Ibid, pp. 145 & 146.
4. Joan Mellen, Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film, N.Y.: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973, pp. 16 & 17.