

Beyond the Graces and the Muses

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Good hostesses are familiar with the rule that the number of guests invited for a dinner party should be no smaller than that of the Graces and no larger than that of the Muses. If the guests are fewer than three, they will be deprived of the variety that should animate a social gathering; if they are more than nine, the group will lose its unity, and some of its less forward members will be left on the sidelines.

Teachers are rarely in a position to apply this rule. If, at a university or college, they teach an esoteric specialty, the students interested in their courses may be so few that the problem takes care of itself. More often, the number is so great that the teacher's function as a host or hostess is fundamentally different. The course Comparative Psychology of the Arts on which I report here is offered as a discussion class but takes about forty students, half of whom are advanced undergraduates, while the others are graduates. Although the applicants are carefully screened, a more severe limitation of the number would exclude too many qualified persons.

How does one conduct a discussion class with forty people? I doubt that even the most skillful teacher could involve everyone of them actively. Even the giant Argus has only a hundred eyes, and it would take nearly so many to catch, on the faces of forty students, that occasional mobilized look that tells us that he or she has something to say but cannot quite muster the courage to speak up. This is too bad, but it is also true that not everyone of the few students who remain silent throughout the term feels left out or fails to profit from the work. After all, this is a course for contemplative people.

Much of the class time of two hours a week is in fact spent in discussion. But the discussion is mostly limited to a dialogue between teacher and student and involves little exchange among the students themselves. I conduct the class that way because I have always felt that simply letting students loose to talk among themselves cheats them of the gain they should expect from any course. A teacher who just turns on the faucet and then sits back watching the show with an encouraging smile indulges in a comfortable illusion. Active discussion releases active thinking and is therefore invaluable. But if left to its own dynamics it is also bound to float from topic to topic, from idea to idea, and from one outlook to another, without the coherent structure of discourse that is indispensable if students are to learn something about the subject. It takes much teaching experience to attain this goal without losing the freshness and spontaneity of productive thinking.

Comparative Psychology of the Arts is based on readings in the theory of visual art, literature, music, radio, film and photography, dance and theater, and architecture. The selections are in no way focused on the latest publications in the various fields; instead, in the example of the particular semester I am citing here, the selections range from the eighteenth century of Diderot and Lessing through the nineteenth century of Kleist and Hanslick to a few outstanding thinkers of our own time. By necessity they reflect my own judgment and preference; one can teach with conviction only texts that have inspired one's own thinking.¹

¹ Assigned readings

1. Rudolf and Margot Wittkower: Born Under

The course has two main objectives. It attempts to identify the general principles that underlie each particular medium of artistic expression, and it points by comparison to the similarities and the differences. For example, a discussion of radio plays is used to observe the particular means of form available in a world limited to sounds and deprived of vision. Conversely, readings on the photographic media give access to the resources of visual imagery under conditions that exclude or properly reduce speech and sound. The second purpose of the course is that of offering an antidote to the parochial constriction by which so many of the more advanced students dedicated themselves to one specialty in monastic seclusion. The members of the class are expected to be well grounded, theoretically and/or practically, in at least one of the media under investigation. Sometimes, however, an anthropologist is also a good musician, or a dancer writes poetry. Architects, accustomed to the inbred talk of their workshops, can get fascinated by

hearing a linguist talk about buildings; and they themselves may have striking ideas on the properties of space revealed in painting or literary description. When it all works out just right, it creates a peaceable kingdom in which the lambs are as well fed as the lions.

The variety of topics is held together by an underlying theme. While psychology offers several such themes, my own inclination happens to be toward the cognitive aspects of art rather than the motivational or social. Thus, after two or three introductory sessions on the artist's place in society and the psychoanalytical approach to creativity, attention is focused upon the representation of reality in the various media. What is abstract painting about and how does it relate to the subjects of music? In what ways do the Old Testament and Homer tell a story differently? How do literature and sculpture treat the same episode? How do intuition and intellect go about portraying human behavior on the stage? And so on.

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- Satum. Chapter 1: "From Craftsman to Artist."
- 2.a. Sigmund Freud: "The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming."
 - b. Roger Fry: The Artist and Psychoanalysis.
 3. Piet Mondrian: "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art."
 4. Erich Auerbach: Mimesis. Chapter 1: "Odysseus' Scar."
 5. Gotth. Ephraim Lessing: Laocoon. Sections 1-16.
 6. Rudolf Arnheim: Radio—an Art of Sound. Chapter 7: "In Praise of Blindness."
 7. Susanne K. Langer: Philosophy in a New Key. Chapter 8: "On Significance in Music."
 8. Eduard Manslick: The Beautiful in Music. Chapter 1, 2, 3.
 9. Siegfried Kracauer: Theory of Film. Chapter 1: "Photography" and Chapter 16: "Film in Our Time."
 10. Rudolf Arnheim: "On the Nature of Photography." In Critical Inquiry, September 1974, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 149-161.
 11. Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."
 12. Heinrich von Kleist: "On the Puppet Theater." In Salmagundi 1976, no. 33/34, pp. 83-88. Also In Partisan Review Jan./Feb. 1947, pp. 67-73.
 13. Denis Diderot: The Paradox of Acting.
 14. Gaston Bachelard: The Poetics of Space. Chapter 1.

None of the readings are easy. They all have the density and authenticity of authors who give their own thoughts rather than merely dilute those of others. They are theoretical and tend to trespass on philosophy. But almost all are quite short. I believe that weekly assignments of hundreds of pages are not only unrealistic but undermine the ability to read. On the principle that what does not deserve to be read word for word is better not read at all, I constantly admonish students for having missed this telling metaphor or that puzzling term or for not looking up the meaning of a reference. When Freud refers in passing to the question that the cardinal asked of the poet Ariosto, don't you want to know who was the cardinal and what was the question? When Kleist uses the image of light reflected from a concave mirror, what optical mechanism does he have in mind? Be inquisitive, be thorough, read slowly, savor the detail, and leave the skipping through to business executives!

For the purpose of credit, every student writes a term paper, the topic to be derived from his or her particular line of interest. Here the student's special knowledge and outlook impose themselves upon the guiding theme of the course even more thoroughly than was possible in class discussion. The result is a dazzling variety of subjects. A recent crop, for example, contained a paper by a dancer relating choreography to sequential movement in architecture, one on the interaction between Virginia Woolf's life and fiction, a comparison between visual and auditory space, an aesthetic evaluation of computer graphics, a scenario for a "happening" based on Shakespeare's Tempest, a paper on color symbolism in the German Romantics, an analysis of Eisenstein's editing technique in relation to that of the French avant-garde films, an essay on innovation in art and science, etc. In my instructions I try to keep the students away from either reporting impersonally on a body of readings or indulging in free-floating speculations about creativity, emotion, or the future of art without the support of factual sources.

Once the students are asked to derive their topics from an area of their particular interest, the "term paper" loses its perfunctory character. What is more, to have to adapt a familiar subject to the particular perspective of the psychology of the arts often means for the students to come upon an approach they might not have thought of otherwise; it may mean to write a maverick piece they had speculated on in leisurely off-hours but to which they had never gotten around. Inevitably, so personal an undertaking reflects in the style of writing. Although they are dealing mainly with the conceptual abstractions of theory, the students are writing in their own voices. The freshness of direct knowledge and direct experience animates the wording, and having to communicate something that matters is different from summarizing for the teacher a body of material with which they know he is all too familiar. As they plead a case of their own, their very syntax becomes less orthodox, which may raise the eyebrows of the conscientious teacher; but the spontaneity of expression to which some of the less defensible formulations are due compensates for the mistakes. For the teacher, to have a few dozen young people speak, each in his own language, is quite different from the chore of reading forty more or less anonymous reports.

The variety of the subject matter keeps the teacher on his toes. Ideally he should be an expert on all the subjects treated in the papers, and in fact he does need at least a generic acquaintance with the topics whose treatment he is called upon to evaluate. On the other hand, it is in the very nature of this kind of course that it try to train the participants in thinking, reading, and writing about subjects that are not their specialty. To step beyond the safety of one's own precinct without becoming amateurish or superficial offers the possibility of thinking more freely, deeply, and originally than one might otherwise. It is a challenge that a course of this nature offers not only to the students but to the teacher as well.

Editor's note: I thought forum's readers might be interested in having the following annotated reading list which Professor Arnheim assigns in the order presented here to students in a seminar he teaches, entitled Visual Thinking:

1. Hans Jonas: The Phenomenon of Life. Delta Books. Sixth Essay: "The Nobility of Sight."

One of the best phenomenological essays on the nature of visual experience.

2. Seventh essay: "Image-making and the Freedom of Man."

One of the best phenomenological essays on the nature of visual experience.

3. Rudolf Arnheim: "Perceptual Abstraction and Art" in Arnheim: Toward a Psychology of Art. U.Cal. Press, pp. 27-50.

Abstraction inherent in visual perception and its relation to pictorial representation.

4. Claude Levi-Strauss: The Savage Mind (La Pensee Sauvage). U.Chicago Press. Chapter 1: "The Science of the Concrete."

On concept formation in the thinking of early folk cultures.

5. Roger N. Shepard: "The Mental Image" in American Psychologist, February 1978, vol. 33, pp. 125-137.

Psychological experiments with memory images.

6. Gaston Bachelard: The Poetics of Space (La Poetique de l'Espace), Chapter I: "The House from the Cellar to the Attic."

Symbolism of the three spatial levels of the basic house: attic, ground floor, cellar.

7. Kevin Lynch: The Image of the City. MIT Press. Chapter III: "The City Image and its Elements."

People's image of the map of their city.

8. Rudolf Arnheim: Visual Thinking. California Press. Chapter 8: "Pictures, Symbols, and Signs."

On three kinds of visual representation.

9. Wilhelm Worringer: Abstraction and Empathy (Abstraktion und Einfuehlung). International Press. Part 1.

A classic treatise on two basic types of visual representation: empathy with nature vs. escape from nature to geometric abstraction.

10. Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Investigations (Philosophische Untersuchungen). Part 2.

Relation of visual perception to concepts.

11. Jacques Hadamard: The Psychology of Invention in the Mathematical Field. Dover. Chapter 6: "Discovery as a Synthesis."

Nonverbal imagery in the creative processes of mathematicians.

12. Rudolf Arnheim: Radio - An Art of Sound. Da Capo Press or Arno Press. Chapter 7: "In Praise of Blindness."

The artistic possibilities of a purely auditory medium deprived of sight.

13. Meyer Schapiro: "Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art" in Semiotica 1969, vol. 1, #3, pp. 223-242.

Basic formal characteristics of visual art: the nature of frame, direction, size, and abstraction.

14. Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in Illuminations. (Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit). Harcourt Brace.

Attitudes toward reproduction as distinguished from those toward the originals of works of art.