



DOCTORAL THESIS

Children's Perceptions of Beauty Exploring aesthetic experience through photography

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Abstract

The research reported in this thesis explores children's perceptions of beauty. It investigates how children reflect upon and articulate their perceptions of beauty and examines how these perceptions relate to philosophical thinking about aesthetic experience.

For the past 100 years, beauty has been marginalised in art and education and it is widely regarded as a problematic notion in a range of social and cultural contexts. Art educators have often portrayed beauty as a peripheral concern, and those who have studied children's responses to artworks have tended to characterise their references to beauty as evidence of passive appreciation and a relatively low level of aesthetic development. In recent years there has been growing evidence of a revival of interest in beauty as a theme for reflection; however, to my knowledge, this is the first study to specifically research children's perceptions of beauty.

The theoretical part of the study examined two fields of literature, in terms of (i) art educators' strategies for engaging children with art and (ii) philosophical theories of aesthetic experience. These sources influenced the design of the empirical part of the study, which consisted of 18 group interviews with 51 children aged 9-11 in two schools, one in inner London and the other in a rural village 40 miles from the capital. Before the interviews children completed two tasks independently in which they found and photographed images they thought were beautiful. Therefore there were two kinds of research data: (i) the images children found and photographed and (ii) the interview transcripts. A content analysis approach informed the interpretation of the images, while a number of themes that emerged from the interview data were identified and discussed in the context of the literature.

The research findings indicated that children have diverse perceptions of beauty and that they are interested in a range of visual properties and expressive qualities of images. Children in one school tended to find beauty in images that reflected relationships, while those in the other judged the subjective nature of such images to be problematic. Children in the rural area often photographed landscapes, flowers and animals, suggesting their direct connection with nature influences their perception of it as beautiful. Those in London also found beauty in the natural world but preferred stylised, digitally generated representations of nature designed to appeal to the viewer.

During the interviews children were often highly motivated to articulate their responses to beauty, and many reflected thoughtfully on their own and others' images. Evidence suggests that children experience beauty in a wide range of contexts and that they variously understand it as an intersubjectively valid, shareable experience or, alternatively, as an individual experience. Several talked about beauty in ways that related to notions well-rehearsed in aesthetic theory while others, though less able to conceive or articulate such ideas, were nonetheless receptive to them when they heard them expressed. Photography played an important part in the research, and the findings suggest the medium has the potential to play a far more prominent role in art education as a means of expression. When combined with group interviews, photography can also be a highly effective method of understanding children's perspectives on their experiences, and the study offers a useful model for researchers and educators to develop further.

The research makes several contributions to knowledge. Firstly, it demonstrates that children's experiences of beauty are often valuable and meaningful to them. Secondly, it provides evidence that children are motivated to explain their ideas about beauty and to engage with the ideas of others. Thirdly, it challenges previous assumptions in terms of both children's aesthetic development and aesthetic preferences by highlighting the diversity and complexity of children's perceptions of beauty.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Contents	v
Acknowledgments	viii
List of Tables	ix
List of Figures	ix
List of Appendices	xv
Introduction	1
Aims of the research	2
Research questions	3
Overview of the thesis	3
Chapter 1: Background to the research	5
1.1 The problem with beauty	7
1.2 Definition of key terms	14
1.3 The revival of beauty	16
1.4 Beauty in education	22
Chapter 2: Children’s engagement with images: strategies in art education	28
2.1 Aesthetic appreciation	29
2.2 Engaging children with artworks: strategies from art educators	36
2.2.1 Critical studies	36
2.2.2 Aesthetic education	45
2.3 Children’s aesthetic development	50
Chapter 3: Philosophical thinking about beauty	66
3.1 Early concepts of beauty	67
3.1.1 Ancient notions of beauty	68
3.1.2 Beauty in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance	71
3.1.3 The beginnings of modern aesthetics	74
3.2 Hume’s ‘Standard of Taste’	77
3.2.1 Seeking a ‘Standard of Taste’	78
3.2.2 The role of the Critics	80
3.2.3 Reflections on ‘Of the Standard of Taste’	82
3.3 Kant and the <i>Critique of the Power of Judgment</i>	83
3.3.1 The third Critique	83
3.3.2 Kant’s conditions for beauty	85
3.3.3 The Sublime	95
3.4 Hume, Kant and the empirical research	99
3.4.1 Research questions	100
3.4.2 Questions for children about experiences of beauty	101

Chapter 4: The design of the empirical research	104
4.1 The methodology	104
4.1.1 Overview of the methodology	104
4.1.2 Methodological decisions	105
4.2 The research design	108
4.2.1 The interview: conceptions and purposes, advantages and disadvantages	108
4.2.2 Semi-structured interviews	111
4.2.3 Interviewing groups of children	113
4.2.4 Interviews, images and the role of photography	115
4.3 Design and structure of the interview	118
4.3.1 Selecting and formatting interview questions	119
4.3.2 The interview structure: description, analysis and reflection	120
4.3.3 Managing the interview: resolving the role of teacher / researcher	125
4.4 Interpreting the data: principles and processes	130
4.4.1 Interpreting children's images	130
4.4.2 Interpreting the interview data	133
4.5 The data collection process	137
4.5.1 Piloting the data collection process	137
4.5.2 Participants	142
4.5.3 Engaging with the schools	145
4.5.4 Introducing the tasks	147
Chapter 5: Description of data (Greystones School)	151
5.1 Content analysis of children's images	152
5.2 Description of interviews A1-A5 (found images)	162
5.3 Description of interviews A6-A10 (photographed images)	181
Chapter 6: Description of data (Old Oak School)	201
6.1 Description of interviews B1-B4 (found images)	203
6.2 Description of interviews B5-B8 (photographed images)	224

Chapter 7: Children’s perceptions of beauty	242
7.1 Identifying themes from the interviews	242
7.2 Beauty and expression	245
7.2.1 <i>‘I was so touched when I saw it I felt like crying’</i> : beauty, love and relationships	247
7.2.2 <i>‘The first time I ever saw pink waves’</i> : beauty, emotion and memories	251
7.2.3 <i>‘What happens on the inside’</i> : beauty, intention and expression	255
7.3 The visual aspects of beauty	268
7.3.1 <i>‘The leaves are glowing as if they were pieces of gold’</i> : beauty, colour and light	268
7.3.2 <i>‘I was like, I want something more colourful!’</i> : beauty, colour and aesthetic preference	276
7.3.3 <i>‘That’s a bit packed for a small picture, for me’</i> : beauty, colour and composition	282
Chapter 8: Children’s thinking about beauty	295
8.1 Interest and intersubjectivity in children’s perceptions of beauty	296
8.1.1 <i>‘We all have it in different ways’</i>	298
8.1.2 <i>‘If you were going to have a cauldron to make beauty...’</i>	303
8.2 Children’s perceptions of beauty in nature	308
8.2.1 <i>‘It represents, like, the process of life’</i> : beauty in flowers	308
8.2.2 <i>‘Where I spend most of my time at’</i> : beauty in the local landscape	313
8.2.3 <i>‘There’s a part of us inside that just dives in’</i> : beauty in remote landscapes	317
8.2.4 <i>‘As if it was there a thousand years’</i> : children’s images and the sublime	322
8.3 Further lines of enquiry	331
8.3.1 <i>‘Beautiful sounds much more powerful I think’</i> : beauty and prettiness	331
8.3.2 <i>‘You can’t really say something’s girly’</i> : beauty and gender	333
8.3.3 <i>‘The others were from the computer. But this is real.’</i> beauty and truth	338
8.3.4 <i>‘Beauty is not important because beauty is not in your exams’</i> : the value of beauty	342
Conclusions	346
Summary of findings	347
Implications for theory and practice	351
Reflections on the research	356
Conclusion	359
Bibliography	367
Appendices	378

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List of Tables

Table 4.1	Considering problematic questions (adapted from Arksey and Knight, 1999)	111
Table 4.2	Questions for interviews with children	114
Table 4.3	Advanced questions for interviews with children	115
Table 5.1	Greystones School: content analysis, found images	145
Table 5.2	Greystones School: content analysis, photographs	146
Table 5.3	Old Oak School: content analysis, found images	147
Table 5.4	Old Oak School: content analysis, photographs	148
Table 5.5	Content analysis of found images	149
Table 5.6	Content analysis of photographs	150

List of Figures

- Fig. 1.1 Richard Billingham *Untitled (RAL 20)* 1996
http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/richard_billingham_untitled9.htm
- Fig. 1.2 Maya Lin *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1982)
http://perceptivetravel.com/blog/wp-content/5249593792_7f98ebb06b.jpg
- Fig. 2.1 Gerd Winner: *Brick Wall* (1988, and illustration of un-named student's work from Taylor (1989)
- Fig. 2.2 Secondary school pupils making drawings of works by Damien Hirst; Tate Modern, 2012
(*photographs: the author*)
- Fig. 2.3 Examples of images of student artwork from the *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, Vol. 31. No. 3 (2012)
- Fig. 2.4 Ivan Albright: *Into the World Came a Soul Called Ida* 1930 Art Institute of Chicago
<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/93811>
- Fig. 3.1 Andrea Palladio *Villa Rotunda*, Vicenza c1550 <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palladianismus>
- Fig. 3.2 Georges Seurat – *Bathers at Asnières*, 1884 (National Gallery, London)
<https://www.pinterest.com/lyanran/composition/> original at:
<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/georges-seurat-bathers-at-asnieres>
- Fig. 3.3 Web page design showing golden section.
http://scm.ulster.ac.uk/~B00662725/DES106/DES106_Diary.html
- Fig. 3.4 Leonardo da Vinci *The Virgin on the Rocks* (c.1491/2-9 and 1506-8) National Gallery, London
<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/leonardo-da-vinci-the-virgin-of-the-rocks>
- Fig. 3.5 Caspar David Friedrich: *The Sea of Ice* (c.1824) Kunsthalle, Hamburg
<http://www.caspardavidfriedrich.org/The-Sea-of-Ice-1824.html>
- Fig. 3.6 Aston Martin DB6 (photograph: Glyn House)
- Fig. 3.7 Sweet Juliet rose <https://www.davidaustinroses.com/english/Showrose.asp?Show=1098>
- Fig. 3.8 Hira's photograph
- Fig. 3.9 Lottie's photograph
- Fig. 3.10 Caspar David Friedrich: *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c.1818) Kunsthalle, Hamburg
<http://www.caspardavidfriedrich.org/The-Wanderer-above-the-Mists-1817-18.html>
- Fig. 3.11 Storm clouds build up over Victoria Harbour. Hong Kong, as temperatures and humidity levels rise - Philippe Lopez/AFP/Getty Images
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/picture/2013/may/01/eyewitness-hong-kong>
- Fig. 3.12 *Visitors walk their dogs through an avenue of cherry trees coming into blossom in Greenwich Park* Toby Melville/Reuters
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/picture/2013/apr/30/eyewitness-london-england>
- Fig. 4.1 Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid: *America's Most Wanted* (1994)
http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/komar_and_melamid/
- Fig. 4.2 Damien Hirst: *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991)
<http://www.damienhirst.com/the-physical-impossibility-of>
- Fig. 4.3 Meaning at the intersection of four fields (adapted from Arksey and Knight 1999: 150)
- Fig. 4.4 Selection of images from the first pilot study, 2010
- Fig. 4.5 Selection of images from the second pilot study, 2010

Fig. 4.6 *7-Up* Granada Television, 1964 - present
Fig. 4.7 Greystones School, London (street view, aerial view)
Fig. 4.8 Old Oak School, Surrey (street view, aerial view)
Fig. 4.9 Homework task 1: Your own idea of beauty

Fig. 5.1 Ilham – waves (photograph taken on holiday)
Fig. 5.2 Christelle – Christelle as a baby (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.3 Chloe – bear (photograph of a book illustration from classroom)
Fig. 5.4 Muse – Muse as a baby (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.5 Sara – holiday (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.6 Ammar – pattern (digital painting from Internet via father’s album)
Fig. 5.7 Yasmina – flower (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.8 Kyra – sunset (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.9 Mohad – flower (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.10 Mahdi – cousin (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.11 Danyaal – cousin (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.12 Mia – Mia in the garden (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.13 Abigail – Abigail’s mother (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.14 Abigail – Abigail as a baby (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.15 Enesa – rose (digitally enhanced image from Internet)
Fig. 5.16 Sherika – rose (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.17 Sandy – Lady Gaga (illustration from newspaper)
Fig. 5.18 Mustafa – landscape (digital painting from Internet)
Fig. 5.19 Breana – Breana and her mother (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.20 Valeriy – castle (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.21 Teyamo – princess (poster from bedroom wall)
Fig. 5.22 Rafeeah – Olympic Stadium (photograph from *Metro* newspaper)
Fig. 5.23 Daniel – flowers (enhanced photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.24 Yonis – flowers (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.25 Billy – sparkler (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.26 Sadiya – bag (photograph taken at the interview)
Fig. 5.27 Kyron – Kyron as a small child(photograph from family album)
Fig. 5.28 Kamau – seascape (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.29 Yonis – landscape (digital painting from Internet)
Fig. 5.30 Ilham – Bishop’s Park (1) (photograph)
Fig. 5.31 Ilham – Bishop’s Park (2) (photograph)
Fig. 5.32 Ilham – Bishop’s Park (3) (photograph)
Fig. 5.33 Ilham – Bishop’s Park (4) trees (photograph)
Fig. 5.34 Ilham – Bishop’s Park (5) flowers (photograph)
Fig. 5.35 Chloe – the London Eye (photograph)
Fig. 5.36 Sara – stained glass window (photograph of a stained glass window)
Fig. 5.37 Sara – painting of a horse (photograph of a painting)
Fig. 5.38 Christelle – painting of a bird (photograph of a painting)
Fig. 5.39 Fartun – fabric design (1) (photograph of fabric)
Fig. 5.40 Fartun – fabric design (2) (photograph of fabric)
Fig. 5.41 Christelle – family photograph (re-photographed photograph)
Fig. 5.42 Muse – self-portrait (photograph)
Fig. 5.43 Muse – baby-portrait (re-photographed photograph)
Fig. 5.44 Danyaal – cousins (re-photographed photographs)
Fig. 5.45 Ammar – aunt (re-photographed photographs)
Fig. 5.46 Ammar – window (photograph)
Fig. 5.47 Yasmina – clouds (photograph)
Fig. 5.48 Mohad – river (photograph)
Fig. 5.49 Kyra – flowers(photograph)
Fig. 5.50 Mahdi – superheroes (photographed illustrations)
Fig. 5.51 Mustafa – Mustafa’s sister (photograph)
Fig. 5.52 Mustafa – Mustafa’s clothes (photograph)
Fig. 5.53 Mia – Mia’s garden (photograph)
Fig. 5.54 Enesa – view from the balcony (photograph)

Fig. 5.55 Sherika – fish (photograph)
 Fig. 5.56 Sandy – portrait re-photographed photograph)
 Fig. 5.57 Rafeeah – Gherkin (re-photographed photograph)
 Fig. 5.58 Rafeeah – Empress State Building (photograph)
 Fig. 5.59 Teyamo – puppy (photographed illustration)
 Fig. 5.60 Breana – Breana’s sister (photograph)
 Fig. 5.61 Daniel – trees (photograph)
 Fig. 5.62 Sadiya – Sadiya’s sister’s bag (photograph)
 Fig. 5.63 Sadiya – butterfly (photograph)
 Fig. 5.64 Sadiya – Sadiya’s cousin’s kitten (re-photographed photograph)
 Fig. 5.65 Sadiya – Sadiya’s mother’s picture of a bird (re-photographed photograph)
 Fig. 5.66 Kyron – basketball player (re-photographed photograph)
 Fig. 5.67 Kyron – Kyron as a baby (image from family album)
 Fig. 5.68 Kamaudin – view from a balcony (tree) (photograph)
 Fig. 5.69 Kamaudin – view from a balcony (fence) (photograph)
 Fig. 5.70 Kamaudin – view from a balcony (sky) (photograph)

Fig. 6.1 Ishaque – sunset (digital painting from Internet)
 Fig. 6.2 Maddie – Sydney Opera House (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.3 Callum – Manchester United badge (design from Internet)
 Fig. 6.4 Ishaque – Arsenal badge (design from Internet)
 Fig. 6.5 Charlie – waterfall (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.6 Nell – cousins (family photograph)
 Fig. 6.7 Megan – Kourtney Kardashian (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.8 James – fractal snowflake (digital painting from Internet)
 Fig. 6.9 Elysia – waterfall (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.10 Maddie – Miranda Hart (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.11 Bonnie – puppy (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.12 Heather – dogs (photograph from magazine)
 Fig. 6.13 Ben – dog (personal photograph)
 Fig. 6.14 Bonnie – tree (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.15 Bonnie – raindrop (photograph from magazine)
 Fig. 6.16 Jasmine – waterfall (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.17 Alastair – giraffe (photograph from book)
 Fig. 6.18 Alastair – dolphin (photograph from book)
 Fig. 6.19 Jasmine – Earth (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.20 Heather – flowers (personal photograph)
 Fig. 6.21 Heather – tree in winter (photograph from magazine)
 Fig. 6.22 Cameron – forest in snow (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.23 Cameron – flowers (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.24 Noah – sky (time-lapse image, photograph from book)
 Fig. 6.25 Izzy – flower (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.26 Charlie – snow leopard (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.27 Izzy – tiger (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.28 Josie – tiger (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.29 Izzy – polar bear cubs (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.30 Noah – African savannah (photograph from book)
 Fig. 6.31 Josie – best friends (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.32 Anya – blossom (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.33 Anya – dog (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.34 Anya – waterfall (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.35 Barney – Stamford Bridge (photograph from book)
 Fig. 6.36 Emily – butterfly (photograph from Internet)
 Fig. 6.37 Emily – seal and me (photograph from album)
 Fig. 6.38 Gracie – my family on holiday (photograph from album)
 Fig. 6.39 Spike – dragon and creatures (pencil drawing)
 Fig. 6.40 Charlie – bridge (photograph of image on TV)
 Fig. 6.41 Callum – iPad (photograph)
 Fig. 6.42 Elysia – puppy(photograph)

- Fig. 6.43 Elysia – sun and clouds (photograph)
 Fig. 6.44 James – vase (photograph)
 Fig. 6.45 Maddie – Frensham Common (photographs)
 Fig. 6.46 Megan – memorial (photograph)
 Fig. 6.47 Nell – cake (photograph)
 Fig. 6.48 Ishaque – horses (photograph)
 Fig. 6.49 Jasmine – hands (photograph)
 Fig. 6.50 Bonnie – feather (photograph)
 Fig. 6.51 Heather – fireplace (photograph)
 Fig. 6.52 Alistair – tulips (photograph)
 Fig. 6.53 Ben – pets (photographs)
 Fig. 6.54 Heather – dog (photograph)
 Fig. 6.55 Jasmine – dog (photograph)
 Fig. 6.56 Bonnie – daffodils (photograph)
 Fig. 6.57 Cameron – Moon (photograph)
 Fig. 6.58 Charlie – Portsmouth coastline (photograph)
 Fig. 6.59 Charlie – Portsmouth coastline with tower (photograph)
 Fig. 6.60 Charlie – Charlie (photograph)
 Fig. 6.61 Josie – friend (photograph)
 Fig. 6.62 Josie – cat (photograph)
 Fig. 6.63 Izzy – golden apples and pears (photograph)
 Fig. 6.64 Izzy – duck (photograph)
 Fig. 6.65 Noah – garden (photograph)
 Fig. 6.66 Noah – trees (photograph)
 Fig. 6.67 Spike – Smiley face in sand (photograph of drawing)
 Fig. 6.68 Anya – Teddy bears (photograph)
 Fig. 6.69 Barney – Sunset, Devil’s Punchbowl (photograph)
 Fig. 6.70 Emily – Cats (photograph)
 Fig. 6.71 Emily – Roses and tulips (photograph)
 Fig. 6.72 Gracie – Dog (photograph)
 Fig. 6.73 Gracie – Deer (photograph)
- Fig 7.1 Danyaal – cousins
 Fig 7.2 Breana – Breana and her mother
 Fig. 7.3 Ilham’s found images
 Fig. 7.4 Ilham – waves
 Fig. 7.5 Billy – sparkler
 Fig. 7.6 Jasmine’s photographs
 Fig. 7.7 Jasmine – view of Earth from space
 Fig. 7.8 Jasmine – Jasmine’s grandmother and sister
 Fig. 7.9 Spike – drawing of a dragon
 Fig. 7.10 Spike – photograph of smiley face drawn in sand
 Fig. 7.11 Pablo Picasso *The Young Painter*, oil on canvas, 1972. Musée Picasso, Paris
<http://www.museepicassoparis.fr/en/pablo-picasso/reperes-chronologiques/>
 Fig. 7.12 Ilham – waves
 Fig. 7.13 Anya – teddy bears
 Fig. 7.14 Callum – football badge
 Fig. 7.15 Kamaudin – view from a balcony (tree)
 Fig. 7.16 Rafeeah – Olympic Stadium
 Fig. 7.17 Mohad – view of the Thames
 Fig. 7.18 Ammar – window
 Fig. 7.19 Cameron – snow
 Fig. 7.20 James – sunlight
 Fig. 7.21 Maddie – sky
 Fig. 7.22 Elysia – sky
 Fig. 7.23 All found images, Greystones School
 Fig. 7.24 All found images, Old Oak School
 Fig. 7.25 Noah’s landscape photographs
 Fig. 7.26 Children at Greystones School – images with highly saturated, intense colours

- Fig. 7.27 Cameron's close-up of colourful flowers
 Fig. 7.28 Issy's multi-coloured flowers
 Fig. 7.29 Noah on Cameron's flowers: *'I think that's a bit packed for a small picture, for me'*
 Fig. 7.30 Cameron on Noah's landscape: *'It's a bit too green. Maybe if the yellow flowers were a bit brighter...'*
 Fig. 7.31 Enesa – view from her balcony
 Fig. 7.32 Enesa – view from the balcony (detail)
 Fig. 7.33 Kamaudin – view from his balcony (tree)
 Fig. 7.34 Kamaudin – view from his balcony (shadow, fence)
 Fig. 7.35 Kamaudin – view from his balcony (shadow, plant)
 Fig. 7.36 Alfred Steiglitz – Tree on a New York street, 1901

- Fig. 8.1 *'I really like the sense of taste in your picture. I love it!'* (Ammar on Mohad's found image),
 Fig. 8.2 Nell's found photograph of her cousins
 Fig. 8.3 Anya's found image of blossom
 Fig. 8.4 Sherika and Enesa's found images of roses
 Fig. 8.5 Flowers photographed by Kyra
 Fig. 8.6 Flowers photographed by Bonnie
 Fig. 8.7 Flowers photographed by Alistair
 Fig. 8.8 Flowers photographed by Ilham
 Fig. 8.9 Flowers (digital painting found online by Mustafa)
 Fig. 8.10 Local park photographed by Daniel
 Fig. 8.11 River Thames photographed by Mohad (1)
 Fig. 8.12 River Thames photographed by Mohad (2)
 Fig. 8.13 Daniel and Mohad's photographs by were reminiscent of Monet paintings
 Fig. 8.14 Ilham's photograph of her local park (1)
 Fig. 8.15 Ilham's photograph of her local park (2)
 Fig. 8.16 Heather's found image of a foxglove
 Fig. 8.17 Yasmina's waterfalls
 Fig. 8.18 Mustafa's flowers
 Fig. 8.19 Images of Plitvička Forest, Croatia found by Charlie, Anya and Elysia
 Fig. 8.20 Calendar, Pipasha Tandoori Restaurant, Churt. (photograph: the author)
 Fig. 8.21 Examples of images relating to the sublime found by James, Cameron, Noah and Yasmina
 Fig. 8.22 Cameron's snowscapes (found images)
 Fig. 8.23 Noah's image of Ayers Rock (found image)
 Fig. 8.24 Caspar David Friedrich: Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (c.1818) Kunsthalle, Hamburg
<http://www.caspardavidfriedrich.org/The-Wanderer-above-the-Mists-1817-18.html>
 Fig. 8.25 Valeriy's screen shot of 'Dragon Quest'
 Fig. 8.26 Elysia's found image of waterfalls
 Fig. 8.27 Yasmina's found images of waterfalls
 Fig. 8.28 Yasmina's photograph of local buildings
 Fig. 8.29 Barney and Spike's photographs of local landscapes
 Fig. 8.30 Rafeeah's photograph of the Empress State Building and found image of a whale
 Fig. 8.31 The Hunger Games (film still) <http://www.mymcpl.org/blog/if-you-liked-hunger-games>
 Fig. 8.32 Noah: found image of African plain
 Fig. 8.33 Nell's photograph of a cake
 Fig. 8.34 Mustafa's clothes and jewellery
 Fig. 8.35 Beauty products <http://www.freegreatpicture.com/cosmetic-advertising/euovmy-beauty-products-32504>
 Fig. 8.36 Sandy's images found in an edition of the 'Metro' newspaper
 Fig. 8.37 Teyamo's princess movie poster;
 Fig. 8.38 Megan's found image of Kourtney Kardashian
 Fig. 8.39 Jo Brand and Miranda Hart: images found by Maddie and Nell
 Fig. 8.40 Chloe's London Eye: *'It's kind of like, been this great experience'*
 Fig. 8.41 Mustafa's flower: *'I went on Google and then I writ down 'beautiful flowers' and then I was scrolling down, then ... I found this'*
 Fig. 8.42 Sadiya's re-photographed image:
'Is this a picture of a picture or is it a picture of a real cat?' 'It's a real cat.'
 Fig. 8.43 Sadiya's re-photographed image of a cat

- Fig. 8.44 Sadiya's re-photographed image of a bird
Fig. 8.45 Ilham's image: 'The others were from the computer. But this is real.'
Fig. 8.46 Identical image found online

- Fig. 9.1 Richard Billingham *Untitled (RAL 20)* 1996
Fig. 9.2 Illustration of un-named student's work from Taylor (1989)
Fig. 9.3 Kamaudin's view from a balcony (shadow) (photograph)
Fig. 9.4 Jack Hill *Great Mosque of Aleppo*
<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21589428-outsiders-will-not-bring-peace-syria-unless-they-face-up-some-difficult-choices-stop?zid=312&ah=da4ed4425e74339883d473adf5773841>
Fig. 9.5 Jack Hill *Great Mosque of Aleppo*
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3805203.ece#tab-4>
Fig. 9.6 Gleb Garanich *Debaltseve, eastern Ukraine, Feb. 6th 2015* (Gleb Garanich /Reuters)
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/picture/2013/jan/26/pakistan>
Fig. 9.7 Muhammed Muheisen *Displaced children on the outskirts of Islamabad*, December 2012, (Muhammed Muheisen/AP Photo)
Fig. 9.8 *Iraqi boys make the most of a burst water pipe in Sadr City, May 2008*. Wathiq Khuzaie / Getty
<http://www.zimbio.com/2008+in+Photos/articles/70/2008+The+Year+in+Photos>
Fig. 9.9 *Pakistani children, who were displaced with their families by 2010 floods from a village in Pakistan's Sindh province, enjoy jumping on a trampoline, in a slum on the outskirts of Islamabad, Pakistan*, Friday, February 8, 2013. (Muhammed Muheisen/AP Photo)
<http://www.gagdaily.com/appealing/2454-daily-life-by-photographer-muhammed-muheisen.html>

List of Appendices

Appendix 4.1	Letter to Head Teacher, Greystones School, January 2012
Appendix 4.2	Overview of proposed research, Greystones School, May 2012
Appendix 4.3	Interview schedule, Greystones School, November 2012
Appendix 4.4	Note on resources
Appendix 4.5	Ethical Issues Application Statement
Appendix 4.6	Ethical Approval, July 2010
Appendix 4.7	Participant consent form, July 2012
Appendix 4.8	Homework task No. 1, Greystones School, September 2012
Appendix 4.9	Letter to Parents, Greystones School, September 2012
Appendix 5.1	Alternative presentation of quantitative data on children's images
Appendix 5.2	Interview questions, Greystones School, September 2012
Appendix 5.3	Transcript, Greystones School, Group 4, 4th October 2012
Appendix 6.1	Letter to Head Teacher, Old Oak School, September 2012
Appendix 6.2	Draft schedule for data collection, Old Oak School, Jan 2013
Appendix 6.3	Reminder for children (<i>example</i>), January 2013
Appendix 6.4	Interview questions, Old Oak School, January 2013
Appendix 6.5	Checklist used for each interview at Old Oak School
Appendix 6.6	Handout describing first task, Old Oak School, Jan 2013
Appendix 6.7	Letter to parents, Old Oak School, 10th Jan 2013
Appendix 6.8	Handout for children describing second task, February 2013
Appendix 6.9	Transcript, Old Oak School, Interview 4, 28 th February 2013