

## RECOGNIZING SOCIAL ISSUES IN THE ART CURRICULUM

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### Abstract

It is a conventional assumption in art education that all experience with art contributes to the student's educational growth. Yet recent art and media criticism suggests that the arts can also function as ideologies that restrict or mystify our views of the world, thus inhibiting growth. This problem suggests the need for curriculum designers, teachers, and students to recognize the social meaning in art. This paper identifies and critically discusses two kinds of social meanings: meanings inherent in the work of art (e.g., political statements in film); and meanings created by the design of the art curriculum (e.g., a monocultural or high-technology emphasis). By directing their critical attention to these social meanings, art educators may more effectively counter miseducational ideologies, and realize the potential of the arts for authentic expression and communication.

It is a conventional assumption in art education that all experience in making and looking at works of art helps people to express themselves and lead fuller, better lives. There can be little doubt that this assumption retains a strong influence on the actual practice of art teaching. Art curricula continue to promote creative experiences in whatever media can be afforded, and appreciation of everything from Renaissance painting to the urban environment, with complete confidence that educational needs are thereby being served. Yet recent art and media criticism suggests that the arts are not an indisputable source of educational value. Film critics in particular, and painting critics as well, have documented the function of art as ideology, a construction of reality that is specific and interest-based, yet is presented as self-evident to its audience (Nichols, 1976; Guilbaut, in press). The ideological function has become particularly apparent in the art of film. Films like The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now, for example, function as ideology when they resurrect the myth that Americans were the victims of "savage" Asians in the Vietnamese war. They promote this myth not by confronting us with an overt argument, but by letting background details, characterizations, and seemingly incidental events pass before our consciousness, in a way that only nondiscursive forms can do. We as audience members may very likely question the logic of the main characters' fates, but we are less likely to question whether a minor character such as a crazed, blood-thirsty captor on a river boat, is really representative of Vietnamese soldiers. Instead, we incorporate this depiction into our construction of the overall reality of that historical period; and, perhaps, we add this depiction further to our mental picture of the character of Asians in general. Even as the film may open our eyes visually with its imaginative form and structure, it also promotes a distortion of history that serves racist and militaristic interests. In this way art

can act as a miseducational ideology, and play a direct role in the development of stultifying, mystifying views of the world.

In an age of centralized wealth and mass communication, the ideological function of art must be considered more seriously than it has been. Films and museum shows enter the experience of millions, yet represent the interests of very small sectors of the population. When these highly visible arts celebrate attitudes and values that do not serve the social interests of the larger community, then their educational value must be debated. What does one learn, for example, when one visits a series of major museum shows such as "Treasures of Dresden", "Scythian Gold", and "Treasures of Tutankhamun"? If one is an art historian, an anthropologist, or an artist, one may be able to add new insights to a personal body of knowledge that is already well-established. But if one approaches the exhibitions as cultural novices -- as children must -- then the exhibitions communicate a different message. As cultural artifacts in themselves, these exhibitions communicate the message that the value of art is essentially a material value. Art is to be admired for its monetary value and gazed upon with envy and reverence. The exhibition, as one selection of themes and objects from among infinite possible themes and objects, celebrates certain specific values that are consonant with the values of the influential group which supports it. While we might have learned tranquility, receptivity, altruism, or social concern from the experience of artists, art is used here to reinforce a view of the world that places material display in supreme position.

These examples demonstrate that experiences with art promote varied -- and not always commendable -- constructions of reality, shaping social and personal attitudes covertly but effectively. What does this recognition of art's social impact mean for education? I believe that a social critique does not negate traditional assumptions of art's educational potential. Rather, it suggests that new critical categories must be applied to the selection and design of art curricula if a more complete educational potential is to be realized. Art activities have always been selected with some critical categories in mind. We argue, for example, that because art is expressive, art promotes the educational value of self-expression. The critical category of expressivity allows us to focus on expressive works of art, even to the point that we ignore less emotive works for educational purposes. By broadening our critical categories to include the social dimension, we can improve the fit between artistic accomplishment and educational goals. We can encourage experiences in art that offer valid personal and social meaning.

There are two kinds of social meanings in the art curriculum that deserve our critical attention. The first are social and political statements inherent in the work of art. Politics is deeply bound up with the nature of art itself, as both are concerned with the valuing and discussion of events that matter in our lives. This point is too often ignored; we often treat art as if it were no more than a purely formal accomplishment. But while the formal differences between Star Wars and a dull, poorly photographed movie may be obvious, the political differences between Coming Home and The Deer Hunter, or The Grand Illusion and Private Benjamin, also have profound aesthetic significance. Both the form and content of art help shape the mental images through which we define our

view of the world. The art educator needs to encourage the student to become aware of the several ways that art builds these mental images: not only how art colors, textures, and composes the world, but also how it recognizes certain subjects as significant and develops a point of view towards those subjects. This broadened sensitivity to social content contributes both to the deepened appreciation of authentic works of art, and to thoughtful resistance to the world views of the mass media. With this awareness it may be more possible to create an art that authentically represents social reality.

The second kind of social issue deserving attention is created by the design of the art curriculum. As the discussion of museum shows illustrates, the selection of objects and themes for our attention is infused with social meaning. As art educators, we communicate powerful values and attitudes through our selection of exemplary art works and activities. In many curricula, for example, a strong reinforcement of dominant culture values is communicated through the omission of multicultural art forms. Art is too often defined with reference to European arts, with other cultures tacked on as a special topic later in the course. How different our conceptions of art might be if we were introduced to art by looking at a Mexican tree of life, a Taoist brush painting, or a contemporary feminist work. This strategy would both have aesthetic validity and be instrumental to the broader educational goal of valuing the experiences of all peoples.

An equally important issue that must be recognized is the curriculum's approach to participation in a technological society. Traditionally, art education has fostered participation through expressive and creative experiences. The technology of the art class - whether brushes, looms, or mallets - has served as a bridge between personal aspirations and social possibilities for action. It is tempting today to extend this model of encouraging participation by making use of new technologies: computer graphics, holography, the special effects of science fiction movies. But in doing so we need to consider the broader social implications of these technological innovations. Can the individual participate, be creative, and actualize himself as well through these forms as through traditional art forms? And how many people can afford access to these new technologies? Through a computer or Star Wars art, the danger exists of becoming surrounded by a culture that dazzles us, but that we have no active role in creating. Critical awareness of the social values implicit in these experiences is needed so that the educational phenomenon of participation is not replaced by the miseducational phenomenon of alienation.

Further social implications of the art curriculum can be mentioned: for example, the conflict between individual and group experience, or between competition and cooperation. If art educators could recognize and act upon these several kinds of social meanings in the art curriculum, the educational role of the arts could be more effectively developed. By looking at the arts with a broadened set of educational criteria, we may better realize the potential of the arts to interpret social reality, value other cultures, and set a lifelong foundation for social participation rather than alienation. Motivated by the need to counter miseducational ideologies, the critical recognition of social issues in art leads ultimately to a stronger role for the arts in education.

## References

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