IMAGES, DIALOGUE, AND AESTHETIC EDUCATION: ARENDT'S RESPONSE TO THE LITTLE ROCK CRISIS

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On September 4, 1957, a crisis occurred at Little Rock Central High School in which a mob of white citizens followed, taunted, and harassed a black student, Elizabeth Eckford, who was attempting to register for classes at the newly desegregated school. Governor Orval Faubus, following his vocal opposition to school desegregation, had deployed the Arkansas National Guard to block the entrance of nine newly admitted black students who were supposed to register for classes that day.

The night before, cognizant of the growing threat of violence to the nine, the NAACP's local president, Daisy Bates, had called all but Eckford, who did not have a phone, giving the others the message to wait at a side entrance to the school so that a team of black and white ministers and volunteers could safely escort them. Eckford, the main subject of Will Counts's photographic series documenting the crisis, never received this message and faced a mob of white students and parents and a cadre of armed national guardsmen alone. His photographs appeared nation-wide in newspapers and magazines.

In 1959, Hannah Arendt published "Reflections on Little Rock." She argued that children should not be placed on the front lines of political battles.[1] Although she acknowledged her sympathy towards members of oppressed groups in general, she nonetheless charged the black parents and NAACP leaders who had involved their children in the desegregation battle with social-climbing, political irresponsibility, and the abandonment of black children to the brutal forces of the Jim Crow South.[2]

Throughout her essay, Arendt referenced Counts's photographs, acknowledging the role these played in shaping her argument.[3] She was particularly disturbed by images of Hazel Bryan, who, with a contorted face, angrily shouted obscenities at Eckford.[4] Such images in the media, as Arendt acknowledged in her articles, informed her interpretation of events and her judgment concerning the crisis. This acknowledgment points to the ways that images can shape ethical judgments.

While Arendt encountered much criticism for her controversial assessments and subsequently defended her point of view, after her exchange with Ralph Ellison (explained below), she became sympathetic to a perspective different from her own. As a result, she refined her judgment and came to

recognize the perspectives of children and the possible goods gained from undergoing this kind of painful initiation into adulthood.

In this paper, I examine how the dialogical exchange between people over the subject matter of images can exemplify an important goal of aesthetic education: critical thinking. While Harry Broudy's theory of aesthetic education stresses the importance for individuals to exhibit refined aesthetic rather than raw visceral responses to images, I argue that visceral responses, rooted in personal experiences and critical reflection, can have educational value during dialogue, namely that one can become aware of and articulate to others highly personalized meanings of artworks, as Maxine Greene has argued.[5] This process can enable participants through dialogue to acquire what Arendt, after Immanuel Kant, has called enlarged thinking by "visiting" different standpoints.[6] I argue, then, that Arendt's response to Counts's images, which I term visceral, and the dialogue she participated in with Ellison, fits the goals of aesthetic education that Greene has discussed.

THE ARTS AND ETHICS

Can the arts move us to act ethically in our daily lives? We might say yes. After all, one can walk into a gallery and encounter artworks that catch one's interest in subject matter or style that make the person want to live differently, act differently, or be differently in the world. For instance, if I encounter images depicting human suffering, loss, and pain, for example due to famine (I have in mind Eugene Delacroix's painting from 1824, *The Massacre at Chios*), I might be moved to want to end that suffering by deciding to volunteer at a local food shelter. Am I not, in essence, moved to act ethically by caring for my neighbors in need? In this example, the arts certainly can move us to respond ethically in our daily lives.

Delacroix's decision to paint this subject was political, even if it had no direct influence over the situation. Certainly Delacroix sympathized with the Greeks who had attempted to liberate themselves from the Turks and the Europeans who had attempted to support this undertaking. Although he did not personally travel to Greece to take up arms against the Turks, his study of the literature, poems, and history of Greek peoples inspired him to produce the *Chios* painting, which shook the sensibilities of the French viewing public. By 1828, French troops intervened to protect Greek independence, and by 1832 Greece's independence was recognized internationally, secured by a treaty signed by various European nations. While Delacroix's painting did not directly impact the political situation, his efforts, along with those of others, facilitated the consciousness-raising of French people.

However, counterexamples abound. The arts do not necessarily move us at all, let alone move us to act in ethical ways. I could walk into a gallery and encounter the same images, and not respond at all. Or, perhaps worse, I could respond to the forms and admire the style, and not think twice about the

subject matter depicted, exclaiming, "look at the frailty of those figures! What great use of line and shading!" Or, I might be an art connoisseur, who on a daily basis has the opportunity to engage various forms of art, and perhaps to be moved to think, live, or act differently, but on the side I am a slum lord who is responsible for the suffering of my tenants, indifferent to their suffering and unable or unwilling to recognize that I am the cause of it.

We might then revise the statement to say that the arts have the possibility of moving us to act more ethically than we would have otherwise if not for their presence. But then we would have to ask ourselves the following question: do the arts or our consciences move us? We would probably agree that the arts cannot move anything or anybody to do or feel anything. A canvas with paint splattered all over it does nothing nor does it contain or exhibit emotions, thoughts, or feelings.

What occurs within us is a response to what we have seen visually in the subject matter or within the forms themselves. We then interpret what we see and make meaning out of it for ourselves, based on our own intuitions, values, and experiences. This is why the arts cannot move us, but rather we can move ourselves to action by experiencing works and thinking about them. Hannah Arendt has much to offer us on this note, as her response to Counts's photographic images indicates.

Arendt's Response to Photographs

Of Counts's photographs, Arendt wrote:

> I think no one will find it easy to forget the photograph reproduced in newspapers and magazine throughout the country, showing a Negro girl, accompanied by a white friend of her father, walking away from school, persecuted and followed into bodily proximity by a jeering and grimacing mob of youngsters.[7]

She continued by describing Elizabeth Eckford, writing, "the girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero…something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be."[8] Arendt's interpretation of the crisis, captured in Counts's photographs, moved her to respond in writing, delivering sharp criticism and voicing concern for black children. She argued that black parents and the NAACP seemed all too willing to sacrifice the physical safety and psychological well-being of their children in pursuit of the right to share the same social space as whites.[9] What fueled her criticism was the concern that black parents exhibited what looked like parvenu, social-climbing behavior to the detriment of their children's well being.

In Arendt's estimation, adults, instead of children, were responsible for solving the problem of racism. Adults could access the proper channels, specifically the courts, to initiate the fight for political equality. By having

black and white school children shoulder the burden of solving the racial problem, Arendt insisted that adults were acting irresponsibly. In schools, the mere presence of blacks was a threat to the social sensibilities of whites. White parents consequently believed that the Supreme Court had violated their rights to remain socially segregated. Black parents struggled to send their children into the harmful environment that the forcibly mixed race school had become.

Protection of children, not inducting them into the ways of the world too soon, was Arendt's utmost concern. In "The Crisis in Education" from 1961, written to complement "Reflections," she argued that in matters of education, adults should exercise conservatism, gently guiding children into a world that threatens to overwhelm them, and from which they initially require protection.[10] Arendt received much criticism, even from colleagues belonging to her own intellectual circle, who considered her article to be not only insensitive, but also an attack on the Civil Rights movement as a whole.[11]

In "A Reply to Critics," Arendt defended her position by justifying her interpretation of Counts's photographs.[12] She wrote:

> The point of departure of my reflections was a picture in the newspapers, showing a Negro girl on her way home from a newly integrated school; she was persecuted by a mob of white children, protected by a white friend of the father, and her face bore eloquent witness to the obvious fact that she was not precisely happy.[13]

To explain further the significance of photographic images in Arendt's analysis, Vicky Lebeau remarked that:

> Looking at the images from Little Rock, Arendt turns that child into the subject of her story, investing a brief, but tantalizing, narrative which remarks on (appears to be driven by) a felt absence of the black family and community, of black and white citizens prepared to act as adults—or, more strongly, as heroes.[14]

The LIFE magazine series of photographs depicting Eckford walking through a mob of white children and adults certainly raised questions for Arendt as to the ethics and efficacy of involving children in political battles. The photograph of Eckford quite possibly triggered for Arendt memories of being a Jewish child in her native Germany, where school children and teachers alike routinely made negative comments to her about Jews.[15] Arendt's own experiences likely shaped her judgment against exposing children to harmful discrimination. From Counts's images, Arendt reflected on her own experiences and drew the conclusion that children cannot be used as means to ends, of which the photographs were a vivid reminder. Children instead should be treated as ends in themselves, which is consistent with her moral philosophy. This idea ran counter to the concerns of her critics, a significant one being Ralph Ellison.

In 1961, Ellison responded to both “Reflections on Little Rock” and “A Reply to Critics” and questioned Arendt’s qualifications for judging members of the black community and their allies. Ellison criticized her interpretation of the crisis, arguing that, in fact, the more painful children’s experiences were, the more prepared they will be to manage life as black adults in America. He wrote:

> …I believe that one of the important clues to the meaning of that [Negro] experience lies in the idea, the ideal of sacrifice. Hannah Arendt’s failure to grasp the importance of this ideal among Southern Negroes caused her to fly way off into left field in her “Reflections on Little Rock,” in which she charged Negro parents with exploiting their children during the struggle to integrate the schools. But she has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people.[16]

Arendt’s vision of protecting children from the world, then, ran counter to the values and lived reality of blacks in the U.S. Blacks were not spared violence from the world in their pursuit of survival and citizenship, and black parents knew this.

In response to Ellison’s penetrating criticism, Arendt reconsidered her perspective. In private exchange, she conceded these points to Ellison and acknowledged her ignorance of the black experience in America. She also noted the potential of such painful initiation to prepare blacks for citizenship.[17]

Clearly, Arendt became sympathetic to a perspective different from her own, and her judgment was refined, as she imagined what it might have been like for black children undergoing painful initiation into adulthood and the possible goods the children might gain from this process. This dialogue began and ended with thinking, which became more refined over time by exploring different standpoints. Such dialogue became an important feature of Arendt’s theory of critical thinking that she elucidated later on in her career.

THINKING AND JUDGING

In her later work, Arendt worked out a theory of critical thinking that has two major features. First, one must think critically of not only the doctrines and concepts that one receives from others and of the prejudices and traditions that one inherits, but one must also be able to apply critical standards to one’s own thought in order to learn critical thinking.[18] Second, and the feature I will focus on, is that one must think critically by imaginatively “visiting” the standpoints of others during the thinking process.

Arendt defines standpoints as the places where one stands and the conditions the person is subject to, which always differ from one individual to

the next and from one class or group compared to another. [19] An individual must be willing to go beyond one's own beliefs and ideals and have the courage to engage in dialogue. Arendt argues that generality connects closely with particulars, and from these particular conditions of the standpoints that one encounters, one will arrive at one's own "general standpoint."[20] In other words, working from various particular standpoints allows one to generalize and ultimately clarify one's own position and beliefs.

Standpoint is also regarded as impartiality, which Arendt describes as a viewpoint from which to look upon, to watch, and to formulate judgments.[21] To be impartial does not mean that one abandons their thinking. Rather, one sharpens one's thinking so that judgments are clearer and more informed.

To think critically, one relies on the faculty of imagination, which functions to conjure images in the mind that can be reproduced through action.[22] Arendt explains that these images reproduce for us ideals on which to base our judgments that reflect our beliefs, values, and goals that then become realized through action. When my imagination is at work, I am able to make others present, moving "in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides, in other words, it adopts the position of Kant's world citizen."[23]

Imagination, as stated, plays an important role in visiting standpoints. Arendt argues that "to think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting," which Arendt then compares to the right that one has to visit another place, of which Kant writes in his essay "Perpetual Peace."[24] Visiting the standpoints of other will lead to an enlarged thinking, which is the basis for critical thinking.

Critical thinking occurs when the standpoints of all others are open to inspection. While critical thinking is a solitary activity, it necessarily involves others. For Arendt, following Kant, enlarged thinking consists not in "enormously enlarged empathy" through which one knows what goes on in the mind of others, and in so doing not think for one's self. Rather, enlarged thinking results from what Arendt, after Kant, argues is a result of abstracting from the limitations that tend to attach themselves to our judgments, and therefore lead us to narrow mindedness. Enlarged thinking enables us to disregard the subjective private conditions that limit us. The result of the enlightened thinker's ability to imaginatively visit different standpoints is an enlarged mentality that is able to think generally.[25]

To return to Arendt's interpretation of the crisis, it is evident that while she acknowledged the potential of exposing black children to harsh treatment so that they could develop resiliency, she nonetheless remained committed to children's safety, care, and flourishing. Unwilling or unable to visit the standpoints of each critic who rejected her argument, she nonetheless visited Ralph Ellison's perspective and that of the children involved in the

crisis to arrive at an enlarged mentality on the issue that then allowed her to think critically about it.

However, this does not mean that she accepted uncritically every aspect of Ellison's criticisms. She remained resolute on the matter of children's welfare throughout her career, which her opposition to the recruitment by the military of high school students during the Vietnam War demonstrates. She instead "abstracted from the limitations" that attached to her own judgments and expanded her narrow mindedness by recognizing the dilemma that racism presented for blacks, but she maintained that adults, rather than children, should fight racism. In other words, she validated the painful experiences that black children endured, but she did not condone the behavior of parents and NAACP leaders who placed their children in such situations. Her original instinct of moral outrage concerning the Little Rock crisis, though refined through dialogue, nonetheless also sharpened her judgment on the matter of roles that adults and children occupy.

While it is true that she confused as social the political fight of black parents and the NAACP, this was mostly because she lacked sufficient knowledge and understanding of the cultural and historical context of the struggles blacks endured in the Jim Crow South.[26] To her credit, she acknowledged her ignorance of this context and even went so far as to argue that perhaps Eckford's experience would prepare her for life as a black American adult. Her ability to think critically and revise her previous stance on the issue should be lauded as courageous participation in dialogue in search of understanding the events captured in Counts's images.

DIALOGICAL ENCOUNTERS AND AESTHETIC EDUCATION

To prepare for dialogical encounters with images and other people, what should aesthetic education look like? Two philosophers of education, Harry Broudy and Maxine Greene, represent different goals in aesthetic education. Ultimately, I find that if the goal is consciousness raising and enacting the imagination in order to realize possibilities of social change, to include specifically dialogical engagement with others, Greene's model fits quite well.

Broudy argues that the first step in aesthetic education is to apprehend the sensory properties of aesthetic objects, whether they appear in the form of a mountain or a work of art, in their fullness and richness.[27] These features also should be perceived through other senses to the extent possible, also taking into account sound, touch, taste, and smell. From these objects, Broudy envisions a kind of aesthetic education that facilitates the transference of skills developed for the analysis of aesthetic objects to carry over to experiencing life in general more fully, or aesthetically, taking into account forms and materials we encounter in everyday life.[28]

In addition, Broudy promotes a kind of aesthetic education that cultivates individuals' receptivity to artists' metaphors conjured up and expressed through forms and materials of art.[29] This kind of education will help individuals identify emotions and values, while not giving themselves over to these, thereby expanding their value domain. Furthermore, this kind of education will broaden individuals' "imagic store," adding to and refining the images already present in aesthetic objects.[30] Lastly, Broudy reasons that the result of his version of aesthetic education will lead individuals to become more discriminating both about art and in life.[31]

Greene states that aesthetic education is designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, and participatory engagements with the arts by setting up conditions that enable individuals to perceive the forms and contents of works of art, and relate themselves meaningfully to the arts, thereby establishing aesthetic experiences.[32] Greene asserts that aesthetic education is integral to the development of individuals' cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative development.[33] So far, there is little difference between Broudy and Greene's aims.

However, Greene wants to see individuals develop a disposition that is open to exploring various art forms, being fully present and attending to those art forms by faithfully perceiving them from their individual standpoints, personal histories, and awareness, which is not part of Broudy's goals.[34] By actively participating in perceiving works of art, individuals can then open themselves up to further experiential possibilities.[35]

Greene furthermore asserts that the kind of aesthetic education she promotes not only continually deepens one's understanding of the arts, but it empowers individuals to act upon their freedom in the world by upholding a commitment to democratic values, which is also absent from Broudy's account.[36] Individuals pursue an education for wide-awakeness, or an awareness of what it is to exist in the world,[37] that is active, responsible, and constantly striving towards not only self-understanding and improvement but also the needs of the community to which individuals belong.[38]

Engaged in the world, individuals recall the experience of existence shared by others. This wide-awakeness contains the possibility of recovering the social imagination, which upholds an ethical commitment to lessen social paralysis and apathy and instead to restore in individuals humane concerns.[39] Engagement with works of art created by others whose standpoints are not our own reminds us of the diverse communities of which we are part and also reminds us to imagine the needs of all community members.

While both Broudy and Greene make perception the focus of aesthetic education, they do not employ the term similarly. Moreover, the two authors use perception as means to two different ends. Broudy uses perception more literally to push for the improvement of how the body cognizes aesthetic

images through the senses. He argues that improved abilities to perceive works of art will lead to the increased capacity for self-expression, making distinctions between sensory properties of worldly objects and an increased capacity to formulate judgments. While Greene also seeks the improvement of individuals' abilities to perceive works of art, she seeks a broader end, which is an increased ability to experience the world as wide-awake, open to the possibilities of dialogue across lines of difference, and an improved social order in general.

Furthermore, there is a difference between the ways each handle visceral responses to aesthetic objects. Broudy argues that refined emotional and sensual responses to artworks signal maturity, which is vital for making informed judgments in one's daily life. With exposure to aesthetic objects, Broudy warned that children must learn to distinguish between aesthetic and visceral responses.[40] In other words, a mature response to an artwork requires the refinement of one's emotions and senses. Through education, one can learn to refine visceral responses to artworks. Without education, individuals will continue to lack understanding and an ability to make informed judgments in daily life.

Greene does not vilify visceral responses to art. Instead, Greene states that an important goal in aesthetic education is to be able to identify one's own subjectivity in relation to images.[41] Such self-reflection can lead to a visceral response, particularly to a personal or politically charged issue with which one might have had previous experience. This is not problematic, however, contrary to what Broudy has argued, as personal self-reflection, critical consideration of an image's meaning, and the sharing of our insights with others can be educative.

In preparation for meaningful encounters with art that also heighten viewers' awareness of the world and others in it, Greene's rather than Broudy's theory of aesthetic education links more closely to Arendt's response to aesthetic images and her subsequent dialogue with Ralph Ellison. To cultivate a disposition of wide-awakeness, openness to difference, and an enlivened social imagination in aesthetic education, we begin by perceiving works of art, engaging them experientially and in dialogue with others whose experiences with art differ from ours. When we participate in this kind of aesthetic education, the hope is that our experiences with art will change the way we see and live in the world and relate to the people in it, as we aspire to improve the human condition overall.

CONCLUSIONS

In aesthetic education, the aim is not to reconcile opposing views, although it does not rule out this possibility either. Rather, as Greene has argued, the aim is to reconcile within individuals their own lived experiences and an ability to connect these experiences to the artworks they perceive and

the judgments they make about experiences.[42] The arts are an important key to wide-awakeness.

Arendt's response to the crisis depicted in Counts's photographs illustrates that images play an important role in the formation of judgments. Aesthetic education attempts to enable individuals to perceive artworks, relate themselves experientially to them, and dialogue over them. It is much less about coming up with the right interpretation as much as it is about recognizing qualities, both formal and sensual properties, of images. Lastly, aesthetic education should recognize and value visceral responses and the role that these play in critical thinking and in the development of judgments.

Notes

[1] Hannah Arendt, "A Reply to Critics." *Dissent* 6, no. 2 (spring 1959): 45.

[2] Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* 6, no. 1 (winter 1959): 46.

[3] We find mention of this both in her "Reflections of Little Rock" and in her later "A Reply to Critics," which came out in *Dissent* magazine's second issue of the year.

[4] Arendt, "A Reply to Critics."

[5] Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers Inc., 1995).

[6] Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[7] Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," 46.

[8] Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," 50.

[9] Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," 46.

[10] Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 173-196.

[11] See Norman Podheretz, *Ex-Friends* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

[12] Published with her "Reflections" essay were other academics' responses to the claims she had made in her article.

[13] See Arendt, "A Reply to Critics."

[14] Vicky Lebeau, "The Unwelcome Child: Elizabeth Eckford and Hannah Arendt." *Journal of Visual Culture* 3 (2004): 51-62.

[15] Hannah Arendt and Peter R. Baehr, "'What Remains? The Language Remains': A Conversation with Günter Gaus," *The Portable Hannah Arendt Reader* (New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2003), 9.

[16] Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 343.

[17] See Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 2nd. ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

[18] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 42.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 44.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 43.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 43.

[26] See Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*.

[27] Harry S. Broudy, *Enlightened Cherishing: An Essay on Aesthetic Education* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 31.

[28] Ibid., 37.

[29] Ibid., 43.

[30] Ibid., 44.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2001), 6.

[33] Ibid., 7.

[34] Ibid., 45.

[35] Ibid., 76.

[36] Greene, *Releasing the Imagination,* 39.

[37] Ibid., 35.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 35.

[40] Broudy, *Enlightened Cherishing*.

[41] Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar.*

[42] Ibid., 113-114.