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Aesthetic learning and general human experiences: implications for aesthetic literacy

Abstract

This paper explored the nexus between professional and epistemological aesthetics in terms of their shared aims in knowledge and evaluation. What constitutes the aesthetic emotion and how do they translate to aesthetic experiences and ultimately aesthetic human and learning experiences? The paper relied on the philosophical methodologies of language and logical analysis and arguments by analogy and inspection of relevant documents in appraising the inherent issues and arguments. The paper posits that there are veritable links between aesthetic phenomena and human experiences. These subsequently have far reaching impacts and implications for aesthetic learning experiences and knowledge. In spite of the varied and sometimes, non-consensual agreement on the aesthetic emotions elicited by various phenomena, they do also have import on extra aesthetic qualities and values. The major issues here bother on the tension between 'formalism' and 'referentialism' in aesthetic knowledge and emotions. It is advocated that aesthetic practitioners, philosophers, epistemologists and educators should explore more deeply, the epistemic links among the various aspect of aesthetics. This is to help improve aesthetic learning and understanding in schools and the society..

Introduction

The question of what constitutes aesthetic phenomena is as controversial as what exactly is aesthetics as a concept. This very issue has been extensively dealt with by Aghaosa,(2013) in the paper: philosophical aesthetics in which spirited attempts were made to distinguish and classify the various aspects of the aesthetic equation. This is in terms of the aesthetic concept; phenomena spectator, impact, and modes; or put in simplistic terms, the psychic osmosis between the aesthetic phenomenon (na) and spectators. In continuance of the search for clarity it has become pertinent to beam the search- light on other sub-aspects of the aesthetic equation. This question will centre on what specifically constitutes aesthetic experiences often talked about in philosophical as well as epistemological aesthetics. This is because, in the literature of this aspect of learning and education, the aesthetic experiences features a lot. Sometimes even usage of the terms either, appropriately or otherwise will often elicit critical responses. So also is the concomitant term 'aesthetic emotions'. These terms and the attendant arguments they tend to elicit in educational discourses generally do raise the need for proper investigations and understanding. It is these that have given rise to the task of this paper. In effect, the problem of this very intellectual endeavor is to investigate what are aesthetic experiences and how are they derived. In other words, how do aesthetic phenomena impact on human emotion and experiences and vice versa? Or put in yet another way: how do aesthetic experiences and emotion translate into veritable aesthetic experience for conscious and unconscious cultivation in academia in particular and society in general.

The purpose of this paper was an attempt to unravel the undercurrents of aesthetic phenomena, emotions, and their interactive impacts on the aesthetic spectators. This is in addition to how this psychic osmosis subsequently translates in to aesthetic learning experiences for deliberate cultivation in learners of secondary schools.

The significance of this paper would be derived from the extent it could assist philosophers, professional and epistemological aestheticians and school administrators get better clarity and be able to decipher adequately, the underlying issues, arguments and mechanics of aesthetic phenomena and aesthetic human experiences and learning.

The paper used the qualitative based approach of research in appraising the arguments and issues. It therefore relied on the documentary and philosophical methodologies of documents' inspection; language, logical and analogical analysis, inferences and deductions. After a survey and evaluation of the theoretical issues, the paper proffered some suggestions on how to use the vision gained to help improve aesthetic scholarship and school learning.

Aesthetic Experience and General Human Experiences and Knowledge

This particular issue verges into the questionable link between aesthetic learning and knowledge to other aspects of human knowledge and experiences. For instance, to what extent does a particular aesthetic experience say a sculptural piece express an aesthetic as well as a religious sentiment of say benevolence or moral lessons of fellow human respect? This matter of expressiveness as assessed, revolves on the twin issues of peoples often varied reactions to particular or all aesthetic phenomena (Art inclusive), and social conventionalisation (Broudy, 1975) of judgments – when presumed aesthetic properties of works of art are repeatedly stressed to people. For example, “the Madonna” (Raphael; Da Vinci) or ‘mother and child’ among orthodox Christians especially the Catholics represents the symbol of motherhood and the divine role of Mary, as the mother of Jesus Christ. However, it is doubtful if all Christians especially the Pentecostals may perceive it so, nor react-psychologically to this image in exactly the same way as the Catholics. But the moral derivable from this is sub-summed in the problem of taste and moral aesthetic judgment. This is the issue extensively discussed by Kant in the Critique of Judgment. Even though this study subscribes to the Kantian notion, Broudy’s (1975) remark about the issue is quite instructive here. This is on the need for caution in the pursuit of universal aesthetic effects or qualities. For example some aesthetic effects or qualities such as cheerfulness, sadness, emptiness, and turbulence are not always amenable to be perceived in the same way by every person or groups of persons. This raises the question: can there be aesthetic objects (phenomena) that have universal appeal and meaning? Acknowledging that any statement to such questions will always be contentious, Broudy harps on the need to focus on the formal qualities that can give insight to some aesthetic attributes in any such discussion. As Broudy (1975) notes:

.. yet we should all agree that if aesthetic experience is not merely an idle contemplation of purely formal arrangements of sensory material, there must be some aesthetic object that do express what is humanly relevant. (P.100)

Explaining further and re-echoing the metaphysical problems encountered about what really is the aesthetic in natural and contrived phenomena, Broudy (1975) contends that:

[Aesthetic objects]... express human import in a metaphor via an image i.e. they represent a meaning or a value as embedded in an image, is what makes art a resource for human experience that is identical with history, science, mathematics, philosophy or religion. Indeed an object not perceived as expressive at some level is not aesthetically perceived at all on the view I am defending. (P.100.)

From the preceding it therefore follows that expressiveness is among the most important aspect of the aesthetic learning endeavour. Expressiveness from the perceptual perspective is that which actually give life to the painting or music. Ideally expressiveness is expected to be an integral part of aesthetic instructions in the earlier approaches discussed. But there is the question of whether students can genuinely discuss the perceptual aspects of aesthetic objects in isolation of their expressive qualities? To put it more clearly, can students, discuss Ben Enwonwu’s ‘Sango’ or Beethoven’s sixth symphony ‘The Pastorale’ or Pablo Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ essentially on their design elements in isolation or what

these works of art really express? What really are the expressive qualities of aesthetic phenomena? As explained, “expressive properties of objects depend on multi-levels of meaning that sensory images can and perhaps always do bear”. To say that a given work of art expresses more than one meaning; or that the two meanings are inconsistent with each other are not what matters most. The crucial element to look for here as posited in Broudy’s (1975) view is that:

It is not that all pupils to agree on the content of the expression, but rather that whatever the pupils say is expressed be related by him to something he has perceived in the object. (P.100)

It is because of the above stated that Broudy (1975) holds the development of aesthetic perception as the most valid reason for aesthetic education. This point is best appreciated if it is noted that it is this aspect that actually unites the theory and practice of aesthetic endeavours. This is because instances abound when some-educated but not formally trained persons in the arts are able to express themselves artistically and are yet unable to discuss intelligently the underlying principles of their creative efforts. Some wedding cake designers often are not eloquent enough to communicate the import of their expressions as posited in the finished product - the cake- in terms of the colours, morals, structures, layers etc.

Three reasons are advanced by Broudy (1975) to support the thesis that the perceptive approach should be given the utmost attention. They are as follows.

1. To avoid restrictions to normative arts and standards, and accommodate a variety of materials and methods. This reason is valid because it is this aspect that really distinguishes the artists from the craftsman. The University of Benin’s Creative Arts’ and perhaps in other tertiary institutions’ art programmes expose students to a variety of media, and styles of aesthetic endeavours. Such exposure expectedly imbues in them the knowledge and confidence of executing a particular theme in most if not all the branches of the arts in for example, painting, sculpture, and textile designs and others . The late Ben Enwonwu, Pablo Picasso and a host of some contemporary artists are apt examples of artists who are able to transcend the presumed disciplinary boundaries in the arts - being accomplished painters, sculptors and art critics. These are unlike most Nigerian traditional craftsmen for example, the Benin Bronze casters and wood carvers who often seem perpetually conditioned to just the very medium such as wood, Bronze, ivory etc and style they were inducted into. This explains why most if not all of their works display a consistent uniformity in media and styles of execution. The Nigerian Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka can also be classified in this mould of individuals who are ‘all rounder’ in their particular branch of the aesthetic endeavours. This is considering the fact that this humanized fellow is an accomplished poet, novelist, playwright, dramatist, and literary and social critic.
2. Helps to accommodate professional artists’ view that insists on persons doing as well as viewing the arts, as professionals of the field would do, not as amateurs do.
3. That it helps to illustrate the fact that the languages of aesthetic perception in all the arts are very close if not the same as people develop the appropriate lingua franca of all arts. It is held that all works of art can be discussed in four dimensions described in different media. In effect, an educated artist could derive inspirations as well as proffer insights in all the arts without necessarily being an expert in any one, or all of the arts. This is perceived as a vital quality for aesthetic education. This point gives credence to the earlier observation and remarks about the versatility of artists like Ben Enwonwu, Pablo Picasso, Wole Soyinka and others.
- 4.

Amongst the enumerated approaches, Broudy holds the perceptual approach as the most vital in comparison to the studio training and appreciation courses. Reasons advanced for this preference are as follows:

- (i) the performance approach has very limited time allotted to it in American public high schools, and that aesthetic education programmes are mostly elective and not compulsory;
- (ii) the low exposure of students at the elementary schools does not create sufficient and universal appetite i.e. appeal for further experience in performance;
- (iii) limited media exposure of pupils at the elementary level of education makes most of the pupils to remain aesthetically 'illiterate' in most art media at the end of elementary school;
- (iv) because of the above stated, there is limited opportunities afforded the prospective professionals at the basic level of schooling – for as noted, there is no alternative to intensive performance training;
- (v) the nature, approach and objective of appreciation courses, which stress mainly periods, styles, historical significance and biographical information though necessary, is no genuine substitute for training in aesthetic perception;
- (vi) that much of the appreciation courses apart from being judgmentally inclined, tend to encourage the assimilations of highly conventionalized norms without the background of direct experience that makes such introjections defensible. In noting the problems of aesthetic education generally in school learning and summing up the above enumerated, Broudy (1975) emphasizes that:
- (vii)
...although aesthetic education does not necessarily commit one to teaching almost more than one art at a time, in practice the curricular time available for this work is so limited that a multi-media approach is almost imperative. (P.103)

For these reasons, aesthetic literacy is held as the utmost goal of aesthetic education. 'Aesthetic literacy is defined as the ability to use the concepts of aesthetic perception in discussing the various arts. It is also pointed out that perceptual competence can be developed through aesthetic literacy. This is especially when it is realized that perceptual competence is a necessary component for students, professional artists and critics for the assessment of aesthetic phenomena (including the arts) and setting the ground rules for assessment. These last issues border strongly on aesthetic judgments and categorization of aesthetic phenomena. These issues have been extensively discussed in the sections on aesthetic judgment and categories.

Broudy's position in the preceding carefully analyzed, shows that apart from advocating the appropriate approaches to aesthetic education also illuminates many of the epistemic and administrative problems likely to be encountered in trying to implement aesthetic education programme in formal education settings. These issues and inherent problems are equally implicit in Reimer's (1991) position though from the perspective of music education. In view of this, there is the need for '*comprehensivisation*' of the performance and appreciation aspects of music. This should be from the theoretical as well as the social perspectives of music interaction in society. As stated:

... aesthetic education has taken a comprehensive stance to the curriculum dimension of this issue. A useful music curriculum in this view is one that includes all the ways people interact with music listening, performing, improvising, and composing. It also includes all the ways people think about and know about music – its history, its social contexts, how to criticize it in relevant ways, its many function, the many issues related to how we can best understand its nature and so forth. (P.103)

While advocating the above Reimer is quick to advise against the tendency in some quarters to have a restrictive view of music – the academic music as encapsulated in the West European genre of classical music. A comprehensive music curriculum should entail all sorts of music as European, Asiatic, African (and their multiple genres) and their performing and appreciation aspects. It is

through such a stance the writer holds that balance could be achieved in any school or social music education programme. This is in addition to the need to harp on the quality of interaction. As stated by Reimer (1991):

..not that there always must be one particular balance among the many ways people can be engaged with music, although inclusiveness or comprehensiveness should be a feature of the total programmes. What seems to me to be essential to aesthetic education is that any engagement at all with music must include – and it is to be hoped emphasize above all else a quality of interaction that we as professionals would recognize as being inherently “musical” whatever that quality of interaction.(Pp.193-194)

It is pertinent to point out that Reimer's *comprehensivesation* of music education in the above, can be extrapolated to other branches of academic arts such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and social arts like dancing, video and the cinema, hair do's. In short, giving contexts to all the arts; and other aesthetic phenomena. This point can also be appreciated from Marciano(2004) as well as Kim's (2004) views on the need for the field of aesthetics to encompass the aesthetic orientation and stipulation of other cultures e.g. Asiatic and African and not just the predominant view of Western aesthetics as the only view of aesthetics. It is also worthy to note that the comprehensivization of music education as advocated by Reimer can be conveniently accommodated in Broudy's three approaches – Perceptual, Technical and Expressive – of aesthetic education programme. This is considering that the different aspects and perspectives of music education advocated tallies strongly with the inherent advocacy by Broudy. In effect, aesthetic education programme in any set up - academic or social, must aim for a compressive based curricula. This is in terms of content, approaches, styles and methods of teaching. In spite of the difficulties of implementation for example, limited time allocation and the elective status of aesthetic education courses in public schools, aesthetic learning encounters should as much as possible attempt to bridge the often noticeable gap between professional, artists or aestheticians and the laymen including students in society. This can be seen to being achieved when the aesthetic literacy rate is regarded as high among many members of society. The manifestation of a comparatively high aesthetic literacy rate is perceptible when artists and laymen alike engage in mutually comprehensible dialogues about aesthetic phenomena. This is with the appropriate aesthetic lingua franca that aids not only in appreciating aesthetic phenomena (i.e. aesthetic perception) but also provides the requisite concepts and vocabularies to communicate such experiences.

Mastery of the aesthetic lingua franca may not always guarantee that what is attempted to be communicated between and among discussants of aesthetic phenomena will in most cases correspond to their individual perceptions of the aesthetic feeling in question. This is considering the multiple meaning derivable from most aesthetic phenomena. (Broudy,1975) This point verges into the contentious problem of how, and to what extent should aesthetic education and knowledge be linked with extra-aesthetic knowledge and values. This issue will be examined in a future exploration.

Summary

This paper explored the epistemic links between aesthetic experiences and their implications for aesthetic learning and education. The exploration was able to note the intricate relationships between aesthetic experiences transformed from human aesthetic emotions and other general human experiences. Works of art do express certain aesthetic sentiments in relations to general human experiences. However these aesthetic sentiments may not be perceived by all persons in the same way. This then implies that any message expressed by a particular aesthetic object may have multiple meanings thereby making consensus in perceptions among spectators sometimes non-consensual. The reason for this is embedded in the complex interplay of varied aesthetic emotions amongst human beings, cultural conditioning and the fundamental issues of aesthetic judgment as profusely explicated by Immanuel Kant. The implication of this orientation as posited in the different views of Reimmer and Broudy is that the pursuit of Universal principles in art perceptions and expressions should be

made with caution. What is strongly advocated is that aesthetic perceptions, expression and judgments should be cognizant of the varied and diversified human experiences as they relate to the aesthetic objects, perceptions and expression. In practical terms aesthetic learning curricula should aim for comprehensivisation.

Conclusion

There are veritable links between aesthetic experiences, derived from aesthetic emotions and general human experiences. These linkages notwithstanding, there are multiple levels of meanings deducible from every art work to different aesthetic spectators. This leads to a variety of perceptions of art objects (aesthetic vehicles), by individuals. Succinctly, every aesthetic vehicle would most likely elicit varying responses from varying spectators- this as a result of aesthetic taste and cultural conditioning. All these have implications for aesthetic learning and education.

Recommendations

1. Epistemologists, aesthetic educators and school administrators should be conscious of the linkages between aesthetic experiences and general human experiences whenever issues of aesthetic learning are up for discussion and practical consideration. This is in the sense that human diversity in terms of aesthetic experiences and judgments should be taken cognizance of rather than pursuing a uniform standard vision for aesthetic perception and experiences.
2. Aesthetic education curricula especially in multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria should be planned in such a way that incorporates aesthetic vehicles, perceptions and messages of the various cultural components of the country. The term: "unity in diversity" is strength, not a drawback in this regard. This would help in the pursuit of comprehensive inclined curricula for aesthetic learning in schools.
3. It would be appropriate to note that comprehensive aesthetic learning curricula for schools would also demand for variety of pedagogical skills to impart aesthetic knowledge to students of varied cultural backgrounds and learning orientations.

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