

In and out of Place:

Cleansing Rites in Art Education

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Belief supports the fantasy which regulates social reality (Zizek 1989: 36)

In this chapter I examine issues that circumscribe the transition between secondary and tertiary art education. Central to the issues discussed is the commonly held perception that during this phase students need to undergo a form of educational purging that requires them to reject many of the values about art that they have learnt in school. The implications of this are explored with reference to signs of difference contextualised within social and cultural networks.

Something out of place

The metaphor of purging may be helpful when looking at those objects which society deems 'dirty', those objects in need of cleansing. Mary Douglas's theory that whatever needs cleansing is in fact 'matter out of place' reveals that 'where there is dirt there is a system.' (1966: 35). Her anthropological stance draws attention away from the spot or mote in need of outing and steers the reader towards a consideration of the taxonomies that exist in order to differentiate between what is and what isn't 'pure' or 'dangerous'. Food is not considered dirty until it appears 'in the wrong place', for example, a Bolognese stain on someone's tie, where it is embarrassing and takes on the status of dirt. Where something needs to be wiped away it is not just

the ‘undesirable matter’ that is brought into question but the construction of a system that categorises it as such. Likewise, various forms of art practice and theory and their adherents are unproblematic until they transgress a boundary and appear in an ‘inappropriate’ context, then they may be commensurate with the Bolognaise stain.

Within the particular sphere of culture known euphemistically as ‘the artworld’ these boundaries are not clearly signposted but this does mean that they do not exist or are about to collapse, far from it. If postmodern rhetoric cajoles people into believing that any[art]thing goes, then they must take care because they would be fooling themselves if they failed to understand that the production of artists and artworks relies on a highly sophisticated, set of culturally and socially framed conditions. Not all art practice is thought of as desirable in all contexts. Where irony and ‘appropriation’ (Foster 1996) may have recently let in some unusual suspects into the arena of legitimate culture, they are there with the caveat of Peter Berger’s (1991) speculations on the cultural status of a garden gnome: ‘a quotation (to) testify to an artistic sensibility so sophisticated as to be perverse’. (1991: 4).

When Becker (1994) discusses the complexity of coming to terms with many contemporary works of art she acknowledges that their ‘discourse is often hermetic and incomprehensible to those outside’ (p. 104). She refers back to Dewey’s (1934) notion that ‘The Language of Art has to be acquired’ and adds that: ‘It is a learned discourse that may be accessed only through immersion in art and the art world’ (ibid). When works of art are not understood they don’t make sense and are indecipherable they are inaccessible. Bourdieu (1983) takes this further and defines works of art as existing:

...as symbolic objects *only* [my italics] if they are known and recognised, that is,

socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognising them as such, the sociology of art and literature has to take as its object not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work or, which amounts to the same thing, belief in the work.

(p. 36)

This provides some clues as to why, at a particular moment in students' art education, a significant shift in their understanding of the object of study appears to be necessary. In England, since the 1960s, a mandatory dip in the efficacious waters (baptismal or disinfectant) of a one-year Art Foundation Course has been the place where this shift is realised. On embarking on this course of study, 'A' Level art work that some months previously looked so impressive; (the same art work that young pupils may have gazed at in wonder and aspired to, with its copious 'preparatory sheets', annotated and mounted on black card), meets with a terrible fate; it is suddenly deemed 'inappropriate'. No longer desirable it is now something the student must learn to reject.

There are many references to general educational ablutions, but Williams (1998), writing in *The Guardian*, refers specifically to the Art and Design Foundation Course as a 'compulsory creative cleansing between school and art school' and she is not alone in her portrayal of the course as a time when the rejected aspects of experience are wiped from the slate. Hollands (2001) also remarks that: 'progression from school art to art on a Foundation course has traditionally been based on an ethos of liberation' (p. 54). He characterises this with the slightly ominous hypnotic incantation: 'We want you to forget everything you have done in school' (ibid). Hollands is less sure that it is the content of what is learnt that is liberating suggesting that it is mainly the social context. However, for many students it will certainly be both. Williams' and Hollands'

descriptions imply a rupture but simultaneously offer the promise of alternatives that are cleaner, truer, freer, or just plain different. Is it an act of sublimation that is promised? This clearly begs a question that concerns the worth of what is taught in many secondary schools especially if it needs to be forgotten in order for students to 'progress'; 'what is to replace that which must be forgotten?'

The right place for a change?

Although there are other stages when art education presents students with a set of oppositional experiences it is in this particular cross-phase transition that the continuum is most forcefully and consciously disrupted. When PGCE students, training to be teachers of art and design, are asked to reflect on their experiences of art education from primary school to BA or MA, they often identify their Foundation Course as the most significant moment; a time when a major shift in their understanding occurs. This juncture rarely seems to precipitate a traumatic or negative reaction, conversely words like *free*, *liberating*, *eye opening*, *exciting* are most frequently used to describe the experience. Students' understanding of the object of their study during this period often changes irrevocably, altering both their comprehension of what is relevant and by corollary how they now understand the art they produced at school.

The Art and Design Foundation Course has been something of an anomaly in an English education system that has been directed increasingly towards standardisation, consequently its death knell has been sounding for over a decade. Recent streamlining into the national qualifications framework (QCA 1997) sees the BTEC diploma course in Art & Design Foundation Studies, examined by Edexcel, sandwiched between the National Diploma in Forestry and Arboriculture and the Advanced Certificate in Front Office Operations in the listings of approved external qualifications (2000).

Homogenisation may have guaranteed a momentary reprise for the course but also brought about fundamental changes that affect its overarching philosophy.

The present day, Art & Design Foundation Course has its origins in Germany's Bauhaus Foundation Course or Vorkurs, and it has retained salient aspects of the course designed by Johannes Itten in 1919. Students today are admitted for a similar limited period, usually one academic year, (at the Bauhaus it was six months), with the aim to sample a range of art experiences. There are many reasons given as to why students need this experience. Ostensibly it offers an opportunity to experience a range of subject areas e.g. visual communication, three dimensional design, fashion etc. that students are unlikely to have experienced at school thus enabling them to make informed decisions when selecting BA courses. It also offers opportunities for students' interests and abilities to be tutored and developed by specialist members of staff who are often practising artists and designers contracted to teach for a limited amount of days each year. Contemporary versions, like their predecessor, still aim to 'liberate student's creative powers' (Efland 1990:216) and to determine, not so much, as was the case at in 1919, 'whether they have the aptitude to continue with further study.' (ibid) but *what* they have the aptitude and inclination to study further. Itten reflected that at that time 'teaching was designed to guide the student in acquiring the means of artistic expression by appealing to his [sic] individual talents and to develop an atmosphere of creativity in which original works became possible' (Itten 1964: 8). Although this can be seen as symptomatic of the self-assured discourse of modernism in which the Bauhaus was conceived, it also points to a pedagogical stance of fostering independent learning and the aspiration for more than formulaic outcomes.

Signs of dissent

The lack of shared values between secondary and tertiary education is most publicly manifest by the refusal of Foundation courses or BA courses to value 'A' Level Art grades as an indication of a student's potential. Although this situation represents a cause for concern, perhaps surprisingly, it has not generated dialogue and there remains a lack of common values between secondary and tertiary art education. Foundation Course candidates continue to be selected on 'portfolio interview' in which the interviewers are very often looking at the very same artwork that will be graded for 'A' Level examination. That there may be two groups of art and design educators considering the merits of the same work and often making different pronouncements, says less about the educators themselves and more about their positioning in relation to institutional values and assessment methodologies.

Like two ends of a telescope, these separate viewpoints are shaped by institutional perspectives. The secondary school's final examination structures are looking for a form of closure in school student's art work at the very same time that Foundation Courses selectors will be looking for emergent signs of potential. So in effect, selection for Foundation Courses is dependent on qualities in students and their work that are different to those recognised by 'A' Level examinations. If the written evidence for this is thin on the ground, and a comparison between criteria for 'A' level examinations and new Foundation Diplomas finds them replete with shared terminology it cannot be assumed that this convergence in terminology precludes a disjunction in assessment. By simply reading from syllabi and course guidelines it may be hard to detect a new set of expectations but the act of interpretation within very different educational settings can generate contrasting meanings.

Embodied within both the school and the art college are powerful legitimating discourses that rarely seem to reflect one another. Bourdieu (1977) refers to these legitimating discourses as exerting *symbolic violence*, his term for the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power. In other words he suggests a system of values that are not arbitrary in the sense of being random or haphazard, but that have been instituted as universally beneficial and accepted as quasi natural structures that determine learning. These acts of symbolic violence are silent and invisible, acted upon agents with their consent. Shostak (2000) points out that this is part of the general condition of having a curriculum with a set of canonic values promoted to the exclusion of others, he too draws on the process of purification that results in displacement. 'In this process of purifying - that is becoming a good representative of a given category - a waste product emerges and has to be dealt with in some way as a rejected aspect of experience which can find no acceptable place within the subjectivity of the individual' (p. 42).

If it is obvious that art and design lecturers in tertiary education do not revere examination systems as a means to identify appropriate candidates for further study; it is perhaps less obvious that neither do a lot of teachers of 'A' Level Art & Design. There are certainly many teachers who actively demonstrate an antimony between obtaining good grades at 'A' level and satisfying entry requirements for further study by guiding their students to produce separate bodies of work: one to satisfy 'A' Level criteria and another to gain students a place on a Foundation course. Although this does not apply to all teachers, it is a significant demonstration of the effects that different systems of external scrutiny exert on what is taught.

External testing informs institutional values and can exert a powerful influence on

teacher's or lecturer's relative autonomy to teach what they 'believe in', it can directly undermine conviction about what is taught, resulting in what could be termed a 'cynical curriculum'. To put this another way, teachers' belief in art, their belief in the symbolic network that constitutes the field, may be compromised by a set educationally framed beliefs that determine what and how it is appropriate for students to study at particular stages in their development. They may not always believe in what they are teaching but they persist in teaching it, often very well, in order that their students will be successful. Here, students' success is seen solely in relation to verification by external testing. As Žižek points out this is the 'paradox of false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is aware of a particular interest hidden behind a universality but one still does not renounce it' (1989: 29). Not surprisingly, most teachers feel unable to renounce the clash of values without risking the guarantee of success in terms of good 'A' Level grades, which in turn affects school league table results and impacts on their reputation and position within the school. Žižek's position on belief draws on the Lacanian concept that 'contrary to the usual thesis, that belief is something interior and knowledge is something exterior (in the sense that it can be verified through an external procedure). Rather it is belief which is radically exterior, embodied in the practical, effective procedure of people' (1989: 34). If belief is articulated in exteriorisation, then this would indicate that teachers of art act out their belief in the legitimacy of certain educational values knowing that this action eclipses belief in particular cultural values. There is a curious circularity about this that reveals transitions from secondary to tertiary and tertiary to secondary (in the case of those who return to teach in secondary schools) as moments when belief is problematised.

Recent government drives towards standardisation have resulted in an increased occurrence of external examinations and assessment procedures. Although secondary

schools have traditionally sung to the tune of the external examining bodies, they are now facing ever increasing demands for this form of testing.

Swift and Steers (1999) acknowledge the effects that increased standardisation in art and design education have had on ‘decreasing variety’ and ‘increasing standardised responses’ in pupils’ work (p. 7). They are referring to school curricula. Until very recently Foundation Courses have not had an external examination component. As a transitional year the emphasis was never towards standardised examination closure, rather emphasis was placed on a range of assessment objectives to enable students to progress towards diverse outcomes appropriate to their BA course selections. Students were internally assessed and externally moderated but these assessment processes were marginal to successfully gaining a place on a BA course that suited their abilities and interests. Risk taking and experimentation were encouraged right up to the final phase of the course which in many colleges was largely seen as celebratory and concluded with a final exhibition of work that was not assessed separately.

It is interesting that Swift and Steers (1999) also advocate that the art curriculum for schools should: ‘reject testing in favor of procedures which require students to engage in long-term, complex and challenging projects reflecting real life situations’ (ibid).

This was once a clearly distinguishing feature of the Foundation Course that undoubtedly contributed to the descriptions of it as liberating and challenging. Sadly, Swift’s and Steer’s words have fallen on deaf ears, and since 1999 the emphasis on testing has increased with the addition of AS level examinations at the end of year 12 and the implementation of Edexcel external examinations for Foundation Courses.

Into the field

This idea of dirt takes us straight to the field of symbolism.

(Douglas 1966: 35)

The rites of passage marking the transition from secondary to tertiary art education does not only describe the educational classification systems that determine what is in and what is out of place. More specifically it implicates a significant moment, a coming of age when art practices and theories learnt schools begin to be brought in to question. This is precisely when they appear in the domain in which legitimate cultural production commences. By this I mean the moment at which students have elected, and been selected to follow the first stage in a course of study that prepares them to be art, craft and design professionals.

Bourdieu (1993) identifies the field of the cultural alongside that of the economic, the political, and the educational. He defines these fields as possessing their own structuring systems and relations that are relatively autonomous but structurally corresponding. The cross-phase transition from secondary to tertiary art education brings the *cultural field* as an ever more powerful influence on the *educational field*. The different structuring systems are revealed as the necessity for students to understand and engage in the ever changing sphere of contemporary art practice and in this way theory becomes established. The educational field both shapes and is shaped by the field of legitimate cultural production.

Students whose experience of art at school has included a substantial engagement with contemporary art work and who have benefited from independent learning and self-initiated projects may find the transition relatively smooth. Those whose experience of art at school included neither are likely to experience tensions as they struggle to reconcile previous understandings of art with new ones and come to terms with

structuring and taking responsibility for aspects of their own learning. It is something of a cliché that students who have achieved the highest grades in 'A' Levels examinations may often have the most difficult start to the course because they have the most 'unlearning' to do. These students, understandably, may be the least willing to relinquish the security blanket of a tried and tested route to success for less certain new demands that ask them to 'give up everything for nothing' (Leader 2002: 101). For as Leader points out in his Lacanian reading of our relationship with art; art requires us to not just believe in it, but in something beyond it. Leader suggests this is precisely the gap between, 'the special sacred place that the artwork inhabits' and the work itself, the space that makes us question, 'Is this art?' he goes on to say, 'the problem, and the power, of this space is that we can't see it' (2002: 177). There are certain works of 20th century art that explicitly ask us to do this, Michael Craig-Martin's 'Oak Tree' or Duchamp's 'Fountain' (1917) for example. These special demands for belief are also characterised by Bourdieu as 'the charismatic ideology which is the ultimate basis of belief in the value of a work of art' (1993: 76).

What ever it is at this moment that emerges as problematic for students at this time does so as a symptom of the truth about these cultural relationships, relationships between things that are normally taken for granted but that are momentarily exposed before they are once again properly disguised as a quasi-natural relationship between things. It is an initiation into a particular aspect of culture that relies on the impetus of an important moment or event. It means that things will never appear to be quite the same again. An alternative reading of the Foundation Course's *raison d'être* could be that it acts to manage and sublimate these problems, successfully reconfigures understanding and re-establishes order. Leader suggests that 'sublimation will be linked to precise historical moments, points at which there is a change in the way we see things, in the way that we

experience reality' (Leader 2002: 62). In order for the symbolic network of cultural value to be reproduced, the inchoate art students must become inculcated as 'players in the field'. They must be like fish in water. Induction into the nuances of the field are as necessary for players as they are not necessary for non-players. Difference is essential for the reproduction of the symbolic networks that we see forming in this cross-phase transition.

Art in schools, as Addison (2001) among others has pointed out, 'is not for the training of artists, craftspeople and designers' (p. 20). This, of course is true, however, the corollary appears to give credence to the notion that the subject content taught in schools can be very far removed the concerns of 21st century and late 20th century art practice and theory. An essential dimension of the transitional phase from secondary to tertiary education centres on bridging the gap from the canonic models for art education in schools, typically situated in practices from the late 19th early 20th Century, to those of the present day

The process that students find themselves going through is reminiscent of a symbolic exchange in Paul Auster's book '*Moon Palace*' (1989). Here, the central character, Marco, is presented with his uncle's collection of over 1000 books when he leaves home for university. In his unfurnished flat he starts to use boxes of these books as improvised furniture; - seven for a chair, twelve for a bed etc. Hereby a transitory illusion of reality is constructed where Marco's desire for what might be assumed as the potential contained by books is pragmatically negated or deferred by their ability to temporarily stand in as furniture. The books are unproblematic in their boxes, their potential to pose questions, challenge preconceptions or emotionally destabilise, is nullified. This compares with many students' experience of art at secondary school, like Marco's improvised furniture, art has a visible presence but it is often so effectively

disguised it resembles something else. Most frequently it resembles itself 'school art', a particular genre of art production characterised by Hughes (1997) as akin to: 'the conceptually unambitious work of a skilful amateur' (Hughes 1997).

Like bolognaise on a plate this sort of work in the right place appears wholly desirable. It is strongly advocated by Sunday painters and believed in by many school pupils (although it is unlikely that it is believed in by all art and design teachers). Concepts of what constitutes art and art practice are constantly prey to different classification systems that have at their core a perpetuation of symbolic networks; Marco is about to find this out.

Marco's life is strongly affected by the event of his uncle's death. This precipitates both him, and his flat, into a difficult transitional period of grieving where the books that had remain untouched for 18 months gradually enter into the hitherto concealed domain of the culturally symbolic and economic. Marco **reads** and **sells** the books and as he does so he becomes inevitably and inescapably entangled with the discourses of desire, taste and value. Many students who go on to study art after leaving school are confronted with a similar complex symbolic network of practices, processes, judgments and encounters, that have little to do with former understandings of the word and just like Marco's flat the furniture has to be taken apart for this to happen.

Marco agonises over the price the secondhand bookseller will pay for his inherited possessions: to him it is obvious why 'three volumes of Descartes were worth less than one by Pascal', why, 'a dog eared Homer was worth more than a spanking Virgil'. For Chandler, the Book shop owner, [these distinctions] 'did not exist. A book was just an object for him a thing that belonged to the world of things and as such it was not

radically different from a shoebox, a toilet plunger or a coffee pot' (Auster 1989: 24).

When Marco enters into the world of the symbolic he accepts that his bedroom reality has been eclipsed by another more compelling version of reality which, from then on, will condition his social interactions with others. He now knows that there are things that are and things that aren't what they seem. That Marco knows this, sets him apart from the bookseller, it constitutes their difference, and if it is obvious to Marco why Pascal should be worth more than Descartes it begs the question, how he has come to understand this? How has he become such an assured player in the cultural field?

Marco, inherited his cultural disposition, in a way that more or less reflects Bourdieu's notions of habitus, from his family. The very fact that he was given 1000 books by a relative tells us something of his background, that in the collection were canonic texts of western philosophy, that these were the particular texts to which Marco is drawn tells us more, and should we be surprised that he defends these texts against the threat to the symbolic order posed by the bookseller Chandler's suspect judgment; no, it is all perfectly 'natural'. But this is not 'real' it is a story, a fiction concocted by Auster and a game is being played with the reader. Auster's choice of name for the bookseller is not random, and when we know that Raymond Chandler is his personal literary hero we may begin to wonder if he is not sticking two fingers up at Marco's conceits from the doyen of 20th C detective fiction and asking the reader to question what is in and out of place in this resolution of order.

This is at best what the first dip into the cultural field has permitted students to do. In a brief respite from the pressures of testing it could give them the chance to critically question the established order, to choose the popular over the seminal to lose naivety but not yet to gain cynicism. Perhaps as John Thompson says to embrace the 'part that

desire plays in this game of chance encounters, intuition, and unsystematic knowledge that we call art education' (Thompson 1991: 46).

The vast majority of secondary school pupils, will not, of course, experience this initiation into the nuances of the cultural field nor be given an opportunity to critically engage with the discourses of artistic production. So if this transitional stage calls for a reconceptualisation of art through baptism or ritual cleansing then it is part of a system that reproduces the conditions for most secondary school pupils to become the 'great cultural unwashed'.

Questions for discussion

1. There is rarely an opportunity for discussion between secondary school art teachers and their colleagues in tertiary education. Would students benefit from increased collaboration between these two groups of art educators?
2. Currently many Art and Design Foundation Courses are being squeezed of their original identities in an attempt to achieve standardisation. Is it important to retain phases in art education that many graduates find particularly significant?
3. What are the implications, for the majority of school students, of an education system that promotes different values about art in secondary and tertiary education?

Further reading

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