

# Art as the core of humanistic education

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**di Robi Kroflič**

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## Abstract

*Lo scopo principale di questo articolo è far vedere perché il dibattito sul valore dell'arte come centro dell'educazione umanistica sia oggi più importante che mai. Nella parte teorica esso presenta argomentazioni sul valore intrinseco dell'esperienza artistica e i suoi elementi strutturali più importanti per la realizzazione personale (come l'immaginazione, la narrazione e la metafora), per l'autorealizzazione personale e per l'interiorizzazione di criteri etici di base post-moderni. Nella seconda parte esso presenta alcuni esempi di lavoro educativo con bambini della prescuola e studenti di pedagogia che sono stati sviluppati nel corso di un progetto Comenio "L'identità europea a scelta multipla" e di un progetto sloveno "L'arricchimento culturale dei bambini. Lo sviluppo dell'identità dei bambini nello spazio e nel tempo attraverso le diverse attività artistiche".*

Parole chiave:

**esperienza artistica, etica post-moderna, realizzazione personale, approccio educativo-induttivo, educazione attraverso le arti**

*The main purpose of this article is to show why the debate about the worth of art as a core of humanistic education is today more important than ever. In the theoretical part it presents arguments about the intrinsic value of artistic experience and its most important structural elements for personal fulfilment (like imagination, narration, and metaphor), for personal self fulfilment and for basic post-modern ethical criteria. In the second part it presents some practical examples of educational work with preschool children and students of pedagogy that were developed during a Comenius project "European Multiple Choice Identity" and Slovene project "Cultural enrichment of children-The development of children's identity in space and time through different artistic activities".*

Key words:

**artistic experience, post-modern ethics, personal fulfilment, comprehensive inductive educational approach, education through arts**

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*Aesthetic experience is not just one kind of experience among others, but represents the essence of experience per se. [...] the power of the work of art suddenly tears the person experiencing it out of the context of his life, and yet relates him back to the whole of his existence. In the experience of art is present a fullness of meaning that belongs not only to this particular content or object but rather stands for the meaningful whole of life.*

Hans-Georg Gadamer<sup>1</sup>

The main purpose of this article is to show why the debate about the worth of art as a core of humanistic education is today more important than ever. As we will see from a brief historical analysis, core values of the postmodern era open more opportunities to defend a thesis about the intrinsic value of educational experience and its role in developing personal identity or in Constantijn Koopman's words, about art as personal fulfillment (Koopman, 2005). This of course does not mean that lectures about the arts are a sufficient tool for achieving this pedagogical goal, although they are important to educate the pupil/student to be more open to concrete artistic experiences as an artist or as an admirer of fine arts. What really counts today is using artistic experiences as a method of prosocial and moral development of children and students at all levels of educational system.

## 1. Art as a core of humanistic education

Art (especially literature and music) was from antiquity and for centuries recognized as a core of humanistic education (*septem artes liberales*), but its "pedagogical role" was usually reduced to the media of transmitting existing cultural patterns and ideological standpoints, or – in other words – utilitarian criteria. Already Plato had required a selection of myths/stories for different bodies of society, when the message of an art object was not appropriate for the wider public. We can trace the same intention in Christian schools, and the same criteria were central in the period of growth of interest for the folk tales and author's fairy-tales which became an important pedagogical tool (Charles Perrault and the brothers Grimm from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century) (Kroflič, 2009).

In the nineteenth century, utilitarian criteria of the worth of an art as the core of humanistic education began to prevail, according to H. Spencer's statement that, as arts occupy the leisure part of life, so should they occupy the leisure part of education (Reimer, 1998, p. 145). And at the end of the twentieth century we can find, as the materialization of this process, a desperate search for proofs that artistic experiences have a positive impact on the development of different intelligences and school achievements, but un-

1 Gadamer, 2004, pp. 60–61.

fortunately a serious meta-analysis of many research studies does not confirm most of the expectations (Winner, Cooper, 2000).

Changes to the basic educational aims in postmodern education from the cultural-transmission model (education as transmission of core values and truths from great narratives of modern philosophy and science) to process oriented education (that fosters personal development in the direction of auto-regulative competencies and a respectful relation toward other as being different) demand new efforts to find reasons for the inner value of aesthetics experience.

According to Burbules and Rice (1991) there are two basic ideas in post-modern philosophy that are fruitful for pedagogy: affirmation of specific values (such as recognition of otherness and democratic dialog), and deconstruction of meanings of modern scientific orientations (such as an exclusive attitude toward people who are not a part of common culture or average personal competencies). These goals of post-modern general education can be best supported by relational ethics (Moss, 2008) and educational approaches that define (moral) education as a dialogical concept (Malaguzzi, 1998; Bingham, Sidorkin, 2004; Kroflič, 2012). It is not a coincidence that especially in before mentioned educational concepts education through the artistic experience has a central role, what is most obvious in the Reggio Emilia Approach.

In the continuation of this paper I will present two practical cases of using art:

- as the means of fostering the child's *relational response-ability* and *normative agency for pro-social activities* (for pre-school children);
- as a tool for *reconstruction of historical metaphors of exclusion* of mentally handicapped people (for university students).

## 2. Intrinsic value of educational experience

Let us consider some contemporary ideas about art as one of the most authentic expressions of humanity that has an important educational value, not only because of its ideological message, but also because of its inner structure:

### 2.1. Art as a Communicative Process

If art experience is a kind of embodiment of knowledge (or embodied knowledge) about myself and the Other, then we have to find something in its inner structure that confirms its value beyond a utilitarian criterion. In the RAND study *Gifts of the Muse (Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts)* (McCarthy *et alii*, 2004, p. 40) we find a further explanation:

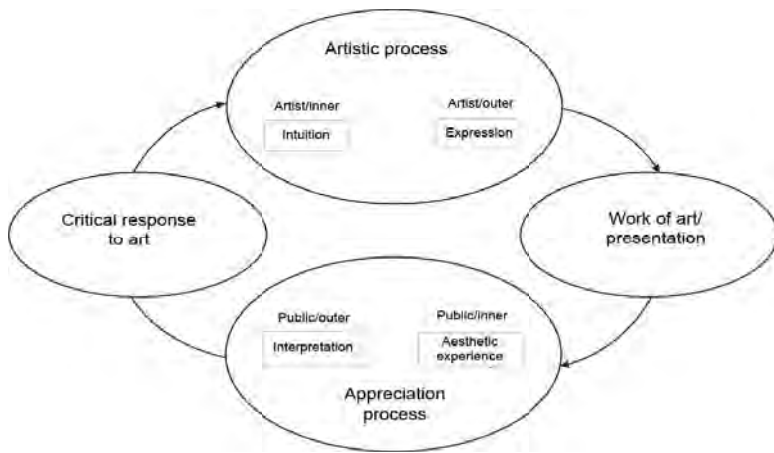


Figure 1: Art as a Communicative Process

As B. Reimer claims, “[...] people who bring meaningful forms into existence are generally called artists and anyone so engaged is, at the time of engagement, being an artist” (Reimer, 1998, p. 161). In the field of philosophy of education this simply means that anyone who is engaged in the experience of art – to be a creator, or co-creator (musician playing a piece of music that was written by another artist) of artistic expression, or just a person enjoying the piece of art – exists in the field of aesthetic experience.

This statement of course does not mean that art classes which offer to pupils or students lectures about (history of) art automatically offer artistic experiences. If we want to ensure that pupils or students will start with an appreciation process, they have to be faced with the presentation of a real art object and motivated to enjoy in it, express their feelings, and interpret the message of the artistic event as their personal experience.

There are several reasons and concepts that confirm the communicative understanding of art:

- Insight into the thesis that *a piece of art is a kind of bridge between the mind of the artist and the public* is crucial for understanding the inner value of art experience.
- The *artistic process* is one of the most complex, mysterious, and only partly conscious human activities, that includes *intuition* and *expression* (see top oval in figure 1).
- *Intuition* can be described as a highly developed capacity for vivid experiencing of the world, including one’s inner, private world. It is a cultivated sensitivity for observing life, a capacity for receiving its impressions (McCarthy *et alii*, 2004, p. 40), that enables the artist to present this impression and vision of pieces of subjective reality to the public (which is not capable of such deep observing and contemplating of life).
- And *artistic expression* is, in the opinion of the Irish novelist J. Cary, “a kind of translation, not from one language into another, but one state of

existence into another, from the receptive into creative, from the purely sensuous impression into the purely reflective and critical act”, or as the same thought was expressed by Ch. Taylor in his monumental work *Sources of the Self*, artistic expression is “a bit of ‘frozen’ potential communication” (quoted from *ibid.*, p. 41).

- The process of *appreciation* (see bottom oval in figure 1) is parallel to the artistic process, because individual experience is an inner one, intensely personal and private, and the interpretative experience is the attempt to express to others what that direct experience was like. Unlike most human communication, art communicates through direct experience, and the core of our response to the piece of art is a kind of intense feeling that is enriched by critical reflection. This means that aesthetic experience is not limited to passive spectatorship, but it stimulates curiosity, questioning, and the search for explanation (*ibid.*, pp. 41-42).
- The *key question of aesthetics*, whether art is a representation of reality or an expression of a subjective view, emotions, and visions, remains, in the opinion of the authors of the RAND study, still open: they declare art as “objectivation of subjective life” or “an outward showing of inward nature” (*ibid.*, p. 43). This means that art can fill the gap left by the scientific and technological discourse of Western European culture: “Rather than describing the world in impersonal, abstract, or mathematical terms, it presents a created reality based on personal perspective (often surprising and original) that includes the whole uncensored human being with all its feelings, imaginings, and yearnings” (*ibid.*, pp. 42-43). Or, as V. Vecchi emphasizes the same feature of artistic experience: “[...] (aesthetic dimension should be seen as) a process of empathy relating the Self to things and things to each other... It is an attitude of care and attention for the things we do, a desire for meaning; it is curiosity and wonder; it is the opposite of indifference and carelessness, of conformity, of absence of participation and feeling” (Vecchi, 2010, p. 5). So aestheticizing can be understood “[...] as a filter for interpreting the world, an ethical attitude, a way of thinking which requires care, grace, attention, subtlety and humour, a mental approach going beyond the simple appearance of things to bring out unexpected aspects and qualities” (*ibid.*, p. 10).

## 2.2. Educational value of artistic imagination

One of the most important characteristics of artistic expression for the development of humanity is *artistic imagination*. It is the concept that is clearly separated from pure fantasy, and contains selective and evaluative functions (Rethorst, 1997, p. 4; Nussbaum, 1990, pp. 77-78; Murdoch, 2006, p. 70). We can say even more so, that it is a cognitive capacity, which enables us to reach a coherent image of the world with the use of empathy (Greene, 1995, p. 3).

According to M. Greene, artistic imagination is the means to reach the world of the Other in a way that we become accustomed to “as if” worlds, that were created by writers, painters, sculptors, movie directors, choreogra-

phers, and composers, and enabled us to gain new perspectives on life (ibid., p. 4) – so important for the post-modern conception of humanity and ethical consciousness. It motivates us to become accustomed to the artistic created person or event, empathetic with its destiny, to restrict our ego fantasies about ourselves as centers of the universe, to reflect life events we would never experience, and to create visions about possible worlds that abolish selfishness and injustice. So it is not a coincidence that in the last few decades we can find more and more proof that “human moral understanding is fundamentally imaginative [and that] metaphor is one of the principal mechanisms of imaginative cognition” (Johnson, M. *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*; quoted from Rethorst 1997, p. 3).

M. Nussbaum in her influential work *Cultivating Humanity* (1997) brings to our attention three important dimensions of the artistic imagination: narrative imagination, deliberative imagination, and compassionate imagination. In its central chapter *Narrative imagination* she claims that cultivating humanity by art was the form which Socrates, the stoics and Seneca held as the central part of basic education. In one picturesque passage she writes: “Habits of empathy and community conduce to a certain type of citizenship and a certain form of community: one that cultivates a sympathetic responsiveness to another’s needs, and understands the way circumstances shape those needs, while respecting separateness and privacy. This is so because of the way in which literary imagining both inspires intense concern with the fate of characters and defines those characters as containing a rich inner life, not all of which is open to view; in the process, the reader learns to have respect for the hidden contents of that inner world, seeing its importance in defining a creature as fully human” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 90).

This description of penetrating into the soul of a literary hero liberates the reader’s stereotypical perception (what the literary critic L. Trilling describes with the term *deliberative imagination*; ibid.) and enables empathy and compassion: “Compassion involves the recognition that another person, in some ways similar to oneself, has suffered some significant pain or misfortune in a way for which that person is not, or not fully, to blame” (ibid., pp. 90–91). Compassion includes one even more important dimension. That is the sense of my own vulnerability, which tells me that I could experience a similar destiny to the literary hero in my future, which causes my readiness to generously help: “That might have been me, and that is how I should want to be treated” (ibid., p. 91). This last dimension of imagination M. Nussbaum describes as *compassionate imagination*, and its value is connected with our readiness to have an empathetic recognition of the social position of different, marginalized, invisible persons in a global world of differences (ibid., pp. 87, 109–112).

### 2.3. Educational value of narration

Another key concept of artistic expression that indicates its importance for the development of humanity is *narration*. After the fall of rationalistic con-

viction that ethical dilemmas can be reduced to abstract events – which are separate from the individual destiny of subjects and from the contingent nature of social circumstances and cultural background – philosophy and psychology began to stress the importance of the “[...] reconstruction of ethical dilemma in its contextual particularity, that enables understanding of causes and consequences” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 100).

M. Greene annotates the importance of telling the story in a narrative way, as a new way of understanding and truth (Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*; quoted from Greene, 1995, p. 186) to the impact of hermeneutics and the recognition of the importance of “heteroglossia” – Bakhtin’s concept of the existence of different views and voices that can only describe human reality in polyphony. She also stresses the importance “[...] of the connection between narrative and growth of identity, of the importance of shaping our own stories and, at the same time, opening ourselves to other stories in all their variety and their different degrees of articulateness.” (Ibid.) Especially stories with “open narrative fable” will act to enable “aesthetic transgression on institutionalized moral chains” and can motivate critical reflection (Winston, 2005) and inductive learning<sup>2</sup>.

#### 2.4. Educational value of metaphor

A short, but very convincing argument about the importance of *metaphor* can be found in the famous study *Sovereignty of the Good*, written by I. Murdoch, where she claims that we can catch sight of good only in an indirect way through metaphor, so admiring the beauty in art or nature is the most accessible way to gain a spiritual experience and a proper way to a good life, because it masters our selfishness with an aim to see the truth (Murdoch, 2006, p. 76). Her argument about the importance of metaphor arises from the analysis of the role of metaphorical thinking in Platonic philosophy, and especially his famous metaphor of the cave, where he presents the idea about the incapacity to picture and describe the Good in a direct way (ibid., p. 82). So *where analytical language fails to describe truth, art can – with the help of imagination, narration, and metaphor – create “embodied meaning”, which replaces invisible secrets of life into visible spheres, and so enables transformative experiences and personal fulfillment* (see Koopman, 2005).

- 2 The inductive approach to prosocial and moral education can be described as a methodical orientation that starts moral and identity development from the analysis of concrete conflict situations (which asks for an emphatic relation toward a narrative of a concrete situation) and not from the notion on the importance of (deductive labeling) social rule/norm, that was the starting point of social learning in the classical culture-transmission model of education (Kroflić, 2011, 2012). Similar structure of solving interpersonal conflicts can be found in the method of peer mediation (Cremin, 2007).

### 3. Art as a sense-opener, as a source of knowledge, and as a cross-over

In a Comenius project *European Multiple Choice Identity*, we used art as a special tool for the development of personal and collective (European) identity of children and young people according to H. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences.

In a seven step didactical model, constructed by W. Kratsborn (2004), different kinds of arts (especially, music, visual arts and design, literature, drama and dance) have an important role as a:

- *sense-opener* and motivational tool for becoming familiar with different topics (such as identity, family and friends, good work, migrations and mobility, and the otherness);
- *source of knowledge* about selected topics;
- *cross-over*, or simply to say a tool for breaking down cultural barriers (by preventing children from fear about the radical otherness and finding common ground for inter-cultural dialogue in a respectful manner) (Kroflič, 2006);
- *seven step didactical model* (Kratsborn, 2004):





Theoretical knowledge and practical experiences were later used and developed further into the idea of education through artistic experiences as a part of a comprehensive inductive approach to prosocial and moral development during the project *Cultural enrichment of children – The development of children's identity in space and time through the different artistic activities* (Kroflič, 2011, 2012).

### 3.1. *Two examples of using art as a source of personal development*

One of the basic ideas of a comprehensive inductive approach to prosocial and moral development is a thesis that children's pro-social orientation and morality is like Aristotelian virtue developed through human relations of love and friendship; therefore pedagogy supporting these relationships enables the child to develop *relational response-ability* and *normative agency* for prosocial activities in a most authentic way (Kroflič, 2012).

#### 3.1.1. Bibarije (development of response-ability for kindergarten children from one to three years old)

“Bibarija” is a folk game with rhythmic singing/declamation of a simple child song and using fingers, “walking” through different parts of a child's body. According to M. Hoffman's (2000) model of the development of empathy as an emotional background of prosocial and moral development, we used *Bibarije* as a source of the development of the child's response-ability to the presence of other person (a teacher or peer) and strengthening his/her sense of otherness of another person in the age group of one to two years old children in kindergarten<sup>3</sup>.

3 In the inductive approach to moral development we speak about three stages of educational impacts: Development of *relational response-ability* and *normative agency* for prosocial activities; development of *the sense of respect* toward concrete persons or activities; development of *the awareness of ethical principles and humanistic demands*, concerning specially *human rights and ecological values*, and learning how to use them as a basis for democratic negotiation in cases of interpersonal conflicts (Kroflič, 2012).

Let us see some photos that present this approach:



**Figure 2 and 3: Communication from a teacher to a child**



**Figure 4 and 5: Communication from a child to a teacher**



**Figure 6 and 7: Communication from a child to another child**



Figure 8 and 9: Feeling of difference...

Simple folk games which combine rhythmic declamation with physical touch are one of very successful artistic tools that support children's needs for physical contacts and strengthening of the feeling of safety and acceptance. Our experiments in the kindergarten Vodmat, Ljubljana have confirmed a thesis that in a safe and inclusive environment children show a lot of interest for different relationships with known adult persons as well as with peers. A short time after kindergarten teachers have started with a game (fingers, "walking" through different parts of a child's body; see Figures 2 and 3), children spontaneously returned the communication in the opposite direction (see Figures 4 and 5) and expanded similar communication among themselves (see Figures 6 and 7).

In classes with integrated children with special needs we have got an opportunity to help children to get rid of fear from differences and to accept these children as equal in this interesting game (see Figures 8 and 9). While there can be no *responsibility* without *the ability to respond* to near person, "bibarije" became a successful method in the first stage of the comprehensive inductive educational approach.

### 3.1.2. Metaphors of otherness (deconstruction of models of exclusion of mentally handicapped people for students of Pedagogy at university level)

According to Foucault (1973), art is an excellent source of recognizing historical practices of exclusion of people with mental problems from the active role in the society. To recognize and de-construct the meaning of different types of exclusion, I further developed Foucault thesis, finding three metaphors of exclusion in European culture: *the court fool*, *the leper*, and *the noble savage*. All these metaphors can be recognized through European fine arts production, as follows (Kroflič, 2007):



Figure 10: The Court Fool

The graphics and paintings present a critical view of artists about common practices of exclusion of mentally handicapped people from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (ibid.). I use them as a tool to make students of pedagogy more sensible to recognize problematic attitudes toward the otherness and to face up with their own stereotypical reactions (a fear of the otherness, believing that tourist attraction to “less-developed cultures”, such as love for gypsy music, is their inclusive mode of relation) with the core values of post-modern ethics. After few years of using this method in a course on the pedagogical approaches for the pupils with special needs I can say that this metaphorical approach can produce more sensibility to tender pedagogical topics than only theoretical explanations during classical lectures.

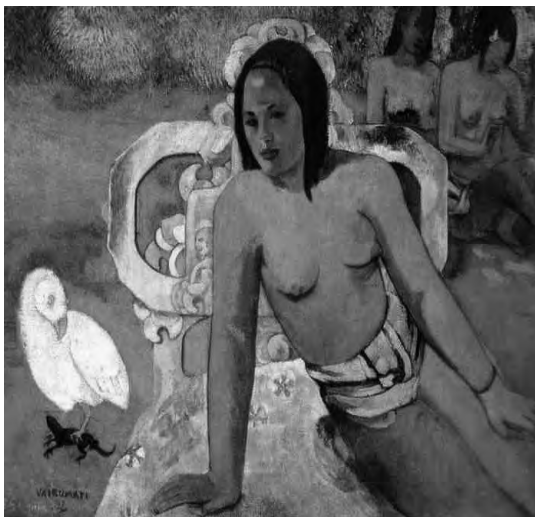


Figure 11:  
The Noble Savage



Figure 13:  
Perception of the  
noble savage today...

Figure 12: The Leper



#### 4. Art as fulfillment in the post-modern world

I would like to conclude this investigation with the idea that art can be seen as a practice of transformative experiences and personal fulfillment, because it has the power to describe the basic secrets of life and allows us to begin a dialog with the otherness of fellow-persons, and also with the otherness in the core of our personality. Let's show some of the most famous arguments for this hypothesis.

I would like to start with Wittgenstein's theory about closeness and the transcendental nature of the languages of ethics, of religious experiences, and of art, that rests on the recognition of the different language of art, that can reach some extensions of truth better than the analytical language of science (Ule, Varga-Kibed, 1998).

When we follow the thesis about art experience as one of the most authentic forms of human activities of personal fulfillment, we should not forget H.G. Gadamer's thesis about 'fulfilled time', exemplified by the feast or celebration, where the feast is a paradigm for the arts: "Just like the feast the work of art presents an episode of fulfilled time. Fulfillment is effected by the organic unity of work. Every detail is united with the whole [...] As an internally structured unity, the art work has its own fulfilled time" (Koopman, 2005, p. 91).

Fulfillment is also central to the J. Dewey concept of art as experience, which means 'to have an experience in the strong sense', to experience wholeness and self-sufficiency because art acts to clarify and intensify events of every day experiences (ibid., pp. 91-92).

So Gadamer and Dewey have offered us two different perspectives on the idea of fulfillment in the arts, the first one with the concept of fulfilled time, and the second one with the concept of completed experience. These two perspectives are supplementary, because "[...] the value of the arts resides in our complete involvement from moment to moment when receiving, creating or performing an art work" (ibid., p. 91).

The idea of art fulfillment finally coincides with Maslow's concept of *peak experience* and Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*. Flow comes from the feeling of total fulfillment in an artistic process that causes a peak experience of pleasure and happiness, which is brilliantly described by the testimony of the poet M. Strand: "Well, you're right in the work, you lose your sense of time, you're completely enraptured, you're completely caught up in what you're doing, and you're sort of swayed by the possibilities you see in this work. If that becomes too powerful, then you get up, because the excitement is too great. You can't continue to work or continue to see the end of the work because you're jumping ahead of yourself all the time. The idea is to be so [...] so saturated with it that there's no future or past, it's just an extended present in which you're [...] making meaning" (McCarthy *et alii*, 2004, p. 46). It is appropriate to notice that especially Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow is scientifically confirmed by a huge number of interviews with creative

people from different fields of work, and in the last decade it is used as one of the key concepts of intrinsic motivation for learning (see Riggs, 2006), a criterion of good work (The GoodWork Project, 2006), and especially one of the most important features of personal identity and mission of a good teacher (Korthagen, Vasalos, 2005).

If we turn our analysis again to the characteristics of life in the post-modern era and the role of art for a fulfilled life in this liquid (Z. Bauman) and risky time (U. Beck), I would like to conclude this approach with the two most frequently emphasized positive roles of art.

The first one is the fact that the world we live in is composed of an uncountable number of simultaneously existing perspectives and viewpoints (Greene, 1995, p. 183), so our personal growth to become different has to include searching for our personal voice and playing participatory and well articulated roles in the communities (ibid., p. 132). Or as the same thought was expressed by M. Nussbaum in her book *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*: “[...] art provides an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events of locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life” (Quoted from McCarthy *et alii*, 2004, p. 47).

This ‘deep, sharp, and precise’ self-understanding and self-fulfillment is connected with the otherness around me that warns me about otherness in the core of my personality (Ricoeur, 1992). To defeat fear of otherness so common to human beings, we need activities that have strong motivational character and emotional engagement in our too objectified world. Or, as the same thought was expressed by two giants of art in the nineteenth and twentieth century: the spirit of abstraction stifles the fire at which the heart should have warmed itself (Schiller), so a book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us (Kafka) (quoted from Hepburn 1998, p. 176).

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