Nice but not necessary? Reflections on the role of the arts in Kitcher's *Main Enterprise of the World*

The manifesto presented in Philip Kitcher's (2022) exhaustive appraisal of contemporary American education – and the case for its potential reform – is so wide-ranging that it is not possible to do justice to its every component. Instead, I will speak to one of its parts in an attempt to recognise what I take to be the value of the whole. My aim is to address the section on the role of the Arts in formal education, and the nature of aesthetic experience within that, to test whether we can take the Arts from their current state of being subject to Adam Smith's model of market utility, to being appreciated for their necessary and organic vitality. Kitcher provides strong arguments for exposure to the arts as leading to invaluable aesthetic experiences for young people. By extension – and at times by contrast – I will explore the possibility that the 'aesthetic' in aesthetic education doesn't just come into force with the *student*'s encounter with art works or creative activity in the classroom, but should be integral also to the development of a particular sensibility amongst educators (i.e. the aesthetic education of the educators) for the shape and form of a 'good' education, according to its context and circumstance. It is perhaps through this sensibility that we might rediscover the necessity of the arts in schools at a time when their importance has been significantly devalued.

The arts: sufficient or necessary?

There is little doubt that the educational value of the arts in globally competitive economies is in peril, and many subjects are staring down the barrel of curricular obsolescence, not least because modes of assessment are increasingly antithetical to the kinds of creative practices and experiment these subjects encourage. The UK has seen a massive decline in pupils entering for GCSE Drama and Music in the last ten years, with STEM subjects in the ascendant. The picture is not all bad, however: the number of students opting for GCSE Design has seen a steady increase, perhaps bolstered by the fact that in 2015, the UK was recorded has having "the second-largest design sector in the world and the largest design industry in Europe", where design refers to "'product, graphic and fashion design" (designcouncil.org.uk). Are we to take from this data that our understanding of what does or should constitute an art may be changing (such that book jackets must be taken as seriously as Bonnards), or that the arts have themselves succumbed to market and industry logic? The latter might be seen as an inevitable consequence of what Philip Kitcher calls 'Smith's Principle', the idea that "education should be tailored to the demands of the occupations that the pupils will take on" (Kitcher, 2022, p.55), and

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that the worth of subjects will naturally be determined by factors such as classroom attendance and course registration. On this view, subjects unable to justify themselves according to the market principle – such as Music and Drama – are less useful in the marketplace of markets. They may suffice in nurturing aspects to young people's imagination and creativity, but can no longer be claimed to be necessary for an individual's overall skillset.

Kitcher's book, by contrast, takes the view that the arts *are* necessary (or at least "centrally important"), but from a particularly Deweyan standpoint which doesn't pretend to dispense with the argument from utility altogether; instead – like Dewey – Kitcher upholds the idea of thinking about any kind of education in terms of its (social) outcomes, whilst preserving the peculiar integrity of aesthetic experience as something which might enhance both quality of life and job satisfaction. To do so, he aims to retrieve the arts from a tokenistic presence within the school curriculum, in the acknowledgment that "When school budgets are tight, administrators usually decide to cut back on 'the frills'" (2022, p.256). Here the frills are both creative subjects – music, drama, visual arts – but also literature and "less important" languages. Elliot Eisner, in his 2008 commentary on 'What Education Can Learn from the Arts', made a similar observation, noting that the shift towards a scientistic paradigm in school performance evaluation often meant that "At their best, the arts were nice to have in schools but not necessary" (Eisner, 2008, p.24). Eisner's phrasing offers further pause for thought in the context of evaluating the merits of an arts education: firstly, it raises the question of what education might *learn from* the arts. In this formulation, the arts are not the object of study, but the subject: they are there to be learned from, not *about*. (Elsewhere, Eisner describes this as knowledge through, as opposed to knowledge of, the aesthetic).

I want to return to the question of the arts' subjectivity later, particularly in terms of what the aesthetic might have to offer the educationalist. For now, I will concentrate on a second and separate issue raised by the quotation, which is the spectre of niceness that seems to haunt contemporary arts education, often to the point of it being marginalised (if not exorcised altogether). The question here becomes whether – and at what level – we can truly contend with Eisner's phrasing, such that the arts in formal education might be seen as somehow more than just nice, amounting instead to necessity. If so, do we need to focus on the necessity as something that is undermined by notions of niceness (and if that is the case, in what might that necessity consist)? Or do we instead need to make of niceness a necessity (perhaps by way of revealing its value in contrast with nastiness)?

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A necessary arts education

The argument from necessity is a path already well-trodden, with forceful contributions from the likes of Eisner, Maxine Greene, John Dewey, and others. In each of these - albeit to differing degrees – the aesthetic is seen to provide some of the curricular glue for the moral and political orientation of formal schooling: to engage with and create works of art is preparation critical appreciation of and participation in a well-functioning democracy. But the register of necessity does vary: on returning to Greene's work in this context, in essays such as 'Toward Wide-Awakeness: An Argument for the Arts and Humanities in Education' (1977), it is notable the extent to which she seems to require of the aesthetic encounter that it be existentially troubling, to the point of casting the learner into a state of moral anxiety. Greene – who, like Kitcher, cautions against the arts being seen as "mere frill" – speaks of the "dreadful freedom" and difficulty that comes with achieving what she terms moral "wide-awakeness." Even in the name of "sense-making in a confusing world," this sounds very much like a case for the arts' (ethical) necessity without any notion of niceness attached – and one of which it might be hard to persuade policymakers in the present climate of increasing concern for student mental health and wellbeing.

Consistent with his Deweyan approach, Kitcher's role for the arts lies less in moral disquiet than in social harmony. For Dewey, there was little intrinsic value to works in themselves – aesthetic experience was understood as tied to ends and environment over and above the D*ing-an-sich*. This is in part due to the temporality constraining our experience: the aesthetic is not fixed in objects, but in the conditions under which they are experienced, limited by time and space. An holistic approach to education and its societal function requires that domains such as the aesthetic don't preserve for themselves rarefied access or outcomes that lead to cultural or cognitive cul-de-sacs. As such, the need for an arts education must reside somewhere between the competing claims of utility and ideality: the value of the aesthetic cannot be reduced solely to skills that are useful within a market economy, nor can we indulge the Pater-esque notion that the arts are to be valued simply for their own sake. Kitcher treads a more careful path: the arts must contribute to the educational (*ergo* societal) whole, and must cultivate appreciation and creativity without canonical framings of what counts as high and low.

The upshot of this formulation is that the nature of the aesthetic need neither be confined to the high vs. the low in art, nor to work in ways conventionally and exclusively delimited as artistic: it extends into all and every aspect of our lives – including our intellectual activity. Indeed, for Dewey, intellectual experience must "bear an aesthetic stamp to be itself complete" (2005, p.40). Dewey was also at pains to show that intellectual and aesthetic experience could not be taken independently of moral

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experience and education, such that they are all part of a continuum, and the continuum nourishes the collective. Kitcher duly reproduces that continuum for a new generation of students, one that may have been allowed to fall out of love with the aesthetic by force of employability imperatives, as opposed to being culturally anaesthetized wholesale. A Deweyan aesthetics spills out of the curriculum and the classroom, and into the world itself. Art-pedagogy is therefore not about preparing people for a life in art, but for an art-full life.

Kitcher's argument for an aesthetically rich curriculum endorses two of the more recognisable candidates for the necessity of an arts education: encounter and creation. If art is to contribute towards a healthier citizenry and individual moral growth, there must be opportunities to encounter – in Matthew Arnold's words "the best that has been thought or said" (Arnold, 1869/2006, p.5) – as well as opportunities to engage in making and doing. Of the first, it is important to note that "the best" need not be determined by the canon; rather, it need only meet with the requirement of the Deweyan virtues of "moments of intense vitality, encounters that transform future experience, opportunities for new insights and the development of refined emotions" (Kitcher, 2022, p.273). Of the opportunities for creative work, Kitcher says that these too should not be too narrowly constrained, but that discipline and training are always required.

The case presented in this chapter certainly goes beyond niceness as mere curricular lip-service – but does it ascend to necessity? Whilst we can see the value of aesthetic encounter and creation in relation to literature and poetry, it becomes harder to argue for necessity with regards to, say, film. Film not only features less in curricular and pedagogical activities than other arts in schools, but – as Kitcher recognises – there are fewer opportunities for young people to experiment with filmmaking. What might interest us here, though, is that neither of these facts have prevented people from going on to be good filmmakers or appreciators of the art form. And cinema arguably remains our most democratic art form, showing that a training in that appreciation may not be justified to the point of educational necessity. Without wanting to undermine the case for arts education in general, or film education in particular, I want to now explore another angle for necessity that incorporates the arts' moral dimension.

Making a virtue of niceness

Niceness is perhaps a less explored concept in arts education, not least because its intonation all too often lends itself to notions of the trivial or juvenile, as in Eisner's phrase "Nice but not necessary". This

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take on the arts might view them as a set of childish things to be put aside as young people emerge into the more proper studies of humankind. One counter to this perspective would be to suggest that niceness need not be extricated from the curriculum in the pursuit of serious study and qualification; indeed, it is to the benefit of the individual that moral development remain intrinsic to that process if young people are not to become cynical and combative in their attempts to succeed in life. To the extent that an arts education is necessarily also a moral education – which on Dewey's and Kitcher's and Greene's view it certainly is – we might therefore be curious to investigate the potential for a moral niceness further, perhaps through its associations with familial concepts such as kindness. Áine Mahon, for instance, has written of Richard Rorty's belief that reading literature "can make us better persons than we already are by appealing to our innate sense of kindness and solidarity and by broadening our understanding of other people from 'one of them' to 'one of us'" (Mahon, 2017, p.103). Arguments in this pragmatist strain centre on intersubjective wellbeing, rather than internal transformation, and echo Kitcher's view that "Morality is a collective affair" (Kitcher, 2022, p. 9). The following passage from Kitcher I think speaks to these more generalized possibilities of niceness that an arts education might afford:

> sharing our aesthetic lives with others is important. We recommend books and plays and films and exhibitions and concerts to our friends. When they respond enthusiastically to the works or events we have suggested, their pleasure heightens our own. Excited discussions may follow, leading all of us to discern even more—perhaps the popularity of book clubs testifies to their ability (when things go well) to provide opportunities for this to occur. Another reason for continuing art education is to build communities of these kinds.
>
> (ibid., p. 268)

The kind of community being described by Kitcher is a departure from Greene's existentially troubling "wide-awakeness", and speaks more to our desire to share, communicate, and enjoy one another's company as social beings. It sounds *nice*, and echoes Kitcher's earlier recommendation that children "need to know how to fit in and to carry on". At the same time, there is nothing here to stop the sceptic from saying that these are all 'nice' activities that can be enjoyed in private, whilst having no claim of necessity upon the school's more public-facing orientation and obligation. Furthermore, I suspect that the idea of niceness will always be at risk of having more than a note of ethical anaesthetic to it, and therefore fails to bring into view either the moral discombobulation of which Maxine Greene speaks so powerfully, or the liveliness of Kitcher's more communitarian aesthetics.

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Both/and: moderate egalitarianism

If neither necessity nor niceness can independently establish themselves as a fundamental criterion for the inclusion of the arts in the curriculum, how then can we secure their significance? Kitcher puts forward something of a case for a both/and solution, a mixture of niceness and necessity, which he calls 'moderate egalitarianism'. Under this aegis, everyone would have an education in the arts, but exactly what the content of that education looks like, as stated above, need not be determined by the canon, so as to mitigate elitism. There should be a "wealth of possibilities" (as opposed to that of Nations), and the presence of many adults sharing their various passions, such that the child is able to choose from among a great diversity. The idea is that "The egalitarian strain in this position surfaces in recognizing the potential for aesthetic experience in people who are badly served by current education in the arts, and in the recognition of a wide diversity of works as able to actualize that potential" (Kitcher, 2022, p.275). Resources permitting, the new path of moderate egalitarianism looks very promising, though its petition also needs to be understood in relation to the main enterprise outlined at the beginning of the book: here, it is argued that a new view of education must be oriented towards self-maintenance (as a mode of readiness for the workplace); the ability to function as a citizen; and the fulfilling life. When it comes to the chapters on the content of the curriculum, Kitcher views the arts and the aesthetic not just in an intrinsic sense, but in terms of how aesthetic experiences prompted by exposure to the arts are conducive to at least two out of three of those overarching ends.

Kitcher again follows Dewey in describing aesthetic experience as trifold, incorporating the personal joy and uplift that comes from any individual encounter with works of art, the delight in sharing that might follow on from that encounter, and the "trans-temporal" resonance that a work might have beyond the immediate encounter. He makes an excellent case for creating opportunities for these encounters within the school environment, involving three stages. Stage one requires exposure to art works from a variety of different sources (not just teachers, but parents and other externals); stage two is devoted to creation and appreciation ("The goal is to develop the skills required for creation, and the understanding needed for appreciation"); whilst stage three becomes about processes of deepening and developing that which has already been established. The outcomes, in line with the goals defined at the beginning of the book, are that "[a]esthetic exchange would be part of deep democracy" (2022, p.278), contributing to "preserving curiosity and joy" (ibid.). These three stages put me in mind of the Harlem Renaissance philosopher Alain Locke, who argued that what we require from the arts "is the capacity for understanding the best and most representative forms of human expression, and of expressing oneself,

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if not in similar creativeness, at least in appreciative reactions and in progressively responsive refinement of tastes and interests" (Locke, 1991, p.182). Locke, like his near-contemporary John Dewey, wanted to both progress the arts in their sharing capacity, as well as in their quality, and Kitcher further advances these dimensions in an outline for an arts curriculum that is intended to build aesthetic engagement and appreciation over the lifecourse.

An aesthetic sensibility *for* education

Kitcher's ideas for the role of the arts and the value of aesthetic experience are certainly to be welcomed at a time when we find both to be severely devalued within our school curriculums. But we could become distracted by arguments in favour of the arts as either nice or necessary (or even necessary by virtue of being nice) if we focus on them exclusively as the *object* of study, and limit their value as educational resource to young people as subjects of education. By situating the arts not only as that from which educationalists stand to learn, but as diffused into a more general aesthetic sensibility for what constitutes the good in any given educational situation, we begin to get a picture of their role as one that does not so much secure their niceness or necessity, as create the space in which they will determine those things for themselves.

On the view outlined so far, the arts might be sufficient for a certain kind of moral citizenry and individual flourishing, but still not *necessary*. This is not to be defeatist. I want to now put forward the possibility that the arts may yet be understood as educationally necessary, but first and foremost in the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility amongst educators, rather than as a statutory requirement in schools. An aesthetics of education in this sense – i.e. a disposition to think critically about the shape and form that schooling and curricula take, rather than an education which emphasises aesthetic experiences – may indeed be necessary for the arts to find their purpose and future, but perhaps only by providing the space to suspend judgment about what kind of arts education is in fact required.

It seems to me prudent to hold on to a distinction between arts and the aesthetic here, and that whilst the former provides us with a general category for both the body of craftsmanship that makes itself available to worthwhile study, and to some extent the induction into craft on the part of students also, the latter pertains more to a way of conceptualising the shapes and forms that any given area of interest may take, as well as the modes of judgment by which we are able to evaluate those shapes and forms. We need to discover the aesthetic not just in art, therefore, but in the shape and form of education itself: its curricula, its practices, its learning environments. To do so, we may need to look at the

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aesthetic anew. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his one published lecture on aesthetics, offers one such different way of looking at the situation: rather than thinking of aesthetics as something that obtains in either the object or the experience, he views aesthetics as revealed in our language and behaviour. For this reason, he is as inclined to discover an aesthetic sensibility in a person's choosing of a suit, or coffee preference, as he is in their reflections on high art, and here we find the potential for appreciating the role of the aesthetic not just in terms of student encounter and experience, but in questions of what a good education *looks like* also.

To begin to think about what makes for a good education under any given circumstance, then, doesn't presuppose the value – or necessity – of the aesthetic within the curriculum: it asks us to reflect aesthetically upon educational value (which might even require the suspension the notion of the arts' inherent good). Such an approach would involve higher levels of contingency than even Kitcher espouses: not just looking at different arts for different demographics, for instance, but at how the aesthetic manifests in disciplines beyond the arts, including – or beginning with – education itself.

Like Kitcher and Eisner, Wittgenstein objects to the scientistic view that would reduce our encounter with art (and therefore its value in the curriculum) to measurement and/or utility, saying of aesthetics that we might suppose it to be "a science telling us what's beautiful - almost too ridiculous for words" (Wittgenstein, 1966/2003, p.11). Instead, Wittgenstein is more interested in the aesthetic as a sensibility, a disposition, an ability to appreciate subtle "clicks" of coherence over great moments of transformation. To see education as an aesthetic domain, then, requires particular skills and sensibilities of its own, and a comcomitant acknowledgment "to pay attention to nuance" (Eisner, 2004, p.5). When Eisner speaks of the educational remit to foster "individuals who have developed the ideas, the sensibilities, the skills, and the imagination to create work that is well proportioned, skillfully executed, and imaginative, regardless of the domain in which an individual works" (Eisner, 2004, p.4), it is clear to see how this should apply not only to the education of the young, but also the education of the educators.

Aesthetically educating the educators

If the arts cannot fully lay claim to necessity within the curriculum – not least because it must be within their remit to challenge questions of what constitutes necessity at any one moment in time – that is not

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to deny their value and urgency. Indeed, if Kitcher's vision of the arts' role is that they steer children "toward a form of creative production capable of generating a deep and abiding interest" (Kitcher, 2022, p.272), then we find ourselves compelled to think urgently also about who is doing the steering, and the kinds of resources available to them that can propel deep and abiding interests. In short, we need to look more closely also at the (aesthetic) education of our educators. If the aim of an effective arts education is to ensure that the aesthetic permeates all aspects of our existence, such that it becomes "a matter for a lifetime" (ibid.), then the continuum must be integrated into a loop that includes not just the young, but those that would educate them. Attitudes towards arts education will be difficult to shift in the direction Kitcher desires unless teachers come to view their disciplines in less instrumental fashion also – and perhaps even see themselves, as Eisner hoped they would, as artists of a kind.

This transition of course faces great resistance from institutional habits, especially with regards to the role of the arts in their potential development. As film-educationalist Alain Bergala has observed,

> The problem with institutions is that they tend to normalise, to homogenise, and thus reduce the singularity of the works as well as the individual reactions towards them. At its core, every institution is afraid of everything that is too personal, too emotional and too unregulated with regard to the relationship between adult and child. Therefore, one has to begin by educating the institutions.
>
> (Bergala, 2016, p. 123)

The education of institutions could do worse than to cultivate a sense for the different shapes and forms educational practice might take under different circumstances, such that educators have the facility to adapt. The development of an aesthetic sensibility for a "good" education resides not in mastery or aptitude, but in the interplay of what Elliot Eisner calls "connoisseurship and criticism". To be a connoisseur of education (as with wine, bicycles and graphic arts), according to Eisner, is to be informed about its qualities, and able to "discriminate the subtleties among types" by drawing upon a range of experiences "against which the particulars of the present may be placed for the purposes of comparison and judgment". But to be a connoisseur of education, wine, bicycles or painting is not enough (this is potentially a luxury one can cultivate on one's own); to make a difference to the educational reality, we must be critics also. The critic renders their observations as connoisseur public, through the motions of description, interpretation and evaluation. The educator, then, must be someone who not only teaches in aesthetic appreciation of their subject area (which might be an arts subject, or any other), but also exercises good judgment about what good education in that subject looks like.

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Another dimension of an aesthetic sensibility for education lies in an attentiveness to contextual difference. Maxine Greene insisted on the value of the educator's paying close heed to context in this regard:

> at least part of the challenge is to refuse artificial separations of the school from the surrounding environment, to refuse the decontextualizations that falsify so much. As part of this refusal, teachers can be moved to take account of connections and continuities that cannot always be neatly defined. That means attending to the impact of street life in all its multiplicity, danger, and mystery. It also means being somewhat aware of students' family life in its ease and unease
>
> (Greene, 1995: 11)

Greene describes an awareness of culture and background that could in itself be called aesthetic: it entails a sensibility for contextual circumstance that resists the universal application of method, theory or curriculum. This sensibility is earned through, and subsequently endorses, good judgment, allowing the "connections and continuities" to determine requirements for particular communities under certain conditions. For the educationalist – both theorist and practitioner – this sensibility can be understood as aesthetic, in that it involves both attention to the ways in which educational worlds are presently formed, as well as the imaginative and creative possibilities for their future(s).

Conclusion

It may not be possible to make an absolute case for the necessity of the arts in the curriculum, not least because the arts resist the kinds of evaluation and assessment upon which our current systems are structured. Nevertheless, an attention to the aesthetic on the part of the educator may well make them more alive to the necessity of any art form or work to a given situation, as well as preparing the way for future arts also. We can all take inspiration from Kitcher's impassioned appeal, and look to our own aesthetic experience for the rethinking of education, and not just the teaching of the arts.

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