"Conjoint Communicated Experience": Art as an Instrument of Democracy

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Abstract:

To be democratic, a society's members should be endowed with capacities and dispositions to communicate and understand the diversity of each other's experiences. Philosophical traditions have explored various forms of injustice arising in societies failing to meet this democratic criterion, including material and psychological harm. But when exploring methods for cultivating and enhancing such democratic-communicative behavior, cognitive processes and intellectual instruction can face documented obstacles such as defensiveness, motivated ignorance, and perceptual-interpretive bias. Art, by virtue of its dealing in aesthetic experience, possesses several unique capacities for facilitating communication between diverse people and encouraging understanding of each other's lived experiences, while overcoming the limitations of exclusively or heavily cognitive approaches. This paper explains three cumulative capacities of aesthetic forms which make them indispensable instruments for cultivating dispositions of democratic communication, including the avoidance of explicit argumentation, the communication of experiential immediacy, and the transformation of pre-existing interpretive frameworks. In doing so, it argues that art plays a crucial function in democratic society.

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"A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."[1]

In this short excerpt, John Dewey expresses the pragmatist conviction—first stated by Jane Addams in *Democracy and Social Ethics*—that a society must cultivate dispositions of curiosity and understanding between its diversely situated members in order to sustain a robust and genuine democracy. It is by our habitual exposure to the experiences of our fellow citizens that we can

[1] John Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924. Vol. 9: 1916, Democracy and Education*. Ed. by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, p. 93.

imagine and understand each other's diverse situations, struggles, and needs. In enabling such imagination and understanding, we create the possibility of fairly incorporating these diverse perspectives into the progressive alterations we make to the shared social institutions which structure our interactions and opportunities. It is also through exposure to diverse lived experiences that we can continuously reconstruct our shared *conceptual* resources for interpreting our social world in fairly representative ways, rather than selectively imposing the assumptions of a society's powerful members.

Various traditions have recognized the cultivation of dispositions of mutual curiosity and understanding among a society's members as indispensable for sustaining democratic society. In the epistemic injustice tradition, Miranda Fricker writes of hermeneutical injustice, or "a gap…in our shared tools of social interpretation" which arises as a result of unequal participation in "the practices through which social meanings are generated"—for example, the professions of journalism, politics, academia, and law.[2] Hermeneutical injustice "impinges unequally on different social groups," forming a "structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" which leaves social experiences of marginalized groups "inadequately conceptualized" and "obscured from collective understanding."[3] In critical race theory, Charles W. Mills writes of "white ignorance"—a "group-based cognitive handicap"[4] which is the result of collective "conceptual apparatus…[being] negatively shaped and inflected in various ways by the biases of the ruling group(s)."[5] W. E. B. Du Bois refers to the "second sight" of African Americans, which involves learning to see "through identifying white blindness and avoiding the pitfalls of putting on these spectacles for one's own vision."[6] The power imbalances of class, race, and gender "determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end…with conflicting judgments about what is important in the past and what is unimportant, what happened and does matter, what happened and does not matter, and what did not happen at all."[7] This undemocratic conceptual framework thereby becomes "inscribed in textbooks, generated and regenerated in ceremonies and official holidays, concretized in statues, parks, monuments."[8] In the Marxist tradition, Antonio Gramsci writes that, although "[e]very social class has its own 'common sense,'"[9] broader shared narratives tend to be skewed towards "those that reflect the world as seen from the vantage point of the rulers rather than the ruled."[10] Hegemony is both "the ensemble of opinions that have become collective and a powerful factor in society," along with access to the resources necessary to proliferate and reproduce such worldviews.[11] Because human beings do not have equal means for disseminating the

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[2] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 6.
[3] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, pp. 6, 155.
[4] Charles W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs. The Critique of Racial Liberalism.* New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 51.
[5] Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, p. 60.
[6] Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, p. 55. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 8.
[7] Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, pp. 64-65.
[8] Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, pp. 64.
[9] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*. Ed. by David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell- Smith. Trans. by William Boelhower. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 420.
[10] Kate A. F. Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense. Inequality and its Narratives.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 51.
[11] Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Vol. III*. Ed. by Joseph A. Buttigieg. New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1975, p. 347.

narratives of their own lived experience, the perspectives of less powerful groups are "forced to exist within the interstices of the dominant explanations."[12]

Much more is at stake in the democratization of civic communication than simply having one's experience *understood* by fellow citizens. By ensuring democratic modes of "conjoint communicated experience," a society "secures flexible readjustment of its institutions" such as law, healthcare, education, and public policy by absorbing and incorporating the experiences, perspectives, and needs of differently situated members.[13] When one group is hermeneutically marginalized, its members encounter material disadvantages as a result of the absence of their perspectives informing shared institutional arrangements. Fricker's main example of this effect is women's experiences prior to the development of the concept of sexual harassment. Carmita Wood, whose case was a catalyst for the development of the concept, was forced to leave her job as an administrative assistant to a professor due to his sexual harassment of her. Unable to find any explanation for leaving her job except 'personal reasons,' she was refused unemployment benefits. In the absence of a shared concept to describe and communicate her experience, no institutional protections or arrangements would accommodate it, leaving Carmita Wood and women who shared her situation vulnerable to abuse and financial and material losses. More recently, the opinions of academics on the importance of including diversity statements in job application procedures have been shown to correlate with social groupings, with white people, men, and tenured professors tending towards less positive views of diversification procedures.[14] If these groups were to be hermeneutically advantaged, their common-sense values and opinions would likely reduce the prevalence of diversity initiatives in academic hiring, in opposition to the material interests of women, disabled applicants, and applicants of color.

Sustaining a democratic society, then, requires the communication of experiences between diverse groups, not only to create representative shared interpretations of social reality, but to democratize the conceptual resources with which we collectively reproduce or readjust our institutional policies and material arrangements. The ability to control the circulation of narratives and impose partial perspectives on a society's shared interpretive resources is "a crucial dimension of any power regime,"[15] while in contrast, "[a] society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic."[16]

Philosophers have provided recommendations for cultivating democratic communicative dispositions in order to render shared beliefs, practices, and institutions more representative of the experiences of diverse groups. However, these recommendations typically place a heavy or exclusive emphasis on *cognitive* methods. Fricker suggests the cultivation of an "intellectual virtue" to counteract the effects of inadequate conceptual resources for understanding the experiences of diverse groups. Individuals would be instructed on the existence and mechanisms of hermeneutical injustice, and would then bring to subsequent conversations "a background social 'theory' that is

[12] Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense*, p. 51.
[13] John Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Vol. 9*, p. 105.
[14] Chad M. Topaz, et al. "Comparing demographics of signatories to public letters on diversity in the mathematical sciences." In: *PLoS ONE* 15.4, 2020.
[15] Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense*, p. 51.
[16] John Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Vol. 9*, p. 105.

informed by the possibility of hermeneutical injustice."[17] As a result of the practice of this virtue, individuals would "receive the word of others in a manner that counteracts the prejudicial impact that their hermeneutical marginalization has already had upon the hermeneutical tools at their disposal."[18] For example, instead of a man rejecting a woman's claims as "less than rational" because of her "intuitive style of expression," his instruction would render him aware of the possibility that "the interpretation the speaker is struggling to articulate would make good sense if the attempt to articulate it were being made in a more inclusive hermeneutical climate."[19] Gramsci, too, focused heavily on the role of *intellectuals* in constructing coherent narratives which could be disseminated to challenge undemocratic and oppressive hegemonies.

In the rest of this paper, I argue that methods which focus too heavily on cognitive or intellectual processes like philosophical instruction have inherent limitations when it comes to facilitating democratic communication, and that their emphasis on cognitive methods has led theorists to overlook the specific suitability of art and aesthetic media for this task. Employing Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics, I discuss three features of the arts which make them a powerful method. These methods, which build on each other cumulatively, include (1) their absence of explicit argumentation; (2) their communication of experiential immediacy; and (3) their consciousness-raising and transformation of interpretive frameworks.

Praise and Blame

A major problem when attempting to educate or instruct people on political issues is *motivated ignorance*. Cognitive psychologists, behavioral economists, and philosophers have recognized the existence of a distinct form of ignorance which is actively upheld in cases where the information presented may be uncomfortable, or when it is in the interest of the individual to remain ignorant.[20] Mills characterizes the ignorance experienced by powerful groups of the realities facing the less powerful not as "the passive obverse to knowledge" but as "an ignorance that resists,… that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly."[21] This is more acute when instructed individuals are implicated in the wrong on which they are being educated. Virtue-instructive approaches are therefore likely to prove challenging, since they involve educating people in a social theory that includes their own privilege and their own role in reproducing injustice.

Art and aesthetics are able to mitigate the effects of motivated ignorance and defensiveness because they are not forms of explicit argument or judgment. While philosophy and other forms of argumentation utilize "theory, simplicity, structure, abstraction, and essence," works of art avoid the "general terms or general principles" characteristic of theory.[22] For related reasons, while moral,

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[17] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 172.
[18] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 168-69.
[19] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 169-70.
[20] Daniel Williams, "Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics." In: *Synthese,* 2020. URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02549-8; Lauren Woomer, "Agential insensitivity and socially supported ignorance." In: *Synthese* 16.1, 2019, pp. 73–91.
[21] Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, p. 49.
[22] Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers, Volume 2*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 73, 78.

political, and social theory is "saturated with conceptions that stem from praise and blame" and divides humankind (at least implicitly) "into sheep and goats, the vicious and virtuous, the law-abiding and criminal, the good and bad," works of art are characterized by an "indifference to praise and blame because of [their] preoccupation with imaginative experience."[23]

It was this contrast that led Richard Rorty to characterize the novel as "the characteristic genre of democracy."[24] Unlike cognitive education, a novel is "not a matter of replacing. . . Error with Truth," but presenting a "diversity of viewpoints, a plurality of descriptions of the same events."[25] By substituting a novel for a treatise, "characters take the place of moral principles and of lists of virtues and vices."[26] For example, "Dickens attacked English institutions with a ferocity that has never since been approached. Yet he managed to do it without making himself hated, and, more than this, the very people he attacked have swallowed him so completely that he has become a national institution himself."[27] Dickens was effective because he presented an unargumentative, untheoretical portrayal of the lived experience of the working poor. Somewhat counterintuitively, he was thereby able to present a ferocious criticism of English institutions without triggering a defensive reaction, even making the experience of undergoing moral instruction actively enjoyable.

Communication of Immediate Experience

Aesthetic art is powerful not only because of what it *avoids*, but because of what it specifically and adeptly *communicates*. Fricker describes hermeneutical injustice as consisting in "having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding,"[28] and Mills describes white ignorance as a failure to understand or view correctly the various aspects of personal, social, and political reality that influence the lived experience of people of color.[29] It is precisely the ability to *communicate experiential reality* between diversely situated groups that would help rectify these forms of injustice.

According to Dewey, "works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience."[30] The way art achieves this radical form of communication is not by presenting cognitive qualities and pieces of knowledge, but by directly expressing the qualities of experiential immediacy. In cognitive processes, "intellectual inquirers deal with [experiential] qualities at one remove through the medium of symbols that stand for qualities"; artists, on the other hand, "have for their subject-matter the qualities of things of direct experience."[31] Art does not present abstractions, information, or ideas, but "renders available in clear and heightened unities

[23] John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953. Vol. 10: 1934, Art as Experience.* Ed. by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, p. 351.
[24] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger, Vol. 2*, p. 68.
[25] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger, Vol. 2*, p. 74.
[26] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger, Vol. 2*, p. 78.
[27] George Orwell, quoted in Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger, Vol. 2*, p. 79.
[28] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 155.
[29] Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, chap. 4.
[30] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10,* p. 110.
[31] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10,* p. 80.

the qualities of experience."[32] For this reason, Dewey takes art to be the greatest means "for entering sympathetically into the deepest elements in the experience" of other people.[33] Through works of art, "we install ourselves in modes of apprehending nature that at first are strange to us…and, by bringing it to pass, our own experience is re-oriented."[34] This capacity of art is particularly valuable in circumstances where a failure to understand the experiences of another person is the phenomenon causing harm.

The effects of works of art in drawing us into a sympathetic understanding of diversely situated people are by no means fleeting—they extend beyond the moment of experiencing the work of art itself. Works of art have an "enduring effect upon those who perceive and enjoy [them, which] will be an expansion of their sympathies, imagination, and sense."[35] They "effect a broadening and deepening of our own experience, rendering it less local and provincial as far as we grasp, by their means, the attitudes basic in other forms of experience."[36] As a result, "[b]arriers are dissolved, limiting prejudices melt away," and we arrive at a more adequate and humane understanding of how the world is experienced by different sorts of people.[37]

Conscious Reworking of Immediacy

Another problem with cognitive approaches to educating people into democratic communicative dispositions is the difficulty of stepping outside one's *pre-existing interpretive frameworks*. Psychological research has confirmed that "rather than continually challenging conceptual adequacy by the test of disconfirming empirical data, we tend to do the opposite—to interpret the data through the grid of the concepts in such a way that seemingly disconfirming, or at least problematic, perceptions are filtered out or marginalized."[38] Our habitual interpretive resources become "spontaneous, natural, 'instinctive'; they form the platform of development and apprehension of further meanings, affecting every subsequent phase of personal and social life."[39]

There have been many historical cases in which distorted interpretive resources have been incredibly resilient to transformation. For example, "[i]n the classic period of European expansionism, it…becomes possible to speak with no sense of absurdity of 'empty' lands that are actually teeming with millions of people, of 'discovering' countries whose inhabitants already exist, because the non-white Other is so located in the guiding conceptual array that different rules apply."[40] Or, during the Rodney King trial in 1992, although graphic police brutality was caught on camera and shown in full to the jury, the predominant interpretive framework surrounding Black men enabled the defense to present King as "a 'dangerous PCP- crazed giant' who was…in control

[32] Irwin Edman, "Dewey and Art." In: *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom*. Ed. by Sidney Hook. New York, New York: The Dial Press, 1950, p. 63.
[33] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10,* p. 335.
[34] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10,* p. 337.
[35] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10,* pp. 336-37.
[36] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10,* p. 335.
[37] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10,* p. 337.
[38] Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, p. 61.
[39] John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953. Vol. 1: 1925, Experience and Nature*. Ed. by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, p. 229.
[40] Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, p. 63.

of the situation," demonstrating that "the ability to see a meaningful event is not a transparent, psychological process."[41] Any cognitive instruction attempting to correct undemocratic failures of communication and understanding would require the listener to grapple not only with the diverse experiences they do not yet understand, but also with the existing interpretations they must transform—processes which "in many respects go against the human grain."[42]

Art and aesthetic experiences can rework and reorient the interpretations that routinely structure people's perceptions by drawing out pre-existing meanings and presenting them in a new way. While most of our experiences are ones in which interpretive resources operate latently and unconsciously, there is a phase of experience in which our meanings are "undergoing re-direction, transitive transformation," which occurs when familiar objects, events, and people appear "in an unexpected, novel situation, where the familiar presents itself in a new light and is therefore not wholly familiar."[43] In such experiences, we are more open to the "dissolving and reforming [of] meaning."[44] Art is precisely such a "revelation of meaning in the old effected by its presentation through the new."[45] The meanings and values that operate without our awareness are brought into particular focus during aesthetic experiences, "as dyes come out of coal tar products when they receive special treatment."[46] In every work of art, the medium must be altered—"[m]arble must be chipped; pigments must be laid on canvas; words must be put together." But "a similar transformation takes place on the side of 'inner' materials, images, observations, memories and emotions."[47]

For example, Jordan Peele's film, *Get Out*, challenges widespread interpretive apparatus many white Americans may not recognize they possess. By presenting Chris, a Black man, as the victim of ruthless white killers in upstate New York, viewers undergo a reversal of common interpretive concepts (among whites) that present Black men as a threatening presence in white neighborhoods. In the climax of the film, viewers see Chris choking his girlfriend, Rose. This image—a Black man choking a white woman—echoes the common interpretive trope of the violent Black killer posing a threat to white women. But it is presented to the viewer in a novel way—as a Black male victim engaged in self-defense against a manipulative and homicidal white woman. Viewers' awareness of their old associations is heightened and transformed through the presentation of this familiar image in an aesthetic way that challenges its usual valence. The next moment, a police car arrives at the scene. While Chris backs away from Rose with his hands in the air, Rose reaches out to the police car and calls for help. Now the viewer witnesses not only a Black male victim and a white female perpetrator, but the *impossibility* of a third person—the officer having just arrived at the scene—coming to a veridical perspective of the situation, precisely because of the shared interpretive resources of their society, of which the viewer has just been made intensely and critically aware. Viewers become aware of 'how it looks,' realizing something about their society's and their own pre-existing interpretive resources, and in the process opening a path for their conscious transformation.

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[41] Charles Goodwin, "Professional Vision." In: *American Anthropologist* 96.3, 1994, p. 606.
[42] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 1*, pp. 234-35.
[43] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 1*, pp. 233-35.
[44] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 1*, p. 235.
[45] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 1*, p. 270.
[46] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10,* p. 17.
[47] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10,* p. 81.

This transformation "does not terminate with the immediate and particular occasion in which it is had."[48] The aesthetic experience opens up new "standards of appreciation which are confirmed and deepened by further experiences," making the world, through new conceptual resources, "a different place in which to live."[49] Art can therefore be a powerful tool in transforming undemocratically-constructed concepts into a more democratically-informed, representative set of shared interpretative resources with which to build a democratic society.

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Democracy requires much more than an elected government. It requires a body of citizens who are given opportunities to communicate their own experiences to their fellow citizens and are predisposed to understand the diverse experiences communicated to them by others. Without this, a society will fail to eliminate undemocratic power discrepancies because it bases truth claims, public policy, and institutional arrangements on interpretive resources which certain groups have had no opportunity to influence. When seeking to cultivate such "conjoint communicated experience," it is important not to overlook or underestimate the power of art, which possesses unique features that can overcome obstacles facing traditional cognitive methods. These include non-argumentative presentation, the communication of qualities of immediacy, and the heightening and conscious transformation of pre-existing meanings. Art should be understood as an indispensable instrument of democracy.

[48] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 1*, p. 352.
[49] Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 1*, pp. 274, 272.