

The Self-Reflexive Logic of Aesthetic Education and Its Mitigation

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The core function of aesthetic education is to promote the free development of human beings, and the mechanism of realizing its function includes awakening the subjective consciousness of human beings, activating the rational self-consciousness of human beings and strengthening the reflective spirit of human beings. However, the problems of standardization of educational contents and intellectualization of educational models in aesthetic education have profoundly affected the promotion of human free development by aesthetic education and produced a serious self-reflexive logic. The discussion of the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education is essentially a discussion of whether aesthetic education is possible or whether the concept of aesthetic education is valid. If this issue is not identified and clarified, then our aesthetic education may remain in educational misconceptions due to its self-reflexive logic. In order to mitigate the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education, we should gradually weaken the compulsory nature of aesthetic education and try to transcend the intellectualization trap of aesthetic education.

Keywords: aesthetic education, self-reflexive logic, freedom, intellectualization trap

The Core Function of Aesthetic Education: Promoting the Free Development of Human Beings

(1) Aesthetic Education Aims to Promote the Free Development of Human Beings

The Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools in a New Era issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council in October 2020 points out that aesthetic education is an education that enriches imagination and cultivates creative consciousness, which can enhance aesthetic quality, cultivate sentiment, warm the soul and stimulate innovative and creative vitality. Fundamentally, the value and function of aesthetic education lies in promoting human freedom and emancipation. Friedrich Schiller profoundly pointed out that the political problems that people want to solve in their experience must assume the path of aesthetics, because it is through beauty that people can go to freedom (Schiller, 1985, p. 14). Freedom here refers not to the personal dimension of freedom, but to the spiritual dimension of freedom. In the Paris Manuscripts of 1844, Marx had clearly stated that communism, through the renunciation of alienated labor and private property, “man takes possession of his full nature in a comprehensive way, that is, as a complete man” (Marx, 2009, p. 123). The “possession of one’s full essence” by a “complete

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person” and “human freedom” are fundamentally identical. Only when man achieves full freedom can he become a complete man and possess his fullness.

Spiritual freedom is not a question of whether it is realized, but rather a question of the degree of realization. The degree of realization of spiritual freedom is influenced by a variety of factors, one of the core factors being the cognitive ability and level of perception of the world. A person with a higher cognitive ability and level of cognition of the world enjoys a higher level of freedom. From the origin and development of aesthetic education, it has played an important role in enhancing people’s cognitive ability and cognitive level and thus promoting their freedom development. The process of aesthetics is the process of discovering various kinds of beauty contained in the objective world, the process of insight and appreciation of the phenomenon of beauty. People with high aesthetic literacy tend to be able to feel the beauty of the objective world in a more detailed way and to establish a connection between the objective world and the inner world in a more diversified way. The development of modern industrial society and the consequent assembly-line production methods and standardized product structures have, to a certain extent, led to the alienation of human beings. The human being as a subject is gradually nested in the modern industrial production process as a tool, and the singularity of work scenes and social roles lead to the narrowing of his vision of the objective world and the dimensions of his thinking. As a result, the scope of their spiritual imagination and the choice of their own life arrangements are greatly restricted, and although they still have the right to freely dispose of their bodies, this freedom is only formal.

Even though human society has entered the modern era, the division of labor developed by industrial society still dominates modern production activities, and the tendency of formalizing freedom has not been fundamentally changed. Aesthetic education aims to broaden people’s cognitive horizons by improving their aesthetic qualities, and to realize their freedom and liberation while reinventing themselves. Therefore, modern aesthetic education is not a conceptual form that points to the construction of ontology, but a functional form of existence that is dedicated to the realization of spiritual reality and reflects the inner restorative requirements of human beings (Wang, 2017, p. 20). The same is true even in the light of the history of modernization of Chinese education. Some scholars argue that modern Chinese aesthetic education is certainly related to the context of Western learning in the east, but fundamentally it originated from the need of the times for a new person and the establishment of a human being, and from the beginning it has been inextricably linked to the transformation of people and the problems of life (Tan, 2020, p. 38).

(2) Why Aesthetic Education Can Promote Human Freedom

The function of aesthetic education in promoting human freedom can be further developed from the following perspectives.

Firstly, aesthetic education is conducive to awakening the subjective consciousness of human beings. Subjective consciousness is the consciousness that people consciously recognize and apply laws in practice, deal with the relationship with nature, others and society, and meet their own or society’s needs (Chen, 2018, p. 37). The production mode of industrial society has instrumentalized and objectified human beings to a certain extent, and the subjective consciousness of human beings is often submerged in productive activities. Aesthetic education aims to return to the subjective existence of human beings, to take them out of the purely productive

activities and place them in the position of aesthetic subjects. The process of aesthetics is also the process of using certain criteria to explore and evaluate objective things, in which people gain freedom from the bondage of things.

Second, aesthetic education is conducive to the activation of human rational self-consciousness. The essential difference between human and animal behavior lies in human rationality, and only by following the logic of rationality in interaction activities, people are truly free. However, human rationality is influenced by many factors to be reflected in concrete actions, one of which is values. Some scholars have argued that pan-entertainment has a considerable negative impact on young students whose values are in the process of formation, from misleading their aesthetic formation and disintegrating their rational spirit to gradually depriving them of the reverence for ideals, faith and morality (Zhang, 2022, p. 84). Aesthetic education fundamentally reshapes human values, enabling people to distinguish between beauty and ugliness, right and wrong, and then activating their rational self-consciousness to achieve higher freedom.

Thirdly, aesthetic education is conducive to strengthening the reflective spirit of human beings. Human freedom is inevitably limited by the concepts accumulated in the process of growing up, and the continuous reflection on the accumulated concepts can make human freedom more fully realized. Aesthetic education enables people to grasp more deeply the diversity, specificity and change of beauty in the objective world, and then to project it into the reflection of accumulated ideas of self. Aesthetic education thus enables a man to liberate himself from the bondage of his past conceptions and move toward a higher level of freedom by reinforcing his reflective spirit.

The Self-reflexive Logic of Aesthetic Education: Between the Goal of Freedom and the Way of Coercion

Marx's fundamental goal of aesthetic education, and in fact the fundamental goal of the future communist social ideal, is to achieve the free and comprehensive development of every individual and the whole human being (Zhu, 2022, p. 4). Only through aesthetic training and the ability to recognize or judge beauty can each individual and humanity as a whole develop freely and comprehensively. It is for this reason that the Party Central Committee has placed special emphasis on strengthening and improving school aesthetic education in the new era in a comprehensive manner. However, aesthetic education itself is a self-reflexive concept, and when we take the freedom of human nature as the core issue of beauty, the freedom to resort to education becomes mandatory, and freedom and beauty are nowhere to be pursued (Yan, 2022, p. 30). This is the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education discussed in this paper. The self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education is manifested in the following two levels.

(1) Standardization of Educational Content in Aesthetic Education

At present, university education is still a form of "one-to-many" education, which is reflected not only in the educational subject but also in the educational content. Aesthetic education in universities usually means the standardization and homogenization of educational contents, i.e. the main content of aesthetic education is some kind of consensus beauty. The standardization and homogenization of educational content also means the standardization and homogenization of aesthetic discourse in the teaching process. The question of whether it is "beautiful" has thus become a closed question with relatively standard answers, rather than an open question full

of free thinking and discernment. This is undoubtedly self-reflexive with the diversity of beauty and the subjectivity and freedom of aesthetics. For this reason, it is questionable whether aesthetic education that attempts to enhance the ability to perceive beauty in all its diversity by means of standardized and homogenized teaching content can succeed. What is more worrying is that the standardization and homogenization of the educational content of aesthetic education may cut off the original understanding and perception of diversity of beauty of the educated person, and as a result, the educated person becomes less free after the aesthetic education. Fundamentally, the standardization and homogenization of aesthetic education in terms of educational content stems from the simple superposition of aesthetics and education in practice. In terms of the disciplinary attributes of aesthetic education, aesthetic education has both the attributes of aesthetics and a close relationship with pedagogy (Li, 2022, p. 116). This disciplinary attribute of aesthetic education leads the practice of aesthetic education to easily go into a misunderstanding and transplant the standardized and monolithic thinking of the textbook-based teaching content in traditional education to aesthetic education.

(2) The Intellectualization of Educational Models in Aesthetic Education

The process of traditional higher education is the process of knowledge transmission, and in order to achieve knowledge transmission more effectively, people have curricularized knowledge to form a logical and easily transferable knowledge system. This educational model has also been applied to aesthetic education. Most of the time, instead of being “tangibly integrated” into the school education as a whole, which carries out the function of “nurturing people,” aesthetic education is set up “independently” as a special knowledge activity for the student. Aesthetic education is not “tangibly” integrated into school education as a whole, which practices the function of “cultivating” people, but is “independently” set up as a special intellectual activity for students, and becomes an intellectual existence dominated by the popularization of artistic knowledge and training in artistic methods (Wang, 2020, p. 2). The transmission of knowledge through the establishment of various courses is necessary for professional training, but aesthetic education does not train people professionally, but promotes human freedom and liberation. The existence of knowledge implies the existence of professional authority, and the intellectualization of aesthetic education means that the educated must accept the discipline of aesthetic authority, which means that the pursuit of beauty at the inner level cannot go beyond the fence of knowledge, and thus is itself not free. Aesthetic education in the mode of knowledge education is only a formal completion of aesthetic education, which is fundamentally different from aesthetic education. Aesthetics focuses on “examination”, that is, the examination and observation of the objective world, and on this basis to obtain certain experiences and feelings. Therefore, aesthetics is not a process of applying knowledge, but a process of activating feelings. It is in this sense that some scholars believe that aesthetic education has an unparalleled position among other education in the association of human education (Peng, 2008, p. 99).

To sum up, the core function of aesthetic education is to promote human freedom, but aesthetic education has a profound restriction of freedom embedded in its educational content and mode. This inevitably makes people wonder whether people who have undergone strict aesthetic education still have aesthetic ability and can still achieve higher levels of freedom. Thus, aesthetic education implies to a certain extent a self-reflexive logic. The discussion of the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education is essentially a discussion of whether aesthetic education is possible or whether the concept of aesthetic education is valid. If this question is not identified and

clarified, our aesthetic education may remain in educational misunderstanding because it is subject to its self-reflexive logic.

Mitigating the Self-Reflexive Logic of Aesthetic Education: From Education to Preaching

The existence of self-reflexive logic seriously restricts the development of aesthetic education and the realization of its function in promoting the free development of human beings. The Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools in the New Era, on the other hand, emphasize that the higher education stage strengthens students' sense of cultural subjectivity and cultivates high-quality talents with lofty aesthetic pursuits and noble personality cultivation. Whether it is to promote the free development of human beings or to strengthen students' cultural subjective consciousness, it is necessary to find a solution to moderate the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education in the first place. This paper argues that the easing of the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education must achieve a conceptual transformation from education to preaching, and try to get rid of the original educational model.

(1) Weakening the Compulsory Nature of Aesthetic Education

The compulsory nature of aesthetic education objectively conflicts with the goal of freedom pursued by aesthetic education, which is the root cause of its self-reflexive logic. The logical contradiction between freedom and education suggests that if aesthetics must resort to education, it should be minimal, i.e., the goal of education is made to look like it is being achieved naturally by weakening its coercive nature (Liu, 2022, p. 11). Weakening the compulsory nature of aesthetic education does not mean that educational institutions can refrain from aesthetic education, but rather that they can carry out the process of aesthetic education in conjunction with the characteristics of aesthetic education as much as possible and constantly improve the inclusiveness of aesthetic education.

The core of weakening the compulsory nature of aesthetic education or enhancing the inclusiveness of aesthetic education is to truly treat the educated as aesthetic subjects and to recognize the diversity or plurality of judgments about beauty in aesthetic education. Especially in the context of the Internet era, where various new things are emerging, aesthetic education cannot be carried out with dogmatic and rigid aesthetic standards. In terms of educational content and teaching mode, we should get rid of the path dependence of professional education and reshape the teaching content and teaching mode according to the characteristics of aesthetic education and its functional requirements. Another perspective of weakening the compulsory nature of aesthetic education is to enhance the practical nature of aesthetic education, that is, to complete aesthetic education through student-oriented bottom-up practice rather than teacher-oriented top-down transmission as much as possible. The role of teachers in aesthetic practice is mainly to guide and preach, rather than to make students accept certain aesthetic standards compulsorily. Of course, a good curriculum education evaluation system can objectively and truly reflect the effectiveness of aesthetic education curriculum education and identify the problems in the process of aesthetic education curriculum education (Yang, 2022, p. 107). In order to enhance the inclusiveness of aesthetic education more effectively, a suitable evaluation feedback mechanism should also be established.

(2) Beyond the Intellectualization Trap of Aesthetic Education

In terms of its direct effect, aesthetic education enhances human aesthetic ability, the ability to appreciate the various things that exist and exist in the objective world. Therefore, it is not a question of literacy at the level of knowledge. Aesthetic education is not about teaching us a certain characteristic of fun, but about breaking the imitative mentality of the masses and the authoritative posture of the elite on the issue of fun, and fully respecting the fun choices of the self and others (Peng, 2005, p. 116). Further, the true meaning of aesthetic education is not to impart knowledge, implement standards, and reinforce order, but to return to the true nature of human beings (Yan & Wang, 2022, p. 30). To moderate the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education, it is necessary not only to weaken the coercive nature of aesthetic education, but also to fundamentally transcend the intellectualization trap of aesthetic education. Aesthetic education in general does not appear as a complete set of “knowledge discourse” constructs, but rather as a systematic “practical” existence (Wang, 2020, p. 3). To transcend the intellectualization trap of aesthetic education, one is to return to humanity and the other is to return to practice. In terms of returning to humanity, aesthetic education must be closely integrated with the excavation of human nature. Beauty is actually a positive reflection of the objective world in the subjective world, and whether a thing can be reflected in a positive form in the subjective world of people must be linked to human nature. Therefore, aesthetic education must first return to human nature, which is very different from professional knowledge education. If this is not recognized, aesthetic education can easily fall into the trap of intellectualization. In terms of returning to practice, aesthetic education must be carried out in aesthetic practice, and aesthetic education must be targeted through the problems presented by people in aesthetic practice.

Conclusion

The conflict between the function of promoting the free development of human beings and the standardization of educational methods constitutes the self-reflexive logic implicit in aesthetic education. Theoretically, the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education inevitably leads to the question of whether aesthetic education is possible, so revealing the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education is a prerequisite to freeing aesthetic education from educational misconceptions. Although the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education cannot be eliminated in the established educational paradigm, it can be moderated by gradually weakening the coercive nature of aesthetic education and trying to transcend the intellectualization trap of aesthetic education. In the future of aesthetic education, we should explore specific ways to moderate the self-reflexive logic of aesthetic education.

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