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## **Education and the Aesthetic Experience**

**A\_HF 4092.001 Educ & the Aesthetic Experienc – Spring 09**  
**1500-1640 Tuesday**

**Instructor: Maxine Greene**

### **Reading Materials:**

#### **Required**

**John Dewey, Chapter I, ART AS EXPERIENCE** (further chapters optional, depending on choice)

**Wolfgang Iser, THE ACT OF READING (Chapters 1 and 2 to be distributed)**

**Herbert Marcuse, THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION**

**Don DeLillo, WHITE NOISE**

**Junot Diaz, THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO**

### **Course Description**

Education is a social and a personal undertaking. On the one hand, it is a process of initiating diverse young people into participant membership in society. On the other, at least for some, it involves an ongoing effort to empower learners to make sense of their own experiences and to interpret the phenomena of the world around. Our interest in this class is in the teacher as agent, not the institution of the school. Assuming that there are many forces, many interests exerting influence on what is taken to be education, we will focus on the opening of spaces for teachers to choose themselves and to act upon those choices.

What has all this to do with the aesthetic experience? Most critics agree that reflective encounters with works of art (literature, the visual arts, film, drama, music) are likely to activate imagination, widen perception, and awaken people to become aware of dimensions of "reality" closed to them before. When a work considered to be a work of art is made available and accessible, when a teacher or a learner is informed enough to attend to its contours, its outlines, its nuances, its rhythms, its colors, it may be as if windows open in the closed room of the 'given,' the taken-for-granted. It may be as if unexpected possibilities are revealed, new connections become visible, things show themselves as if they were 'otherwise'. As important may be the light thrown on the perceiver's life and story. It is unlikely, for instance, that WHITE NOISE will leave untouched a reader's view of the effects of modern technology on her/his life. It is unlikely that THE LIVES OF OTHERS will leave unaffected one's confidence when it comes to understanding others. Indeed, one of our themes will have to do with the self-other relationship, another with the self and the stranger.

Teachers are familiar with the blanket of boredom that can envelop a classroom and often

spread as far as the teacher's desk. One philosopher has said that boredom is a response to a feeling of meaninglessness. We are familiar with the sense of irrelevance, even of futility aroused in students by the subject matter they are given; and we know that there is no greater obstacle to learning. There is never a guarantee; but the turning on of imagination through an encounter, say, with Picasso's GUERNICA or an engagement with Conrad's THE SECRET SHARER may enable students to reach beyond where they are--to think in terms of what might be, what should be when it comes to human relations, to the state of things.

Virginia Woolf wrote of the need to break through the "cotton wool of daily life" too frequently the nondescript life lived in the school. It may be a life lived mechanically rather than consciously. But it may seem preferable to live within the accustomed framework of the taken-for-granted than to move towards the new and unpredictable. There are times, however, when the framework seems to crumble. To borrow Camus's metaphor, it is as if "the stage sets collapse....and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins' ---this is important. Weariness comes at the end of a mechanical life but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness."

If boredom gives way to a half-understood restiveness, a desire for a new beginning, there cannot but be a moment of uncertainty, a wondering 'why'. People may suddenly discover that there is more in our experience than we suspected and that our experience is important enough to warrant an effort to understand it. Surely imagination can breathe life into experience and lead to a mode of questioning that makes it possible to begin.

We will be concerned with breathing life into our experiences through encounters with works of art. We may try to expand our vision, to 'see' more, each in her/his distinctive way. Through reading, looking, listening, taking part in dialogue, we shall try continually to begin.

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A list of assignments follows with approximations of the time required for each one

The optional readings are intended to serve as resources for clarifying some of the ways there are for looking at the meanings of 'aesthetic', 'experience', 'perspective', 'anaesthetic'. Treat them as optional, depending on questions you have at hand --having to do in part with the implications of fiction, e.g., for understanding the role of the teacher as agent and meaning-maker., and as shaping relationships with 'others'..

#### OPTIONAL READINGS

John Dewey, Art as Experience, Chapter 1.

Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading, Chapter 1 and 2

Herbert Marcuse, The Aesthetic Dimension

SESSIONS 1 AND 2: Life and death in the technicized, media -dominated world. . Read for discussions Don de Lillo, WHITE NOISE. .And what of the children? What do they

do and say? Echoes of Obama?

SESSION 3: Newcomers in new worlds. Read Junot Diaz, *THE BRIEF WONDERFUL LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*. [Times reviewer said the book tells of a multigenerational immigrant family from Santa Domingo in ways that "dabble in tropical magic realism, punk-rock feminism, hip-hop machismo, post-modern pyrotechnics and enough polymorphous multiculturalism to fill up an Introduction to Cultural Studies Syllabus". Again, what of the child strangers? What of the American Dream?

SESSION 4: Film to be shown in class. *THE LIVES OF OTHERS*.

SESSION 5: Discussion of film as art. Bibliography on film to be appended

SESSION 6: Discussion of film as art, as art and as possible source of aesthetic experience. Compare values of film with values of novel. How, given context, might this film be taught? What films with social or political concerns are comparable?