

LEARNING AND TEACHING  
THE WAYS OF KNOWING

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Part Two  
MODES OF KNOWING

CHAPTER II

*Aesthetic Modes of Knowing*

ELLIOT EISNER

*So gorgeous was the spectacle on the May morning of 1910 when nine kings rode in the funeral of Edward VII of England that the crowd, waiting in hushed and blackclad awe, could not keep back gasps of admiration. In scarlet and blue and green and purple, three by three the sovereigns rode through the palace gates, with plumed helmets, gold braid, crimson sashes, jeweled orders flashing in the sun. After them came five heirs apparent, forty more imperial or royal highnesses, seven queens—four dowager and three regnant—and a scattering of special ambassadors from uncrowned countries. Together they represented seventy nations in the greatest assemblage of royalty and rank ever gathered in one place and, of its kind, the last. The muffled tongue of Big Ben tolled nine by the clock as the cortege left the palace, but on history's clock it was sunset, and the sun of the old world was setting in a dying blaze of splendor never to be seen again.*

Barbara Tuchman  
*The Guns of August*, p. 1.

An examination of the relationship between the form and content of the opening paragraph in Barbara Tuchman's *Guns of August* will help us understand what the phrase "aesthetic modes of knowing" alludes to. Before examining this relationship I wish to mention now a theme that I will return to later. The phrase, "aesthetic modes of knowing," presents something of a contradiction in our culture. We do not typically associate the aesthetic with knowing. The arts, with

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I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the very useful critique of this chapter by my student, Lynda Stone.

which the aesthetic is most closely associated, is a matter of the heart. Science is thought to provide the most direct route to knowledge. Hence, "aesthetic modes of knowing" is a phrase that contradicts the conception of knowledge that is most widely accepted. I hope to show in this chapter that the widely accepted view is too narrow and that the roads to knowing are many. Let us return to Tuchman.

"So gorgeous was the spectacle on the May morning of 1910 when nine kings rode in the funeral of Edward VII of England that the crowd, waiting in hushed and black-clad awe, could not keep back gasps of admiration." What does Tuchman do in this, the opening line of her book? In the initial phrase, "So gorgeous was the spectacle on the May morning," Tuchman creates a rhythm, which is then punctuated by a staccato-like "when nine kings rode in the funeral of Edward VII." She then follows with contrasts between "gasps" and the soft sound of "hush." And then again, with the phrase "in scarlet *and* blue *and* green *and* purple, three by three the sovereigns rode through the palace gates," Tuchman creates a syncopation that recapitulates the sound of hoofs pounding the pavement as the horses pass by. Again, "with plumed helmets, gold braid, crimson sashes and jeweled orders flashing in the sun"—another series of short bursts filled with images as well as sound. And later in the paragraph, the "muffled tongue of Big Ben tolled nine by the clock." Here, the paired contradictions of "hushed gasps" and "muffled tones" appeal to our sense of metaphor. And for a finale Tuchman writes, "but on history's clock it was sunset, and the sun of the Old World was setting in a dying blaze of splendor never to be seen again." Like the coda of a classical symphony, Tuchman brings the paragraph to a slow declining close.

What occurs in the paragraph occurs throughout the book, and what occurs throughout the book is what makes literature literary. It is in the use of form, especially in the cadence and tempo of language, that patterns are established among the "parts" of the sentence and between the sentence and the paragraph that create their counterpart in the reader's experience. "After them came five heirs apparent, forty more imperial or royal highnesses, seven queens—four dowager and three regnant—and a scattering of special ambassadors from uncrowned countries." Like a partridge in a pear tree, the cadence of the sentence captivates and carries the reader off on a ride.

What also occurs in the paragraph is the generation in the reader's

mind's eye of an array of visual images. The writing is vivid and it is vivid because it is designed to elicit images of scarlet and blue and purple and of the plumed helmets and the gold braid. The writing evokes the scene Tuchman wishes the reader to see. We are able to participate vicariously in events that occurred when we were not yet born.

Consider again her use of language: "the muffled tones of Big Ben" and "black-clad awe." The language is shaped to help us see and feel the day and hence to know it as participants. Its form and content transport us to another time, another place. The literary in literature resides in the aesthetic capacities of language to influence our experience.

The reader should not assume that the aesthetic treatment of form for purposes of vicarious participation in events not directly available is limited to literature. Poetry, dance, the visual arts, and drama all employ form for such purposes. The drama within drama is created through the tensions that writers, actors, stage designers, lighting experts, and directors produce. What happens on the stage is the result of a collective effort. What occurs in literary works and in the visual arts is usually the product of individuals. Whether collective or individual, the common function of the aesthetic is to modulate form so that it can, in turn, modulate our experience. The moving patterns of sound created by composers, in turn, create their counterparts in the competent listener. The physically static forms produced by visual artists create in the competent viewer a quality of life analogous to those in the forms beheld. In sum, the form of the work informs us. Our internal life is shaped by the forms we are able to experience.

The phrase "we are able to experience" is a critical one. If the forms that constitute the arts or the sciences spoke for themselves we would need no programs in the schools to help students to learn how "to read" them. What we are able to see or hear is a product of our cultivated abilities. The rewards and insights provided by aesthetically shaped forms are available only to those who can perceive them. Not only is competence a necessary condition for experiencing the form in works we have access to, but the particular quality of life generated by the forms encountered will, to some degree, differ from individual to individual. All experience is the product of both the features of the world and the biography of the individual. Our experience is influ-

enced by our past as it interacts with our present.<sup>1</sup> Thus, not only must a certain kind of competence be acquired in order to perceive the qualities of form in the objects available to us, but the nature of our experience with these forms is influenced not only by the form itself but by our past.

I have thus far directed my remarks to the aesthetic functions of form as a source of experience and understanding in the fine arts and in literature. But I do not wish to suggest that the aesthetic is restricted to the fine arts and literature. All scientific inquiry culminates in the creation of form: taxonomies, theories, frameworks, conceptual systems. The scientist, like the artist, must transform the content of his or her imagination into some public, stable form, something that can be shared with others. The shape of this form—its coherence—is a critical feature concerning its acceptability. The adequacy of theory is not simply determined by experimental results. Experimental results can often be explained by competing theories. The attractiveness of a theory is a central factor in our judgment of it.

Viewed this way, both artist and scientist create forms through which the world is viewed. Both artist and scientist make qualitative judgments about the fit, the coherence, the economy, "the rightness" of the forms they create. Readers of these forms make similar judgments. It was his recognition of the universal character of form-making in every sphere of human life that prompted Sir Herbert Read to say that the aim of education was the creation of artists. What he meant was that all students should be enabled to produce good forms. He writes:

Having established the relevance of aesthetics to the processes of perception and imagination, I shall then pass on to the less disputed ground of expression. Education is the fostering of growth, but apart from physical maturation, growth is only made apparent in expression—audible or visible signs and symbols. Education may therefore be defined as the cultivation of modes of expression—it is teaching children and adults how to make sounds, images, movements, tools and utensils. A man who can make such things well is a well educated man. If he can make good sounds, he is a good speaker, a good musician, a good poet; if he can make good images, he is a good painter or sculptor; if good movements, a good dancer or laborer; if good tools or utensils, a good craftsman. All faculties, of thought, logic, memory, sensibility and intellect, are involved in such processes, and no aspect of education is excluded in such processes. And they are all processes which involve art, for

art is nothing but the good making of sounds, images, etc. The aim of education is therefore the creation of artists—of people efficient in the various modes of expression.<sup>2</sup>

There is another sense in which form and the aesthetic experience it engenders can be considered. I have used the term "form" thus far to refer to the products made by both artists and scientists. Both, I have argued, create forms, and these forms have aesthetic features that appeal. But the term form can be conceived of not only as a noun, but as a verb. Following Read, we form groups, we form sentences, we form structures. "Form," in this sense, refers to something we do. Indeed, in Norway visual arts education is called "Forming." To form is to engage in an activity occurring over time, guided by attention to changing qualities whose end is to produce a structure, either temporal or spatial, that gives rise to feeling. To be able to produce such forms the qualities that constitute them must be appraised by their contribution to the life of feeling. The maker, in this case, must know what he has before him in order to make decisions that will yield the hoped for results. A satisfying end is achieved only if appropriate choices are made in process. To make such choices one must be aware of the qualities of form as well as the content as one proceeds. One must know the qualities of life that the qualitative components engender and how they will function within the whole when it is completed.

In this view the aesthetic is both a subject matter and a criterion for appraising the processes used to create works of science as well as art. The aesthetic is not simply the possession of completed works. The sense of rightness or fit that a scientist or artist experiences in the course of his or her work is crucial to the quality of the final work. But not only does the aesthetic function in this way. The ability to experience the aesthetic features of the process has been regarded as a prime motive for work. Alfred North Whitehead once commented, "Most people believe that scientists inquire in order to know. Just the opposite is the case. Scientists know in order to inquire." Scientists, Whitehead believed, are drawn to their work not by epistemological motives but by aesthetic ones. The joy of inquiry is the driving motive for their work. Scientists, like artists, formulate new and puzzling questions in order to enjoy the experience of creating answers to them.

The distinctions I have made concerning form and the aesthetic as a