**Aesthetic Education: Thinking with Others**

**A two-day colloquium, 29-30th May, 2025, at**

**St John’s College, University of Oxford**

The term ‘aesthetic education’ refers to the way in which our ability to perceive, imagine, and judge is importantly shaped by our responses to works of art and (albeit now less frequently) experiences arising from our encounter with the natural world. The attempt to define how it works and why it matters has a long history, which extends from Plato’s Republic and Horace’s Ars Poetica, through Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1791)*,* Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795)*,* Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Tagore’s *Viśva Sāhitya* (1907)and Herbert Marcuse’s *The* *Aesthetic Dimension* (1977).This tradition of inquiry, both within Europe and beyond, has fascinatingly explored the role of literature and the arts in shaping moral understanding and promoting a good society. But within contemporary literary studies there is now a certain lack of confidence, or even suspicion, about what it means to appeal to this tradition for intellectual guidance, or indeed for support in justifying our own role as educators.

The main source of this suspicion is the wide-ranging revisionist critique made in the 1980s and 1990s of the various concepts which underpin aesthetic education. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s influential *Distinction* (1979) portrayed the Kantian conception of aesthetic disinterest as a fantasy of transcending class tensions. Paul de Man’s *Aesthetic Ideology* (1977-83) criticised the ‘Schillerean’ impulse within education as complicit with authoritarian fantasies and in denial of material difference. Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* (1986) and *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) attacked the core idea of aesthetic judgment, upon which the distinctiveness of literature as an object of study rests. While there is a great deal of insight in these revisionist accounts, there is an equally great deal to challenge. Yet their impact has been at once wide and diffuse, giving rise—even and perhaps especially among many who have never read these texts—to an ill-focused suspicion (or just lack of confidence) when it comes to core concepts such as aesthetic disinterest, the free play of the imagination, and the distinctiveness of aesthetic judgment.

This is particularly evident in the recent renewal of interest in aesthetic education from within literary studies. While Michel Chaouli has importantly renewed attention to Kant’s third *Critique*, in *Something Speaks to Me* (2024) he too quickly assimilates aesthetic education to a domesticating moral agenda of ‘good outcomes’. Michael Clune’s *A Defense of Judgment* (2019) either ignores or over-hastily rejects the accounts of judgment provided by Kant, Gadamer, and Hannah Arendt, which impoverishes the alternative conception he develops. In other recent works, such as Kandace Chuh’s *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* (2018) or David Lloyd’s *Under Representation* (2017),precursors are pushed aside to make space for an analysis based on contemporary literature and the politics of identity, which for all its insights is again unnecessarily circumscribed in its conclusions. The leading premise of these and other recent accounts is that the longer tradition of reflection on aesthetic education is at best vexed and problematic, and at worst irreparably damaged by its connections with social exclusion, racism, and gendered bias—and that it therefore must be reinvented from the ground up.

Yet while it would be deeply misplaced to leave inherited assumptions untouched as our understanding of social and political differences widens, it is equally misplaced to ignore or repress the challenge the past can make to our own ways of thinking—and the ways in which it is open to being reinvented. The impoverishment that has resulted is evident in the conceptually limited nature of much work in literary studies today, which often struggles to understand what if any difference literature makes to the various questions typically posed about morality, emotion, politics and social institutions.

This colloquium aims to generate dialogue between scholars with different areas of expertise—from English and modern languages, philosophy, political theory, and sociology—on the subject of aesthetic education. We will explore the various concepts associated with this broad theme, including (but not limited to) judgment and taste, disinterestedness, moral perfectionism, the clarification of emotion, the creative will, and the shaping of imagination. More precisely, we will consider how best to go about placing ourselves in a productive and non-trivialising dialogue with the many-sided inheritance of the past. Each speaker has been invited to ‘think with’ a particular historical interlocutor in relation to some aspect of aesthetic education, to evaluate what is generative and what is untenable in that approach.

**Confirmed speakers:**

Erik Bachman (UC Santa Cruz), ‘The God Who Fails Better: Aesthetic Conditioning in Lukács and Pavlov.’

Amit Chaudhuri (novelist, musician and literary critic), ‘The Emergence of the Impersonal’

Rosinka Chaudhuri (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta), ‘Tagore’s Viśva-Bhāratī: Aesthetic Education in Practice’

Jennifer Gossetti-Ferencei, (Johns Hopkins), ‘Literature, Aesthetic Education, and Ecological Thinking.’

Peter McDonald (University of Oxford), ‘The A-Word, Reading with Wittgenstein and Joyce.’

Tim Mehigan (University of Queensland), ‘Schiller and Aesthetic Cognitivism.’

Yi-Ping Ong (Johns Hopkins), ‘On Imagining the Impossible.’

Lloyd Pratt (University of Oxford), ‘Black Aesthetic Education and Self-Reliance.’

Gisèle Sapiro (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales), ‘Rethinking Aesthetic Education in light of Bourdieu’s reading of Kant.’

Noël Sugimura (University of Oxford), ‘‘The Last Victorian Rationalist: Empson and Aesthetic Education.’

Linda Zerilli (University of Chicago), ‘The Aesthetics of Democratic Persuasion: Thinking with Arendt, Kant, and Wittgenstein.’

Abigail Zitin (Rutgers), ‘Aesthetic Learning: Education and Empiricism.’

**Outline**

Thursday May 29th

*All events will be in the St John’s Auditorium and open to the public. The format is a panel of 3 speakers who introduce their topic in a short paper of 15 mins, leading to a discussion involving both participants and audience members.*

9:15: welcome and intro

9:30-11:00: Panel 1 (3 speakers)

11:00-11:20: coffee

11:20-12:50: Panel 2 (3 speakers)

2:00-3:30: Panel 3 (3 speakers)

3:30-3:50: coffee

3:50-5.20: Panel 4 (3 speakers)

5.20: Closing response.

Friday May 30th:

10:00-12:00: plenary session, in which 4 respondents comment on the gathered papers (N.B. this is also a public event in the auditorium)