**Erik M. Bachman, “The Sense for Art: *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*, Signal System 1’, and Aesthetics as Comportment”**

*The Specificity of the Aesthetic* (1963) comprises Georg Lukács late attempt to synthesize a lifetime of literary criticism and political commitments into a coherent account of how art emerged in human history and how our behaviors have adjusted over the course of millennia as its makers and receivers. Along with two other incomplete late works on ontology and ethics, Lukács’s aesthetics is (as Ágnes Heller, his former student, has put it) “a historico-philosophical confession of faith” in the dialectical unity of history in the ongoing formation of a humanism that hitherto remains very much a work in progress marked by continuities and discontinuities. Notably, *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* also provides Lukács’s most developed account of subjectivity, one that is rooted in the research of Ivan Pavlov, who famously conceptualized two signal systems to encompass the neural activities of higher organized forms of life. Signal system 1 refers to direct signals from the objects and creatures of the world that, through patterns of association characterized by stimulus and inhibition, give rise to the conditional reflexes. Humans remain subject to signal system 1, but additionally we have developed signal system 2 (language). Lukács understood his innovative contribution to both psychology and aesthetics to be the discovery of signal system 1’ as the realm of art, which brings together the sensuous evocative immediacy of signal system 1 with the second-order qualities of signal system 2 as a signal of signals. Accordingly, thinking with Lukács in aesthetics means moving beyond judgement, taste, representation, expression, or experience. Instead, the bodily (not just neuroscientific) plasticity of signal system 1’ and the challenge to transform its affects into passional comportments require a confrontation with the fact that aesthetic education entails continuous *re*-education (there is no end to the education of the mind and body through art).

**Amit Chaudhuri, ‘The Emergence of the Impersonal’**

This talk looks not at a history of impersonality but at a recurrent emergence, where 'impersonality' becomes, at certain moments in a culture, an intervention and a minority pursuit comprising the dismantling of the pervasive binaries of 'subjectivity' and 'reality'. This minority pursuit is of significance to a particular kind of artist, or theorist, or philosopher, whether they are from 2nd-century BCE India, 10th-century Kashmir, or 19th-century England. As far as English literary history is concerned, Warren Hastings's reading of the *Gita* in his letter to Nathaniel Smith in 1784, urging the East India Company to support the publication of Charles Wilkins's translation, marks an unremarked-on but decisive shift in that history from subject-matter and emotion to attention - a kind of attention that leads to new kinds of creative work, and also makes new theories of the impersonal indispensable.

**Rosinka Chaudhuri, ‘Aesthetic Education in Practice’**

If an aesthetic education is an investigation into what the real ends of education might be, and an assertion, after Schiller, that art should be the basis of education, then a particularly powerful realisation of those ends are to be found in Rabindranath Tagore’s educational initiatives in an obscure corner of early twentieth-century Bengal, Santiniketan. Here he imagined and implemented new roles for art, aesthetics, and education animated by his own specific practices as poet, painter, composer, and choreographer. Individual contributions and many voices were accommodated in an unfolding of a practice of aesthetic education that was not just new to India, but new to the world. I show here how, in asking for a displacement of the Europe/non-Europe economy of correctness, Tagore put into practice an aesthetic education that was a fundamental reflection of his way of reading, privileging the useless, the superfluous, and the unnecessary as the core attributes of *ananda* (delight), the central philosophical tenet underpinning his notion of literature and existence in the world.

**Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei, ‘Literature, Aesthetic Education, and Ecological Thinking.’**

Through experientially intricate evocations of the more than human world, environmentally-sensitive literature has been valued as fostering ecophilic sensibilities rethinking our place in a larger ecosystem. Yet literary ecology has been challenged on several grounds: concerning the ontological notion that poetic language reveals being and thus facilitates poetic dwelling; concerning the assumptions of realism in ‘nature writing’ and the idealization of nonhuman nature in romantic works; and involving competing visions of the relation between texts and the ‘nature’ they represent. What is more, the history of literature itself has contributed the cultural marginalization of the more than human world, by relegating environment to background or dramatization of human events, obscuring larger-scale interdependencies of which humans are a part. Even ecologically sensitive literature may inadvertently bolster an anthropocentric aesthetic by enframing nature within narrative consciousness or absorbing nature into poetic imagery that appeals to the scale of individual readerly experience. Most generally, literary ecology raises questions of medium, including whether we can ever adequately represent or give voice to nonhuman nature in human terms. In light of such criticisms, here it will be suggested that literature has ecological import when fostering awareness of both our entanglements with and our difference from nonhuman nature, when engaging both the intimate scale of human experience and pointing toward that which exceeds it, and in self-reflexive illumination of the possibilities and limits of its medium.

**Damian Maher, ‘A Whale of a Time: Christopher Bollas on Transformational Aesthetic Experience’**

Aesthetic education, by definition, promises change. According to this fantasy or conviction, an encounter with a work of art influences or transforms, beneficially, it is hoped, our experiences of ourselves, others, and the world as well as our ways of experiencing. Whether and how encounters with art are genuinely transformative, and whether these transformations are beneficial, harmful, or neutral have not only stoked much anxiety within the tradition of aesthetic education, but also emerge as existential questions for psychoanalysis, which likewise works according to and against the hope of a transformational encounter. Christopher Bollas, in ‘The Transformational Object’, ‘The Aesthetic Moment and the Search for Transformation’, and other essays in *The Shadow of the Object* and *Being a Character,* conceives of aesthetic experience and all object relations as bids for transformation that recall the earliest infantile experiences of being transformed, that is, being cared for, disseminated, and evoked by a caregiver. His view that (meaningful) aesthetic experience is a bid to recreate pre-conscious transformation presents considerable challenges to the ethical, cognitive and social aspirations of the tradition of aesthetic education. Yet the problem for Bollas is that the search for transformation, whether gratifying or not, can prove pathological rather than, say, generative. His overriding hope for art and psychoanalysis is that they can transform what one (mis)takes transformation to entail. In this paper, I will test his notion of transformation and this reparative hope by probing how Bollas reassuringly juxtaposes Ahab’s and Ishamel’s object quests in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* to avoid or deflect the ruinous logic of transformation.

**Peter D. McDonald, ‘The A-Word: Reading with Wittgenstein and Joyce’**

This paper addresses the intersections of philosophy and literature using Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939), focusing on their implications for aesthetic education and the critique of language. Beginning with a personal reflection on the term ‘Aesthetic Education,’ I trace its conceptual origins to Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where disinterestedness emerges as a defining principle of aesthetic judgment. I argue against the homogenization of artistic experiences under the rubric of ‘the Aesthetic,’ proposing a more nuanced, embodied understanding of creative expression.

I then turn to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, examining the ongoing debate over its status as a philosophical treatise or literary artefact. Engaging with recent translations and interpretations, I highlight Wittgenstein’s effort to demarcate the limits of meaningful language, advocating for philosophy as a practice of elucidation rather than doctrinal prescription. His rejection of ‘geschwefelt’ (gassing?) in favour of logical clarity finds a counterpoint in Joyce’s linguistic playfulness.

Bringing *Finnegans Wake* into dialogue with the *Tractatus*, I discuss Joyce’s embrace of nonsense as a generative mode of meaning-making that resists rigid conceptual frameworks and the desire to unveil hidden structures. Unlike Wittgenstein’s structured ascent toward clarity, Joyce’s world-book destabilizes fixed interpretations, foregrounding the materiality and multiplicity of language itself. This comparison raises broader questions about the role of creative criticism in crossing the disciplinary boundaries of the university and managing the tension between philosophical rigour and literary experimentation.

By reading Wittgenstein and Joyce together, the paper invites a reconsideration of how we engage with literary and philosophical writings—not as rigid systems but as dynamic, transformative encounters with creativity in language.

**Tim Mehigan, ‘Schiller and Aesthetic Cognitivism’**

The debate about aesthetic education today is framed within a wider debate about the knowledge, or “epistemic content”, that can be attributed to the artwork. In that wider debate, two positions currently occupy attention: a “cognitivist” account of art, on one side, which maintains that art has epistemic content or value, and an “anti-cognitivist” account, on the other side, maintaining that art neither subtends epistemic content or value nor is reliant on it for its messaging. One can further suppose that aesthetic education will look different depending on which of these two accounts of art is defended. Proponents of cognitivist arguments claim that art represents a core activity of education in general since the epistemic value of art is of the same order as the epistemic orientation of education itself (Biesta 2017). By contrast, anti-cognitivists maintain that art draws on expressivist energies, not epistemic ones (Lamarque and Olsen 1994), and that art in consequence should be deemed a non-necessary component in the enterprise of education. Where the humanities appear under pressure in educational settings, as they are today in the modern university, anti-cognitivist accounts of art are likely to be in the ascendancy.

Against this background, the paper points to the value of returning to a moment at the beginning of the modern period when these positions were first outlined. This is the moment when Kant set out an influential account of art’s outlook and purpose in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) (C*ritique of Judgment*) and when the philosophical poet Friedrich Schiller moved against this account of art in a series of aesthetic writings in the early to mid 1790s. A good way to understand Schiller’s protracted dealings with Kant at this time is to see them as differing responses to Kant’s occluded anti-cognitivism – “occluded”, because both cognitivist and anti-cognitivist tendencies can be found in Kant’s account of art. By contrast, Schiller was an aesthetic cognitivist who never deviated from this position. In his disputation with Kant, accordingly, Schiller did not resile from the cognitivist position, but came to an understanding about how he should defend it in response to Kant’s objections. The result of these encounters with Kant’s thought is the notion of aesthetic education which, importantly, views art as epistemically valuable in a way that is consistent with cognitivist accounts of art today (cf. Nussbaum 2001, Schellekens 2023).

The paper concludes by considering the Schillerian aftermath. While German Romanticism drew inspiration from Schiller’s aestheticism, his thinking does not inevitably lead to it, and properly considered, is mostly at variance with it. A stronger line of influence is traceable through both Humboldt’s formalization of the notion of *Bildung*, a core educational concept in German-speaking Europe today, and Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, whose modern adherent, Hans-Georg Gadamer, explicitly acknowledges the importance of the lineage drawing back to Schiller. These are major lines of intellectual development that explicitly recognize the importance of the aesthetic cognitivist position Schiller made central to his pioneering account of aesthetic education in his *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795) (*Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Humanity*).

**Yi-Ping Ong, ‘On Imagining the Impossible’**

We often marvel at works of art and literature for their ability to bring forth vivid representations of the world as we know it. Truth, reality, verisimilitude: our most precious masterpieces, from Homer’s *Iliad* to the great ink paintings of the Song Dynasty, are said to exemplify these qualities. Indeed, even in contemporary art, literature, and media, the essential quality of realism reigns supreme – think of the five sprawling seasons of *The Wire*, often compared to Dickens or Zola in its epic breadth, or of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s monumental autofiction and Elena Ferrante’s masterful social realism. In keeping with the ethos of realism, these works are lauded for their capacity to deliver reality stripped of its illusions and ideals – life as it *really* is, and not as we would wish it to be – and, moreover, to transport us into a world that is teeming with what Roland Barthes called “reality effects”: those tiny details that reproduce the actual texture of lived experience.

Yet there is something very strange that even realist works of art and literature do which is seldom noticed: they show us things that are impossible to see in real life. This paper focuses on art as an education in the impossible. Via three examples drawn from realist painting and novels, I explore the way art and literature bring into the frame of representation phenomena that are impossible to represent outside of a fictional universe. In so doing, these works take us beyond our ordinary, habitual mode of perception and enable us to perceive something that in principle cannot be perceived but only, as it were, *imagined*. In Pierre-August Renoir’s *Luncheon at the Boating Party* (1880-1881), for instance, we suddenly see our own not-to-be-seenness; in Charles Dicken’s *Great Expectations* (1861), we encounter as an integrated whole the existence of the traumatized self; and, in Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886), we experience life beyond its final endpoint in death.

**Lloyd Pratt, ‘Black Aesthetic Education and Self-Reliance’**

Julian Mayfield’s novel *The Hit* (1957) is a meditation on the challenges confronting a Black family living in 1930s Harlem. It opens with an odd poetic epigraph that insists on the priority of the individual: “Magically greased, out of the locks / and chains of definition, slips the / personal I. In my Harlem, therefore, / find the Race, the Group, but, more / find Me.” Mayfield’s history of committed anti-colonial Black Marxist activism looks confusing in relation to the epigraph, which emphasizes the individual and so seems to betray an emerging Black post-WWII political consensus regarding the priority of the community in relation to the individual. The tenor of Mayfield’s thinking and literary practice come into focus, however, when read through the lectures on American literature Mayfield offered during his time as a Fulbright scholar in West Germany. Mayfield’s understanding of Emerson’s thought, Emerson’s legacy in American literature, and the novel genre’s obligation to depict moments of individual moral decision-making illuminate the stakes of Black individualism after World War II. Mayfield’s view of Emerson’s legacy informed his approach to the teaching of Black literary history and the project of the Black novel during his time at Cornell University’s Society of Fellows. His Emerson is a thinker of consequence who pushed back against the tendency of communitarian projects to defer responsibility from the individual to larger forces. At the same time, Mayfield how accepting personal responsibility involves a clear view of what Emerson calls the ‘impersonal’. Mayfield suggests the Black novel must rise to the Emersonian challenge of thinking through the moment of individual decision, the place of the impersonal in modern life, and their implications for collective Black life.

**Gisèle Sapiro, ‘Rethinking aesthetic education in light of Bourdieu’s reading of Kant.’**

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu criticizes Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgement. His critique does not dismiss Kant’s analysis, but he argues that Kant’s vision of aesthetic judgement universalizes the experience of the educated people, who are trained to have a distanced relationship to artworks and to culture. By obscuring other forms a relationship to culture and art, Kant’s analysis legitimizes the belief in the superiority and authenticity of the aesthetic posture. Furthermore, this abstract theory of aesthetic judgement dissimulates its social function as “distinction” from attitudes towards art deemed vulgar – which problematizes Kant’s core idea of disinterestedness -, and thus the social (class) foundations of the hierarchy of tastes. We can call it an “aesthete” bias, comparable to the scholastic bias that Bourdieu also criticizes from an epistemological standpoint. However, as an intellectual, Bourdieu did not reject the aesthetic judgement, which he himself practiced. His efforts to analyze the symbolic revolutions produced by Flaubert, Baudelaire, Manet or Duchamp, attest to his strong belief in objective criteria of artistic value, although his work tries to combine external and internal analysis. And he definitely believed in aesthetic education. However, his empirical research on education and on museum attendance shows that access to aesthetic education is unequal even in a context of democratization of both education and culture, due to the weight of inherited cultural capital, which is more valued in professors’ judgment than acquired cultural capital (or scholastic capital, acquired at school). His reflections had some impact on education and the growing awareness to these inequalities. However, aesthetic education is facing now new challenges that were not addressed by Bourdieu, and that I will develop in the second part of this presentation: the exclusion from the canon of artworks based not on aesthetic criteria but on cognitive biases and prejudice related to gender, race, geographic origin, and class. Does it mean that the canon should be suppressed? Or should it just be revised? And what are the implications for aesthetic education?

**Linda M. G. Zerilli, ‘The Aesthetics of Democratic Persuasion.’**

Received accounts of democratic persuasion work from the assumption that agreement can be generated through rational argumentation. However, such argumentation generally takes for granted that we work from shared premises or worldviews. Where such premises cannot be found, argue critics, we must reconcile ourselves to the intractability of what Robert Fogelin calls “deep disagreement.” Numerous studies have shown that people are rarely persuaded of things they do not already believe. So-called democratic deliberation, guided by the norms of “pubic reason” advanced by neo-Kantians such as Habermas and Rawls, is rife with confirmation bias (cherry-picking information that confirms existing views), motivated reasoning (believing what we wish to be true despite the evidence), and polarization (restricting ourselves to conversations with those whose views we already accept). In his recent book, *Changing Our Mind*, the novelist Julian Barnes admits that when looking over decades of discussions with others about political matters, he cannot “remember a single, clear instance, when a single, clear argument has made me change my mind—or when I have changed someone else’s mind.” On the rare occasions when he has changed his mind, it was by way of feeling, not rational thought.

In this paper, I want to develop the aesthetics of democratic persuasion. What moves us to change our mind? Although this question cannot be answered in the abstract, there are several generalizable features of persuasion that I’d like to explore. Developing the idea of affective intentionality, I try to show that persuasion involves altering one’s affective propensities and how one receives the world, beginning with the Kantian recognition of the subject dependence of all objective thought and the subjective validity of aesthetic judgment. With Wittgenstein, I show that knowledge is nested in forms of certainty (*Gewissheit*) that are not static but subject to change by altering rational thought's pictorial basis. With Arendt, I show that changing one’s mind involves a distinctively political and aesthetically based ability to orient oneself in thinking and judging in a plural public world where standpoints and opinions differ.

**Abigail Zitin, ‘Aesthetic Learning: Education and Empiricism.’**

My point of departure is Frances Ferguson’s *Solitude and the Sublime* (1992). Ferguson mounts a robust defense of Kantian aesthetics against its indictment as mere ideology. But Ferguson’s approach is singular among other, like-minded projects (e.g. Rancière) in resisting (or merely appearing indifferent to) the claims of aesthetic education. She leans into the least accountable, the least usable, aspects of Kant’s theory (his formal idealism), suggesting in the process that to spin the Critique of Judgment toward a progressive vision of cultural enfranchisement is to mistake its central insights.

This has payoff, albeit of a deflationary kind, for understanding Kant; I think it’s interesting to consider how critical desire (to make the aesthetic good for something) might arguably warp Kant’s argument beyond recognition (opening it up, in the process, to ideology critique). But what about for aesthetic education?

Education—or, more precisely, learning—cannot do without the category of experience, involving, as it does, a processual movement from not-knowing to knowing. And experience is a key term in Ferguson’s account of the aesthetic, too; she repeats, as a kind of slogan for aesthetic experience, the phrase “You had to be there”: an expression of the limits of the communicability of judgment.[[1]](#footnote-1) Ferguson suggests that the account of experience that matters for education is precisely that which doesn’t for the Kantian theory of aesthetic judgment: experience that accumulates, that is represented and communicated. It’s all the more striking, then, that education has been a central concern for Ferguson in some of her more recent work, especially in essays on I.A. Richards and on Jeremy Bentham as an aesthetic theorist.[[2]](#footnote-2) My paper will attempt to make sense of this trajectory in her work, with a glance back (I hope) at the role of taste in a watershed British empiricist theory of learning: John Locke’s 1692 *Some Thoughts Concerning Education.*

1. Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 29, and “Reflections on Burke, Kant, and *Solitude and the Sublime*,” *European Romantic Review* 23, no. 3 (2012): 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ferguson, “Our I. A. Richards Moment: The Machine and Its Adjustments,” in *Theory Aside*, ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 261–79, and “Not Kant, but Bentham: On Taste,” *Critical Inquiry* 45 (Spring 2019): 577–600. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)