Politics and Philosophy of Aesthetic Education

Michael Chanan

Revised version of paper for the MEDIA PRACTICE CONFERENCE, Royal Holloway College, 4-6 July 97

Preamble

This paper is about theory and practice, but not in the expectable way. The practice to be treated is that of the pedagogy of film schools in Britain in the 1990s, while the theory is Romantic aesthetics. The paper looks at the legacy of 18 years of Tory government in the field of the moving image within higher education, following the huge expansion and popularity of media education combined with the depletion of funds and the new managerialism which now rules our universities. In order to search for some principles by which to re-establish our bearings I feel prompted to go back to Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, written two hundred years ago, at the birth of the modern era.

1 The Tory Heritage

For the last decade or more, almost everything that government has done to education has been counterproductive and seriously mismanaged. In 1979 the Conservatives inherited a binary system of higher education - a system divided between universities and polytechnics - created in the mid-60s by a Labour government's response to the Robbins Report. The Polytechnics, which subsequently saw the integration of the arts schools, challenged many of the assumptions about the nature of higher education held by the universities. They were particularly successful in increasing numbers of women, students from ethnic minorities, mature students, and those without traditional entry qualifications. They catered for them by creating new patterns of courses in both further and higher education, in a wide new range of subjects, pioneering degree courses in fields such as librarianship, business studies, and our own sector, film, television and video. They also, and for Mrs Thatcher's government more critically, showed how to provide higher education at lower cost to increasing numbers of different types of student in different ways.

Seeing in the Polytechnics a model for the cheap expansion of further and higher education, the Conservatives pumped up student numbers, at the same time encouraging the new methods of educational management which had been developed in the process. Many of the features of the present funding mechanisms were pioneered in the polytechnics, such as the system which uses student numbers and staff/student ratios to determine the quantity of funding. This was supposed to ensure expansion in more popular courses (according to the rule of the market) but it was left to individual institutions to work out how to manage expansion in expensive areas and how to cope with those that were failing. With the institutions reluctant - until recently - to try and shed staff, the results have been cut-backs in 'desirable expenditure' such as books and libraries, buildings and maintenance - in other words, infrastructure - where short-term savings bring both medium and long-term problems.

Then the government lumped the two parallel systems of university and polytechnic together with scant regard for their different pedagogic practices, and set up new controlling agencies to supervise it all. The result? In the words of a recent writer in the THES: 'Although the polytechnics showed how higher education can respond to market forces and expand on demand, this was achieved at the price of penury. We may now have mass higher education, but it is higher education on the cheap. It is often futilely competitive, and mindlessly managerial.' [1] This attempted Americanisation of British higher education earned Mrs.Thatcher the snub of the academic elte, when Oxford University denied her an honorary degree.

The government came up with proposals for higher education based on the advice of the accountants and business consultants Coopers and Lybrand. This approach places higher education institutions in direct competition through a ranked assessment system based on the inspection of courses, with the allocation of student numbers, and hence funding, as the reward (or punishment). Courses deemed to be 'good' receive greater resources. To the question what is good and who does the judging, the answer is that it's built in to the system. What looks superficially like an extension of the peer review system which has guided British higher education in the past, becomes a systemic process in the form of a categorized audit conducted by trained assessors. (And at the HEFCE assessment at Back Hill last February, someone else turned up on the last day, who was introduced to us as 'here in order to assess the assessors'.)

The Tories, prime movers of economic neoliberalism, argued that the way to improve things was by better management. However, first of all, management is never neutral, but normative. It imposes its own programme and obliges obeisance to its own concepts and practices, and 'better management' is a euphemism for management according to market principles. Secondly, the process, especially in the public services and wherever it's connected with the 'the internal market', means not better but more management, largely because these are domains where market mechanisms do not come naturally and must therefore be created and operated. Perhaps the situation in higher education is not yet as bad as in the National Health Service, or at least, not so dramatic, but we need to be clear about what is at stake (especially now people are starting to lose their jobs).

The system relies on statistics about 'course delivery' in order to monitor 'student satisfaction'. But what part of the experience of the student can possibly be expressed through answering the questionnaires through which such statistics are compiled? Almost certainly, nothing essential, for it is the process they are passing through which is of the essence, and this is not quantifiable. (For example, I can imagine a situation where a good student can learn a great deal from a poor teacher, while a poor student will never learn very much even from the best teaching.) From students I learn that these questionnaires are mystifying: they do not know who are they are addressing, or what notice is taken of anything they say. Basically, the language of the resulting statistics is a managerial tool which suppresses the lived experience of both student and teacher (not to mention the technicians, and the administrative and building staffs).

Pedagogy, in short, is not like the production of commodities, except from the most limited utilitarian point of view. To increase the numbers of students in higher education while proportionately reducing the funds to support them cannot improve

the efficiency of teaching, it impairs it, and this is what has happened, although the situation is not beyond saving. For education is not like mass production, where you can indeed expect improvements in productivity by seeking greater efficiency, and the more a worker can produce in a day, the more profit you can make. Rather, the student's experience is impaired when equipment turns out to be less impressive than at first sight, and when teachers have to lecture more with less time to prepare their lectures; and then have less time to assess the students' work and give feedback because there are more students for each lecturer to see, and the staffing has not increased in proportion with the students. In short, students are not commodities, they are individuals; teachers are not like production-line workers; and learning, from the individual's point of view, is not a matter of statistics about 'learning outcomes', but of the amount and quality of attention you receive. (It is pertinent to add that you cannot get this kind of personal attention from a computer, however interactive the teaching programme. Computer aided teaching can become a wonderful tool as a complement to human dialogue, but cannot replace it without impairing the learning experience.) [2]

One of the characteristics of personal attention is that its value is not measurable in terms of time and productivity. A small amount at the right moment can go a long way. At other times, patient repetition is the order of the day. There is no given equation between a certain level of output for each unit of input. Here the principle of time economy is inapplicable, and there can be no such thing as objectively measurable efficiency savings. When the attempt is made to do so for management purposes, the inconveniences are always swept under the carpet.

These considerations mean that in all those fields which involve personal attention, neither privatisation nor the simulation of an internal market produce efficiency, but the very opposite: they impair the service and therefore introduce inefficiency. The accountant deprecates the non-monetary values of interpersonal relations, the beneficent effects of individual care. In the NHS, this is to neglect the positive influence on recovery of nursing, and leads to the idea that reducing the time the patient has to occupy a bed improves the efficiency of the service. In education it ignores the nature of the dialogue between teacher and pupil, and leads in turn to a new separation between them (in which interactive computer programmes are said to increase learning and reduce the amount of teaching needed).

Ideas about the differences between teaching and learning originate in the third stream of the higher education system inherited by the Tories in 1979, The Open University - one of the most original institutions this country has ever created. The Open University's remit posited two features which are now returning to prominence: distance learning, and continuing adult higher education, now called 'lifelong learning'. If informatics now makes the means for satisfying these aims much more widely available, the question arises whether the humanist project embodied in the Open University is becoming distorted by the mutation - I use the term strictly objectively - of contemporary culture induced by the increasing convergence of the media and the penetration of the domain of education by powerful commercial forces.

2. Aesthetic education following Schiller

Schiller, two hundred years ago, in his *Letters on Aesthetic Education* - his principal contribution to philosophy and a work of considerable influence on both Hegel, the young Marx, Nietzsche and others - observed a distinction between different types of production which it seems to me has strong bearing on the situation we now find ourselves in. When a craftsman, he said, works on his raw material he has no scruple in doing it violence. The artist has just as little scruple, but avoids showing it (which was true in Schiller's day, though not in ours). But for both pedagogy and politics things are very different -- or ought to be -- because the material on which they work is not inert, but the same as the goal, namely, the human being. Do violence to the material you are working with and you can no longer achieve your aims, because your ends and your means are the same.

Schiller's philosophy is both humanist and utopian, but no less acute for that. On the one hand, it stems from deep introspection on the part of the poet-playwright about the nature of human imagination and the creative process; this is an aesthetics from below, which says that art is like play, a disinterested activity in which the human adult, like the child, discovers and develops their capacities. On the other hand, Schiller was an acute social observer, and already described the temper of the modern era when he wrote that '[A]t the present time, material needs reign supreme and bend a degraded humanity beneath their tyrannical yoke. Utility is the great idol of our age, to which all powers are in thrall and to which all talent must pay homage.' [3] It is here that we find the elegant origins of Marx's more convoluted account of the phenomenon of alienation, in Schiller's description of the way that the aptitudes of the psyche are fragmented and neglected by the divorce demanded by modern society between enjoyment and labour, means and end, effort and reward. One of the results is that the State becomes a stranger to its citizens, which never makes contact with their feelings, 'never to get an impression of humanity except through representation at second hand...while the governed cannot but receive with indifference laws which are scarcely, if at all, directed to them as persons.' [4] In short, aesthetic education, for Schiller, was about resisting materialist utilitarianism and restoring human nature to itself.

In Schiller's terms, to treat the student managerially is a form of systemic violence which breaches the very principles of pedagogy. Violence is done by managerialist notions of economy and efficiency, which are both misnomers. First of all, economies are false, because they only rob Peter to pay Paul. And as everyone knows, 'efficiency savings' is a euphemism for job losses and longer working hours among staff, larger classes among students, and for neglect to the fabric of the buildings and other elements of the infrastructure.

Secondly, managerialism depends on quantification and accountancy. But as I've already argued, the work that the teacher does cannot be quantified so easily. Student needs both individual attention, private study, and the experience of collective learning. In each situation every student learns at their own rate, but the different modes reinforce each other. The dialogue between teaching and learning is therefore highly slippery and very fluid. In fact, in managerial terms, education is a highly imperfect business. While from the point of view of the pedagogue, it is not a business at all.

In other words, the costs of mismanagement are not just monetary costs. In accountants' terms, graduating students are seen as a product, to be fashioned according to the requirements of the end-user, or in simple old-fashioned language, the employer. At the same time, the entering student is redefined as the customer, in the manner of the privatised passenger and even the patient. This is a serious confusion of categories (what Gilbert Ryle called a category mistake) and a highly damaging mischief. In the first place, if the student is indeed a customer then it only shows that customers have no real rights and they're being short-changed. Secondly, can the student be both customer and product at the same time? But our students are not our customers, they are our students. They are not buying our services and we are not selling them. That is not the nature of the relationship - and the dialogue - which we have with them.

3

In Schiller's terms, the outcome of education is a growth in mental powers which permanently alters the way you think about things. The answers that you give yourself after a course of study are necessarily different, in substance and in kind, from those you might imagine at the beginning. Including the understanding that everything you've learned is provisional, and must continue to evolve if you don't want to stand still. While philosophically speaking this is hardly controversial, then it acquires renewed pertinence in the present cultural situation, in which the solidity and fixedness of employment and occupation has begun to dissolve, and talk of the need for new skills of adaptability has become a commonplace. But if this is the argument, then in the domain of media production it is hardly a new phenomenon. Despite periods of relative institional stability, for very many people working in the media, the pattern of employment is not at all jobs for life, but constant career development as they shift from one job and skill to another.

The issue is connected with another evolving element in the contemporary landscape. One of the reasons I think Schiller is pertinent to the present situation is that the educational programme he was proposing is putatively more realisable today than ever, at a time when marketing the means of production of aesthetic creation has become one of the primary domains of late capitalism, and the dividing lines between consumption and production of cultural goods are becoming blurred. This inevitably poses delicate questions for those of us involved in higher education in the media, which emerges from a liberal arts tradition and is based on the idea of preparing professional practitioners. But the same converging technology also means that the means of production are becoming cheaper and more powerful at the same time, creating all sorts of possibilities for the exploitation of the new resources which we have hardly begin to perceive. Can the system in its present mode respond effectively to the challenges which this new stage of convergence now present to the imagination? This system that is supposed to provide the flexible, market-responsive and extended higher education which is now being put on the agenda, but which is based on the abstracted statistics of course delivery and student satisfaction?

The blurring of consumption and production goes back at least to the introduction of the first Kodak camera in the 1880s and the famous slogan 'You push the button, we do the rest'. The history the media is also a history of the creation and demarcation of professional domains in a form that excludes the amateurs and denies (except perhaps

in the case of photography) that the skills involved might be regarded in the same way as, say, literacy and music, that is, the birthright of all. (Except of course that one of the effects of the media has been to overwhelm the common practice of music with passive consumption.) There is no reason to suppose that the culture industry will stop employing professionals, and that there will not continue to be a distinction between professionals and non-professionals. On the other hand, the make-up of professionalism is indeed changing, and we must ask ourselves if we're geared up to these changes. We need, urgently, seriously to rethink our pedagogic discourse, if we wish to keep alive the humanist tradition of aesthetic education which I have here unashamedly tried to defend.

NOTES

1 John Pratt, '1964 revisited: lessons from the history of Mr Poly', THES, 16.5.97

2 What of the use of e-mail? The Rector of the London Institute, Sir William Stubbs, who was also a member of the Dearing Committee Working Party on IT, recently reported about this to a meeting at LCP. He had learnt on a visit to the USA from professors who made themselves available by e-mail to answer questions after lectures of two effects: on the one hand, questions at the end of the lecture were curtailed; on the other, many students never sent e-mail questions but simply followed the correspondence that then occurred

3 Schiller, Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967, p.7

4 Ibid., p.37

© Michael Chanan, 1997