

Oscar Brenifier at the National Museum

Seminary in philosophical practice (with children and youth) for art mediators,
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The following is a *report* from the seminary. It is not an attempt to analyse the content of the course nor to evaluate the purposefulness of the proposed methods and strategies in this particular context (art mediation). It is a reminder of the most important points, tips and tools that Oscar presented to us during the seminary—although I may have added a line or two of my own (based on my acquired understanding of Oscar's theory and practice) to safeguard the flow of the narrative. I hope the paper will be of some benefit.

Introduction—theoretical input

Oscar starts the session by putting us into the proper philosophical perspective represented by the famous questioning practice of Socrates. His questioning attitude is a result of his self-proclaimed ignorance: Socrates knows that he possesses no knowledge, and that this is precisely the reason why he devotes himself to thinking and the never-ending asking of questions. Oscar invites us, in the sporting spirit of Socrates, to “take off our shirt” and venture into friendly, intellectual “wrestling” with each other, knowing that the “fight” will make us sweat a little, but also that we will emerge from it strengthened and invigorated. Oscar compares Socrates with the sophists of his day. The sophists were in the “knowledge-business”, they were the ones who knew and who wanted to “sell” their wisdom to others. Socrates on the other hand did not know anything, therefore he had no “product” to sell. Instead he showed the others how to *think*. Normally we are inclined to believe that knowledge and thinking go naturally together, but the fact is that *when you know, you don't think any more*. Therefore we must try to “forget” that which we already know (or believe that we know) in order to start thinking.

“Stop thinking, in order to think!” Or: “Stop talking, in order to think!” This is Oscar's main recipe when it comes to practical philosophy. This is also at the core of his “critical concept of thinking” which stems from the practice of Socrates. When we start to think, relieved by the philosopher from our quick replies, our preconceptions and our prejudices—from our “knowledge” as such—we start instead to create *meaning*; we are so to speak “born again”. Oscar expresses the same basic insight using a term from Hegel: the *de-doubling* of ourself. When we start to think, we are immediately alienated to our psychological self, viewing ourself from the outside as it were, finding that there is an “I” (transcendental ego) looking back on “me” (empirical ego).

In this process we experience a “fracture of Being”; there is no longer unity in the world, but rather a split or a tension between passion and reason, duty and pleasure etc. As thinking beings we are caught between the finiteness and the infinity of Being. This is also where the arts reside, caught in the middle as it were. So when we produce art, we “de-double” ourselves in the effort to see clearer (although we should be aware here of the danger of narcissism). The goal of art and philosophy is to *represent* ourselves.

Time for activation of the participants—warming up

One of the participants notes that Oscar in his review fails to make reference to any *female* artists or philosophers. Why is that (the underlying assumption obviously being that Oscar is chauvinistic)? Oscar pleads guilty on this score but at the same time points out that what's important is not to have the right references, but to think for yourself. However, to give something back to the questioner, he refers to *Diotima*—Socrates' female "teacher" in Plato's dialogue *Symposion*. Here Diotima helps Socrates to get a grip of the nature of love.

Next Oscar asks the participants to write down a comment or question to what they have heard so far. Last speaker is told to pick one from the audience to read his/her comment or question aloud. We have the following question: "Is art to express myself or for others?" Oscar asks whether this is an interesting question or not (decided by vote). In the process some participant reveals his lack of understanding. Oscar seizes the opportunity to remind us of the Socratic ignorance: we must not be afraid not to understand, nor to admit that we don't understand. On the other hand he warns about the common misapprehension that we have understood something although we are unable to formulate the understanding in words, as if the real understanding existed in a hidden layer inside of us waiting to be expressed by impulse or intuition. He quotes Hegel again who simply says that "if you don't have the words, you don't think". The idea is not at all to write off the possibility of mental content that cannot be expressed in words, but rather to avoid the mistake of denoting this content, or the process leading up to it, thinking.

The interaction with the participants culminates with Oscar's expounding of the three main tools of the philosophical questioning. There is the *deepening/identifying*. Here we ask for reasons and examples in order to make it clearer what is the issue/question at hand. It is typical for many (Norwegian!) teachers to pay less attention to this phase since most are eager to get fast to the "juicy bits", i.e. the content matter. Second there is the *problematization*. This is where we call for new perspectives, objections, expansions, limitations and reservations in order to differentiate a viewpoint. In French culture, Oscar informs us, this is the single most difficult phase to perform since French children (and therefore adults) usually adhere to one way only of looking at things. Third we have the tool of *conceptualising*, i.e. to find a concept, a word, that corresponds most exactly to our thoughts. During one and the same session all three tools may be in operation, which is why it is important to be familiar with all three.

Session with 7th graders from Marienlyst skole

After experiencing that the children were unwilling to answer any of his questions, Oscar suggests the following exercise: write an answer to the question "Why are you here today?" Then, after a couple of minutes, he asks each and every child what they have written on their sheet. Many pupils have written the same answer: "Because the teacher told us to." When two boys sitting next to each other turn up with the same answer, Oscar asks them—reproachingly but at the same time rather jokingly—if that is a coincidence or not...

But this is just a preliminary exercise. This session is to have art as the main theme. So Oscar now divides the class into four groups. Each group receives 5-6 posters (reproductions of more or less famous Norwegian paintings). The task of each group is to select one picture and to give at least two reasons for their choice. When the groups are ready, all other pictures are removed from the table. Group 1 comes up with the following reasons: "Because I like it" and "Because there are light and dark colours in it". With both reasons Oscar tries to find out what lies behind them, that is, to discover further reasons, and references in the picture itself, that may serve as exemplifications of the reasons (compare *deepening/identifying*). Group 2 chooses a picture depicting a summer landscape, but have found no reason for their choice, so they are told to write one. They come up with: "Summer is more beautiful". But why is summer more beautiful? Because the col-

ours are more fresh in the summer. But cannot winter colours be said to be fresh as well? The third picture has a great fire in the middle surrounded by a dark mountain landscape. The reason for preferring it is that “I like fire”. Why? Because of the yellow colour, and because the mountains are big etc. A pupil says he likes the picture because he enjoys walking in the mountains. Then Oscar asks if he can walk (i.e. do that which he enjoys) in this picture? No, of course not. So why then does he like the picture? Oscar obviously tries to make the pupil discover the distinction between object/action and its representation (a central issue in art theory). But since the pupil fails to make any such discovery the questioning leads nowhere.

The session ends with an evaluation. The pupils are asked to write in one sentence what they think about the session. Did they like it, did anything surprise them etc. Several boys says that it was boring, a reply which prompts their teacher to come to their “rescue”. The teacher explains that the context must have been a problem here (the children are away from their familiar surroundings with lots of adults listening to them etc.). More specifically she thinks that *language* was the main problem: the pupils didn’t understand (although I acted as translator for the latter part of the session). Oscar rejects this, claims that these are mere *excuses* for the pupil’s inability to think on their own. Forget the context! Even when talking to Chinese children who didn’t speak a word of English the very same thing happened, Oscar notes: they were unable to answer the questions, not because of a troublesome context, but because they never learned how to think for themselves.

Evaluation of the session with the children

The seminary participants want to have their say on this too. Some claim that this has not been a very productive session. The reason being that Oscar’s questions were not “creative”; on the contrary they were insistent, tedious and unimaginative. Other participants disapprove of Oscar’s refusal to accept the children’s indifference/lack of interest. They find it perfectly in order—for anyone, child or adult—to look at a group of pictures and not have any particular opinion about any of them. Oscar does not agree. “It is impossible to be indifferent,” he says. And: “There is no such thing as 50/50!” We are *never* neutral, although we often think that we are—and strive to be—we always have preferences. True neutrality is very, very difficult to achieve. In fact, in Buddhism this is a major spiritual task: to become neutral and disengaged—a task we most rarely see accomplished. So, continues Oscar, when confronted with works of art, we are almost automatically loaded with opinions of all kinds, whether we reflect about it or not. Therefore, the primary purpose of art is to help us acquire a new type of consciousness, a new awareness of our prejudice and preconceived notions. Hence there is little reason to accept an alleged neutral stance.

But what is the purpose of the exercise? Is it to “open up” or reveal the work of art itself, or is it rather to improve children’s thinking? Oscar seems to be less preoccupied with the work itself. His goal is, as we just said, to create new self awareness in the individual. Therefore Oscar does not entirely disagree when some other participants find that the exercise almost “kills” the artistic side of the work. It is true: in order to think we usually must kill something within ourselves, more specifically: that which prevents us from thinking. And in relation to art this “something” may very well be the search for the “true meaning” of the work. Another major pitfall in the arts is the heavy inclination to go by the subjective *feelings*, leaving reason and rationality “out of the picture” as it were. Here Oscar points out that we should be able to distinguish between three operations: *feeling*, *seeing* and *thinking*. Seeing is not identical with thinking, nor vice versa, and experiencing an overpowering feeling in connection with art is not equal to thinking, nor does it make thinking about the work of art superfluous. Oscar reminds us that Socrates was in fact killed, suggesting that not everybody will approve of certain ways or methods to make people think...

Another criticism arises: the children did not appear very comfortable during the exercise. They seemed nervous and maybe even a little bit scared. So why didn’t Oscar exert himself to make the children feel more at ease in this awkward situation? Oscar answers with a rhetorical question:

“Who wants the children to relax?” Certainly Oscar doesn’t. Rather, he suggests, the task of the philosopher is to make people *uneasy*. This is the only way to make people think. Today we are too much into the “mothering” and “nurturing” type of pedagogy. We are supposed to be nice and to care about each other all the time. This is of course very pleasant and civil, but it is also a most effective way to preclude the development of independent thinking and self consciousness. So to counter balance the contemporary sociological and psychological climate a dose of philosophical uneasiness will not go amiss.

One participant comments that the exercise looked a bit like a competition, implying that this is maybe not a suitable way to go about an investigation into a work of art. Oscar answers that the exercise can be compared to martial arts. Here it is not the competitive aspect that predominates, but instead *mutual respect*. Martial arts also demand complete awareness and presence in the moment, just like (Socratic) philosophical practice.

The same exercise with the participants

After the break Oscar runs the same exercise with the seminary participants. Only this time each participant has to choose one of the posters that he or she likes, then he asks each person to come up with three criteria for liking this picture. He stresses that the three criteria must be of a different type or character. The group gets a couple of minutes to study the pictures, make a decision and work out the criteria. Then he asks participant A to read aloud what she has written (while she reads, he writes her criteria on the flip-chart).

A’s set of criteria:

- it reminds me about my childhood
- it makes me think of another painting
- it is disturbing/irritating

Now Oscar asks the group to evaluate whether the three criteria fit in with the work of art she had selected. For instance: where do we observe childhood in this picture, and where is the disturbing part in it? And why do you like something that irritates you? Then he asks the group what we can know about a person’s general way of thinking, based on what we have just heard. Or differently put: can anyone see some similarities between the three criteria, is there a concept that can sum up the “trend” in her criteria—although being different? The woman who presented the first set of criteria is asked to pick one of the participants to answer this. Eventually we have three concepts on the flip-chart. Each concept is cross-checked with the criteria so that everyone can fully understand if and how the concept is relevant for each criterion.

Set of concepts characterising A’s criteria:

- associative
- emotional
- sentimental

After having spent quite some time on A’s criteria, we move on to participant B. He comes up with four criteria for liking his picture.

B’s set of criteria:

- it looks like Picasso
- it has a formal construction

- it shows the deconstruction of the subject
- it is connected to my own work

The task is the same this time: is there a single concept that is common to all four criteria? The group eventually produces four such concepts.

Set of concepts characterising B's criteria:

- formal
- association (?)
- image (?)
- conceptual

There is considerable doubt here. Especially it proves difficult to explain how the concepts “association” and “image” fit in with the criteria. In effect, we are left with the two other concepts: “formal” and “conceptual”. But here Oscar creates a meta-challenge for us: can we find an adjective that characterises a person whose criteria is characterised by these concepts? In the case of A we discover that *personal* might be an adequate adjective: looking back on one’s childhood, associating to another picture stored in one’s memory, and experiencing a picture as disturbing and irritating—these are all personal responses, all of them relates to the subjectivity of the person. In the case of B we find quite the opposite traits: here is a person who goes directly to the work itself, who analyses it and creates new concepts to understand the work. The group agrees to name this kind of approach *professional*. So already with participant A and B we uncover an interesting contrast between two personalities.

Participant C presents two criteria.

C's set of criteria:

- it reminds me of Russian avant-garde
- I like the type of art in the painting

We do not spend so much time on C’s criteria, and the major issue here is whether her criteria are more personal or professional. Next, participant D.

D's set of criteria:

- it is a strong portrait about a woman I like
- it depicts a strong woman
- this is a woman with an interesting story

Set of concepts characterising D's criteria:

- biography
- emotional (?)
- personal (?)
- associative

Maybe the group is getting a bit tired by now since only two of the proposed concepts are new? Anyway “emotional” and “personal” are rejected, which leaves us with “biography” and “associative”. But also A’s criteria were said to be associative. So is there a difference between A and D in the associativity of their criteria, or no? Yes, there is: while A primarily associates with *herself*, D associates with the *picture*. These thoughts eventually lead to the discovery that either we can bring

our predefined criteria to the picture—or we can observe the picture first and then afterwards establish criteria. An important discovery indeed.

E's set of criteria:

- I have never seen it before
- it's juicy (fresh brush strokes)
- it has shadows in contrast
- it displays an exciting shirt (the lines in the blouse are exciting, in a formal sense)

As a common denominator only the concept “analytic” springs to mind here. The ensuing discussion concentrates on a comparison between participant D and E. Antinomies are found and we use the last part of the session to discuss whether these antinomies really describe the difference in approach between D and E. The antinomies are:

- direct/indirect
- surface/underneath
- judgemental/analytic

The general idea is that D's criteria are direct, superficial and judgemental, while E's criteria are more indirect, deep and analytic. We do not reach a final conclusion here.

Concluding evaluation

As always Oscar finishes off his sessions and courses with evaluation. This course is no exception. He asks the participants whether they liked the exercises or not, and why, whether they found something interesting or surprising in it, whether they saw something useful in what he had been doing. The response was by and large very positive (a few who were clearly not in favour had left the seminary earlier in the day...). And although the majority seemed to find Oscar's facilitation style unusual and even controversial, most participants still thought that this analytic and conceptual approach to the rather personal field of art mediation was refreshing and stimulating. New ideas had seen the light of day for the first time and old, established, institutionalised ideas had remained safely in the kernel of subjectivity for the whole day—maybe for the first time too.