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## **Herd instinct, self-realization and Bildung**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, research in arts education has expanded into new subject areas, such as environmental protection, minority issues and well-being, etc. The general impression in this debate seems to be that art is considered a panacea for all problems in society. It is noteworthy that the same topics are regularly featured on social media as well. It seems that the arts should follow their time rather than look to create something new on their own terms. Do the arts deserve their own ontology or are they just obedient servants of other things?

In this article we look at the ideas that have influenced perceptions of both the arts and humanity starting from the era of Enlightenment and Romanticism to postmodernism. Paradoxically, the long history of pronounced individuality and self-realisation has led a situation where collectivism and group thinking are taking society in an increasingly authoritarian direction. If emotions complement the prevailing rational and individual-centred person and the purely rational worldview, a new balance could help improve the "excessive use of imagination" of our time.

*Keywords: individualism, collectivism, herd instinct, arts education*

## **Instinto de rebaño, autorrealización y Bildung**

### **Resumen**

En los últimos años, la investigación en educación artística se ha expandido a nuevas áreas temáticas, como la protección del medio ambiente, las cuestiones de las minorías y el bienestar, etc. La impresión general en este debate parece ser que el arte se considera una panacea para todos los problemas de la sociedad. Cabe señalar que los mismos temas también se presentan regularmente en las redes sociales. Parece que las artes seguirían su tiempo en lugar de buscar o crear algo nuevo en sus propios términos. ¿Merecen las artes su propia ontología o son simplemente obedientes sirvientes de otras cosas?

En este artículo analizamos las ideas que han influido en las percepciones tanto de las artes como de la humanidad desde la época de la Ilustración y el romanticismo hasta el posmodernismo. Paradójicamente, la larga historia de marcada individualidad y autorrealización ha llevado a una situación en la que el colectivismo y el pensamiento grupal están llevando a la sociedad en una dirección cada vez más autoritaria. Si las emociones complementan la persona racional y centrada en el individuo imperante y la cosmovisión puramente racional, un nuevo equilibrio podría ayudar a mejorar el "uso excesivo de la imaginación" de nuestro tiempo.

*Palabras clave: individualismo, colectivismo, instinto de rebaño, educación artística*

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## Introduction

In connection to the arts, reference is often made to three transcendent values - truth, beauty, and goodness. Related research fields include logic, aesthetics, and ethics. Although the original concept of the "trinity of transcendence" has been modified from the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and the philosophy of Christian thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, the context of aesthetic education was born much later. It was invented during the Enlightenment. In Germany, a new concept called *Bildung* was used referring to the ideal education, which referred to a civilized person with a harmonious personality reinforced by a moral and scientific orientation. Originally, the religious term from the 14th century (man as the image of God) was secularized, but still the word *Bild* (image) and its suffix *-ung* (becoming something) contained the idea of man's duty to be perfect. To this end, the civilized (*gebildete*) man sought to develop all his gifts in a varied and equitable manner. A one-sided focus on just one thing, no matter how high a person was in their skills and knowledge, was essentially seen as an obstacle to become truly civilized. (Martin, 2017). These philosophical ideas reinforced the idea of an independent and responsible individual, who would serve society in the best possible way – by becoming himself.

## The Era of self-realization

In the 19th century, the idea of a sovereign self was reinforced by liberalism and the idea of self-realization. This romantic idea gave individuals – instead of just fulfilling their duties – opportunities to dream of alternative futures. The arts and goals of education reflected this idealism. In a sense, the arts were seen as uplifting people and being an example of what life might be. As Oscar Wilde famously said, "Life mimics art much more, than art mimics life." By this, he meant that things are, because we see them, and what we see and how we see them, depends on the arts that have influenced us. From an educational perspective, the task of the artist was to teach others to see the world through the lenses of art – not to tell them, what the world ought to be or really is.

The misconception of romanticism, however, was that this aesthetic shifted to other areas of life as well. For example, if ethics depended solely on independent imagination, multiple truths could be true simultaneously. What might be natural for arts, led to huge problems in other areas of life. If the truth depended only on "*Der Wille zur Macht*", brutal force could be used to settlement of disputes – and this was exactly what happened, as the "*Age of Extremes*" led to the two world wars. According to Eric Hobsbawm, for arts this meant several things:

"...consisted largely in a series of increasingly desperate gimmicks by which artists sought to give their work an immediately recognizable individual trademark, a succession of manifestos of despair... or of gestures reducing the sort of art which was primarily bought for investment and its collectors ad

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absurdum, as by adding an individual's name to piles of brick or soil ('minimal art') or by preventing it from becoming such a commodity through making it too short-lived to be permanent ('performance art')...The smell of impending death rose from these avant-gardes. The future was no longer theirs, though nobody knew whose it was. More than ever, they knew themselves to be on the margin." (Hobsbawm 1994, 516–517).

By revealing the nature of reality, 20th century arts were no longer as attractive to the audience, as they used to be – perhaps, the picture was too truthful to be popular?

### **“Après le rêve” – the age of withering arts?**

While the ideal of romantic worldview crumbled after the turn of the 20th century's, the idea that artists are both geniuses and at the same time, misunderstood, persisted in its existence. Later, the idea was also embraced by ordinary people, and it soon became the driving force of the consumer society. Paradoxically, competition for status between people and inherent "*mimetic desire*" (we desire what others desire because we imitate their desires) led to a situation where true individuality might be rarer than earlier. As consumers we are treated as individuals, but always in a similar way. In the end, we all look the same. The question is, why the liberal freedom does not guarantee diversity, but seems to drive people in similar directions? The possible answers are, as follows:

- 1) Emphasis on individual self-realization undermines inter-community ties and commitment to communities. Natural connections to family and close people are replaced by celebrities and media-generated topics.
- 2) Since many people are never content with the individual sovereignty they are supposed and claimed to have, they begin to search themselves by joining groups they feel they ought to belong to.

In short: by letting go of the original ideas of Enlightenment, the quest to be an independent autonomous person, the Western societies have entered from modernity to post-modernity and eventually to mass society. The paradox of this mass society is that, while our scientific worldview is based on logical, objective reason, our choices in life seem to rely on Romantic freedom of self-determination: *the idea that I am free to decide for myself what concerns me, rather than being shaped by external influences* (Taylor 1993, 27). However, the individual's problem is to ask difficult questions and turn their gaze from outside into their own soul. What are the ideas I am selecting from, which direction should I choose? Most people solve these problems by giving away their freedom and by joining larger groups, that is, identities. The human need for belonging is thus easily solved. How authentic this choice is, is of course another question: as social media algorithms increasingly affect us, these external forces are shaping our attitudes, thoughts, and the way we see the world. This, regardless of whether we notice it or not. Surprisingly few are willing to admit that this applies to them.

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## From excessive rationality to a more real worldview

As the study of social media and mass behavior progresses, the notion of rational individuality becomes increasingly unlikely. The new paradigm of the field will be based on the study of social mood, emotions and their effects on culture and society. For arts education, this will mean new possibilities and better times ahead, but before that, the old misconceptions concerning excessive rationality, and erroneous individuality must be abandoned.

### *Rationality*

As all art educators know, the world is not based on words alone (epistemology), but reality, being, and becoming something are based on experience (ontology). The scientific logic that suggests that claims are either true or false cannot therefore apply to most everyday questions or the aesthetic world. Because rationalism is seen as related to reason and logic, things, which cannot be rationally explained are said to be irrational. If irrationality is to be avoided in every possible way, doubt about the arts is understandable. However, “baby does not necessarily have to be thrown with the bath water” to realize that processes like intuition, anticipation, are something other than irrational. They are a-rational, meaning that they are independent of the realm of reason. They are based on the senses – and what is based on the senses, can be discussed, verified, and proven to be either true or false. This has nothing to do with irrationalism.

### *Individuality*

The term *individual* is indivisible, a single human being, to which the prefix *indivi-* refers. However, a suffix *-dual*, can be interpreted in two ways. The original meaning of duality refers to the human potential to do both good and evil. I interpret this as a person’s innate characteristics being related to their relationship to the emotional climate of his environment, and the movements of surrounding social dynamics. This social mood is a shared state of mind that fluctuates in time dynamically between optimism and pessimism (Ketovuori 2022). This dualism is an indistinguishable and characteristic trait of being human.

### *Human beings as members of herd*

According to the theory of socioeconomics, the driving force of society is based on the herd instinct that shapes the collective atmosphere of society. As most economists, historians, and sociologists assume that events determine the mood of a society, this theory assumes the opposite: the social mood determines the nature of social events. As an example: while we normally think that war makes people angry and afraid, Socioeconomic analysis shows that angry and frightened people start wars. In short: the social mood is the primary source of what is happening in the world. Because individuals do not choose where they live, what language they speak, and what opinions they have, they are completely dependent on their culture and the emotional

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environment in which they live. The most direct way to understand what this environment is like; is to study the art it produces. In this mission, the arts reflect the truth.



Herding instinct shaping the reality

## Conclusions

If the theory of aesthetics is repealed as obsolete and the idea of education is replaced by individual expression or identity, what is left of arts education at all? From the point of rational worldview, we tend to explain our choices in the best possible way, that is, we rationalize our "individual" choices retrospectively. Unfortunately, this is the mechanism, how the arts educators have tried to justify the existence of their field, far too long. Let's get real, no one practices arts to save the environment, help minorities, or promote well-being in society. These tasks belong for other professions. The meaning of art, no less, no more – is art.

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The picture from the book cover (Laumavaiston varassa) by Aino Aulanko, Agile Publishing.

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