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Arts-Based Research

Stephen K. Levine

A Philosophical Perspective

A revised version of "Researching Imagination : Imagining Research," originally published in POIESIS: A Journal of the Arts and Communication, Volume 2, 2000.

"What is arts-based research" As soon as we ask this question, we have stepped outside the realm of research itself. The question, "What is it?", is fundamentally a philosophical question, as Socrates showed. In this essay, I would like to provide a philosophical perspective on the question of what arts-based research is.

In journals devoted to the creative and expressive therapies, we can see many examples of projects being carried out according to established scientific methodology. Whether the studies be quantitative or qualitative in nature, they follow procedures that are methodically established. Often, as Shaun McNiff points out in *Art-Based Research* (1998), the motivation of these studies is to justify the arts therapies in the eyes of other professionals, to establish that we are "legitimate," and deserve to be accorded a place at the table of mental health professionals.

The problem with many of the current research projects in the arts therapies is that they lack imagination. They are as dry as dust. They lack the very quality of that which they are investigating – the aesthetic dimension of our work, that which excites us, turns us on, makes our breath come faster: the erotic, dynamic vitality of the arts. Heraclitus said that everything is fire; the world is alive. The task of our thinking should, therefore, be to capture the aliveness of our being, to follow it until it expresses itself in words.

One of the sub-themes of McNiff's book is the concept of "energy": the imagination is energetic. Images possess energy, and they demand that we respond to them with the energy of our own imagination. If we try to think the image, we must find an imaginative, energetic way of thinking. Otherwise we will kill it: as Wordsworth says, "We murder to dissect." And ultimately, in that case, we will turn against thinking itself.

The danger today is that we will take for granted the conventional opinion that "research" means following an established scientific methodology. We will thereby produce studies that no one will want to read and, conversely, we will allow thinking to be defined in a way that will make us see it as a danger to experience. Students habitually speak of the expressive therapies as "non-verbal," thereby not only

neglecting the obvious verbal dimension of the arts (poetry, story-telling, drama) but also showing a fear that to use words means to reduce the rich, creative field of sensible experience to an arid, logical plain, to turn the living into the dead.

This conception of thought as antagonistic to the imagination goes back at least as far as Plato. What is interesting, however, is that in the Platonic dialogues themselves, the tension between image and word, imagination and thought, is maintained, not eliminated. In *The Republic*, Socrates bans the poets from the just city, because, in his view, their images distort reality and stir the passions, thereby creating public disorder. Nevertheless, the style of the book itself reveals its imaginative dimension: thinking is carried out in the form of a dramatic dialogue; the main ideas are presented through metaphor; and the entire work ends with the re-counting of a myth that purports to tell about the nature of that which we cannot know by logical reasoning alone. All the Platonic dialogues have an aesthetic dimension. Moreover, they are animated by a passionate and combative (even aggressive) thinking that stirs the reader, making his or her own thoughts come alive. After Plato, this aesthetic, imaginative dimension is largely lost in the Western concept of knowledge.

It is not until Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* that we encounter a philosophical text that is suffused with the imaginative dimension. Nietzsche, trained as a classical philologist, eschewed the scholarly apparatus of his time and engaged creatively with his subject: the “What is it?” of Greek tragic drama – the highest expression, he thought, of art itself. German-language scholarship saw the greatness of tragedy in its language, the articulated expression of an orderly, harmonious way of being. The hubris, or overweening pride, of the hero creates a disorder in the cosmos that can only be corrected by his fall. The speech of the tragic characters is an attempt to restore order to the world.

For Nietzsche, on the other hand, exclusive focus on the texts of the tragedies reveals a failure of scholarly imagination. Only the texts have been handed down, we read them as if they were literature, thereby neglecting the performative dimension which is the essence of theater. If, however, we were to imagine the texts being performed in front of an audience, we would come to understand them in a new way. The role of the chorus, in particular, would appear in its full significance. The chorus does not engage in discourse; it dances and sings. Choral song and dance, far from being an impediment to the “real” stuff of tragedy, the speech of the individual actors, is the very foundation of the art. Tragedy, for Nietzsche, arises out of communal song and dance; the measured speech of the protagonists takes place against this collective, bodily expression.

This vision of tragedy led Nietzsche to a more far-reaching perspective: he saw the whole of Greek culture, seemingly so harmonious and serene, as a response to a basic experience of the chaos of life. It is because life is chaotic, conflictual, passionate, violent – in a word, “alive” that the Greek tragic artists were able to forge works that embodied both the eros and the logos of existence. The greatness of Greek tragic drama – and indeed of all art – is in its ability to marry these two dimensions of our being. Nietzsche embodied these two aspects of life in the images of two gods of Greek mythology: Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo, the god of light, of justice, of individuality and rational thought (Socrates – patron, in fact) is contrasted with Dionysus, the god of the underworld, of the vine, of communal revelry, suffering and redemption. The Apollonian and the Dionysian are the two great forces or principles of existence: order and chaos, mind and body, reason and passion, science and art – all the great antitheses of life are embodied in this imaginative conception. The strength of Nietzsche's vision lies not in a rejection of the Apollonian (this was the Nazi's deliberate misreading of Nietzsche's work), but in a realization that the Apollonian is only possible on the basis of the Dionysian, that logos depends on eros, and that we are in danger of creating a world in which the erotic dimension is denied (or rather, since it will not be denied, that there will be what Freud later called a return of the repressed,” that it will manifest itself as a blind and self-destructive passion to master existence by logic, a passion that may yet lead us to the destruction of the earth).

It would be well for arts therapists to keep this Nietzschean vision in mind: if, in our research, we lose the Dionysian dimension of our work, we lose thereby its very foundation. We need to harness the energetic dimension of aesthetic experience and join it to the articulate expression of artistic form. Art is always Apollonian - there is, as the Danish artist and therapist Majken Jacoby puts it, a “necessity of form” but form must have a dynamic basis in order to be alive, to seize us with the power of the gods.

Art-based research, then, needs to pay attention to both dimensions of our work; it must honor the demand for clarity, order, form, meaning, logic, and all the other dimensions of the Apollonian, but it must also embody the passionate, erotic, vital basis of the arts. If we ask, “Is this science?”, we must be clear that we know what science is, that we do not take for granted an Apollonian conception of knowing which would betray the very heart of what we seek to understand.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his great work, *Truth and Method*, contrasts the methodical procedures of scientific rationality with the capacity of art to reveal a deeper truth about human existence. For Gadamer, truth can never be reached by method. “Truth,” for him (following Heidegger), is not mere correctness of correspondence to a preexisting reality; rather, truth is the uncovering of the meaning of being. Such an

uncovering demands that we enter into a dialogic relationship with that which we seek to understand, a relationship in which not only the being of the thing we study, but also our own being comes into question. The experience of a work of art is for Gadamer an archetype of the revelation of truth. To understand the work demands more than a detached objectivity; rather, we confront the work with our own existence in a passionate encounter in which it speaks to us in a way that shatters our preconceptions. As Rilke says in the “archaic Torso of Apollo,” the message of the work is, “You must change your life.”

A “method” based on the detached observation of an objective state-of-affairs neglects our involvement in what we interrogate and runs the risk of reducing the phenomenon to what we already know. The truth that matters to us is the truth of our existence; to reach it requires that we put ourselves at stake in the enterprise of knowledge. This does not mean that we must be against “science” – the controlled objectivity of scientific method is wholly appropriate to the objects that it interrogates. Otherwise we run the risk of prejudicing our understanding with our own point of view. In natural science, the formation of the object of research explicitly attempts to “bracket” all particular perspectives in favor of an objectivity that would extend to any possible knower, regardless of their point of view.

We can extend this concept of “method” to “human nature” as well; there is no aspect of human life that cannot be studied objectively, quantified and analyzed. And there are many occasions when this is useful to do so. But it is a mistake to think that the methodology of natural science is the solely appropriate one for the study of human beings, for in this case we are what we are studying – the truth that we seek is not only a truth of knowing, it is a truth of being, and we seek it with our whole being, with our emotions and our imagination, as much as with our cognitive faculties – indeed we know ourselves primarily through these non-cognitive (or at least “non-logical,” because often contradictory) means.

Art, as Aristotle said (and as Pat Allen has recently reminded us), is a way of knowing. It is poesis, knowing by making, as contrasted with theoria, knowing by observing, and praxis, knowing by taking action. This making is a forming. The German word, *Bildung*, meaning the process of cultivation or education, has the root *Bild* (image) in it. Poetic knowledge proceeds by way of the imagination; we make forms embodying images that reveal the truth of what we see. This is not the literal truth of representation; art does not re-present, it makes present, and what it makes present, ultimately, (to paraphrase Jean-Luc Nancy) is presence itself – the coming into being of the world.

To base our research in the arts means to engage the imagination in the forming of our concepts and in the carrying-out of the project itself. Not only may the initial inspiration come in the encounter with an image, but the conduct of research should itself be imaginative. We must have faith that the imagination can inform us, that art is not non-cognitive but that it binds together both feeling and form in a way that can reveal truth.

The example of Nietzsche may hold a key. It is not just that Nietzsche is able to conceive of two fundamental principles of existence and hold them together in his thinking; more importantly, he does so by means of the imagination itself. By naming “Apollo” and “Dionysus” as central figures in his thinking instead of saying “science” and “art,” he marries image and thought, the aesthetic and the rational. Unlike Plato, however, he does so within a framework in which both terms of the opposition are accounted for. This is imaginative, passionate thinking – a model, I believe, for arts-based research.

“Art-based research” may be a contradiction in terms, but, as Jacques Derrida might say, “Vive la difference!” This kind of research takes place in the liminal space of the imagination in which contradictions can co-exist. The poet John Keats once said that an artist needs the “negative capability” of being able to live with uncertainty and contradiction without irritably searching for reasons. In trying to understand the essence of art-based research, let us use our negative capability of being open not only to scientific cognition but also to artistic imagination. The result may not only produce a new vision of research but a new conception of our lives as well.