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Emotional Education through the Arts: Perception of Wellbeing

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L'EDUCAZIONE EMOZIONALE CON L'ARTE: LA PERCEZIONE DEL BENESSERE

ABSTRACT

The present research deals with the topic of emotional education through the arts. The purpose is to verify if the vision of art images – divided into three different picture categories, with disturbing, neutral, and serene content – can influence the participants' emotional state depending on the content expressed by the pictures. Nine images, three for each category (Disturbing, Neutral, and Serene) were presented to a sample of participants. The hypothesis was that the vision of disturbing images may cause an increase in anxiety; neutral images would not cause significant changes, while the use of serene images would produce a reduction in anxiety. To verify the hypothesis, the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) was administered before and after the vision of the pictures. Findings showed that the state anxiety score of the participants who evaluate the disturbing and neutral pictures did not show a significant change before and after the vision of the pictures; on the contrary, for the group who evaluated the serene images, the values of pre- and post-anxiety score decreased significantly. A possible explanation of the asymmetry of the findings is that probably it is not enough to see disturbing images to increase the anxiety level. An art context heightens, in general, positive response also toward images with negative content. Interesting is that serene pictures decrease anxiety significantly: the simple vision of pictures with this content can produce a perception of wellbeing.

Keywords: Aesthetic experience; Anxiety; Emotional education; Vision of art images; Well-being.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education through the arts is focused on the integration of an art form (e.g., theatre, visual art-painting, music, etc.) with another subject matter, to enhance cognitive, emotional, and learning processes (Rieger & Chernomas, 2013). Several studies have been conducted on the efficacy of art-based interventions in professional education, demonstrating a growing interest in this field, and posing challenging opportunities for the traditional learning methods that shape the current teaching practice (Richard, 2007; Leonard, Hafford-Letchfield, & Couchman, 2018). Learning through art means that the learner approaches a subject matter by creating art, responding to art, or performing artistic work not by studying art as a theoretical discipline (Rieger & Chernomas, 2013). Bamford (2006) makes an interesting distinction between education in the arts and education through the arts. Education in the arts refers to systematic teaching and learning, theory and skills, in different art typologies such as music, drama, and dance, not only visual arts. Education through the arts means the use of arts as a sort of pedagogical cultural system useful for many topics such as literacy, history, etc. Both education in and through the arts improve knowledge and culture, but also reinforce group cohesion and social identity (Mastandrea, Wagoner, & Hogg, 2019).

This art-based learning has been used successfully in several domains (Wikström, 2003; Rieger *et al.*, 2016). For instance, using a work of art as a teaching method is effective in increasing students' observational skills, empathy, nonverbal communication, and interpersonal relationships in comparison with traditional teaching programs (Wikström, 2011; Mastandrea & Umiltà, 2016). The aesthetic experience during the observation of an artwork allows the recollection of positive memories (Biasi & Carrus, 2016) at an explicit and implicit level (Curci *et al.*, 2015).

Moreover, art education is not only valuable by itself; some studies have reported a positive correlation between education in the arts and through the arts with an increase of positive feelings, wellbeing, and social relationships (Eyestone-Finnegan, 2001; Mastandrea *et al.*, 2019).

One might wonder how the emotional experience elicited by the appreciation of diverse forms of art enables individuals to feel better and learn quickly and effectively, and whether the boosting effect of art on these different domains forms a basis of a common cognitive or affective mechanism (Mastandrea, Fagioli, & Biasi, 2019).

Images are considered as media with multiple meanings. In particular, art images, due to their aesthetic, social, and historical value, perform different tasks (Mastandrea & Crano, 2019). We would like to consider

the possibility that art images also can play a positive role in terms of perceived well-being; more specifically, if they can contribute to reduce anxiety and stress. We refer to this process «emotional education through the perception of the arts».

2. THE RESEARCH

The purpose of the research is to verify if the vision of art images – divided into three different categories, with disturbing, neutral, and serene content – can influence the participants' emotional state. The hypothesis is that the vision of disturbing images may cause an increase in anxiety; neutral images would not cause significant changes, while the use of serene images would produce a reduction in anxiety.

Anxiety is considered a pervasive emotion in our daily life to which is generally attributed a negative and unpleasant meaning. The experience of anxiety is characterized in a form of activation of the organism while facing a situation that is perceived subjectively as dangerous. What we call anxiety is a set of active, emotional, physiological, and behavioural reactions that constitute an important form of adaptation of the organism into the environment (LeDoux, 2016). For example, in the case of a dangerous situation, according to the cognitive component we can evaluate the presence of a potential threat; through the physiological component (arousal) our body reacts promptly with a series of automatic changes, and attention and concentration are amplified; through the behavioral component the individual is ready to attack or escape (Frijda, 1986; Scherer, 2005).

Anxiety can be considered not only as a limitation or a nuisance, but also as a resource that allows extensive protection against risks, and can enhance performance. We have said that this mechanism is extremely effective when dealing with a negative external event that threatens our survival. If this can be used as an explanation in evolutionary terms, problems that arise in our daily life are more complex and refined and do not concern the survival factor. The anxiety dimension of daily life arises with reference to problems inherent our personal, social, and relational sphere. In such situations, the primitive attack/escape mechanism appears inadequate. We, therefore, have to deal with a more widespread and pervasive form of anxiety.

After a pilot study that was used to fine-tune the procedure used, and which provided encouraging results, the experimental research was carried out. In the next section, as an application of what has been presented so far, the research conducted, with all the different phases, aims, hypotheses, results achieved, is reported.

3. METHOD

3.1. *Participants*

The sample was composed of 126 healthy participants (88% women, from 18 to 62 years, with an average age of 28 years). 32% students, 25% educators, 22% employee, 5% teachers, 5% freelancers, and 11% unemployed. About 60% had at least a bachelor degree. These 126 participants were randomly divided into 3 groups: 37 evaluated the disturbing images, 29 the neutral images and 60 the serene images.

3.2. *Images selection*

First, we proceeded to the selection of images to communicate clearly and unequivocally apprehension, serenity, and a group of neutral control images. With this objective, 30 art pictures of different styles were chosen, 10 for each emotional valence category. Sixty participants (42% women, 58% men; age range between 16 and 55; mean 26.6) were asked to assess how disturbing, serene or neutral each image was on a 5 points Likert scale (from not at all to very much). Based on the highest scores obtained, for each category, the three most disturbing, most neutral and most serene images were chosen to be sure that each image communicated the expressive quality indicated. The final artworks selected were: *Disturbing Pictures*, Francis Bacon (1953), Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X; Andy Warhol (1964), Little Electric Chair; Sergio Padovani (1972), Onnipotente Arcadia. *Neutral Pictures*, Giorgio Morandi (1953), Still life; Sol LeWitt (1982), From Five Forms Derived from a Cube; Richard Diebenkorn (1973), Ocean Park No. 67. *Serene Pictures*, Peder Mork Mønsted (1926), A terrace, Ravello; Carl Frederic Aagaard (1870), Amalfi Cappuccini; Thomas Edwin Mostyn, The Garden of the Castle (1919). The images were high-quality colored digital reproductions downloaded as jpegs from the web. The proportions of the stimuli were in accord with the original format of each painting. The picture sizes and resolution in the display were between 9 cm and 16 cm in height and between 12 cm and 19 cm in width, with 36 dots per cm.

3.3. *Measures*

For the measurement of anxiety, we used the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI): the first (Form Y-1) measures the anxiety trait and the second (Form Y-2) the anxiety state (Spielberger, 1983). In this research, the Italian version of the test was used (Pedrabissi & Santinello, 1989). Trait anxiety refers to anxiety as a lasting and stable condition of the personality, a personality trait. Trait anxiety characterizes the individual on an ongoing basis, regardless of the specific context. State anxiety, on the other hand, indicates how much the person perceives his anxiety at a given moment; for this reason it is called «state» anxiety. There is, therefore, an important difference between trait anxiety understood as the usual mode of response and state anxiety as a form of reaction to external contextual stimuli (Lingiardi, 1991). The test consists of 20 items. Once completed, all of the scores of each participant were added up; the higher the score, the greater the level of anxiety (trait or state).

In addition to the measurement of anxiety, we also asked, with reference to each of the images administered, «how much you like it», «how interesting it is» and «how arousing it is», on a 5 point Likert scale from not at all to very much.

3.4. *Procedure*

The administration took place online through the Google Forms platform. Each participant was sent the corresponding link exclusively to the evaluation of the three images of the assigned category. Once the link was opened, the instructions for the compilation appeared on the first page. The research was described to the participants as a study on the evaluation of the personal experience with different types of pictures. The first phase consisted of completing the two questionnaires that determined trait and state anxiety. Once this first task was completed, the presentation of the three images began. Only one type of image was presented to each participant. Thus, for example, one participant responded solely to the three disturbing images, indicating to what extent she/he found them pleasant, interesting, and arousing. Once this second phase was completed, only the state anxiety questionnaire was administered again. The reason was to see if, after viewing the images, anxiety was increased, decreased, or remained stable, depending on the type of images presented (disturbing, neutral, or serene). The task took about 20 minutes.

We decided to administer the trait anxiety questionnaire, because a high level in this dimension could have affected the results. If people tend

to be anxious, with high trait anxiety personality levels, they could benefit from the vision of serene images, since they start from a high level of habitual anxiety; on the contrary, the level of state anxiety in people with a low level of anxiety may not diminish following seeing the same images. To overcome the fact that the cause of the possible reduction in anxiety could be due to a high level of the trait and not only to the images observed, the questionnaire on trait anxiety was administered.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first data analyzed for the three groups referred to the average of the trait anxiety obtained from the questionnaire STAI Y-1. Knowing the level of trait anxiety is important because, as we have said, if it had been significantly different among the three groups, it could have been responsible for the variations in the evaluation of the images. The results showed that the average data of trait anxiety varied little for the three groups who evaluated the three different picture categories; respectively, *Disturbing*: $M = 42.7$, $SD 8.7$; *Neutral*: $M = 44.5$, $SD 8.4$; *Serene*: $M = 45.2$, $SD 9.6$, and did not show any statistical significant difference. It can be stated, therefore, that the three groups of participants started from a homogeneous level of trait anxiety, and therefore, the possible differences could have been attributed exclusively to the evocative power of the images.

The most relevant data of the study refer to the difference in terms of measurement of state anxiety before and after viewing the images. The hypotheses were that the anxiety increased after viewing the disturbing images, remained stable after the neutral ones, and decreased after the serene ones.

Findings showed that the average state anxiety related to the group of participants before the presentation of the disturbing images was 41.0 ($SD 13.3$); following the viewing of the images, it increased slightly, by 1.7 points ($M = 42.7$; $SD 12.5$), without any statistical significant difference. For the group of participants who evaluated neutral images, the pre- and post-anxiety values were 39.4 ($SD 13.5$) and 37.7 ($SD 11.2$) respectively, with a reduction of 1.7 points; the subsequent level of anxiety was therefore, slightly lower, but not statistically significant. On the contrary, for the group who evaluated the serene images, the values of pre- and post-anxiety changed significantly, decreasing from 43.7 ($DS 12.0$) to 38.6 ($DS 10.0$); a reduction of 5.1 points was observed which was statistically significant ($t_{59} = 6.182$; $p < 0.001$) (*Fig. 1*).

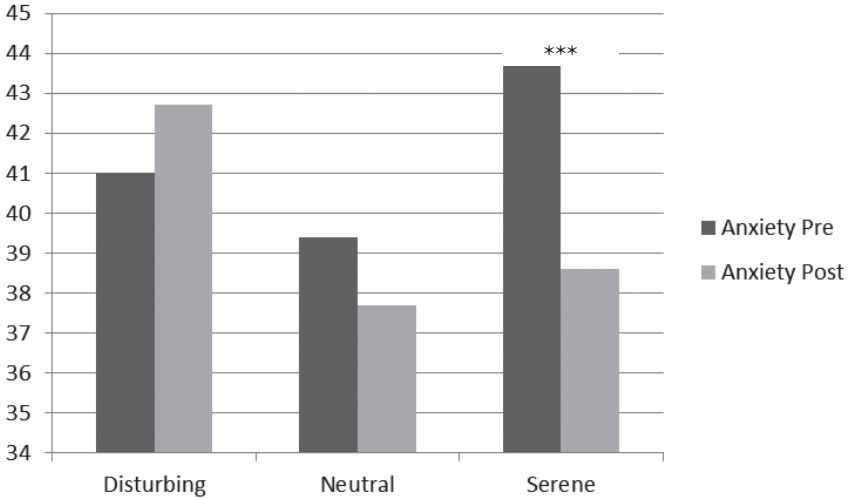


Figure 1. – Mean scores (vertical scale) of the state anxiety, before and after the vision of the pictures, for the three different categories, Disturbing, Neutral and Serene. As can be seen, only for the serene pictures there is a significant statistical difference in the reduction of the anxiety before and after the vision of the pictures (***) $p < .001$.

It can, therefore, be affirmed that only in the «serene images» condition, the presentation of these type of pictures is correlated with a decrease in anxiety. The hypothesis that neutral images did not produce sensitive changes in the state of anxiety is confirmed, while the hypothesis of increased anxiety following the viewing of disturbing images is not confirmed. The most important fact is that a significant result is obtained regarding the so-called serene images: the visualization of these images is correlated with a decrease of the anxiety level of about 5 points in the participants between pre- and post-presentation of the pictures, producing well-being and stress reduction.

Moreover, as can be seen in *Figure 2*, the serene images are those that have obtained greater appreciation in terms of likeness, interest, and arousing than the other two types of images, with a statistically significant difference [respectively: *Liking*, $F(2,123) = 107.3$, $p < 0.001$; *Interesting*, $F(2,123) = 54.8$, $p < 0.001$; *Arousing*, $F(2,123) = 24$, $p < 0.001$].

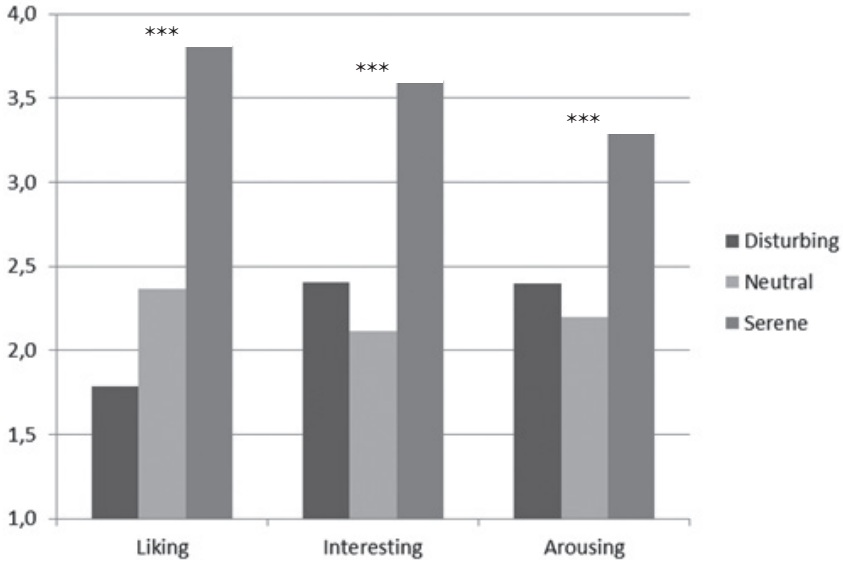


Figure 2. – Mean scores (vertical scale) for Likeness, Interesting and Arousing for the three categories of pictures, Disturbing, Neutral and Serene (**<math> <math> <math>

The data that emerge clearly show that while the disturbing images do not produce an increase in anxiety, the serene ones, on the contrary, produce a significant decrease in this emotion. Therefore, it can be said, limited to the data from this research (to be replicated and extended in the future), that even the simple use of artistic images can have positive effects on an individual in terms of anxiety reduction. On the contrary, disturbing images did not produce an increase in anxiety. The effects of the two types of images on the participants were not, therefore, symmetrical in terms of positive/negative value (Mastandrea, 2014). A possible explanation of the asymmetry of the findings is that probably it is not enough to see disturbing images to increase the anxiety level. Probably, although these images are evaluated negatively, they are experienced with a certain distance. According to some other studies and theories, experiencing art is a self-rewarding activity, irrespective of the emotional content of the artwork. Gerger and collaborators (2014) showed that an art context heightens positive response toward images with negative content. Adopting a distanced perspective in art reception may produce positive emotional state and pleasure, irrespective of the emotional content of the artwork (Menninghaus *et al.*, 2017).

In the findings obtained in the present research regarding the disturbing pictures, there would be a clear difference between communicating a negative emotional aspect and producing an equivalent emotion (producing an emotion consistent with the content of the images). Adapting the distance model of Menninghaus and colleagues (2017) to the present findings, we could say that participants understood the distressing contents of the pictures, but did not react empathetically because of the distance, which would then attenuate the negative meaning they attributed to them. The serene images, on the contrary, would activate a sort of empathic perception: the garden, the nature, the green, the sea, the warm colours, for example, would produce a sort of direct involvement by the observer with the represented environmental context; we would like to be there and enjoy the peace and tranquillity described, in a place where we can forget our worries through the enjoyment of that warm and pleasant environment that gives us a sense of well-being and comfort, quantified in terms of reducing anxiety and an attribution of positive meanings.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Art education can be addressed in different ways, specifically with *formal* and *informal* teaching. The formal education concerns the study of the arts as a theoretical discipline such as art history. This kind of teaching is more similar to other subjects in the pupils' school curricula, such as literature, mathematics, etc. But education through the arts also can be addressed in other ways of teaching: creating art, responding to art, or performing art can be considered different ways of informally approaching the arts (Rieger & Chernomas, 2013). Visiting museums and other contexts in which students directly experience original artwork, often is described as an informal means of learning, with the potential to offer different kinds of knowledge, from art to history, from science to technology (Bartels & Hein, 2003). This way of considering education through the arts can be very helpful. Several cross-cultural studies on education in the arts (learning how to draw, how to play an instrument, etc.) and through the arts (the use of the arts to understand art itself and as a pedagogical tool in other subjects) show that the art experience is characterized by important goals and benefits such as improvement of cognitive resources, creativity, critical thinking, divergent thought, among others (Bamford, 2006; Falk & Dierking, 2016).

Experiencing positive feelings while observing artworks, as demonstrated in the study presented, and having a more general satisfactory

experience of art enjoyment, can create positive dispositions and attitudes, which can encourage engagement in more difficult and challenging tasks in the future.

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RIASSUNTO

La presente ricerca affronta il tema dell'educazione emozionale attraverso l'arte. L'obiettivo è verificare se la visione di immagini d'arte – suddivise in tre diverse categorie, con contenuto inquietante, neutro e sereno – può influenzare lo stato emotivo dei partecipanti in funzione del contenuto espresso. Nove immagini, tre per ogni categoria (Inquietante, Neutrale e Serena) sono state presentate a un campione di partecipanti. L'ipotesi è

che la visione delle immagini inquietanti possa causare un aumento dell'ansia; le immagini neutre non causerebbero cambiamenti significativi, mentre le immagini serene produrrebbero una riduzione dell'ansia. Al fine di verificare l'ipotesi è stato somministrato, prima e dopo la visione delle immagini, lo State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). I risultati hanno mostrato che il livello di ansia di stato dei partecipanti che hanno valutato le immagini inquietanti e neutre non ha subito cambiamenti significativi prima e dopo la visione delle immagini; al contrario, per il gruppo che ha valutato le immagini serene, i valori pre- e post-ansia sono diminuiti in modo significativo. Una possibile spiegazione dell'asimmetria dei risultati è che probabilmente non è sufficiente vedere immagini inquietanti per aumentare il livello di ansia. Il contesto artistico attiva, in genere, una risposta positiva verso immagini anche con contenuto negativo. È interessante osservare che le immagini serene possono ridurre significativamente l'ansia: la semplice visione di immagini con questo contenuto può produrre un benessere percepito.

Parole chiave: Ansia; Benessere; Educazione emozionale; Esperienza estetica; Visione di immagini d'arte.

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