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Researching Imagination – Imagining Research

Stephen K. Levine

What is research in Expressive Arts? 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. It cannot be answered by giving examples of the thing being asked about, for what we call a thing is not necessarily what it is. To understand the 'what' of something requires that we seek to understand its essence, that which makes it the thing it is. In this essay, I would like to provide a philosophical perspective on the question of what research in Expressive Arts is.

For Socrates, the question of the 'what' requires that we enter into a dialogue, that we follow the *logos*, the thought/meaning/reason/discourse that enables us to understand the essence of what we are asking about. *Dia-legein*, to follow the thought, means to let oneself be guided not by one's own interests but by that which we interrogate. 'Listen not to me, but to the *logos* within me,' said Heraclitus. And, similarly, Husserl advised us to go 'Back to the things themselves!' – to let our thinking be guided by what is to be thought and not by our ideas about it. Phenomenology, then, can be seen as an explicit formulation of the Socratic maxim: we attempt to think that which shows itself to us, the *logos* of the phenomenon.

When we look at the question 'What is research in Expressive Arts?' we see many examples of projects being carried out according to established scientific methodology. Whether the studies are 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 Expressive Arts 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 professions. The motivation of a project should not in itself discredit it. Justification may be a valid motive; and, in any case, noble acts are often committed from base intentions. (Samuel Johnson, the great English man of letters, once declared, 'The man who does not write

for money does not write for me.')

The problem with many of the current research projects in Expressive Arts is that they lack imagination. They are as dry as dust. They lack the most important 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 our field. Heraclitus also said that everything is fire; the world is alive. The task of our thinking is to capture the aliveness of our being, to follow it and help it express 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: we murder to dissect. And in that case, we will turn against thinking itself. Socrates warned against 'misology,' the hatred of thinking. For him the danger came from sophistry, from those who taught their students to persuade others by rhetorical tricks, to make the weaker cause appear the stronger in public debate, and thereby to enable their interests to prevail.

For us today, the greater danger 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, on the other hand, 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 Expressive Arts as 'non-verbal,' thereby not only neglecting the obvious verbal dimension of the arts (poetry, story-telling, drama), but also revealing the fear that to use language means to reduce the rich, creative field of sensible experience to an arid, logical plain, to turn the living into the dead.

It is interesting that in the Platonic dialogues themselves, the tension between image and word, imagination and thought, is maintained. Although in the *Republic* Socrates bans the poets from the just city because their images distort reality and stir the passions, thereby creating public disorder, nevertheless, as we have noted, 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 thought alone.

All the Platonic dialogues have an aesthetic dimension. Moreover, they are animated by a passionate and agonistic (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 – or, perhaps, it is concealed in the sober analysis of logical discourse, living only as the engine that drives thinking to persist without its being aware of its own motivating force.

It is not until Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967) that we encounter a philosophical text that is suffused with the imaginative dimension. Nietzsche, trained as a classical philologist, eschews the scholarly apparatus of his time and engages creatively with his subject: the 'What is it?' of Greek tragic drama – the highest expression, in the opinion of his contemporaries, 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, the 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 their performative dimension, which is the essence of theater. If we imagine the texts being performed in front of an audience, we come, in particular, to understand the role of the chorus in a new way. 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 itself is chaotic, conflictual, passionate, even 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, Socrates' patron, the god of light, of justice, of individuality and rational thought, is contrasted with Dionysos, 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, art and science – all the great antitheses of life are present in this imaginative conception. The strength of Nietzsche's vision lies not in a rejection of the Apollonian (this was the Nazi regime's deliberate misreading of Nietzsche's work), but in a realization that the Apollonian is only fully 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 – as Freud understood when speaking of the 'return of the repressed' – that it will express itself blindly in self-destructive ways, above all by the desire to master existence by logic, a passion that may yet lead us to the destruction of the earth).

It would be well for Expressive 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. The goal is not to obliterate oneself in a Dionysian orgy (though that may have its appeal when the alternative is a bureaucratized universe), but 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 Majken Jacoby has put it, a 'necessity of form' (Jacoby 1999) – 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 knowledge that would betray the very heart of what we seek to understand.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Truth and Method* (1975), 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 pre-existing 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 existence 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 being, in a passionate encounter in which it speaks to us in a way that shatters our preconceptions.

From this point of view, 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 actually 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 which it interrogates. Otherwise, we would run the risk of prejudicing our understanding with our own point of view. Nothing could illustrate this better than Stalin's attempt to create a 'Soviet' science – the notion that 'nature' is different when seen from a socialist or any other particular perspective (feminist, post-colonial, etc.) is deeply misguided. This is not because these frameworks are invalid. Rather, it is because they do not belong in a field in which the formation of the object explicitly attempts to 'bracket' all particular perspectives in favor of an objectivity that would extend to any possible knower, regardless of her point of view. Whether and in what way such objectivity is possible is another matter.

We can extend this 'positivist' understanding 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 it is useful to do so. But it is a mistake to think that the methodology of natural science is the only one appropriate for the study of human beings. 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 entire existence, with our passions, our emotions, our will, 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 (1958), and as Pat Allen has reminded us (1995), is a way of knowing. It is *poiesis*, knowing by making, as contrasted with *theoria*, knowing by observing, and *praxis*, knowing by taking action. This making is a forming, *Bildung* (the German term for formation or education), in the literal sense of the word: transformation into an image (*ein Bild*). 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 represent, it makes present, and what it makes present, ultimately, 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 also the conduct of research may itself be imaginative. We

must have faith that the imagination can in-form 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 only 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 'Dionysos,' 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 our work.

Let me note in passing that much of what has been called 'post-modern' thinking similarly embodies such an imaginative dimension. In the wake of world-wide technological destruction, the naïve faith in natural science and the natural-scientific method has been challenged by a more imaginative conception of knowing, one that is often expressed in the style of the works themselves. This tendency is found also in different scientific fields: the methods of natural science, in their positivistic conception, are no longer taken for granted, and more imaginative approaches have come to the fore.

In a sense, the whole debate about methodology is a reprise of the *Methodenstreit* (struggle of methods), the conflict between the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften* ('natural sciences' and 'human sciences') that took place in Germany in the nineteenth century. Only a naïve positivism would assume that the conditions of experimental research carried out in the laboratories of physicists could be reproduced in the study of human behavior and cultural life. Wilhelm Dilthey (1976), for example, saw clearly the need for a psychology based on understanding meaning, rather than one that looked solely at the explanation of causes (*Verstehen* as opposed to *Erklärung*), though Dilthey's conception of psychological understanding was based on an assumption of empathic identification that neglected the otherness of the phenomenon being studied – the way, as Gadamer has pointed out, that the phenomenon questions us as much as we question it.

What is different about the current historical context of this debate, however, is that the very concept of method has come into question in the sciences themselves. Action-research, participant observation, hermeneutic inquiry, constructivism, post-modernism, narrative understanding – all demand that we put into question the taken-for-granted distinction between subject and object that underlies much philosophy of science (if not science itself). When we carry out research in the human sciences, we are involved in what we study; we affect

it by our research; it is not neutral stuff that we can survey from an Olympian distance without changing its appearance, as the object of natural science is usually thought to be. In a way, all research in the human sciences follows Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty. It is not that we cannot know anything and must have recourse to mystical intuition or ancient wisdom; rather, we must recognize that our questions affect the answers we receive. As soon as we research a cultural phenomenon, we affect the way it appears – it only appears the way it does because we view it from a certain perspective. If we change the perspective, we will change what we see.

In that sense, research in the human sciences is a creative act. That there is no pure objectivity here is not a counsel of despair; instead, it opens up the possibility that we can do research in a way that matters to us, that is passionate, imaginative and dynamic. We must free ourselves from a conception of research that is devoid of energy and life – such research will be of no interest to anyone, least of all to ourselves ('rats and stats,' we used to call such work in psychology).

Moreover, if we affect what we see, it is also true that what we see affects us. In our research work, we are working upon ourselves as well. If this formulation seems strange, consider historical research as an example. When we study the Holocaust, there is no neutral, objective position from which the phenomenon would appear as if we were not looking at it. The questions we ask, the matters that concern us that gave rise to these questions, what we count as evidence, these all depend on the point of view we assume towards this historical event. Works as diverse as Hannah Arendt's research into the compliance of the Jewish councils with Nazi terror (1992), on the one hand, and Daniel Goldhagen's investigation of the extent to which ordinary Germans supported the extermination of the Jews (1996), on the other, obviously stem from different perspectives. Yet each, perhaps, reveals a different aspect of the phenomenon in question.

Not only does the phenomenon look different, we ourselves appear in a new light after these works. I remember reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and being almost physically struck by what Arendt's point of view revealed (whether it was one-sided is another question) – from then on, I could only see myself differently. The same must be true for Goldhagen's work when read by a German reader (and perhaps by a Jewish one as well, German or not). Research that is worth doing not only changes the way we see the other – it changes the way we see ourselves. It is a way of 'soul-making,' to use Hillman's term.

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I would like to conclude by discussing a theatrical work I saw in London a few years ago, Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (2002). In this piece, Frayn recalls the visit of Werner Heisenberg to Niels Bohr in Copenhagen, during the Second World War. At that time Denmark was occupied by the Nazis. Heisenberg, a German atomic physicist still engaged in research under the Hitler regime, took a surprise trip to see his former mentor, Bohr, who abhorred the Nazi regime and was himself in danger due to his partially Jewish ancestry. What was the purpose of this trip? Was Heisenberg trying to help Bohr, to warn him in some way? Was it a purely personal visit, conducted out of sentimental and perhaps self-justifying motives? Was Heisenberg proposing that Bohr work with him on atomic research that could lead to the construction of a bomb or, alternatively, telling Bohr that he had deliberately sabotaged the possibility of such research in Germany? No one knows for certain – the motivation for the trip remains unclear.

Moreover, and this is the genius of Frayn's piece, the uncertainty of Heisenberg's motivation and of the nature of his encounter with Bohr mirrors the uncertainty principle of Heisenberg's research into sub-atomic particles. And the relationship between the two scientists also embodies Bohr's notion of complementarity. The dramatic situation thus imitates the scientific one; we could say that this is a mimetic conception of theater. *Copenhagen* is an artistic presentation of scientific theory; its theatrical structure provides an image of some of the most complex scientific principles that we know.

Moreover, this parallel structure extends to the staging of the piece, not just its characterization. In the production I saw, the characters moved around a circular, slanted stage, relating to each other (and to Bohr's wife, a witness to the scene) as if they themselves were sub-atomic particles. Each of them exists only in relation to the movement of the other (Bohr's complementarity principle) – their bodies are in a dynamic relationship, shifting position as they speak. And the spectator shares in this dynamism and changing perspective. One section of the audience, of which I was fortunate to have been a member, was seated on stage, behind the protagonists. Not only did we see the action differently than we would from the 'normal' position of audience members, but we were also seen by the other spectators. Our reactions were fully visible to them; in that sense, we became part of the drama for them, as they did for us, since from our position we could see their reactions as well.

The effect was to involve us in the action in a way that made us question our own perspective. In fact, I had to ask myself, was it a good thing that atomic weapons were developed by the allies? Not, obviously, that I would have wished Hitler to have the bomb, but

rather that I had to interrogate the price paid for scientific progress – Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and all the Hiroshimas and Nagasakis to come. Was Heisenberg a deluded, egocentric servant of the Third Reich or was he an inspired prophet of atomic catastrophe? Was Bohr an idealistic hero or a collaborator in mass destruction? What did I think about science and art? Was I like a character in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, who might end up braying, 'Art good, science bad?' Or could I hold together these two fundamental perspectives on life without desperately seeking to resolve their contradictions?

'Art-based research' may be a contradiction in terms, but, as Jacques Derrida might have said, '*Vive la différence!*' 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. Perhaps then the reasons will come of their own accord. In trying to understand the essence of research in Expressive Arts, let us use our negative capability of being open not only to scientific conception but also to artistic imagination. The result may not only produce a new conception of research but a new vision of our lives as well.