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A RHETORIC OF AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENT FOR THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

By

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ABSTRACT

A RHETORIC OF AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENT
FOR THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

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In this qualitative research study I examined how people produced and consumed media aesthetically. I defined aesthetics as: how people make and experience meaning through their sensory-based perception (from the ancient Greek). Employing the methods of discourse analysis and discourse-based interviews, I traced the ways students experienced the aesthetic. My findings include a matrix, which frames nine diverse potentialities for meaning making and meaning taking in the acts of production and consumption. This matrix provides a useful, audience-centered navigational aid which can aid in the critique and creation of new media compositions. Importantly, this framework supports a theory for engaged learning in digital environments, where students produce and consume media convergent texts that combine multiple modalities, including sound, image, and user-interaction.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Donna VanSteenhouse and Bruce Knight, PhD who have encouraged and supported me throughout the entire doctoral program. Thank you.

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Chapter 1

New Directions for Composition Studies

In many ways what students "do" in school is changing. Consuming and producing is fast becoming the new reading and writing. That is to say that reading is now about consuming—viewing, reading, and interacting with and through a variety of mediums. Writing is increasingly about producing—composing, designing, and authoring with multiple media. Acknowledging these changing performances of communication, filmmaker George Lucas asks:

> "Don't you think that, in the coming decade, students need to be taught to read and write cinematic language, the language of the screen, the language of sound and image, just as they are now taught to read and write text? Otherwise, won't they be as illiterate as you or I would have been if, on leaving college, we were unable to read and write an essay? (Daley 15).

These changes point to a shift, where being literate has less to do with the written letter and more to do with being knowledgeable in textual, visual, digital, and web-based contexts.

Recognition of this change is prevalent in new media and rhetoric and composition scholarship. In fact, many current studies begin with phrases similar to these:

- "writing is changing and the look and functioning of texts are changing" (Wysocki, "Writing New Media" vii).

- "...it is justifiable to speak of a revolution in the landscape of communication" (Kress, "Gains and Losses" 9).
- "we are witnessing the emergence of a new cultural metalanguage, something that will be at least as significant as the printed word and cinema before it" (Manovich 93).

Recent scholarship heralds this change; students increasingly engage with multimodal platforms. By multimodal, I mean platforms that move between different modes of interaction, from visual, to voice, to touch. Not only do composers regularly employ multiple modes of representation they also "choreograph audio, video, still images, text, and more" (DeVoss and Webb 79). This means that the media students produce and consume on a daily basis are increasingly combining and converging.

A popular activity in recent scholarship is to ask what constitutes new media (see Brooke & Grusin, 2000; Manovich, 2002; Wysocki et. al., 2004). I call myself a new media scholar because I am interested in the ways we create knowledge through media (new and old) and how the combination of text, audio, image, animation, video, and interactive content forms are changing our communicative practices. I particularly like Anne Wysocki's approach to new media in *Writing New Media* where she says that texts are made by composers who are aware of the texts' materiality; the various materialities of a text contribute to how it is read and understood. Interestingly, Wysocki doesn't define new media in terms of digitality and neither do I. This is because emphasis on the digital—on the technological—can sometimes cover up the *human aspects* of

texts.[1] This is not to say that new media is or should be located within a "text." Media, whether new or old, is still the plural of medium. And a medium is still an agency or means of doing something and a means by which communication is expressed. Consequently, media (or mediums) are not static objects that function independently of how they made and in what contexts. Media are always being made, always changing. The study of media (both new and old) can contribute to the design of helpful products for knowledge making, and can help others communicate more effectively and persuasively.

Making meaning

Living in an era where technological advances are shaping the ways we communicate, we need a better understanding of our engagement with media in order to render more transparent the ways in which we create knowledge—or take and make meaning. The New London Group's *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* has become a touchstone for composition studies, supporting inquiry into meaning making with multiple modalities. Within this publication, the New London Group offers the notion of "available designs" (20). Their conception of available designs formulates the "Resources of Design:" what communicators can observe in use around them as they prepare to design new communications" (26). The now familiar modes of communication that can work together to create meaning consist of the linguistic, audio, spatial, gestural, visual, and multimodal. According to new media scholar

[1] This project is an example of why this is important. How do humans make meaning through their aesthetic experience? I wanted to make visible the kinds of *ways* people experience the aesthetic—not solely in the digital realm, but in actual everyday experience.

Ellen Cushman, the New London Group's theory of multimodal literacies works to value multiple modes of meaning making, the power of which rests in its multidisciplinary perspective of meaning making and its inclusion and equal weighting of various sign technologies. In this theory of multiliteracies, the letter, print, and word are valued equally in relation to other forms of meaning making that include images, motion, graphics, and sound (Cushman 115).

Works such as *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* extend the original work of the New London Group to argue that today "meaning is made in many different ways, always in the different modes and media which are co-present in a communicational ensemble" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 110). The key point here is that meaning is made in a multiplicity of modes and media *and* meaning occurs at different places within these. Kress and Van Leeuwen stress that in every mode of the multimodal, there is communicative "work" being done, with all the available representational forms—*and* such work is always meaningful. Theories of multimodality are widely embraced by composition scholars, as they readily acknowledge that media convergence produces deep "changes in the forms and functions of cultural and bodily engagement with the world, and on the forms and shapes of knowledge" (Kress "Literacy in the New Media Age" 1). Kress believes that as we see communication increasingly relying on multiple modes of interaction, new spaces and new strategies will be needed.

Correspondingly, many studies demonstrate the need for a more complete way to understand visual communication and the relationship of the visual to

meaning making. Rhetorician Carol Lipson contends that the changes that are taking place in our increasingly complex, data-rich, data demanding lives "demand a mode of creating meaning that can convey the depth and detail and complexity of our world" and visual language offers that opportunity" (Hocks and Kendrick 113). Diana George also discusses the significance of the visual in the writing classroom. George claims that due to the history of composition studies, we have limited the possibilities for the visual in the teaching of writing, due to the field of composition's traditional ties to the written word. George readily acknowledges, however, that many our students do not have the same binding ties: "For students who have grown up in a technology saturated and image-rich culture, questions of communication and composition absolutely will include the visual, not as attendant to the verbal but as complex communication intricately related to the world around them" (George 32). However, understanding these new practices presents a serious challenge. Charles Kostelnick and Michael Hassett explain that although we live in an 'information age' inundated with visual language (e.g. charts, texts, graphs, illustrations, icons, screens) the structure of that language evades scholars. The problem, can be summarized as follows: "We inhabit a world that relies increasingly on visual language to function, yet the structure of that language remains surprisingly opaque" (Kostelnick 1). This implies that although we rely on communication with and through the visual in our everyday lives, we do not fully comprehend how it "works."

While scholars (see Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, Carey, and Kress, 2003; Kress, 2005; Wysocki, 2005; Cushman, 2006) believe that new

theories of meaning are taking shape—there is still much to understand regarding the possibilities of new media. Reflecting on some examples of interesting student work Diana George deduces that current composition scholarship and pedagogy has only "tapped the surface of possibilities" (George 12). It is clear that our understanding of meaning making needs to be reworked, in step with our changing times. Part of what is at stake here, as we move toward more visual and interactive means of communication is in understanding how students create meaning through media. This includes new media that is newly created, which employ multiple sources of information and representation, but also 'old' forms of media that we can't help but see newly, from our evolving positions and perceptions.

Inquiry into the aesthetic

Recently, some scholars have turned to the concept of the aesthetic as a way to understand the meaning making potentialities of media. In "Show, Not Tell: The Value of New Media Scholarship" Cheryl Ball offers a definition of new media as "texts that juxtapose semiotic modes in new and aesthetically pleasing ways and, in doing so, break away from print traditions so that written text is not the primary rhetorical means" (Ball 405). Ball justifies this definition by explaining that "New media scholarship has a necessary aesthetic component because of its designed, multimodal elements, and because these multiple modes can be read in conjunction with written text to form the text's meaning" (404). Ball argues that new media combines layers of multimodal meaning making strategies, and that an understanding of the texts' aesthetic qualities is one possible way to

appreciate and further our understanding of how we take and make meaning. Ball claims that "It is the combination of understanding the use of aesthetic elements within intellectual meaning making strategies that will best help readers interpret scholarly new media texts" (411). But exactly how are we to understand 'the use of aesthetic elements within intellectual meaning making strategies'? Ball never clearly defines what an aesthetic element is here, but she does note that *it* (the aesthetic) is necessary to "understand how video, audio, and other elements can work with or enact an argument" (413).

Ball is right to suggest that the aesthetic is increasingly relevant for new composition studies. How people make meaning aesthetically is an important consideration in the construction of more integrative multimodal theories and pedagogies. If the recent special issues of *Computers and Composition* on new media and sound are any indication, this inquiry is already past due. For a case in point, consider Cheryl Ball's and Ryan Moeller's recent work in *Computers and Composition Online* in the print to screen special issue on media convergence. In this work, Ball and Moeller implore the field to rethink aesthetics and rhetoric in a Web 2.0 world. Yet again, it is very difficult to begin to rethink aesthetics when the authors offer up no working definition of what the aesthetic *is* or what it *could be*. The authors claim they are building "the new media bridge between rhetoric and aesthetics, between the scholarly and the creative, between low art culture and high art culture, and between academic texts and popular texts. (Ball and Moeller). With this bridge, the authors are not talking about an outmoded, disinterested aesthetic of the past, but something new. Something useful.

Something that could aid in both the critique and the creation of new media. However, I believe most readers would be hesitant—indeed would be hard put—to articulate what exactly is meant by 'aesthetic' in this piece. If the field of rhetoric and composition is going to establish "the potential role new media can play in converging English studies," as the authors claim, a clearer understanding of the aesthetic is essential.

Anne Wysocki's work also points to the importance of aesthetic elements in multimodal designs. In the articles "Impossibly Distinct" and "Seriously Visible," Wysocki moves beyond text and image by analyzing the interactive and aesthetic features of several multimedia CD-ROMs, showing how each CD creates meaning through its multimodal design. In these articles, Wysocki argues that we need to rethink or expand the conceptual categories that we are currently using to better understand (and teach) the multimodal aspects of texts. Wysocki questions why we still hold onto so many common assumptions regarding the teaching and understanding of visual elements. She argues that when dealing with the visual, form is not always separate from content, word is not always separate from image, and information is not always separate from design. When we choose to separate these elements, we seriously diminish our returns.

Both Ball and Wysocki extend the theories of multimodal discourse by supporting inquiry into the rhetorical *and* aesthetical aspects of media. Although both Ball and Wysocki claim that the aesthetic does important communicative work, it is not abundantly clear in either's work whether the aesthetic dimension is complimentary to or distinct from the various modes under analysis, i.e., the

visual modes of meaning (images, page layouts, screen formats), the aural modes of meaning (music, sound), and the gestural modes of meaning (body language, sensuality), etc. In other words, is there a separate aesthetic mode of meaning making? Or does the aesthetic dimension lie within each of the various modes of communication (the visual, aural, etc)?

Asking difficult questions of the aesthetic and its possibilities is a timely and important endeavor. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich asks "Is it necessary for the concept of the aesthetic to assume representation? Does art necessarily involve a finite object?" (164). Manovich argues that new communication practices have the potential to drastically change the "paradigm of the aesthetic object." He observes that the aesthetic object as "self contained, limited in space and/or time, is fundamental to all modern thinking about aesthetics" (163). The aesthetic is traditionally located in a finite object (such as a literary text which assumes a reader reading). However, today, making such an assumption or appropriation of "text" is rather unproductive. There are more generative possibilities open for aesthetic consideration, and according to Manovich, we should be considering them. He asks:

> "Can telecommunication between users by itself be the subject of an aesthetic? Similarly, can the user's search for information be understood aesthetically? In short, if a user accessing information and a user telecommunicating with other(s) are as common in computer culture as a user interacting with a representation, can we expand out aesthetic theories to include these two new situations? (164).

Such an understanding could help bridge the gap between the formal aspects of media and the more social and cultural aspects of how media aesthetically engage the reader, the writer, and the world.

Wysocki's work opens an expanded space for the aesthetic, a space that not only informs the functional and technical aspects of design, but also one that has critical and social traction. She envisions a useful theory of meaning making that goes beyond the technical and functional aspects of texts. For instance, she argues that visual compositions are inherently rhetorical—that is, they cover a series of design choices that have much broader consequences and articulations than formal principles of design suggest. She recommends that "we don't teach students formal vocabulary and principles for visual analysis and production unless we also consider the visual aspects of texts through the lenses of specifically gendered (and so on) material lives" (Wysocki 149).

Kress also argues that theories are needed which go beyond technical and functional considerations to address the social and cultural importance of the design of communication: "we need the notion of design, which says: In this social and cultural environment, with these demands for these materials, for that audience, with these resources, and given these interests of mine, what is the design that meets these requirements?" (Kress 20).

These authors demonstrate the need for an increased understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which the design of communication functions. This area of scholarship is and will continue to grow from one which dealt primarily with formal aspects, including the technical look and functioning of

media, to a phenomenon with much more *human* consequence. A new aesthetic theory can help to engage in the formal aspects of design, but, just as importantly, it can expand issues concerning social and cultural aspects of representation and communication. As Manovich suggests, locating the aesthetic in a *finite* object, in a fixed text, is just that—finite and limiting. Instead, a productive course of action is to ask: How are we to understand the aesthetic as a mode of meaning making?

A new study, a new aesthetic

Allusions to the aesthetic already appear in a variety of contexts relevant to new composition practices, including: multimedia literacy, multimodality, rhetoric, interface design, such as GUIs (Graphical User Interfaces) and rhetorical interfaces, the Internet, Computer Generated Imaging (CGI) technologies, infosthetics (the visual representation of information), design of communication, the teaching of composition, new media art, online gaming, electronic music, cinema and digital cinema. However, these are merely *allusions.* The concept of the "aesthetic," is not yet clearly defined or extensively researched in the field of composition studies. Yet, a clear conception of the aesthetic can be promising for deepening our understanding (and our teaching) of new composition practices.

The aesthetic should not be overlooked as merely a visual or surface level component in these practices. Nor should the concept of the aesthetic remain fixed within the narrow realm of beauty or the philosophy of art. Rather, due to the array of potential applications, it is necessary to imagine a wide-ranging

conception of the aesthetic. Such a useful conception would push against "fixed" and "limiting" definitions, in order to accommodate a more inclusive view of new composition practices. This would be a flexible concept that could encompass a range of potentially "aesthetic" concerns, including issues of beauty and pleasure, taste and appreciation, form and content, art and craft, process and product. This more accommodating notion would conceive of the aesthetic, not as something set apart as a special order, but as a mode of human experience.

Such an understanding would help to address the role of the aesthetic in meaning making and student learning. It would also present an opportunity for work in composition studies to examine the aesthetic in the context of digital literacy. Gunther Kress stresses the need to better understand and promote processes of student learning, for today, which in his view, include: "transformative engagement in the world, transformation constantly of the self in that engagement, transformation of the resources for representation outwardly and inwardly" ("Gains and Losses" 21). In Kress's view, we are all agents designing meaning out of our 'engagement with the world'—our lived experience—and it is going to be necessary to pursue lines of inquiry from which we can learn about the possibilities such engagement offers. Kress contends that we should equip ourselves with the "necessary aesthetic and ethical navigational aids" to prepare ourselves for this kind of inquiry (21). While Kress doesn't expand on what the necessary aesthetic and ethical aids look like, it is clear that they will break with convention to examine and establish new forms of knowledge and meaning making for our changing times.

The study at hand seeks to develop such a navigational aid. In this study, I looked rhetorically at students' meaning making practices—specifically, the meanings they made through their aesthetic experience. I did this in order to 1) offer a detailed explanation of students' aesthetic experience (in one group of students in one point in time); 2) to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the aesthetic as a mode of experience relevant to composition studies and 3) to develop a better understanding of the aesthetic in the context of teaching and learning.

In chapter two, "Locating the Aesthetic," I trace the work of aesthetic philosophers who worked to shift the focus of the aesthetic away from experience in order to attend to historical, cultural, or ideological positions. While the last 200 years of Western thought has championed the idea that the aesthetic is to be explained by and helps to explain other things (for example, to explain matters of beauty, art, judgment, taste, and class), I argue that this tradition has created a limiting conception of what the aesthetic is and how it is actually experienced. I offer an alternative model to contemporary Western aesthetics that is experience-centered, based on the ancient Greek notion of *aisthetikos*—'relating to perception by the senses' (from the Greek *aistheta*— 'perceptible things' and from *aisthesthai*—'to perceive').

In chapter three, "Emerging Rhetoric," I return to the notion of *aisthetikos* in order to develop a working-theory, which locates the aesthetic directly as an observable phenomenon based in perception. Thus, the aesthetic, in my study, is not located in an object of perception, but in the performance of perception—the

act of perceiving. I apply this working-theory to a case study of students' accounts of aesthetic experience in the context of an Arts and Humanities course. Specifically, my study is built around four individual cases and investigates the meanings students associate with their aesthetic engagement (i.e., how meaning is made through the senses) in the acts of production and consumption through the methods of field observation, discourse-analysis, and discourse-based interviews.

Chapters four through seven represent the multiple cases of aesthetic engagement. Within these chapters I create a conceptual portrait for each study participant and describe how each one makes meaning through their engagement with the aesthetic. These narrative chapters put participant voices in context and work to reveal the various ways in which local meanings are made. Each portrait chapter shares a comparable structure. They begin by showing who the student is, both in and outside of the course. Next, the portraits move on to discuss a creative project from the course in some detail. Following the discussion of the creative project comes a section that highlights a meaningful aesthetic experience for the student. For some this experience was consumption oriented, and for others it was production oriented. For example, Chapter 4, "The Message on Multiple Levels: Lilly's Portrait of Aesthetic Engagement," describes Lilly's account of a particular sunset. Chapter 5, "How We Perceive Things: Jack's Portrait of Aesthetic Engagement" details a trip to Niagara Falls. Chapter 6, "Making Real Connections: Emerson's Portrait of Aesthetic Engagement," describes the act of taking pictures. Chapter 7, "The Perceptual Materials of

Reality: Pi's Portrait of Aesthetic Engagement," focuses on the experience of playing video games. The final section of each portrait discloses further anecdotal information revealed during the discourse-based interview process, bringing certain aspects of students' aesthetic engagement to light.

In chapter eight, "A Rhetoric of Aesthetic Engagement," I read across the student portraits to ground my findings in a range of cases. Using a multiple-case strategy I generalize from one case to the next on the basis of the underlying theory. Here, I deal directly with my study's findings. Across these cases of student engagement, it is clear to me that students use the aesthetic in similar ways. For example, students use the aesthetic in a variety of ways to make new knowledge, including acts of interpretation, analysis and appreciation.

Chapter nine, "Aesthetic Spaces of Composition," describes the pedagogical implications for understanding the aesthetic as a perception-based, knowledge-making practice. Given my findings, the aesthetic can be marshaled in a range of situations to support student learning. The aesthetic can provide a practical yet theoretical 'navigational aid' to help students in composition studies understand the diverse potentialities for meaning making and meaning taking in the acts of production and consumption. When students focus on how people make knowledge through the act of perception, they learn multiple strategies to better interact, make meaning, and otherwise communicate. Significantly, this particular and embodied approach to meaning making supports learning in digital environments, where students are increasingly asked to produce and consume media convergent texts that combine multiple modalities, including sound, image,

and user-interaction. Attention to the aesthetic enables the design of more effective products and practices that better engage audiences and users.

Chapter Two

Locating the Aesthetic

The first step in researching students' aesthetic experience must be to examine the concept itself, to render a useful definition to employ within the scope of my study. This is not necessarily a straightforward task, as the story of the aesthetic also involves the struggle to establish the source and status of knowledge itself. Western philosophically speaking, ways of knowing the aesthetic commonly fall into two general (but often entangled) categories. One way has to do with *a priori* knowledge—knowledge that is related to reasoning or theoretical deduction. The other way of knowing is inductive, related to or derived from experience, *posteriori* knowledge. I demonstrate the tension between these two aesthetic ways of knowing by considering a number of landmark studies of the aesthetic. Starting with the ancient Greeks, I consider the axiom that what counts as knowledge determines what the aesthetic is—and also limits what it can be.

It is generally accepted that the ancient Greeks supplied the original notion of the aesthetic, from the verb *aisthanomai* (I perceive) & the noun *aisthetike* (sense perception) 'I perceive with my senses.' Thus, the Greek aesthetic, originally encompassed perception through the senses. Interestingly however, the Greeks were not concerned with the knowledge gained from sensory perception outright; they were also interested in codifying that knowledge into a hierarchy of the senses.

To illustrate, Aristotle, building on the work of his teacher Plato, postulated

that sight was the most important sense and provided the most information about the world. As his *Metaphysics* begins:

> All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight . . . The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things" (Barnes 1552).

In addition to the sense of sight, the sense of hearing was also privileged, due to its capacity to draw attention away from the body of the perceiving subject. Sight and hearing, thus, were considered sites of prized objective information because they revealed knowledge external to the body, observable and verifiable by others. The lower senses, smell, taste and touch, were deemed lower because they could only be experienced subjectively, within the body. Carolyn Korsmeyer explains this preferencing in her *Making Sense of Taste*:

> The information delivered by sight and hearing, especially sight, lends itself to reflection and abstraction that yields knowledge of universals. (It is the intellectual activity of knowing that permits this generalization, not the sense experience itself, which only gives one acquaintance with particulars). Because attention is directed outward rather than toward the particular state of the body, the mind is disposed to generalize about its objects. They may be counted and assigned number; their qualities may be summarized in categories such as color and shape. Because the truths

> arrived at concern the external world, the language developed to refer them is common, shared (Korsmeyer 25).

Notably, the ancient Greeks believed knowledge offered by the lower senses, was lesser knowledge because it was "particular, specific, pertaining to the here and now" (25). The bodily senses provided inferior knowledge of the world precisely because they were empirical—the knowledge they yielded was based on subjective observation and experience. Sight and hearing, in contrast, offered *a priori* knowledge, knowledge about the external world prized for its universal, shared character.

The works of Plato, especially *The Republic* (360 AD) *Book VI (The Allegory of the Cave)* and *Book X* establish the foundation for this ordering. According to Plato, the world we perceive through the senses is illusory and deceptive. Knowledge gained though the senses only represents "appearances of truth", which is not reality. According to Plato, this order depends on an *a priori* realm of separately existing Forms, organized beneath the Form of Good. The realm of Forms is not accessible through the senses—only through philosophical discussion and thought, based on reason. *A priori* knowledge, consequently, is considered by the Greeks to contribute the most to knowledge and meaning making. Furthermore, sight and hearing are an important part of this knowledge base, since these "external" senses are associated with reasoning and theoretical deduction. Table 2.1 shows the dichotomy between the ancient Greek conception of higher and lower order senses.

Table 2.1 Hierarchy of the Senses

Higher Order Senses	**Lower Order Senses**
Sight, Hearing	Taste, Smell, Touch
A priori knowledge	*Posteriori* knowledge
Theoretical	Empirical
Logical	Experiential
Universal	Particular
Mind	Body

Things known and things perceived

Centuries later, this "sense hierarchy" was addressed by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (by way of the Latin *aestheticus*).[2] In his early work, *Reflections on Poetry* (1735), Baumgarten develops a theory of aesthetic experience. He writes: The Greek philosophers and the Church fathers have already carefully distinguished between *things perceived* and *things known*...Therefore, *things known* are to be known by the superior faculty as the object of logic; *things perceived* of the science of perception, or aesthetic (17). Building on this distinction between things known and things perceived, Baumgarten goes on to advance his theory of sensory perception in *Æsthetica* (1750), a work on the theory of beauty in art. In this work Baumgarten links the aesthetic perception of "good art" with "good taste"—(the ability to judge well)

[2] Baumgarten is credited for crafting the word "aesthetic" from the Greek *aisthetikos*—'relating to perception by the senses.' (From the Greek *aistheta* – 'perceptible things' and from *aisthesthai*—'to perceive.')

and devises a set of rules by which to base judgments.

However, in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Immanuel Kant renounces Baumgarten's science of perception, claiming that the establishment of rules for judging the beautiful was "futile," because those rules were merely empirical, based on *posteriori* knowledge of the world:

> He hoped to bring our critical judging of the beautiful under rational principles, and to raise the rules for such judging to the level of a lawful science. Yet that endeavor is futile. For, as far as their principal sources are concerned, those supposed rules or criteria are merely empirical. Hence they can never serve as determinate *a priori* laws to which our judgment of taste must conform. It is, rather, our judgment of taste which constitutes the proper test for the correctness of those rules or criteria (21).

Kant continued to privilege knowledge gained from reason over knowledge gained from experience in his later work, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which concerned judgments of taste, i.e., judgments of the beautiful—above all the beautiful in nature. In this work he established the *a priori* conditions of the aesthetic—conditions that, not surprisingly, transcended the limits of empirical inquiry. This was the birth of aestheticism for aestheticisms' sake: intellectual, non-utilitarian, and markedly disembodied.

Kant's way of explicating the aesthetic had a long and influential history in Western European thought. He reinforced the idea that the aesthetic was based in pure theory—and that its "truths" could be arrived at through reason alone.

Moreover, these truths appealed to the *sensus communis*, a universal "common sense" that could be arrived at externally through the "free play of our cognitive powers." (Kant, "Judgment" 238). Kant held that only through such common sense could judgments be made.

Because Kant located the aesthetic in the abstract and universal (while shunning the particular or applied), he set a precedent for the aesthetic to be explained in other terms, with other criteria—for example, with historical, cultural, ideological, or political associations. Notably, aesthetic/sensory perception and the meaning derived from that were no longer an acceptable way of *knowing* the world; the lower senses could only offer deceptive, illusory appearances and mere impressions of how things *really* are.

Other ways of knowing

Throughout the next two centuries of Western European intellectual thought, inquiries into the aesthetic continued to demonstrate concerns regarding the source and status of knowledge. As a case in point, theorist Pierre Althusser's work located the aesthetic firmly in the context of ideology—that is, in society's dominant beliefs and values. In his influential essay "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre" (1966) Althusser investigated the influence of ideology on artworks. Althusser claimed that art is embedded in institutions (which were seen to play a powerful role in creating and commodifying cultural discourses), thus advancing the values and ideas of the dominant ruling class. He wrote: "What art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of 'seeing', 'perceiving' and 'feeling' (which is not the form of knowing), is the ideology from

which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes" (Althusser 1480). Althusser continues: "Neither Balzac nor Solzhenitsyn gives us any knowledge of the world they describe, they only make us 'see', 'perceive' and 'feel' the reality of the ideology of the world" (1481). Althusser words almost echo back to the ancient Greeks—that perceiving is not really a form of knowing. He contended that the aesthetic reveals only ideology—not reality.

Pierre's Bourdieu's work shows the influence of Althusser in his pronouncement that: "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Bourdieu 6). Bourdieu explored the connections between aesthetic taste and social-economic status in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (*1979). Bourdieu made the argument that our sensibilities derive from and produce "cultural capital" which is obtained from the existence of economic and social inequities. For Bourdieu, aesthetics was about the ability to differentiate between "good' and "bad" art. It was a process through which society produced and legitimated inequities of economic and social status. He asserted that taste functions to make social distinctions and is an acquired "cultural competence" which can be used to legitimate and perpetuate social and economic inequalities. For example, Bourdieu claimed "a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded" (2). Without this code, the beholder "feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason" (2). For Bourdieu, the

aesthetic was inseparable from its "social function of legitimating social differences" (7).

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, aesthetic ways of knowing were persistently subsumed by *other* ways of knowing and relating to the world, philosophically, ideologically, historically, socially, and politically. This is a convention that is, without question, still alive and well. Recently, the book — part literary criticism, part philosophy — entitled *The New Aestheticism* (2003), vehemently petitioned for the need for the aesthetic to attend to its own historical position. The editors, Joughin and Malpas, stated in the introduction: "It is impossible now to argue that aesthetics is anything other than thoroughly imbricated with politics and culture. And this, without doubt, is entirely a good thing" (Joughin 3). This comment demonstrates the widely-held belief that if one wishes to speak of the aesthetic in this day and age, one must attend to its historical (or cultural, or ideological) position—indeed it is "impossible" not to. While the authors of *The New Aestheticism* stated that they were issuing in an era of "new aestheticism" with this very premise, there is nothing exceedingly new about their conception of the aesthetic. The authors simply echo the stance that an aesthetic mode of knowing does not exist in and of itself (but is always entrenched in other constructs of culture, history, etc).

To explain the aesthetic in other terms, with other criteria has been a major occupation of a variety of stakeholders over the last two and a half centuries. In this vein, institutional and ideology critique have been especially prominent—the critical examination of the ideas, feelings, beliefs, and values

embedded in the artifacts or practices of a culture or group. Because of this, the aesthetic, as concept, has come to be accepted as inextricably bound to ideology and to mean little in and of itself. According to arts educator Elliot Eisner, the aesthetic has become "a casualty of American education" because "it is embedded in a historical context that has underestimated the role it plays in man's effort to know" (Eisner 32). Eisner's observation is a poignant one, because it acknowledges that the role of the aesthetic has been underestimated—due to the "established" ways of knowing, which frame the aesthetic as a highly intellectualized pursuit based on the idea that knowledge itself is a historically, culturally, and ideologically imbricated process.

Actor-Network-Theorist Bruno Latour (2005) also makes note of the obfuscation of the aesthetic when he states that: "Every sculpture, painting, haute cuisine dish, techno rave, and novel has been explained to nothingness by the social factors 'hidden behind' them (Latour 236). Latour continues

> Through some inversion of Plato's allegory of the Cave, all the objects people have learned to cherish have been replaced by puppets projecting social shadows which are supposed to be the only "true reality" that is 'behind' the appreciation of the work of art" (236).

While the modus operandi has been to "explain away" the aesthetic by addressing the social and ideological factors hidden behind it, this unapologetically *a priori* "way of knowing" has served to create a limiting conception of what the aesthetic is and how it is experienced—privileging mind over body, theory over experience, and universals over particulars.

Reinvesting the aesthetic with meaning

Arnold Berleant, a contemporary philosopher of the aesthetic writes of the need for a revisioning, or reseeing of the aesthetic in *Art and Engagement* (1991)

> Fresh concepts are required that help explain art and the aesthetic without legislating what they must be and without co-opting them to serve other purposes. We must learn to look at the domain of the arts without preconceptions about what they must show, do, or mean (Berleant 211).

Learning to look without preconceptions entails not explaining the aesthetic with *other* criteria, not appropriating the aesthetic in the service of some *other* objective. To reimagine the aesthetic is to explain it as a phenomenon rather than as a means to provide an explanation for something else.

An explanation of this kind is past due. As early as 1934 John Dewey addresses the state of the aesthetic in *Art as Experience.* He observes: "So extensive and subtly pervasive are the ideas that set Art upon a remote pedestal, that many a person would be repelled rather than pleased if told that he enjoyed his causal recreations, in part at least, because of their esthetic quality" (5). Dewey asserts that the major challenge for a genuinely useful aesthetic theory would be to "to recover the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living" (10). Speaking in broad terms of philosophies of aesthetics he claims "the system in question has superimposed some preconceived idea upon experience instead of encouraging or even allowing esthetic experience to tell its own tale" (275).

Building a genuinely useful aesthetic theory

Aesthetic experience, according to Dewey, has lost touch with lived experience and should be made more concrete again. This endeavor would conceivably involve inquiry into the aesthetic as a mode of sensory experience—an act of perception (from *aisthetikos*—'relating to perception by the senses'). Such a conception of the aesthetic would have particular relevance for recent new media scholarship. Current studies in new media argue for more embodied approaches to perception for our digital age. In *New Philosophy for New Media,* Mark Hansen argues that digital media has fundamentally changed how we perceive. Hansen employs Henri Bergon's 1896 theory of perception and his emphasis on the body (what he calls "a center of indetermination within an acentered universe") to argue that the "digital image" encompasses the entire process by which information is made perceivable through embodied experience. He places the body in a privileged position—as the agent that filters information in order to create images. By doing so he argues for the indispensability of the human body in the digital era. His work demonstrates how new media artists "have focused on foregrounding the foundation of vision in modalities of bodily sense" and that these demonstrations mark a paradigm shift in "aesthetic culture . . . a shift from a dominant ocularcentrist aesthetic to a haptic aesthetic rooted in embodied affectivity" (Hansen 12). Hansen claims that, not only does the user actively go into new media, but that the user actively creates the image – the image is a process which takes place within the users body. He argues that the image is a process (and not necessarily a product) that "demarcates the very

process through which the body renders information perceptible" (10). He holds "the image can no longer be restricted to the level of surface appearance, but must be extended to encompass the entire process by which information is made perceivable through embodied experience" (Hansen 10). Perception, Hansen argues, is no longer an ocular event but a haptic event of the body.

A further argument for a better understanding of how we make meaning through sensory perception is made by Caroline A. Jones in the edited collection entitled *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art.* Jones claims that aesthetic practices locate how bodies are interacting with technologies at the present moment, and provide a site for questioning those locations" (Jones 2). Essays within *Sensorium* (the term refers to the sum of an organism's perception, the "seat of sensation" where it experiences and interprets the environments within which it lives) argue that "embodied experience through the senses (and their necessary and unnecessary mediations) is how we think" (5). Importantly, *Sensorium* demonstrates how new media artists work to make the 'sensorium' visible. Practicing new media artists "are not interested in having us disappear within a given apparatus. They work to surface the effects of technology, making the viewer question mediation even within the pleasure of media" (3). Jones' conception of the aesthetic represents a critical shift in awareness of the possibilities for bodily experience.

One last work for consideration is Anna Munster's (2006) project entitled *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics* that demonstrates how the aesthetic can help foster a move toward a more embodied

experience of new media and meaning making. Her scholarship involves the argument that: "aesthetics is capable of offering us both a critical commentary that folds back upon the broader flows of a more reductive information culture and a new kind of aesthetics that unfolds into new sensory spaces for lived experience" (Munster 38). In her analysis of recent new media artworks, Munster suggests that the body provides the site where the "aesthetic processes of composition" inevitably take place (145). These recent studies on the aesthetic demonstrate that new, broader examinations of the notion are needed—especially as we seek to understand the processes of meaning making and sensory experience within digital environments.

My own study builds on this work as it addresses the need for a broader, more accommodating notion of the aesthetic, while at the same time rooting it in sensory perception (from the Greek *aisthetikos).* Based on the rich history of the concept, I deem the senses a productive starting point to examine the phenomenon of aesthetic experience. I also believe that for such a study to be productive, it would have to be a given that the aesthetic does not (in and of itself) give rise to social factors, ideology, politics, or culture. In such a study, the aesthetic, as phenomenon, can only be the consequence of its associations and not their cause. This means that the aesthetic cannot account for its associations. Instead, associations are what can help account for the aesthetic. To trace these associations, I conducted a descriptive qualitative case study of four students in an Arts and Humanities course.

In the next chapter I describe this study in detail. I explain how I constructed it around four individual cases of students' aesthetic experience. This was an opportunity to look deeply at a small number of students in order to examine the particular associations that accounted for their aesthetic experience. Through these cases it was possible for me to examine if and how students made knowledge, made meaning through their aesthetic experience.

Chapter 3

Emerging Rhetoric

From the beginning of this study, from the first field observation, it was clear to me that students experienced the aesthetic in different ways. Students *associated* the aesthetic in different ways—they connected their aesthetic experience to a wide array of modes and meanings. My task in this study was to ask students' to verbally associate their aesthetic experience for me. Consequently, I use the tracing and following of these associations as an analytical methodology. The associations I traced throughout my study were indicators of my phenomenon of interest—*aesthetic engagement*. I define aesthetic engagement as that which engages the possibilities, the potentialities for aesthetic experience. Thus, the goal of my project was to examine the aesthetic as a rhetorical practice, to better understand the ways in which people made meaning through their experience with it. The act of tracing associations led to the development and documentation of a rhetorical framework that was true to the various ways in which the students in my study made meaning through their aesthetic experience. In this chapter I begin with a discussion of how I framed this project around four cases of students' aesthetic engagement. I then describe the methods I employed to build my cases studies: field observation, discourse-analysis, and discourse-based interviews. Following a description of the methods, I explain my coding practices and the emerging themes from this study. Finally, I represent my findings in a way that illustrates a transdimensional approach to meaning making with the aesthetic.

Lenses

I employed two lenses to locate aesthetic engagement, my phenomenon of interest. I employed my first lens to look at students' acts of material production and consumption. This lens was conceived to be purposefully wide-angled in order accommodate the many different ways students were producing (composing/designing/authoring) and consuming (viewing/reading/interacting) in the material world. 'Materiality' in my study included produced or consumed texts and accounts of experiences but not things that were merely thinkable, imaginary, abstract, or otherwise immaterial.

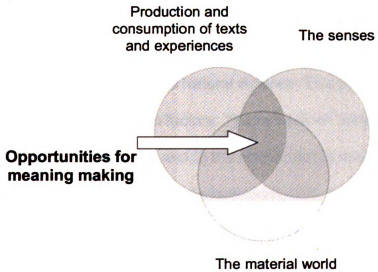
I employed my second lens to look at these acts of material production and consumption through students' sensory perception. By (re)locating the aesthetic in sensory perception—from the concept of *aisthetikos*[3]— it was possible to render the aesthetic visible, to render it a traceable, empirical phenomenon in the material world. The senses considered in this study referred to physiological methods of perception and included sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. This approach made it possible for me to examine the ways in which students engaged with the aesthetic *performatively* that is, through their sensory perception—through their experience—and to examine the meanings they associated with that experience. Thus, the aesthetic in my study was in essence a *how* and not a *what*; it was not located in an object of perception, but in how the aesthetic was perceived. For instance, the aesthetic was not located *in* a painting or a website, but in *how* that painting or website was perceived by the senses.

[3] An explanation of *aisthetikos* is offered in the previous chapter.

It is necessary to acknowledge that while my conception of the aesthetic in this study borrows from Baumgarten's work, it also represents a robust departure. Baumgarten's work assumed a genuine difference between things "known" (logically) and things "perceived" (perceptually). My study does not necessarily distinguish things known from things perceived. Accordingly, I do not adhere to a "sense hierarchy," but instead locate aesthetic ways of knowing firmly within each individual's particular sensory-based associations.

Figure 3.1 demonstrates that aesthetic engagement is about the opportunities for meaning making that arise at the intersections of these three spheres: 1) consumption and production of texts and experiences, 2) the senses, and 3) the material world.

Figure 3.1 Locating aesthetic engagement



Thus, aesthetic engagement is about ways of meaning making through the senses in the production or consumption texts and experiences in the material world. The way I defined and operationalized aesthetic engagement in this

project was deliberately in order to make visible its various potentialities (and not limit it to preconceived notions).

The Setting

Performances of aesthetic engagement are always located in time and space. In order to closely observe how students made meaning through their aesthetic engagement I observed a small group of students in one particular time—fall semester 2007—and in one particular place—an Arts and Humanities course at a large mid-western land grant university. This particular 16-week course titled Self, Society, Technology focused thematically on environmental sustainability. A prerequisite for the course in which I conducted my study was the completion of the university writing requirement, a one-semester composition course taught primarily by TAs and adjunct faculty. Consequently, the majority of students in the course where I conducted my research were in their second or third year of college. This particular Arts and Humanities course drew many students from the College of Natural Science. This phenomenon can most likely be attributed to one of two factors: 1) emphasis on technology in the course title: Self, Society, Technology and 2) the online course description which stated that the course focus would be on "understanding the environment from an arts and humanities perspective." While many students in the class majored in the College of Natural Science, there were also a variety of majors represented from the College of Agriculture and Natural Sciences, the College of Engineering, the College of Social Sciences, the College of Communication Arts and Sciences, and the College of Arts and Letters.

This course was one option in a required Arts and Humanities sequence at the university where I conducted my study. Students, no matter what their declared major, were required to take two Arts and Humanities courses in order to meet their Arts and Humanities general education requirements, courses necessary to graduate from the university. To quote the general program description, Arts and Humanities courses

> seek[s] to assist students to become more familiar with ways of knowing in the arts and humanities and to be more knowledgeable and capable in a range of intellectual and expressive abilities. . . courses encourage students to engage critically with their own society, history, and culture(s); they also encourage students to learn more about the history and culture of other societies. They focus on key ideas and issues in human experience; encourage appreciation of the roles of knowledge and values in shaping and understanding human behavior emphasize the responsibilities and opportunities of democratic citizenship; highlight the value of the creative arts of literature, theater, music, and arts; and alert us to important issues that occur among peoples in an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world.

This course also had specific objectives, particular to the course professor. The professor designed this course to "draw on the arts and humanities to examine how we see and understand the environment." The professor's syllabus stated: "The goal of the course will be the development of critical interpretive capacities that will enable you to understand the environments

that you inhabit and communicate that understanding to others." The syllabus also stated that by the end of the course, students should be able to

- Demonstrate multiple understandings of the environment using different frames of reference
- Communicate effectively to multiple audiences utilizing different genres and technologies
- Understand the role of ways of knowing in the arts and humanities in developing a coherent view of the environment

Both the general and the specific course objectives stated that one of the goals of the course was to become familiar with or understand "ways of knowing in the arts and humanities." Consequently, I deemed such a course an appropriate place to study the phenomenon of aesthetic engagement. Additionally, this course was an ideal place to conduct research on students' aesthetic engagement given that its students were repeatedly asked to both produce and consume a diverse range of texts. Students were asked by their professor to *consume* lectures, books, articles, videos, films, poems, artworks, illustrations, and presentations. Students were asked to *produce* short writing assignments, longer essays, reflections, portfolios with an emphasis on visual components, and town-hall presentations. Many students also produced drawings, poems, PowerPoint presentations, posters, artifacts, and photographs in response to course assignments.[4]

[4] More detailed descriptions of student production and consumption are offered in chapters 4-7.

Participants, Sampling, and Case Development

The course in which I conducted my study met in a large lecture amphitheater in a building in the center of campus during the fall semester of 2007. Out of approximately 137 students enrolled in the course, 92 students give me consent to examine their writing and projects assigned as part of routine classroom practice. In order to determine appropriate study participants from this large pool of students, it was essential that those participants met certain additional criteria. To generate a smaller pool of students, I employed a strategy of best-case sampling, because I wanted to use a sampling strategy that would maximize my chances of finding my phenomenon of interest. Since I was interested in finding and describing cases of aesthetic engagement, I wanted to choose participants who had the best probability of being aesthetically engaged. I considered my in-class field observations as well as student's written work as I looked for broad indicators of aesthetic engagement. I looked for participants who met the following criteria:

- Participated actively in class discussions and activities
- Expressed ideas and opinions in class and/or composed projects that advanced ways of understanding through various lenses of the arts and humanities
- Indicated willingness to engage in active self-reflection and self-disclosure about their writing, course experience, ideas, and opinions

This sampling strategy allowed me to work closely with students through an intensive discourse-based interview process, which I discuss below.

The four students I identified for this level of the study were contacted via e-mail. All responses were positive and students arranged two meeting times with me to undergo an intensive discourse-based interview process. I conducted all interviews at the university's collaborative technology labs, located at the library. The first interviews occurred during mid-semester (week 7 or 8). The second round of interviews took place toward the end of the course (week 13 or 14).

The identity of the student participants from this study is held in strict confidence. In the analysis and reporting of the research I used a pseudonym in the data and kept the pseudonym codes separate from the data. Participants themselves chose their pseudonyms, a feature that the participants enjoyed because they were able to have a degree of control in their identity construction within this aspect of the study. While none of the participants in this study expressed concern with protecting their anonymity, I as a researcher was ethically bound to ensure that contextual details did not give away my participants' identity. To protect students in the course from any instructor bias or favor, the course professor and TAs did not have knowledge of who participated in my study and who did not. Table 3.1 describes the four case-study participants by their pseudonym, major, academic college, and their year in their respective programs of study. A detailed portrait of each participant's aesthetic engagement is offered in chapters 4-7.

Table 3.1 Study Participants

Name	Major	College	Year
Lilly	Journalism	College of Communication Arts & Sciences	Junior
Jack	Microbiology	College of Natural Science	Sophomore
Emerson	English Education	College of Education	Sophomore
Pi	Physics	College of Natural Science	Junior

In order to examine students' aesthetic engagement at the local level, I created multiple cases—or portraits—of aesthetic engagement, one for each participant in the study, (using the data collection methods described in the next section). Each portrait demonstrates how the individual study participant associated their aesthetic experience in different ways, at different times, in different places. Interestingly, when I traced students' associations across my four cases, I observed that certain associations emerged consistently. Multiple-case sampling provided me with confidence that my findings were reliable—my findings could be generalized from one case to the next.

Methods

In this qualitative case study I employed three different methods to collect my data. The data came from field observations, discourse analysis, and discourse-based interviews with study participants over a 16-week time span. In employing the method of field observation, I recorded written observations of the professor and students as they went about their normal class routine. I sat

amongst the students during class lectures in a large amphitheater. I also observed some class recitations (led by the TAs) during the semester for a combined total of approximately 40 hours of about classroom field observation. I made a record of in-class activities and responses in a two-column notebook. In one column I wrote a description of what I observed and in the other, I wrote a reflective memo. I often brought questions to my observations, which I wrote at the top of my notebook pages. These questions gained more focus as the study progressed. For example, in the early stages of the study I was interested in the broad meanings people attached to their sensory encounters. Later, I was more interested in emerging patterns. Later still, I was interested in locating dissident voices that did not correspond with my emerging associations.

The data from field observations afforded me two important things. First, it allowed me to gather descriptive notes for my study, including details on the setting, participants, and background information on assignments and in-class activities. These descriptive notes provided me with abundant contextual descriptions. The second affordance of field observations was their utility as a point of reference. I was able to refer to them when deciding what to look for in discourse analysis and what kinds of questions to ask in the discourse-based interviews.

Discourse analysis

I employed the method of discourse analysis to examine the writing and visual compositions which students produced as part of routine classroom practice in order to understand with more clarity how students made meaning

through their aesthetic experiences. I had access to 92 students' work, which I accessed directly from the professor, teaching assistants (TAs) or the course's online learning management system. When necessary, I made copies of consenting student's work and returned all work to the instructor or TAs within 48 hours.

During the process of discourse analysis I employed my two lenses to examine 1) student production and consumption of texts and experiences in the material world and 2) experience via the senses. These two lenses guided my attention during the study and are discussed in more detail in the section "Segmenting the Data." The primary goal of discourse analysis was to locate particular passages of interest in student discourse that I could then discuss with the study participants during the discourse-based interview sessions.

Discourse-Based Interviews

In my study, the four case-study participants were each interviewed twice using a discourse-based interview process, for a total of eight interviews. Each session lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours for a total of almost 12 hours of interview data. I employed this method in order to look deeply at particular texts (written, visual, and digital) which they had produced in the course. Discourse-based interviews were developed in 1983 by Odell, Goswami, and Herrington to

> help uncover writer's tacit knowledge of, and motivations for texts. The method involves some transformations to the original texts by the researcher. The technique typically involves: (1) presenting one or more alternatives for some passage(s) of a text to the writer (or possibly

someone else), (2) asking if she would accept the alternative(s), and (3) asking her to explain why or why not (Bazerman and Prior 189).

In my interview sessions I presented the student's own words or phrases in conjunction with various alternatives, which I prepared ahead of time. I then asked the student which choice best conveyed the intended or most appropriate meaning. I concluded by further asking the student to explain or expand on his or her responses. In employing the discourse-based interview method, Paul Prior notes that it is important to make clear to the interviewee that "the alternative is not intended to be a correction or a proposed improvement, that is might be better, worse, or no different" (Bazerman and Prior 190). Thus, during the interviews I had to reinforce that I was not looking for a particular answer, nor judging the responses—instead, I was solely interested in tracing the associations they made.

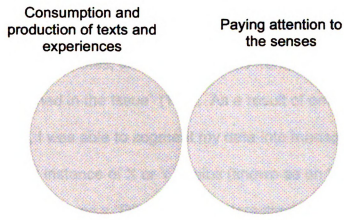
The Data Analysis Strategy

Locating emergence

Employing the two lenses of aesthetic engagement oriented me toward particular ways of working and particular approaches to data collection and analysis. Working with these lenses helped me to determine how to segment the data gathered from student texts and discourse-based interviews in order to identify my indicators. Specifically, the lenses I employed guided me to look for indicators of the following: 1) students producing or consuming meaning from a text or experience in the material world and 2) students paying attention to the senses. By considering the data through these wide and narrow lenses I was

able to identify where the phenomenon of aesthetic engagement *lived* in my data and was able to determine appropriate units of analysis to systematically read my data. The challenge was that the selection of a unit of analysis appropriate to my phenomenon of interest was actually quite difficult.[5] This difficulty resided in the fact that my two indicators occurred in non-uniform ways in my data. Figure 3.2 Aesthetic engagement was to be located at the levels of 1) consumption and production of texts and experiences and 2) paying attention to the senses.

Figure 3.2 Locating emergence



To locate these phenomena in the data set, I determined my unit of analysis to be the d-unit, or discourse unit. The d-unit can be described as "any stretch of continuous text—a whole text, a section, a paragraph, even a small group of related sentences—that functions as a unit and whose parts are more related to each other than to those outside the d-unit" (Colomb & Williams 102). The d-unit allowed me to establish boundaries for my two phenomona of interest: 1)

[5] Units of analysis identify "the level at which the phenomenona of interest occurs" (Geisler, 2005: 29).

consumption and production of texts and experiences and 2) paying attention to the senses.

By looking at the data from the level of the d-unit, I was able to segment my data into separate discourse units. According to Colomb and Williams

a d-unit = an Issue + a Discussion

As explained by Colomb and Williams, an Issue performs all of the announcing functions of discourse, it "signals those expectations that the reader will use to construct a coherent whole and which specifically announces the Discourse Topic" (103). The second part of the d-unit equation is the Discussion, "which explains, describes, illustrates, draws conclusions from, or otherwise develops the matters established in the Issue" (103). As a result of employing the d-unit as my unit of analysis, I was able to segment my data into manageable units, identifying where an instance of X or Y begins (known as an "Issue") and how it unfolds and ends (known as a "Disucssion"). Interestingly, the structure of d-units is recursive, meaning that "d-units can be composed of other, smaller d-units and in turn can compose parts of larger d-units" (104). Due to this characteristic (smaller d-units can be embedded in larger d-units) it is possible to construct "rich, multilevel analyses" (104).

For purposes of clarity, I provide two examples of d-units from this phase of the analysis. The first d-unit is an example of indicator #1—attributing meaning to the consumption or production of a text or experience.

1) [begin d-unit] I used to work at McDonalds and I had a very hard

time. Nobody cares if their hamburger is exceptionally crafted. It's like, "Hey, just give me my food so I can go." What's valuable now is not fine craftsmanship—it's the ability to be flexible and multitask. Nobody wants someone who can do one thing really well. [end d-unit]

This d-unit marks the limits of an "area" in the data. The Issue in this d-unit concerns a student attributing meaning to the production (the crafting) of a hamburger. The ensuing Discussion elaborates on the value of that production (i.e., the meaning that the student made from that production).

The second sample is an example of indicator #2—paying attention to the senses.

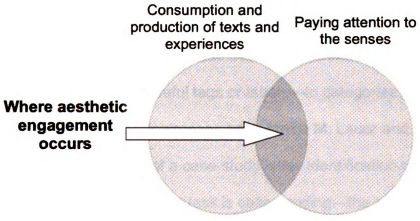
2) Beauty appeals to our senses. Smell, taste, sight, sound all appeal to us in beautiful ways. A beautiful woman is desirable to a man. A beautiful song is enjoyable to our ears. A beautiful pastry is entertaining to our taste-buds. Every aspect of beauty entertains the human soul, it is this beauty that makes life meaningful.

This d-unit also marks the limits of a distinct "area" in the data. The Issue in this d-unit concerns a student paying attention to the senses. A reference to or association with a sense, e.g. touch, taste, etc. is the criterion for this indicator. The ensuing Discussion elaborates some of the ways in which beauty appeals to the senses. Thus, using the d-unit as my unit of analysis, I was able to pull, from a larger dataset, the passages that were interesting to me.

Locating convergence

Since aesthetic engagement, my phenomenon of interest, was not expected to be located in any one indicator, but in the two together, the second stage of my analysis had to identify the convergence of my two indicators. Consequently, I began to look specifically for the times when my two indicators converged, because their convergence was precisely what would help to determine the ways meaning were made through the senses in the production and consumption of texts and experiences in the material world. Figure 3.3 demonstrates how I narrowed down my dataset to only observe only the convergence of my two indicators.

Figure 3.3 Locating convergence



For purposes of clarity, I provide an example from this second phase of the analysis. Convergence of my two indicators was found in sample #2, discussed above. Convergence was found in the following selections:

A) A beautiful song is enjoyable to our ears.

B) A beautiful pastry is entertaining to our taste-buds.

These two instances demonstrate a convergence of my indicators because A is about making-meaning from the experience of a beautiful song (it is *enjoyable* to our ears). B is about making meaning from the experience of a beautiful pastry (it *entertains* our taste-buds).[6]

By employing the d-unit as my unit of analysis in this second stage of data segmenting, I was able to assemble the relevant data that corresponded to the intersections of my indicators. This act of systematic reading prepared the relevant data for further analysis.

Coding

After segmenting the data at the level of the d-unit to reflect the convergence of my two indicators, I began identifying the variables—the participant's associations of aesthetic engagement. I did this through the attribution of codes— useful tags or labels—to categorize selected units of data. According to composition researchers Janice M. Lauer and J. William Asher: "The most crucial task of a case-study is the identification of important variables in the data. Sometimes this task is called coding—the setting up and labeling of categories, which then become the variables of the study" (26). The researchers claim that this process is about analyzing the data for patterns, and identifying and operationally defining and relating variables and testing them for reliability

[6] In contrast, the final sentence from the initial d-unit does not demonstrate a convergence of my indicators: "Every aspect of beauty entertains the human soul, it is this beauty that makes life meaningful." Although this Discussion is about making meaning from the experience of beauty (it *entertains* the human soul), this Discussion does not have a strong enough basis in the observable, material world, a criterion for Indicator 1.

(27).

It is important to state that my coding of the data was not a one-time affair, but a bi-weekly process that lasted the duration of my 16-week study and that persisted for many weeks after my field research was done. During these sessions I coded and recoded my entire data set, since my codes were in a continual state of flux. My coding sessions occurred bi-weekly for the very practical reason that every two weeks I met and shared my progress with a faculty advisor and my dissertation workgroup. These meetings played an important role in my data analysis, especially when I needed input from others in order to evaluate my coding scheme.

In the initial stages of my research, I attributed many codes of various shapes and sizes to my data set. I seemed to attribute a code to every association I encountered and wound up with a coding scheme of well over 100 items. Besides this matter of quantity, another issue I needed to address was the matter of 'mutual exclusivity' due to attributing two (or more) codes to the same d-unit. As Weare and Lin suggest, codes must be "comprehensive and mutually exclusive" (284). Because of my 'loose' or 'indiscreet' coding practice at the beginning of my study, I was not able to describe with any degree of certainty my boundaries for my codes and categories.

At that point, I returned to my rapidly growing dataset. As I kept track of how often each code appeared, it was relatively easy to determine which codes held the most relevance across my data, which was primarily comprised of data from discourse analyses and discourse-based interviews from the four participants.

My multiple case-study design helped me to locate points of convergence across the multiple sources of data which comprised my dataset. These predominant codes I labeled my 'emergent themes.' According to qualitative researcher Sarah Lawerence-Lightfoot, "Emergent themes arise out of this layering of data, when different lenses frame similar findings" (204).

At this stage in the analysis, I enjoyed seeing my codes become consistent with what I saw, heard, and felt as a researcher. Definitions, at first tentative and soft became more solid. Comparisons began to hold. My emergent themes began to explain how students made meaning through their aesthetic engagement. Through the tactic of analytical memoing I began to understand how my findings created a conceptual map of emergent themes.[7] However, the single most helpful tool in interpreting and organizing my data was my use of the data display—"a visual format that presents information systematically, so the user can draw valid conclusions and take needed action" (Miles and Huberman 91). Creating data displays to represent my findings helped me to visualize my emerging themes and how they related to one another. It was with the act of creating a data display (the first of many) that I began to see the ways in which my findings were connected. Each time I revised my data display, I created a more intricate picture of my case. In turn, this new picture of my case refocused my data collection, data coding, and led me to the creation of a data matrix.

[7] "Memoing helps the analyst move easily from empirical data to a conceptual level, refining and expanding codes further, developing key categories and showing their relationships, and building toward a more integrated understanding of events, processes, and interactions in the case" (Miles and Huberman 74).

The Matrix: an Emerging Rhetoric

In the later stages of my analysis, I created a descriptive matrix which helped me to lay out my emergent themes and gain a better understanding of how student's aesthetic associations operated separately and in relation to one another. A matrix is another tool of analysis, a tool for gaining a better understanding of the data set. As defined by Miles and Huberman, *"Matrices* essentially involve the crossing of two or more main dimensions or variables (often with subvariables) to see how they interact" (239). In the concluding weeks of my study, around Week 13, I drafted my initial matrix, a model consisting of rows and columns which conceptualized the different possibilities for aesthetic engagement on a grid. I immediately started revising the arrangement of my themes once I did this, because what happened at the intersections of the matrix made distinctly visible the relationships of parts to wholes. The data matrix performed the concept of the intersection visually and allowed for conceptual analysis at the level of individual parts as well as their relations to each other.

During multiple workshopping sessions, my peer writing group helped me to confront my assumptions about my data representation and suggested various alternatives as I worked and reworked my data matrix for about eight weeks. During these weeks I puzzled over what the matrix was doing, rhetorically, and how the types of rows and columns described, indeed, represented my cases. Finally, I came to a version that created a sense of balance among the interrelated parts—the emergent themes. The final matrix achieved a kind of harmony among the different ways of meaning making which I had to account

for. Thus, the matrix was a comprehensive conceptual map of the emergent themes from the case-study. It succinctly described the phenomenon of aesthetic engagement in one group of people in one point in time, i.e., it represented readings within and across my four case studies. The matrix helped to make visible the various ways in which students made meaning through their aesthetic engagement at the levels of *logos, pathos,* and *ethos*, thus, I described these emergent themes, seen together in the matrix, as a rhetoric of aesthetic engagement. This matrix, portrayed in Table 3.2, depicts the themes which emerged from the study. It illustrates a transdimensional approach to meaning making with the aesthetic; it represents aesthetic engagement at various intersections of *logos, pathos,* and *ethos*—including the representative, the sensory, and the appreciative. In Chapter 8 I explain this matrix in more detail.

Table 3.2 Matrix

	Representative	**Sensory**	**Appreciative**
Logos: Formal Connections	1 Formal/Representative	2 Formal/Sensory	3 Formal/Appreciative
Pathos: Emotional Connections	4 Emotional/Representative	5 Emotional/Sensory	6 Emotional/Appreciative
Ethos: Individual Connections	7 Individual/Representative	8 Individual/Sensory	9 Individual/Appreciative

The portrait structure

In the next four chapters (4-7), I craft a descriptive portrait for each of my study particpants, based on data collected from discourse analyses and discourse-based interviews. These chapters are at the same time inviting, complex, and revealing. They are inviting in that they provide convincing and authentic narratives tracing four students' aesthetic engagement. They are complex because they describe and investigate human aesthetic experience in context. They are revealing, since they work to describe separate instances of aesthetic engagement, while at the same time attempt to explain its comprehensive nature.

These chapters, then, begin to chart some territory. They represent my communication with my study participants over a sustained period of time, the 16-week fall semester of 2007. These chapters describe and explain various aspects of students' aesthetic experience. As a result, these chapters begin to interpret my study's emerging themes and develop a framework to understand the thoughts *(logos),* feelings *(pathos),* and beliefs *(ethos)* students associated with the phenomenon of aesthetic engagement.

The portrait chapters each share a comparable structure. They begin by showing the reader who the student is, both in and outside of the course. These beginning sections also work to show the students' orientations to the course. As one of the primary goals of the professor, according to the course syllabus, was to help students become aware that how we "see the arts and humanities contributes to how we understand the environment and solve environmental

problems," each portrait demonstrates how learning about the environment through the lens of the arts and humanities was a challenging yet rewarding experience. One study participant described the course in this way: "In this class we learn about the environment—but not in the expected way. I mean, we don't study the mountains, but rather the ways we view the mountains. We learn about nature—how we see it, how we describe it, and how we experience it." All four participants reported that this was not the course they expected; most referenced that the course title was somewhat misleading; yet all found the course an "eye-opening" experience.

Next, the portraits move on to discuss Project 1 from the course in some detail. This creative project afforded many opportunities for students to discuss their aesthetic engagement. Each study participant reported that Project 1 had been the most enjoyable project in the course, due to the perception that they "got to be creative" and "got to do what they wanted to do." However, while study participants commented on the freedom the project offered, there were actually a number of guidelines for the project, which ultimately asked students to make an argument that clearly communicated their own understanding of "nature" to a specific audience of their choice.

Following a discussion of Project 1 comes a section on meaningful aesthetic experience. I asked each participant to describe, in detail, a meaningful aesthetic experience in his or her life. It was up to each student to interpret what "aesthetic experience" meant. The range of experiences was telling. For some, this experience was consumption oriented, such as experiencing a sunset or the

grandeur of Niagara Falls. Others reported a more production oriented experience, for example, taking photographs or playing video games.

The final section of each portrait discloses further anecdotal information revealed during the discourse-based interview process. These final sections do not provide closure to the individual portrait at large. Rather, they bring certain aspects of students' aesthetic engagement to light, with additional clarity and depth.

Chapter 4

The Message on Multiple Levels: Lilly's Portrait of Aesthetic Engagement

"I have a pair of yellow and gold 5-inch stilettos that are so gorgeous and completely out of this world. I think, like the shoes, I am very much unique and in a category all my own."

Lilly sat in the front row. She wore bright colors (greens, pinks, and yellows) even when the days got colder—when the general fashion trend leaned toward grays and blacks. She chatted and joked easily with those around her, including the professor. She was someone people noticed despite her petite frame, in part, because she always looked very "put together," and in part, due to the comfortable grace with which she moved.

Lilly was ambitious and said that she planned to do many things when she graduated from college, including a possible tour with the Cirque du Soleil. While this might sound like an unrealistic goal for some, it was very much a reality for Lilly. Lilly almost dropped out of high school to "do Cirque," back home in Canada.

When I asked Lilly why she wanted to do this, the answer was apparently self-evident.

> HAVE YOU EVER *SEEN* THE CIRQUE DU SOLEIL?! You get to *perform*. It's the coolest thing ever. You do things not everyone gets to do. I mean, who gets to get strapped up there on the high-wire wearing metallic-rhinestone-studded-outfits swinging around to crazy music? It's just fun.

That being said, Lilly wasn't necessarily wearing rose-colored glasses. Having toured Cirque's training facilities and talked to its members she came to find out that "they don't treat their injured troupe members very well. They basically fire them. When you sign a 3-year contract doing 2-shows a day, your body can just give out."

This is where Lilly's university degree in broadcast journalism would come in. For a career, Lilly would like to be a reporter, ideally, a television news anchor. Her dream job would be to work for E! News and "interview famous people all day." In order to become a television news anchor, Lilly was realistic about the "grueling 15-hour days" she would have to put in, and the amount of "grunt-work" necessary when starting out in the world of broadcast journalism.

However, that did not seem to phase Lilly because she was accustomed to hard work. Lilly was a student athlete at the university and for as long as she could remember she had an exceptionally disciplined routine

> I have classes scheduled in the morning from 8:00-12:30. I do a rehab maintenance program three times a week. (I had shoulder surgery a year ago so, I have to keep that strong.) Practice is from 2:00 until 6:30 six days a week. Then I go to dinner or else I pack a dinner. Some nights I have group-project meetings, or tutoring sessions. Other nights I'll go to the lab to do homework. I usually get home around 12:30 am. Then there's always recruiting or fundraising or other stuff for the team when I'm not studying, training, or competing on the weekends. I have one day off a week. When I have time off I usually sleep.

Lilly scheduled time to meet with me on her precious days off. On these days we met at one of the collaborative technology labs at the university library, where I held all of my interviews with my participants. These labs are private studio spaces outfitted with ergonomic furniture, dual platform capabilities, and interactive whiteboards. While sometimes Lilly and I would use a computer to reference something brought up in class (a photograph, a TED talk, a YouTube video), usually we just sat next to each other at a low coffee table, each with a copy of her projects and short writing assignments from the course.

On Project 1

When introducing Project 1 in class, the professor asked students to be specific in their choice of audience. His instructions on the assignment sheet read: "Everyone" is not a good choice; good choices are more specific, such as "my dorm floor," "my fraternity," or "my hometown newspaper." Lilly's choice of audience was noticeably thoughtful. She stated in the beginning of her project:

> I have selected my 79-year old grandmother Beverly as my audience. My grandmother has recently been diagnosed with stage-four lymph node cancer and because of her age and frailty; she is not doing well physically. With this project I would like to show her that her life has been one of natural beauty and that she has experienced nature in multiple forms.

In this project Lilly asserted that the course had compelled her to see the world differently. She wrote

At the beginning of this course, my views on nature were too constricted. I thought that it was *out there,* with the birds, the trees and the grass. However, after only a few short weeks of lecture, and the assigned readings (especially William Cronon's *Uncommon Ground*), I am able to challenge that way of seeing the world. My argument is that nature is more than trees and grass, but is a way to view the natural aspects of everyday life and society.

Another requirement for the assignment was the creation of an album containing "a collection of images, artifacts, and other found objects in varying media, that you arrange deliberately to achieve your purpose." Lilly stated: "My 37 pictures are mounted on colored construction paper, reflecting the colors of the rainbow. The images start with the most obvious ideas of nature (the trees, the mountains, the seasons) and end with the most far off or least considered idea (that is—humans: a new born baby, different body types, an old man)." In an interview, I asked Lilly to explain how some of the images in her album (see Figure 4.1) communicated her understanding of nature.

Figure 4.1 Lilly's album pictures

On Frida Kahlo:

> The image of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo illustrated the native culture of her country through her work. She is best known for self-portraits showing her physical pain and suffering through her work. Frida may not fit the typical mold of physical attractiveness, yet the way she painted herself and her emotions shows a type of human nature and beauty that can also be viewed as nature.

On the Dove advertisement:

> In a world where beauty seems to by anything but natural, these pictures (as part of the Dove beauty campaign) show that natural beauty comes in the size and shape that nature has given you.

On the baby and the old man:

> The picture of the baby illustrates new life, in human form. The picture of the elderly man shows the natural evolution of life on the opposite end of the spectrum, in the sense that humans cannot fight age or the aging process. Together, these two pictures show nature as a cycle, as a journey, with a concrete beginning and ending.

This last point Lilly considered the most important, as her project goal was to persuade her grandmother that physically growing old was actually a beautiful reflection of nature's cyclical process. This argument was intended to help her grandmother come to terms with old age and illness, to show her that "nothing was wrong" with what was happening to her. Instead, growing old could be seen as an opportunity to become a living (and dying) embodiment of a natural process—something Lilly viewed as "beautiful." When I asked Lilly what she meant by "beautiful" she explained: "When I see an old woman with long white hair, well, I believe that is beautiful. It can be beautiful to physically grow old because you are reflecting the natural process. This is one more way that nature manifests itself in the world."

I then asked Lilly to describe what she meant by "natural process." After admitting how hard it was to explain her thinking, she said: "Right now my grandmother is depressed and afraid—because she is dying. But my project is trying to show that—for my grandmother—this is the sunset moment of life. Instead of feeling afraid, she could be feeling relaxed and at peace—like one

feels when viewing a sunset. Aging can be a radiant and beautiful experience. It all depends on how you perceive it."

When I asked Lilly how this project aesthetically engaged her, she talked about how much she enjoyed assembling the project. She reported that at the beginning: "I was constantly thinking about what I could do—even walking to class—turning it over and over in my mind." Then, once her audience became more concrete in her mind, she was able to put the aesthetic elements together in a way that facilitated her message. She ventured: "The aesthetic elements work to get beyond the surface-level of things." I asked Lilly for an example and she explained: "There is read and *then* there is really read. You might read for content, or to skim, or to summarize. But then there's *really* read. The way you might read a letter from a loved one." I asked Lilly to expand on this comment. She said: "Sometimes you read it over and over, in order to understand everything the writer is trying to say. You do this in order to get *underneath* it." Lilly said that she assembled the 37 images of her view of nature in order to demonstrate the underlying message that nature takes many forms—in order for her audience "to stop and look, at all the aspects of it. That is what the aesthetic does for my project; it allows the audience to enter deeper into the message on multiple levels."

Lilly's focus on audience engagement was both astute and perceptive. As a competitive athlete, and someone who planned to "perform" on the high wire for Cirque du Soleil and in front of a camera as a news anchor, an awareness of audience was an essential asset. In discussing her project, she explained that

people made meaning through their aesthetic engagement on many levels. These layers of meaning allowed the audience to "get underneath" the more superficial, or surface-level material, and "to enter" into some of the deeper, more nuanced layers of meaning. Her project had many such layers, as she chose to create an intimate, philosophical, and spiritually revealing project specifically for her grandmother.

On aesthetic experience

In one conversation with Lilly, I asked her to describe a meaningful aesthetic experience in her life. She asked what *exactly* I meant by "aesthetic," and I told her that she could define aesthetic in any way that she wanted to. She decided that she would define it as "beautiful." She proceeded to describe an experience she had while in Mexico, viewing a sunset:

> I was in an Infinity pool above the ocean watching the sun go down. I was aware of the air surrounding me, the smell of the ocean, the way the entire sky lit up with color, the way the water looked like it was on fire, the warm water on my skin, the sound of the water hitting the sand below. All this set the stage for my aesthetic experience as I watched the sun fall lower and lower into the horizon. There was the feeling of being nowhere but in the moment. I felt totally relaxed and at peace. And there was the appreciation that comes from witnessing something so real.

This sunset experience was significant for Lilly, in part, because it was not an everyday event. Throughout my conversations with Lilly, she was consistent in noting how an aesthetic experience was different from everyday routine. She

explained: "Take milk for instance. I drink milk everyday and it is not an aesthetic experience for me to drink it. But take hot cocoa with lots of marshmallows. When I drink that, it can be an aesthetic experience. I can appreciate different feelings and sensations."

Aesthetic engagement, for Lilly, was a kind of "zone" she could enter, where she could experience the world in a different way. In our discussions she revealed that being in this "zone" was more than a surface-level experience: "It's about going deep, it's an experience-oriented knowing where you are really in the moment." For Lilly, her "experience-oriented knowing" was very difficult to put into words. "It's basically indescribable," she insisted. But, when I asked her to try to expand on what she meant by "experience-oriented knowing" she offered the following illustration: "When you are watching fire, really watching how it burns and moves, you become fascinated with its different colors and shapes. Then you are really in the moment—you're not thinking about tomorrow. The meaning is in the experience—and there's different degrees of experience."

For Lilly, being in the "zone" of aesthetic engagement meant paying attention to her surroundings in a way that deepened and enriched the quality of the experience. It was about deeply dwelling in the present moment (where "you're not thinking about tomorrow"). She explained, "When people enjoy beauty, they want to take their time to take it all in. When you watch a sunset, you really watch it. You don't just go look at it quickly and leave! You take the time to soak it in." What made aesthetic experience different than everyday

experience for Lilly was the degree, or quality of presence she brought to the "aesthetic" moment.

When she said "there's different degrees of experience" she was talking about how a person can bring varying degrees of presence as well as various ways of knowing to the aesthetic moment. Lilly's own description of her sunset experience would fit this position, as she described how she accessed this "zone" through her senses. She described how she was conscious of: "the smell of the ocean, the way the entire sky lit up with color, the way the water looked like it was on fire, the warm water on my skin, the sound of the water hitting the sand." She also described "the feeling of being nowhere but in the moment" while simultaneously feeling "relaxed," "at peace," and "appreciative" of her experience. This was an apt description of multiple ways of "experience-oriented-knowing."

However, from Lilly's description of the sun setting, we can observe that she was not solely focused on the object (the sunset and its "formal" attributes, such color, shape, etc.). Instead, she located her experience in how she perceived that sunset through the senses. Throughout this study I found that sensory perception did not merely "enhance" aesthetic experience (Csikszentmihalyi 120) rather, it was the foundation of people's engagement with the material world—and is the initial basis for aesthetic ways of knowing and meaning making.

On wallowing

The discourse-based interview process allowed Lilly and I the opportunity to zero in on certain words or phrases, in order to uncover her potentially tacit

knowledge regarding her views on the aesthetic. On one occasion, it was necessary for Lilly and I to spend a great deal of time discussing her decision to use the word "wallow" in a short writing assignment.

After we looked at an excerpt from her writing assignment (seen below), I asked, "How did you arrive at the word *wallow*"?

Excerpt:

> This shot was taken in a butterfly conservatory, a dome-like building that was created simply for consumer purposes. This conservatory was constructed so that people could pay to come walk, sit, and wallow in the natural beauty of the plants, flowers, and the life of the majestic butterfly.

Lilly answered:

> "Do you remember when we were discussing sunsets, and how people don't just glimpse them for a second, but actually try to soak them in? I used the word wallow for that reason. When you are watching butterflies, you see the delicacy of the wings, their intricate patterns, the amazing colors. Wallow, to me, is about how people should act when visiting a place that was built solely for the experience of viewing butterflies.

As a researcher, however, I was interested in going deeper into the meaning/s Lilly attributed to experiencing the butterflies. In order to dig deeper, I first showed Lilly her original sentence. I then showed her two more sentences and asked her to choose the option that was closest in meaning to what she had originally intended.

Original sentence:

This conservatory was constructed so that people could pay to come walk, sit, and [wallow] in the natural beauty of the plants, flowers and the life of the majestic butterfly.

Option 1:

This conservatory was constructed so that people could pay to come walk, sit, and [indulge unrestrainedly] in the natural beauty of the plants, flowers and the life of the majestic butterfly.

Option 2:

This conservatory was constructed so that people could pay to come walk, sit, and [give their attention to] the natural beauty of the plants, flowers and the life of the majestic butterfly.

Lilly immediately admitted that the second option "makes more sense." She explained "you make the effort to visit the conservatory and pay your eight bucks to experience—to pay attention to—what's going on around you. It's a special experience." I then revealed to Lilly that "indulge unrestrainedly" (from Option 1) was actually a dictionary definition of wallow. She laughed and said that the word indulge "reminded her of chocolate." She qualified this by stating that, "But you *do* use this word to explain something you *enjoy*."

I then asked Lilly if she would now use another word instead of "wallow." After thinking about this for a moment, Lilly answered that she would use the word *experience*, "because you are experiencing something that you don't get to experience everyday." Her comments here were consistent with what she had

stated previously regarding aesthetic experience as fundamentally different from routine experience. She continued

> Unless you work there, you don't go to the butterfly conservatory every day. So, when you do go, it's something special. If you are paying to go see something, it has a certain value—probably an enjoyable experience. It is something that you don't do all the time, so it causes you to experience part of the day differently.

It was necessary to conduct this rather fine-grained analysis of Lilly's use of the word wallow because her word choice was a possible "outlier" in my data set, meaning that it was an instance that potentially did not "gel" with the research data I had collected thus far. While all participants noted "interesting," "fun," and "pleasurable" experiences in this study, I found that these were not necessarily criteria for their aesthetic engagement in the production or consumption of texts and experiences. To clarify, all participants at one point or another disclosed that they made meaning through their emotional connections to an aesthetic experience. However, this was not a prerequisite for aesthetic engagement—it was simply a possibility. Frequently, students reported that their aesthetic engagement was facilitated by fostering degrees of "presence" and "paying attention" (which, in some cases, might be considered contrary to "indulging" or "reveling").

Chapter 5

How we perceive things: Jack's portrait of aesthetic engagement

I probably have the aesthetic sensibilities of your average ten-year old. I like cartoons; I'm a fan of SpongeBob SquarePants. I like bright colors. I like 'zany.' Now, there are people much more highbrow than that, but that's not me.

Everyone in the course knew who Jack was. He enthusiastically spoke-up in class to offer comments and opinions—something out of the norm in such a large class—and often made the class collectively laugh with what might be described as his "off-beat sense of humor." In our interviews Jack was funny, self-assured, moreover, he was deeply caring about the world around him.

For example, every Thursday when Jack got out of class, he saw the campus student organic farm-stand across the street selling fresh corn and heirloom tomatoes. He commented: "It was so nice to see, so refreshing. It's good to know that there are people here who are doing that. It's good to know that all of our corn doesn't come from giant corn factories. It's good to know that that kind of cultivation is still alive in this day and age. It's a matter of pride." Jack appreciated the things he could take pride in. He used to work at McDonalds, and in his own words, he had a "very hard time" there. "Nobody cares if their hamburger is exceptionally crafted. It's just like, give me my food so I can go. No one cares. What's valuable in employees now is not fine craftsmanship, it's the ability to be flexible and multitask. Nobody wants someone who can do one thing

really well." In our conversations, Jack referred numerous times to the art of craftsmanship – to skilled and devoted making. It is something he believed "is not really valued in our society anymore." He explained: "Take Stradivarius for instance. They devoted their whole lives to violin making. You would have to have a certain internal fortitude and belief in what you are doing. That's admirable. I like that." He continued, "Too much of our activity is automated—with too little awareness and too little appreciation for process. I say this because while the end product is important, it is also about a way of undertaking an activity."

As a student of biology—of living organisms—Jack had a great appreciation for process. He studied microbiology, a branch of science that deals with microorganisms like bacterium and fungi. As a child, Jack's dream was to be a scientist at NASA. However, now he seemed a little less specific about his career goals. He might "do research or go to medical school—maybe." In spite of not knowing exactly what he would do, it was clear that Jack would devote his life to meaningful, scientific work—to make a valuable contribution to humanity. The whole point of science," he explained, is "to have something that you can apply to humanity."

On Project 1

According to the course syllabus, the professor conceived of the course as divided into three themes, or modules: 1) ways of seeing, 2) ways of knowing, and 3) ways of acting. When I asked Jack how aesthetics played a part in the course, he explained:

> The first third of the course was about "ways of seeing"—and that's pretty much all about aesthetics, that is, about how we perceive things. This is meaningful because the ways we perceive things alters the ways we become aware of knowledge and how we communicate that knowledge, which is all about "ways of knowing," the second part of the course. This in turn informs our actions, since we act on the information we have, the "ways of acting" portion of the course. This process of acting in the world can circle back around to the beginning of the cycle, since our actions can sometimes change our perspective – how we see things.

This was Jack's interpretation of the course, as the professor did not formally make this cyclical nature of the units explicit. Throughout my interviews with Jack, I learned that he had a knack for pulling seemingly disparate threads together, finding meaningful order, forming unified wholes.

In the first project assignment, which fell under the "ways of seeing" theme, Jack did just this, as he formed a unified theory of humanity and nature:

> There are few among us who would deny that nature is beautiful. Unfortunately though, many people seem to be under the false impression that nature and mankind are mutually exclusive. It is my belief that in order to better appreciate nature, humanity needs to reject that premise that all of man's presence in nature is negative, and embrace the idea that man and nature can coexist peacefully. Such a step is necessary for the advancement of the way we think about nature because mankind and nature are so deeply entwined that they are virtually inseparable.

In this project, Jack argued that "nature" and "humankind" were so intrinsically connected that they were actually one, and should be viewed as such. The audience for this project was his adult sister, a parent to a young child. Jack argued that it was best to teach children this integrative view of nature and humankind at an early age.

Jack represented his argument for Project 1 visually, with photographs that he took from around campus, which he then pasted into a "nature" themed scrapbook. He explained, "After much deliberation I chose to exploit the latest fad in the world of arts and crafts—scrap booking. Surely it is reasonable to assume that my audience would respond best to something they are familiar with, and I happen to know that my audience enjoys the construction of scrapbooks."

Jack and I discussed his photographs at length. He felt that the act of going out into the world to locate and photograph his "evidence" helped him to communicate his argument. He explained: "From a practical standpoint it [the argument] was much easier to express. It was much easier to draw the connection – and really that's what education is all about—learning to draw the connections."

I asked Jack if the act of taking the photographs enabled him to be engaged in the project in a different way. He answered emphatically: "Yeah. Not only on the level of a student trying to get a good grade. But it also really forced me to hunt and to find the thing that I was talking about. I don't think I would have actually believed in my own thesis, if I had not witnessed these things first hand." Jack then referred to the photographs in his project (See Figure 5.1), to illustrate

his claim that humanity and nature can peacefully coexist: "It is obvious by looking at the ivy scaling the building that man is in no way limiting nature; to the contrary, when man builds a wall he provides a space for nature. Both man and nature participate in creating the wall."

Figure 5.1 Photo of ivy

He offered another example (See Figure 5.2): "It is actually common to see such examples of trees growing through gates or fences. In this photo the fence and the tree are one, they cannot be separated without causing damage to both objects."

5.2 Photo of a tree

I told Jack that I was interested to know if the act of constructing the argument visually enhanced his learning process. He explained: "I was able to make more meaningful connections – by going out and taking my own pictures. I'm making better connections, getting different views of nature, aesthetics, design elements, even different perspectives and viewpoints—you know—I even stood on a park bench to get the right angle." Jack also said that his project wouldn't have "meant as much" if he had not personally taken the photographs he used for his project. He explained: "When you take pictures yourself, you know the intent. If you used a picture from Google it would be your interpretation of the photo. But when you take it yourself you know what it means. It means more. People say that food tastes better when you grow it yourself. It's kind of like that."

The act of taking photographs enhanced Jack's learning process, as it engaged him aesthetically—on multiple levels. Jack reported that his

engagement was meaningful because the act of creating a visual argument took the project to a personal level. The act of locating and assembling the visual evidence "first hand," allowed him to establish an individual connection with his project—as he entered into a personal relationship with the argument. His "found-argument" also was aesthetically engaging on the level of *ethos*—or character. His argument gained real-world credibility as he located and collected evidence of his argument first-hand. Due to this, Jack was "able to believe in' his own thesis.

On aesthetic experience

In one interview with Jack, I asked him to describe a meaningful aesthetic experience in his life. He chose a visit to Niagara Falls: "I was around 12 years-old. It was the first big, glorious, awe-inspiring thing I'd ever seen. It was larger than life. You could go behind the falls in these tunnels. It was powerful. It sounded like a roaring jet-plane." When I asked Jack to describe what that experience was like, he said: "Nothing short of being part of the experience is sufficient to truly describe the experience. It was a very beautiful place. Seeing the sheer size of the falls allowed me to grasp their size and grandeur. The roaring of the falls created a feeling of insignificance—it allowed me to realize how big the world truly was."

Jack's aesthetic experience had all the elements of the sublime—the encounter of beauty or grandeur of such magnitude that it inspires great admiration or awe. This kind of aesthetic engagement, for Jack, concerned powerful sensory, emotional, and appreciative connections, similar to Lilly's

Mexican sunset experience in the preceding chapter. Jack initially located his experience in how he perceived Niagara Falls through the senses (primarily the senses of sight and sound). He claimed: "Sight allows one to relate the falls with other objects in order to grasp their magnitude. The roaring of the falls creates a feeling of insignificance that submerges the onlooker in the framework that allows them to realize how big the world truly is. Without the sensory input of the eyes and ears, it would be impossible to establish the perspective necessary to be emotionally impacted by the experience."

From there, Jack went on to describe the meaningful emotional and appreciative connections he associated with the experience. Jack described how he couldn't help but to feel admiration and respect for the falls: "They are impressive because they are of such an impressive scale, and humans have always been impressed with the large and powerful." This grand impression subsequently allowed him to "recognize the beauty of our existence in the grand scheme of things." This description was consistent with Jack's views regarding the connectedness of all living things. Even as a young boy, he was already interested in the sciences and the "bigger picture:" To me, seeing something so wonderful and powerful in the world helped to instill a sense that we were part of a bigger picture, just as everything else in the world is."

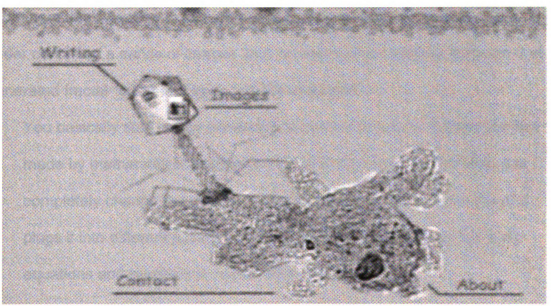
On representation

In our interviews, Jack returned frequently to the significance of craftsmanship, or skilled and devoted making. High-culture or fine art did not offer much to impress Jack. Instead, he saw value in the "home-made Valentine"

qualities of both processes and products. He was drawn to things imbued with meaning and character—to experiences not, in his words, "dulled by the weight of mediocrity."

To illustrate his thoughts on craftsmanship he turned to a digital portfolio he had developed in a writing class the previous semester: "The professor asked us to create a digital portfolio in a way that was meaningful to us. And since I'm a microbiology major, I chose to use various microbes." He described how this portfolio (see Figure 5.3) was a "visual representation" of his interests and explained how the site functioned to convey his digital identity: "It represents my personal aesthetic on many levels. For one, it hasn't been mass-produced. It looks like a person made it and not a big corporation—and this is important."

Figure 5.3 Jack's website



Jack went on to describe his use of color: "I chose a blue background, because I think blue is soothing. I like things when they're bluish. It's odd, because my favorite colors are in the red area, but blue is more calming. When I'm sitting at a

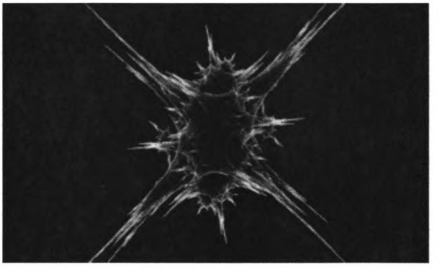
computer, I don't want to be riled up; I want to be calm." When I pressed Jack further about his color choice for his website (for instance, why not green or purple?) he explained: "I never thought of this before, but blue is the color of technology. There's that blue bar, blue screen-savers, Bluetooth...and the PS3. Everything these days has that blue flashing light. It just works." He then described the depth of thought that went into the digital collage he created for his site.

> This image on my homepage is an image of a virus. So instead of the virus injecting its genetic information into a cell and then having it replicate and create more viri, instead, it's injecting my writing. So, to me, it represents a fusion or a coupling of the arts and the sciences. Of course, this interpretation is not obvious to the average onlooker. It's very nuanced.

From here Jack went on to discuss the fractal art within the "Images" folder. This folder contained a series of images Jack created using computer software that generated fractal "art" (see Figure 5.4) He explained:

> You basically start out by generating a batch of images—fractals are just made by mathematical equations. One tiny little change in variable can completely change the picture. It uses a random number generator and plugs it into different pictures. You can take them and manipulate their equations and numbers to create different images.

Figure 5.4 "Spore"



The image above was Jack's favorite. I wondered if Jack considered this image "aesthetically engaging." He explained:

> Yes, it is aesthetically engaging to me because I really like fractals. It has to do with the whole chaos theory thing. This makes me think of math and science and so I'm automatically interested. Plus, the reason I named this one "Spore" is because it looks like an electron-microscope image of a fungal spore, so it makes me think of plants and fungi. It also gives the impression that there's a shadow, or that it's 3-D.

Here, Jack related part of his aesthetic engagement to his interests in Microbiology. Interestingly, he experienced aesthetic engagement with this image, because of its representative connections to the disciplines of Math and Science, and because the image reminded him of a fungal spore, something he was familiar with in his discipline. He continued: "Aesthetically, it could look cold and sharp to someone. It could appear dark and unfeeling. But not to me."

Through the image entitled "Spore," Jack forged a representative connection to his area of study. The spore was a portrayal, or symbol of his interest in Microbiology.

I proceeded to ask if the act of creating the fractal art was aesthetically engaging. Jack once more said yes and that the process was fascinating because "with a fractal, you can go into one of these jagged peaks, and it will be a repetition of all the other jagged peaks. You can infinitely zoom in." Jack turned to chaos theory to explain his fascination. "What might look like chaos, what we might perceive as chaos, is actually finely-structured—it's just that we can't usually perceive that structure. Also, one little change, one little butterfly flapping its wings, one tiny decimal in the equation, and the picture is completely changed."

On one level, creating fractals connected with Jack's general interest in chaos theory. But on another level, he was able to observe—indeed play—with one of the tenets of chaos theory, that is, when one small thread was altered, everything changed. For Jack, this connection was meaningful because it took him took him beyond his intellectual investment in chaos theory toward something even more meaningful. Through the act of creating fractals he was able to demonstrate "the connectedness of all things." Jack's fractal art was, quite literally, something he could believe in.

Chapter 6

Making real connections: Emerson's portrait of aesthetic engagement

"I'm not into going to galleries to interpret complex symbolism—but I'll gladly go to the middle of nowhere to take pictures."

Although she did not expect to enjoy taking her general education requirements, Emerson was enamored with the course by day two. In a course titled Self, Society, and Technology, she did not imagine the degree to which paintings, poems, and photographs would play an almost daily role in class discussions. On day two, the professor had shown a photograph of planet Earth. He then gave the students the writing prompt: *What does this picture mean to you?* After a few minutes he opened up the question to discussion and students began to respond: "Life. Home. A part of something bigger. Creation. Beauty." Emerson called out: "It's gorgeous." "Largely emotional responses," the professor observed.

He explained that this photograph was the very first picture of the Earth with the sun behind it, taken in 1972 by Apollo 17 (see Figure 6.1). He then asked the class to imagine the impact this photograph would have had if they had never seen an image of Earth. He said, "When some people first saw this photo, they wept at their first vision of the planet." He continued, "Truth and beauty, as rendered in painting and poems is just as important as science's contributions. For example, it was the power and force of this photo that got the

Clean Air Act passed, not the numerous scientific studies." This lesson was intended to illustrate the contributions the arts and humanities could make, including powerful emotional and aesthetic arguments laden with value and power.

Figure 6.1 Apollo 17 photograph

Emerson said that after this lesson, she had been emotionally affected from just imagining how it must have felt to see the planet for the first time. She became engaged in the ideas of the course because they were suddenly "speaking her language." As a photographer herself, Emerson knew the profound impact photographs could have. Years ago, she had begun taking portraits of the children in her mother's home-based day care. Inspired by photographer Anne Geddes, Emerson dressed the children in whimsical costumes and spent

hours photographing them. When her family and friends raved about these portraits, Emerson was encouraged to develop her "natural eye" for picture taking. She said: "When I had my first camera, I had a lot of encouragement from friends and family. I got more and more into it as I realized people's reception was very positive." With this positive feedback, she began to venture outdoors, in the unpopulated areas surrounding the small town in which she lived.

Her photo albums contained many remarkable photographs of rural landscapes, storms, clouds, trees, forests, streams, animals, bridges, lakes, fields, and ice. She recently invested in a hefty, professional-grade digital camera to continue developing her passion for photography. However, Emerson did not plan to make a living as a professional photographer. Instead, she was going into elementary education, as she had always been around young children and loved "working with kids." She was content to pursue a teaching career and take pictures during the summer months—possibly for income.

On Project 1

Taking the course IAH 206 was a self-proclaimed "transformative experience" for Emerson. As she wrote in the reflection for Project 1:

> Prior to taking IAH 206 I knew very little about the problems that environmentalists face or the organizations that are trying to better this Earth. I have never adopted a river or hugged a tree and I rarely recycled. But as I write these things I find that I am becoming disgusted with myself and my lack of concern with the environment and the world in which I live.

This confession was somewhat surprising to me, as I had seen Emerson's extraordinary photographs. From her photographs, one could easily assume that the photographer enjoyed an intimate, even reverential relationship with the natural world around her and thus an interest in its protection. Emerson remarked that unfortunately, that was not necessarily so, as she had simply viewed nature as something that was "outside." She explained that she began her transformation when discussions in the first few weeks of the course caused her to think about nature in a different way: "The simple and obvious question posed in the class: '*What is nature?*' is so confusing. This question never would have occurred to me before. Now it is always on my mind." In actively investigating environmental issues for the first time in her life, Emerson discovered the concept of "green burials" and decided to explore this issue further for Project 1.

Emerson conceived of her project as a booth featured at the university's Earth Day Fair, in order to give college-age students information about eco-cemeteries and the concept of a "green" or natural burial." In her project she discussed how green burials minimize one's footprint on the Earth:

> The objective behind a green burial is simple; to minimize one's impact on the environment and to actually give oneself back to the Earth. Simply put, a green burial means no embalming, no conventional marker and no metal caskets. People may choose to mark the graves with flowers that are native to the area, some sort of indigenous rock or nothing at all.

For her Earth Day fair display, Emerson built two miniature caskets out of cardboard boxes—one traditional, one eco-friendly. The traditional casket was painted metallic black with a large silver cross on the top. The eco-friendly casket was covered with hundreds of strands of green grass and small prairie flowers. To further inform her audience about green burials, she continued her argument inside the caskets. Emerson explained: "On the inside lid of my miniature casket I have pictures of traditional cemeteries. I chose these pictures because they show the extent to which the tombstones overtake the landscape of these cemeteries. Inside the casket I have a list of facts obtained from Wikipedia.com about traditional funerals and formaldehyde's impact on the Earth's environment." In contrast to the traditional casket, the eco-friendly casket had photographs of multiple natural burial sites. Emerson explained:

> These pictures are meant to show the natural beauty of these places. Similar to the concept behind spreading cremated ashes; eco-cemeteries are created with the intent that people are visiting their loved ones when they come to the park, that the deceased are actually a part of the environment here, rather than just lying in a concrete vault beneath the surface.

By representing her argument in various ways, she believed she could better convey what green burials have to offer.

Although Emerson acknowledged that burials were often viewed as a "taboo" and "creepy" subject, she insisted that her visual casket argument was not at all off-putting and was in fact "kind of cute." She then described how her

two caskets worked together "to show the drastic difference between the two burial options in a neat, creative way." In her written project reflection she stated: "Although death and burial is a very taboo and difficult subject for many people to deal with, I designed my visuals in a way that is esthetically pleasing and not intimidating so that more people will be willing to hear what I have to say about the subject." In an interview, I asked Emerson what she meant by "[a]esthetically pleasing." She explained that "the boxes [*caskets*] were more interesting, arresting, and interactive than just viewing pictures or reading information." She was also quick to point out that people would be engaged with her display because "people would have to open them up and confront multiple representations." Not only was there the tangible argument of the caskets themselves, there was also the photographs and more text-based information inside the boxes to engage her audience.

Emerson's project was successful because her primary focus was the audience's perception of her argument. She had specifically designed her project with this orientation in mind, beginning with the tactile and sensory argument of the three-dimensional caskets. As the audience interacted with the caskets, they were confronted with additional elements (text, image) to reinforce their understanding on multiple levels. Emerson recognized that these elements all worked together to become a vehicle for her audience's aesthetic engagement.

On aesthetic experience

Emerson said that the most important aesthetic experience in her life was "When I discovered that I not only enjoyed photography, but that I had a good

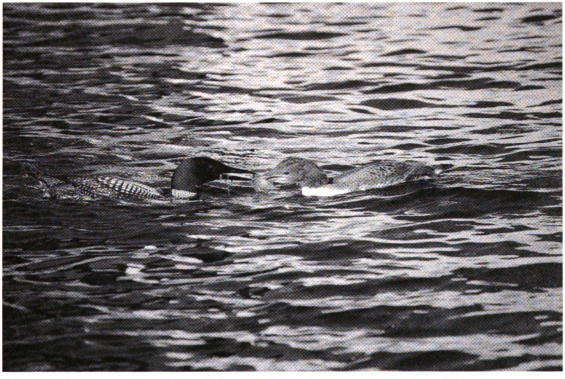
"eye" for it." For Emerson, the production of the photograph was where her own aesthetic engagement occurred. Although, she was delighted that her family and friends appreciated the finished product, Emerson's aesthetic engagement was primarily in the doing—in the moment of taking the photograph. She explained that what she loved about it was more than just pointing and shooting: "It's about adjusting white balance, iso's depth, perspective, composition—all those things."

In fact, Emerson rarely went to galleries or exhibitions to view paintings or other artist's photographs. "I take pictures almost every day" she said, "but I only occasionally look at others photographer's work." Emerson felt that when she looked at others' photos she was "wasting time." She said: "I'm not into going to galleries to interpret complex symbolism—but I'll gladly go to the middle of nowhere to take pictures." Emerson explained that the "complex symbolism" one usually encounters in artist's work was a turn-off because she didn't enjoy trying to figure out the artist's abstract or intended message. Furthermore, she did not believe there was only one kind of meaning in a work: "We all see the same thing physically, but it's what we do with the information we have received. We tend to do different things, perceive things differently." She continued, "We might see the same thing but we might respond and interpret it in completely different ways." For Emerson, each individual's perception was valid, no view counted more than another.

Emerson and I spent a good deal of time paging through her photography albums, which were housed in her laptop. We stopped at an interesting photograph of loons on a lake (see Figure 6.2). When I asked her if the

photograph was aesthetically engaging, she said, "It's a mother feeding a baby, so it invokes a kind of compassionate, mother and child moment." She continued that it was thrilling for her, as a photographer, because "loons don't usually let you get that close—especially to the babies. It was exciting and rare to be able to get so close."

Figure 6.2 Photograph of loons



I asked Emerson to discuss the composition of the photograph and she said: "As far as formal qualities go, I have no idea. It's just raw and in the moment. It's not perfect. It shows how things really are." I wondered why she did not think the photograph was "perfect" and she explained: If you were to edit it, you might lighten the water and remove the seaweed from the loon's mouth. But then it would no longer represent the moment at hand that this picture really captures." Capturing "raw moments" was in fact part of Emerson's aesthetic style

as a photographer: "I try to get views that other people wouldn't necessarily see. To pick out ordinary things and show how interesting they are. To show their beauty, their essence, their story."

As we began to page through her album again, we stopped briefly at an image of a tree in winter. She offered: "The story in this picture is about the last leaves, and the one branch that is still holding on." The next photograph featured a rusty bridge (see Figure 6.3).

Figure 6.3 Photograph of bridge

She said:

> Some people have taken pictures of this bridge, where it looks rusty. They try to make it look ugly. My attempt at this picture is to make it look like it belongs. It is natural to the place. There are trees that are growing through

it. Everything goes together, it has grown together. The trees need the bridge now. They support each other.

This was yet another perfect example of Emerson's photographic style, to show people different views, to turn ordinary things extraordinary by making visible their beauty, their essence, their story.

Preparation for teaching

Emerson chose to go into elementary education because she loved working with kids and wanted to use her creativity in her job. She had recently taken an influential teacher education class on children's literature, to help her prepare for entering the elementary classroom. In this class, she critically examined literary classics and award books for children, including both critics and children's responses to the literature. She explained that this class was aesthetically engaging for her because: "We had to get really involved in it, and not only look at the books from a teacher's perspective but also from a child's perspective. How a child would see and react to it." The ability to enter into the books from different perspectives was a valuable quality of the course. Emerson and her classmates were asked to read and respond to the books through a child's point of view and to contemplate what young students might think and feel. This course also brought up important concerns for diversity and equity in the classroom. As she commented: "It was interesting how people with different backgrounds and experiences could interpret the books and pictures differently." She added that: "there's actually some offensive things going on in some of the books."

The course was important to Emerson because it changed her attitudes regarding the teaching of young people through stories. She explained: "A young person doesn't necessarily think analytically about the pictures in the books, but when we as a class looked closely at the words and pictures it was really fascinating." The interplay of word and image can influence (sometimes in subtle ways) a range of aesthetic responses. Through the course, Emerson began to learn the value of those responses, in order to facilitate effective classroom practice. To illustrate, the course read Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and spent a great deal of time discussing why the book was a classic example of children's literature. Emerson noted: "We realized that the book went really deeply into the emotions of the main character, Max. Even though the book was really short—it expressed, through effective words and pictures, a whole array of intense emotions from a child's point of view."

Emerson saw how she could explore the emotions of the young boy Max with her students, as a way to connect with them on an experiential level. If she could get her students to make real, experience-based connections to the material, she saw opportunities for learning to take place. To relate to her students, she could ask: Who here has ever been angry, like Max? Who has ever been frustrated, like Max? Who has ever wanted to be "King of the Wild Things," like Max? The idea was to collect a variety of answers and establish recognition of both commonalities and difference. Emerson saw picture books as an effective way to teach children because "pictures do not have right or wrong answers. You can respond to them emotionally. Emotions can't be wrong." For Emerson,

teaching and learning through picture books was a way for everybody in the class to relate on an emotional and experiential-level to different people and their different experiences. It was about celebrating both the unity and the diversity of experiences.

Chapter 7

The Perceptual Materials of Reality: Pi's Portrait of Aesthetic Engagement

But aesthetic experience could also be negative... it could be bad pizza.

Pi would rollerblade into class every day sporting the ubiquitous iPod and white ear buds. Music played an important role in his life and was integrated into its every aspect. His music preferences varied widely, and included classical, rock, jazz, metal, punk rock, techno, ska, indie, bluegrass, and rap—"basically everything but country." Pi attributed his appreciation of music to piano lessons, starting at an early age. "I studied concert piano for thirteen years," he explained. This fall, Pi became interested in techno, especially the art of sampling. He had recently created several compositions, which were connected to, but very different from the original source material—variations on Beethoven's 3rd Movement of the Moonlight Sonata.

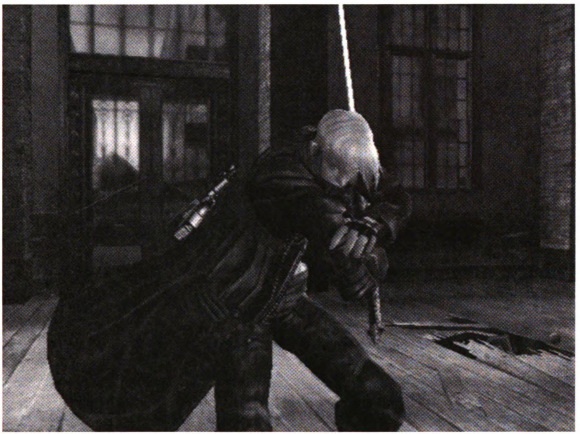
Pi also practiced Capoeira, a Brazilian martial art which "mixes dancing, games, music, and fighting." He described Capoeira in this way:

> Two people go into a circle and it's called "playing a game." Basically, they are not trying to hurt each other but they are fighting each other. Capoeira has room for expression. Depending on how I feel, my "game" is completely different. There are a range of emotions that can be conveyed through "the game." The way we move, it's emotional. It's conveyed through body language. It's subtle, but it is there if you are paying attention.

While music and Capoeira preoccupied this busy math and physics double major, Pi's true passion was videogames. His areas of expertise were role playing games (RPGs) and action/adventure games. He preferred games with 3-dimensional open environments. In discussing the importance of gaming in his life, he said, "Some claim that videogames are not an art form, but I couldn't disagree more." He continued, "In terms of keeping people engaged in a task, it's hard to beat them, and for a very good reason: visuals, music, and story are coupled with a form of interaction not found in other media." To illustrate the art of the game, Pi described what it was like to play Devil May Cry 3 (See Figure 7.1):

> I love the presentation, the attention to detail in this game. There are gothic looking towers, small fires, an ornate staircase—broken in parts. And the music fits the mood of the game very well; it's dark, heavy, and gritty metal. There are a number of weapons you can choose from and you can switch between them with a button click. There are five different guns you can use. And then you have six different styles you can play with and each emphasizes something different. One emphasizes swords. Another acrobatics. There are a lot of decisions to the game, which makes it feel deep and immersive. You can fight somebody, throw them up in the air, choke them with your gun, jump on them, jump off of them, switch to another weapon...

Figure 7.1 Screen capture from Devil May Cry 3



Pi claimed that the game engaged him because it embodied many of the perceptual qualities of lived experience. It employed space, time, and movement in its game play. It constructed a social setting, a physical, material locale. It even employed the use of memory and dreams. The game also drew him in directly through the senses and offered "beautiful game play"—which he claimed had to do with the user's immersion within the game. Devil May Cry offered such game play:

> When you are playing you can go in the castle and can look at the paintings hanging on the walls. The lighting is cool and interesting. And the music is gorgeous, dramatic, and operatic. I would like to do an

> arrangement of it for the piano. The game is beautiful to play because of the way it has integrated art and music. The art and music make it more immersive and more exciting to play.

Pi then likened the heightened experience of playing Devil May Cry 3 to the way professional chefs have the culinary arts. He explained, "Chefs cultivate an appreciation of how their food tastes, looks, smells." He went on to describe a recent dining experience at a food "Gallery" on campus he said

> The food there tastes a lot better. And I think a lot of that has to do with presentation. For example, I ordered a steak salad there once. The server puts the salad on the plate. He then takes the steak and lays it out in strips, then he layers the peppers on there, and finally he quickly zigzags the dressing over it. I thought: 'Wow. That was really unnecessary. I'm just going to eat it.' But it looked really cool. And I enjoyed it more because it looked nice.

Pi claimed that certain kinds of games and certain kinds of foods were "an art" because through them he "attained a heightened sense of experience and appreciation" which accordingly contributed to a "deeper degree of engagement."

On Project 1

Pi was challenged by the first assignment in the course. When he found out that he had to construct an argument that communicated his understanding of nature from an "arts and humanities perspective" he was slightly vexed.

> I was a little stumped, so I thought—what if I tried to talk about art but approach it from a more abstract–scientific based view of the

environment? That was when I decided to look at the arts and humanities more as a form of communication, as a big all-encompassing kind of thing, rather than saying it was art or drawing or music.

After much deliberation, he settled on the theme of "viewing nature differently." He explained, "The word nature feels so natural, you don't think about it. About what it means. But once you do, it's like, that's really interesting. Nature is all around and you know it, but you don't necessarily recognize it. I tried to bring that question to my audience's (my friend's) attention: What or where is nature?"

Pi's project began with a bag containing chalk and white rocks. The directions say: "Draw with these on the sidewalk." He explained that he wanted his audience to physically go outside as he demonstrated the chalk's often overlooked ties to nature. "I wanted my audience to think: drawing with rocks, drawing with chalk. Really the same thing." The next visual argument in Pi's project was a bird's nest. He described the process of building the nest: "I went out and collected some sticks and garbage to build the nest. I assembled various kinds of grasses from campus, pine needles, sticks, beer caps, a broken piece of a lighter, foil from some applesauce. I found out it is really hard to build a bird's nest." He then asked his audience to list what was in the nest and to categorize the items as "natural or not."

I asked Pi if he could have communicated a similar argument using only words. He answered that a word-based project wouldn't have been engaging to his audience and that the artifacts helped him to make the argument:

> With writing, if you want people to really read it, you've got to find a way to draw them in. People pay attention if they have stuff to do, and stuff that interests them. Reading a paper can get kind of boring. Interacting with the artifacts helps the audience internalize the ideas that are expressed. It gives the audience a lot of ways of getting at something.

Reaching his audience was central in his mind as he constructed this project. It was important to Pi that his project argued his point in more than one way. "The more stuff you have people doing," he explained, "the more attention they are going to pay." He continued:

> Sometimes you have a great idea, but it's almost no good it it's not accessible to people. If you have this idea and no one can understand it then it's not very useful at all. Immanuel Kant didn't care that very few people would be able to access his stuff. His ideas were hard enough but then his sentence structure was virtually incomprehensible—comma, comma, semicolon, etc. But that was okay with him. He wasn't that concerned with being accessible.

To Pi, having more than one way to argue a point was key. He wanted his audience to be able to access his ideas. If the first way did not (drawing with chalk), perhaps the next (the bird's nest) would. As he knew the audience he had selected for his project, his friend, liked to play videogames, Pi designed his project to have an active, involved component to keep his friend interested.

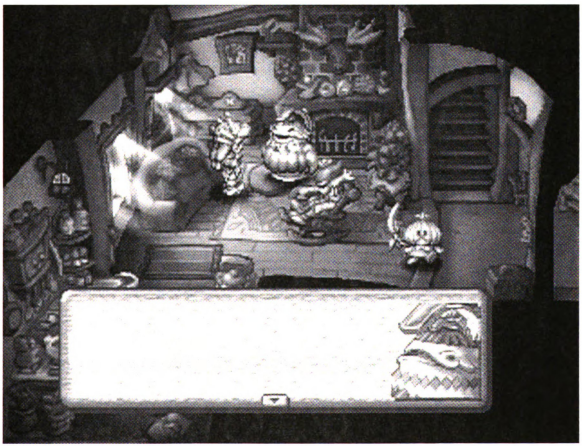
On aesthetic experience

Pi discussed many important aesthetic experiences in his life, such as understanding the intricacies of a piece of music, seeing a certain painting up close for the first time, and attending a concert. But when pressed to choose one to talk about, he chose playing the videogame Legend of Mana for Playstation. He explained, "This was the first videogame I played which made me stop and pay attention to the music and the artwork. Since then, I have looked back at other games and marveled at their artistic direction, but Legend of Mana was the first to make me realize how important art was to great videogames." See Figure 7.2.

Figure 7.2 Legend of Mana Character

I asked Pi to describe what made playing this game such an important aesthetic experience for him. He said, "The music was beautiful, varied, and engaging. The art had a storybook quality to it, very different from the next generation graphics that most Playstation games were sporting at the time." We then went into more detail about what "storybook quality" meant. He offered, "The game contains beautifully hand-drawn backgrounds and characters. When I was playing the game, it has almost an older, children's book quality. A Peter rabbit-antique-soft-brushed-pastel look. The look combines well with the music" (See Figure 7.3).

Figure 7.3 An example of a detailed background from Legend of Mana



Pi continued on to say that the interactive quality of the game also had an "artistic feel to it". He explained, "One could forge their own weapons, build robots, construct musical instruments, raise pets, and grow produce." When we discussed the significance of making things in the game (forging weapons, building robots, constructing instruments, raising pets, and growing produce) Pi chose to clarify with an example:

> When you read something, you can't know exactly what the author intended, so when you read it you take part in their literary creation. The author made the words, but then you recreate it by trying to come up with your story, what you get out of it. There is interplay between what the author created and the meaning you make. It is always going to be experienced a little differently by the next person.

Pi then likened this experience of reading to the act of playing videogames. He explained, "There is obviously a creative process on the end of the people who design them. But there is also a creative process on the part of the person playing them. The whole process of taking it in, interpreting it is a personal creative act."

I continued to ask Pi about the opportunities for creating knowledge—and meaning—while interacting with the multimodal platform of the video game. Pi focused on how a game's focal point was "always the user." He talked about the capacity for games to shape the perceptual materials, "the building blocks," that constitute an alternate perceived reality for the user—a reality without temporal, spatial, or physical constraints. For Pi, the most important element of this was the

user's ability to be an active participant in the perceptual process. The user takes action, directs action, sequences action within the alternate reality of a game—but importantly—it is not an illusion. A game works with actual performances of perception and meaning making to bring a user into the world of the game. Consequently, a user's perceptual engagement with the game is real, even if the game is based on science fiction or fantasy. According to Pi, "The more active a user is required to be, the more effective the game is in deepening the user's engagement, in achieving its constructed reality." The video game as a medium shapes the conditions of a user's aesthetic experience. It invites the user into an all–encompassing realm, an order of reality that exists only through the user's active perceptual engagement—but exists nonetheless.

On education

According to Pi, aesthetic engagement "has to do with recognizing the communicative power of art's many forms." For Pi, videogames were aesthetically engaging because they were able to convey meaning on a variety of levels. In our interviews, we spent a good deal of time talking about what would make education more aesthetically engaging for students. He explained, "In this class, I think that our aesthetic engagement is focused on understanding a multitude of views on nature through non-traditional means, such as the artistic renditions of nature, photographs of nature, and written works which are not primarily scientific."

Pi then gave an example:

One day in class the professor asked what art is and I mentioned that I take a broad view and think that art is a way of communicating using the senses. Singing is art. Spoken word is art—it uses rhythm and tempo to communicate meaning. And public speaking is also a form of art. Anything that communicates an idea and appeals to the senses to get that idea across concerns aesthetics. So, aesthetic engagement to me has to do with how you communicate an idea through the senses, audio, visual, touch, etc.

I asked Pi if he could recall a specific lesson that engaged him on an aesthetic level. He said yes, and mentioned a particular day when the professor had brought in some botanical prints by the Maria Sibylla Merian (see Figure 7.4).

Figure 7.4 Botanical Drawing by Maria Merian (1627-1717)

"The professor asked us if these drawings were art or science," Pi recalled. "This was an interesting question that got us all engaged. It was interesting to see people's responses and their reasoning. There was not a right or wrong answer." This lesson was interesting to Pi because as his classmates gathered evidence to create their arguments (regarding whether the print represented art or science), people started to get "really involved" in the discussion. Pi claimed, "People were really involved and were sharing all kinds of ideas and impressions. This kind of lesson makes it more personal to us, so we can relate our experiences, and this makes it more important and engaging to us."

In our interviews, Pi discussed various ideas to enhance the aesthetically engaging aspects of the course. He explained, "I like reading, but I might not make reading the main focus of the class. It would have been more engaging if we had looked more at particular passages from the readings, instead of focusing on the broad sweeping content oriented questions." He added, "I also would have liked to do more with visuals. I like art and visual representations of nature, but I don't know a lot about it. That would be interesting." Pi was interested in gaining a more critical understanding of how the image conveyed meaning. Ultimately, he was motivated to learn about the variety of meanings that can be made through an act of communication—what he considered aesthetic engagement to be about.

Chapter 8

A Rhetoric of Aesthetic Engagement

The goal of this project was to examine the aesthetic as a rhetorical practice, to better understand the ways students made meaning through their experience with it. From the individual portrait chapters it is clear that aesthetic "meaning" can be associated in vastly diverse ways, yet interestingly, these ways are not at odds with each other. Instead, these diverse performances form a constellation of possibilities and approaches to aesthetic meaning making. The act of interpreting and analyzing students' various associations led to the documentation and development of a rhetorical framework. This framework, depicted in Table 8.1, represents my interpretation of the various ways in which the students in my study made meaning through their aesthetic experience.

Table 8.1 A Rhetoric of Aesthetic Engagement

	Representative	**Sensory**	**Appreciative**
Logos: **Formal Connections**	1 Formal/Representative	2 Formal/Sensory	3 Formal/Appreciative
Pathos: **Emotional Connections**	4 Emotional/Representative	5 Emotional/Sensory	6 Emotional/Appreciative
Ethos: **Individual Connections**	7 Individual/Representative	8 Individual/Sensory	9 Individual/Appreciative

The nine intersections illustrated in this framework describe different aspects of my study participants' aesthetic engagement. I will first define each of the six key concepts and then provide more anecdotal, contextual details concerning each of the nine intersections. Seen together, these instances rhetorically map the multifaceted role of the aesthetic in students' lived experience. Ultimately, this framework scaffolds an emerging theory of students' aesthetic engagement. This is a useful tool which demonstrates both a way to communicate and actively engage the possibilities, the potentialities for aesthetic experience.

Key Concepts of Aesthetic Engagement

Representative

Students assembled aesthetic meaning through connections that represented previous associations and encounters. This kind of engagement illuminated aspects of their connectedness to each other and to the external world—to people, places and ideas that lay beyond the individual. Representative connections included associations that were familiar, typical, characteristic, or symbolic.

Sensory

Students assembled aesthetic meaning through their sensory connections. The senses were the medium through which students participated directly with acts of production and consumption in this study. This emphasis located the aesthetic in the material, empirical world (as opposed to the

immaterial world). While the senses were the starting point for inquiry into the aesthetic as a knowledge making practice, sometimes the senses were also an ending point, meaning, no further associations were deemed necessary.

Appreciative

Students assembled aesthetic meaning through their appreciative connections. Students demonstrated appreciation through the quality of their attention and observation. A necessary attribute of an appreciative experience was conscious presence and attention. This kind of noticing notably heightened or enhanced the quality of an experience.

Formal Connections—*logos*

Students assembled aesthetic meaning through shared or common associations of logic and reason. These associations were generally made based on how students perceived and responded to the given mode (the way or manner) of external representation. This kind of engagement spoke to the "logic" underlying or guiding a performance of consumption or production. These elements included formal and informal design principles, styles, techniques, movements, and genres.

Emotional Connections—*pathos*

Students attributed aesthetic meaning through their emotional associations. Performances of consumption and production evoked a wide array of emotions, such as delight, awe, anger, and revulsion. Often these emotional associations proceeded to move the student to decision or action.

Individual Connections—*ethos*

Students assembled aesthetic meaning through their individual connections. Students' individual associations were regarded as meaningful because they reflected their lived experience, personal beliefs, imaginative lives, and unique styles, and tastes.

The key concepts described above, *representative, sensory, appreciative, formal, emotional,* and *individual* are fundamental to explaining how students discussed their aesthetic experience in this study. Equally important is my interpretation of the ways students repeatedly combined or crisscrossed these concepts in their discussions, as shown in the matrix. These nine intersections reveal different, but sometimes interrelated aspects of students' aesthetic engagement.

1. Formal + Representative Connections

When formal and representative connections were activated, students made meaning through a given mode or manner by means of previous associations and encounters. For example, Jack's Project 1 took the form of a scrapbook, in order to engage his chosen audience, his sister. He explained, "my audience would respond best to something they are familiar with, and I happen to know that my audience enjoys the construction of scrapbooks." Jack opted for the form of the scrapbook because he thought it would best engage his audience. This example illustrates a formal/representative possibility for aesthetic engagement.

2. Formal + Sensory Connections

When formal and sensory connections were activated meaning was made through a given mode or manner by means of the senses. For example, Lilly spoke about watching fire burn and move as she became fascinated with its "different colors and shapes." For Lilly, the way fire burned was an engaging sensorial experience. This would be an example of formal/sensory aesthetic engagement.

3. Formal + Appreciative Connections

When formal and appreciative connections were activated, meaning was made through a given mode or manner through conscious presence and attention. For example, when Lilly experienced the sunset in Mexico, she was paying attention to her surroundings in a way that deepened and enriched the quality of her experience. She was noticing what there was to be noticed. As her attention focused on the setting sun, she felt "nowhere but in the moment." This is an example of a formal/appreciative possibility for aesthetic engagement.

4. Emotional + Representative Connections

When emotional and representative connections were activated, meaning was made through feelings and subjective reactions to familiar encounters. For example, Emerson claimed that her photograph of loons on a lake was aesthetically engaging because, "It's a mother feeding a baby, so it invokes a kind of compassionate, mother and child moment." Emerson's compassion was evoked by the representation of mother and child. The photograph's personal

resonance for Emerson is an example of an emotional/representative possibility for aesthetic engagement.

5. Emotional + Sensory Connections

When emotional and sensory connections were activated, meaning was made through feelings and subjective reactions to sensory perceptions. For example, when Jack visited Niagara Falls, his senses were overloaded with the sights and sounds of the falls (the sheer size of the falls and its deafening roar). This caused him to feel awe-inspired and is an example of an emotional/sensory possibility for aesthetic engagement.

6. Emotional + Appreciative Connections

When emotional and appreciative connections were activated, meaning was made through feelings and subjective reactions to conscious presence and attention. For example, when Emerson recalled the course professor discussing the first Apollo 17 photographs, she became emotionally affected from attentively "imagining how it must have felt to see the planet for the first time." This is an example of an emotional/appreciative possibility for aesthetic engagement.

7. Individual + Representative Connections

When individual and representative connections were activated, aesthetic meaning was made by connecting personal beliefs and attitudes to familiar encounters. For example, when Jack designed his website he chose the color blue for his background. He chose this color because he felt blue was calming and soothing (an instance of 5 emotional/sensory connections). However, he

also stated that he believed the color blue to be an appropriate choice because it was "the color of technology," as seen in navigation bars, screensavers, Bluetooth, etc. Jack's outward associations of the color blue are an example of an individual/representative possibility for aesthetic engagement.

8. Individual + Sensory Connections

When individual and sensory connections were activated, aesthetic meaning was made by connecting personal beliefs and attitudes to sensory perceptions. For example when Pi described the video game Devil May Cry 3, he remarked on how vividly the game drew him in through the senses, while observing the paintings, lighting, and the integration of music within the game. This is an example of an individual/sensory possibility for aesthetic engagement.

9. Individual + Appreciative Connections

When individual and appreciative connections were activated, aesthetic meaning was made by connecting personal beliefs and attitudes to conscious presence and attention. For example Pi believed that Devil May Cry 3 had beautiful game play. He came to this conclusion because he achieved a heightened "sense of experience and appreciation" while playing. This is an example of an individual/appreciative possibility for aesthetic engagement.

An Embodied Process

The rhetoric of aesthetic engagement demonstrates that aesthetic meaning making is a complex and multidimensional process. It is a process in which meaning is made through bodily perceptions, representative associations,

emotions—a wide range of possibilities. Significantly, the possibilities for aesthetic engagement are not mutually exclusive. For example, when Jack discussed the design of his website, he employed Emotional/Sensory Connections (#5) and Individual/ Representative Connections (#7). When Lilly discussed her Mexican sunset experience, she employed Formal/Appreciative Connections (#3), Emotional/Sensory Connections (#5), and Individual/Appreciative Connections (#9). Interestingly, this study suggested a positive correlation between the number of intersections employed and the degree of the student's aesthetic engagement.

As a conceptual tool, the matrix shows different aspects of students' aesthetic meaning making at the levels of *logos* (how student think), *pathos* (how students feel), and *ethos* (how students believe). Due to the range of possibilities, this framework may expand notions of "what counts" as aesthetic experience. It is a much broader account than some versions, which emphasize disinterested judgment or rational cognition as the basis for aesthetic knowledge. This more accommodating conception conceives of the aesthetic, not as something set apart as a special order, but as a mode of human experience—as an important everyday knowledge making practice. It is a practice that does not favor mind over body or body over mind. Instead, it reveals meaning made through body and mind as particular aspects of a larger knowledge making process.

Aesthetics, thus, is the study of how people make and experience meaning through their sensory perception. The framework of aesthetic

engagement explains the many ways such meaning is made and experienced. Such a framework offers a necessary navigational aid for our changing times; it is a blueprint for a human–centered approach to understanding how students take and make aesthetic-based meaning.

Chapter 9

Aesthetic Spaces of Composition

A tangible result of this study is the rhetorical framework explained in the previous chapter. This framework represents a blueprint for a useful theory of aesthetic engagement. Such a blueprint can support new directions in composition and new media studies, especially multimodal composition practices in aesthetic spaces. The key to negotiating these aesthetic spaces of composition is in working from a practical theory which can account for a variety of aesthetic possibilities. This project supports a theory grounded in "perception by the senses," and is able to address the diverse potentialities for meaning making in the consumption and production of new media texts and experiences. Accordingly, this theory of aesthetic engagement delivers several affordances in the context of composition and new media studies.

This theory provides a wider, more accommodating conception of the aesthetic appropriate for multimodal work

Inquiry into the changing nature of new writing practices comprises an important direction for composition and new media studies. Given that practices of multimodal composition are flourishing, an understanding of how students take and make meaning from multiple media is more important than ever before. Kress and other multimodal scholars believe that as we see writing become subordinated to the logic of the visual, new spaces and new strategies will be

needed.[8] Discussing the challenges of new media, DeVoss and Selfe advise that "New media and new realms have invited new rhetorical positionings for the creative souls working in these spaces, and as teachers of composition, we need to help students explore, develop, and communicate more effectively in them" (46). Clearly, there is a pressing need for a better understanding of how students make meaning through their experience with new media.

This study's findings can help expand understanding of how new composition practices are changing the ways we take and make meaning. The framework is a useful tool which can help bridge the chasm between the theoretical and the material, by explaining how we make meaning through our sensory perception. Aesthetic engagement cannot be found in a text, in a finite *object* of perception, but rather in *how* the aesthetic is perceived.[9] This theory provides an expansive conception of the aesthetic by describing nine ways in which the aesthetic may be perceived. These nine ways, viewed together, imagine the aesthetic within a larger cultural matrix and allow for a more inclusive and flexible view toward the many different modes of aesthetic activity and design. Importantly, this accommodating notion situates aesthetic engagement not as something set apart as a special order, but as part and parcel of everyday human experience.

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[8] In the influential article, "Gains and Losses: New Forms of Texts, Knowledge, and Learning," Gunther Kress (2005) examines contemporary newspapers, tabloids, textbooks, and drawings to illustrate how word-based writing is being quite literally "pushed to the margins" in favor of more visual means of representation.

[9] This way of understanding the aesthetic (as "a how") is in opposition to art critic and perceptual psychologist Rudolf Arnheim, as he decisively locates the aesthetic in "a what." Arnheim explains in his *Gestalt Theory of Expression*: "The phenomenon in question is actually present in the object of perception" (64). This conception also goes against some recent scholarship in English studies, especially Misson and Morgan (2006) who claim that ""The aesthetic...is a quality inherent in texts" (Misson, et. al, 212)"

This working-theory supports multiple perspectives toward meaning making

A sensory-based aesthetic allows us to account for a wide range of possibilities for making and taking meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen, have predicted that: "When readers begin to understand and value the multiple semiotic modes of new media texts, the shape of "what counts as forms of knowledge in 'disciplines' or 'subjects' will also begin to change (Kress and van Leeuwen 43). This aesthetic theory changes our views of "what counts" as "knowledge" " by accounting for the multiple ways in which we take and make meaning in the acts of consumption and production. This theory takes a trans-dimensional approach to knowledge making; it explains aesthetic engagement at the intersections of *logos, pathos,* and *ethos*—including the representative, the sensory, and the appreciative. It demonstrates how meaning is attributed in a variety of situations, in a diversity of ways.

Accounting for these multiple modes and perspectives is an important direction for composition and new media studies. Scholarship in the field can and should address how work in new media opens new, diverse spaces for ways of knowing, understanding, and interpretation. Part of this change entails the ways in which readers and writers design meaning from their engagement with the image and other materials available to them through the interface of the screen. Significantly, meaning is now designed by the experiencer/interpreter/reader as much as by the writer/creator. Study participant Pi alluded to this practice, when he stated, "the whole process of taking it in, interpreting it, is a personal creative

act." The framework provided here not only establishes new forms of knowledge and meaning making for our changing times, but it accommodates and values the inherent diversity of those different modes and meanings.

This working-theory offers a flexible navigational aid for composition in aesthetic spaces

This theory of aesthetic engagement represents a flexible view of interconnected knowledge. Through it, students are able to access multiple perspectives, multiple knowledge sources, and multiple points of view. Students may explore an aesthetic *performance* (an act of production or consumption) from a variety of vantage points, each perspective highlighting aspects of the performance in a somewhat different way than the other perspectives. In this way, the complexity and richness of the performance is understood and communicated through the framework's multiple access points. Current theories of learning support this flexible approach to knowledge construction. Cognitive flexibility theorist, Rand Spiro claims that "highly interconnected, web-like knowledge structures . . .permit greater flexibility in the ways that knowledge can potentially be assembled for use in comprehension or problem solving" (Spiro 170). This theory of aesthetic engagement is one such approach that supports the flexible application of knowledge in new contexts and serves as a tool for solving and dealing with new problems and situations.

This theory can help students to work within and across the genres, objectives, and audiences that comprise various writing situations by developing students' capacities in understanding the diverse potentialities for meaning

making within the context of word-based, visual, and web-based texts. An understanding of how people communicate through discourse provides scaffolding from which students can address the writing situations they actually encounter in their composing lives—whether they are conducting textual analyses, composing visual arguments, or designing with multimedia. The theory can also aid students in understanding how audiences make meaning via their sensory perception—that is, how they read, view, interact and otherwise make meaning through their senses. Additionally, the theory emphasizes active knowledge construction over the passive transmission of information, thus, enabling students to master the complex concepts they encounter and to transfer that knowledge to a variety of digital and real-world contexts.

Directions for Future Research

As the media students produce and consume on a daily basis increasingly combines and converges, an understanding of how people take and make meaning in digital environments is more important than ever before. This study contributed to such inquiry, as its results created usable, practical knowledge that drew on real cases of students' aesthetic engagement. The application of these results has the potential to inform more enriching opportunities for learning in both real-world and digital environments. It is important to promote further evidence-based research to support the design of effective learning environments that utilize the full communicative potentials of emerging technologies.

This rhetoric of aesthetic engagement can offer students theoretically grounded yet practical learning experiences as they are taught to both analyze and design writing for digital environments. It is an opportunity for work in the field of rhetoric and composition to contribute to an understanding of how the media people produce and consume conveys meaning. Locating the aesthetic in perception, in performance, expands the aesthetics' scope, utility, and applicability to composition and new media studies. Still, further analysis and exploration is needed regarding the ways students "read" and "write in aesthetic spaces. This includes further inquiry into 1) how images communicate meaning, 2) how people design for meaning making, and 3) how people make meaning through their interaction with convergent modes and media. Upon further study, instructional materials may be developed which address new composition practices, based on this theory of aesthetic engagement. These materials would build on how students actually use and apply the nine ways of meaning making, focusing on media convergent contexts. In essence, these materials could constitute a model of new media writing theory and pedagogy, which can be applied to a range of topics in the classroom including visual rhetoric, user-experience design, human-computer interaction, web development, and new media art.

Appendix 1
A Difficult Day

For a number of years, I taught a course in the Arts and Humanities, titled "The U.S. & the World." This particular course was designed to explore the unities and diversities of the American experience and was organized historically with thematic emphasis on literature and the arts. The artistic and literary elements were intended to enhance the more political and historical content we studied by contributing different artistic and humanistic perspectives and viewpoints. However, my students often had resistance to making sustained arguments and thinking and writing critically about these artistic (creative) and literary elements.

For example, I recall one particularly difficult teaching day in the classroom. We were in the second week of a Modernism unit when I brought in a painting to enhance the primary documents we were reading. The painting was Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" (1912). Simply put, many of my students immediately began to protest: "What is this? I could paint this! Where's the nude? Where's the staircase? This "means" something? This means what I think it means. This says only what I think it says. How could it possibly say anything else? I suck at paintings. I certainly wouldn't buy this!"

Figure 10.1 Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending A Staircase* (1912)

Since different experiences produce and shape thought in different ways, I had brought in the painting in order to explore different approaches to the course material and to help students make connections in the Modernism unit. However, observing that many of my students were irate, indignant or simply dumb-founded, I decided to back up and create an impromptu mini-lecture on the historical resonance of the nude in the world of art. The idea was to engage my students in the joy and discovery of the work of art.

From there, we moved from the traditional depiction of nudes in art to Duchamp's representation of the nude. I believe less than half of the students were following me. We spent an inordinate amount of time just trying to locate the nude (or nudes) in Duchamp's painting. Then we worked to locate the staircase. The lesson continued in a painstaking fashion.

At the end of the class hour I was exhausted. In my teaching journal I wrote:

> My students were completely unprepared for this. I have to find a better way to incorporate works of art into my lessons. I need a vocabulary to talk about these things. I need my students to be able to hold on to something so that we don't have to reinvent the wheel again tomorrow if we look at another painting. I need some practical tools to discuss the aesthetic. I need to be able to show them that, yes, this painting actually means something.

Consequently, in my desire for students to engage meaningfully with the aesthetic texts in the course, I had to confront a very real problem: How to teach an understanding of a diverse body of aesthetic texts to students with no formal education in the arts? In response to my students' resistance to analyzing works of art and literature, I underwent a SOTL research project, to answer this perplexing question. At the time, I was primarily interested in developing a teaching and learning tool which could help students navigate the artistic and literary materials in the course. I wanted to find a way to enable students' critical perception and analysis concerning the creative texts in the course.

The Aesthetic Toolbox

Building upon the theory and practice of arts education pioneers such as John Dewey, Maxine Greene, and Richard Gale, I built my first project upon the notion of "aesthetic literacy," the goal of which is "to provide students with another tool, another skill, another way to see the world, the culture and their own lives" (Gale 9). As a result, I drafted, studied and later presented the "Aesthetic Literacy

Toolbox"—a teaching and learning tool which I hoped would develop my students' aesthetic interpretation and analysis skills and to provide some useful tools for myself the next time I tried to enhance course material with an aesthetic text.

I designed the Toolbox to present fundamental concepts of aesthetic literacy in such a way as to create a common vocabulary for students with diverse backgrounds to communicate meaningfully about the artistic subjects they encountered in the course. Using the conceptual "tools" f*eeling, design, movement, familiarity, vocabulary* and *idea* students investigated a range of subjects including painting, sculpture, poetry, literature, photography, architecture, and music. This vocabulary enriched their understanding of artistic subjects and aided in the development of their critical and interpretative skills. For example, my research indicated that familiarity with the concepts of the Toolbox helped students to think through sophisticated concepts and to bring specific evidence to support their arguments and interpretations of artistic subjects. The "tools" provided a connective tissue through which traditionally disparate bodies of knowledge could be brought into dialogue with one another.

When the tools were used repeatedly in classroom activities I observed that we had created a scaffold to seamlessly incorporate any work of art – almost any aspect of any work - into our discussions. Moreover, in the later versions of the course, there ensued a more balanced emphasis on student consumption (viewing/reading/interacting) and student production (composing/designing/ authoring). Not only were we using the Aesthetic Toolbox to talk about aesthetic

texts in the course, we were employing the toolbox's concepts in our own creation of aesthetic texts—including poetry, posters, paintings, photography, skits, and digital stories.

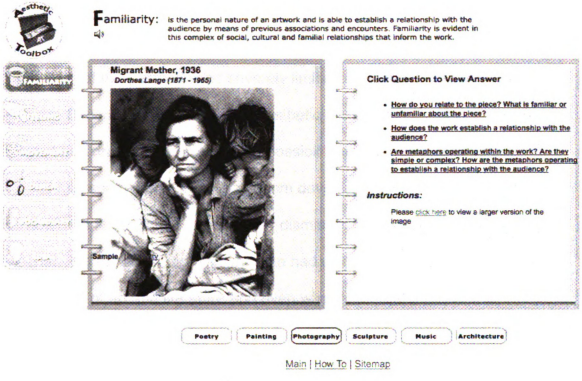
One of the largest successes in working with the Toolbox involved the ways in which students found useful ways to transfer their knowledge of the aesthetic outside of the classroom walls:

> I could use it [*the Toolbox*] in my future classes to help me better analyze any novels I may have to read. It could also help me in the real world. I have no problem examining art now. A trip to an art museum once would have been boring, but now that I know what to look for it would actually be something I look forward to and would want to do (Student 2006).

Often, I witnessed changes in orientations and attitudes toward both consuming and producing creative material. I believed this achievement was facilitated by the components of the Toolbox that specifically helped students make sense of their own aesthetic experience and how that experience related to the world both within and outside of classroom walls.

In spring 2006, with the aid of the program in the Arts and Humanities, a Toolbox website was created. This website expanded both the range and efficacy of the Toolbox by bringing an interactive, multimedia component to student learning. The online Toolbox was also an opportunity for me to assess possibilities for integrating technology in the arts and humanities classroom to achieve instructional goals.

Figure 10.2 The Online Aesthetic Toolbox



Thinking inside a box

My continued work with the aesthetic and student learning (two international SOTL conference presentations and 2 pilot studies) eventually suggested that my Toolbox was rather limited as a teaching and learning tool. My classroom researched revealed that its design only allowed students access to a limited number of contexts—to paintings, sculptures, poetry, literature, photography, architecture, and music. The design of the Toolbox did not allow students to reflect on the aesthetic found in nature or the natural world. Nor did the Toolbox allow students the freedom to reflect on their aesthetic experiences that fell outside the allotted contexts—although this was a next step many

students made on their own. While assessing the effectiveness of the Toolbox as a teaching tool I had to confront the fact that the aesthetic was actually found in more places than paintings, sculptures, poetry, literature, photography, and music. While considering this dilemma, I came to the realization that my original conception of the aesthetic had severely limiting consequences for student learning. Because I had located the aesthetic in a limited number of specific *things*, I had drastically narrowed the possibilities for student engagement.

I had spent years in the classroom developing my students' "aesthetic literacy." Yet I had limited or altogether dismissed legitimate ways of experiencing the aesthetic. This mistake had ultimately reduced my students' conceptions of art and literature and even what "counted" as aesthetic experience. After years of teaching and researching the aesthetic, I had finally arrived at the rather obvious questions: What is the aesthetic? What are the ways students experience the aesthetic? How do students make meaning through it? What are its possibilities for teaching and learning? The need for a better understanding of the aesthetic and its potentials for teaching and learning motivated the current study.

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