Research As Aesthetic Contemplation: The Role Of The Audience In Research Interpretation

Ardra L. Cole and Maura McIntyre
The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario

You see before you a photograph. Articles of clothing hang on a clothesline. You notice that the articles of clothing are all undergarments, women’s undergarments. A closer look reveals that there is an order to the way they are hung on the line. You notice a baby’s diaper at one end and an adult’s diaper at the other and you suspect that there is particular significance to this ordering. As you take in the image you may wonder why it is here, what it represents, what it means. What does it mean? To us? To you? It could be that, through this image, you are taken back to a time and place in your life when laundry drying on a line had particular significance. Perhaps your gaze has focused on the tiny baby’s undershirt and you want to reach into the image to touch it or bring it close to your nose. Maybe your attention is drawn more toward the middle of the line and you pause to wonder about fit—where you might fit and what might fit you. Or it could be that the heaviness of the adult diaper hanging at the end of the line pulls your gaze in that direction.
We each engage differently with the photograph and we each ascribe different meaning to it. Interpretive ambiguity of photographs is inescapable; there is no such thing as a one to one correspondence between message intended and message received. This ambiguity, we argue, is as central to the interpretation of qualitative research texts as it is to the interpretation of any photograph. In this article we explore the notion of qualitative research as aesthetic experience where meaning is ascribed by the reader through a dialectical, contemplative process. We draw parallels between the subjective relationship of an art object to a viewer and the dialectical process that characterizes the subjective relationship between research text and audience. To do so we draw on our own program of research in the area of Alzheimer’s disease. Because a central part of our research agenda is public education, the usefulness and relevance of our research is in large part determined by the nature and quality of audience engagement; hence, our interest in better understanding, and mindfully addressing, the role the audience plays in ‘reading’ research.

Methodological Backdrop

In our program of research on Alzheimer’s disease and caregiving we have a three-fold commitment to knowledge advancement, public education, and community development. We are interested in contributing to knowledge in forms that evoke and communicate the relational, emotional, cultural, social, and political complexities of caregiving. We direct our work to diverse communities beyond the academy hoping to invoke broad commitment to an ethic of caring. To do so we draw on processes and forms of the arts (poetry, narrative, photography, three-dimensional installation art, and performance) both to inform how we engage in research and represent and communicate research texts, and to invite the audience to experience and make meaning of the work (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Neilsen, Cole, & Knowles, 2001). We rely on the ambiguous nature of our research representations and engage the audience in experiencing and attaching meaning to what is presented. In this way we see the interpretation of research as a dialogical process or in Bakhtin’s (1986) terms, as discourse. Just as a work of art can stand free of its creator and take on new meaning as a result of another’s dialectical engagement with it, so it is with research texts. We strive to engage viewers in what Robert Sardello (1976) calls an experience of “aesthetic contemplation.”

Aesthetic Contemplation

Sardello’s (1976) work in the area of psychological aesthetics provides a framework that allows us to account for the aesthetic experience without reducing its complexity. The give and take of dialogical communication parallels the dialectic of the aesthetic experience. Perception and emotion are two key qualities in the aesthetic experience. Provoked by art, these qualities do not emerge in a cause and effect relation, but rather exist interdependently while advancing understanding. The “density of meaning” that develops out of the play between these qualities resides in the “awe, wonder, contemplation, admiration and appreciation we recognize as the aesthetic experience” (Sardello, 1976, p. 24).

Aesthetic contemplation is the reflective process that emerges out of the aesthetic experience. Contemplation occurs over time and involves the evolution of meanings as our feelings and intellect mull over perception. The concept of aesthetic contemplation has four main dimensions. It involves the dialectic of active participation and passive observation. The viewer/reader takes in what is presented but also acknowledges a place for her/himself. Aesthetic contemplation also involves a dialectic of subjective-objective. Viewers bring their own history to the work and project themselves into it but at the same time experience what is presented.

Another dimension of aesthetic contemplation is the relationship of art/research to artist/researcher. Viewers are able to have an understanding of the artist/researcher’s intention, situatedness, circumstance, and process. The fourth dimension is what Wimsatt (1958) calls the ‘concrete universal,’ an Hegelian term to characterize the relationship between the individual and the universal. In research, as in art, representations express and invite engagement with individual characteristics and elements of experience but at the
same time reflect some more universal themes or qualities. Both are held in dialectical relationship.

A Site of Aesthetic Contemplation

Recently, we held a month-long public exhibit comprised of four thematic representations related to the psychosocial dimensions of Alzheimer’s disease. Some of the representations directly reflected our autobiographical connections with the illness. The focus of this particular exhibit was public education and we provided materials and space for writing and invited viewers to record their responses to the work. We intended the exhibit as a site of/for aesthetic contemplation and the audience engaged with it as such. For the next few minutes we invite you, the reader, to join some of these viewers and walk with them through the exhibit. Consider their presence through the comments you overhear as you engage with the work (access link). Consider the voices of theory that might influence and perhaps deepen or complicate your engagement with the work (access link). Explore the notion of research interpretation as aesthetic contemplation.

The Exhibit

The venue: a public building located in the downtown core of Toronto, Ontario; Canada’s largest city, home to three million people. The building, the central broadcast centre for the country’s national public radio, is open to the public 24 hours a day and has a high volume of pedestrian traffic. (You are one of over 30,000 people who pass by the exhibit during its month-long stay; one of hundreds, perhaps thousands, more who ‘view’ the text during its stay in cyberspace.) The exhibit occupies most of an expansive space that serves as one of the main throughfare corridors. The busyness of the area is tempered by its size and, despite the steady flow of people through the space, it has an ambience of quiet reverence. Entering from the street through a set of double glass doors you are immediately struck by the presence of a free-standing clothesline. You pause to take stock of what is around you.

Lifelines, colour slide by J. Nolte, 2002

A large plexiglass sign on one of the long walls grabs your attention: “The Alzheimer’s Project.” You return your gaze to the clothesline and slowly walk its length. You trace the line of laundry from baby's diaper to lace garter belt to multi-hooked brassiere to adult diaper. The overwashed, white, female undergarments mark the shift in personal power and changing nature of dependence across a life span. You are tempted to move closer to the adorable baby's undershirt to see if it smells like powder; you giggle to yourself as you

http://ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v09n01/articles/cole.html (3 of 10)
imagine slipping away to try on the padded push-up bra; you groan as you recognize the full-size nylon panties with the elastic waistband slightly stretched; and you pause in silence in front of the adult size diaper hanging heavily at the end of the life line.

On the wall a short distance away you spot a series of large black and white photographs. They draw you closer.

Voice of Theory: Berger and Mohr, in their book Another Way of Telling (1995) employ Hegelian philosophy to discuss, among other things, the ambiguity of the photograph. "An instant photographed,” they claim, “can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and future" (89). Memory and meaning making come together in the evocative, resonant space of the photograph.

As your eyes sweep from left to right you read a visual narrative of a mother-daughter relationship across a life span–mother holding newborn baby to baby-now-adult holding ill mother. Immediately below the photographs on a table is a set of eight small handmade books resting on individual stands. It seems that they are meant to be read so you pick one up. It fits comfortably in your hand and you turn back the hard black cover. On each page, in hand-printed, silver lettering, is written one or a few words. You read slowly, savouring each word, turning each page with a quiet reverence. You move to the next book and the next; each one tells a different relationship story, of the intimacy of human connection. As you replace the last book on its stand you pause to look again at the photographs.

Voice of Theory: Drawing on Hegel’s (1975) theory of the dialectic nature of human consciousness, Berger and Mohr (1995) assert that a photograph achieves its expressiveness through a dialectic process. The photograph acquires meaning when it provokes in a viewer a recognition (tacit or conscious) of some past experience. Only then does the photograph (as object) instigate an idea. Together, in dialectic communion, the photograph and the idea move beyond themselves to represent a generalization (or abstraction).

One of the hallmarks of ‘good’ qualitative research is the richness of the representational accounts presented. This richness allows the reader/audience member to engage more fully with the work, to understand it in a more intimate way, to get as close as possible to it. When this kind of connection happens there is a level of resonance between text and reader. In this resonant space the reader attaches meaning to the work.

Still Life with Alzheimer’s I, b/w photograph by S. Thomas, 1999

http://ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v09n01/articles/cole.html (4 of 10)
Now you move quickly, your curiosity piqued by what look like free-standing refrigerator doors. You notice that there are three refrigerator doors arranged in chronological order, each reminiscent of a different era. The front of each door is partially covered with photographs secured by magnets. "Just like my fridge at home," you think to yourself as you step closer. You study the black and white images on the first fridge door and see snapshots of a young mother and daughter—baby, toddler, adolescent—in involved a variety of everyday activities. You study the images long enough to get a sense that the relationship depicted looks quite ordinary. Mother, with horn rimmed glasses and red, red lipstick is young and vital. Daughter is infant, is baby, is girl, is teen. Mother, a young professional, is getting into the car, working in the kitchen. Daughter is baby in the bath, toddler running on the grass, irreverent adolescent sitting on the kitchen table. Together they are beside the wading pool, at the table eating, walking through the snow. You move to the next fridge and notice that some years have passed: the refrigerator door is more modern, the images are in colour, and mother and daughter are older. You see snapshots of two adult women enjoying life and each other. You take in the story being told and feel like you are almost part of it.

Voice of Theory: Assigning interpretive authority to the reader/viewer changes the ways in which research texts are produced and readers are engaged. Quoting Ong (1977, 137), Denzin elaborates, “Understanding is more than visual knowledge. Understanding is visceral. The fully interpretive text plunges the reader into the interior, feeling, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching worlds of subjective human perception” (46).

You move on to the third and final fridge door. Immediately you realize that the mood of the story has changed and that the characters in the story have switched roles. Daughter is now feeding, bathing, and caring for mother whose illness is very apparent. You step back and do a visual sweep to read the relationship narrative laid out before you. You pause to reflect and then walk along a few steps farther.

Voice of Theory: There is a difference between storied text that leads the reader to conclude a particular meaning and storied text that inspires and invokes the reader to create his or her own meaning. Denzin (1997) elaborates this distinction. From a positivist perspective stories can be analyzed and presented or told in such a way that they become data to support a researcher/author’s theory or (camouflaged) hypothesis. The text is closed; meaning is more or less fixed; a ‘good’ reader gets the intended message. In contrast, an interpretive poststructural approach to narrative involves readers and writers in a co-creation of the research text. “This ‘messy’ approach to reading (and writing)”, says Denzin, “embraces experimental, experiential, and critical readings that are always incomplete, personal, self-reflexive, and resistant to totalizing theories” (Denzin, 1997:246). Meaning emerges through a dialectical and sensual engagement; research texts invoke the subjective presence of the reader and invite the reader in to interpret the text in a personally meaningful way. Meanings are infinite; text is open; and a ‘good’ reader is actively engaged in meaning making. Knowing emerges from and through embodied or somatic-affective (Heshusius & Ballard, 1996) experience and response.
A set of large framed photographs hangs on the wall, four across in two parallel rows. The matted and framed black and white images appear normal from a distance. As you step up to them, however, you realize that the images appear out of focus. A closer look reveals that there is another image superimposed on each that is creating a distortion and obscuring your view. It is a transparent image of an aging and ill woman with a vacant, gaunt look. Her haunting eyes draw you in, fix your gaze. It is difficult to get past that look, to see beyond to the background image. When you do you see a little girl in old-fashioned attire standing in what might be the backyard of her home. The next image, also overshadowed by the ill woman, is of a young woman perhaps in her late teens. With chin resting on elbows she leans over a high fence, a piece of straw clenched in her broad, confident smile. You fill out the rest of the story in your mind. Each of the eight images captures a moment in a woman’s life as she grows through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, marriage, motherhood, and grandmotherhood. This is herstory but you have difficulty keeping it in focus; the ill woman commands your attention.

Voice of Theory: Kvale (1976), drawing from the doctrines of other philosophers, notes that dialectics emphasizes the interdependence of observing subject and the observed phenomenon, of observation and active interpretation.

As you are about to leave the exhibit area you encounter another image of an aging and ill woman; this one is larger than life and affixed to a mirror suspended less than a metre above the floor. She is obviously in an institutional context and you recognize that same steady gaze that demands your attention. As you respond to her demand you realize that you have entered the picture. Beside her image you see your own reflection. You pause to take it in. Herstory/Yourstory the title says. You wonder.

Voice of Theory: Denzin (1997, 36) applies the concept of dialogical engagement to qualitative research. He refers to Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of text as a “parallax of discourses in which nothing is ever stable or capable of firm and certain representation.” In so doing Denzin calls for a postmodern ethnography which values and privileges the authority and voice of the reader and thus changes the role and authority of the researcher as meaning maker and theorizer.
Moving away from the exhibit area you are attracted to a splash of colour on the other side of the corridor. A large floral arrangement invites you to cross the floor to look at a table which includes information about the artists (which puzzles you because they are from a prominent university and describe themselves as researchers) and their work. A fact sheet positioned on a small easel reveals some startling statistics about Alzheimer's disease. You learn that:

- There are 18 million people in the world with dementia.
- It is estimated that 30 million people worldwide will have Alzheimer’s disease in the year 2025 (Post, 2000).
- In 2001, some 364,000 Canadians had Alzheimer’s disease or a related dementia.
- More than half the population knows someone with the disease. One quarter of Canadians have a family member affected.
- There were an estimated 83,200 new cases of dementia in 2001.
- 1 in 13 people over age 65 is affected, 1 in 3 over age 85.
- More than two-thirds are women.
- About 50% are cared for at home and most caregivers are women. (Alzheimer Society of Ontario, 2001)

Also on the table are several attractive notebooks, a few pens, and an invitation to share your responses to the exhibit. You pause, unsure of what to write, where to begin. Your palms are moist; your throat is full. Written words on the page suddenly feel inadequate. The currency of the academy, your currency, your language, feels flat. You choose a gray ribbon from a silver wire basket, pin it to your lapel in a gesture of solidarity. Wondering if it is appropriate, even as you do it, you flip through the pages of the book reading other people’s comments. Moved by the tenderness of the prose, the expressions of solidarity, of connection and compassion, you reach into your pocket for your wallet. In one quick motion you extract a two inch square photograph and insert it between two white pages. Only then do you sit down, pick up one of the books and a pen, and begin to write.
Contemplative Texts: Qualities of Audience and Researcher Engagement

Treating research texts as sites of aesthetic contemplation implies a challenge to a conventional model of research (including qualitative research grounded in neopositivist and modernist traditions) that treats research texts as vehicles for the display of a set of fixed meanings created by the researcher. Viewing research texts as sites of aesthetic contemplation implies a model of research that engages researchers and readers/viewers as co-creators of the text. Research texts do not represent or illustrate experiences or events; rather, each engagement with a research text is a new meaningful interaction. This requires a new form of research text, one that invites multivocal engagement and creates spaces for interpretation. “The unsaid, the assumed, and the silences in any discourse provide the flesh and bone—the backdrop against which meaning is established” (Denzin, 1997: 38). Such a text emphasizes showing not telling and relies on the holistic—intellectual, emotional, embodied—engagement of the reader/viewer.

Research becomes a site of aesthetic contemplation when feelings, intellect, and perception are given space to come together to make meaning. Creating conditions where the process of aesthetic contemplation can unfold requires researchers also to attend to the aesthetics of the research ‘text’ environment. For example, when we look for sites to display our research on Alzheimer’s disease, we are mindful of the audience’s need for silent repose, privacy, spaciousness, and time. We draw inspiration from both natural and constructed spaces such as libraries, art galleries, gardens, churches, and other sanctuaries conducive to aesthetic contemplation. These spaces have a way of drawing disparate parts together into a whole. They create a resonant context which invites a quality of engagement that honours the full presence of the viewer, the holistic whole of the work presented, and the meaning making process itself.

Our work honours and pays tribute to people caring for people with Alzheimer's disease. It provides a respectful space for people to engage with this notion and to experience the worthiness of care and caregiving. This approach to research and representation brings opportunities for connection between viewer and text, author and reader that conventional forms of research and representation simply do not permit. Real people responding to two and three dimensional representations of research in real time makes audience response palpable. Questions are asked. Tears are shed. A hand reaches out. Our understanding of care and caregiving is advanced through the intimacy of being together in the text.

Alzheimer’s disease is emotionally daunting and demanding thus there is a strong emotive component to the work we present. We are committed to rendering the emotional complexities of caregiving and Alzheimer's disease in forms that are capable of activating the senses. We expect that people who engage with our research texts will be moved by them in some way. Beyond that we cannot and do not try to anticipate the meaning the work will have for viewers. We want them to experience it emotionally, bodily, and intellectually. We want the work to remain with them. We want the work to command their attention and call them to action. Thus the impact of our research relies on the meaning it evokes for each person who engages with it. We do not aim to communicate a single, intended message. There is no single "correct" interpretation; the representations are intentionally ambiguous—open texts. Indeed, the power of our work relies on its ambiguous and self-reflexive qualities. We rely on our readers and viewers to write their own version of the text. It is at this level of resonance, of personal connection, that individuals are likely to be inspired to moral action. It is through this kind of deep personal engagement that the politics and poetics (Denzin, 1997) of research work in tandem.
You see before you a photograph….

We invite your response…

educational.insights@ubc.ca

Responses to this text will be posted here as we receive them…)

Note and Acknowledgements
An extended seven-piece exhibit of The Alzheimer’s Project will be at the Sudbury Civic Centre, Sudbury, Ontario May 5-15, 2003; Pier 21 National Historic Site, Halifax, Nova Scotia, May 25-June 4, 2003; and Lower Level Mall, 910 Government Street, Victoria, British Columbia, January 5-15, 2004. For more information contact authors or check http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~aresearch. We extend our appreciation to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their support of our research on Alzheimer’s disease.

References
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About the Authors:

Ardra Cole is Professor and Co-director of the Centre for Arts-informed Research in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Canada. Her teaching, research, and writing are in the areas of teacher education, qualitative research, particularly life history and arts-informed methods, and Alzheimer’s disease. Correspondence welcome: acole@oise.utoronto.ca; websites: http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~acole; http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~aresearch

Maura McIntyre is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Arts-informed Research in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Canada. Her research and writing are mainly in the areas of caregiving and Alzheimer’s disease and arts-informed research methods. Correspondence welcome: mmcintyre@oise.utoronto.ca; website: http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~aresearch