DOCTORAL THESIS

Children's Perceptions of Beauty
Exploring aesthetic experience through photography

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**Introduction**

In 2014 the Department for Education published a revised national curriculum for schools in England that provided for each subject area a justification of its place in the curriculum. The rationale for art, craft and design was one rooted firmly in the notion of creativity: art education should ‘embody some of the highest forms of human creativity’ and equip children with the knowledge and skills to ‘experiment, invent and create their own works’ in order to ‘contribute to the culture, creativity and wealth of our nation’ (DfE 2014: 182). However, in an unpublished draft of the revised curriculum, circulated a year earlier, there was an additional focus: ‘Art and design teaching’, the document proposed, ‘should instil in pupils an appreciation of beauty.’ (DfE 2013: 146).

For what transpired to be a brief moment – and despite its widespread marginalisation in art and education during the 20th Century – beauty had a place in the art curriculum. Teachers would be prompted to engage with the concept of beauty, to reflect on its meanings for children and perhaps provide them with opportunities to document and share their experiences of beauty. When the final document was published, however, the line that referred to an appreciation of beauty had been removed. The only remaining reference to beauty in the curriculum was to be found far away from the pages devoted to art and design, in a proposal that teachers should instil in children an appreciation of the beauty of mathematics. If there was a place for beauty in schools, it was not to be found in art lessons.

The removal of the reference to beauty was almost certainly linked to the lukewarm reception art educators afforded the draft curriculum. In what he entitled ‘a cautionary tale’, Steers (2014) offered insights into the conception and development of
the new curriculum, before outlining the National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD)’s objections to the proposals:

As it stands, the proposed national curriculum for art, craft and design is reductive. It strongly references a historical fine art led model focusing on appreciation, aesthetics and beauty in preference to a more balanced programme of study that includes contemporary, global and future gazing curriculum… We want more than appreciation. We want participation and engagement. We want inspiration, risk, imagination and challenge. (Steers 2014: 11)

In this critique of the proposed curriculum, Steers polarises the aims of art education: ‘historical’ is pitched against ‘contemporary’ and ‘future gazing’; ‘appreciation’ contrasts with ‘participation’ while ‘aesthetics and beauty’ are identified as representative of a ‘reductive’ curriculum model that neglects preferred principles of ‘participation’, ‘engagement’, ‘inspiration’, ‘imagination’ and ‘challenge’. Though Steers concludes that ‘the advice of most subject specialists was ignored [and] no changes were made to the earlier draft for art and design’ (2014: 12), the NSEAD’s objections almost certainly led to the deletion of the reference to beauty contained in the earlier draft. Thus the most influential of art educators in the UK reinforced what has, in recent decades, become a clear and consistent message for teachers: that art education should be principally concerned with creativity; that children and young people should learn to be active makers rather than passive viewers of art, and that the concept of beauty is irrelevant to art, craft and design education. This is the context in which I conceived, planned and carried out the research reported in this thesis.

Aims of the research

My central aim for this research was to understand children’s perceptions of beauty. I aimed to discover if children value beauty, and if so what meanings and associations it may have for them. I aimed to explore the kinds of subject matter children find beautiful, to establish their awareness of the visual properties of images and to
investigate whether they are motivated to share their ideas about beauty and to engage with those of others. I also aimed to investigate how children’s ideas relate to our existing understanding of the nature of aesthetic response, and whether social or environmental factors influence their perceptions of beauty. Finally, I aimed to establish how children can use photography to express their perceptions of beauty and how they might articulate their experiences, thoughts and ideas about the visual world.

Research questions

The research questions were as follows:

- How do children represent their perceptions of beauty?
- How do children reflect upon and articulate their perceptions of beauty?
- How do children’s perceptions of beauty relate to philosophical thinking about aesthetic experience?
- What role can photography play in exploring children’s aesthetic experience?

Overview of the thesis

During the process of planning and carrying out this research I explored a wide range of literature related to beauty, art and education, and over the course of the first three chapters of the thesis I reflect on those areas of literature that have inspired, informed and influenced my research. Chapter 1 describes the background to the research. It explains how recent work by a number of authors shaped my interest in beauty as a theme for reflection, informed my understanding of aesthetic theories and helped me to identify a focus for the research. Chapter 2 explores a number of strategies art educators have developed in order to engage children with art, and explains how these strategies influenced my approach to the empirical research. Through a review of the
literature it examines the Critical Studies movement in Britain and the parallel movement of aesthetic education in the US, before reflecting on concepts of developmental stage theory in aesthetic response. Chapter 3 examines a different strand of literature, and focuses on theories of aesthetic experience developed by David Hume and Immanuel Kant in the 18th Century. It explores how their key works marked a significant departure from previous conceptions of beauty and explains how and why their theories influenced the design of my empirical research.

The three central chapters of the thesis describe the design of the research and present the research data. Chapter 4 provides an explanation of the methodology for the empirical research and describes the research design, which centred on a number of semi-structured interviews in which children discussed images they had found and photographed to represent their perceptions of beauty. Chapter 5 begins with a summary of the contents of children’s images and offers a descriptive account of the ten interviews conducted in the first school, while Chapter 6 describes the remaining eight interviews carried out in the second school.

The final two chapters of the thesis interpret the research data and identify the key findings. Chapter 7 discusses evidence related to the ways in which children associated beauty with emotion and expression, before exploring their awareness of the visual and formal aspects of beauty. Chapter 8 discusses children’s thinking about beauty. It reflects on evidence of how children’s thinking connected with notions of interest and intersubjectivity in aesthetic experience, and explores children’s reflections on beauty in the natural environment. The thesis concludes with a summary of the findings and their implications for art educators, for teachers and for theories of children’s aesthetic development.
Chapter 1: Background to the research

We’re in the middle of one of the most beautiful Georgian towns in the country on the edge of the Lake District... The Great Gatsby manages to be so beautifully lyrical and so economical and efficient... When the church was rebuilt after the war in the mid-'50s the French embassy asked Jean Cocteau if he would give something beautiful to this new building because they were very proud of it... I realised I had been missing the ability to be moved for a long time and I had allowed stress, tiredness and the anxiety of parenthood to harden me – while, paradoxically, making me less resilient. That night I stood out on the front doorstep and watched snowflakes drift down into the acid-orange glow of the London streetlights and I was taken aback by the sheer beauty of it all... I remember a particular time when I was busking on the Brighton seafront in front of the pier. There was a beautiful sunset and the pier had all its glittering lights on and I was playing ‘Baker Street’. And it just – everything seemed to come together at the right moment. The starlings swirling round and making their patterns and lots of people stopping and listening, watching the sunset... The Sheffield memorial on Sea Lion Island – I was talking to the lads, like, you know – and they were at peace. And there was penguins all round them. It was beautiful... I remember the parachutes falling. I remember them like stains on the sky, thousands. And my father took me to the window to see them and the Turkish army which was the enemy. It was very dangerous for us but he took me to the window and he said, ‘Look how gently they fall, how beautiful they are!’ They were coming to kill us... And he put my mother and I in the lifeboat and he didn’t make any attempt to get in himself, he just put us in and said goodbye. And we were rowed away from the ship and my father we never saw him again. What about the Titanic? Well she was so beautiful and she was all alight from stem to stern and she looked wonderful. And we rowed as fast as we could away from the sinking ship. And we saw her sink. We heard the noise, we heard the sound of people drowning. And then as the daylight came, of course we saw all the icebergs, the whole horizon was ringed with these icebergs. They looked like beautiful white-sailed yachts. And through a space between two of them came this little ship that rescued us... I am holding on to his left hand, Grace his right. Mum has her arms around his neck, leaning on his chest. The Gregorian chant fills the room and, as it reaches its last note, Dad gives a shudder and lets go. And the room is for a microsecond full of a powerful energy. Mum feels a flash of joy. She is sobbing, overcome, repeating in awe... Phillip, I didn’t know it would be so beautiful... This is a magical spot, Ben. Yes. It’s very beautiful. Yes. It is.

Beauty can be consoling, disturbing, sacred, profane; it can be exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, chilling. It can affect us in an unlimited variety of ways. Yet it is never viewed with indifference: beauty demands to be noticed; it speaks to us directly like the voice of an intimate friend. Scruton, 2009: ix

Work in the arts develops the ability to care, to care not about the monumental but about the little things, the inner aspects of experience – the shimmer of a droplet on a golden leaf, the cool grayness of an early winter morning, a rusted, crumpled pile of wire laying near an old brick wall. When experienced, the arts contribute to the fund of our experiences, develop our perceptivity, and hence enable us to savour the previously insignificant. Eisner 1972: 281
Introduction

This chapter describes how I began to research the subject of beauty. It explores how my experiences as an art student in the 1980s led me to perceive beauty as irrelevant to contemporary art practice, and how subsequently, as an art educator, I gradually rediscovered an interest in beauty. This interest was prompted initially by my curiosity about the place of beauty in art, society and everyday life, and subsequently by the work of a range of authors in several fields that inspired my thinking about beauty and confirmed my belief in its relevance as a theme for research. Beauty is, in many ways, a very personal subject to research, and each of the authors whose work inspired my own has approached the theme from a unique perspective and with a distinctive voice. Though I have written this thesis in a broadly conventional manner, there are certain points throughout the text at which I have considered it appropriate to adopt a less formal and more personal tone in my writing. I was never a researcher in search of a subject; rather, I was absorbed by the idea of beauty and sought a context in which to explore and understand it, and I hope this writing conveys a sense of my deep engagement with the subject.

The chapter begins by describing how my interest in beauty grew as I began to appreciate the diverse nature of experiences of beauty, how many people engage with beauty in everyday contexts and how some associate beauty with particularly significant events in their lives. The central section of the chapter provides an overview of recent literature on beauty that indicates the extent to which, despite its marginalisation in art during the 20th Century, an increasing number of authors recognise it as a relevant theme for reflection. The chapter concludes by examining work by a small number of authors who have begun to explore the theme of beauty in the context of education.
1.1 The problem with beauty

Around ten years ago I began to realise that I had a problem with beauty. It was a Thursday afternoon, I was with a group of trainee teachers and we were looking at a photograph of a woman, sat at home on a sofa, absorbed by a jigsaw puzzle (Fig 1.1). I had first seen the photograph several years previously in an exhibition of work by Richard Billingham at the Royal College of Art, and it was later shown at the Royal Academy as part of the Sensation exhibition of work from the Saatchi collection. I remember being immediately intrigued by the simplicity of its subject, the complexity of its composition and the way it worked within an artistic tradition while simultaneously challenging it. On this Thursday afternoon however, the trainee teachers seemed to see none of these things. None of them liked it. Lots of them hated it, and I ran out of ways of persuading them to change their minds. In desperation, I pointed to it, turned to them and said ‘Well I think it’s beautiful.’ They all laughed.

Fig 1.1 Richard Billingham Untitled (RAL 20) 1996
My reference to beauty surprised me almost as much as it did the students. I rarely used the word; I never thought about people’s perceptions of beauty and I had no knowledge or understanding about the history of beauty or theories of aesthetic experience. I had spent most of the 1980s either at art school or working as an artist, and beauty rarely featured in any of the conversations I had with tutors, students or anyone else. On the rare occasions I heard people refer to beauty, it was invariably to highlight their perceptions of it as an out-dated or problematic concept rather than a pleasurable aesthetic experience.

Two art school scenes spring to mind. Firstly, during a friend’s interview for a place on a painting degree course, she was asked which artists she liked. When she said she thought Edward Burne-Jones’ paintings were beautiful, the interviewer laughed as he recalled how, as art students in the 1960s, he and his friends had ritually pretended to vomit at the entrance to the Tate Gallery’s Pre-Raphaelite rooms, in protest at the perceived formulaic nature of ‘beautiful’ art. Secondly, I recall a group ‘crit’ in which one student responded to another’s paintings with the words: ‘They’re very… aesthetically pleasing…’, a comment that drew sharp intakes of breath from around the room. As students we interpreted this response to mean ‘merely aesthetically pleasing’; it was an insult that implied that the work under scrutiny lacked any intellectual depth, rigour or meaning. We knew we were in tune with the art school attitude of the late 1980s – the decade that produced the Young British Artists who would become widely influential on contemporary art in the following years – and we were certain that, whatever lay ahead for us, it would have little to do with beauty.

Many years later, when I found myself describing Billingham’s portrait to my students as beautiful, I realised that in the absence of any thinking or discussion about
beauty I had entirely lost sight of what I understood the word to mean. Of course the woman in the photograph wasn’t conventionally beautiful – but it was a beautiful photograph – but was it a beautiful photograph despite the fact that she wasn’t beautiful? Or because she wasn’t beautiful? I didn’t know, but I realised that in describing the image as beautiful I had made a provocative statement, one that challenged my students to look again and, perhaps, to re-think what we mean when we talk about beauty.

Because, despite its marginalisation in art and education, people talk about beauty a lot. This chapter is prefaced by a page of references to beauty, a collection of fragments gleaned from listening to the radio while driving to work over a period of two weeks in 2012. At the time I was preoccupied with plans for my research: I was reflecting on issues emerging from the literature on aesthetic experience, refining my research questions and reviewing my plans for data collection, and I sometimes looked forward to my commute as an opportunity to listen to the radio and forget about these plans for an hour or so. This became increasingly difficult as I gradually realised how frequently people on the radio referred to beauty, how broad the range of contexts was in which they mentioned it and how often they talked about it in ways that made it clear they believed it was important. The diversity of references was striking. Some, such as the busker’s evocation of Brighton at dusk, were lyrical; others, such as the soldier’s description of a memorial to lost colleagues in the Falklands, were emotional. Some associated beauty with moments of self-realisation while others found beauty in times of crisis, as they experienced the invasion of their country, the loss of their partner or the death of their father. In each description the word was never used lightly, always precisely, as if to underline for the listener the significance of the event. Listen to this, they seemed to say: beauty is important.
Three years on, I have heard hundreds more references to everyday beauty. Untroubled by art school students’ straight-faced debates or philosophers’ theories of aesthetic experience, people go about their daily business, noticing beauty, appreciating it and sometimes finding it even in the unlikeliest of circumstances. Winston (2010) points out that the notion of everyday experiences of beauty was first described by R.G Collingwood in 1938, when he suggested that people use the word to describe what they love, admire or desire, and Winston himself describes how ‘ordinary people use the word effortlessly, aligning language to world in a manner that communicates perfectly well how unexceptionally human it is to love and value beauty’ (2010: 4). Rautio notes in her (2010) study of everyday aesthetic experiences that ‘beauty orients us to concentrate on the desirable in our lives’ and ‘commits us to replicate and protect it for the future’ (2010: 39), while Hickey (2009) describes the ease with which Americans talk about beautiful things: ‘In this vernacular usage, the word “beautiful” bears no metaphysical burden. It signifies the pleasure we take in something that transcends the appropriate.’ (2009: 70) Free from the ‘metaphysical burden’ that demands a dissection of aesthetic experience, many people are compelled to note and to share everyday moments of beauty. When the people I heard on the radio said something was beautiful their judgments were always accepted as faithful accounts; no one ever disagreed with them. So when I described Richard Billingham’s portrait of his mother as beautiful, why did the students laugh?

The answer may be that, while people tend to perceive experiences of beauty as individual, personal and subjective in nature, they often simultaneously believe that there are certain people, places and objects that everyone should – or in this case should not – regard as beautiful. Beech (2009) summarises this idea: ‘There are two contradictory conceptions of beauty: one is the conviction that it is a purely private,
subjective experience; and the other is the notion that it is always, inevitably socially inscribed.’ (2009: 14). Beech refers here to the extent to which beauty has become increasingly perceived as a problematic issue in western society. It has, for example, become increasingly associated with altered, rather than natural, physical appearance. Wolf (1991) argues that men have deliberately constructed contemporary notions of feminine beauty as subservient in nature in order to maintain their own social status, while Freedman (2003) is one of several art educators who view with suspicion the male influence on women’s aspirations for their appearance and identifies men as ‘the architects of beauty [who] work to fashion our visions of our bodies’ (2003: 123).

It is in the context of art, however, that the marginalisation of beauty is most evident. Best (1996), for example, argues that, while the notion of finding beauty in artworks was indeed once the ‘traditional quest of the philosopher’ in the 1990s ‘that quest is thoroughly misconceived’:

Despite this still-prevalent assumption [that beauty is important], questions of beauty are usually irrelevant to artistic appreciation. Imagine going to music concerts, plays, art-exhibitions, etc. with someone who says he appreciates these arts, yet who, when asked for his opinion of a work, always replies: ‘It is (or is not) beautiful (or some similar comment).’ (Best, 1996: 81)

Best goes on to blame the fragile status of art education on society’s inability to distinguish between ‘the aesthetic and the artistic’ (1996: 81) and to conclude that beauty is peripheral to art and art education. What is striking about his conclusion is its sense of finality, of a debate that is over, an argument already won.

Returning recently to Best’s argument, I was reminded of the opening of Tate Modern in 2000. During the 1980s and 1990s I enjoyed the Tate Gallery’s juxtaposition of British art since 1500 with modern and contemporary art from Europe, America and beyond. I loved exploring the connections and contrasts between old and new, the way one could walk in and turn left for one and right for the other, before buying a postcard
of Millais’ *Ophelia* or Rothko’s *Maroon on Red* on the way out (or maybe both: the odd couple often appeared together on the walls of student halls). The opening of Tate Modern, however, prompted a re-organisation of the collection. Picasso, Pollock and the rest of the 20th Century were removed and re-housed in a former power station on Bankside, and Rothko and Ophelia would no longer compare notes on despair. The move seemed designed to ask art-lovers a question, one that anticipated Steers’ (2014) response to the art curriculum: which side are you on? The ‘historical fine art-led model focusing on appreciation, aesthetics and beauty’? Or would you rather search for ‘inspiration, risk, imagination and challenge’? (2014: 11). My memories of empty rooms in the re-branded Tate Britain of the early 2000s would suggest most people opted for the latter, and that Best’s (1996) assessment of the peripheral role of beauty in art had been accurate.

While it would be an over-simplification to lay the blame for the marginalisation of beauty at the doors of Tate Modern, with over five million visitors a year (Tate 2012) its popularity is nonetheless emblematic of unprecedented levels of interest in modern and contemporary art, in which beauty, in any conventional sense, rarely features. The curatorial decision to separate pre-1900 from post-1900 art brought into sharp focus the extent to which beauty was largely absent from 20th Century art, an absence that Barnett Newman celebrated when he declared: ‘The impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty… I believe that, here in America, some of us, free from the weight of European culture, are finding the answer, by completely denying that art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it.’ (1948: 52-53).

The extent to which beauty was marginalised by the advent of Modernism in the early 20th Century is well documented (e.g. Hughes 1991; Danto 2003; Prettejohn 2005; Nehamas 2007). Danto (2003) notes that beauty ‘almost entirely disappeared from
artistic reality in the twentieth century, as if attractiveness was a stigma’ (2003: 7), while Beech (2009) points out that until recently the two were intertwined, ‘neither beauty nor art have come through avant-gardist rebellion and modern social disruption unscathed. Their special relationship has, as a result, become estranged and tense.’ (2009: 12). Other commentators perceive it as a problematic theme for those who advocate greater equality in society; Jenkins (2009) observes that: ‘The word itself borders on the politically incorrect. We are embarrassed to speak of beauty, worried at being thought foppish, indolent or even elitist.’ (2009: 1) and recalls architect Richard Rogers’ account of how the New Labour government rejected of his vision of urban regeneration in the 1990s, warning him ‘to avoid using words like beauty if I wanted to be taken seriously by those who counted’ (Jenkins 2009: 3).

I typed the previous sentences with a sense of déjà vu, aware of occasions in the past few years when I have hesitated to describe the focus of my research. There were times when I worried that people would dismiss the idea of beauty and, like the trainee teachers in the art room, laugh when I pointed to something and said ‘Well I think it’s beautiful’. I was concerned they would think of beauty as superficial, trivial or peripheral, that they would tell me there are more important things to think about, more pressing issues in society and more contemporary concerns in art and education. In the 21st Century, people do not look to art education to learn how to appreciate beauty. As Steers (2014) says, they want more than appreciation; they want participation and engagement, inspiration and risk, imagination and challenge – and they could be forgiven for thinking none of these concerns relate to beauty.
1.2 Definition of key terms

There are three terms used in the title of this thesis that each require some explanation. The first is beauty, the meanings of which are explored throughout the thesis: firstly through an account of historical concepts of beauty, secondly through reflecting on philosophical perspectives on beauty and thirdly through the research into investigation of children’s perceptions of beauty. The other terms are ‘perception’ and ‘aesthetic experience’ and, since these are terms I use throughout the thesis, it is useful to briefly discuss and define them at this point.

There is much debate among contemporary philosophers with regard to definitions of aesthetic experience. Robert Stecker regards it as ‘the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities, or meaningful features of things’ (2010: 283), and suggests that, while these experiences may be valued for various reasons, they are not intrinsic to the aesthetic nature of the experience and are essentially valued for their own sake. Noel Carroll, on the other hand, locates his definition more firmly in the context of the relationship between an artwork (or aesthetic object of some kind) and the viewer (or reader or listener). He argues that an aesthetic experience involves the viewer engaging with the formal or expressive properties of an artwork and with the ways in which these properties interact to engage a cognitive, perceptual, emotive or imaginative response (Carroll 2010). In the context of art education, Elliot Eisner’s (2002) concept of aesthetic experience anticipates both these definitions. Identifying his principles for art education, he suggests firstly that teachers should encourage students to understand how their aesthetic experiences can enable them to place their own work within their broader culture; and secondly that art should help students to recognise and appreciate aesthetic experiences in everyday life:
'As one Chinese scholar is said to have commented, “First I see the hills in the painting, then I see the painting in the hills.” After a while it is not art that imitates life; it is life that imitates art.’ (Eisner 2002: 44)

Drawing on these perspectives, the definition of aesthetic experience that informs my approach to this study is one that is inclusive of both the artistic and the everyday. An aesthetic experience can involve the viewer looking at an image and understanding that it invites a response; or it can be one that involves the viewer seeing something in everyday life and recognising within it qualities that they instinctively want to capture and share with others in the hope or belief that they will also appreciate these qualities – and it may involve deciding that something is beautiful. My understanding that aesthetic experiences occur at the intersection between art and life closely informs my approach to this research.

This notion that aesthetic experiences can be both art-specific and everyday may relate to my identity and experiences as an artist, art educator and school teacher. I taught in primary schools for twelve years before becoming a teacher educator and my instinct is still to try to simplify ideas in ways that would be accessible to children. Aesthetic experience, I might tell children, is about the way something looks and how it makes you feel, why it makes you feel that way and what you want to say about it. An aesthetic experience is like the first line in a conversation, one that you say in your head when you see something and that you want to say to someone else.

While the focus of my research remained consistent throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis, the words I used to describe it changed over time. I began by writing about children’s ‘experiences’, ‘understanding’, or ‘notions’ of beauty, but decided that these terms wrongly implied that I believed children developed tentative theories about the theme. There are many words to describe the process of
how we look, or see, or observe, and how we make sense of what we see through thinking and comparing new experiences with previous ones, and I wanted a word that captured a sense of this process happening in children’s minds. In his essay On Possessing Beauty (2002), Alain de Botton describes how John Ruskin’s observational drawing courses at the Working Men’s College in London were underpinned by the principle that ‘drawing could teach us to see: to notice rather than to look’ (2002: 222). Ruskin’s idea of noticing captures what it was I wanted to find out about children’s experiences. I wanted to find out whether children ever paused to look at something and notice that it was beautiful and, if they did, whether they thought about the reasons why. I decided this process was best described in terms of perception, and that the focus of my research was best described as children’s perceptions of beauty.

1.3 The revival of beauty

Since 2000 a number of authors in the US and Britain have published work that shaped my thinking about beauty. It is widely agreed that the recent revival of interest in beauty began with Hickey’s (1993) essay Enter the Dragon in which he described how, during a panel discussion on the state of contemporary art, he surprised his audience by predicting that:

> The issue of the nineties will be – beauty!… The total, uncomprehending silence that greeted this modest proposal lent it immediate credence for me… Out of sheer perversity I followed beauty where it led, into the silence. “Beauty” just hovered there, a word without a language, quiet, amazing, and alien in that sleek, institutional space – like a Pre-Raphaelite dragon aloft on its leather wings. (Hickey, 2009: 1).

Hickey describes how the audience’s indifference to his announcement – no-one questioned him and most filed quietly out of the lecture room – alerted him to the void that existed in the place where beauty was once located: ‘I had put out my hand and discovered nothing – a vacancy that I needed to understand’ (2009: 3). As an influential
art critic Hickey was able to reflect upon and articulate his awareness of this vacancy in ways that alerted other authors. In the decade that followed, *Enter the Dragon* was gradually recognized as ‘a turning point in thinking about beauty’ (Beech: 2009: 13) and anticipated work by a number of authors in the US and Britain intent on exploring various aspects of the theme (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999; Steiner 2001; Scarry 2001; de Botton 2002; Danto 2003; Armstrong 2004; Eco 2004; Sartwell 2004; Prettejohn 2005; Nehamas 2007; Dutton 2009; Scruton 2009; Gardner 2011). In the early stages of the research, my reading of work by these authors developed and extended my understanding of the issues surrounding beauty and encouraged me to conceive a focus for my own research. Several texts were particularly useful in this respect, and these are briefly explored below.

Arthur Danto was primarily concerned with philosophical definitions of art, specifically in the context of Modernism and Postmodernism, before writing *The Abuse of Beauty* (2003), in which he explored the question of whether beauty has a place in modern and contemporary art. His answer, inspired by his reading of Hegel, was that the viewer should differentiate between the beauty of the appearance of an artwork and the beauty of its meaning. Danto describes how Hegel drew a distinction between natural and artistic beauty and claimed that the latter was superior because it was ‘born of the Spirit and born again’, which Danto interprets to mean that ‘artistic beauty was in some sense an intellectual rather than a natural product... I began to think that the beauty of an artwork could be internal to it, in the sense that it was part of the artwork’s meaning’ (2003: 12-13). He explores several artworks in relation to his theory, including Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Fig. 1.2), which consists of two triangular, black granite walls inscribed with the names of almost 58,000 American soldiers killed in the Vietnam War. Danto describes how its austere minimalism
confounded critics, but how the public nonetheless engaged with it, seeing their own faces reflected in the black granite as they made rubbings of the names of loved ones. Though few would describe the memorial as conventionally beautiful, Danto argues that the nature of people’s engagement with it _made_ it beautiful, and this engagement exemplifies his conception of the place of beauty in modern and contemporary art:

>[E]ven if beauty proved far less central to the visual arts than had been taken for granted in the philosophical tradition, that did not entail that it was not central to human life. The spontaneous appearance of those moving improvised shrines everywhere in New York after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 was evidence for me that the need for beauty in the extreme moments of life is deeply ingrained in the human framework. (Danto 2003: 14)

![Fig. 1.2 Maya Lin Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982)](image)

Reflections on beauty in the context of war memorials may seem far removed from the focus of my own research. However, they bring to mind a specific characteristic of my study, in that they helped me to conceptualise how I conceived my research to be located at an intersection between art and life: Danto highlights how powerful an experience of beauty in art can be, particularly if the viewer is _unaware_ that they are looking at an artwork. This idea was to become important to me when I came to carry out the empirical research, in terms of how I deliberately decided to present my research to participants outside of an art-specific context (see Chapter 4).
Another author whose reflection on beauty influenced my approach to the research is Alain de Botton, who explored aspects of beauty in several texts written between 2000 and 2005. In *On Possessing Beauty* (2002), he reflects on encounters with beauty and describes how:

>[A] dominant impulse on encountering beauty is the desire to hold on to it: to possess it and give it weight in our lives. There is an urge to say: “I was here, I saw this and it mattered to me.” (de Botton 2002: 218)

These incidental experiences of beauty prompt de Botton to reflect on Ruskin’s beliefs on the subject. Ruskin proposed that people have an innate desire to possess beauty, that a beautiful object can only be possessed through understanding it, and that the best way to understand something is to draw it or write about it. Inspired by Ruskin’s description of the importance of drawing, de Botton takes up observational drawing and finds that the process ‘brutally shows up our previous blindness to things’ (2002: 227) and, despite his disappointment with his drawing, he discovers that the process makes him more attentive to detail and helps him to understand what it is about a landscape or object he finds beautiful. He summarises what he finds valuable about Ruskin’s approach:

> If drawing had value even when it was practiced by people with no talent, it was for Ruskin because drawing could teach us to see: to notice rather than to look. In the process of re-creating with our own hand what lies before our eyes, we seem naturally to move from a position of observing beauty in a loose way to one where we acquire a deep understanding of its constituent parts and hence secure memories of it. (de Botton 2002: 222)

This distinction between seeing beauty and noticing beauty is an idea that informed the conception of my own research. While I was quite sure that children saw beautiful things, I was unsure whether they recognised them as beautiful, or whether they ever had opportunities to express their responses. Though de Botton goes on to suggest that photography is a poor substitute for drawing, as it discourages the sustained act of looking that observational drawing demands, I perceived the process differently,
perceiving it as a possible way of encouraging children to engage with their experiences of the visual world.

Two further texts, by Denis Dutton (2009) and Crispin Sartwell (2004), influenced my approach to the research. In *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution* (2009) Dutton asserted that humans have an instinctive appetite for art and beauty that needs to be satisfied by the creation and the consumption of artworks in both formal and informal contexts. He built on previous research by Orians and Heerwagen (1992) who found that adults and children were drawn to images of certain types of landscape, regardless of whether or not they had had any direct experience of them. Dutton argued, for example, that the similarities between illustrations found on calendars throughout the world offer evidence of an aesthetic sensibility that is shared to a surprising extent across continents and cultures, and suggested that this was an example of how ‘pre-existing, pre-calendrical human preferences’ play a strong role in determining aesthetic preference (2009: 18). After analysing a range of studies of variations in aesthetic preference across different cultures, Dutton discovered that one recurring, dominant image loomed large in the minds of many and posed the question: ‘Why is there such a preference for the blue, watery landscape?’ (2009: 18). For Dutton, the reason for the homogeneity of landscape preference had an evolutionary explanation. Drawing upon a range of visual examples, he identified a number of links between the elements of the ideal landscape and their practical uses for human beings engaged in a battle for survival. The desire for beauty, Dutton argued, is closely intertwined with the human instinct for survival.

A question that occurred to me when reading *The Art Instinct* was, if Dutton’s theory that landscape preferences are determined by evolution, then surely children would recognise the beauty of certain landscapes on some kind of instinctive level? If
they were given opportunities to find images that they thought were beautiful, would any of them choose images similar to the landscapes Dutton describes, regardless of whether or not they had any direct experience of being in those landscapes? It was an idea I would return to at a later stage of the research.

While Dutton sought to explain experiences of beauty by travelling back in time, in *Six Names of Beauty* (2004) Crispin Sartwell travelled more laterally, by exploring notions of beauty in different cultures as evidenced by the etymological associations of the word in various languages. In Greek, for example, *kalon* refers to the beauty of the ideal; while in Japan, the concept of *wabi-sabi* evokes the beauty of imperfection and humility and in the Navajo language *hozho* is synonymous with health and harmony as well as beauty. These different perspectives prompted Sartwell to reflect on how they inform his understanding of his own experiences of beauty; describing the Hebrew notion of *yapha*, for example, he recalls the experiences of his own children:

> I love to show my two-year-old daughter Jane almost anything, because almost anything can be for her a source of wonder. My son Hayes, who’s now fifteen, said a year or so ago, ‘I never really saw the moon until I was showing it to Jane.’ But I’ll bet he did see the moon, when he himself was small. My son Sam, now eleven, once crawled across a field at my mother’s house toward a huge full moon on the horizon, trying to put it in his mouth. I myself saw the moon differently that night, and am now capable of in a pinch of seeing it that way again. (Sartwell 2004: 28-29)

Of all the sources referenced so far in this chapter this is the only one that refers in any way to children’s perceptions of beauty. Various authors explore, understand and explain beauty in different ways, yet each might be accused of assuming that aesthetic experience begins relatively late in life. What I found inspiring about this excerpt from Sartwell’s book was his acknowledgement that children could have memorable experiences of beauty, and his inference that our own understanding of the experience of beauty might be informed by studying the experiences of children. Chapter 2 presents further reflections on art educators’ recent perspectives on the place of beauty in children’s aesthetic experience, but this chapter concludes with some reflections on
recent work by a small number of authors who have recently explored the place of beauty in education.

1.4 Beauty in education

The image of Crispin Sartwell’s children, staring at the moon and crawling across the fields towards it, is one that would appall Thomas Gradgrind. Dickens’ schoolmaster has come to symbolise a system of education that values facts above all else and conformity over creativity: ‘No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon.’ Cannatella (2006) quotes this line in his exploration of the question *Is Beauty an Archaic Spirit in Education?* He argues it is not, and in order to counteract the ‘dystopian’ principles of the current system he proposes a philosophy of education that explicitly values beauty, one that acknowledges that ‘the intimacy of beauty is good for us’ (2006: 95). Cannatella bemoans the fact that beauty has received little attention within educational research and argues that the Dickensian schoolmaster’s values continue to permeate current priorities in education. At the time I began this research, many art educators (e.g. Herne 2000) shared such concerns about the test-driven culture in schools, and would recognise his description of the current educational climate as ‘tasteless, aggressive, and doctrinaire’ (2006: 94). Cannatella’s argument for the place of beauty in education draws upon works by Wordsworth as well as Dickens, in which he finds evidence that ‘beauty is a force for good’ (2006: 99).

Joe Winston’s *Beauty and Education* (2010) is the only text that focuses in depth on the place of beauty in schools. Winston introduced the theme in journal articles (2006; 2008) in which he highlighted its marginalisation in schools, arguing that: ‘Beauty is a problem in educational discourse, seen as either wildly irrelevant or discordant with the job of teaching. Yet it was not always the case. Beauty has in the
past been understood as one of the highest aims of education.’ (2008: 71) Winston offers a rationale for the place of beauty in education, explores its value as an educational experience across the curriculum and argues that teachers should be able to draw on values of the past without resorting to a retrogressive approach: ‘[W]e learn best how to imagine the future by looking closely at history… the concept of beauty can inform what teachers do in progressive ways, whilst avoiding the kind of revisionist zeal that warps rather than liberates their imaginations.’ (2010: 8)

Drawing on his experiences as both a teacher and learner, Winston reflects on the beauty of educational experience. He suggests that there are epiphanic moments, times when people make accidental discoveries they know instinctively will be important to them even if they do not fully understand them at the time. For example, discovering Bob Dylan’s songs as a teenager taught him about the way experiences of beauty can inspire the listener (or viewer): ‘[I]t motivated me to learn as nothing else in my adolescence did. As an overwhelming experience of beauty it provided me with an ideal which I internalized and strove to emulate for many years’ (2010: 45). In his description of the desire to make something in response to beauty Winston evokes the feeling that many musicians, writers and artists like myself would recognise, whether they aim to emulate existing work or to create something entirely new. It was the value of beauty, Winston concludes, ‘that made it all matter and that anchored me to the process’ (2010: 49).

While this story illustrates how beauty can play a role in shaping an artist’s motivation, Winston argues that teachers must do more than simply wait for inspiration to strike their pupils. Rather, they should seek to understand the pedagogical principles that underpin such experiences and apply them at each stage of the learning process. To begin with, teachers should be aware that simply introducing a poem, artwork or song in
class is not in itself enough and that they need to be attuned to children’s existing aesthetic interests. With this in mind, they should try to choose music, books, or artworks, that are relevant to children’s lives and to anticipate ways in which children may perceive these works as beautiful. Once they have selected and shared a stimulus, teachers should strive to find ways to help children immerse themselves in the experience of engaging with the work. They should expect the unexpected, to be prepared for unpredictable outcomes rather than try to guide the lesson towards predetermined goals that reflect their own assumptions about the work. A final guiding principle, Winston suggests, is that ‘the teacher [should] allow for different forms of replication, different ways for students to respond to and communicate their experiences of beauty’ (2010: 54).

Though Winston writes from outside of the context of art education, several of his principles will be familiar to art educators. Specifically, the idea that students should produce diverse outcomes is one Elliot Eisner (e.g. 1972; 2002) and other leading theorists have identified as a key feature of teaching and learning in art. In another respect, Winston’s ideas challenge common practice in art education as, in my experience, art teachers are far more likely to take responsibility for the selection of artworks to use in the classroom than they are to allow children to select images that reflect their preferences: a stimulus is therefore more likely to be subject-centred than child-centred. Winston’s notion that children should ‘respond to and communicate their experiences of beauty’ (2010: 54, my emphasis) was central to the development of my own research and is explored further in Chapter 4.

Winston concludes with an appeal for the ‘awakening’ of beauty in education. He invites teachers to reflect on how experiences of beauty in their own personal and professional lives have informed their learning and understanding of themselves and
their pupils, and to consider how encouraging children’s awareness of beauty can be a way of offering balance in an educational climate that values conformity above individuality:

Beauty reminds us that emotion and cognition are inseparably bound together, that the one cannot be dislocated from the other and taught separately and that neither can be learned outside of experience… Beauty can be an uplifting rather than an oppressive source of cognitive-emotional learning; we enthuse, admire and empathise at the same time as we observe, evaluate, attend and respond. (Winston: 2010: 134)

This notion of beauty as an uplifting experience is evident in Rautio’s (2010) research into everyday experiences of beauty. Rautio asked four women living in a tiny village in the remote north of Finland to write monthly letters, to her and to each other, letters that recorded their everyday experiences of beauty. The women wrote of their engagement with wildlife and their natural surroundings and the beauty they found in objects that evoked the passing of time, and Rautio observes that: ‘Beauty in one’s everyday life is not merely found, it is created in continuously engaging with one’s surroundings. Beauty is an entry point to the intricate webs of significance with which we connect and relate ourselves to our surroundings but rarely acknowledge.’ (2010: 47).

The simplicity of Rautio’s study is in itself rather beautiful and almost timeless: her letter-writing participants seem isolated both technologically as well as geographically. My own study, however, is located more firmly in the present. Winston (2010) suggests several areas for further research, one of which is the place of new technologies in relation to beauty, creativity and education. Long before I became interested in researching beauty, I was curious about how technology is changing relationships between children and images. It is estimated that one tenth of all photographs ever taken were made in 2011 (Pollack 2012) and the implications of this in terms of how children make sense of this intensely accelerated visual world have not
begun to be explored. Writing recently in *Tate Etc.* magazine Kevin Jones observes that: ‘Images flow at our children like never before. They need to learn to read and interrogate the visual world, to find space to see feelingly and with wonder, to contact and reflect.’ (Jones 2015: 25) Jones’ observation echoes a line from an interview with film director Wim Wenders I read in 1988, shortly after I left art school: ‘Images are escaping our control: they are like a currency of which a whole suitcase is need just to buy one piece of bread’ (Malcolm 1988: 1). I wrote down the quote in my sketchbook, with little idea how true it would become. Children encounter hundreds of images every day, yet they are provided with little or no support in terms of understanding and responding to them. The more they see, the less likely they are to notice.

Conclusion

This chapter has described how my interest in beauty as a theme for research developed in recent years, how the literature helped me to understand some of the issues surrounding beauty and to begin to develop a basis for the empirical research. What I took to my own research from the literature was a fascination with the diversity of perspectives on beauty and a determination to make my own contribution towards understanding of the value of the subject. I was motivated not only by Danto’s notion that ‘the need for beauty in the extreme moments of life is deeply ingrained in the human framework’ (2003: 14), but also by Rautio’s belief that that beauty can be an everyday experience, ‘created in continuously engaging with one’s surroundings’ (2010: 47). I was inspired by Winston’s argument that teachers should create opportunities for children ‘to respond to and communicate their experiences of beauty’
(Winston 2010: 54) and above all by de Botton’s reminder of Ruskin’s advice, that those in search of beauty should learn ‘to notice rather than to look’ (2002: 222).

These authors provided me with a theoretical framework within which I could begin to research children’s perceptions of beauty. The following chapter explores how a number of strategies developed by art educators in recent years influenced my approach to the empirical part of the study.
Chapter 2: Children’s engagement with images: strategies in art education

Introduction

From the earliest stages of planning the empirical research, I knew that I wanted to understand children’s perceptions of beauty through finding out what they thought and felt about images. Although there is very little existing research focused specifically on understanding children’s notions of beauty, art educators use images (principally artworks) in various ways, and this chapter reflects upon a number of theoretical perspectives emerging from the literature about children’s engagement with works of art.

My aim for this stage of the research was to develop my knowledge and understanding of art educators’ approaches to using images in the classroom in order to work out how I might approach the task of engaging children with images during the empirical part of the research. While I had developed my own strategies for using images in my teaching, both as a primary school teacher and a teacher educator, I was aware that I needed to reflect on where my ideas had originated and how existing strategies may have influenced my own approach. Therefore I needed to re-visit and review these strategies in order to identify and refine those that I would adopt for the empirical research.

The first section of the chapter explores the notion of aesthetic appreciation, its roots in the 19th Century and its current and somewhat problematic status in art education. The central section reflects on a range of strategies art educators use to engage children and young people with art, through an examination of the parallel development of the critical studies movement in Britain and aesthetic education in the
US during the 1980s and 1990s. It also reflects on recent research into children’s interpretations of illustrated texts. The latter sections explore concepts of developmental stage theory in aesthetic response, and the chapter concludes by reflecting on theories on experiences of beauty that have recently emerged from the field of evolutionary psychology.

2.1 Aesthetic appreciation

In the introduction to this thesis it was noted that references to beauty were removed from an initial draft of the English National Curriculum for art, following criticism that it was retrogressive in referencing an ‘historical fine art led model focusing on appreciation, aesthetics and beauty’ (Steers 2014: 11). Of these three terms, I suspect that the one most likely to trouble art educators was appreciation.

Appreciation is a problematic term. Firstly, as Steers intimates, it suggests a passive, unquestioning response to artworks that discourages the expression of divergent views. This was the view of commentators such as Osbourn (1991), who described how ‘the traditional view of appreciation [involves] a silent viewer, cut off from reality and wrapped in his or her own thoughts’ (1991: 33). In the context of the classroom, this notion of the silent viewer is one likely to meet resistance from teachers, largely because they need to hear children articulating their appreciation rather than merely experiencing it. Secondly, the term also implies an expectation of a certain ‘standard’ level of appreciation, and suggests the viewer must bring to an artwork certain levels of knowledge, understanding and sophistication in order to interpret and ‘properly’ appreciate it. Some critics have argued that these are qualities not all viewers
possess. F.R. Leavis, for example, asserted that ‘in any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends’ as worrying evidence that the educational system can sometimes serve to maintain an ‘exclusive and elitist notion of culture’ (in Addison 2007: 319). The implication that there exists a hierarchical structure in which only a small proportion of people are able to articulate their appreciation of art is particularly problematic in the context of education. Not only does it deny the notion of equality of opportunity, it also suggests that children should learn to appreciate artworks in ways sanctioned by adults, rather than to engage with them on their own terms. In my experience, such an approach risks narrowing, rather than broadening, the appeal of art to children and young people.

The principle of encouraging wider participation in aesthetic engagement can be traced back to the mid-19th Century, when art appreciation was closely intertwined with notions of ‘taste’. During this period, there was a growing belief in the need to refine working class tastes, with reformers such as Joseph Addison proposing that ‘as soon as Taste was established, vice and ignorance would be banished’ (Romans 2005: 41). As manufacturers began to produce goods on an industrial scale, there emerged a widespread perception that the aesthetic sensibilities of their customers were underdeveloped: ‘The public itself’, noted the Edinburgh Review in 1849, ‘stands in need of the schoolmaster, as much as either the manufacturer or the designer’ (2005: 42). Art and design education was therefore perceived to offer ‘a route to raising the public taste’ (2005: 51).

This was the context in which, in 1854, John Ruskin established his courses in observational drawing at the Working Men’s College in London. Ruskin focused attention on what he believed to be the key purpose of art education: to improve the quality of life through the appreciation of the beauty of nature (Haslam 1988). He
deplored the tendency of people to pass through a landscape without taking time to engage with it, and argued that drawing offered a valuable opportunity to pause, reflect and connect with the details of a landscape otherwise easily overlooked. The value of drawing, he proposed, was greater than that of writing: not only did it enable the creation of a record of the visual world, but also that it ‘could teach us to see: to *notice* rather than to look’ (de Botton 2002: 222).

Ruskin’s desire for his students to learn to draw was borne out of a conviction that it would enable them to appreciate beauty. He believed that the human response to beauty was instinctive; that it was natural to wish to possess it; that only through understanding beauty could it be possessed and that ‘the most effective way of pursuing this conscious understanding is by attempting to describe beautiful places through art, through writing or drawing them’ (2002: 220). An aesthetic education, through which people were taught to notice and appreciate beauty, would, Ruskin believed, enable them to lead happier, more fulfilled lives.

More than a century later, Ruskin’s emphasis on the importance of noticing was revisited by Harold Osborne. However, for Osborne a heightened awareness of the visual world could best be achieved not through observational drawing, but through reflection on the experience of looking. In *The Art of Appreciation* (1970) he proposed that the development of skills of art appreciation were an integral part of a process through which the viewer’s experience of the visual world could be enriched:

> It is […] like acquiring new powers of perception, like the awakening of a sense that was dulled. By acquiring skill in appreciation we acquire power to perceive features of the world around us which had hitherto passed unnoticed and unremarked and to hold clearly and deliberately in attention aspects which without this skill had impinged only casually and incidentally upon our awareness. (Osborne 1970: 15)

Like Ruskin, Osborne proposed that developing an appreciation of art would enable the viewer to move from appreciating a work of art to engaging with a broader range of
visual experiences, enriched through a heightened sense of their value. Though not explicit in his assertion that the viewer should attend to what can easily pass ‘unnoticed and unremarked’, the notion that experiences of the visual world are intertwined with experiences of beauty is articulated throughout the text: ‘It is taken for granted that appreciation of art and natural beauty is in some sense a matter for everyone and not the prerogative of a restricted class of experts.’ (1970: 1) By linking together so closely the terms ‘art and ‘beauty’, Osborne was himself taking something for granted, that the two concepts belonged together.

Though some of his perspectives are dated, I find that Osborne’s classification of aesthetic qualities offer a useful framework for reflecting on visual experience, one that I subsequently drew upon when interpreting children’s thinking about beauty. Osborne proposed that the aesthetic qualities of a work of art could be classified as sensory, intersensory, formal or emotional (or expressive). Firstly, he described the sensory qualities as ‘the shapes and patterns upon which the whole superstructure rests… the bricks from which the edifice is built’ (1970: 65). Secondly, aesthetic qualities are ‘intersensory’, in terms of qualities that are generally objective, but with which the viewer might have specific individual associations. Although qualities such as colour can be described objectively, they may hold subjective associations for the viewer. The most complex quality Osborne identified is the one concerned with emotional or expressive response, of which he proposed that there were two distinct ‘classes’. The emotional or expressive qualities of a work of art may emerge directly from the artist’s deliberate portrayal of emotion; alternatively there is a more subtle aesthetic response, in which the viewer actively ‘perceives emotionally’ (1970: 74). In this context, the knowledge or associations that the viewer brings to the experience of engaging with an artwork influence their perception of it. Osborne described an
‘affective’ response, one that can involve a sense of detachment from the subject matter depicted, one that enables the viewer to enjoy what is represented in the image without concern for any practical considerations implied in it.

Finally, Osborne suggests some aesthetic qualities are not concerned with representation but are purely formal in character. As well as colour, pattern, line and tone, works of art also have qualities such as balance, harmony and proportion. During the 20th Century there was an increased awareness that it is possible to separate pure form from content (a Madonna and Child, for example, could be appreciated by an atheist as well as a Christian believer) and Osborne conceded that, while the content of a representational picture ‘must be apprehended as if it were an abstract structure of visual shapes’ (1970: 91). Here, Osborne alludes to the Formalist principles of Clive Bell who, in Art (1914), decreed that painters should be exclusively concerned with ‘significant form’, a notion that centred purely on the interaction of the formal elements within the work rather than the subject matter or its emotional impact on the viewer. According to Carroll (2001), a Formalist approach offers the viewer a way of engaging with a wide range of artworks and artefacts of the past and, while the subject matter of such works may not reflect the contemporary viewer’s concerns or interests, they are nonetheless able to engage with the work on a purely formal basis.

Noticing beauty

Despite the relative age of Osborne’s text, I recognised that it could help me to understand aspects of children’s explanations of their experiences of beauty. I anticipated that his classifications would offer a framework that could inform my approach to interpreting images found and photographed by children in this research, as well as their responses to them. They encouraged me to approach the interviews with
an awareness of concepts and themes that might arise in discussion, to anticipate and to build upon children’s responses in order to facilitate discussion. They could also help me to recognise themes as they emerged from the data and to reflect on them in the context of the literature, and to identify connections between the aesthetic qualities and the categories I designed to describe and summarise children’s ideas and beliefs about beauty.

As described in the previous chapter, my own perspective is that while children encounter many images every day, teachers provide few opportunities for them to share what they think, feel or notice about them. Osborne’s emphasis on noticing the visual world is an important part of my own beliefs about the purposes of art education, one that finds an echo not only in the past, with Ruskin, but also in more recent justifications of art education. In 1972, Elliot Eisner concluded *Educating Artistic Vision* with the following thoughts:

Work in the arts develops the ability to care, to care not about the monumental but about the little things, the inner aspects of experience – the shimmer of a droplet on a golden leaf, the cool grayness of an early winter morning, a rusted, crumpled pile of wire laying near an old brick wall. When experienced, the arts contribute to the fund of our experiences, develop our perceptivity, and hence enable us to savour the previously insignificant. (Eisner 1972: 281)

I reflected on the notion of ‘savouring the previously insignificant’, noticing what can be easily overlooked, many times during this research, and it was alluded to recently by Hickman (2010) in his rationale for art education:

I put forward the notion that one of the aims for art education is, or ought to be, concerned with noticing… Visual education must surely concern itself with drawing attention to the subtleties of the visual world, which includes the intriguing, the interesting, the arresting and the beautiful. (Hickman 2010: 149)

Hickman goes on to explain that he uses the word beauty despite the fact ‘it is considered by many to be passé’ (2010: 149). I suspect the ‘many’ that Hickman refers to are art theorists and art educators who have been most influential in recent decades,
as beauty is almost entirely absent from the discourse in art education. Nonetheless, many of these educators offer valuable strategies for engaging children and young people with works of art, several of which are explored in the following section of this chapter.
2.2 Engaging children with visual images: strategies from art educators

This section of the chapter reports a number of strategies designed by art educators with the aim of engaging children with visual images. A review of the literature indicated that these strategies are those that have been most widely disseminated in the field of art education, initially through journal articles and subsequently through edited collections of articles (Thistlewood 1989; Hickman 2005). It begins by reflecting on the nature of Critical Studies movement in art education in the UK, before examining the parallel movement of aesthetic education in the US.

2.2.1 Critical Studies

The term ‘Critical Studies’ emerged during the early 1980s in order to describe a range of activities in art education that extend beyond making artworks. Thistlewood (1989) traced the emergence of Critical Studies to the marginalisation of art history in schools and to changes to the English examination system in the 1960s that led to increased pressures on art teachers’ time and the subsequent near demise of art history. The Critical Studies movement emerged partly as a compensation for its absence by offering pupils opportunities to reflect on the social and political contexts within which artworks were made. Its remit, however, went further as it prompted teachers to encourage reflection on interpretation and aesthetic response, thereby enabling a ‘widening of art educationalists' ambitions on behalf of young people’ (Thistlewood 1989: viii). These ambitions emerged from a growing awareness among art educators of the potential value of establishing clearer connections between the work of artists and that of children and young people. On one level, the styles and techniques employed by post-war artists
were often more easily imitated by young people than those of the Old Masters; on another, Critical Studies offered opportunities for children to articulate their personal responses through *talking* about art rather than through *making* it.

At the time these distinct strands of art education were encapsulated in the conception of three curriculum ‘domains’ of art education – the conceptual, the productive and the contextual and critical – that the Secondary Examining Council Working Party identified in 1988. These domains were to become influential on the structure and content of the National Curriculum for Art (Taylor 1989). The distinction between Art History and Critical Studies is perhaps best encapsulated with reference to another term that emerged at around this time, Visual Literacy (Boughton 1986; Allen 1994; Raney 1999). The argument was that, whereas an art history student might investigate artworks within a specific historical or cultural context, a *visually literate* student would have the ability to confront an unfamiliar artwork and to respond to it thoughtfully, irrespective of their historical or contextual knowledge of the work. Advocates of Critical Studies valued visual literacy above art historical knowledge.

*Conceptions of Critical Studies*

By 1991, ‘Knowledge and Understanding’ of art and design (which was distinguished from ‘Investigating and Making’ in art and design) was specified as an attainment target in the National Curriculum for England and Wales (DES 1991). The debate amongst art educators subsequently progressed from providing justifications for the existence of Critical Studies to developing rationales for the selection or rejection of particular artists or art movements as a focus for study, and conceptions of Critical Studies evolved to emphasise a more pro-active approach from art educators. Reflection on the nature of Critical Studies continues to be a theme for art educators. For Addison (2007), the term
implies ‘the notion of enquiry, a continual questioning of assumptions and the challenge
to discover through investigative and interpretative practices why visual and material
culture has been, and remains, so significant for so many people’ (Addison 2007: 247).
Over time, the language used to describe activity within Critical Studies became more
confrontational, with authors becoming increasingly critical of teachers’ over-
dependence on the ‘accessible modernist, Eurocentric canon (that) has become the
privileged source for transcription and pastiche’ (2007: 247). Addison was alluding
here to research in schools carried out by Downing and Watson in 2004 that indicated
the over-use of a narrow range of ‘male, pale and stale’ artists (Brand 2009) – those
who were white, male, European and who whose work dated from the late 19th and
early 20th centuries.

Another key debate relating to Critical Studies centred on whether its role was
ultimately to inform students’ own art practice – for example, by raising their awareness
of alternative approaches to creating artworks – or to appreciate artworks. Was it a
means to an end or an end in itself? Building upon these debates, a number of art
educators developed pedagogical strategies for engaging children and young people
with artworks, examples of which are explored here. Cunliffe (1996), for example,
devised a system for enabling pupils to respond to images through grading their specific
expressive or emotional qualities (happy/sad, serious/fun, nice/awful) on a scale of one
to five, while Bowden (1993) developed ‘criteria of judgements’ aimed at facilitating
responses to artworks in the classroom. His structure for discussion consisted of six
stages, progressing from the superficial (‘I like it because it would go in my bedroom’)
to analysis of the skills, techniques and materials used, the formal and expressive
qualities of artworks, to the contextual information related to the work. For Bowden,
the strength of this approach lay in its ‘non-didactic’ nature that encouraged children to
develop their own responses rather than reply to specific, ‘closed’ questions about the work. Hickman’s (1999) strategy for engaging students with artworks identified four sequential steps in the process – react, research, respond and reflect – designed to support them as they moved beyond their initial thoughts and feelings about an artwork towards a more reflective state. In an effort to encourage deeper reflection on the range of historical, social, cultural and political contexts in which artworks are made, Addison (2003) identified three stages of analysis: empirical analysis (focusing on description, form, materials and techniques); functional analysis (focusing on patronage, purpose and provenance) and contextual analysis (focusing on classifications, style, context and interpretation). Of all the approaches to sustaining children’s engagement with images, however, arguably the most influential was that developed by Rod Taylor.

Taylor’s (1989) approach to investigating artworks in the classroom was initially prompted by a question from a teacher – *What do you actually say to pupils when you are standing in front of a painting?* The question prompted Taylor to develop a strategy designed to generate discussion of artworks regardless of whether or not students were aware of the historical context in which they had been made. It consisted of a collection of questions, asked by teachers and responded to by students, gathered together under four ‘fundamental standpoints’: content, form, mood and process (Taylor 1989: 38). The questions ranged from ‘closed’ questions that demanded a factual rather than an interpretive response – *What kind of colour scheme has been used?* – to those that offered more opportunities for a diversity of response: *Is your mood simply one of the moment or has the work directly affected you?* (1989: 38). Taylor’s suggested questions for teachers to ask students – ‘How has the work been arranged? Is this in keeping with its content? Does it confirm or contradict the work’s imagery?* (1989: 39) – offer ways to make artworks accessible to students, and for directing and developing
discussion in the classroom. The questions Taylor proposed teachers use move logically from the objective to the subjective, and his framework offers a manageable strategy for engaging children with unfamiliar images by encouraging them to observe, reflect and to make connections with other artworks and experiences. The framework also suited educators intent on raising awareness of the expressive potential of art among children and young people, and it was widely adopted by teachers and adapted for use by museum and gallery educators.

While Taylor’s framework for discussion of artworks in the classroom is simple and accessible, there are aspects of it I find problematic. The framework requires some skillful handling from teachers if its potential as a means of engaging children with artworks is to be fulfilled, and my main concern is that it may encourage teachers to lead children towards gaining certain existing knowledge about an artwork. From my own experience, unless used with great care the strategy can sometimes lead students towards ‘appreciating’ the teachers’ predetermined reading of a work, rather than responding in diverse ways. Though in theory teachers try to pose ‘open’ questions that invite individual responses, they often ask them with particular responses in mind. And, even if a teacher tells their pupils that ‘I want to hear your ideas’, it is easy for the discussion to drift into a game of ‘Guess what’s in the teacher’s head’. When children offer alternative, unanticipated responses, the teacher can sometimes be caught ‘off guard’, resulting in missed opportunities for interesting discussions.

I am also concerned by some of the examples of successful teaching and learning Taylor cites in support of his methods. Like other art educators writing in the 1980s and 90s, Taylor was concerned with making art lessons more ‘relevant’ to the needs of his students. Reflecting on their choice of artists to study, for example, he observed that ‘there is immeasurable difference between... studies as ends in
themselves, and work which genuinely relates to pupils’ own practical needs’ (Taylor 1989: 28). To illustrate his point, Taylor recounted how a group of secondary school pupils were each asked to choose an artist as the inspiration for their own ‘personal study’. One student had initially decided to focus his project on Degas but changed his mind when he visited an exhibition and saw work by German conceptual artist Gerd Winner. Taylor’s article includes an illustration of Winner’s work, a photograph of a brick wall, placed alongside another photograph of a brick wall taken by the student (Fig. 2.1). He observes that ‘the impact of Winner’s work was so great that the student discarded Degas in order to write about Winner instead’ (Taylor 1989: 28).
Taylor viewed the student’s rejection of Degas in favour of the contemporary edge of Winner as a clear-cut cause for celebration, citing it as an example of art education ‘which genuinely relates to pupils’ own practical needs’ (1989: 28). But it is also the case that this student’s work was as derivative as any of the examples of clichéd images
in classrooms at that time—drawings of halved peppers and crumpled Coke cans— that Taylor simultaneously cited as being sadly emblematic of school art practice. This example of the foregrounding of what is now known as ‘issues-based’, contemporary art at the expense of ‘aesthetically pleasing’ artworks from earlier periods is broadly typical of the perspectives of art educators championing Critical Studies in the 1980s and 1990s. In an analysis of visual resources published with the aim of engaging secondary school pupils, for example, Bancroft (1995) bemoaned the absence of any images depicting ‘contemporary representations of killing, war, death and disaster’ (1995: 24) while applauding Taylor’s decision to use an image illustrating the ‘charred head of an Iraqi soldier’ as it provided an opportunity to ‘tackle disturbing issues in the classroom’ (1995: 24).

This emphasis upon the use of challenging images in art lessons is perhaps understandable in the context of the 1980s and 1990s. In line with Eisner’s (1972) identification of ‘essentialist’ and ‘contextualist’ domains of art education (see below) there emerged a widely-held perception among art educators during this time that, if art educators wanted to attract the attention of young people and to challenge their perceptions of art, then the images they encountered in school must be relevant and meaningful, no matter how disturbing and distressing. If you thought art was all about flowers and sunsets, art educators seemed to say, then wise up and take a look at this.

In fairness, art educators could not have anticipated the extent to which issues-based contemporary art would shortly assume cultural prominence both in Britain and internationally. In the late 1980s, Damien Hirst was barely out of art school; in 2008, a collection of his works sold at Sotheby’s for over £70 million (Adams 2008). In the late 1980s, a disused power station languished on the banks of the Thames: in 2001, reincarnated as Tate Modern, it welcomed 5.25 million visitors (Tate 2001), sustaining
these numbers over a decade later (Tate 2012). A recent report on the shifting curatorial priorities at Tate Britain revealed that the vast majority of the historical collection was now ‘relegated to store rooms, while the exhibition space is dominated by contemporary art’ (Alberge 2012: 17).

Fig 2.2: Secondary school pupils making drawings of works by Damien Hirst; Tate Modern, 2012 (photographs: the author)

In the current cultural climate, young people need little persuasion of the appeal of contemporary art (Fig. 2.2), and art educators can claim some responsibility for the shift in perceptions that has taken place. Yet, despite evidence that the battle has been won, the more influential art educators in Britain and Europe continue to promote student work that emphasises meaning and message over visual and formal elements. The International Journal of Art and Design Education frequently features images of issues-led art practice that have very limited aesthetic appeal (Fig. 2.3). Perhaps it is the case that popularisation of contemporary art has marginalised the role of beauty in art and art education more firmly than ever and that art educators are right to judge this is as a
positive development. But I can’t help wondering whether Taylor’s former student, the one who dumped Degas, still has pictures of brick walls on his walls.

Fig 2.3 Examples of images of student artwork from the International Journal of Art and Design Education, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2012)

2.2.2 Aesthetic Education

The emergence of Critical Studies in British schools was paralleled in several respects by the Aesthetic Education movement in the US, the origins of which can be traced to the early 1960s. Following a proposal by Barkan (1962) that the teaching of art in US schools should be more tightly structured, a number of art educators gathered with the
aim of defining guiding principles for the discipline. A set of four aims was identified that were concerned not only with making art but also with responding to art. Specifically, educators proposed that children and young people should develop an appreciation of the aesthetic elements of art, to respond to artworks and to make judgments about them. The weighting of these aims signaled a marked shift away from the widely held perception of the discipline as concerned principally with production of art, rooted in Modernist conceptions of the ‘child artist’ (Hickman 2005). The proposed new structure for teaching art foregrounded the role of the viewer and marginalised that of the maker. Following his earlier call for a tighter structure, Barkan identified a rationale that reflected his conviction ‘that art curriculum development should be derived from its three disciplinary sources – the artist, art historian, art critic and the aesthetician’ (2005: 21).

Elliot Eisner soon built upon the notion that the practice of responding to art and the visual world had become marginalised in education. He agreed that there was too much emphasis on making art in schools and that the historical and cultural aspects of the art curriculum had become marginalised. He argued in *Educating Artistic Vision* (1972) that, while making art was clearly important, that ‘learning to see visual form, learning to understand how art functions in contemporary culture and how it has functioned in the cultures of the past are also important. He pointed out that, to a very large degree, the historical and cultural aspects of the art curriculum have been neglected in schools’ (1972: 26). His response was to identify what he described as two complementary ‘domains’, ‘contextualist’ and ‘essentialist'. Contextualists were those who believed that the needs of the individual child or community should take priority over all else. Their aims for art education could vary according to the context in which it operated and the values held by members of a given community, and art could help
children to learn across the curriculum. Essentialists, meanwhile, believed that as a subject for study, art had unique characteristics and qualities that distinguish it from other areas of the curriculum and therefore it ‘should not be subverted to serve other ends… what art has to contribute to the education of the human is precisely what other fields cannot contribute’ (1972: 5).

Discipline-Based Art Education

The contextualist approach gained momentum in the early 1980s, when Greer (1984) built upon Barkan’s principles to define what he termed Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE). Proponents of DBAE were concerned with: the intrinsic value of art; the broader context of aesthetic education; a systematic structure for learning; regular systematic instruction and the identification of specific learning outcomes in art (Hickman 2005: 21). Articulating his own rationale for DBAE, Eisner (1988) simplified the principles by suggesting that: ‘There are four major things that people do with art. They make it. They look at it. They understand its place in culture over time. They make judgements about its quality.’ (1988: 189) What is notable about this rationale is its implication that teachers should place as much emphasis on encouraging children to responding to art as well as to make it.

While DBAE can be seen as a parallel movement to Critical Studies, there was in the former an emphasis on aesthetics that was absent from the work of art educators in the UK. Reflection on issues surrounding aesthetics in art education was widespread in the specialist literature emanating from the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with several texts helping to locate aesthetics as an integral part of art education (e.g. Parsons 1987; Smith and Simpson 1991; Parsons and Blocker 1993; Moore 1994). These
authors aimed to make philosophical aesthetics accessible in the classroom, believing that ‘the consequences of introducing young people to aesthetics will be pervasive and long-lasting’ (Moore 1994: 6). As was the case with many of their contemporaries in the UK, these authors each proposed a rationale for engaging with artworks and strategies to support the implementation of their ideas.

It should be noted that the use of the term ‘aesthetics’ by art educators in the US is distinctive from that in Britain. Whereas art educators in Britain use it to refer specifically to formal properties of artworks, those in the US adopt a broader definition, located more firmly within the tradition of philosophical aesthetics that encompassed the notion of understanding artworks beyond their formal properties. Parsons and Blocker, for example, define aesthetics as ‘the analysis of the ideas with which we think about the arts’ (1993: 73). Eisner recognised that teachers might perceive the inclusion of aesthetics in the art curriculum as a challenge, and offered a persuasive argument for its place:

Aesthetics... pertains to the theoretical bases for judging the quality of what one sees. Human beings are evaluative creatures. We argue about our value judgments and we are keen to make them. Understanding the variety of criteria that can be applied to works of art and reflecting about the meanings of that intellectually delicious and elusive concept ‘art’ is what much of aesthetics is about. (Eisner 1988: 189)

By broadening his focus away from teachers and pupils (to the more inclusive ‘we’ and ‘human beings’) Eisner raises the possibility of something approaching a democratic educational environment in which the ideas and opinions of children could be regarded as equally valid as those of the teacher. Similarly, his comments on the nature of art criticism imply an inclusive vision similar to Ruskin’s aspirations for his pupils was that they should learn to notice, not to look. Eisner argued that art criticism ‘develops their ability to see, not merely to look at the qualities that constitute the visual world – a world that includes, yet exceeds, formal works of art’ (1988: 189). The notion that the
scope of art education extends beyond the classroom and the gallery continued to inform Eisner’s later work. Identifying ‘some principles to guide practice’ in 2002, he asserted that one of the purposes of art education should be ‘to enable students to secure aesthetic forms of experience in everyday life’ (2002: 44) and that children and young people should be provided with ‘a distinctive window or frame through which the world can be viewed’ (2002: 45).

Recently art educators such as Tavin (2007) have challenged the value of aesthetic education, warning that teachers are often inclined to select for use in the classroom artworks that they themselves feel connected to or comfortable with and, in doing so, they underestimate the extent to which their decisions privilege certain cultures, traditions and attitudes above others. However, Eisner’s principle that teachers should provide ‘a distinctive window or frame through which the world can be viewed’ (2002: 45) is one that accurately describes my motivation for researching children’s perceptions of beauty. While I was curious to find out about their experiences of beauty, I was also convinced that art educators pay insufficient attention to children’s aesthetic experiences. I was also sure that teachers have an important part to play in providing their pupils with ‘windows’ through which they can look at, and notice, the visual world and to articulate aspects of their aesthetic experience. The following section of this chapter reports on previous research into children’s aesthetic experience, specifically in terms of their aesthetic preferences and development.
2.3 Children’s aesthetic preferences

While some art educators during the 1980s and 1990s proposed strategies for increasing engagement with art, others were more concerned with reflecting on how responses to artworks varied according to the age or experience of the viewer. This section of the chapter reflects on a number of studies located at points where art education meets with psychology. It begins by reflecting on research into ‘stage theories’ of aesthetic response and focuses particularly on the work of Michael Parsons in the US and Norman Freeman in the UK, before examining theories of aesthetic preference in the context of evolutionary psychology.

2.3.1 Aesthetic development and stage theory

In the 1980s Michael Parsons carried out extensive research into people’s responses to artworks (1987; 1988). His primary concern was to find out what people thought and felt about artworks, how their responses changed as they grew older and how they progressed through a sequence of ‘stages’. Two aspects of his study make it particularly pertinent to my own. Firstly, the youngest participants in the study were of a similar age to the pupils I decided to target for my own research, and secondly, one of the themes Parsons explored in his research was his participants’ perceptions of beauty. Therefore, while Eisner’s conception of the ‘window’ of art education is closest to my own philosophical position, Parsons’ study is the closest in terms of my research aims.

This section of the chapter offers reflection on the literature relating to children’s aesthetic experience in order to provide a clear indication of how certain studies informed my approach to the empirical research. Though the literature in the field is relatively limited, I found it useful to examine the approaches that various
authors adopted and to reflect on the implications for the empirical part of my own research.

Although Parsons’ study of aesthetic development became the most widely known, in the 20 years that preceded its publication a number of doctoral students in US universities carried out related studies. Chen (1997) analysed several of these dissertations and the summaries that follow are drawn from her research. Machotka (1966) shared 15 reproductions of paintings with a number of children aged between six and twelve years old and assigned their responses to stages of development. Until the age of seven or eight, children talked mainly about the subject matter of paintings, while 7-11-year-old children were more interested in the extent to which to pictures were realistic or colourful, while those aged twelve were more interested in style, composition and luminosity. Machotka concluded that these stages paralleled aspects of Piagetian stages. Coffey’s (1968) gathered responses to a collection of postcard reproductions, half of which were representational artworks, the other half abstract, from participants in kindergarten to college students. Like Machotka, she found younger subjects were interested in colour (and were more instinctive in their responses), while older children took more interest in realism and eventually in meanings and explanations of images.

Clayton (1974) investigated the extent to which aesthetic development mirrored developmental stages previously identified by Piaget (1970) and identified four stages of development among subjects aged between five and 17. She described how older children were more aware of the unity of the artwork and of connections between the subject matter of an artwork and its visual form. The youngest children in Brunner’s (1975) study were by the colours of the images of paintings, sculptures and buildings they were shown, and later became more interested in the messages they thought they
contained. Older participants were less interested in content and more concerned with structure, eventually progressing to making judgments about artists’ intentions.

Housen (1983) was interested not only in how the age of a participant influences their aesthetic response but also education and socio-economic status. She identified five stages of aesthetic response: (i) an ‘accountive’ stage, where responses to an artwork are mainly descriptive; (ii) a ‘constructive’ stage, when children become more interested in why and how the work was made; (iii) a ‘classifying’ stage in which participants articulate their intellectual understanding of the artwork; (iv) an ‘interpretive’ stage, in which they theorise about its meaning, and finally (v) a ‘re-creative’ stage, in which they reflect on their initial impressions and the validity of their own opinions. In a study carried out at around the same time as Parsons’ research, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) surveyed a relatively elite band of curators, museum directors and art educators, and identified four dimensions to the aesthetic experience: knowledge, communication, perception and emotion. Even ‘art experts’, it was found, were initially attracted by the formal qualities of an artwork, before becoming engaged with its emotional content and then eventually appreciating its intellectual qualities. Without training, the authors concluded, this higher stage could not be reached.

A common characteristic of each of the studies described above is that authors identify stages of aesthetic response, which draws on Piaget’s theory that children progress from one stage of learning to the next. Concepts of stage theory also underpinned Gardner’s (1973) research into children’s cognitive development in art (1973). Prior to Parsons’ research in the 1980s, Gardner’s investigations were the most extensive in the field, and he sought to establish the extent to which children’s cognitive development in art corresponded with their general intellectual development. Gardner
identified a number of common findings in several studies. He found that younger children tend to focus their attention on the subject matter of images and are easily influenced by opinions of older children whom they perceive as ‘experts’. He argued this was evidence that development was ‘accelerated by exposure to products that are somewhat but not too far advanced along the target population’ (1973: 224). The role of ‘training’ in the development of aesthetic sensitivity is a common theme in Gardner’s research: for example, he found that children as young as six demonstrated that they were able to group paintings by artist, particularly if they were ‘trained’ to overlook subject matter, indicating their sensitivity to the subtleties of different artistic styles. Gardner argued that children’s visual sensitivity was also a factor in terms of their drawing and he noted that by the age of seven most are able to modify drawings in such a way that their peers could interpret them more easily (1973: 225).

Since Parsons’ research (which, together with that of Norman Freeman, is explored in detail below), there have been far fewer studies of children’s aesthetic development. One exception is Hickman’s (2000) research into age-related development, which explored 11-14-year-olds responses to art. He found that the more abstract an artwork is, the more ‘difficult’ students perceive it to be, and that those working at ‘lower’ levels held relatively narrow conceptions of art, describing it in terms of media or processes, while those operating at ‘higher’ levels could reflect on competing theories of art. Despite his own use of the concept of levels, Hickman advises caution about the use of the term because it ‘implies that such divisions exist; in reality they do not, but they do offer a useful theoretical model for discussing artistic development’ (2010: 64). Hickman also compared the characteristics of Gardner and Housen’s models of developmental stages and related them to Lowenfeld’s (1970) overview of the stages of drawing, noting that ‘progression through the stages is
characterised by a decline in egocentrism and an increase in more reflective socialised activities’ (2010: 26). The comparison is structured, however, around what is regarded as the most detailed proposal of stage theory in aesthetic development, that Parsons provided in How We Understand Art (1987). Parsons’ work has a particular relevance for my own study, and the following section of the chapter presents some detailed reflections on his research.

_How We Understand Art_  
When Parsons began his research he contextualised it by rooting it in psychology, art, education and philosophy and, like Clayton (1974), he explicitly grounded his analytical approach in educational theories of cognitive development by Piaget (1970) and Kohlberg (1981). While Piaget investigated children’s understanding of the external world of objects and Kohlberg of the social world of norms, Parsons set out to explore ‘the inner world of the self,’ arguing that: ‘These different worlds provide us with different kinds of data and sustain different kinds of meanings. For this reason... there should be three corresponding streams of cognitive development.’ (Parsons 1987: xiii) Parsons suggests that the ‘inner world’ of the self was where aesthetic experience occurred, and that ‘a response to art is an implicit exploration of self and of human nature’ (Parsons 1987: xiii).

Parsons’ method for gathering the data that enabled him establish his own version of developmental stage theory was to ask people questions about images of eight artworks (seven paintings and an etching). He interviewed children and adults, art novices and art experts, and found that ‘people respond to paintings differently because they understand them differently. They have different expectations about what paintings in general should be like, what kinds of qualities can be found in them, and
how they can be judged; and these expectations deeply affect their response’ (Parsons 1987: 3). The simplicity of this statement, however, masks the complexity of the strategies he employed to extract responses from his subjects. His detailed analysis of the data he collected enabled him to identify ‘clusters’ of thought he characterised as ‘ordinary ideas about what is worth noticing’ (1987: 14) that were simultaneously simple and complex. They may be ideas that ‘ordinary people’ use, but they are also ideas that prompt wider philosophical reflection in the contexts of art and art education.

Parsons identified four types of responses to paintings, responses that focused on either: subject matter; expression; medium/form/style, or judgment. He devised a framework that described how people progress from one stage to the next, and integrated into it aspects of the developmental stage theories of Piaget and Kohlberg. Based on his data he proposed that each ‘idea’ is especially significant at a particular stage in the viewer’s aesthetic development:

- Viewers at Stage 1 demonstrate a minimal awareness of others’ preferences and believe that artworks are made purely in order to please the viewer
- Viewers at Stage 2 are primarily concerned with the, subject matter and realism of an artwork, and whether or not it is beautiful
- Viewers at Stage 3 are more interested in the expressive qualities of an artwork
- Viewers at Stage 4 are principally concerned with artistic decision-making in terms of the medium, form and style of the work
- Viewers at Stage 5 are more autonomous and reflective regarding their judgments of the concepts and values a work embodies.
Parsons’ discussion of the first and second stages of development are most relevant to my own research, because he highlights these as the stages at which children (a) demonstrate that they are not interested in other people’s preferences and (b) that their perceptions of beauty begin to inform their response to it. Although he highlights the role that beauty can sometimes play in each of his five ‘ideas’ (the beauty of expression, the beauty of the medium, the value of beauty as a judgment of art) he suggests that children principally perceive beauty in the subject of an artwork. He illustrates this point with references to interviews with 12-year-old children:

If you showed a woman sitting in a boat, and a lake behind her, and stuff, or a couple of deer in the mountains then that would be beautiful.’ Blair, 12 years old (Parsons 1987: 40)

Well, if a painter was going to paint something – Most painters paint beautiful women, or they really look nice in beautiful surroundings… Connie, 12 years old (Parsons 1987: 40)

Parsons conclude from these observations that children perceive that the beauty of an artwork was dependent solely upon the artist’s choice of subject matter, rather than upon the manner or style in which the work is made: the assumption being that ‘a painting will be beautiful if it is about a beautiful subject. Beauty is transferred, as it were, from the subject to the painting’ (1987: 40).

Parsons suggests that perceptions of beauty only become more complex when children become adults. To illustrate this, he quotes Rebecca, an undergraduate student, to one of the seven paintings, Ivan Albright’s Into the World Came a Soul Called Ida (Fig. 2.4).

(What about beauty here? Is this a beautiful painting?) In a sense it’s not beautiful. When people think of the definition of beautiful, they think about flowers and light and love and happiness and all those pretty things in the world; and this is not that beautiful. But, if you think about yourself, and you’re in the position of her, what she’s thinking about herself and past happiness, it could be beautiful. (Parsons 1987: 57)
Parsons had previously quoted a child’s response to the same painting: ‘It’s gross! It’s really ugly!’ and argued that this response indicated that children operating at this lower stage (Stage 2) believed ‘a painting is better if the subject is attractive’ (1987: 22). His subsequent inclusion of the quote from the undergraduate student is therefore designed to illustrate the contrast in responses, and how people’s understanding of paintings, and the place of beauty within them, develops as they progress through each stage.

Reflecting on Parsons’ conclusions, I find it difficult to believe that all children had such limited perspectives on beauty. I wondered how representative these responses were of a broader population, and I was curious as to what extent Parsons’ selection of images and his approaches to questioning influenced his participants’ responses. Other aspects of Parsons’ work have attracted criticism, and issues that scholars have raised about his methods are explored later in this section.
Developmental perspectives: Freeman

Parsons’ methodology reflects his training in psychology and art education, and Norman Freeman is another developmental theorist whose work spans both these disciplines (Freeman and Sanger, 1995; Freeman 2004; 2009; Freeman and Parsons 2001). In his 1996 article, *Art learning in developmental perspective*, Freeman discussed young children’s ideas about pictures and reflected briefly on their perceptions of beauty. He explained he was principally interested in ‘what resources children have [and] what they find easy and difficult about pictures, (1996: 125). Though his aim was broader than to simply establish what it is that children find beautiful, Freeman’s research with children resulted in some pertinent observations regarding their perceptions of the role of beauty in the process of looking at artworks.

Freeman categorised children’s responses to pictures into what he characterised as the ‘traditional concerns... about truth and fact, beauty and significance’ (1996: 126). He found that (i) children initially talk about what a picture is of or what it is about; (ii) that their observations often reference a notion of authorship, the idea that somebody is directly responsible for the decisions that have resulted in the finished artwork; (iii) that they have a notion of the role of audience in the process of looking (audiences that likes to look at beautiful things); and (iv) that artworks have certain unique and special qualities. Focusing on the third of these observations, Freeman expanded on his approach to the research:

First, we want to know whether children think that beauty is an objective property of some pictures in perhaps the same way that paint is an objective property. Secondly, if they do not think that, perhaps they think that beauty comes from whatever it is that a picture relates to in the world; perhaps to them a picture is rather like a mirror, reflecting the beauty of the world to which it is ‘pointed’. Thirdly, maybe children think that the agent, the artist, beautifies a picture somehow, regardless of what is depicted. Fourthly, maybe children think that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and only in the eye of the beholder. (Freeman 1996: 126)
In order to test these hypotheses, Freeman interviewed children drawn from different age groups and locations in England and in the Caribbean. Some of the results were very similar to those of Parsons. He found, for example, that young children had pronounced views on whether a picture of a unicorn or a princess was more likely to be beautiful than a picture of a homeless person. However, he provided new insight into the ways children’s views changed as they grew older. For example, 11-year-olds in the Caribbean were adamant that if the subject of a painting is ugly it naturally follows that the painting itself would also be ugly. 14-year-olds disagreed, claiming that the beauty of a painting is more dependent upon the ‘skills and enthusiasm’ of the artist than the appearance of the subject. According to Freeman, the older children were ‘invoking an entity, the picture producer, in the corner of the intentional net’ (1996: 129). The results were replicated across groups of children in several different locations in England yet, curiously, there was an age-related shift. By the age of 11, children in England were able to state that a picture of an ugly scene need not be an ugly picture.

With regard to the fourth and final of Freeman’s constructs – that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ – it appears that none of the younger groups of children, in any of the locations, had a sense that this might be the case. For these children the beholder is ‘just the passive person who comes along and glances at the picture’ (1996: 129) and in response to the question whether the way he or she felt before seeing the picture influenced their subsequent response to it, almost all said no. The children in the older age groups understood, however, that a viewer’s state of mind plays a role in the process of making judgments of a picture, and their responses to the question of whether the artist’s state of mind impacted upon the quality of the artwork also revealed similar age-related shifts in perception. Freeman concludes that while older children believe the quality of a picture is due entirely to the level of skill of the artist, younger children
believe an artist needs to be happy, rather than skillful, to create a picture that others would want to look at.

With one exception, Freeman’s conclusions about children’s perceptions of beauty, like those of Parsons, centred on the analysis of children’s responses to artworks provided by the researcher, rather than on. Almost as a postscript to his 1996 article, Freeman reflected on responses to an additional question asked of seven-year-olds that was not based whether or not a picture was beautiful, but on the idea of beauty, namely: ‘Could you have a picture of a snake that would make Sarah (a snake hater) like snakes?’ (1996: 130) In their responses the seven-year-olds, previously united in their beliefs, were divided. The snake question is essentially different in nature to the others he asked, in that it prompts children to reflect on their responses to previous questions and the assumptions they already revealed. By asking children this question Freeman was anticipating a moment of revelation. The question was designed to prompt what teachers often refer to as a ‘light bulb moment’: I was sure I thought this until I was asked that and now I realise I was wrong all along. Now I get it. I have seen many teachers use this strategy with young children in order to challenge them to think more logically and consistently. For half the seven-year-olds in Freeman’s survey, the light bulb went on and, whether he acknowledges it or not, his role subtly shifted from researcher to teacher. Reflection on such details enabled me to develop the design of the empirical part of my research.

Critique of Parsons and Freeman

This section of the chapter reflects on Parsons’ and Freeman’s methodology for researching children’s responses to artworks and the implications of this for my own
research. The discussion focuses on the images they used as stimuli, the participants involved and methods of data collection.

**Artworks**

As described above, Parsons provided participants with seven paintings and an etching as stimuli for discussion. While the selected works reflected a range of styles and moods they were drawn from a relatively narrow canon of white, male, 20th Century artists: two of the eight images, for example, were works by Picasso. Dixon (1989) criticised this lack of diversity, observing that Parsons ‘avoids considering any art that has not been safely digested by society and history and incorporated into the theory of art. I am deeply suspicious. How would he deal with controversial, new or unfamiliar work? (1989: 134) Hickman (2010) also expressed concern about the narrow range of works and identified a number of related issues that could have influenced the interviewee response. Firstly, the use of reproductions, while practical, means that many qualities of an artwork, such as scale or texture, are inaccessible to the viewer; secondly, the frequent conflation of the terms ‘art’ and ‘painting’ suggests a narrow conception of art; thirdly, the fact that most of the artworks were relatively well-known (Picasso’s *Guernica*, for example) raises the possibility that some interviewees provided ‘text-book’ responses based upon existing knowledge of the work and its status; finally, the artworks each had a distinctive, expressive quality. Hickman considered this last criticism to be particularly significant, ‘because it relates to Parsons’ overall view of the nature of art and therefore to his theory about ‘how we understand art. The importance attributed to expression and emotion in Parsons’ framework is likely to be due to the choice of paintings used as stimuli’ (2010: 25-26).
Curiously, Freeman neglected to describe the pictures he used, though the responses he documented suggest they were paintings. In both Parsons’ and Freeman’s research, the fact that the stimuli were paintings, and that even the youngest respondents recognised them as such, is significant. Respondents were encouraged – either implicitly or explicitly – to reflect on artists’ decisions and on the effect they have on viewers. The choice of paintings enabled both Parsons and Freeman to identify the distinctions respondents made between the *subject* of an artwork and the artwork as *object*, and subsequently to claim that older children demonstrated they were more likely to understand that an artist could, in theory, create a beautiful artwork about a subject that was not beautiful.

*Participants*

The participants in Parsons’ research represented a wide range of age groups and art experience, ‘from preschool children to art professors’ (Parsons 1987:18). It appears that he used convenience sampling and they were selected largely because of their proximity. He interviewed a total of 300 participants over a period of ten years, enough to be able to generalise about the ‘clusters’ of ideas he used to define each of his five stages of aesthetic response. In contrast, Freeman researched the opinions of a smaller number of participants from a narrower age range across contrasting locations in Britain and overseas.

*Methodology*

Reading his Parsons’ interviewees’ responses helped me to visualise carrying out similar interviews myself and his approach to conducting semi-structured interviews
influenced my own research design. I was attracted by the simplicity of a scenario in which I would share images with children, or they would share images with me, and we would talk about them. Parsons explains that there were:

[A] number of topics that we wanted to discuss, and a number of questions with which to begin that discussion. At the same time, we felt free to follow up whatever was said, as long as it seemed relevant, and we allowed the order and introduction of topics to come as naturally as possible in the course of the discussion… the best interviews were more like genuine conversations’. (Parsons 1987: 19)

Though Parsons made the process seem straightforward, I suspected it would be more complex than it appeared. For example, though a one-to-one interview sometimes resembles a ‘genuine conversation’, I was aware there is a power imbalance in terms of that could prove problematic. Issues surrounding the methodology of the study are explored in detail in Chapter 4.

Conclusion

Since the 1980s art educators have sought to establish strategies for engaging children and young people with art, and this strand of the art curriculum became well established alongside the more traditional strand of ‘investigating and making’ (DES, 1991). During this period, many of these art educators specifically advocated engagement with contemporary art in the belief that the subjects contemporary artists tackled are more ‘relevant’ to the lives of children and young people. In the course of this process, aesthetic experience was marginalised in art education as the emphasis was on engagement with meaning and issues. In the US, art educators have retained a stronger sense that aesthetic experience has a role to play in art education; however definitions of
aesthetics are broader than those employed by their counterparts in Britain. Some theorists have proposed that children’s responses to artworks develop through developmental stages, and a small number of research studies relating to children and their notions of beauty have been carried out in the field of psychology, the results of which are reported in this chapter.

When I began the review of the literature reported in this chapter I was sure that I would find that several theorists had carried out studies of children’s perceptions of beauty, and that I would need to find ways of building upon existing research, for example by investigating how new technologies were impacting upon children’s levels of engagement with images and their perception of them as beautiful. My search for evidence of previous studies that focus specifically on children’s perceptions of beauty was both extensive and fruitless, and I was both surprised and encouraged to discover that none existed. I was also intrigued to find that authors of previous studies of aesthetic experience noted children’s opinions on the beauty of artworks yet were simultaneously slightly dismissive of them.

Reflecting on the findings of the review of the literature in art education, I concluded that beauty appeared to be marginalised in both contexts. Art educators were far more interested in encouraging children and young people to engage with the challenge, meanings and messages of contemporary art rather than enabling them to experience its beauty, while theorists of aesthetic development were more concerned with how children gradually developed their understanding of the expressive power of art, rather than its potential as a source of aesthetic pleasure. I reflected on how difficult it would be to explain this to someone not involved with the theory and practice of art and education. Beech’s (2009) introduction to his anthology of recent writing on beauty summarised my thoughts:
Beauty and art were once thought of as belonging together, with beauty as among art’s principal aims and art as beauty’s highest calling. However, neither beauty nor art have come through avant-gardist rebellion and modern social disruption unscathed. Their special relationship has, as a result, become estranged and tense.’ (Beech 2009: 12).

The following chapter of the thesis begins by reflecting on periods in the past in which beauty and art still belonged together. It explores a different strand of literature, the history of beauty, before examining central theoretical and philosophical perspectives on beauty that closely informed my approach to the empirical research.
Chapter 3: Philosophical thinking about beauty

Introduction

Until the mid-18th Century, the notion that the beauty of an artwork, object, landscape or human being could be contested was not widely accepted. It was believed that there were specific qualities inherent in each that constituted the components of beauty, easily identified, quickly recognized and universally agreed. Around 250 years ago, however, philosophers began to question the assumption that beauty can be defined so objectively. In the wake of works by Francis Hutcheson, Edmund Burke and others, key texts by David Hume and Immanuel Kant highlighted the role of subjectivity in the process of aesthetic engagement in ways that would proved hugely influential on subsequent theories of art and aesthetics.

The approach I adopted for the empirical part of this research was based on the assumption that aspects of the theories of aesthetic experience conceived by Hume and Kant could be applied to researching children’s perceptions of beauty. While Hume and Kant were concerned with the responses of the adult mind, their theories prompted me to investigate their relevance to children’s experiences of beauty. In pursuing this line of enquiry I was working within a context in which both Hume and Kant continue to exert a strong influence on current research in philosophical aesthetics, and a substantial proportion of recent research in philosophy by authors such as Guyer (2005) Savile (2006) and Allison (2011) continues to shape contemporary understanding of Hume and Kant’s theories of aesthetic experience.

This chapter explores these theories, partly with reference to the primary sources, specifically Hume’s essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ (1757) and Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790), and partly to secondary sources in the form
of a range of recent literature by authors in the fields of philosophy and art history. It reflects in depth on aspects of the theories that became relevant to my empirical research. In reviewing this literature I aimed to provide answers to the following questions: What was the nature of philosophical aesthetics prior to the mid-18\textsuperscript{th} Century? What was distinctive about the theories about beauty developed by Kant and Hume? How might I incorporate these theories into the design of my empirical research? The chapter begins with an overview of the concepts of beauty that pre-dated Hume and Kant’s work.

3.1 Early concepts of beauty

The section of the chapter provides a brief overview of concepts of beauty that existed prior to the mid-18\textsuperscript{th} Century. There are two reasons why this was relevant to the empirical research. Firstly, the significance of the Hume and Kant’s theories of aesthetic experience cannot fully be appreciated without consideration of the ideas of philosophers that preceded them. Secondly, I anticipated that images children chose to represent their perceptions of beauty and the ways in which they articulated their experiences of beauty might connect in some way with philosophers’ theories that pre-date those of Hume and Kant. The section begins with a summary of ancient ideas about beauty, before exploring those prevalent in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It concludes with some reflections on aesthetic theories from the early part of the 18\textsuperscript{th} Century.
3.1.1 Ancient notions of beauty

The earliest recorded reflections on beauty date from the sixth century BC, when Pythagorus proposed that its essence lay in mathematics. Working within the tradition of pre-Socratic philosophers that aspired to identify the essential laws that governed all aspects of life on earth, Pythagorus’ assertion originated in his observation of the proportional relationships between mathematics and musical harmonies: in a simple experiment, for example, he noticed that a note created by plucking one stretched piece of string harmonised with that created by another precisely half its length. His explorations of such phenomena led him to theorise that such patterns existed throughout nature and beyond into the cosmos: beauty was, he believed, ‘the key to the order of the universe’ (Armstrong 2004: 27). The notion that mathematical proportions were a central element of the experience of beauty was influential throughout antiquity, the Middle Ages and into the 19th Century, and even today continues to inform certain principles of contemporary design (Figs 3.1 – 3.3).
While Pythagorus’ notion of beauty was located in mathematics, the argument Plato proposed a century later was rooted firmly in metaphysics. Plato believed that the aim of philosophy was to discover the order of the Universe, and the role of beauty in this process was to inspire in humans a desire for the ideals of truth and goodness. In his *Symposium* Plato (speaking through the character of Socrates) distinguishes between *kalos* – the beauty perceived in people, places or objects in the physical world – and *The Beautiful*, ‘the eternal, unchanging and divine Form of Beauty, accessible not to the senses, but only to the intellect’ (*Symposium* 211d, in Janaway 2001: 8). Earthbound beauty, Plato argued, is relative: sometimes someone looks beautiful, sometimes they don’t. The Beautiful, however, ‘always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes’ (2001: 8). The appreciation of beauty on Earth was for Plato nothing more than the beginning of a journey towards a greater *understanding* of beauty, one that was entirely distanced from desire. Initially, he believed, humans were drawn to the beauty of another person; then to the soul of that person as the epitome of objective beauty; then finally to the wisdom of understanding beauty itself. He argued that people should aspire to lead ‘a life governed by the love of all the beauty in the world’ (Nehemas 2007: 2).
Plato’s pupil Aristotle proposed a contrasting view of beauty and art. Where Plato’s ideas were otherworldly, Aristotle’s were earthbound; while Plato denigrated the arts, Aristotle believed that they could provide unique insights into the human condition (Dutton 2009). There was, he argued, an inevitable tension between the cultural traditions developed in societies (nomos) and the instincts that drove human behaviour in the natural world (phusis), and this tension was one that offered a rich source of drama that could be represented through stories or images. Furthermore, he perceived that humans had an instinctive interest in looking at representations of certain things that in real life they might prefer to avoid. Aristotle emphasised the difference, for example, between the unpleasant experience of looking at a snake or a spider and the pleasurable experience of looking at a representation of the same thing. He argued art was concerned with creating beauty through the imitation of life (mimesis) and it was instinctive for humans to make it and to enjoy looking at it. Dutton (2009) highlights the link between Aristotle’s ideas and the creative and experiential strands of childhood activities such as playing with doll’s houses or a toy train: ‘Human beings are born image-makers and image-enjoyers… There is a bedrock delight in the tiny represented world just by itself’ (2009: 33).

For Aristotle, beauty was an essential element of the way things functioned in the world. In terms of the visual properties of beauty, he was concerned, like Pythagoras, with order, symmetry and harmony. But whereas Pythagoras’ theories emerged from an overarching belief that mathematical principles governed the universe, Aristotle’s concerns arose out of an awareness of the experience of the perceiver of beauty. As such, his theories hold particular relevance to the emphasis placed upon the psychological and biological strands of contemporary experience. Aristotle’s ideas about the perceiver are more easily explained within the context of drama. A human
being, he reasoned, is only capable of processing a certain amount of information at any given time; the plot of a play should, therefore, have an identifiable beginning, middle and end. It would also be likely to feature a character that experiences a recognition or revelation of some kind as the result of a dramatic development, and it should be long enough to tell the whole story, but not be so lengthy as to leave its audience dazed and confused. Similarly, he reasoned, ‘a beautiful object, whether an animal or anything else with a structure of parts, should have not only its parts ordered but also an appropriate magnitude: beauty exists in magnitude and order’ (*Poetics VII*). In other words, for Aristotle, something that was too huge or too tiny for the naked eye to see – and all eyes were, at this time, naked – could not be described as beautiful. However this should not be taken as an indication that he aimed to restrict the viewer’s perspective; rather he was, as Dutton argues, concerned with ‘the nature of the minds that understand and enjoy (works of art)... the psychological conditions that make possible an intelligible grasp of any aesthetic object’ (2009: 35). As such, Aristotle’s concerns pre-figure those of philosophers who lived many centuries later.

3.1.2 Beauty in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

During the middle ages philosophical reflection grew scarce, and beauty was one of many themes that became subsumed within wider debates on theological issues, the origins of which lay partly in continuing tensions between differing perceptions of the transcendent and earthly realms that Plato had identified 750 years earlier. In the 5th Century St Augustine had analysed the pleasures of the experience of beauty through the arts in his text *On the Beautiful and the Fitting*. Following his conversion to Christianity, however, he began to associate a devotion to beauty with an inclination
towards sinfulness: he withdrew from the experiences of sensuous beauty art and poetry offered, believing that such earthly pleasures distracted him from the ‘true’ beauty that could be found through only devotion to God (Tanke and McQuillan 2012). In an attempt to reconcile his belief in a transcendental, metaphysical realm with Christian perspectives, Augustine adapted Plato’s concept of the journey towards a greater understanding of beauty and proposed that human beings scaled a metaphorical ladder beyond sensual perceptions towards the ultimate beauty, the revelation of God. Simultaneously, he revived classical preoccupations with symmetry, harmony and proportion – only with God imagined as the ultimate architect of the natural world. Beauty, Augustine claimed, was to be found in the ‘design’ of those natural things that displayed a sense of order and unity. In foregrounding formal aesthetic elements such as mathematical proportion, Augustine sought to establish the role of God as the creator of beauty - while marginalising the role of pleasure in the viewer’s experience of beauty.

By the 11th Century, the classical cultures that had shaped Augustine’s concepts of beauty had all but disappeared. The growing perception of Ancient Greece as a pagan culture led to the near-disappearance of Plato and Aristotle’s writings, until their works began to be translated into Latin in the 13th Century. Inspired by these texts, Thomas Aquinas came to believe that beauty, alongside truth and goodness, was one of the ‘transcendentals,’ those concepts that mattered above all others. While Aquinas, like Augustine, acknowledged that the ‘due proportion’ of beautiful things was important, he also addressed the aspect of aesthetic experience that Augustine had chosen to ignore, that of the experience of the perceiver of beauty. In his Summa Theologica, Aquinas stated that ‘The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since good is what all seek, the notion of good is that which calms
the desire, by being seen or known’ (Aquinas 2012: 82). Aquinas believed that beauty offered the perceiver an opportunity to enter a peaceful, harmonious state, one arrived at not through a purely sensual experience but through the viewer’s cognitive awareness of what they perceived. By emphasising the role of the intellect, rather than the senses, Aquinas sought to make the experience of beauty acceptable to Christian theology.

The advent of the Renaissance marked the point at which the nature of the influence of Christianity upon perceptions of beauty began to shift. In the 15th Century, two distinct conceptions of beauty emerged that, as Eco (2004) suggests, are today likely to be regarded as quite contradictory in nature. In the first, artists were increasingly concerned with representing the natural world as accurately as possible by employing new techniques, such as the use of perspective, that enabled painters to make increasingly precise representations of landscapes, objects and the human form. In his Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects, Vasari linked the Renaissance artists’ technical mastery and reverence for beauty with a revival of Plato’s concerns with the perfect Forms: he claimed the existence of art could be explained by an innate human desire to attain perfection through making imitations of the natural world. The second conception of the nature of beauty at this time was of a suprasensible beauty, one that existed in a realm that was imperceptible to the senses and that could not be experienced in the physical world. Paintings from this period such as Leonardo’s Virgin on the Rocks (Fig 3.4), with its location of a Biblical theme within a real landscape, illustrate the Renaissance aspiration to combine these two conceptions of beauty: the artist was both ‘a creator of new things and an imitator of nature’ (Eco 2004: 178).
Further evidence of the development of perceptions of beauty during the Renaissance can be found in the literature of the time. The beauty of nature was a source of inspiration for poets such as Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser and John Donne and there was a widespread perception of the impermanence and fragility of beauty, an understanding of the inevitability with which natural beauty decays. Shakespeare made numerous references to beauty, often alluding to the complex relationship between visual beauty and spiritual or moral beauty, while the notion that physical attraction arose from spiritual compatibility – that ‘beauty is in part a creation of love’ (Nehemas 2007:64) – is one that continues to be explored in contemporary drama and literature.

3.1.3 The beginnings of modern aesthetics

During the 17th and the early part of the 18th Centuries, a number of writers continued to shape perceptions of the experience of beauty. While French philosophers such as Boileau, DuBos and Batteux determined rules by which poetry, drama and painting
could be considered beautiful, in Britain essayists such as the Earl of Shaftesbury and Joseph Addison produced texts that reflected on similar themes. In 1764 Johann Joachim Wincklemann published his History of Ancient Art, in which he proposed that beauty was not, as had been widely perceived, an innate quality within an artwork, but instead was something that could only be appreciated through prolonged and personal engagement with the work (Prettejohn 2005). This period is widely regarded as representing the beginning of modern aesthetics and, though he did not claim to have invented the subject, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten used the term as the title for his thesis of 1735, defining it as ‘a science of how things are to be known by means of the senses’ (Guyer 2005: 3). It is widely speculated that Shaftesbury and Addison influenced Hume to some degree and Kant would almost certainly have been aware of Baumgarten’s work.

Kant may also have influenced by texts by Francis Hutcheson and Edmund Burke. In 1725, Hutcheson published An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue, and in doing so ‘made natural beauty central to the subject of aesthetics’ (Scruton 2009: 59). Rather than identify a set of rules that determined whether something might or might not be considered beautiful, Hutcheson declared that there existed a shared human instinct for engaging with beauty, one that he termed an ‘internal sense’. He argued that some people, despite being able to make judgments about beauty that are informed by their education and experience, lacked this internal sense and were therefore unable to appreciate the value of beauty:

> It is plain from Experience, that many Men have, in the common meaning, the Senses of Seeing and Hearing perfect enough… And yet perhaps they shall relish no pleasure in Musical Composition, in Painting, in Architecture, natural landscape; or but a very weak one in comparison of what others enjoy from the same Objects. (Hutcheson 2012: 125)

Those who are able to gain aesthetic pleasure from such experiences possessed, Hutcheson explained, ‘a fine Genius or Taste’ (2012: 125), a notion that anticipated
Hume’s ideas that were to follow within a few years. But unlike Hume, Hutcheson believed that there was a further value in the experience of beauty, in the form of a spiritual dimension. Through the ‘Perception of Harmony and Beauty’ the viewer was able to appreciate more fully the role of God in creating the earth: this was the ultimate purpose of the internal sense of beauty.

The emphasis Hutcheson placed upon the value of an internal sense of beauty was soon to be challenged. In 1756, Edmund Burke published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, in which he catalogued a broad range of aesthetic experiences, from ‘pain and pleasure’ and ‘light and sound’ to ‘the cries of animals’ and ‘why smoothness is beautiful’. Some of Burke’s classifications anticipate those Kant made later in the century, particularly in terms of the distinction between finding aesthetic satisfaction in the beautiful and the contrasting notion of the sublime. Burke conceptualised the sublime as ‘a way of thinking about excess as the key to a new kind of subjectivity… (while) beauty was something more reassuringly tempered’ (Phillips 2008: ix). Burke’s theory anticipates a modern understanding of psychological impulses in the sense that his conception of the Sublime and its relationship to beauty was rooted in ideas of how the human mind and body respond to experiences of pleasure and pain. Essentially, whereas the experience of looking at a beautiful image is *directly* pleasurable, the pleasure derived from looking at an image of the sublime is dependent upon the viewer’s understanding that they are potentially at the mercy of the hostile environment depicted. This understanding informs a different kind of response from the viewer, one centred on their awareness of an absence of the pain that might be endured were they subjected to the elements of the landscape. Caspar David Friedrich’s images of landscapes are frequently used in the literature on the Sublime to illustrate this concept, and for good reason: they encapsulate
perfectly the notion of human frailty in the face of the power of Nature (Fig. 3.5). We may enjoy looking at such images, but our experience of enjoyment is closely linked to the feeling that we are happy to remain at a safe distance from the landscapes they represent.

![Image of Caspar David Friedrich: The Sea of Ice (c.1824) Kunsthalle, Hamburg]

**Fig 3.5 Caspar David Friedrich: The Sea of Ice (c.1824) Kunsthalle, Hamburg**

### 3.2 Hume’s Standard of Taste

During the mid-18\(^{th}\) Century aesthetics became a key theme for Enlightenment philosophers. There was an increasingly widespread belief during this period that for every phenomenon there exists a rational, rather than spiritual explanation, a belief that resulted in a widespread and sustained effort to categorise knowledge. Ideas surrounding the subjective nature of aesthetic experience became increasingly influential, none more so than those contained in David Hume’s 1757 essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’. This section of the chapter examines Hume’s aims for the essay, his arguments regarding both the nature of the perception of beauty and the principles of
taste, and Hume’s proposal regarding the role of the ‘critics’ in making informed judgments about beauty.

3.2.1 Seeking a ‘Standard of Taste’

Though there is no textual evidence that Hume was aware of the contributions Hutcheson and others made to debates on aesthetic experience, it is possible that their ideas influenced the development of the ideas explored in ‘Of the Standard of Taste’. Whereas Hutcheson had emphasised the spiritual dimension of an internal sense of beauty, however, Hume argued that experiences of beauty were secular and rational in nature. Within the context of the Enlightenment, this aim of rationalising and categorising a broad range of human experiences was welcomed as a natural and sensible line of enquiry to pursue. Consequently, and although he acknowledged that he was unlikely to succeed with this task, Hume adopted a logical and systematic approach towards his task of understanding judgments of taste. The four key parts to ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ are summarised here.

Hume begins by identifying what he perceives to be the central problem. This is that ‘the sentiments of men often differ with regard to beauty and deformity of all kinds, even while their general discourse is the same’ (Hume 2012: 186). The ways in which language is used, Hume suggests, can lead people to appear to agree when in fact they do not: when what seem to be shared experiences are reflected upon in more depth, it is often found that there are variations in these experiences. Hume aspires to apply a scientific approach to this problem, as he notes that misunderstandings in a scientific context are often resolved through ‘an explanation of the terms (that) commonly ends the controversy’ (2012: 187). This leads Hume to declare that it is, therefore, ‘natural
for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled’ (2012: 187).

The problem with judgments of taste, Hume argues, is one of differences between ‘sentiment’ and ‘understanding’. A sentiment, he suggests, ‘has a reference to nothing beyond itself’ whereas ‘all determinations of the understanding… have a reference to something beyond themselves’ (2012: 187). In other words, if an artwork, place or person is described as beautiful then this judgment refers to a concept of beauty that exists beyond the subject. Hume argues that those people who possess good taste are able to identify this quality of beauty in much the same way that they can to identify the indisputable qualities of a text by Homer – one that was unquestionably regarded as being of great value. However, if a judgment of beauty is conceptualised as a ‘sentiment’ – a personal, emotive response – then it refers to nothing beyond the subject itself. In this context, if someone experiences pleasure looking at something, then it is described as beautiful – and if they do not, then it is not. These two contrasting conceptions of beauty should have logically led Hume to conclude that it is impossible to identify a standard of taste, ‘for assuming that we are capable of detecting the presence or absence of pleasure in our own minds, all judgments of beauty will be true, and all tastes therefore equally sound’ (Shelley 2001: 44). This is the tension that drives his essay: on the one hand, there is widespread agreement about the beauty of old master paintings, while on the other there is widespread ‘variety and caprice’ of taste (Hume 2012: 190).

Hume follows these observations with a suggestion that ‘Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty’ (2012: 188). A common contemporary response to questions of aesthetic preference is to paraphrase the lines – ‘beauty is in the eye of the
beholder’ – the implication being that all contributions to the discussion are entirely subjective: this is what you find beautiful, this is what I find beautiful. Yet the widespread appropriation of this idea oversimplifies its meaning in the context of the text. Hume proceeds to suggest initially that ‘there are certain qualities in objects which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings’ (2012: 191) and subsequently that ‘few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty’ (2012: 194). Therefore, far from beauty being in the eye of the beholder, it appears not only that certain images or objects possess specific qualities that instinctively appeal to the viewer regardless of their personal preference but also that certain viewers, or critics, are more qualified than others to make judgments about beauty.

3.2.2 The role of the Critics

The next stage of Hume’s essay centres on this notion of the critics. Hume believes that it is rare to find critics who are suitably equipped and well positioned to make judgments about taste, and he identifies five required specific attributes he believed they must possess; namely ‘strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice’ (2012: 188). By ‘strong sense’, he was referring to the ability of the critic to perceive the qualities of the individual elements of a work, while ‘delicate sentiment’ describes the critic’s ability to understand and appreciate these qualities. Only through practice can these qualities be acquired and refined, and this process should include making comparisons of different qualities within an artwork and with other works. Hume developed the idea that the critic should be free from all prejudices with reference to works originating from cultures other than their own. Critics should look at such objects on their own terms, he
argues, they should be unbiased, objective and capable of placing themselves in the same situation as the audience. Only an agreement reached by critics in possession of these qualities, Hume claimed, can be regarded as a true standard of taste, one that transcends particular matters of character or culture.

In terms of character and culture, Hume suggested that there are ‘two sources of variation’ (2012: 195) in his scheme, circumstances in which critics might not be unanimous in their opinions. Firstly, there are ‘the different humours of particular men’, and secondly ‘the particular manners and opinions of our age and country’ (2012: 195). In other words, although there are general principles of taste that should be agreed, psychological variations in people’s characters exist that cannot be explained by their experience. With regard to ‘our age and country’, Hume refers initially to chronological age – ‘a young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years’ (2012: 195) – and subsequently to a historical age: ‘we are more pleased… with pictures and characters, that resemble objects which are found in our own age or country than with those that describe a different set of customs’ (2012: 196). This prompts Hume to reflect on a further element of aesthetic experience, that of responses to art and artefacts that originate from an age other than our own. He argues that we tend to like that which is familiar to us – but should understand that, over a period of time, manners, opinions and tastes may change: ‘a certain degree of diversity in judgment is unavoidable, and we seek in vain for a standard by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments’ (2012: 195).
3.2.3 Reflections on ‘Of the Standard of Taste’

The tone of Hume’s writing in ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ might lead the reader to expect guidance on what regulates aesthetic experience. Although it is tempting to extract certain phrases or passages in the hope that they will provide a concise summary of Hume’s aims, the text is stubbornly resists generalisations. This partly accounts for the extensive number of direct quotations used in this chapter: the task of paraphrasing the ideas in Hume’s treatise is one fraught with etymological danger. And while there has been a great deal of contemporary reflection on ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ there is a tendency for some writers to cloud Hume’s ideas as often as they clarify them. My conclusion is that the relationship any reader has with a text of this nature is one that is ongoing and that there is merit in resisting any definitive interpretation of its content. My reading of Hume will, inevitably, continue to change over time.

Despite the difficulties of the text, I realised that some of Hume’s ideas are clearly relevant to notions of contemporary aesthetic experience and for my own research. While some passages, couched in antiquated terms, may seem slightly opaque to the reader unfamiliar with the text, there are others have a striking clarity and familiarity. Although the specific examples Hume used to illustrate his text may lack relevance today, the theme of the role of objectivity and subjectivity remains central to contemporary debates about aesthetic experience (e.g. Shelley 2013). Indeed, I found that there are some aspects of the text that were almost prescient in nature. For example Hume’s comment suggestion that one whose taste deviates from the ‘true standard’ risks losing authority is particularly interesting when considered in the context of the role of market forces in contemporary art. Similarly, the question of ‘must we throw aside the pictures of our ancestors, because of their ruffs and farthingales?’ (2012: 197)
is one that we might ask today, when auction prices for contemporary art almost invariably outstrip those attained by Old Masters.

### 3.3 Kant and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*

This section of the chapter provides a description and analysis of the theories of aesthetic experience in Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). The section begins with some brief background to the third *Critique*, before examining the four ‘conditions’ upon which Kant proposed that judgments about beauty should be made, and concludes with reflections on his conception of the sublime.

#### 3.3.1 The third Critique

While it is debatable whether or not Hume succeeded in his attempt to establish a ‘standard of taste’, his text was one of several that influenced Kant’s work in the latter part of the 18th Century. Although he had documented his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* in 1764, it was not until the late 1780s that he began to consider aesthetics as a serious theme for reflection (Crawford 2001). By this time, Kant had already completed two *critiques*. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), he had sought to establish conditions for making empirical judgments, while in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1787), he had identified conditions for making moral judgments. Having investigated empirical and moral judgments, Kant turned his attention to judgments about beauty, which resulted in the complex theoretical framework of ideas about aesthetic experience that form the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. 
In this third *Critique*, Kant aimed to interrogate the experience of beauty, to understand judgments about beauty and to explain how these differ from other types of judgments. He asserted that solutions to questions about the experience of beauty cannot be found *within* beautiful objects themselves. Rather, they are to be discovered through close analysis of the experience of the individual and the judgments they make based upon these experiences. However, Kant identified a distinction between judgments that are purely personal (this is pleasant or agreeable *to me*) and interpersonal (I believe that *everyone* should find this beautiful). Whereas Hume had argued there are ‘certain qualities in objects… fitted by nature’ to prompt people to regard them as beautiful, Kant proposed that judgments of taste are entirely subjective and that the experience of beauty arises from ‘harmonious free play’ between imagination and understanding that takes place in the mind of the viewer. As Savile points out, Kant aimed to provide his reader with ‘a clear distinction between the purely personal judgment that something is aesthetically pleasant, or agreeable, and the interpersonally secure judgment that it is beautiful’ (2006: 442).

In order to emphasise the distinction between objective and subjective experiences of beauty, Kant isolated aspects of aesthetic response into what he called ‘moments’, or conditions. There are, he proposed, four such conditions that must be met if something is to be described as beautiful, namely: disinterest, universality, purposiveness and necessity. The explanations Kant provides for each of the four conditions are occasionally illustrated in the third *Critique* with reference to everyday life experiences, or ‘elucidation by means of examples’ (§14). In order to examine the meanings and implications of Kant’s four conditions, I have adopted this strategy for organising the following section of the chapter, in which abstract concepts are illustrated with concrete examples in the form of images shared by student teachers during teaching sessions.
3.3.2 Kant’s conditions for beauty

Disinterest

The first condition upon which Kant proposed that judgments about beauty should be made is disinterest. As is often the case with the language used by authors of this period, the meanings and implications of the word in Kant’s writing differ from those used today. Whereas today the word indicates a lack of bias or self-interest, Kant’s conception of the disinterested viewer was one with no form of personal investment in the object, person or place depicted. Something could only be called beautiful, he proposed, if it instilled in the viewer a satisfaction unrelated to any personal interest they may have:

The satisfaction that we combine with the representation of the existence of an object is called interest… if the question is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it in mere contemplation. (§2)

Kant suggests here that viewers should resist any urge to know whether they might benefit from the existence of that which is represented. Rather, they should be solely concerned with their experience of the object itself. It is relatively easy to appreciate this notion of disinterestedness by reflecting on an example from everyday life and contemporary culture. I have included the image below as it is helpful to reflect on my response to it in terms of the Kantian notion of disinterest.
There are several reasons why I think the Aston Martin DB6 is beautiful. I think its formal qualities are beautiful: it has a fine balance of straight and curved lines, while the complex pattern of spokes in its wheels contrasts beautifully with the simplicity of the shape of its body. I think its colour is beautiful: this one, like most of the others I’ve seen, is a steely grey. The seats are often red, though, and I also happen to think the hard, grey metal and soft, red leather form a pleasing contrast and a beautiful combination. Other reasons why I admire the Aston Martin DB6 might, I think, intrigue Kant. For example, I know that the Aston Martin DB6 is not only an expensive car to buy, it also one widely regarded as a cultural icon and a design classic. Even as a young child, I would have been aware of this, as I initially became familiar with the car through my enthusiasm for James Bond films in the early 1970s. I had a little model Aston Martin DB6, complete with a little James Bond driver that I loved. Although my enthusiasm for James Bond films has slightly diminished, my admiration of the Aston Martin DB6 remains, and Kant would argue that within this admiration lies a residue of
affectation. My feelings of affection might be directed towards the notion of the action hero that I may once have aspired to become; or towards myself as a child, whose horizons, simultaneously naively narrow and yet also impossibly broad, were neatly encapsulated in my admiration of the little toy car. Nonetheless, Kant would remind me that ‘the existence of the thing’ (§2) still matters to me, and that today, if I see an Aston Martin DB6 and declare it to be beautiful, my response is not objective and disinterested, but is instead inevitably interwoven with the subjective autobiographical narrative of my childhood experiences.

Universality

Kant’s second condition for making judgments about beauty is that ‘the beautiful is that which pleases universally without concept’ (§9). His notion of ‘concept’ refers here to our a priori understanding of a particular object. If we judge a rose to be beautiful, it should not be because we are aware of its attendant qualities, for example that it smells nice, or that it is pleasant to touch or that it grows at time of year or in a particular place for which we have some affection. Kant argued that such judgments are problematic because they depend upon the viewer ‘bringing the object under a concept’. Agreement on the aesthetic qualities of an image or object is neither a matter of personal taste nor dependent upon our understanding of its essential nature: a rose cannot be called beautiful simply because it is a rose.
By way of example, a botanist encountering an image of a rose would be inclined to employ their knowledge, understanding and experience of plants to identify the particular kind of rose illustrated in the photograph (Fig. 3.7). As their initial response to the image is likely to be influenced by the specialist knowledge they bring to the experience, they are likely to make empirical judgments about it. Kant would say that their judgments are driven by their concept of the rose. Alternatively, a visitor to a garden centre intent on purchasing a colourful addition to their borders would view the rose quite differently. Their decision as to whether or not to buy it would be influenced by its qualities of colour, shape and smell that could only be assessed through dwelling upon their own experience of the rose. Their appreciation of these qualities is unrelated to an awareness of which particular type of rose they are looking at. Whereas the botanist makes an empirical judgment, the garden lover makes an aesthetic judgment.

In order to explore the condition of universality a little further we could compare the two images below. Both images were shared by student teachers during one particular teaching session, following my request that each student should bring to the lecture an image of their idea of beauty.
These two images could be described in a way that makes them sound similar. They both depict a mother and daughter, while the palette of colours is largely restricted to oranges, greys and browns. Yet the photographs are very different. Hira’s image features herself as a baby, held by her mother on a summer’s day. Mother and daughter each look left, smiling at someone other than the photographer, while a Volkswagen Beetle suggests their recent arrival or imminent departure. Hira described to the class how she had chosen the image to evoke the time in which it was taken, to represent the
nature of the relationships within her family and to celebrate the sense of continuity that the photograph, now displayed in her family home, represented to her. She explained that these factors combined to make the image beautiful – though she did not expect others to agree (a comment I will return to when I consider the last of Kant’s four conditions).

When it came to Lottie’s turn to describe her image she promptly burst into tears. This response might have suggested that her reasons for selecting the image, like those articulated by Hira, were very personal, and it should logically have followed, therefore, that the universal appeal of her image would be limited. However, the photograph was quickly recognised by many other students as having qualities that distinguished it from the other images and, while it may not have conformed to their preconceived ideas about beauty, they instantly agreed that it was beautiful. Lottie’s tearful pause prompted several of them to offer reasons why they thought it was beautiful and, while she did not seem to expect agreement from her peers, she was not unduly surprised by their responses. Many of us, she reasoned, are able to recall the sensation of the warmth of a parental bed we enjoyed as children. Although, no-one else in the room could be moved by this image in quite the way that she was, the majority were able to appreciate that the image prompted an emotional reaction from one intimately connected with it.

According to Kant, however, the reason for the universality of the response is not dependent upon people’s ability to identify with such an experience; otherwise, they would have responded in a similar way to Hira’s photograph, which essentially depicts a similar experience. Lottie’s photograph brought into play an additional layer of aesthetic experience that involves not only ‘the taste of the senses’ but also ‘the taste of reflection’. This capacity for reflection involves not only understanding but also
imagination – concepts that are central to purposiveness, Kant’s third condition for the beautiful.

_Purposiveness_

So far, it might be assumed that the process of applying Kant’s conditions for judging something to be beautiful is one designed to restrict, rather than enrich, our experiences of beauty and that if we were to maintain such a rigorous stance towards our aesthetic experience we would find that fewer things are beautiful than we once thought. Kant addressed this concern in the third _Critique_ through his introduction of the condition of ‘purposiveness’.

Contemporary interpretations of purposiveness tend to be connected with a use, a purpose or a determination. However, Kant’s notion of purposiveness relates to his central idea of the interplay in the mind between imagination and understanding (§17). As Savile summarises, Kant’s idea has a striking clarity: ‘A beautiful object is one which in virtue of its particular form lends itself to engaging the two active cognitive faculties of the mind – imagination and understanding – in such a way as to cooperate in a notably harmonious and satisfying fashion’ (2006: 445). The role played by understanding in experiencing beauty is to make sense of the visual material presented to the mind by referring to previous, related experiences – while the role played by imagination is to make connections with features of the image that are absent but implied. The ‘harmonious interplay’ between imagination and understanding is a central feature of the Kantian notion of aesthetic experience. The question of whether the image accurately represents an aspect of real life becomes irrelevant compared with the viewer’s experience of it: whether the beautiful object represented actually _exists_ or not is immaterial to their perception of its beauty.
It would be useful to return to the family photographs with these ideas in mind and reflect on how an understanding of what the viewer can see could inform their imagination. Hira’s image probably represents a mother and child beginning or ending a journey, which could evoke in the viewer thoughts and emotions associated with themes of love, time, distance and separation. But this chain of mental associations soon stops, as the viewer becomes easily distracted by aspects of the image that detract from the quality of the aesthetic experience. The vertical white line to the left of the image, for example, or the sense that the car door is given equal prominence in the composition as the mother and child, interrupt engagement with the photograph. The beauty of the photograph is entirely dependent upon the viewer’s perception and understanding of the loving relationship between the mother and child; there is little in the image to sustain their attention on a purely aesthetic level. Once the image has been read and its story told, there is little incentive to dwell any longer: the interplay between experience and imagination comes to an end.

Before turning to Lottie’s photograph, it is useful to pause to reflect on the term ‘aesthetic’, one used frequently throughout this chapter and in the title of the first section of Kant’s Critique (Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment). Kant’s use of the word is likely to have been influenced by that of Baumgarten, who appropriated it from the Greek to denote ‘things perceived by the senses’ (rather than the mind) a definition that roughly equates with ‘feeling’ (hence its antonym, anaesthetic). Kant’s notion of aesthetic, therefore, relates to his assertion that judgments concerning taste are ‘entirely subjective and quite uninformative about the object’ (Savile 2006: 442). A definition of aesthetics that highlights the role of psychological experience has a particular resonance when engaging with images such as Lottie’s photograph. While it is possible to identify an initial set of specific visual features that make the photograph
‘beautiful’, such as the representation of a relationship between a mother and child, there is also a second set of features that make a crucial contribution towards the viewer’s perception of the image, but which more difficult to articulate. These features are inextricably linked with the experiences viewers themselves bring to this photograph and emerge from what Kant called the ‘harmonious interplay between imagination and understanding’.

The viewer’s initial level of engagement with Lottie’s photograph involves ‘reading’ information about the scene: two people are in bed, a woman and a small child. The context in which it was presented enabled the audience of students to quickly deduce that the child in the photograph was Lottie and the woman was almost certainly her mother. So far, this description could also be applied to Hira’s image. But as soon as the description moves beyond these initial elements, Lottie’s photograph begins to assume qualities that distinguish it from Hira’s image. The aesthetic qualities that initially attracted the viewer’s attention begin to sustain a deeper level of engagement as the imagination becomes engaged by details that conceal as much as they reveal.

Much of the image is shrouded in darkness while the two faces are illuminated by a lamplight. Some of the objects surrounding the faces – a lamp, a bowl, the corner of a table – are easily identifiable, while others – semi-circles of light, a dark rectangle in the corner – are less distinct. Closer inspection prompts further reflection, and each detail of the photograph adds another layer of recognition. The fine texture of the cotton sheet contrasts with that of the heavy woolen blanket covering the child and the soft, embroidered fragment she holds to her face. The dark space to the left of the picture contrasts with a collection of abstract shapes to the right, each of which generates or reflects light. The eyes of the woman and child gaze directly at the camera,
at the person holding the camera, and our understanding leads our imagination to identify this person as the missing part of the picture, the father. While these details of the image are all present from the moment the viewer encounters it, they do not immediately resonate until the ‘free play’ of the imagination is engaged.

_Necessity_

The final condition for beauty Kant identified in the third _Critique_ is that of necessity. His concept of necessity is encapsulated in the idea that when an assertion is made that something is beautiful there is an expectation others should agree: ‘In all judgments by which we declare something to be beautiful, we allow no one to be of a different opinion, without, however, grounding our judgment on concepts…’ (§22). The caveat – this image is beautiful _to me_ – Hira included in her statement about the photograph of her mother was one frequently heard when the student teachers presented their images to rest of the group. Perhaps partly because they lacked confidence in the selection of their images, many of them presented their contributions modestly, with an expectation that others were unlikely to agree with their choice. Kant would challenge their choices, would argue that, although the experience of beauty is subjective, judgments about beauty should ‘nevertheless [be] assumed to be subjectively universal (an idea necessary for everyone)’ (§22). One cannot state, therefore, that something is beautiful ‘to me’: the ‘necessity’ of the pleasure we experience from looking at something beautiful ‘is necessary in an exemplary way, one that we demand, or exact, of others’ (Savile 2006: 441). Contained within the assertion that something is beautiful, therefore, is the assumption that others will agree.
3.3.3 The Sublime

As well as describing the conditions that characterise experiences of beauty, the exploration of a further element of aesthetic response forms a significant part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Kant’s conception of the sublime is likely to have been influenced to some extent by texts by Hutcheson (1725) and Burke (1756) and although the *Analytic of the Sublime* begins with an observation on how judgments about the beautiful and the sublime are similar in some respects – they both ‘please for themselves’, for example, and require ‘a judgment of reflection’ rather than one of logic – Kant quickly moves on to emphasise the distinctions between the two concepts:

The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it… and yet it is also thought as a totality… Thus the satisfaction is connected in the first case with the representation of quality but in this case with that of quantity. (§23)

Kant argues that at the centre of the contrast between the beautiful and the sublime is the distinction between the ‘limitation’ of an object and the ‘limitlessness’ of the landscape. Specifically, an object may possess a natural beauty in its form that seems designed to please the viewer; or, in contrast, an experience of the sublime is connected with displeasure, caused by an awareness of the potentially hazardous relationship between the viewer and the landscape or object depicted. As an art educator, I found that studying examples of artworks that captured a strong sense of the Sublime was the most effective way of developing my understanding of this notion. Prettejohn (2005) is one of several authors who select Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* to encapsulate the notion of the sublime.
There are several specific features of Friedrich’s landscape that characterise it as representative of the sublime. The mountains that stretch into the distance, coupled with the diminishing clouds above them, evoke a sense of infinite space. There are clouds below the peaks as well as above, indicating the altitude from which the scene is viewed. Yet the central feature of the painting is another viewer, a man who has scaled one peak and who, back turned towards the viewer, now stares across at the next and beyond into the distance. Friedrich deliberately included the figure in the centre of the picture plane in order to communicate a specific sense of the sublime. Seen from behind but staring ahead, he is a *Rückenfigur*, whose lack of identity prompts the viewer to impose their own and who represents them in the landscape. Yet while the inclusion of this figure encourages the viewer to imagine what it might be like to *be* in the
landscape, they are simultaneously relieved that it is him and not them that is there. As Prettejohn summarises, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* ‘does not pretend to present us with a natural scene as it exists in its own right, but makes us conscious instead that we are seeing a human perception of nature. Friedrich has, then, found a way to present the scene that corresponds to the Kantian aesthetic experience’ (2005: 56).

A contemporary equivalent of the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime can be found in an everyday source: newspapers. The contrasting subject matter of images offers the reader a casual glimpse into contemporary notions of the beautiful and the sublime. Pictures of a public figure interviewed in a weekend supplement, for example, inevitably present a flattering image, while the landscape that illustrates a travel feature is likely to offer a pleasing perspective. The same edition may juxtapose such pleasant images with photographs that illustrate the intensity of human suffering, located in environments that are often bleak and inhospitable. The world is represented in newspapers as simultaneously beautiful and terrifying, and the process of turning a page often requires the reader to rapidly recalibrate their aesthetic perceptions.

*Fig 3.12 Toby Melville: ‘Visitors walk their dogs through an avenue of cherry trees coming into blossom in Greenwich Park’ (Reuters)*
Two centuries on from the publication of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, it may appear retrogressive to focus upon Kant’s conception of the nature of aesthetic experience and to allow his theories to shape the design of the empirical research. During the 19th and 20th centuries a succession of philosophers – Schiller, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger – in turn rejected, revised and revisited Kant’s theories. Yet it is widely agreed that the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* occupies a unique position in philosophical aesthetics, one that continues to exert an influence on contemporary perspectives of aesthetic experience. The continued influence of Kant can easily be measured by the frequency with which his works are the subject of recent publications (e.g. Budd 2005; Savile 2006; Alison 2011) while, at the time of writing this chapter, two of the six articles in the latest edition of the British Journal of Aesthetics focus specifically on Kantian concepts (Cohen 2013; Tinguely 2013). The third critique is hailed by Savile as ‘the fullest and richest treatment of aesthetic experience to be found in the philosophical canon’ (2006: 441) while Winston describes it as ‘the most coherent and influential theory of aesthetic knowledge and the nature of the pleasure at the heart of aesthetic experience’ (2010: 19). Guyer argues that ‘Kant’s
analyses of aesthetic experience, aesthetic creativity, and the connections between the aesthetic and the moral responded to the complexity of all of these in ways that ensure their continuing interest and fruitfulness’ (2005: x) while Prettejohn maintains that Kant’s theories have ‘remained central both to artmaking and to debates about art throughout the succeeding two centuries, and up to the present day’ (2005:54).

This section of the chapter has sought to describe and analyse Kant’s theories of aesthetic experience and to illustrate the extent to which his conception of aesthetic experience is distinctive from that of previous philosophers. The chapter concludes with reflections on how these theories informed the design of my own empirical research.

3.4 Hume, Kant and the empirical research

One of the key distinctions between Hume and Kant’s perspectives on aesthetic judgment is the extent to which they understand an appreciation of beauty as intrinsic to humans. Hume suggests that the observer’s ability to make sound judgments on aesthetic issues was based on their intellectual and emotional qualities and their education and experience. In contrast, Kant argues through his examination of the process by which human beings make judgments about beauty proved that the observer need not possess any special qualities. He is insistent that taste is based ‘in human nature… that which we may expect everyone to possess and may require of him’ (§29).

Human beings, therefore, have an innate ability to recognise beauty.

The philosophical position from which I began my empirical research rests at precisely this point. If it is true that human beings have an innate ability to recognise, reflect upon and respond to beauty, then it should be true of children as well as adults.
Furthermore, it may be that some children have a nascent awareness of issues surrounding the subjective nature of aesthetic response. Do they find images beautiful simply because they like them, or because they have some form of interest in the subject represented? Or when they say that something is beautiful do they expect others to agree with them? Are they prepared to revise their opinions of beauty in the light of what others might say? Or do they believe that aesthetic preferences are more deeply ingrained and cannot be affected by others? What kind of engagement do they have with nature? Do children living in different environments respond differently to images of nature? Clearly, these questions were too complex to ask children directly. But while reading Hume and Kant I gradually became aware that I could re-formulate these questions in ways that were more accessible to them, and was increasingly convinced that they offered a powerful lens through which to develop my understanding of children’s perceptions of beauty.

3.4.1 Research questions

My review of the literature, in the context of both art education and studies of aesthetic response, had revealed no evidence of any previous research that investigated children’s aesthetic experience in a way that was informed by aesthetic theory. There was no existing research that focused on finding out what children found beautiful and for what reasons. Through my reading of Hume and Kant I became aware that their theories offered a lens through which to investigate and understand children’s perceptions of beauty, and I wanted to explore this possibility through my empirical research. At this point in the process I became confident that I was able to articulate my research questions:
• How do children represent their perceptions of beauty?
• How do children reflect upon and articulate their perceptions of beauty?
• How do children’s perceptions of beauty relate to philosophical thinking about aesthetic experience?
• What role can photography play in exploring children’s aesthetic experience?

My research was premised on an assumption that ideas, theories and concepts developed by Kant, Hume and other philosophers discussed in this chapter are useful for researching children’s experiences of beauty and capacity for reflection on representations of the visual world. This chapter concludes with a brief overview of how Kant and Hume’s theories of aesthetic experience influenced the research design in terms of the questions I asked the children participating in the research.

3.4.2 Questions for children about experiences of beauty

The questions I developed to ask children in the empirical research emerged from my reading of Hume and Kant and they informed the design of the interviews I carried out. The practicalities of the interview situation led to substantial revisions to this first draft list and eventually resulted in a more concise list; nonetheless, they almost all found their way into one interview or another, often prompted by responses children made. This revised list is presented in the following chapter, but these initial questions belong here, because they emanated from my study of the philosophers that inspired them. An important characteristic of these questions is that, while the content of each is drawn directly from Hume and Kant, the language used to express the content is clearly accessible to children. My experience as a primary school teacher proved valuable in this process of ‘translating’ ideas from 18th Century aesthetic theory into 21st Century child-friendly terms.
Questions inspired by Kant

*Disinterest*

- If you had never visited this place, would it still be beautiful to you?
- If I found a photograph of a dog that looked exactly the same as yours, would you still think the picture was beautiful?
- (5) If you found out that the person in this picture was not a real person, would it change the way you felt about it?

*Universality and Necessity*

- Should one person’s idea of beauty different from everyone else’s?
- Are there some things that you think should be beautiful to everyone?
- Do you think girls and boys find different things beautiful?
- Are there rules that make these things beautiful?
- Do we *know* that something is beautiful? Or do we *think* that something is beautiful? Or do we *feel* that something is beautiful?
- How do you *know* when something is beautiful?
- How do you *feel* when you see something beautiful?
- When we call something beautiful, do we just mean that it gives us pleasure – or should we expect others to agree?
- Which of these images do you think everyone should find beautiful?
- How would you feel if someone were to disagree with your opinion that this is beautiful?
- If you found out that the person in this picture had committed a crime, could they still be beautiful?
- Which of these two pictures (*of the same subject*) do you think is the more beautiful? Why?

Questions inspired by Hume

- Do some people have a clearer idea of what is beautiful than others?
- Can other people influence what you find beautiful?
• Think of something that someone else has said today that made you change your mind about the beauty of one of the images.
• If you don’t find something beautiful today, could you find it beautiful in the future?

Further questions
• Do we learn to find certain things or people beautiful? Is it something that is inside us? Or can we choose what we find beautiful?
• When you hear the word beauty, what do you see in your mind?
• Imagine an ugly man. Is it possible to make a painting of him that would be beautiful? Is it possible to take a photograph of him that would be beautiful?
• Is beauty important?

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a review of a range of literature on historical and theoretical perspectives on aesthetic experience in order to locate my empirical research within a broader context. The chapter has centred on the significance of the theories of aesthetic experience developed by Hume and Kant and has explained how their theories closely informed the design of the empirical research. Chapter 4 of the thesis presents an overview of this process.
Chapter 4: The design of the empirical research

Introduction

This chapter explains the methodology for the empirical research and describes the research design, which centred on a number of semi-structured interviews with groups of children. It begins by reflecting on a range of issues surrounding interviews, before outlining the design and structure of the interview used in schools. The chapter goes on to explain how the interviews were managed and identifies the principles that underpinned the process of data interpretation. The chapter concludes with reflections on the pilot study and a description of how I introduced the project to the first of the two participating schools.

4.1 The methodology

4.1.1 Overview of the methodology

The empirical research took the form of 18 hour-long, semi-structured interviews with 51 children in two schools. The children carried out two tasks: for the first they brought to school images that represented their ideas of beauty, while for the second they borrowed digital cameras to take photographs that represented their ideas of beauty. After each task I carried out semi-structured small group interviews with them, during which they shared and discussed their images. The research data is therefore in two forms: the images children found and photographed to represent their ideas of beauty and the transcripts of the interviews during which they described, analysed and reflected upon their own and each others’ images.
4.1.2 Methodological decisions

Wellington (2010) defines methodology as ‘the activity or business of choosing, reflecting upon, evaluating and justifying the methods you use’ (2010: 129). Methodological questions explore the reasons why certain approaches are adopted and others rejected, a process of reflecting upon and justifying decisions that is not confined to the planning stages of the project but is maintained at every stage of the research through to its completion.

When I decided to investigate children’s perceptions of beauty, I was sure my research should include a quantitative element. I planned to analyse large numbers of images chosen by children, believing this would enable me to summarise their perceptions of beauty. I anticipated that boys might prefer images that reflected masculine notions of the sublime, for example, while children living in urban areas might reject images of rural landscapes. I thought I could carry out a large-scale study that might identify such patterns, one in which several hundred children would rank images to indicate their aesthetic preferences. I considered a survey of children’s aesthetic preferences that would involve hundreds of questionnaires, but suspected that a collection of brief responses would raise more questions than it answered. I also thought about an experimental approach, a series of classroom interventions in which I would explore strategies for helping children to appreciate beauty through sharing images I thought were beautiful; but I was concerned that my influence would be excessive and that my approach would blur ‘the boundary line between the phenomenon and its context’ (Yin 2009: 18). At one point I imagined enlisting the help of a group of student teachers to apply a ranking system to analyse children’s images, and at another I investigated the potential of recently developed software that would allow children in classrooms to press buttons on handsets to indicate their preferences for images
displayed on interactive whiteboards. I thought using a quantitative research methodology would lend my project a sense of authority and gravitas. Beauty is a slippery subject, and my instinct was to try to nail it down with numbers.

I was discouraged from adopting these lines of enquiry, partly by the realisation that my plans were sufficiently complex as to be incomprehensible to others, and partly by a project entitled People’s Choice by Russian artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. Dutton (2009) describes how the pair created a series of paintings based on descriptions of aesthetic preferences gathered from hundreds of people from ten countries. The image that summarised the tastes of the average US citizen, for example, depicted a lakeside scene inhabited by teenage tourists, George Washington and a hippopotamus (Fig 4.1). Such images were not only visually unappealing but also rather misleading: people might like three or four types of subject matter but would probably prefer not to see them all included in the same painting. As Dutton observes, Komar and Melamid’s conclusions are analogous to claiming that America’s favourite food is ‘hamburger-flavoured ice cream with chocolate-coated pizza nuggets’ (2009: 14). Ironically, by attempting to create images that appealed to everyone, they had succeeded in creating bland compromise that appealed to no-one.

Fig. 4.1 – Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid: America’s most wanted (1994)
Komar and Melamid’s approach was doubtless tongue-in-cheek, but the inevitability of compromise that lay at the centre of their project alerted to me to a potential problem with my own. If I chose to survey the aesthetic preferences of large numbers of children, the most common responses would probably represent a relatively narrow, clichéd range of subject matter and I would risk overlooking the breadth and diversity of their responses. I also reflected on my experience of a previous research project, in which I investigated children’s attitudes to making art (Watts 2005). When I asked children why they made art, it was not the most popular responses (It’s fun! It’s messy!) that were the most illuminating, but the least expected. Indeed it was one such response – We make art because it’s beautiful – that originally prompted my interest in researching children’s perceptions of beauty. Finally, Elliot Eisner’s argument that ‘in most of the arts we seek diversity of outcome’ (2002: 44) reminded me that I was interested in exploring the breadth and depth of children’s perceptions of beauty, and I concluded a quantitative approach to finding out about children’s perceptions of beauty was unlikely to help me achieve my aims.

Inspired by Rautio’s (2010) research into peoples’ experiences of everyday beauty, I considered conducting a case study in which I would explore the place of beauty in a primary school, through observing children’s everyday aesthetic experiences. However, my motivation for the research had emerged from a growing sense that beauty was largely absent from the discourse of education, and I was disheartened by the thought of a research project that documented this absence. Essentially, I wanted to discover what children found beautiful and why. I wanted children’s thoughts, feelings and voices to be central to the research, and I decided that this could best be achieved through a simple combination of words and images. I began to think about ways I could enable children to locate, create and share images they
thought were beautiful through planning a series of group interviews with children, interviews that would provide opportunities for them to describe, analyse and reflect upon their images.

4.2 The research design

This section of the chapter draws on a range of literature on research methodology in order to explore conceptions of the nature of the interview, the challenges of interviewing children and the role of images in the research. It begins by examining the conceptions and purposes of the interview, before exploring its advantages and disadvantages as a research method. It identifies the key features of semi-structured interviews and explains why I adopted this method for my study. Finally, it reflects on the particular issues surrounding interviewing groups of children, before explaining the role of photography in the research.

4.2.1 The interview: conceptions, purposes, advantages and disadvantages

According to Robson the interview is essentially ‘a conversation with a purpose’ (1993: 228). Beneath the simplicity of this definition, however, there are a range of issues to consider in terms of the reasons for the interview, the intentions of the interviewer and the design of the interview itself. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) describe three conceptions of the interview. Firstly, interviews offer opportunities to uncover ‘pure’ information, directly from an interviewee, rather than information interpreted through observing their actions. This assumes, however, that the motivations of both interviewer and interviewee are sound and that the interviewer is sufficiently skilled to be able to eliminate any bias in their subsequent representation of the interviewee’s perspective. Secondly, the researcher should acknowledge that all interviews are
inevitably biased towards the interests and motivations of the interviewer, particularly when he or she is also responsible for the overall design of the research. Thirdly, the interview can be seen as a form of social encounter in which knowledge is ‘co-constructed’ by the participants (Walford 2001: 90), in the process ‘(making) sense of their social world and of each other’ (Barker and Johnson 1998: 230). Mason (2002) builds upon this conception of the interview, defining it as a process that involves ‘the construction or reconstruction of knowledge more than the excavation of it’ (2002: 63). Within this process of construction, co-construction and reconstruction, a transaction takes places between the interviewer and the interviewee in which the purpose of the interview is revealed.

In the context of gathering research data the purpose of the interview is essentially to answer research questions, test hypotheses or validate other methods already used in the research (Cohen et al 2011). Mason (2002) identifies the importance of the link between the ontological position of the researcher and the selection of the interview as a research method, arguing that ‘people’s knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality which... research questions are designed to explore’ (2002: 63). In the context of my research, the central purpose of the interviews was to provide children with opportunities to share such perceptions of beauty through describing, analysing and reflecting upon the images they found and photographed. While these images would provide data of one kind they would not, in this context, ‘speak for themselves’, but provide a stimulus for discussion and opportunities for children to explain the reasons for their choices.

There are several advantages to using interviews as the principle method of data collection. In practical terms, interviewers should be able to uncover relevant data by
following up questions and prompting interviewees to clarify responses when necessary; they should be able to modify their lines of enquiry, to encourage interviewees to build upon responses and to observe and interpret non-verbal clues (Robson 1993). More importantly, interviews are valuable opportunities to understand the meanings of people’s lives and the reasons for their behaviour and responses (Rubin and Rubin 1995). The directness of the interview offers opportunities for the researcher to gather ‘rich and highly illuminating material’ relevant to their research questions (Robson 1993: 229), while interviews not only allow both interviewer and interviewees to explore the meanings of questions and responses in greater depth (Brenner, Brown and Canter 1985) but also offer opportunities ‘[to] conjure up, as fully as possible, the social experiences or processes which you are interested in exploring’ (Mason 2002: 64). In their detailed account of interviewing as a research method, Arksey and Knight (1999) propose that:

Qualitative interviews examine the context of thought, feeling and action and can be a way of exploring relationships between different aspects of a situation. Interviewing is a powerful way of helping people to make explicit things that have hitherto been implicit – to articulate their tacit perceptions, feelings and understandings.

(Arksey and Knight 1999: 32)

In the case of my research, this notion of the interview as a means of making the implicit explicit was a persuasive factor in the methodology, not only in terms of the research focus but also in terms of the age and experience of the participants.

Several authors highlight disadvantages to interviews, problematic issues that can arise at any stage of the process. The researcher may face difficulties trying to gain access to interviewees, particularly when targeting a specific population, thereby delaying the process of data collection. When planning the interview, they can easily overlook the fact that interview questions do not accurately ‘match’ research questions: interviewees may answer a question truthfully but their responses fail to help answer the questions the researcher set out to address. The interviewing process also places
demands upon the interviewer in terms of their communication skills. As Mason (2002) points out, achieving a balance between talking and listening can itself be a challenge, as the success of the interview is ‘heavily dependent upon people’s capacities to verbalize, interact, conceptualize and remember’ (2002: 64). Non-verbal communication can also be problematic: pre-occupied with asking questions and listening to responses, the interviewer may not notice that an interviewee may be uncomfortable with a particular line of enquiry. The practicalities of the interview situation – finding suitable times and locations, ensuring resources are available, etc. – offer further potential obstacles to gathering data, while the process of transcribing recordings is time-consuming and can often reveal missed opportunities or misunderstandings. I aimed to take each of these points into consideration when planning and carrying out my own interviews.

4.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

According to Cohen et al (2011) the most important consideration is whether the design of the interview is ‘fit for purpose’ in terms of the overall aims of the research, and the design of an interview is characterised largely by the extent to which it is structured. Bloor and Wood (2006) equate the semi-structured interview with an ethnographic approach, one that aims to explore experience in depth, ‘shaped partly by the interviewer’s pre-existing topic guide and partly by concerns that are emergent during the interview (2006: 104). Robson (1993) suggests that interviewers ‘have their shopping list of topics and want to get responses to them but as a matter of tactics they have greater freedom in the sequencing of questions, in their exact wording and in the amount of time and attention given to their different topics’ (1993: 237). The range of questions is unlikely to be as broad as that of an unstructured interview, and the
sequencing of the questions is unlikely to be as consistent as that of the structured interview. Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) identify a number of advantages to the approach and suggest that researchers are better-placed to make decisions about how best to use the time available; that they are more able to follow up on ideas raised by respondents and that the questions they ask ‘tend to be open-ended enough to allow interviewees to express their perspectives on a topic or issue and also allow for comparable data that can be compared across correspondents’ (2013: 359).

Considering these perspectives, I judged that semi-structured interviews would be most appropriate for my research. I decided to establish a clear set of questions before the interviews while retaining flexibility over matters such as the sequence of questions and the way I worded them. I described in Chapter 2 how Parsons’ (1987) investigations into children and adults’ perceptions of art inspired my research. Though his methods, as described in the previous chapter, have since been criticised (Hickman 2010), Parsons’ justification for the selection of semi-structured interviews as the preferred method for his research is significantly influenced my approach, as evidenced in the following:

The interviews were ‘semi-structured’. We had in mind a number of topics that we wanted to discuss, and a number of questions with which to begin that discussion. At the same time, we felt free to follow up whatever was said, as long as it seemed relevant, and we allowed the order and introduction of topics to come as naturally as possible in the course of the discussion. The basic purpose was to understand as well as we could what people thought about the paintings. Most of the interviewers’ remarks and questions were ‘probes’ intended to prompt further clarification of what had been said. We tried not to suggest particular answers. The process of interviewing became very enjoyable, though it was also demanding; and the best interviews became more like genuine conversations. (Parsons, 1987: 19)

If the words ‘people’ and ‘art’ are substituted with the words ‘children’ and ‘beauty’, this paragraph offers a succinct summary of my approach to collecting the research data. However, there were particular issues I needed to consider when carrying out
semi-structured interviews with groups of children, and these are explored in the following section of this chapter.

4.2.3 Interviewing groups of children

Group interviews are increasingly regarded as a valuable means of gathering data from children. Greig, Taylor and MacKay (2007) suggest that groups of children generate ideas more quickly, are generally more confident about sharing them and that most children enjoy the interview process, while Mason (2002) highlights how the group interview offers opportunities for the researcher to gain a clearer understanding of ‘how issues are conceptualised, worked out and negotiated among children’ (2002: 64). From a philosophical perspective, Hickman (2008) draws a link between researching children’s experiences in a group context and the nature of learning in art, while from a more practical perspective, Kellett (2010) argues that group interviews are easier to manage than individual interviews, as children are often less forthcoming when interviewed alone. Kellett also emphasises the importance of ‘transactional dialogue’ in the group interview, a process by which participants develop new understandings of their own experiences through comparing and contextualising them with those of others (2010: 73). Cohen et al (2011) argue that the group interview has unique potential of as a method for researching children’s experiences because it ‘enables them to challenge each other and participate in a way that may not happen in a one-to-one, adult-child interview’ (2011: 433). They also cite Docherty and Sandelowski’s description of children as ‘the best sources of information about themselves’ (1999: 177) and emphasise the importance of adopting an approach that enables the researcher to ‘see’ children’s experiences from their own perspectives.
However, several authors highlight potential barriers to understanding children’s perspectives through group interviews, particularly with regard to their levels of confidence. Children are not used to being interviewed and may perceive the situation as a form of test or assessment that some will pass and others will fail. It is likely that while some children will be assertive during an interview others may be inclined to ‘hide’ and respond less. Some children may be inhibited by others’ contributions and feel unable to express themselves openly for fear that group members might disagree with them so they adapt their responses accordingly, a process described by Watts and Ebbutt (1987) as ‘group think’. It is essential that the interviewer is sensitive to children’s perceptions of the process at every stage of the process, that they take steps to ensure that children’s trust and confidence are gained and maintained and that any specific issues that may cause children concern are identified and addressed as soon as possible.

Interviewers also need to be aware of the limits of children’s abilities and capabilities. Some can only concentrate for limited periods of time, while others might lack the language skills needed to recreate and communicate their experiences to the rest of the group (Arksey and Knight 1999). Interviewers should pay particular attention to the language they use both within the interview itself and in any interactions before or after the interview to ensure that it is both age-appropriate and accessible to children, to provide children with time to think before responding to questions and to reassure them that any contributions they make are valued by others. Cohen et al (2011) identify a number of further potential problems with group interviews, such as the challenge of inappropriate behaviour and ensuring that all members of the group have a chance to speak. While I realised that I would need to remain aware of these
issues throughout the interview process, I concluded that these problems were outweighed by the potential benefits.

I reflected for some time on the question of whether to define the nature of my interaction with children during the research should be defined as ‘discussion’ or ‘interview’. The roots of this distinction are intertwined with issues surrounding my identities as a researcher and teacher, and my motivations in each context. My conception of discussion in the context of the classroom is that it involves children learning, either from each other, from the facilitator, or both, and it is part of the teacher’s role to ensure that this learning takes place. In contrast, as a researcher rather than a teacher, I wanted to learn about children through my interaction with them. As such, I am confident that my interaction with the children is best described as a series of interviews rather than discussions. However, I decided to avoid using the term ‘interview’ with children because I suspected that it might have slightly negative associations for them – an interview being something that can be passed or failed – and I wanted to reduce the likelihood they would feel scrutinised.

4.2.4 Interviews, images and the role of photography

Photography played a central role in the plans for the empirical part of this research, and I explored work by a range of authors on its use as a research tool. Photography is widely recognised as a means of gathering research data, and a number of recent texts deal exclusively with its role in the context of visual research methodologies (e.g. Banks 2007; Rose 2007; Emmison, Smith and Mayall 2012). Used alongside other sources of data, photographs offer opportunities to bring the data to life, to ‘catch the texture, the mood, the atmosphere, the ‘feel’ of real life and different places, emotions and flesh-and-blood drama’ (Cohen et al 2011: 530). Rose (2007) describes how photographs are
often used in social sciences to accompany interviews or ethnographic fieldwork, highlighting Knowles and Sweetman’s (2004) suggestion that photographs ‘can achieve something that methods relying only on speech and writing cannot’ (2007: 238) and arguing that photographs have a unique potential to reveal a ‘gateway’ for researchers into the lived experience of participants.

The role of photography in the context of my research was largely one of photo-elicitation, a process by which photographs are used ‘to invoke, prompt and promote discussion, reflections, comments, observations and memories’ (Cohen et al 2011). Whether images are provided by the researcher or the participants, the central aim of photo-elicitation is to achieve a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences. Emmison, Smith and Mayall (2012) emphasise that the unique feature of the approach is that it marks a move away from the researcher retaining authority over the interpretation of images towards a more democratic situation in which interviewers empower participants through giving them opportunities to decide which images are discussed. They also note that, until recently photo-elicitation was used only rarely in social research, and that Harper’s (2002) review of existing studies stretched to no more than ten. The increasing in popularity of this method is almost certainly due to the advances in digital technologies and their accessibility to a wider population (as recently as 2007, Rose refers to the need to develop and print photographs from negatives before meeting with participants).

Several authors describe how photographs can be particularly valuable when interviewing children. In a recent project, for example, Mason and Tipper (2008) chose to explore children’s perceptions of their relationships with family and friends by giving them disposable cameras to take photographs of people they cared about, and found that the images helped to elicit more complex responses from the children. Banks (2007)
suggests that, in such situations, photographs can make interviews less intimidating by reducing the need for eye contact; this is particularly important when researching children’s experiences, where the power differential between interviewer and interviewee, adult and child, is more marked.

In Chapter 2 I reported that authors of previous studies of aesthetic experience invariably selected images of artworks (specifically well-known paintings from Europe and America) for participants to discuss (e.g. Gardner 1973; Parsons 1987; Freeman 2004), and how that could be perceived as problematic for several reasons. Firstly, researchers risk implying that their prior knowledge of an artwork lends them a sense of ownership over the images that participants cannot hope to gain; and secondly, in spite of any reassurances that there are no right or wrong answers to questions about the artworks, participants may feel hampered by their inferior knowledge of the work under scrutiny. I wanted the participants in my research to feel as confident as possible about their own opinions when responding to images during the interviews, and I resisted the temptation to introduce images that I thought would stimulate such debates as I suspected that this might influence their own choice of images.

My main reason for placing photography at the centre of the research method, however, was my interest in its increasingly multi-dimensional presence in society. Photography is a medium seen so frequently as to be almost invisible. In 2012 an estimated ten per cent of the total number of photographs ever taken were made during the previous year (Pollack 2012), a figure that is likely to have grown exponentially in the ensuing period. There is little existing research into young children’s use of photography (e.g. Sharples, Davison, Thomas and Rudman 2003; Pahl 2006) and none into children’s perceptions of the nature of the process. However, it is widely argued that not only do children take photography for granted as part of their daily lives, but
also that they have few preconceptions or concerns about its status compared, for example, with that of painting. In my experience I find that children perceive photography as a largely unmediated reflection of the visual world, making it the obvious choice of medium for research into their perceptions of it.

There were practical as well as theoretical reasons for using photography. Recent studies (e.g. Buckingham 2007; Selwyn 2011) confirm the children’s high levels of engagement with technology, how accessible it is to them and how they increasingly experience a sense of ownership over digital devices. For example, recent research by Ofcom (2014) into the technological abilities of 800 children and 2000 adults concluded that ‘the average six-year-old understands more about digital technology than a 45-year-old’ (Garside 2014 np).

From my perspective as a researcher, the affordability, manageability and immediacy of digital cameras was a key factor in ensuring that the data collection process would proceed smoothly, and before beginning the first interviews I bought a set of seven cameras at relatively little expense.

4.3 Design and structure of the interview

The process by which the research objectives were translated into interview questions was central to the research enquiry. It was at this point that the theoretical foundations of the research met with the reality of the situation and it was crucial to ensure a clear and coherent link between theory and practice. Chapter 3 provides an account of how texts by David Hume, Immanuel Kant and others informed and helped to refine questions about beauty and aesthetic experience I planned to ask children during interviews, and this section of the chapter provides an overview of the process of designing and structuring these interviews with these questions in mind. It identifies the
principles that informed the selection and formatting of the interview questions, describes the structure of the interview and reflects on how my experience as a teacher informed my management of the interviews.

4.3.1 Selecting and formatting interview questions

According to Arksey and Knight (1999), the types of questions posed during interviews have a strong bearing on the nature of responses received, and questions can be problematic for a number of reasons. As one of the key principles that underpinned my selection of the interview as the principle method of data collection was that it offered opportunities for ‘diversity of response’, it followed that there was little room in the interview for questions of this nature. Other types of question are problematic for different reasons, as illustrated by Table 4.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problematic question</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Leading’ questions that prompt the interviewee towards a particular line of response.</td>
<td>‘Don’t you think this lovely landscape is more beautiful than this picture of your dog?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double questions</td>
<td>‘Are there some things that you think everyone should find beautiful or is everybody different?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive or personal questions</td>
<td>‘Can you think of a person you know who you think is beautiful?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions that assume certain experiences on the part of the interviewee</td>
<td>‘When you go on holiday abroad do you notice how different everything looks?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions that assume a certain amount of knowledge on the part of the interviewee</td>
<td>‘To what extent do you think that 20th Century notions of Modernism and Postmodernism have impacted upon popular perceptions of the value of beauty?’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 Considering problematic questions (adapted from Arksey and Knight, 1999)

Whenever possible, I selected ‘open-ended’ questions for the interview, for a number of reasons. Firstly, they are reported to offer respondents more flexibility and greater freedom; secondly, they allow for additional prompts to encourage interviewees to
clarify or elaborate upon their answers, thereby enabling a more accurate assessment of the respondent’s intentions and meanings; thirdly, they can be used to prompt new lines of enquiry during an interview, sometimes revealing what Cohen et al describe as ‘hitherto unthought-of relationships or hypotheses’ (2011: 416).

I was aware that I would need to pay close attention to the format of my interview questions, and Cohen et al’s summary of issues previously identified by Tuckman (1972) proved valuable in refining the phrasing of my questions. Tuckman identifies four formats of interview question and emphasises that even subtle changes to wording can prompt different responses. Firstly, a question may be direct or indirect. ‘Do you think girls and boys find different things beautiful?’ is an example of a direct question whereas ‘What do you get from looking at beauty?’ is an example of an indirect question, one that Tuckman suggests is more likely to prompt a more open, revealing response from the interviewee. Secondly, questions can be general or specific in nature. A general question such as ‘How is beauty important?’ could stimulate an interviewee to reflect on an issue they might never have considered before, whereas a specific question such as ‘If I found a photograph of a dog that looked exactly the same as yours, would you still think the picture was beautiful?’ would prompt the respondent to justify a statement that has already been made. The advantage of the general question, Tuckman argues, is that it ‘may lead circuitously to the desired information’ without making the interviewee feel that they are ‘under the microscope’, thereby making them a little more guarded in their response (Tuckman 1972 in Cohen et al 2011: 417). Thirdly, questions can demand either factual answers or opinions. A question such as ‘Can you describe this image in a way that everyone would agree with you?’ would prompt the interviewee to search for an objective response based upon observation and description. In contrast, a question such as ‘When you hear the word
beauty, what do you see in your mind?’ demands a more personal response, one more likely to be distinctive from that offered by other members of the group.

It was important for me to be aware of how specific questions might play a particular role within the structure of an interview. A question might be included to introduce a new theme or to uncover further information on an existing topic; it might ask for examples to illustrate a perspective already shared or offer an interpretation of information already provided (Kvale 1996). The process of categorising questions enables the researcher to reflect upon which styles of questioning are predominant in the interview, and whether a weighting towards one or two particular kinds of questions could reveal an insufficiently broad range. Patten (1980) prompts the interviewer to reflect on whether the substance of a question is concerned, for example, with descriptive, background or demographic information, or whether it centres on the interviewee’s knowledge, experience, sensory perceptions or feelings. For my research, an over-riding concern was to ensure that children were asked a sufficiently wide range of questions to enable them to contribute responses that were distinctive and that accurately reflected their individual perspectives. The types of questions used in interviews inevitably influence the types of responses received. Tuckman (1972) identifies a number of response modes, such as structured, unstructured, scaled, ranked and checklist, each of which help to generate a distinctive type of data.

After reflecting on these authors’ perspectives I was able to return to the list of questions I had drafted following my reading of Kant and Hume, and to refine them in ways that I judged children would find accessible and that would prompt them to share their ideas and perspectives. Table 4.2 presents a list of questions I planned to ask during all interviews, while Table 4.3 features a list of possible additional questions intended to probe children’s understanding a little further. I sequenced the questions
According to a simple three-part structure of description, analysis and reflection, which is explained below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 - Description</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Describe your image to the rest of the group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prompts:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>content (people, trees, sky, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>media (photograph, painting, drawing, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visual elements (shapes, colour, tone, texture, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2 - Analysis</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Look at the image you’ve chosen to share with the rest of us. Think in your head about why you think your image is beautiful.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Now talk to your partner and take turns to describe why each of you thinks your own image is beautiful.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prompt:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the image beautiful because of what it represents, or because of the way it represents something? Or is it both of these things at the same time?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do the visual elements (shapes, colour, tone, texture, etc.) of the image affect the way we see it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who would like to share their thoughts and ideas with the rest of the group?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Which of these two pictures do you think is the more beautiful? Why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(images of the same subject provided by the researcher)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3 – Reflection</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Thinking about yourself</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do you know when something is beautiful?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do you feel when you see something beautiful? Why do you think this is?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Can you decide what you find beautiful, like you can decide on a favourite book? Or is it more like food, where you can’t help what you like and don’t like?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If I found a photograph of a dog/cat/baby brother that looked the same as yours, would you still think the picture was beautiful?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is beauty important? How?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| *Thinking about others* |  |
| • Is one person’s idea of beauty always different from another’s? |  |
| • Which of these images do you think everyone should find beautiful? |  |
| • When we call something beautiful, do we just mean that we like it – or should we expect others to agree? |  |
| • Do you think girls and boys find the same things beautiful? |  |
| • Do you think adults and children find different things beautiful? |  |
| • Do some people have a clearer idea of what is beautiful than others? |  |
| • Can other people make you change your mind about what you find beautiful? |  |

*Table 4.2 Questions for interviews with children*
Beauty and experience

• What do you get from looking at beauty?
• If you don’t find something beautiful today, could you find it beautiful in the future?
• If you had never visited this place / met this person would the picture still be beautiful to you?
• Do we know that something is beautiful? Or do we think that something is beautiful? Or do we feel that something is beautiful?

Beauty and art

• Should works of art be beautiful? Why?
• Are there rules that make things beautiful?
• Have you ever made something that you thought was beautiful, or that other people thought was beautiful?

Beauty and knowledge

• Imagine an ugly man. Is it possible to make a painting of him that would be beautiful? Is it possible to take a photograph of him that would be beautiful?
• If you found out that the person in this picture had committed a crime, could they still be beautiful?

Table 4.3 Advanced questions for interviews with children

4.3.2 The interview structure: description, analysis and reflection

In Chapter 2 of the thesis I reflected on strategies art educators use to engage children with artworks, focusing particularly on those developed by Taylor (1989), Addison (2005) and Hickman (1994). Hickman’s strategy consisted of four stages of response, identified as React, Research, Respond, and Reflect. In my teaching I have often used a similar approach, particularly in terms of the latter two stages. The strategy I use, described below, is designed to enable children to progress from describing what they can see to articulating responses that are more analytical and reflective. Like many teaching strategies it is centred on questioning, but a key feature of the approach is that questions are asked by children as well as the teacher, and of each other rather than the teacher. The strategy guides children through three stages of response– description,
analysis and reflection – and aims to support them as they journey into an image or artwork, moving from first impressions through to reflective conclusions.

**Description**

The process begins with the teacher presenting an image and asking the group to agree on what it is they are looking at. One child is asked to describe it to the group in a way that everyone might agree is accurate. At this stage children are likely to ask ‘closed’ questions that the teacher can answer briefly, as it is useful to confirm a shared understanding of some of the objective properties of an image (e.g. its medium) before the discussion can progress. My experience has shown that it is important to begin the discussion in a way that makes children feel secure that they have a ‘foothold’ in the process of engaging with the image and that their view of it is, to some extent, shared with others in the group. Questions from the teacher or children at this stage of the discussion are more likely to begin with the words ‘what’ or ‘where’, as the group establishes some agreement about what it is they are looking at.

**Analysis**

At the second stage the teacher poses more ‘open’ questions with more than one possible answer. Children are encouraged to look more closely at the image and to justify their answers by referring to specific details, thereby analysing its content (what it represents) and its formal elements (how it is represented). The process might continue with discussion of how the formal elements combine to sustain the viewer’s attention beyond the point when they understand what is being looked at: once they have agreed on what the image represents the image, what is it that sustains our attention and makes us want to continue to look? The teacher might encourage
children to make judgments about the image (such as deciding whether they think it is beautiful) and to articulate reasons for their judgments (why is it beautiful?)

Reflection

Finally the teacher invites children to make further responses that that do need not to be justified with reference to the image. Individuals might describe personal associations with a particular feature of the image, they might make connections with other images or ask further questions inspired by broader themes they associate with the image. In my experience it is useful for the teacher to conclude by asking the group to reflect on their first impressions of the image and how they may have been altered in the light of what they have subsequently heard or thought. Realistically, few discussions progress so smoothly along these lines, but nonetheless the strategy provides a useful trajectory for discussion, one in which each member of the group begins from the same point and yet might end in different places.

4.3.3 Managing the interview: resolving the role of teacher / researcher

In the previous section of this chapter I described how the ‘teacher’ leads children through the process of description, analysis and reflection, though in the context of my research, the identity shifted to that of the researcher. This section of this chapter reflects on this issue of dual identities in more depth. Throughout the data collection process I was conscious of issues surrounding my dual identities as a teacher and researcher. I was particularly conscious of children’s perceptions of my role. Was I a teacher from another school? Was I intent on assessing their academic ability in some way? Denscombe (2008) raises similar questions when he highlights the problematic nature of teacher/researcher identities. He suggests that while teachers want to be in the
‘thick of the action’, making judgments and attending to the immediate demands of the classroom, researchers aim to ‘stand back’ and reflect on the ‘bigger picture’ (2008: 27). Above all, I was aware that children usually regard teachers as ‘the resident expert’ (2008: 27) so would assume that I was looking for certain ‘correct’ responses to questions. The truth was, I did not know what the answers were, and I wanted children to be aware of this. Rather than be perceived as an expert, I wanted to be perceived as a learner. I wanted children to appreciate that although I had a genuine interest in the subject of beauty, I did not necessarily consider myself to be knowledgeable about it, and I was not planning to judge their responses in relation to my prior understanding of the subject. In adopting this approach, I also drew upon recent accounts of researching the experiences of young children. Smith (2011), for example, highlights how researchers can encourage children to respond in interviews by deliberately playing down their own knowledge of a subject. Her experiences of interviewing young children led her to conclude that ‘chances of a participatory dialogue and of gaining an understanding of the child’s standpoint were greater when the topic meant something to both child and researcher, and when the researcher positioned herself as less knowledgeable than the child’ (Smith 2011: 17). Though I was uncertain whether the topic of beauty would prove to be meaningful to children, I was determined to avoid presenting myself as an expert.

My approach to managing the interviews was also influenced by theory and practice outside of art education. Specifically, it drew closely on the work of authors associated with the Philosophy for Children movement. The concept of Philosophy for Children was developed in the US in the 1980s by Matthew Lipman and others and emerged from a concern that schools were failing to facilitate children’s abilities to think. ‘Why is it’, Lipman asks, ‘that while children of four, five and six are full of
curiosity, creativity and interest... by the time they are eighteen they are passive, uncritical and bored with learning?’ (Lipman 1982: 37)

Since the 1990s a number of authors have built upon Lipman’s work, mainly through texts designed to provide practical support and starting points for teachers to explore in the classroom (e.g. Worley 2010; Gaut and Gaut 2012; Lewis 2012). However there has been relatively little recent research into the impact of Philosophy for Children programmes, largely because the aims of the programme are relatively wide-ranging and strategies for measuring its impact are relatively limited (Fisher 1998). When Trickey and Topping (2007) carried out a quantitative systematic critical review of ten studies of Philosophy for Children programmes in the US, Britain and Canada they concluded that all studies indicated positive outcomes and questioned why the programme was not adopted more widely. In the UK, Robert Fisher adapted Lipman’s ideas during the 1990s (1992; 1995; 1998) and developed the concept of the ‘Thinking Circle’.

The theoretical foundations of Fisher’s Thinking Circle draw on the notion of Socratic teaching. Drawing parallels between Socrates’ philosophical position and the role of the modern teacher, Fisher describes how Socrates approached his dialogues with ‘a mixture of patient listening and preaching, of humility and arrogance, of kindly tolerance and aggressive persistence’ (1998: 139), and suggests that his perception of Athenian culture as intellectually and morally vacuous is reminiscent of many teachers’ current perspectives on contemporary society. His response was to question people about their assumptions, adopting the position of ignorance. Describing the key features of Socrates’ approach, Fisher identifies ‘the search for true knowledge [as] a cooperative enterprise pursued through dialogue’ and highlights Socrates’ belief that ‘questioning is the primary form of education, drawing out true knowledge from within
rather than imposing knowledge from outside’ (1998: 140). Fisher summarises Socratic approach by quoting a primary school pupil’s description of how ‘Socrates was always asking questions, and we are still looking for some of the answers’ (1998: 135).

In practice, a Thinking Circle begins with a stimulus that the teacher reads to the children before asking them to generate a range of questions in response, one of which they agree to explore in depth. Once children have agreed on a question they want to explore, the teacher then takes the role of the facilitator of the discussion. An effective facilitator, Fisher explains, focuses children on their ideas, asks for clarification of ideas and highlights links and contrasts between their ideas (1998: 182). In doing so, they establish a ‘community of enquiry’ in which children are encouraged to listen, to reflect, to articulate their ideas and move from individual interpretations to a shared understanding of the theme raised by the stimulus. Fisher frequently foregrounds children’s voices by integrating direct quotations from them into his writing to illustrate key points (as in the example above), and each chapter of ‘Teaching Thinking’ (1998) is prefaced with a juxtaposition of two quotes, one from a philosopher, the other from a child.

My own experience of the Thinking Circle approach dates back to 1999 when, as an MA Education student, I completed a Philosophy for Children module taught by Robert Fisher. Part of the assessment for the module required students to present to the group a stimulus designed to prompt discussion. While most students followed Fisher’s example by choosing a story or poem, I opted to present an image of a sculpture by Damien Hirst entitled The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living – otherwise known as ‘the shark in the tank’ (Fig. 4.2). Given the focus of my current research, this now seems a curious choice. I suspect that I was keen to reveal to
the other students my art school roots by choosing a stimulus that was widely perceived as ‘challenging’ and that any thoughts about beauty were at that time far from my mind.

*Fig. 4.2 Damien Hirst: The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991)*

What I learned from the experience was how effective an image could be as a stimulus for discussion. Whereas some group members might quickly forget certain details of a story they have just heard, an image remained visible to them throughout the discussion, they can return to it, point out certain details, notice new things and sometimes change their minds. Back in my Year 6 classroom, I experimented with using images as starting points for my own Thinking Circles. From a theoretical perspective, I was curious to find out about their responses to images, while from a practical perspective I realised that the quality of discussion was improved when they were able to still see the stimulus of the discussion, rather than rely upon their memories of a story.

Years later, these experiences were to influence my research design. While planning my interviews with children I drew upon and adapted Fisher’s theory to suit my purposes. Firstly, I decided that children should provide the starting points for discussions; though I was curious to discover what they thought about images I found beautiful, I wanted to place their own experiences at the centre of the research. Secondly, while Fisher conceptualises the Thinking Circle as a means of creating a shared understanding among participants, I drew on Eisner’s (2002) argument that the
art teacher should seek ‘diversity of outcome’ (2002: 44). I was interested in children’s perspectives, whether they agreed or disagreed about their perceptions of beauty. I did, however, retain one key feature of Fisher’s approach: the role of facilitator.

Fisher’s notion of the facilitator strongly influenced my approach to the interviews and enabled me to resolve my dual identities of teacher and interviewer. As a teacher I had the necessary experience and confidence to manage groups of children effectively: as a researcher I had the motivation to find answers to my questions. As the facilitator of discussion I aimed to combine the roles of teacher and interviewer, a role that involved focusing children’s attention on the theme of the interview; uncovering meaning through asking questions, requesting explanations or clarifications; highlighting connections and contrasts between children’s contributions and offering them support and encouragement when necessary. I judged that this approach would enable me to develop an understanding of children’s perceptions of beauty.

4.4 Interpreting the data: principles and processes

This section of the chapter identifies the principles that underpinned my approach to interpreting the data once it was collected and outlines the processes adopted. It begins with a discussion of the methods of content analysis and photo-elicitation, before identifying the three principles that underpinned my interpretation of the interview data.

4.4.1 Interpreting children’s images

Just as my approach to interviewing children drew on several disciplines, I drew on several strands of literature to inform my approach to interpreting their images. Content analysis is an approach to data interpretation that draws upon both quantitative and
qualitative methods. On one level, the approach centres on the identification of relative frequencies of elements within a written data set (Cohen et al 2011); on another, it demands that the researcher interprets the symbolic qualities of the data with an awareness and understanding of the contexts in which it has been generated in order to make inferences that are replicable and valid (Krippendorff 2004). My approach to interpreting the images children found and photographed drew on Rose’s (2007) four stages of content analysis: finding images; devising categories; coding images and analysing results.

In the context of this research, it was children themselves who would carry out the first stage of the process. Powell and Smith (2009) point out that the success of an interview can depend upon participants’ levels of engagement with the subject matter discussed, and I anticipated that I would gain a greater understanding of their perceptions of beauty if the images they discussed were ones they wanted to talk about. Therefore, rather than select them myself, I decided to ask children to choose which of their images they wanted to share with others during interviews. This transpired to be one of the most important decisions I made, the implications of which are discussed in the concluding chapter.

Rose suggests that at the second stage of the process the researcher should devise categories for coding the images that are ‘exhaustive, exclusive and enlightening’ (2007: 65). She also warns that the process of reducing a collection of images to a number of categories risks affecting their value or meaning. It is essential therefore that the codes are grounded in a theorized connection between the image and the broader cultural context in which its meaning is made’ (2007: 65). I anticipated that children’s contributions to interviews would provide me with the basis to both devise categories and code images. I was conscious, however, of Rose’s warning that the third
stage of the process needed to be ‘so clearly defined that the coding process would be replicable’ (2007: 68). In order to ensure that the categories I had devised withstood scrutiny, I planned to repeat the process several times, both during and after the interviews. This would inform an analysis that would enable me to assemble a quantitative summary of the contents of children’s images. Following Rose’s recommendations, I decided to foreground the most significant frequencies before identifying key characteristics of the data, highlighting trends, similarities and differences between images.

The characteristics of photo-elicitation were described in an earlier section of this chapter (4.2.4) and it is useful to return to this notion in the context of explaining the process of data interpretation. Rose (2007) describes six stages of photo-elicitation: (i) an initial interview identifying the questions the photographs will help to answer; (ii) the researcher then briefs provides cameras and guidance for participants about the photographs they will take, before (iii) printing the photographs and encouraging participants to write about related thoughts and feelings. The researcher then discusses the photographs with participants, who clarify the meanings they associate with the images, before analysing interview transcripts. Rose notes that, once completed, ‘the talk about the photos between the researcher and the researched takes precedence over the photos themselves’ (2007: 242). This last observation encapsulates the approach I finally adopted to researching children’s experiences. Although in art education it is the visual that tends to take precedence and the notion that the work should ‘speak for itself’ is held dear, my intention was to place the children’s words, rather than their images at the centre of the enquiry. The following section of the chapter explains the approach I adopted to enable me to interpret their words.
4.4.2 Interpreting the interview data

This section of the chapter identifies the principles that underpinned the interpretation of the interview data. Savin-Baden and Howell Major define interpretation as ‘the act of explication, explanation and elucidation’ (2013: 451), and my intention here is to clarify and explain the principles I adopted for this stage of the research.

The interpretation of interview data is problematic in terms of what both the interviewer and interviewees bring to the situation. Arksey and Knight (1999) suggest that several factors can combine to influence the interviewer’s perceptions of the meaning of interview data, and that they extend back to the origins of the research. The interviewer brings to the situation knowledge, experience and understanding that are likely to impact upon their expectations of the situation and to come into play during the data collection process. Long before the first interview, they should have identified their focus for the research, developed their knowledge of relevant background literature and considered their approach to data collection. They will have anticipated, or even hoped for, certain responses from interviewees and perhaps imagined certain exchanges or discussions. Consequently, interviewers are likely to perceive their interviewees’ responses through a number of filters that threaten to distort as much as clarify their meaning. Arksey and Knight argue that researchers must remain aware of this threat as they strive to identify the meaning that exists at the intersection of four fields (Fig. 4.3).
In order to get to the meanings at the centre of the research I needed to establish my own principles for interpreting the interview data. After due consideration of the literature, my approach was guided by the following principles: (i) to provide faithful descriptions of children’s perspectives; (ii) to identify themes that summarised their perceptions of beauty without simplifying or misrepresenting them and (iii) to represent the diversity of children’s perceptions of beauty rather than foreground the most frequent responses. Each is discussed in more detail below.

The first principle, to provide faithful descriptions of children’s perspectives, would be challenging in terms of the quantity of data gathered, and I aimed to summarise each interview in a way that would communicate its ‘key events’ to the reader. The experience of piloting the data collection process (details below) enabled me to recognise the extent to which each interview would consist of a number of discussions, each prompted by a particular image. These discussions were sometimes quite brief, often because children were less interested in an image, and I would need to judge children’s levels of engagement before deciding whether to ask more questions about the image or introduce another. Other discussions were much longer, engaged more participants and prompted more reflective responses. Viewed through a
pedagogical lens, as a teacher these would be the discussions that I would want children to remember at the end of the day. These types of discussion might occur only once or twice during an interview, but they offered valuable opportunities for me to understand children’s perspectives in ways that would eventually help me to answer my research questions. Consequently, such discussions feature prominently both in the summaries of the interviews featured in the following data and interpretation chapters.

My second principle for interpreting the interview data was to identify within it themes that illuminated children’s perceptions of beauty without simplifying or misrepresenting them. Miles and Huberman (1994) identify a range of strategies for generating meaning from interview data, several of which I decided to adopt, such as counting frequencies, noting patterns and clustering items into relevant themes. I was aware that the process of identifying these themes would be challenging and complex: it would involve much reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts, organizing and re-organizing data in ways that recognised its relevance, clarified connections and highlighted contrasts. I was also conscious that I should be alert to instances in the discussions when children’s ideas connected or contrasted in some way with themes from the literature on aesthetic experience. My experience of piloting the interview suggested that at times I would recognise such instances and question children more closely about their ideas, and that at other times I would miss such opportunities.

My third principle for interpreting the interview data was that it was more important to represent the diversity of children’s perceptions of beauty than to foreground the most frequent responses. This principle is perhaps the most contentious, but it underpinned the earliest methodological decision I made, when I decided to research the aesthetic experiences of children in different economic, social and geographical contexts (see below). This was rooted in my experiences as a teacher and
educator, and my instinct was that a study that was restricted to one school population
would raise more questions than it answered and any conclusions I would draw would
be relevant only to that school and community. I believed that by locating the research
in schools that represented two contrasting communities, I would be able to make some
informed generalisations about children’s perceptions of beauty.

The notion of generalisation in qualitative research is, however, contentious. Larsson (2009) describes his dissatisfaction with the tendency of authors of qualitative
studies to refrain from claiming that their findings can be generalized, arguing that, ‘[if] taken seriously, it will reduce the interest in many qualitative studies to practically
nothing.’ He proposes that a study must have some capacity for generalization and that it is ‘the variation of a phenomenon [that] should be investigated’ and that it is possible
to enhance the potential for generalization by maximizing the variation of the participants:

In order to generalize from a certain study, one needs to optimize the probability that as many qualitatively different cases or categories as possible will be possible to describe. This means that the uncommon case is as important as the most common kind of case… the variation in the study should be expected to exist also in relevant situations that one wants to generalize to. (Larsson 2009: 31)

I anticipated that in my research it might be the ‘uncommon cases’, unexpected contributions to interviews that could lead to sustained discussions during which children shared the most intriguing ideas. Even if only a relatively small proportion of children proved to be capable of expressing such ideas, they could nonetheless be taken as representative of the views of a similar proportion of children in other schools. Furthermore, my experience as a teacher had taught me that, even though some children might not be capable of conceiving certain ideas themselves, they could nonetheless understand them when they heard them discussed.
These uncommon cases are not representative of all children, but have what Strauss and Corbin describe as ‘explanatory power’ (1990: 61). They suggest that it is more appropriate to think in terms of the explanatory power of qualitative data rather than generalizability: if the reader understands the context within which the research was carried out, then they are likely to make judgments regarding its relevance to other contexts. Larsson argues that it is not the author but the reader of the research who decides the extent to which its findings can be generalized: the reader ‘is invited to notice something they did not see before… the audience becomes the judge of the meaningfulness of a piece of research’ (Larsson 2009: 33/36). In the context of my research, I chose to focus on extracts from the interviews that I believe had the most explanatory power in terms of answering my questions about the nature of children’s perceptions of beauty.

4.5 The data collection process

4.5.1 Piloting the data collection process

There were two stages to piloting the data collection process. The first was piloted during the very early stages of the research in 2010, with two primary schools, one in London, the other in Surrey, both of which I knew through my role supervising trainee teachers. At this point I had not decided on adopting group interviews as my main research method, and did not have a list of specific questions for children (see 4.3.1).

I chose to approach the two schools because their populations reflected very different social and cultural groups, and I was interested in whether children’s environment might influence their perceptions of beauty (see below). I made initial
visits to both school to ask children in each Year 5 class (9-10-year-olds) to find and bring to school an image that represented their idea of beauty. The request was in the form of a homework task and the following week I returned to each school, collected the images and spent an hour with each class discussing them. I stood at the front of the room and went through each image in turn, asking who had chosen it and why they thought it was beautiful. Children talked informally about their images, and at the end of the discussion I gathered their teachers’ views on the whether they found children’s responses interesting or informative.

There were several encouraging features to this pilot study. I found children were engaged by the project: all but one or two children remembered to bring an image to school; they were curious to see what others had chosen and enjoyed both the diversity of the images and also the similarities, as two boys were pleased to find they had independently chosen images of exactly the same car. During whole-class discussions some children were keen to articulate the reasons for their choices and one teacher observed how some hard-to-engage individuals responded positively to the task.

Several minor issues arose. I realised my initial engagement with the children needed to be managed more carefully: I was introduced to one class as an ‘art lecturer’ which may have led to children assuming that they should look for images of artworks (though very few did). Similarly, when discussing plans for my research with teachers, I quickly realised that they were also inclined to make assumptions about children. ‘Of course you know what they’ll do,’ one teacher said to me, ‘they’ll all bring in pictures of their mums.’ This conversation was one of several that prompted me to reflect upon how even subtle messages about expectation could impact upon children’s responses to such challenges.
While there is insufficient space here to offer an analysis of the contents of children’s images, the random selection pictured below (Fig. 4.4) indicates a range of subject matter and an clear preference for intense colours.

![Selection of images from the first pilot study, 2010](image)

There were three key issues, however, that emerged from this first pilot study. Firstly, I did not arrange to collect children’s images before meeting them for the discussions, which meant I had to ‘think on my feet’ as teachers handed me children’s images shortly before the start of the discussion. Secondly, once the discussions began, I found they lacked structure: we drifted from one image to the next and often returned to themes previously discussed as similar subject matter resurfaced. Thirdly, I found I had an insufficient range of questions for children and that I missed opportunities to challenge them to articulate their ideas more clearly. Finally, within a whole-class context I found some children were inclined to dominate the discussion while others
were reluctant to share their images or opinions. As a result of this pilot study I realised that I needed to allow time to collect images and sequence them during interviews in ways that would avoid repetition and, despite the implications for the length of time it would take to gather data, I needed to work with much smaller groups.

I carried out a second pilot study summer 2012. In the intervening two years I had developed a much clearer idea of how theories of philosophical aesthetics could inform my questioning of children, and also reflected on how I could base my approach to conducting group interviews on Fisher’s notion of the Thinking Circle (see 4.3.3). This time I asked several friends if I could trial the interview with their children, and I subsequently interviewed two groups of five, aged between nine and thirteen.

Before the interviews I asked each child to provide two images to represent their ideas of beauty, one found, the other photographed. Only one or two minor issues arose. Despite being asked to select images independently, one pair of 13-year-old girls collaborated and presented images they agreed were beautiful. This seemed to influence responses from the rest of the group, who were made to feel a little marginalised if they disagreed with the girls’ choices. Consequently I decided to emphasise to children involved in the actual study should work independently and to provide them each with individualised envelopes for printed images and blank CDs for digital files.

Crucially, however, I found the group interview situation worked very well. Children quickly established a positive and generally supportive environment that was strongly reminiscent of Fisher’s ‘community of enquiry’. My experience as a teacher helped me to maintain an atmosphere that was informal yet purposeful, while my increased awareness of theories of aesthetic experience enabled me to take advantage of
opportunities to further my understanding of children’s perceptions through questioning them.

There were also some interesting findings in terms of the subject matter of children’s images. Though the sample of children was too small to make any judgments about frequencies, what was evident was that several children took photographs that were very similar to the images they had found; one who found an image of a lion went on to photograph a cat, for example (Fig. 4.5). Overall, children’s capacity for reflection during these interviews impressed me, and the experience confirmed that the interview design would help me to understand children’s perceptions of beauty. Specifically, the route towards understanding their experiences lay in the interpretation not only of children’s images but also of the words they used to describe, analyse and reflect upon them.

![Fig. 4.5 Selection of images from the second pilot study, 2010](image-url)
4.5.2 Participants

From the earliest stages of the project, I wanted to research the experiences of children in contrasting environments. My early plans were influenced by 7Up, a series of television programmes by Michael Apted charting the lives of a diverse selection of people born in England in the late 1950s (Fig 4.6). The participants were each seven years old at the time of the first programme in 1963, and it features interviews with them at seven-yearly intervals, through which their perceptions of themselves and the world gradually emerge and develop. I was 19 and in my first year at art school when I first saw 7Up in 1984 (56Up was broadcast in May 2012) and two of its features continue to intrigue me: firstly, the extent to which younger children’s curiosity, optimism and unselfconsciousness was invariably lost as they grew older; and secondly, the ways in which participants’ social, economic and cultural backgrounds influenced their perspectives on (and subsequent trajectories through) their lives.

Fig 4.6 7-Up Granada Television, 1964 - present

Though practicalities prevented the option of conducting a longitudinal study, 7Up influenced the conceptualisation of my research. I wanted to capture children’s
experiences, ideas and beliefs about beauty while they were still relatively unselfconscious about them yet able to articulate them; I wanted to children’s voices to feature prominently in the research, and I wanted the study to reflect the experiences of children from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds. Fortunately, my experiences of working in education over the past 20 years meant that I was able to find two schools, one in inner-London, the other in a rural area 40 miles from London, with head teachers who welcomed my plans to carry out the research. Each is a state school with a population broadly representative of its local community. The names of both schools have been changed, though I obtained permission from teachers and children to use all real names when writing this thesis.

Fig. 4.7 Greystones School, west London (street view, aerial view)

Greystones School (Fig. 4.8) is a two-form entry primary school in west London attended by 434 children aged three to 11 years (all figures correct as at 2015). 67.8%
of the school population is eligible for pupil premium additional funding (a measure introduced in April 2011 to commit extra resources for disadvantaged pupils) compared with a national average of 26.8%. The population of the school reflects the cultural diversity of the local area: 52.1% have English as an additional language (NALDIC 2012) 63% of the cohort of pupils involved in the research achieved Level 5 or above in English and 59% in Maths. A 2014 Ofsted report judged the school as one that ‘requires improvement’.

*Fig. 4.8 Old Oak School, Surrey (street view, aerial view)*

Old Oak School is a four-form entry junior school in south-west Surrey attended by 476 pupils aged seven to 11 years. 6.4% of the school population is eligible for pupil premium additional funding and only 2.1% of pupils have English as an additional language. 82% of the cohort of pupils involved in the research achieved Level 5 or above in English and 58% in Maths. A 2014 Ofsted report judged the school as ‘good’. In the two data chapters that follow, the data gathered from Greystones School is presented in Chapter 5 and that from Old Oak School in Chapter 6. The interviews are numbered A1 to A10 (Greystones School) and B1 to B8 (Old Oak School).
4.5.3 Engaging with the schools

In March 2012 I wrote to the Head Teacher of Greystones School, briefly describing my plans for the research (Appendix 4.1). The letter was the first step in a process of engagement with the school community – though it is perhaps better described as re-engagement. As a student teacher I completed a two-month placement at the school in 1992 and, despite the brevity of this experience, it influenced my concept of myself as a teacher. The placement offered me time and space to experiment with pedagogical strategies, to develop my communication skills and to begin to construct what I considered to be my ‘teaching identity’, one that was related to, yet distinct from, my ‘real’ identity. 20 years on, I still perceived the school as a place where I could go to learn, rather than to teach.

Curiously, the three members of staff who became involved in the research were also ‘returners’. I had met the Head Teacher 20 years earlier, when she taught five and six-year-olds; the Deputy Head Teacher had previously worked at the school and, despite living two hours’ journey away from the area, had returned to teach there again, while the teacher of the class I planned to work with had previously been a teaching assistant in the school. Even one of the boys I had taught in 1992, the Deputy Head Teacher told me, as she pointed out his picture in the corridor, had eventually become a teacher there. It was, she explained, a place to which many people were drawn to return.

In March 2012 I drafted a detailed overview of the proposed research that addressed a range of possible questions (Appendix 4.2). While it was important to demonstrate that I had invested a great deal of thought in my plans, I also indicated that I would be happy to be revise them if necessary in order to accommodate the requirements of the school: I realised I needed to be purposeful, yet flexible. I had, for
example, identified Year 5 children as the most appropriate age group to take part in the research, as I had assumed that teachers would not want their Year 6 pupils to be ‘distracted’ by a new project during their final year in the school. This turned out not to be the case, and the Deputy Head identified a class that was about to enter Year 6 as one that she believed would be suitable for the project. Fortunately, she had a particular interest in strategies for developing children’s thinking skills and had previously worked on ‘Philosophy for Children’ projects. She described children’s previous levels of engagement with philosophical themes so stood to benefit from further such experiences.

Having secured approval from the Head and Deputy Head, I met with the class teacher in order to confirm the details of the project. At this meeting I sought to reassure her that I wanted the research to cause minimal disruption to the running of the class, and we agreed that this would best be achieved by identifying a regular place in the timetable for weekly visits, beginning in September (Appendix 4.3) and we discussed resources I would bring to the interviews (Appendix 4.4). The class teacher offered to divide children into five groups for the interviews and, rather than allocating them according to their academic ability (a strategy widely adopted in primary classrooms) she identified groups of children who regularly worked collaboratively together. I also brought to the meeting a summary of ethical issues related to the research in the form of my application statement for ethical approval (Appendix 4.5), evidence that the statement had received approval from the University (Appendix 4.6) and copies of a participant consent form to be sent home with children (Appendix 4.7).
4.5.4 Introducing the tasks

I introduced the research tasks to children in Greystones School in London in Autumn 2012 and repeated the process at Old Oak School in Surrey in Spring 2013 (a brief account of which is presented at the beginning of Chapter 6). A week before the first interview I introduced children to the first research task. Conscious that they needed to be provided with identical instructions, I arranged to address the whole class for 20 minutes; I provided each child with a named, blank CD for saving digital images, a named envelope in which to return their image and a summary of the task (below, and Appendix 4.8).

I read the task through with children and asked whether they had any questions. There were very few: could they save the image to a data stick? (no, you have a CD to save it to); which file format should they use? (jpeg would be fine). I was re-assured by these enquiries, partly because they indicated children had previous experience of locating and saving digital images and partly because they were restricted to technical, rather than conceptual issues. I had anticipated more challenging enquiries. A fair question, for example, might well have been Why do you want us to do this? In which case, I would have explained that I was curious to find out about children and what they thought about the images that they saw, and was especially interested in finding out what ideas they might have about beauty. (A few weeks later, at the end of one interview, a child asked me whether everyone at my university was interested in beauty; No, I said, I didn’t think so).

Together with the homework task, I also gave children letters of consent for their parents (Appendix 4.9) to ensure that children had parental consent for taking part in the project and that parents were aware of the task that children had been set. This was also an opportunity to encourage parents to provide support with the task, while
gently discouraging them from influencing their children’s decisions. Specifically, it stated:

You may find that your child will ask you for help in locating an image. It may be that they would like to locate an image of something but are unable to do so without help. Please feel free to support your child in any way, but try to let them make their own decision about which image to choose. (Appendix 4.9)

As some participants in the pilot study had chosen images collaboratively, I took care to emphasise to children that it would be better if they did not share their images with classmates, as it would be a nice surprise to see each other’s images.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The image you have chosen is...</th>
<th>What to do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In a newspaper, book or magazine</td>
<td>Bring it to school. We will scan the image and return the newspaper, book or magazine to you next week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the Internet</td>
<td>Either:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1) Print it and bring the image to school in your envelope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Save it as a picture file on to your CD and bring the CD to school in your envelope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Carefully write down the website address where you found the image, write a short description of the image and put this information in your envelope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a family album</td>
<td>Ask permission to remove the picture from the album, bring the picture to school and we will scan it and return it to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhere else</td>
<td>Ask your family for advice!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4.9 Homework task 1: Your own idea of beauty

I scheduled a number of preliminary visits to the children’s classroom before the summer break in order to familiarise myself with the children and for them to become familiar with me as a presence in their classroom. This notion of establishing myself as
a ‘presence’ in the classroom is one that requires some explanation. The pilot study had alerted me to the problem of assuming too specific a role in the children’s eyes: in one school I had been introduced to the children as ‘an art teacher’, and I was concerned that this description had influenced children’s responses during our subsequent interactions: specifically, they might have assumed or suspected that the images I asked them to bring to school should be works of art. Therefore, when I began a series of six visits to the Year 5 classroom in Greystones School in June 2012, I provided children with a minimum of information about myself. I found they were used to receiving visitors (in the form of parent helpers, for example), and they quickly accepted and rarely questioned my presence. When asked, I explained that I taught at a university and that I was interested in finding out what children were learning. I tried to present myself as someone who was curious about the children, their work, their interests and their opinions, in order to ‘pave the way’ towards the interviews. As described above, I wanted to position myself as a learner, rather than a teacher.

As well as providing opportunities to get to know the children, these visits also helped me to become familiar with the routines of the school day and of the class teacher’s expectations of the children, experiences that were to prove valuable when the interviews began in the autumn term. For example, I would know whereabouts in the playground to meet ‘my’ group of children at the beginning of each afternoon. In terms of my interaction with children, I carefully noted the class teacher’s strategies for managing behaviour and sought to be consistent with them: I was aware that changes of routine can be disruptive, and I wanted to reduce the likelihood of inappropriate behaviour.

Finally, in order to minimise distractions and to facilitate audio recordings, it was agreed that the interviews should take place away from classroom. Fortunately, the
Deputy Head offered the use of her room as a location, a small classroom set up for group teaching sessions. As a result, interviews were rarely interrupted; the round tables helped to create an atmosphere conducive to discussion, and the remoteness of the room from the classroom helped to create a sense that the interviews were ‘special occasions’, something for children to look forward to. There were few distractions: the room was on the third floor of the Victorian building; tall windows offered views across streets and tower blocks. We could often hear younger children through the open windows, in the nursery playground the pilot study had alerted me to the problem of, a backdrop of wordless voices that contrasted with those of the ten-year-olds upstairs, talking to each other about beauty.

This chapter has presented an overview of the methodology of the study, a description of the research design, an explanation of the design and structure of the interview and of the data collection process. The following two chapters present the data gathered from the two schools.
Chapter 5: Description of data: Greystones School

Introduction

This is the first of two chapters that describe the data gathered during the empirical research. 18 semi-structured interviews with nine groups of children from two schools were carried out between September 2012 and March 2013. The first ten interviews took place at Greystones School, London and involved 28 children aged 10-11, while the remaining eight interviews took place at Old Oak School, Surrey and involved 23 children aged 9-10. Prior to their first group interview, children were asked to find images that represented their ideas of beauty and to bring them to school; before their second interview, they were loaned cameras and asked to take photographs that represented their ideas of beauty. During the interviews children took turns to describe, analyse and reflect upon the images they had found and photographed, to ask each other questions about them and to respond to my questions about their perceptions and understandings of beauty. Children were interviewed in groups of five or six. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In total the 51 children participating in the research found or photographed more than 500 images, and chose over 100 examples to share during the interviews, the transcripts of which totaled almost 120,000 words.

This chapter describes the data gathered from Greystones School, and the following chapter describes the data gathered from Old Oak School. The aim of both chapters is to provide a descriptive, narrative account of the data collection process and of the data collected, in the form of summaries of the discussions that occurred, extracts from interview transcripts and all the images children shared during the interviews. The
chapter begins by presenting an analysis of the contents of children’s found images and photographs and a comparison between the two schools in terms of their subject matter.

5.1 Content analysis of children’s images

Two days before the first interview at Greystones School, I collected the images the children had found. Most had remembered to bring them to school while others brought them the following week. I checked that I had received images from all the children in the first interview group and found that, as I had anticipated, some had chosen original photographs that had to be scanned and printed before being returned to their owners, while others had submitted digital files that also needed to be printed in order for children to share them during their interviews. I had also anticipated that I would probably find some images more interesting than others, that my preferences might be noticeable to children and that I risked influencing their responses during the interviews. Therefore, at this stage I refrained from interpreting the images in any way, and only once the interviews were completed organised them into ‘clusters’ according to their content. The reproductions on the following pages provide an indication of the types of content represented in the images and the frequency with which each type occurred.

The process of clustering images according to their content was influenced by my experience of the pilot study interviews, when it was clear that it was important for children to have a shared understanding of what it was they were looking at before further discussion could take place. If a child presented an image with content that was difficult to identify, children’s responses to the image were often restricted to factual, ‘lower order’ questions, rather than reflective, ‘higher order’ enquiries. Essentially, they needed to know who or what they were looking at, how the image had been made and where it had been found. Only once the ‘facts’ about the content of an image were
agreed were children ready to share their personal interpretations and discuss the reasons for their preferences. Similarly, when I clustered images according to their content rather than any particular aesthetic or artistic qualities they displayed, I aimed to provide a relatively objective starting point for the process of analysis reported in later chapters.

The process of analysing the contents of children’s images at Greystones School began within moments of collecting the first set of images. It eventually involved periodically re-visiting these images, together with those gathered from Old Oak School, over a period of two years. When I looked at children’s images independently I found many of them interesting, but it was not until I looked at them again, in the context of children’s descriptions and explanations of them, that their value as evidence of children’s perceptions of beauty became clear. Throughout the process I was always aware that another researcher might look at the same images, yet see different things and draw different conclusions. As Arksey and Knight (1999) highlight, research data has multiple meanings and the one that each researcher perceives is that which lies at the centre of their own unique combination of experiences. As described in Chapter 4, I aimed to provide faithful descriptions of children’s perspectives, to identify themes that summarised their views without simplifying or misrepresenting them and to represent the diversity of their perspectives rather than foreground the most frequent responses (Larsson 2009).

The conclusion of this thesis presents some reflections on the research process, but several issues need to be highlighted at this point. Certain aspects of the content analysis process were difficult to anticipate: firstly, some children contributed far more images than others. While most chose only one or two, some chose as many as nine and, while most photographed between five and ten each. As such anomalies would
skew the data, I decided to express frequencies in terms numbers of *children* who chose or photographed certain subject matter rather than the number of *images* that represented it. Secondly, when it came to comparing frequencies from the two schools there were 28 children in one school and 23 in the other, so I converted these numbers to percentages. (Around two thirds of children chose or photographed images of more than one type of subject matter; consequently, the percentages of children identified in the following tables are greater than 100). Thirdly, though I strove to ensure that the process of categorising images would be replicable (Rose 2007) I found it was difficult to categorise images as precisely as I had anticipated. Some featured several types of subject matter and, although the tables offer succinct summaries of image content, they also obscure several instances when a single image depicted different types: for example, a single landscape could feature mountains, water and trees. Finally, I experimented with a number of approaches to presenting this quantitative data in clear and visually engaging ways, before settling on a simple pictorial grid arrangement that provided both visual and numerical information on the main types of content. Examples of earlier experiments with pie charts and Venn diagrams can be found in Appendix 5.1, but Tables 5.1 to 5.4 present the content analysis of children’s images from the two schools.
Table 5.1  Greystones School: content analysis, found images

The 28 children at Greystones School found 63 images, 29 of which were shared during their first interviews. More than half the children chose images that depicted people. One quarter chose images of themselves, while one in five chose images of other family members. One in four children chose images of landscapes and a similar number chose images that illustrated abstract patterns. One in three chose images that pictured flowers while one in five found images that depicted animals. One in ten children pictured architecture while one in five children chose images that depicted ‘other worlds’.
Table 5.2 Greystones School: content analysis, photographs

Children photographed a total of 215 images, 42 of which were shared during their second interviews. A third of children re-photographed images of themselves and one in five photographed siblings or cousins. A similar number photographed flowers and animals, while fewer children photographed local buildings and decorative objects in the home. A small number of children photographed religious artefacts and images of superheroes, while several re-photographed images of distant landscapes.
The 23 children at Old Oak School found 76 images, 36 of which were shared during their first interviews. More than half represented landscapes and around one in five flowers. Half the children found images of animals, mainly wild and some domestic. Only one in ten images represented people, some of whom were family members while others were celebrities and a similar number pictured architecture. One child provided a diverse range of images that included fantasy worlds, a fractal snowflake and views of stars.
Table 5.4  Old Oak School: content analysis, photographs

Children photographed a total of 278 images, 34 of which were shared during their second interviews. Half photographed flowers and a similar number photographed landscapes. 43% photographed domestic animals and 21% farm animals; 16% photographed local buildings and 13% photographed people, mainly grandparents, cousins and siblings, while a similar proportion photographed aspects of the home environment, particularly fireplaces.
Tables 5.5 and 5.6 present a summary of the data on the preceding pages that allows a direct comparison of the two schools. The similarities and contrasts between the images are summarised on the following pages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Predominant feature</th>
<th>% of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Greystones School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The natural environment</td>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Landscapes</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domestic animals</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wild animals</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Me when I was younger</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Siblings / cousins</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Celebrities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The built environment</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract patterns</td>
<td>Abstract patterns in design</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abstract patterns in nature</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Other worlds’</td>
<td>Space, stars, fantasy landscapes</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5.5 Content analysis of found images*

*There were 28 participants in Greystones School and 23 in Old Oak School; therefore one child in Greystones School is equivalent to 3.5% while one child in Old Oak School is equivalent to 4.5%.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Predominant feature</th>
<th>% of children</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Greystones School</td>
<td>Old School</td>
<td>Oak</td>
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<tr>
<td>The natural environment</td>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Landscapes (distant)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Landscapes (local, natural)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domestic animals</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wild / farm animals</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Still life</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Me when I was younger</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Siblings / cousins</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grandparents / extended family</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Celebrities</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The built environment</td>
<td>Local buildings</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distant buildings</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The home environment</td>
<td>Cuddly toys</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decorative objects</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fireplaces</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fabrics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
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<td>Cultural artefacts</td>
<td>Heroes and superheroes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious artefacts</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5.6 Content analysis of photographs*
Similarities and contrasts between images from the two schools

There were relatively few similarities between the two image sets. About a third of children in each school photographed their local environment and around a fifth chose to share images of flowers. Around one in ten children from each school chose images of buildings in distant locations and a similar proportion shared images of celebrities. There was only one instance of two children choosing the same image, and they happened to be in different schools. More often it was the contrasts between the contents of the two sets of images that were more noticeable than the similarities.

Children in Greystones School frequently chose images of people and almost always of family members: 29% shared images of themselves, while 8% chose images of their mothers and 8% siblings or cousins. People featured even more frequently in the images they photographed: a third of children either photographed themselves or re-photographed existing images of themselves when they were younger, while a fifth photographed siblings or cousins. In contrast, only 8% (two children) in Old Oak School found images that depicted either themselves or family members, while only five photographed people. People appeared in only one of the 41 images found by boys at Old Oak School and only five of the 59 images they photographed, while of the 187 images that girls photographed, only ten included people.

60% of children in Old Oak School chose images of landscapes compared with only 28% of children at Greystones School, and 30% of children in Old Oak School went on to photograph landscapes, compared with 15% of children at Greystones School. 50% of children in Old Oak School chose images of animals compared with 20% of Greystones School and 64% of children in Old Oak School photographed animals compared with 18% at Greystones School.
The content analysis process I adopted failed to highlight an aspect of the data that was evident from comparing the images from the two schools. While children in Greystones School also found beauty in the natural world they were much more likely to choose digitally enhanced images of nature (meaning that images were either digitally generated or photographs that were digitally manipulated). These images almost always featured enhanced colours and contrasts of tone. 29% of children in the school chose digitally manipulated images of nature, with enhanced, intensified colours, while only 13% of children at Old Oak School chose similar images. The difference was even more striking when comparing the two sets of images of flowers. 78% of images of flowers chosen by children at Greystones School were digitally manipulated, compared with only 25% of those chosen by children at Old Oak School. Finally, 14% of children in Greystones School found images that represented abstract patterns, either in nature or elsewhere while only 4% of children (one child) in WA school chose an abstract pattern.

I have kept this analysis of the contents of children’s images succinct because I am acutely aware that describing them in such general terms and reducing their contents to percentages and proportions does not do justice to their diversity – or their beauty. The conclusion of the thesis presents further reflection on the process of analysing the images; the remainder of this chapter focuses on the ten interviews carried out with children at Greystones School, London.

5.2 Description of interviews A1-A5 (found images)

This and the following section of the chapter provide a narrative, descriptive account of the ten interviews carried out at Greystones School. Each account includes descriptions
of the discussions that took place during the interviews, illustrated with extracts from transcripts and reproductions of all images discussed. The interview questions were listed in the previous chapter and are also included as an appendix (5.1).

In Chapter 4 I described how I conceptualised the role of interviewer as a facilitator of discussion, and how this process involved several stages: (i) focusing children on the theme of the interview and discussions within it; (ii) uncovering meaning through asking questions; (iii) requesting explanations or clarifications; (iv) highlighting connections and contrasts between contributions and (v) offering support and encouragement when necessary (Fisher 1998). I began each interview by asking each group member to select one image they would like to share with the rest of the group, to take turns to describe it and to explain why they thought it was beautiful. I encouraged children to ask each other questions about their images and I asked further questions of individuals and of the group as a whole.

When asked to describe their images and explain their responses to each other’s images, children most children talked engagingly, listened carefully and responded thoughtfully. As described in the previous chapter, I sought to encourage children to respond directly to one another rather than through me. Although this rarely happened during the initial interviews, it happened more frequently in later interviews. It was often the case that a passage of dialogue between two or more children – whether agreeing or disagreeing with each other – became pivotal, intensifying the ensuing discussion in such a way that others in the group were prompted to follow suit with contributions of their own, as evidenced by the interview transcripts (see example, Appendix 5.3). The following descriptions of the interviews highlight such discussions.

With regard to the dialogue quoted in both this and the following chapter, a brief grammatical note. I have taken care to reproduce children’s contributions to the
interviews as accurately as possible, and a disadvantage of this is that certain extracts from transcripts can be a little – like, umm… hard to read. The advantage is that it provides an indication of the distinctiveness of children’s voices and the ways they expressed their thoughts, perceptions and curiosity about their ideas and images.
Interview A1  20th September 2012
Group 1:  Muse; Christelle; Chloe; Ilham; Sara

Fig. 5.1  Ilham’s waves  (photograph taken on holiday)
Fig. 5.2  Christelle as a baby  (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.3  Chloe’s bear  (photograph of a book illustration from classroom)
Fig. 5.4  Muse as a baby  (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.5  Sara’s holiday  (photograph from home)
While most children in the class brought a single image that represented their idea of beauty to the interviews, a small number of children brought several. Ilham described one of the eight images she brought to school, a photograph of waves crashing on a shore (Fig. 5.1):

I think it’s beautiful because of the colours – because there is green and then there’s pink and then there’s blue. And when I was there it was the first time I ever saw pink waves and I thought it was really beautiful… I went to Egypt and on a beach and when we came there was nobody there and so we took a picture of it and it was really beautiful...

Colour was the first quality Ilham identified, before quickly moving on to emphasise the uniqueness of her experience, the fact that it took place in a distant location and that she and her family had found themselves alone on the beach. When I prompted her to reflect on her feelings about the photograph, she expanded on the sensory associations of the image, saying that she felt ‘like the water was just on me… it feels like I can feel another water running through my hands’. The other children in the group responded warmly to this image, particularly when they discovered that the photograph was from Ilham’s family album and recorded a real trip to the beach, rather than being located on the Internet: ‘You actually went there?’, exclaimed Christelle, ‘I thought you just took it from the computer! Ilham explained that: ‘The others were from the computer. But this is real.’ Christelle, Chloe and Muse each spoke briefly about their images (Figs. 5.2-4), before Sara presented hers (Fig 5.5) and offered several reasons for her choice:

I chose this picture because it was my idea of beauty and it was myself. And I chose this picture because of my brother ‘cause when he was small he was so cute. And the third reason I chose this picture is because it was in Greece and I haven’t went for five years and it brings back my memories.

Sara’s initial comment suggests a slightly self-centred approach to the task, but she quickly expanded on the reasons for her choice, introducing themes of family, memory
and cultural roots. Greece was special to her ‘because normally I don’t get to see my cousins and when they come to Albania I just get to see them one day’.

Interview A2 27th September 2012

Group 2: Ammar; Mahdi; Danyaal; Kyra; Yasmina; Mohad

Fig. 5.6 Ammar - pattern (digital painting from Internet via father’s album)
Fig. 5.7 Yasmina – flower (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.8 Kyra - sunset (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.9 Mohad – flower (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.10 Mahdi - cousin (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.11 Danyaal – cousin (photograph from home)
Ammar presented his image (Fig. 5.6) enthusiastically. It was beautiful, he declared,

Because it’s like a rainbow, it has lots and lots of colours and it just looks so realistic. And there’s a bit of water down here that reflects it and makes it look even more beautiful… When the colours are shining on top the background it just looks like, you know, so real… And the shapes in the blue in the pink and the other blue… it’s like seeing real people… it’s like I can see this man with a beard and moustache staring right out at me, it’s like knights or something, or guards guarding him – and that’s why I think the picture is beautiful.

Ammar referred to colour, shape and symmetry as well as to his perception that, although his image was an abstract pattern, he thought he could ‘see’ certain subject matter in it. Other members of the group soon indicated that colours were important to them. Yasmina told us she selected her digitally enhanced image of a flower, full of saturated ‘because it’s not only pink, it has purple and blue – and where the droplets of water are they are the same colour’ (Fig. 5.7). Colour was also the reason for Kyra’s choice of image (Fig. 5.10), and she specifically liked the way ‘the colours all fade into each other and it’s near the sea… I always see sunsets near my house a lot and I thought I should get a sunset picture’, while Mohad chose his image because ‘I like the petals on the flower… it has a lot of elaborate colours’ (Fig 5.9). Two children chose images from family albums. Mahdi’s image was of himself as a young child (Fig. 5.10) and he chose it ‘because there’s, like, a baby there and I’m there and I just like how it is… there’s lots of colours in it. I like the carpet and everything there’. Danyaal, however, did not refer to any visual qualities of his picture of his baby cousin (Fig. 5.11) but instead explained that he chose it ‘because I really love him, and (he’s) really cute and I always play with him and he’s beautiful’.
Reflections on Interviews A1 and A2

Following the first two interviews, I transcribed the recordings and identified a number of practical issues I needed to address in order to ensure that in the subsequent interviews I maximised opportunities for the children to articulate their ideas. Firstly, there were several occasions when discussions were relatively brief, stilted and superficial in nature:

- M: I chose this picture because... I don’t know...
- I: Where were you?
- M: I think I was in my cot.
- Ch: How old were you?
- M: Five months.
- C: Who took the picture?
- M: I don’t have no clue. (Interview A1)

I decided two issues had conspired to prevent the development of a discussion. In this extract, each question I posed in this extract was ‘closed’ in nature, requiring only a factual response; secondly, the brevity of the responses received discouraged children from pursuing lines of enquiry any further. Consequently, in subsequent interviews I encouraged each child to present their image by describing it. This usually helped them to provide the kind of information that others in the group needed to know, thereby reducing the need for closed questions and facilitating those of a more searching nature.

Secondly, it emerged that the range of questions I asked children was too broad. It was evident that certain questions that had made sense to me when typed on a screen sounded contrived in the ‘real life’ context and were difficult for children to answer, particularly during the early stages of the interview. I realised that I was progressing too quickly from asking children specific questions about images to asking them broader questions about their aesthetic experiences and understandings of the concept of beauty. For example, after only a few minutes in the first interview I asked children whether or not they thought everyone should find similar things beautiful. On
reflection, I decided that making such enquiries so soon after beginning the interview suggested impatience on my part, and that I wanted my research questions answered immediately. I learned to ask such questions towards the end of each interview, when we had finished discussing the images and children could ‘tune in’ to themes of a more philosophical nature.

Thirdly, I began to develop a clearer awareness of the importance of sequencing questions in such a way that they are accessible to children. Essentially, I needed to begin each interview with questions that prompted them to describe what they agreed they could all see, before asking them to analyse their own and each other’s responses, then eventually to encourage them to reflect in more depth on their experiences of beauty. Through following this sequence of description / analysis / reflection children’s ideas emerged more organically during subsequent interviews.

Finally, the recordings of the initial interviews revealed that I was talking too much, suggesting that the transition from teacher to interviewer had not been entirely smooth. In later interviews I learned to listen more carefully, to pause and allow children more time to respond, and to encourage children to build upon each other’s responses. This allowed children to reflect upon images at greater length during subsequent interviews, and to articulate their responses in more depth.
Interview A3 4th October 2012

Group 3: Mustafa; Mia; Sherika; Enesa; Sandy; Abigail

Fig. 5.12 Mia in the garden (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.13 Abigail’s mother (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.14 Abigail as a baby (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.15 Enesa’s rose (digitally enhanced image from Internet)
Fig. 5.16 Sherika’s rose (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.17 Sandy’s Lady Gaga (illustration from newspaper)
Fig. 5.18 Mustafa’s landscape (digital painting from Internet)
Mia was unselfconscious about presenting a recent photograph of herself to represent her idea of beauty. Though her image (Fig 5.12) represented the natural world—‘it’s a nice background… it’s like all leaves and that’s one of the reasons I think it’s beautiful’—she made it clear that her presence in the photograph was what made it beautiful: ‘The second reason (it’s beautiful) is because it’s me and I think I’m a very beautiful person’.

The relative brevity of Mia’s contribution prompted Abigail to take centre stage, where she remained for much of the hour that followed. She chose the photographs of her mother (Fig. 5.13) and of herself as a baby (Fig. 5.14) for several reasons:

I picked this picture of my Mum because it’s very special and I think my Mum is a very pretty woman even though she’s a bit fat (laughs) but I still think she’s a very pretty person and she’s got beauty within herself. I picked this (other) one because I looked very cute there and I just looked very pretty and I had very soft hair.

Shared notions of beauty were evident in the images Enesa and Sherika brought to the group (Figs. 5.15, 5.16). Their roses were chosen ‘because my favourite is purple’; ‘my Mum liked it as well’, and ‘it’s bright and colourful and I like the shapes of the leaves’. When asked whether she was surprised that someone else had chosen a rose, Sherika replied no, ‘because lots of people like roses’. Sandy’s choice of image was a drawing found in the Metro newspaper (Fig. 5.17), chosen ‘because I like the singer Lady Gaga and it shows here what she wears and the accessories that she use. And the person that drawed it really inspired me’.

While these images were shared, Mustafa, the only boy in the group, had remained silent, which made his subsequent contribution to the discussion all the more surprising. Introducing his image (Fig. 5.18), Mustafa returned to themes already discussed – Mia’s scenery, Abigail’s life cycle, Enesa and Sherika’s roses – and quietly drew links between them:

First of all, I like the setting and the scenery. I like how it showed how that the flower was blossoming. I also think it represents, like, the process of life. And thinking of the flower and the scenery, it looks very beautiful. And it all connects well together.
Whether his allusions to previous contributions were deliberate or otherwise, Mustafa’s description prompted waves of agreement and admiration from the group: ‘I like his description because if I didn’t see the picture and he described it to me I would kind of get a picture of what it looks like’ (Mia); ‘My gosh! I want to take out his brain and put it in mine!’ (Abigail). While the image had already begun to intrigue the other children, Mustafa’s final remark (‘it all connects well together’) clearly encouraged others to build upon his description in their individual ways. Sandy liked the way ‘the moon is reflecting on the flower... it makes the atmosphere of it – it feels like I’m actually in the picture; Mia commented on ‘how there’s a little bit of a sparkle and there’s a glow inside, so it looks kind of magicky... like something’s gonna happen next. Abigail’s mixed response was that ‘It makes me feel sad a bit... because of the moonlight effect and it’s dark... And then it makes me feel happy because of the flowers and the sparkly stuff’, which prompted Mustafa to notice something previously unnoticed in his image:

I was thinking that... the moon is like the sad sort of bit and then it comes, like, down and the flowers springs out. It’s like when you go sad and something makes you happy.
Fig. 5.19  Breana and her mother (photograph from home)
Fig. 5.20  Valeriy’s castle (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.21  Teyamo’s princess (poster from bedroom wall)
Fig. 5.22  Rafieah’s Olympic Stadium (photograph from Metro newspaper)
Fig. 5.23  Daniel’s flowers (enhanced photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.24  Yonis’s flowers (photograph from Internet)
Breana selected a portrait of herself and her mother (Fig. 5.19), and dealt with its emotional resonance in an unusual way, through an impromptu role-reversal, pretending to be a proud parent tearfully describing her beautiful daughter. She said: ‘This is the best, best picture we have in this house and in this school and in all the houses in the world…’ By this stage I was sufficiently confident with my interactions to attempt to dig below the surface of Breana’s approach, and I suggested that, despite the element of parody in her performance, she did feel genuinely emotional when she looked at the picture. Nodding, Breana agreed and responded: ‘Sometimes I don’t really get the love that I really wanted… but in this time (when the photo was taken) I was really happy to have this picture… some people are just upset to see this and – say they don’t have a family – so I’m happy that I have a family that loves me’.

Valeriy brought 11 images to the first interview, more than any other child. Several of them (e.g. Fig. 5.20) were screen shots from computer games, and his description emphasised what he found interesting and engaging about them, rather than beautiful. ‘It has lots of little details and it makes a huge detail and there’s like, loads of colours... And it looks ancient, as if it was there a thousand years... It’s like Earth, loads of people are in there’. Teyamo’s image, a promotional poster for a recent Disney movie (Fig. 5.21), also represented another world. It was chosen ‘because it’s colourful and loads of people know it and like it - and the princess matches with the dress and the atmosphere outside the picture’. The princess, Teyamo continued, ‘has beauty inside... and she does have a beautiful dress that’s puffy and green... ‘I want to be exactly like her because she’s beautiful’.

Rafeeeah had found her image of an aerial view of the closing ceremony of the 2012 Olympics (Fig. 5.22) in the London Evening Standard and chose it ‘because of the lights... and because of the fireworks’. The questions it prompted focused on
experience of the games and their ‘special’ qualities: ‘I think she like, picked it up because, all the celebration and the beautiful lights and people applauding the countries’ (Yonis). Daniel was keen to articulate the reasons for choice of image (Fig. 5.23). The flowers were, he explained, ‘part of nature... (the picture) has some artistic colours and the emotion of this flower makes me feel happy - and it feels good to be in nature’. Yonis also chose an image of flowers (Fig. 5.24), ‘because it has loads of colours, like in an African way... they have colourful clothes and colourful things and colourful houses and that’s why I picked it’.

Yonis had located his image shortly before the start of the interview, as he had lost the one he had brought to school. I watched him as he made use of an Internet search engine on a school computer to locate a picture of ‘beautiful flowers’, an experience that offered me some insight into the strategies children adopted by for locating images. Though his search term returned a high number of results, Yonis was happy to spend some time scrolling through several pages of possible options (while the rest of his group waited for him), before carefully making his selection. Comments made during several of the interviews suggested that this was often the case. Many children described how, when confronted with a screen full of similar images from which to select, they had taken time to make their final decision.
Interview A5  18th October 2012

Group 5: Kamaudin; Kyron; Billy; Sadiya; Yonis

Fig. 5.25  Billy’s sparkler  (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.26  Sadiya’s bag  (photograph taken at the interview)
Fig. 5.27  Kyron as a small child  (photograph from family album)
Fig. 5.28  Kamau’s seascape  (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 5.29  Yonis’s landscape  (digital painting from Internet)
Billy’s image was a long exposure photograph of an illuminated sparkler (Fig. 5.25), chosen:

Because it reminds me of bonfire night and it was when you use the sparkles and everything. And if you look closely it looks like something’s going up into the air, sort of like a firework but it’s sort of different. Because before my Dad moved to go into a different house he used to like flying stuff a lot so I chose that picture because it reminds me of my Dad a lot.

While he described how the image reminded of his absent father, other children had various other associations: ‘I like the swirlers - it’s like the May Day pole, the thing where they go around’ (Kyron); ‘It kind of looks like something in space’ (Yonis); ‘It’s like those things that are like hurricanes - when it turns around there’s colour - a tornado’ (Sadiya). When Kyron asked him whether he would ‘rather see something like that for real - or would you rather just stay at home and look at this (picture)?’ Billy said he would ‘like to see it in real life as well’.

Rather than bring an image to the interview, Sadiya brought an object: her bag (Fig. 5.26). She explained that the bag was beautiful ‘because it has nice colours and flowers and berries’. Beyond that, she did not seem to want to share further information about the bag, aside from pointing out that it was waterproof. Kyron then said:

I like that bag because it’s very colourfull… But I wouldn’t choose it because it’s not the type of bag that I would get myself…. Because… it’s more for, like, girls, yeah? It’s girly and I don’t like the colour pink.

This was the first time that the idea of gender preferences had arisen during the interviews, and I took the opportunity to question the group a little closer. Kamaudin’s response, that ‘some boys like pink’ was initially given short shrift by Kyron (‘That’s the ones that play with Barbie’), before both boys admitted that they possessed certain items of clothing that might not conform to such gender stereotypes: ‘I have a kind of, like a shirt that’s kind of pinkish… and a purple one as well’ (Kamaudin); ‘I don’t have a purple one but I have a kind of, like a shirt, it’s like in between kinda peach colour and pink, red and pink’.
Kyron chose an image of himself as a small child (Fig. 5.27) ‘because it reminds me of when I was small and when I was just getting to know stuff, like getting to know how to speak and walk and talk’, while Kamaudin’s image of waves (Fig. 5.28) reminded him of a visit to the sea: ‘It’s beautiful because -it doesn’t feel like it’s especially anywhere… I think it’s really nice’. Water also featured in Yonis’s imaginary landscape (Fig. 5.29), which had taken a curious route to the table. Yonis originally brought it to school a month earlier, but the image had gone missing and turned up in Mustafa’s hands, who had presented it to his group with what transpired to be a fictitious description of how he had located it on the Internet. The group’s responses to the image were different to those shared previously. Yonis suggested that:

> It symbolises something about where – about – I can’t really explain it – where I was born, because I was born in, like, a garden… there was all these pretty flowers… and it sort of symbolises, like, the memories of when I was a baby.

The children had diverse interpretations of the image: ‘It reminds me of peace, basically, as if there were no wars… All the sparkles, it’s like when something good happens, sparkles come out and light up the sky’ (Billy); ‘It reminds me of under the sea… it’s just floating, floating on top of the sea… It looks like a hand holding the moon, an old man’s hand…’ (Kyron); ‘It tells me to be calm when I really wanna be angry. If I’m angry I should look at this picture because it makes me calm and it says remember to be nice to others’ (Sadiya).

*Instructions for Task 2*

At the end of their first interview, I loaned children each a digital camera and set the second task. I provided minimal instructions and simply asked each group to use them to take beautiful photographs. I demonstrated the basic functions of the camera, though it became apparent that children were already familiar with the technology. At around
this time I spoke with a Year 6 teacher, during which we discussed the rapid increase in children’s knowledge and understanding of ICT. He told me: ‘You can’t teach the ICT any more, you can only facilitate it.’ With this in mind, I decided to hand the cameras over to remaining groups without instructions. None were asked for. The second set of interviews began the following week.
5.3 Description of interviews A6 – A10 (photographed images)

Interview A6 25th October 2012

Group 1:  Muse; Fartun; Christelle; Chloe; Ilham; Sara

Fig. 5.30 Ilham – Bishop’s Park (1) (photograph)
Fig. 5.31 Ilham – Bishop’s Park (2) (photograph)
Fig. 5.32 Ilham – Bishop’s Park (3) (photograph)
Fig. 5.33 Ilham – Bishop’s Park (4) trees (photograph)
Fig. 5.34 Ilham – Bishop’s Park (5) flowers (photograph)
Fig. 5.35 Chloe – The London Eye (photograph)
Fig. 5.36 Sara – Stained glass window (photograph of a stained glass window)
Fig. 5.37 Sara – Painting of a horse (photograph of a painting)
Fig. 5.38 Christelle – Painting of a bird (photograph of a painting)
Fig. 5.39 Fartun – Fabric design (1) (photograph of fabric)
Fig. 5.40 Fartun – Fabric design (2) (photograph of fabric)
Fig. 5.41 Christelle – Family photograph (re-photographed photograph)
Fig. 5.42 Muse – Self-portrait (photograph)
Fig. 5.43 Muse – Baby-portrait (re-photographed photograph)
Ilham brought 12 photographs to the second interview. Each one was a different perspective of her local park (Figs. 5.3—5.34). When I asked her why she chose to photograph the park to represent her idea of beauty, she explained that it was ‘because it’s where I spend most of my time at. I feel – it feels peaceful because I – you can hear the water running and you just feel calm’. Of the view of branches overhead (Fig. 5.4.33), she described how ‘it feels like I’m covered or like, safe or something, like something is covering me up from rain’. Yet she also held another view of the park, which she described in response to her image of flowers:

This is beautiful to me because I look at this (part of the picture) and I see nice fresh flowers and then afterwards I look at this (part of the picture) and I am like ‘What happened? It is so dark and… dead’... It makes me feel upset because it goes round in a family circle – like – you are young, you are fresh and then you are old and then you die.

Similarly, when Christelle asked her whether she would want to stay in the park at night, Ilham was sure that she would not:

It would be scary at night because you’ve got lots of strangers there. I wouldn’t like it. I wouldn’t like it. Because then, like, all the animals and then it would be raining and it would be cold. But if it was in the morning I would, like, stay there.

While Ilham avoided the park after dark, Chloe took her photograph of the London Eye (Fig. 5.35) deliberately at night ‘because if you take it in the morning the lights don’t even show’. The view is one seen from her window: ‘I live on the seventh floor and I thought it was beautiful because… I’ve never actually been there – I’ve only been there once. And it’s kind of like been this great experience and that’s why I wanted to choose it’. Sara chose to photograph a stained glass window in a church (Fig. 5.36), to represent ‘my own religion that I really care about’ while the painting of a horse (Fig. 5.37), was photographed because it was an animal she wished she could ride; she also talked of how she liked the colours in the stained glass window and how the horse was painted. Similarly, Christelle chose her photograph of a painting of a bird (Fig. 5.38) ‘because I like the textures that they put inside and the colours’. Colour was also one of
the reasons why Fartun chose to photograph patterns on a piece of fabric (Figs. 5.39, 5.40). She told us she chose one ‘because it’s got loads of purple’ while the other was selected because it was pink. She said this was a beautiful colour ‘because it reminds me of springtime’.

Of the 26 children who shared photographs during the second set of interviews, 11 chose to photograph existing images. Some of these were artworks found in the home or elsewhere and others were photographs, mostly displayed at home. Christelle’s reason for re-photographing a family photograph (Fig. 5.41), was ‘because it was me and my sisters when we were all babies... and I think it’s beautiful because it reminds me of the times when we were young. Sometimes I feel like crying every time I see it’. Sara was also sensitive to the emotional resonance of family photographs. When I asked the group why they thought people have photographs of their children on their walls, she replied ‘because, say if you are, like, much more (older) – say if you’re 20, probably your life is going hard and you just wanna think about your old life’. Volunteering a self-portrait (Fig. 5.42) together with another photograph of the baby snapshot from the previous interview (Fig. 5.43), he was asked whether he thought any picture of him would be beautiful. ‘Yes’, was the answer, any picture.
Interview A7  25th October 2012

Group 2: Ammar; Mahdi; Danyaal; Kyra; Yasmina; Mohad

Fig. 5.44  Danyaal - cousins  (re-photographed photographs)
Fig. 5.45  Ammar – aunt       (re-photographed photographs)
Fig. 5.46  Ammar - window     (photograph)
Fig. 5.47  Yasmina - clouds   (photograph)
Fig. 5.48  Mohad - river      (photograph)
Fig. 5.49  Kyra - flowers     (photograph)
Fig. 5.50  Mahdi - superheroes (photographed illustrations)
In the previous chapter I noted that one characteristic of the pilot study was that was several children photographed subject matter that was similar to that depicted in their found images, and this was often the case in Greystones School. Danyaal’s cousin re-appeared in another image during this interview, photographed alongside his twin brother and re-photographed by Danyaal (Fig. 5.44). When Ammar asked Danyaal ‘Why are they so cute?’ Danyaal replied, ‘It’s nature, innit?’, adding that he thought everyone should agree with this assessment. Ammar also re-photographed existing photographs of his aunt (Fig. 5.45) and said: ‘She’s like, 26… I think she’s beautiful. You can’t see it well because it’s kind of blurry but she’s dyed strips of her hair, yeah? The dresses – one is blue, this one is brown, this one is pink. I like it because I just like it’. The faces in the portraits were difficult to see in Ammar’s image. Uniquely in the class, he had opted to use the ‘video’ function of the camera, treating viewers to a guided tour around his home. The first frame of his video depicted light falling into a bedroom through a pair of curtains (Fig. 5.46). I was interested in the image and could not resist asking him about it, even though it was one he had not chosen to share. ‘Well’, he deadpanned, ‘it’s just a curtain half-closed with the sun coming in’. Kyra, who was struck by the scene, interjected to suggest that it looked ‘like a passage to a new world… it’s like a bright light and – maybe – angels could live in there’. Despite Ammar’s initial indifference to the image, Kyra’s response persuaded him to look at it again and he reluctantly conceded that that he was happy to have made something others liked – albeit unintentionally.

The local area inspired children in different ways. Yasmina was clearly unhappy with the quality of her photograph of a building silhouetted against a pattern of clouds (‘I don’t like it’) (Fig. 5.46), although when Mahdi suggested she took it ‘randomly’ she disagreed, saying that ‘it was then (taken at that point in time) because I
like the sun going or coming only’. Light was also an attraction for Mohad, who took his camera on a walk along the Thames (Fig. 5.48): ‘I think it’s really beautiful because of the river’, he explained, ‘how the sun bounces off the river – and all the buildings in the background and the bridge. When it’s night there’s usually lights in the buildings so you can see them in the far distance’. Kyra photographed the flowers in her garden (Fig. 5.49) because ‘it was, like, new life for flowers and stuff. The day I got (the camera) I just came home and I saw it out there so I just went out and took it straight away’. Finally, Mahdi brought a total of 22 photographs to the interview (Fig. 5.50), each of a product found in a local video shop (Mohad: ‘I thought you weren’t allowed to take pictures in the shop?’ Mahdi: ‘Yeah. I got told off by the manager. He told me to stop. I came back in.’) When I asked him whether he thought the images were beautiful, Mahdi shrugged, and said: ‘They’re just cool’.
Two photographs prompted lengthy debates during this interview. Mustafa explained that he had photographed his sister (Fig. 5.51) ‘because I love my sister and I think she’s cute’. The other image he chose to share with the group depicted some recent purchases, a coat, a baseball cap, a bracelet and a necklace. He had chosen them ‘because I like clothes and I – I think that, like, clothes do make, like, might make a difference to beauty’ (Fig. 5.52). This statement initiated a debate in which children linked notions of beauty and identity:
I don’t really think clothes actually change your appearance… Clothes is just something to put on your body that looks pretty. And also – I don’t even actually like these school uniforms – but it doesn’t mean I actually look ugly (Abigail).

The clothes may be beautiful but it doesn’t change how beautiful somebody is. Like, they all have different ways to be beautiful – so the clothes isn’t going to change how beautiful they are (Sherika)

If you wore, like, baggy trousers and a dirty T-shirt or something, and then you wore, like, a suit or something… it would be like the opposite. It doesn’t really change your personality but it does change the way some people look about you overall (Mustafa)

Some people – when they wear clothes like just a normal T-shirt and normal trousers – they feel like they’re not beauty – beautiful. And then when they get to wear, like, really nice, like a dress or something, they really feel beautiful and they feel so important (Sandy)

Enesa’s photograph of the view from her balcony (Fig. 5.4) led to a debate about its composition that became the longest discussion of any interview. Though she presented the image with a minimum of description (‘I was in the balcony because I didn’t know what picture to take and I just put that one’) the children found it absorbing. What particularly caught their attention was the inclusion of a number of cars in the photograph that, several agreed, detracted from its appeal. Mia initiated the discussion this way:

I like the picture but I don’t think it’s really; like, beautiful because… what kind of ruins it is that I can see cars (murmurs of agreement around the table) and if you could see it without the cars it would look really nicer - but I understand that you couldn’t get rid of them.

I don’t really like the cars but I don’t think there’s anything wrong with them. I don’t really think they actually really affect it because you can see the birds and the bright sky. You don’t actually notice it until you actually, actually look at the cars so I think it don’t actually ruins the picture (Abigail)

The whole picture’s nice but the cars are not. When you look at the picture the first thing you recognise is the cars (voices – ‘yes’) and they don’t look nice, especially this yellow one… your eyes are mostly drawn to the yellow one (Sherika)

Yeah – it’s just big and bright and you don’t want to see it (Mustafa)

Sherika presented a collection of photographs of her pet fish (Fig. 5.55). Though the discussion around them was brief, a number of interesting themes arose. the photographs drew praise from Mustafa ‘because I love animals and I think that they’re
very beautiful’. Abigail agreed that it was a beautiful image, but disagreed that the animals themselves were beautiful: ‘They’re not beautiful animals but it’s a beautiful picture what she took’. This prompted Mia to offer an explanation of the different opinions: ‘Abigail might not think (that they’re beautiful) because she hasn’t experienced having them – or seen them, like, in person’. In this short exchange children alluded to ideas about emotions, to the notion of creating beautiful images of subject matter that is not beautiful and to the importance of the role of the individual’s experience of the subject.

Finally, Sandy chose to re-photograph an image of herself as a younger child (Fig. 5.56). In contrast to her image of Lady Gaga, this was a wistful portrait in black and white that prompted discussion on a specific formal quality. Abigail said: ‘Some pictures and some photographs are meant for different colours, like a flower – you’re only actually meant to see colours… but some pictures [like this one] are actually meant to look black and white’. Mia disagreed: ‘It’s a good picture tooken in black and white [but] if you saw it in colour you’d think it looked better’.
Interview A9  8th November 2012

Group 4: Daniel; Rafeeah; Valeriy; Breana; Teyamo; Yonis

Fig. 5.57  Rafeeah’s Gherkin  (re-photographed photograph)
Fig. 5.58  Rafeeah’s Empress State Building  (photograph)
Fig. 5.59  Teyamo’s puppy  (photographed illustration)
Fig. 5.60  Breana’s sister  (photograph)
Fig. 5.61  Daniel’s trees  (photograph)
Rafseeah had been a little tongue-tied during the first interview but she was more forthcoming in the second and seemed keen to share two photographs she had taken of contemporary architecture. One was of 30 St Mary Axe (otherwise known as the Gherkin, Fig. 5.57), taken ‘on the way when the bus was going’, and the other was of the Empress State Building, a distinctive 1960s landmark in west London (Fig. 5.58):

She told us this one was taken:

... near my house and it’s a simple picture because – because it’s near my house and I don’t really go far to – to go and do things. I just – I just do – go places that I know that there’s something beautiful there and it’s in my area so I think that’s good... When I always look outside my window I just keep staring at it and – and when – when – always I can’t, like, stop looking at it because it’s a beautiful place.

She went on to describe a longstanding fascination with the building: ‘When I first came to this country I saw this building and I was, like, wow! Yeah, that’s how I felt. And I was always saying to my dad I want to go in that building, I want to go in that building’. Similarly, Teyamo shared an image of something that she longed for, in the form of a photographed illustration of a puppy (Fig. 5.59), around which she constructed an touching narrative:

I don’t have a puppy, I don’t have an animal. I think it’s beautiful and cute because it has blue eyes... you want him to come alive and you want to play with him... you sometimes dream about him and then you go and ask your father and your father says no. So then you get sad about that.

Breana also talked about being sad when she shared her image, one of 52 she photographed (Fig. 5.60). She explained that her younger sister needed to wear glasses:

‘It’s very sad, she started wearing them when she was one. I’ve never seen her very happy like this before... I just feel really happy that she’s still OK and she’s not blind’.

Valeriy was interested in the way the subject was framed in the image: ‘I think it’s beautiful because where you took the picture really fits in - into how - the size of your sister, the people behind it and the floor... she didn’t make it too big, too much, she didn’t go really far away. It’s just in the right place to take a picture’.
Daniel, who had previously referred to the ‘artistic’ qualities of a picture of flowers during the first interview, used the word again a month later in a description of his photograph of trees in the local park (Fig. 5.61). Planted in rows, the trees ‘are quite interesting and it’s a bit... artistic, like my Mum said’. Daniel indicated other factors that influenced his choice. While the nearby park is busy, ‘here’s peaceful’, and the stillness of the trees is offset by ‘leaves falling in mid-air’. Valeriy, observed that: ‘It looks like a very professional picture. It could be good enough to go on Google Images’.

Interview A10 15th November 2012

Group 5: Kamaudin; Kyron; Billy; Sadiya; Yonis

Fig. 5.62 Sadiya’s sister’s bag (photograph)
Fig. 5.63 Sadiya’s butterfly (photograph)
Fig. 5.64 Sadiya’s cousin’s kitten (re-photographed photograph)
Fig. 5.65 Sadiya’s mother’s picture of a bird (re-photographed photograph)
Fig. 5.66 Kyron’s basketball player (re-photographed photograph)
Fig. 5.67 Kyron’s baby picture (photograph from family album)
Neither Billy nor Yonis returned their cameras and to school in time for the final interview, so they could not share their photographs, which provided Sadiya with extra time to share four of her 18 photographs with the group. Billy thought the image of her sister’s bag (Fig. 5.62) looked ‘like an imported picture’ - meaning, he explained, one image collaged in to another. Sadiya found it difficult to follow this train of thought, and offered the puzzling explanation that she ‘didn’t have the USP for the thingy’. Her photograph of an image of a butterfly constructed from card and decorated with sequins (Fig. 5.63), also attracted mixed reviews: ‘Don’t like it’, said Billy, ‘Part of the picture’s missing and the background doesn’t match.’ Undaunted by this critical reception, Sadiya responded by saying that ‘It doesn’t make much difference to me, because if they don’t like it, it’s up to them. I don’t care because I like it myself and it’s not gonna change me’. However, Sadiya’s third image (Fig. 5.64) won her audience over: ‘I chose this picture, the kitten, because I thought it was so cute. And it was coming to me whilst I was holding my camera when I was at my cousin’s house’. Kamaudin greeted the kitten with a shout of ‘Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!’ Valeriy announced ‘I’m saying yes to this one!’ then expanded on his first impression:

    I love it, I love it, I love it – because it looks like it’s a picture from the Internet. It’s so good. And plus, the cat looks so cute… he’s looking at her as if he’s about to… It looks really gingery and I feel like eating it…

The arrival of the cat was swiftly followed by a bird, a photograph of a picture on Sadiya’s wall (Fig. 5.65). She described it as beautiful ‘because it’s flowers and it reminds me of peace… my cousin went birdwatching and took it’. The group did not question the authenticity of this statement. If anyone had doubts regarding the authorship of this (or the previous) image, they kept quiet. Kyron’s photograph of a basketball player (Fig. 5.66), taken from a poster in his room was chosen because ‘his face is, like, really tough… No matter if you’re - if you’re lost something, never ever
give up... If someone says you’re ugly or something - you can never give up on self-confidence’. Several children made a link between this and the other image Kyron had photographed, an image of himself as a baby (Fig. 5.67), and Billy made a connection between the two, saying: ‘It’s like what the baby’s thinking. It looks like he’s thinking of what he’s gonna be when he’s older’.

Kamaudin’s photographs prompted the longest discussion in the final interview. Three of them (Figs. 5.68-5.70) represented different views from the balcony of his flat in a
tower block close to the school. Kamaudin chose one (Fig. 5.68) to describe to the group:

I chose – I chose this because – ummm, I thought it was beautiful. And, like, it was, like that – you know that thingy, walking place – path – I was sitting here. I think it makes it more beautifuller. And the tree as well, that tiny tree. And the colour, I love the colour. It’s not just one whole colour, it’s like, you know, mixed. Ummm – and, yeah, it’s beautiful.

Though most of the group warmly welcomed this image, Yonis took strong exception to it, claiming forcefully that:

I could take that every time! I could take that at the middle of the day. It’s that walking down to the shopping. What’s so beautiful about this? This is green. That’s a tree. And a path… Half of it is shaded! This is not a good picture. It’s just some greenery and blackery. I don’t really care.

This outburst served to unite the rest against him, though I sensed that this was partly his intention. Other children leapt to defend the image, highlighting how the decisions Kamaudin had made, in terms of the time of day, the time of year, its content and composition, had helped him to create a beautiful image:

You could not take that at any time. If it was at night-time you wouldn’t be able to see the tree! (Kyron).

I disagree [that’s it’s not beautiful] because where the sunlight is going it looks like the leaves are glowing as if they were pieces of gold. And the tree looks really golden as if it was made out of real gold … from where he done it he chose a perfect spot to make the picture (Valeriy).

Children recognised similar aesthetic qualities in another of Kamaudin’s images (Fig. 5.69), which he introduced by saying, ‘I saw the shape and I saw - I thought it was so beautiful so - that I took it. And I love the colour - again’. Valeriy highlighted the composition (‘In between every single pole it looks the same’) while Billy referred to an optical illusion in the image: ‘It looks like the shadow is making a fence. It’s connecting the bars to make a fence’. A third image in Kamaudin’s sequence, of clouds in the sky (Fig. 5.70), prompted a more succinct, yet equally enthusiastic response from
Billy: ‘Love it. Love it!’, while Sadiya was able to recognise through the images the notion of finding beauty in everyday experiences:

OK, I learnt that – people think – some people think this is a beautiful picture (but) when they see it (the scene in real life) they don’t. But when they see it in a picture they think it’s more beautifuller because – when you’re going past here you don’t normally see leaves shining because… you’re so close to it and it’s just yellow. But when they take a picture it’s like shiny. I learnt – reality it’s not shining – but pictures it is shining.

*Children’s reflections on the meanings of beauty*

In each of the ten interviews at Greystones School I asked children questions about their perceptions of beauty that were not directly linked to the images that they had chosen or photographed, questions that were more philosophical in nature. As described above, during the initial interviews I made the mistake of asking these questions early on in the interviews, when children were unprepared for them. Once they had shared their reflections on their own and others’ images, however, I found that they were better placed to engage with questions about their broader experiences of beauty. Questions were asked of groups as a whole rather than of individuals, and not all questions were asked in each interview; therefore, I have not included a numerical breakdown of children’s responses. However, the statements gathered in this section of the text are representative of a range made by children in response to these questions:

- Should people agree about beauty?
- How does it make you feel when people agree with you about a beautiful picture?
- Is beauty important?
- How do you feel when you see something beautiful?
Should people agree about beauty?

Responses from Fartun and Sara are typical of several children who highlighted the importance of individuality:

If someone likes something, the other person shouldn’t just like it - they should actually know their self that they like it because everyone is different (Fartun).

I think everybody should have different (opinions) because we are all different and we all like different things - and if it we like (we had) the same idea of beauty it would be really boring. But if everybody had a different picture it would be more exciting (Sara).

How does it make you feel when people agree with you about a beautiful picture?

Despite the lack of evidence that children expected others to agree with their perceptions of beauty, they were nonetheless often pleased to find that others appreciated their images. Kamaudin, Sara and Kyron described their perspectives:

It makes me feel, like, really happy. I wouldn’t mind if a person or two didn’t like it but I would still be happy. They kind of should (agree about what’s beautiful) – but I wouldn’t mind (if they didn’t) because it’s their own opinion and I can’t say you have to like it. (Kamaudin).

It makes me feel happy – (but) if they didn’t like it I wouldn’t really care because I’d still like it myself (Sara).

I personally wouldn’t care but on the other hand I would care because - it’s like – if the picture’s very, very special to me and no-one really cared about it I wouldn’t mind and I would mind because it brings memories of the time I had with this person. And – I think you shouldn’t tell someone your own opinion you should just take a deep breath and just accept it (Kyron).

Is beauty important?

Only a few children provided definitive responses to this question, with most opting to answer both ‘yes and no’. Those that did think beauty was important raised themes of family, memory and ‘beauty within’, for example:

Yes – because you have beauty within you. And if you don’t have beauty within you, you become a horrible person (Abigail).

There’s other good things about beauty (like) pictures of your family. Imagine if you were leaving and you don’t ever going to see them again it will remind you of them so you won’t forget about them (Sara).
Beauty’s not important because – let’s say you’re in Year 11 and you have to go college and that stuff, if you just think about, like, beauty, beauty, beauty, and don’t care about your work you’re just gonna be a tramp on the street… Beauty is not important because beauty is not in your exams (Yasmina).

Beauty is not important because – if you’re in a marriage and you only like them because they wear make-up they look really nice and that…If you just like them with that they won’t really like you that much because you’re wearing just stuff. You have to like them – where they live…how they act and everything. Don’t just like how they look (Billy).

Most children, however, avoided offering definitive answers to the question and acknowledged that there are arguments for and against its importance:

Beauty is not important and it is important. It's not important because if you don't think someone in your family is beautiful you can't just not like them. You have to like them and you will like them because they're in your family. And beauty is important because, like, you have to present yourself neatly and presentably (Fartun).

I think beauty is important because – umm – you don’t have to wear make-up to be beautiful. It’s just self-confidence in people. Like, you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover and some people don’t have self-esteem (Kyron).

It would be yes and no because you might be really ugly, but then you might be a really good person inside. You might be a nice person inside – but if you’re beautiful, you might be really horrible inside, so it’s kind of yes and no (Mia).

Beauty comes with its good effects and its bad effect. Its good effects are that you can get someone handsome to marry you. And its bad effect is that you become really selfish and an un-like person. I think yes and no because… beauty is not what it looks like on the outside, but then people, yeah, some of them are beautiful but they have an ugly personality (Sherika).

How do you feel when you see something beautiful?

Responses to this question were of three kinds: (1) some related to feelings of being moved by the experience of beauty; (2) others reflected aspirations or desires for particular experiences, while (3) others related to the need to possess beautiful things

Moved

If I saw something beautiful, I would like feel, like, so calm. And then I’d close my eyes and I’d go in to some imaginary world and think of what would, like, happen, like if, if for instance – I think of that (his image) I think how it would be like if I was there (Mustafa).
I feel – when I look at - when I look at beauty – I feel the atmosphere of - I can feel the atmosphere around it at that picture and I can understand what the emotion of picture is and how the feelings and why that person named it beauty and added to the picture (Daniel).

When I look at this picture (her own image) particularly I see, umm – the real beauty in me because – not all the time I get what I want and I’m not always smiling but I know – in this picture – when I always look at it I’m always smiling because… Sometimes I may be upset and bad things happen but I know when I look at this picture I will always be smiling, no matter what (Breana).

Desires / aspirations

I feel like as if I want to be in that picture... It feels like I’m in it already (Valeriy).

If I see a beautiful picture I feel like I want to go in the picture. Because if there’s a nice picture you would like, say, Wow and think of loads of questions in your head and that’s what I would probably do (Mia).

If I saw a picture of a puppy I would close my eyes, I would go into the picture and squeeze it ‘til I die (Sara).

When I see something beautiful I feel like… exactly like… I want to be exactly like her because she’s beautiful (Teyamo).

Possession

When I see something beautiful I feel like, yeah I wanna take this because it’s beautiful. And this is something that I would like to see every time and this is something that would make me smile (Rafeeah)

If I saw something beautiful, like a necklace, I just, like, imagine that I’d got it. It would make feel happy and it would make me feel like I want it. So I’d just ask my Dad (Abigail).

I feel like I want to take it (Enesa).

Conclusion

When I looked at children’s images before the beginning of each interview, it was impossible to predict which would prompt discussion. It transpired that certain images acted as ‘triggers’ to encourage children to articulate their responses. A child might share an image shyly only for others to receive it with immediate warmth, and often the
most thoughtful comments were made by children in response to images brought to the interviews by other children, rather than those they had brought themselves.

Viewed outside of the context of the interviews, many of the children’s images may represent what might be expected from ten-year-olds with digital cameras and a homework task about beauty: photographs of trees and flowers, mothers and babies. Yet when I viewed them again having listened to children’s reasons for selecting them, the images often acquired a deeper resonance, and I began to appreciate the extent to which richness of children’s descriptions and reflections offered clear evidence of the importance of dialogue in the process of exploring children’s notions of beauty.
Chapter 6: Description of data (Old Oak School)

Introduction

This chapter describes the data gathered from Old Oak School, Surrey, where eight semi-structured group interviews were carried out with 23 children aged 9-10 between January and March 2013. It presents summaries of discussion from each of the eight interviews at the school together with all images children shared during the interviews.

Old Oak School is a four-form entry junior school located on the edge of a small village on the Surrey/Hampshire border. The school is one I knew well at the time of the research: two trainee teachers I once supervised taught there; a third was a friend and two of its pupils, aged ten and eight at the time, were my own children (neither were involved in the research). Fortuitously, in September 2012 all three teachers were placed in Year 5 classes, and I decided to approach the Head Teacher with the idea of carrying out the research (Appendix 6.1). She approved my schedule for data collection (Appendix 6.2) and agreed that interviews could begin in January 2013.

As the data collection process had run relatively smoothly at Greystones School, my intention was to replicate procedures as closely as possible at Old Oak School. However, in order to accommodate the preferences of staff I made several organisational changes. Firstly, the participants were slightly younger than their counterparts in London, with an average age of ten years and six months compared with 11 years and two months. Secondly, the four teachers at Old Oak School asked to select certain children to take part. Though I was initially concerned they would choose children with specific abilities (or lack of them), I was reassured to find that they chose children for diverse reasons. Some were selected because of their willingness to contribute to class discussions, for example, while others because they struggled to be
heard in class and stood to benefit from working in a smaller group. Thirdly, fewer children were involved in the research (23 as opposed to 28) and they were drawn from four classes rather than one. Finally, because teachers preferred children not to be withdrawn from lessons I scheduled interviews to take place after school. My initial concerns that children would find the experience tiring after a day in the classroom were unfounded. They maintained their energy levels, though the timing of the interviews created additional organisational issues; the children needed to be provided with weekly written reminders to attend the interviews (Appendix 6.3), and I needed to be sure to deliver them safely to waiting parents at the end of the day.

Following the first set of interviews I decided to simplify my list of questions (Appendix 6.4). The content of the revised list was very similar to that used at the first set of interviews, and the editing process was designed mainly to make the list easier for me to use as a prompt. My previous experience also enabled me to address other organisational issues. At Greystones School, some children forgot to return cameras on time, meaning that they were passed on to other children in my absence and that photographs by two or more children accumulated on to the same memory card. This complicated the process of identifying their owners, so I bought an additional three cameras for children to use in these circumstances, I collected cameras from children at the school an hour before each interview, and downloaded images to a laptop computer and, rather than print images, I organised them into folders and each group viewed them directly on screen. All other arrangements were consistent with those devised and used previously, though my organisation was a little tighter, as evidenced by the checklist I used for each interview (Appendix 6.5).

In early January 2013 I spent a short time in each of the four Year 5 classes to familiarise myself with the children, before gathering together all 23 participants to set
them their first task, summarised on a handout (Appendix 6.6). As before, I provided each child with a named, blank CD for saving digital files together with an envelope, to be returned to school the following week with the images they had found to represent their ideas of beauty. I also gave each child a letter addressed to their parents (Appendix 6.7) that encouraged them to offer support with the task but gently discouraged them from influencing children’s decisions. Once again, children asked few questions. They seemed surprised and slightly amused by the task but simultaneously excited to be chosen to complete it. They returned their envelopes with their images the following week and I collected them from the school before the first interview.

6.1 Description of interviews B1-B4 (found images)

Most children chose more than one image to represent their idea of beauty (an average of three each compared to two each at Greystones School) and, as there would not be time to discuss all of images, I asked each child to select one or two to share with their group, and 36 of the 75 images were discussed during the four interviews. For these interviews I paid closer attention to the sequence in which I selected images for discussion at each interview in order to maintain the flow of discussion more effectively. For example, three children in the second group shared images of either tigers or leopards, and viewing these images sequentially, rather than punctuating them with pictures of flowers, meant discussion flowed more naturally.

One of the ways in which the interviews at Old Oak differed slightly to those previously carried out in Greystones School was that children’s ideas about the value of beauty and judgments about beauty often arose naturally during discussion of their
images. This was evident from one of the earliest discussions in the first interview, when James argued that people would be wrong to make judgments about beauty of a football club badge based on their opinion of the football team, saying that ‘They can’t, on real terms, on real beauty terms, they can’t.’ (Interview B1). Children at Greystones School had rarely, if ever, expressed such sentiments and I usually concluded each interview there with questions for children designed to explore their ideas about beauty. In the previous chapter, children’s responses to these questions were gathered together at the end of the chapter, whereas in this chapter children’s reflections on these ideas can be found in the descriptions of each interview.

The interviews took place in a small room designed for teaching groups of children, and they sat in a semi-circle around a table. This ensured they could all see each other as well as the screen, which I hoped would encourage them to respond directly to each other rather than address their comments to me. The room was relatively dark, which helped us to see the images on the screen clearly, and relatively quiet, as most pupils had headed home by the time each interview began.
Interview B1 31st January 2013
Group 1: Callum; Charlie; Elysia; Ishaque; Maddie; Megan; Nell

Fig. 6.1 Ishaque - Sunset (digital painting from Internet)
Fig. 6.2 Maddie - Sydney Opera House (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.3 Callum - Manchester United badge (design from Internet)
Fig. 6.4 Ishaque - Arsenal badge (design from Internet)
Fig. 6.5 Charlie - Waterfall (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.6 Nell - Cousins (family photograph)
Fig. 6.7 Megan - Kourtney Kardashian (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.8 James - Fractal snowflake (digital painting from Internet)
Fig. 6.9 Elysia - Waterfall (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.10 Maddie - Miranda Hart (photograph from Internet)
Ishaque was the first to share his image with the group, a digital painting of a palm tree silhouetted against a sunset (Fig. 6.1). He told us he chose it because ‘the wave is really calm…and there’s lots of bright stars, there’s a lovely palm tree and the sky’s gone to a beautiful colour’. He found it hard to explain why the image was beautiful: ‘It stood out from all the others… I just think it had a special – you know – kind of thing to it’. Everyone agreed it was beautiful, because ‘it shows what a beach can be like at night but in a different place than where we would usually go’ (Nell) and ‘because it’s got all the things: you’ve got sunset, some birds, you’ve got the moon, then you’ve got your beach which I can see some people on…it’s got a beautiful blend of colours’ (Charlie).

Maddie explained how she chose her image of the Sydney Opera House (Fig. 6.2) partly because of the sun shining on it and the calm sea and the ‘abstract roof’, meaning ‘the way that all the shapes, they’re not just like our roofs, it’s different’. Nell observed that ‘if you look at the sky more carefully it kind of looks like the sky is making the triangles instead’ (meaning that the ‘negative’ shapes created by the outline of the roof create blue triangles that appear to project forward in the image rather than recede into the background). While most children agreed that it was a beautiful image, Charlie was less sure and commented: ‘I have to admit, the roof is…a nice structure… I guess in some people’s minds it looks beautiful but in other people’s beautiful it’s a different type of thing… I like it, but I wouldn’t say it was beautiful’. Charlie’s comment prompted James to confess ‘I just don’t see the beauty in it. I don’t see how people can see that as beautiful (although) as Charlie said, you can see it in different ways, you see beautiful in different ways’.

Callum chose his Manchester United badge (Fig. 6.3) ‘because I support Man U and red is my favourite colour’ but he couldn’t describe why he thought it was beautiful. As the discussion faltered, I opened another of Ishaque’s images on the
laptop, an Arsenal badge (Fig. 6.4) superficially similar to Callum’s image but essentially different in terms of what it represented. I asked the group whether they thought it would be possible for each boy to find the other one’s image beautiful. ‘No’ was the immediate, unanimous response because, James argued, ‘The only reason they actually chose them is about football, so they can’t, on real terms, on real beauty terms, they can’t.’ Encouraging children to reflect further on this issue, I closed the laptop and asked the group to:

Imagine we were looking at a picture of a person, and some people knew the person, and other people didn’t know the person. Would that affect whether you thought that person was beautiful or not? Or are people just beautiful, or they’re not beautiful?

Charlie responded by using Beyoncé as an example and explained that ‘some people, if they looked at (a picture of her) and they’d never met Beyoncé, would think that she might be beautiful, whereas the people that had actually met her might actually know her true personality and it might be horrible and they might not find it beautiful any longer’.

Charlie’s own image was of a waterfall (Fig. 6.5) printed on a very small piece of paper that I propped up against my watch on the table for the other children to see. He described the picture as:

A remote, calm place, where you can see, from behind the trees, there are no cities close to it. It’s got two waterfalls, there’s one close up and one behind, light blue water. The sun shines through which makes it… then it’s got the nice green trees. I think it’s in the summer time or late Spring…. It’s beautiful because it’s calm and remote. There are no cities because when the world was made by – we don’t know, whatever – there were no cities or anything, and now the world’s evolved and it’s mainly cities and there’s not much countryside (but) there’s this part and it’s just nice countryside which has obviously never been touched.

Several children agreed this image was beautiful and highlighted specific features that Charlie had already identified. Megan observed that the image was beautiful because ‘It’s something that you don’t see every day… so it would make it out of the ordinary but still beautiful’.
Nell’s photograph (Fig. 6.6) was taken ‘just before my Granny’s wedding and I kind of like it because of it’s got all of us in it… I just really like it’. Charlie was curious as to whether this meant it was beautiful, prompting a discussion that also involved Megan:

Charlie: Um, to you and your family that is obviously beautiful because it’s got all your girl cousins in it - and to you it’s precious and beautiful, but to us, um, some of us, we don’t really get the point.
RW: Do you mean you don’t find it beautiful or you don’t understand why it could be beautiful to Nell?
Charlie: No, Nell finds it beautiful because it’s her family, all her cousins (but) some of the people here (might) ask why is it beautiful (to them)?
Megan: Well… I find it quite beautiful but I was wondering how Nell finds it beautiful because we all have it in different ways… we all have different thoughts about why it is (beautiful). Like Isaac likes Arsenal and Callum likes Man U, they’re really different but they’re still football teams. And we all have different thoughts about what beauty is. For Nell, that would be what she thinks beauty is.

Megan chose her image of Kourtney Kardashian (Fig. 6.7) because she ‘liked her hair’, though Nell found it unappealing, and suggested that it represented ‘the average celebrity, a bit stressy, a bit spoilt, kind of a bit rude to people.’ Maddie also chose an image of a female celebrity, Miranda Hart (Fig. 6.10), a choice that divided the group along gender lines: ‘I disagree that that is beautiful’, declared Callum, ‘That’s the most ugly thing of all’. ‘No, no, no!’, responded several girls, ‘Beautiful! It’s Miranda!’

This exchange took place towards the end of the interview and time constraints prevented the group from exploring their responses in more depth.

Before this, two other images were discussed. Elysia’s photograph of a waterfall (Fig. 6.9) closely resembled Charlie’s, though the low quality of the reproduction prompted him to question how it had been created: ‘I don’t know if it’s man-made or natural’, he observed, ‘One, it could be natural, just a bit pixelated and blurred a bit; two, it could be something made on a computer’. This prompted James to wonder whether this should make a difference to the viewer: ‘If you saw that picture and you liked it, then someone told you that it was man-made, would it make any
difference to your feelings of it at all?’ ‘No’, Charlie responded, ‘Not one bit. I like it for what it looks like. It’s got waterfalls.’

The idea of the ‘natural’ as opposed to the ‘man-made’ resurfaced during discussion of James’s image, a digital painting of a fractal snowflake (Fig. 6.8):

Charlie: That’s obviously not natural, that’s obviously done on the computer or something.
James: How do you know that? It could be the way it’s drawn.
Charlie: It could be a firework but I really, really, really, really, really, really doubt that.
Elysia: I actually don’t think it’s real because it’s completely, exactly symmetrical.
James: But does it matter whether it’s real? We never said it had to be real. We said what’s beautiful, didn’t we? The Opera House is man-made, some of you thought that was beautiful.
RW: Is there an implication here that we want beautiful things to be natural? Because one of the qualities of your image, Charlie, was that it was perfect nature… Is it possible for something man-made to be beautiful?
Several: Yes…
RW: And something natural to be beautiful? But what we’re kind of curious about here is whether this is natural or whether it is man-made.
Charlie: I still don’t think it’s beautiful but it’s - it’s not because it’s man-made. It’s hard to explain. I’ve just got a phrase and then that’s all I’ve got to say; beauty is in the eye of the beholder.
James: Everyone knows that.
RW: What does that mean, I don’t understand?
Charlie: If you’ve got a picture of something, like any of the pictures here, it could be beautiful to someone, but to someone (else) it couldn’t be. That doesn’t make it not beautiful and it doesn’t make it beautiful.
RW: Was it true of your picture though? And was it true of the first picture we looked at, because everyone agreed about the sunset and the silhouette, and everyone agrees about this.
Charlie: But maybe the whole of 6LS think it’s not beautiful. If you’ve got two people… one says it’s beautiful, one person says it isn’t beautiful… Then it doesn’t mean that it’s not beautiful and it doesn’t mean that it is beautiful. Say you’ve got the Queen and you’ve got… a random girl picked off the streets, the random girl says it’s beautiful and the Queen says it’s not, it doesn’t mean that it’s not beautiful because the Queen is more powerful, it doesn’t mean it’s not beautiful.
RW: So everyone has sort of equal rights when it comes to deciding what’s beautiful?
Charlie: Yeah.
Fig. 6.11  Bonnie - puppy (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.12  Heather - dogs (photograph from magazine)
Fig. 6.13  Ben - dog (personal photograph)
Fig. 6.14  Bonnie - tree (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.15  Bonnie - raindrop (photograph from magazine)
Fig. 6.16  Jasmine - waterfall (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.17  Alastair - giraffe (photograph from book)
Fig. 6.18  Alastair - dolphin (photograph from book)
Fig. 6.19  Jasmine - Earth (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.20  Heather - flowers (personal photograph)
Fig. 6.21  Heather - tree in winter (photograph from magazine)
Each of the 14 images chosen by the children in the second group represented an aspect of the natural world. Before beginning the interview, I sequenced the images in a way that I anticipated would enable discussion to move smoothly from one theme to another. Consequently, the first three images each featured dogs. Bonnie described how she found hers (Fig. 6.11) by typing ‘beautiful pictures’ into a search engine and told us she chose it because ‘the beautiful part is the eyes… they’re really sweet and gentle and loving’. She added that she also liked the colours and tones of the picture: ‘With the bit lighter and the bit darker, I think it makes it nice’. Others agreed that it was beautiful and added their own observations. Jasmine thought the dog looked ‘comfy and relaxed’, Ben imagined it was slightly cross because ‘clothes have been dumped on him’ and Heather confessed she was ‘an animal maniac’. She told us ‘I find any animal beautiful’ and that this one was particularly beautiful ‘because it’s small and it’s a new life’.

Beginning with an image that prompted agreement appeared to help to settle children into an interview and increase their confidence in responding to each other’s images. I asked Bonnie how she felt about the group agreeing that her photograph was beautiful and she described her relief: ‘I feel relaxed, ‘cause I was quite tense when I was describing it… I wasn’t sure if it was a beautiful picture or not and I was, like, Are they going to go with me or are they not?’ Heather displayed a little more confidence in her canine selection process: leafing through a magazine, ‘I found that picture… and I thought Well I think that’s beautiful so it’ll be perfect’. (Fig. 6.12) Alastair wasn’t so sure, citing a protruding tongue as evidence of imperfection and reasoning that ‘it’s a beautiful dog, but it’s not a beautiful picture of the dog’. I asked the group if someone could explain this statement, which prompted Jasmine to suggest that ‘every human is beautiful in their own way - and it doesn’t have to be just looks, it can be beautiful
inside and outside or they can just be beautiful inside’. Ben’s photograph of his own
dog (Fig. 6.13) prompted discussion of a related theme, with Alastair reasoning that ‘if
it’s your pet you’d think it was beautiful’ and Heather agreeing that ‘it’s not about the
looks… you’ve learned what it’s like and it’s become a friend to you’.

Bonnie also appeared to value the fact that others shared her tastes. Her
photograph of an autumnal tree (Fig. 6.14) prompted admiration, and she told us how
another image of a tree reflected in a raindrop (Fig. 6.15) was found in a magazine
belonging to her mother, who ‘liked it quite a lot and so she put one on her wall’.

Jasmine agreed that it was beautiful and that she understood it as beautiful:

Because the flower, the way it's curved around the raindrop, it's like when you’re
carrying… it's like it's safe, it's like it's safely, like, curved into the flower. So the
raindrop is, like, in the flower getting held safely and then the pink of the flower, it
just, it almost blends in with the raindrop in the background.

Jasmine’s own choice was an image of a waterfall (Fig. 6.16), located by typing
‘beauty’ into a search engine and choosing from a number of them. ‘I never really
looked twice at the other ones’, she explained, ‘but that one, it just caught my eye and I
just really liked it’. It was beautiful because ‘it’s like flowing down and then it goes
into a big pond, and then it’s like trees and beautiful water as it goes through the
rocks… and the grass bit looks a bit like a heart’. Bonnie agreed. She told us: ‘I love
the colours and, like Jasmine said, the purple and the colours of the waterfall, it’s kind
of light blue and white flowing down.’ Heather described how ‘you could look at it for
ages, looking at the different parts’. Ben, however, had reservations. He said: ‘I don’t
think it’s really beautiful because I just think of lethal rocks. I went on a walk once, I
think it was up a mountain in Italy… I slipped on a rock, fell in the freezing cold water,
swallowed a load and scraped my back’. Ben’s story prompted me to ask the group if
they thought he was right to let this memory affect his perception of the picture: Alastair
said ‘Yes, if he looks at that it’s probably going to give him bad memories’.

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Alastair chose to share two pages from a book of wildlife photography that prompted discussion on the scale and colour of the images. The photograph of a giraffe framed against a distant mountain (Fig. 6.17) caused Bonnie to comment on the relative size of each feature: ‘People think that the giraffe is big, but compared to other things it actually is really small’. The formal qualities of Alastair’s image of a dolphin emerging from the sea (Fig. 6.18) appealed to Jasmine, ‘because the sky, it’s blue and it’s mixed with the ocean, and the sun shining on it, that makes it nice’.

Jasmine’s second selection was a satellite image of Earth (Fig. 6.19), chosen partly in order to represent the diversity of existence on the planet while simultaneously presenting a unified visual appearance: ‘Everyone says the world’s a small place, but actually it’s really big and everything lives on earth… and it’s like the colours blend in with the blue ocean and the lands… everything blends in, the ocean and all of the land just sort of come together’. Once again, however, Ben offered a contrasting perspective on this image:

Ben: I think… it looks quite peaceful but… when you’re actually down (on Earth), from up in space it looks peaceful but in some parts of the Earth it’s definitely not peaceful… like in big cities it’s not peaceful because you can hear engines… the roads… and lots of people around talking… that make the most noise’.  
RW: And is it harder to imagine something being beautiful if it’s noisy?  
Ben: Well in some bits no and in some parts yes, because you can have - like, there could be a shop you really like and that could be beautiful, and then you could have all the people and that could not be beautiful.

The theme of urban/rural experience raised by Ben immediately resurfaced in discussion of Heather’s images, one of a tree in winter (Fig. 6.21), the other a bumblebee in a foxglove. (Fig. 6.20):

I’ve just lived in the countryside all my life and I’ve seen busy cities and I don’t like them. I think that (picture) is really quiet and nice if you’re just in the garden and the bee’s, like, peacefully minding its own business and flying into flowers… I just imagine like in a big forest, field area with a few plants, when you’re just sitting there relaxing and thinking about things and you just see a nice… and you hear the birds and then you see a bee flying into a flower.
At the end of the interview I asked children if they had enjoyed looking at each other’s images and whether anything had surprised them. Heather was surprised at the frequency with which images of the natural world had appeared (‘there were so many of nature, stuff like that’), while Bonnie referred back to Jasmine’s image of the Earth: ‘I never really noticed how beautiful the world actually is’.
Interview B3 21st February 2013
Group 3: Cameron; Henry; Izzy; Josie; Noah

Fig. 6.22 Cameron - Forest in snow (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.23 Cameron - Flowers (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.24 Noah - Sky - time-lapse image (photograph from book)
Fig. 6.25 Izzy - Flower (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.26 Henry - Snow leopard (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.27 Izzy - Tiger (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.28 Josie - Tiger (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.29 Izzy - Polar bear cub (photograph from Internet)
Fig. 6.30 Noah - African savannah (photograph from book)
Fig. 6.31 Josie - Best friends (photograph from Internet)
Of the 25 images chosen by the third group, 24 represented the natural world. Cameron provided nine of these and each represented either a snow-covered landscape (Fig. 6.22) or flowers (Fig. 6.23). Noah found the composition of one problematic: ‘They’ve taken it up close so all you can see is the flowers basically coming out straight at you… that’s Cameron’s perception of beauty but if I was asked what I think of the beauty of that, I think that’s a bit packed for a small picture, for me’. Henry agreed, suggesting that the photograph would have been better if it had ‘more of a background instead of just more flowers, like a flowerbed, a garden or something’. Josie commented on the juxtaposition of colours in the image, pointing out: ‘It’s like something you can’t find anywhere else, ‘cause you don’t always find flowers (of) loads of different colours… they look like they’ve been made especially for this photo because they’ve all been set out and they’re all, like, perfect’.

Cameron used the word ‘pretty’ to describe one of his snowscapes, and this prompted me to ask the group whether they thought the word has the same meaning as ‘beautiful’. There was disagreement. It had kind of the same meaning, children said, though they found it difficult to explain why. I tried to help them articulate their ideas by showing them an image chosen by Noah, a time-lapse photograph of the moon rising (Fig. 6.24). There was some agreement that, while parts of the photograph could be described as pretty, the word could not be used to describe the image as a whole:

Noah: I’d say, like, the star, the line things in the sky are pretty, (but) the whole thing put together is beautiful.
Josie: Well I would call that beautiful… because it’s, like, a way of nature and it happened - and the way it happened is, like, fascinating. I would have immediately said ‘That’s beautiful’ if it was put in front of me, not pretty, because I would use that on, like, a person… like a singer or something, you know, really pretty. I would (say), ‘She’s really pretty’… but then for nature I would use ‘beautiful’.

Children were engaged by discussions of the realism of certain images. Josie questioned Issy’s image of a flower with multi-coloured petals (Fig. 6.25), ’because that
doesn’t look real - but, if I saw it, like, on a walk or something, then (I would say) that’s fascinating, the way it’s created… and I (would) want to take it home with me’. Josie went on to describe how, in other circumstances, her response to the flower would differ: ‘If someone has made it there for, like, something - and then it was handed to me I’d think ‘How did you make that?’ I wouldn’t think that it would ever be real’. Other children were interested in the possibility that the multi-coloured flower might be real: ‘Well - sun and rain creates a rainbow and it has the colours of a rainbow in it - so (maybe) it’s created, like, once in a lifetime… I would want to stare at it for a while, see what happens’. The idea that perceptions are shaped by the viewer’s knowledge of the rarity of an event prompted me to suggest a scenario to the group:

**RW:** Imagine this for a moment. What if every day when you woke up, there was a rainbow outside? And every evening when you got home from school, there was a rainbow outside. Would you still look at it all the time? Izzy?

**Izzy:** Well, when I see a rainbow I would, like, go ‘Oh wow, there’s a rainbow!’ - but then, if when I came home and I was looking up and there was (another) rainbow I wouldn’t really be… like if Christmas is every day, like I get really excited when it comes up to Christmas but if it was every day you wouldn’t get really excited.

**Noah:** I would still think it’s beautiful and I’d just take a glimpse of it when I’m going into my house.

Rarity resurfaced during discussion of four similar images, of tigers and a snow leopard and a polar bear cub (Figs. 6.26–6.29). Referencing the fact that the animals are endangered species, Cameron connected beauty and rarity: ‘They look really beautiful… you want to save them and you like them even more because of how they look’. These images of animals from distant places were complemented by Noah’s images of an African savannah landscape, and he drew attention to decisions the photographer made that related to content and composition. Cameron, however, found these decisions problematic:

**Noah:** I find it beautiful because… I like landscape with… the yellow flowers in the front and then just the trees dotted about. Like, if you’re painting, you’d put things in certain places - but it’s like they’ve randomly gone in different places and I like that.
Cam: If it was me - I don’t want to be mean, but - although my one with all the snow is quite plain, *this* landscape, it’s a bit too green because everything you can see is mainly green, except for some trees and some yellow flowers. Maybe if the yellow flowers were a bit brighter and a bit bolder then it might show up a bit more… *but* the trees are, like, dotted around so it looks like there’s no order to anything. It just looks like there’s been some random trees planted in random places in a random field.

Noah: I’m not saying Cameron’s wrong, because that’s his opinion, but when Izzy asked Cameron, do you like plain stuff or would you prefer packed-full stuff, if I had that question I would say plain stuff like that picture, ‘cause that’s what I’d think of *(as)* beauty.

Cam: When I said I like plain and packed-full it depends *what* plain stuff you have and *what* packed full… If you took a close image of the flowers it would just look like some bits of weed with yellow spots in and *that’s* not very beautiful - but if you bring it out and put some more trees in and make it look like it’s actually a proper field, which *is* beautiful, then you would probably think… ‘Yes that’s beautiful’.

RW: So what we’re saying is, that this might be a beautiful place or it might not be, but you could take a beautiful photograph or a photograph that is not beautiful - even though you’re in the same place. Can that make sense?

The children agreed this made sense, and indicated that they were aware of how the decisions taken by photographers impact on images. Cameron talked about ‘the distance of where you are and the angle’ and Henry added: ‘It’s also the timing - say you took it when the wind was blowing, the trees would be swept back’. Finally, Josie shared a poster about friendship which she described as two hands ‘pinky promising’ to remain best friends (Fig. 6.31). ‘You wouldn’t particularly say two hands pinky-promising is a beautiful picture’, said Noah, ‘But what it’s about is beautiful’.
This interview was characterised by several debates that resulted in distinctive contributions from two children. Seven images, with varied content, were discussed, and Anya provided the first three. The reason she gave for choosing a photograph of
blossom (‘It’s quite sort of girly… that’s what I think is pretty’) prompted the first of
the debates: does ‘pretty’ meant the same as ‘beautiful’?

Gracie: Well, not really. ‘Pretty’ is sort of, like, ‘Oh, she looks really pretty’ but
beauty, it could be anything. Let’s say someone was, like, even if they look
ugly, it’s what’s on the inside that counts, like the heart and the things what
they say, the kindness of what they are.
Spike: I think, like, ‘pretty’ means almost ‘attractive’ - you think it looks good - and
then ‘beautiful’ means you think it’s different, you think… it’s got its own
touch.
RW: Can you explain what you mean by ‘beauty has got its own touch’?
Spike: Well, like, for an example, Anya said ‘This is beautiful’ so that’s got its own
touch for her, so it’s got the pink, it’s got the elegant-ness - but then I might say
a tractor’s beautiful because it’s got like things that I like, touches that I put in.
So we all, like, have our own touches put in to the beauty - ingredients to make
something that’s beautiful.
RW: And, it’s different with pretty because you can look at something and you can
agree that it’s pretty without really…?
Spike: … Just thinking at all - you just think it’s pretty because it looks attractive.

After explaining that her reason for choosing her second image, a photograph of her dog
(Fig. 6.33) was that ‘It looks solemn’, Anya shared a third image, of a waterfall (Fig.
6.34). This prompted Gracie to enthusiastically point out the way in which elements of
the image were integrated into a whole, both pictorially and emotionally:

Anya: It’s quite tropical and I like the colours in it, they’re not too big and bold. I
think it’s just quite calm and peaceful.
Gracie: I think it’s like, I think it’s like natural, it’s nature really, it’s just like - not like
there’s rubbish everywhere, it’s just natural, nature, it’s together, it’s beautiful!
And I really like the way like the trees, it’s like a ‘V’ shape, it looks like they’re
all… holding hands, if you see it like that… Everything’s like really peaceful
and calm, loving and caring, in a way.
RW: You used the word ‘loving’ and I was quite surprised and interested. Could you
explain what you mean by this, the sense of loving?
Gracie: Well, it’s quite hard to like, explain, but it’s basically everything’s like in order,
it’s loving, everything’s like basically got a partner, ‘cause like, (pointing to
parts of the picture) that’s got that, that one’s got like the nature bits are like
around here, that’s got that, the sky’s got the that, so basically they’re all joined
together like it’s a family of green, a team, it’s like it’s working together,
basically, to run this, to make it beautiful.

Barney’s aerial photograph of Stamford Bridge football stadium (Fig. 6.35) was very
different to Anya’s images but it prompted both Spike and Gracie to return to ideas
from previous discussions. Just as she had described the trees ‘holding hands’, Gracie
personified the stadium. She said: ‘Even if a football stadium is rusty, it means it’s
been well used, it’s had a nice time, a good time and everything. It doesn’t mean it’s not really [as] special [as] the others that are really posh’. Similarly, thinking of the image of the stadium prompted Spike to return to his idea of people and images having ‘their own touch’, and to suggest that the beauty was dependent upon ‘how you think’:

All the girls will… probably think ‘for me that’s not beautiful’ - but then for some boys they think ‘Oh yeah, Chelsea, that’s beautiful for me,’ and (others) think ‘Oh yeah the structure, that’s beautiful for me’. But then it depends how you’re thinking about it because some of us in the room might now think ‘Oh that’s ugly’.

Spike pursued this idea of objective and subjective strands of experience when discussion turned to Emily’s image of a butterfly (Fig. 6.36): ‘I can understand why she thinks it’s beautiful. I like the flowers, the scene, the butterflies, the elegance’. Emily also shared a photograph of herself with a seal (Fig. 6.37), explaining that she liked it ‘because seals are really rare’. This was the second consecutive interview in which a child had referred to rarity and this prompted me to ask the group whether they thought there was a connection between rarity and beauty. Spike was keen to explore this idea, and though his subsequent contribution to the discussion was a little hard to follow, it was thoughtful and considered and encompassed a range of ideas.

Spike: With the connection between rare and beautiful, with beautiful it’s almost like, in this cauldron - and you put in your opinion, then you put in some other stuff - and with rareness, rareness gets a bit of a count in what you think of beautiful. Because, if something’s really dull, and there was something really rare, if they’re both like the same thing but one was rare-r, you’d think the rare one was more beautiful because something in your head would think ‘Well, that’s rare-r, that’s better…’ But then you - it’s not real, that’s just like if you were told this you’d probably think ‘Oh no, no, I never say this, I think it’s actually it’s pure beauty,’ but it’s almost like a thing in your head, like a trigger, that goes off and thinks ‘Oh it’s rare-r, that’s better’ and, like, you don’t really realise, it just goes on.

RW: A minute ago you used the word ‘pure’ beauty, what does that mean?
Spike: As in, like, you can get, like, beauty where you’ve just been told by people and that wouldn’t be real beauty, that would just be like if you were with your best mate and he said ‘Stamford Bridge is amazing,’ and you hated Chelsea, you might be like ‘Oh yeah, yeah, definitely’. That wouldn’t be real beauty, like beauty is your opinion, not somebody else’s unless you’re agreeing on it.

RW: So your opinion stops being pure when…
Spike … You’re just saying it because somebody else is - perhaps your best mate is saying it. And that, like, changes the whole effect of beauty because that way, almost like copying, if you had an idea but then somebody else said ‘Oh, this is
better,’ you’d go for what everyone else thinks just to make yourself look cooler…

RW: And am I right in thinking that you value the pure beauty more highly?
Spike: Yeah. So I’d rather have a friend that says ‘No, you’re wrong, I think this is beautiful,’ rather than someone who copies me…

Gracie shared a photograph taken on a family holiday that she had chosen for several reasons (Fig. 6.38):

Well, I think it’s beauty because, one, it’s a moment that I loved. Secondly, I love the shape of it, and the texture of this bit here and I really love - it’s like paradise, in a way… it was just - amazing, it was like my dream, dream place… I thought of this photo straight away because… I’ve got a picture of it in my frame so every morning when I think ‘Oh, it’s raining’ I just look at that picture and… it just makes me smile, in a way’.

Gracie’s references to paradise, rarity and a ‘dream place’ reminded me of her earlier responses to Anya’s image of a waterfall, so I asked the children to compare the two images side-by-side on the screen. ‘Basically’, Gracie suggested, ‘I thought my picture was paradise and together and I think this is paradise too, because it’s got the nice blue sea waters and and it just makes me feel lovely and happy’. Once again, Spike looked at the image from another child’s perspective. He said:

I can see why Gracie thinks it’s paradise but then, with Gracie’s family on top – for me, I’d think, it’s Gracie’s family, for me that’s not paradise. From all I’ve been saying earlier, like, we all have our own touch… so I was imagining that I wouldn’t have Gracie’s family there.

Finally it was Spike’s turn to share his image. Uniquely for the class, he chose a drawing, one he had made himself (Fig. 6.39). When I had first seen it, several weeks before the interview, I was unsure whether or not Spike had understood the task, though I thought it more likely that his choice of image was designed to challenge both his classmates and me. In both respects, I was wrong. Why did he choose it?

Spike: Well, there are a few reasons. One, I chose it because I did this when I was younger and it made me think… I remember when I was doing this and I couldn’t draw very well, I put so much effort into it. It made me feel, like, really proud of it which makes me feel better about myself, which makes me feel like it’s really beautiful…

RW: Did you hope that other people would find it beautiful - or expect them to?
Spike: I was thinking – most people will not find this beautiful but then - knowing me as a bit of an addicted doodler, they’d probably know why I think it’s beautiful because of the effort and things I put into it… At that age, those pictures took me around a day because they were so hard to do.

Anya: Do you think it’s beautiful to look at - or just the pleasure of thinking that you’ve achieved it?

Spike: Well actually, I feel it both ways. I feel it’s beautiful for my effort and achievement but then [also] on how it looks. You’ve got to, like, almost understand, you have to be passionate about a drawing yourself… ‘cause, to, like, most of you here, you think ‘Ooh, he’s done a bunch of scribbly lines, that looks weird’ and then, like, when you understand, when you’ve looked at some of your other things, you think, ‘Oh, that’s beautiful’ ... it’s unlike what everyone else has done... I find, like, it is beautiful but in two different ways.

*Instructions for Task 2*

At the end of their first interview, each child was provided with a digital camera and set their second task, briefly summarised on a handout (Appendix 6.8). As was the case with Old Oak School, I provided minimal instructions, simply asking each group to use their cameras to take beautiful photographs. The second set of interviews began the following week; an example of a full transcript is provided as an appendix (6.9).
6.2 Description of interviews B5-B8 (photographed images)

Interview B5 7th March 2013
Group 1: Callum; Charlie; Elysia; Ishaque; Maddie; Megan; Nell

The eight children in this group photographed a total of 105 images. With one exception, each child chose only one to share with the group. Maddie had taken a sequence of 52 photographs that recorded a family walk (Fig. 6.45) and, rather than select one to discuss, I suggested we scroll through some of them onscreen. Discussion
centred on what made certain images more beautiful than others, and one, a view of reeds around a pond, was explored in depth. ‘My dad gave me a few ideas about what to do,’ Maddie explained, ‘He just found this thing and he said, ‘zoom in and just take a picture of it’. Children continued to ‘zoom in’ to the image as they discussed decisions regarding its content and composition. At one point Nell used her hands to ‘re-frame’ her view of the image in a way that masked out a fence among the reeds, which, Maddie explained, was designed to demarcate a space for anglers, ‘because the fishermen, they do their fishing’. ‘Well’, James responded, ‘That’s ruined the natural-ness of it. Now we’re thinking, no more natural-ness’. Several children agreed they had preferred the image when they thought that the gap in the grass was natural rather than man-made, and James summarised this group’s preferences: ‘Throughout the past month, all the nature things have got the most “likes”’.

Charlie had chosen to photograph a freeze-framed television picture of a formal garden (Fig. 6.40). He said: ‘This is in Japan and, as [with] my last picture, it had no, no sign of man, it was one hundred per cent nature… just beautiful, seeing how still the lake is and the flowers and everything. I think it’s just a wonderful place’. James was troubled by the composition of this image: ‘There’s a bit too much in the background,’ he complained, ‘I don’t get as much detail as I want from it - and also the bridge is kind of too close so it blocks out (too) much’. However, when it came to Megan’s photograph, which depicted a makeshift memorial with flowers tied to a tree (Fig. 6.46), James adopted a different kind of judgmental approach. When several children agreed that the photograph would have been better if it had been taken before the flowers began to die, James challenged the emphasis they placed upon appearance at the expense of meaning. He said: ‘I’m guessing, everyone at first didn’t know someone had died there - like, you took one glance at it and you didn’t think ‘death’ did you?’ In this instance,
James was convinced that discussion of pictorial qualities detracted from the experience of engaging with the image. He demanded: ‘Don’t think about how it could have been improved. Think about how it is - and what you first thought of it’.

When it came to James’s photograph of a copper vase (Fig. 6.44), he had low expectations of securing approval: ‘I’m pretty sure none of you will find this beautiful’, he warned, and several children promptly agreed they did not. ‘It’s really ugly’, said Callum, ‘It looks like it should be in an old people’s home’. ‘You are correct’, James replied, ‘I took most of my pictures in my Grandma’s house. It’s my favourite colour, kind of goldy-orange, and I kind of like the sense of peaceful-ness around it.’ Then he linked the image with the broader experience of a visit to his grandmother’s house: ‘It kind of makes you feel like you’re there and then, then it feels like beauty’. Several children were interested in whether James’s choice of subject had been influenced by his mother, who had suggested that James take his camera with him on the visit:

Nell: So basically, all your pictures are your mum’s fault?
James: She kind of influenced it. But she kind of left me to do it, like deciding what I should take a picture of.
Nell: My mum gave me ideas but I didn’t listen. I just took a picture of lovely stuff.
RW: Can we be influenced by other people’s opinions of what they find beautiful? Can they make us change our minds?’
Megan: It can’t be possible unless you cut their brain open and put it in (your own head)… You have your idea of beauty and that’s your idea. How are you going to change it? How are you suddenly going to think it’s beautiful?’
Callum: Well you could change someone’s mind but it would take quite a lot of effort, by, like, trying to persuade them and by telling them things, trying to make them think that it’s beautiful.

James concluded the discussion by describing that, camera in hand at his grandmother’s house: ‘I started to notice more. Notice more about her house and how nice it is’.

Several images prompted minor disagreements about personal preferences. While children welcomed Elysia’s first photograph, of the sun breaking through clouds (Fig. 6.43), as ‘an amazing picture’, her second, of her ‘cute’ and ‘adorable’ dog, (Fig. 6.42) was less popular. ‘I don’t really see how it’s beautiful’, said Nell, prompting me
to ask Elysia whether she had expected others to agree. No, she replied, because ‘it’s like Nell’s picture of her family, it’s kind of the same. Not everyone likes it’. Nell was unconvinced also by Ishaque’s photograph of some horses near his home, taken because ‘the place I live has lots of nature and there’s lots of things I could have chosen. I chose this because I think they look really nice all together eating hay’. ‘It doesn’t look that beautiful to me’, Nell responded, ‘because, basically, it’s brown’. Of her own image, depicting pink icing on a cake (Fig. 6.47) she declared ‘I absolutely love this picture because I absolutely love cake… I love it, I love it, I love it!’ ‘I like cake,’ said Callum ‘I hate pink.’

Callum found it hard to explain his reasons for photographing an iPad (Fig. 6.41). He said: ‘I’m not sure – just it kind of looks beautiful.’ This explanation failed to satisfy Megan: ‘He likes it like Nell likes her family photo… they’re both precious to them, so they both think [they’re] beautiful in different ways… I don’t see any visual beauty in it’. ‘Megan’s right’, said James, ‘There’s different types of beauty - like I wasn't attracted to her picture because [it was] a different type of beauty - but that’s [just] a laptop - get over it!’ Nell agreed and suggested that ‘I like the games on it, but the object itself isn’t beautiful - it’s just a black thing with a button’. Charlie came to Callum’s defence, and suggested that the functional design of the iPad was central to its aesthetic appeal: ‘It's beautiful in a way-ish, inside… how all the things are connected and how they are all made to create the iPad’. He thought the reason Callum had chosen it, however, was less rational: ‘You love it, don’t you? You just love iPads and iPhones. So you thought, as you loved the iPad, you’d take a picture of it. Correct?’ Callum replied ‘Yeah.’

I concluded the interview by asking the group whether they thought beauty is important. Opinions were varied: 'I’m not going to say yes or no’, said Maddie,
‘Because it’s in the middle. You can see the people who just chuck on loads and loads and loads of make-up, ‘cause they want to make their appearance good, and then there’s no point’. Elysia was more positive: ‘I think it is, because then people, like you’re doing to us, can see what you actually think is beautiful, and your ideas… you can see what’s going on in our minds’. James disagreed: ‘No! There’s more to life than beauty… because like, you look at a girl, [and you think] ’Ah lovely!’ But then, what does that really matter? There is more to life than just ‘Oh, she’s nice…’ I think there’s just more to life than what people’s opinions are’.
Fig. 6.49  Jasmine - hands  (photograph)
Fig. 6.50  Bonnie - feather  (photograph)
Fig. 6.51  Heather - fireplace  (photograph)
Fig. 6.52  Alastair - tulips  (photograph)
Fig. 6.53  Ben - pets  (photographs)
Fig. 6.54  Heather - dog  (photograph)
Fig. 6.55  Jasmine - dog  (photograph)
Fig. 6.56  Bonnie - daffodils  (photograph)
The five children in this group took a total of 41 photographs, eight of which were shared during the interview. Whereas the mood of first group was often playfully combative, this one was quieter and more reflective, and children often sought agreement about their images.

Jasmine’s close-up photograph of two hands entwined (Fig. 6.49), was unique in that it was the only one posed deliberately for the purpose of the task: ‘My sister and my grandmother are holding hands… it just, like, represents love and happiness, and beauty is not just on the outside but also on the inside. Bonnie built upon this theme, adding: ‘Beauty, love and happiness, they’re all kind of in a big umbrella-thing because – well, they are all things that happen on the inside, not what’s on the outside.’ Alistair described how his perception of the image changed as he listened to the others. He said: ‘At first I thought – ‘cause I didn’t really look at the picture properly – I didn’t know why Jasmine chose it. I thought How could an old wrinkled hand be beautiful? But [when] Jasmine made her point about how it’s beautiful, it started to change my mind’. There was further agreement around the theme of animals being beautiful, as Ben, Heather and Jasmine all talked about photographs of pets they loved (Figs. 6.53/4/5): ‘Any cat or any dog or any animal, it’s beautiful because it’s a living thing and it has its own thoughts and stuff and it means you’re the same’ said Heather. Jasmine explained that ‘I see [my dog] as my baby, because I do most things for her, I take her on walks, I feed her with my mum, I do everything for her’.

Several images prompted children to reflect on the therapeutic effects of beauty. Heather told us how her photograph of a fireplace (Fig. 6.51) reminded her of sitting and staring at the fire: ‘I just think it’s peaceful and I do that at the end of the day and burn away all the bad thoughts. I imagine the fire… lashing through my thoughts and it makes me think of peaceful things’. Bonnie agreed, saying: ‘It can let your bad
thoughts drift away and let your new, better thoughts come in’. Alistair chose his photograph of a vase of tulips (Fig. 6.52) because ‘flowers remind me of new life and new life can be beautiful in a way. It’s starting to grow, it gives me all the good memories I have from growing up’, while Bonnie photographed a vase of daffodils (Fig. 6.56) for similar reasons: ‘Like Alistair’s picture, it shows the circle, because there are new buds and then they’re fully bloomed buds’. Bonnie also selected another photograph of a feather found on a walk (Fig. 6.50) because ‘it reminds me of all the beautiful things that are in the world… it’s unique and it made me think about [how] everything in the world is different and beautiful in their own way’.

The five children also shared broader concepts of beauty. Heather thought beauty was not important ‘because, if someone’s not beautiful it doesn’t matter’. Bonnie disagreed, suggesting that it is important ‘because it creates happiness and love in the world – like Heather said, it doesn’t really matter if someone’s not beautiful but just, just if it is (there), then it makes more happiness and love in the world. For Jasmine beauty was sometimes important, though not always, ‘because… if you have something that is beautiful, it creates happiness … but if someone’s not beautiful it doesn’t matter if they’re not beautiful, it’s whether they’re a nice person or not’. This discussion led me to explore the children’s notions relating to universality in aesthetic experience, and I asked them if, when they described something as beautiful, did they describe it in a way that was personal to them or in a way that was the same for everybody? ‘Well, it can be beautiful for you and beautiful for someone else’, Jasmine explained, because if you don’t think something is beautiful, someone else might think it is beautiful. I think that ‘beautiful’ is a very strong word’. The interview concluded with further discussion around their perceptions of beauty:
RW: How do you know when something is beautiful?
Jas: When you look at it twice and you just, you don’t think ‘Oh gosh that’s just sad,’ or ‘That’s just stupid’; you think, ‘Oh that looks really nice,’ you just…
Ben: When you don’t think any bad thoughts about it.
RW: And how do you feel when something is beautiful?
Jas: Happy - and you get, like Bonnie said, you get like a warm feeling, you don’t feel like you’re - you’re like, you don’t feel like you’re just…
Bonnie: When I see a beautiful picture I don’t feel like I’m alone, though? It might be weird but I don’t feel like I’m alone. I see a beautiful picture, I don’t think ‘I’m alone’, I think I’m, like, with someone and I know they’re there.
Interview B7  21st March 2013
Group 3:  Cameron; Henry; Izzy; Josie; Noah

Fig. 6.57  Cameron - Moon  (photograph)
Fig. 6.58  Henry - Portsmouth coastline  (photograph)
Fig. 6.59  Henry - Portsmouth coastline with tower  (photograph)
Fig. 6.60  Henry - Henry  (photograph)
Fig. 6.61  Josie - friend  (photograph)
Fig. 6.62  Josie - cat  (photograph)
Fig. 6.63  Izzy - golden apples and pears  (photograph)
Fig. 6.64  Izzy - duck  (photograph)
Fig. 6.65  Noah - garden  (photograph)
Fig. 6.66  Noah - trees  (photograph)
The five children in this group chose to share ten photographs. Cameron was the first to share his photograph, taken of the night sky outside his house (Fig. 6.57), and although all that was distinguishable was a tiny moon, the image prompted two thoughtful lines of enquiry. Josie thought that the image was beautiful because ‘God’s creations are beautiful and it’s one of God’s creations’, an opinion Noah challenged: ‘It depends… if you believe in God. ‘Cause if you don’t believe in God, then you think, then the world is just nature, so you’d think nature’s beautiful. And if you believe in God then you think God’s creations are beautiful… You can’t really think that’s beautiful just because you think everything God’s made is beautiful’.

Cameron explained that his intention when taking his photograph was to capture the stars as well as the moon, though they were invisible in the image. Discussion turned to the idea that it was an imperfect representation of a perfect moment:

Cam: I really like space (but) you can’t really get that good images on cameras of the stars… when I took that there was loads of stars around it. I thought that it would have came out with loads, loads of stars. (But) when I realised it didn’t, I didn’t really mind - because although it’s just two colours it makes a good effect.

Noah: It would be beautiful if you were looking at it with all the stars (but) as the photo turned out, it’s not as beautiful as it would be with all the details.

Cam: I would say what Noah said but, if you had to… if you had to make a decision if it’s beautiful or not, I would say it, although it hasn’t got the stars, it is still beautiful.

The notion that even an invisible feature of a photograph could contribute to its beauty recurred during discussion of the next two photographs, views by Henry of the Portsmouth coastline (Fig. 6.58/9). Though barely distinguishable, the presence of Spinnaker Tower in the images was important to him: ‘It’s got that dome bit coming out of the side and it just looks kind of, like, very modern’. In the absence of the tower, or any other real focal point to the images, several children commented on their formal qualities: ‘It’s quite shady - it has a nice, black background to it and makes it look beautiful…’ (Cameron); ‘I like this one because it’s got sun and shade… and half the
houses are lit up and the other ones are shady, and you’ve got the sea, just flat, in the background’ (Noah). Henry’s third image was unique among all those taken, in that he featured in it, silhouetted against the sun (and photographed by his mother) (Fig. 6.60). Avoiding discussion of whether Henry himself was beautiful, children commented on the broader pictorial qualities of the image, about which they disagreed. Whereas Josie liked the silhouette effect: ‘the sun changes the way you think about it… the hill in the background sort of matches with the sun’, Izzy thought ‘it would be better if it was, like, shining on from where the picture is being taken’, while Noah felt that, if the picture were a simple representation of Henry ‘it wouldn’t be beautiful… but with the sun in the background with the hills, it looks really good’.

In her first interview, Josie had shared a poster promoting friendship and an image of a tiger, and the two photographs she shared during this interview featured similar subject matter. The photograph of her friend (Fig. 6.61) prompted me to ask whether we have friends because they look nice. ‘No, no, no’, several children responded, and Josie elaborated: ‘It doesn’t matter if they’re, like, pretty or not - because in films you see, like, these really bossy girls that only have friends whether they’re good-looking, but I don’t think in that (way)... what would you get out of it?’ Cameron was less interested in the theme of friendship and more concerned with composition: ‘I think, like, you need to cut out the background’. Moving on to her portrait of her cat (Fig. 6.62), Josie explained that ‘she’s beautiful, not because she’s cute and everything - but I think she’s one of a kind, she’s different from all the other cats’. Henry was skeptical about this comment, arguing that ‘you would always think that your cat is more beautiful ‘cause you’ve been with it and you’ve bonded with it’, and suggested that an encounter with a more beautiful cat might change Josie’s mind: ‘Even if you think your cat’s more beautiful, sometimes looking at other people’s cats
would sometimes take over what your thoughts are’. Meanwhile, Cameron maintained his focus on composition: ’I think you could have placed her in a better background’.

Towards the end of the interview I questioned children further about how they decided whether something was beautiful, and whether they felt that their responses had changed as a result of their experiences of the interviews:

RW: This idea, that sometimes we think something’s beautiful and sometimes we don’t… does it mean that there’s a problem when we call something beautiful? Because maybe it doesn’t really mean anything if it can mean different things at different times? So is it a word that you feel comfortable using or do you think it’s a word that’s kind of hard to understand?

Izzy: Hard to understand, because… like you’ve just bought a new book and you think, ‘Wow, look at the front cover, it’s really, really nice… And you can’t really understand because when it’s, like, a year old and you don’t think about it, you think Oh that’s just like a book, a normal book, you don’t think it’s beautiful. So that’s why I think it’s quite hard.

RW: We’ve been thinking about beauty over the past few weeks: do you feel as though you’re kind of better at making decisions now about what’s beautiful and what’s not? Or is it kind of more confusing than it ever was?

Josie: Now that I’ve started this I see what the real point in beauty is and - umm, sort of going back to talking about the cat, or the friends - it doesn’t matter what you look like, it’s the inside that counts. I always hear that saying and I’m starting to believe in it.

Izzy: I think I understand it better - because when you (first said) the word ‘beautiful’ I did just think about flowers and nature but, since we started I think that I understand it more.

RW: Can you explain how?

Izzy: Umm - well, like the backgrounds and how things are placed in pictures or whatever.

Cam: I am the same as when I started - but now when somebody says ‘beautiful’ after this… I’ll probably come back to one of these pictures and think ‘Well is it as beautiful as this?’

Izzy’s observations on the diminishing returns of aesthetic experience appeared to influence the subsequent presentation of her own photographs, one of a duck (Fig. 6.64): (‘Well, I wouldn’t say it’s beautiful’), the other of a golden sculpture of apples and pears (Fig. 6.63). Despite the interest of the rest of the group in this image, she appeared to be disappointed: ‘I know when everyone saw this picture, they were, ‘Like, wow!’… (but) I don’t really think that any more’. The ‘wow factor’ happened, she suggested, ‘because you’re seeing them more like seeing them only once (for the first
time). This prompted me to ask the group whether, when they saw something beautiful, did they know it straight away? Or did it take time? Opinions varied: ‘It depends what it is and what kind of person you are’ (Noah); ‘Like, you go Wow! when you see someone that’s really beautiful but then once you get to know them, you like, (think) Oh they’re not vey nice’ (Izzy); ‘It kind of takes a long time to realise that it’s beautiful because if you, like, (see) something in the shops… your mind goes Is it beautiful or isn’t it? You get quite stuck about what you want to think. And then when you pick it up you kind of think, Well actually it’s not as beautiful as I thought (Cameron).

Finally, Noah shared two photographs taken in his garden (Figs. 6.65/6), one of which his father had described as ‘a happy accident’ (‘like, you accidentally… take a picture and it turns out really good’). Cameron had reservations: ‘Well if it was to my opinion, this photo, I wouldn’t say, isn’t a beautiful photo. It would be good as an art photo I should think, but if it’s supposed to be a beauty photo, I would say that it’s not really nice…’ Cameron’s reference to art prompted me to observe that ‘We’ve not really talked about art before. Is art beautiful? Should art be beautiful?’ It depended, children agreed: even a ‘scribble over a page’ could be beautiful, ‘depending on how think it is, what colour it is, what kind of shade’ (Izzy). ‘And it depends on what you think of beauty’, Henry suggested, ‘(some people might think) Oh my God, it’s just paint splodged on and then other people would think Wow, that is beautiful and amazing!’
Interview B8  28th March 2013
Group 4:   Anya; Barney; Emily; Gracie; Spike

Fig. 6.67    Spike - Smiley face in sand  (photograph of drawing)
Fig. 6.68    Anya - Teddy bears  (photograph)
Fig. 6.69    Barney - Sunset, Devil’s Punchbowl  (photograph)
Fig. 6.70    Emily - Cats  (photograph)
Fig. 6.71    Emily - Roses and tulips  (photograph)
Fig. 6.72    Gracie - Dog  (photograph)
Fig. 6.73    Gracie - Deer  (photograph)
Barney’s photograph of the sun setting behind the Devil’s Punchbowl (Fig. 6.69), attracted mixed responses (‘there’s not much colour in it’ - Emily) but initiated a discussion about how the experience of the local environment might influence perceptions of beauty. ‘Where we are we’re quite lucky’, Spike observed, because we’re not, like, in that much of an industrial estate, ‘cause our town’s quite nature-y and just got, like, loads of trees… which, like, almost completely changes your opinion on beauty’. Anya, however, suggested that familiarity bred indifference - ‘You get used to it… when you’ve been around something that you’ve seen every day, you get a bit bored’ - and Emily agreed, welcoming the novelty value of the sunset: ‘We get a bit bored of just the same trees, but then the reason why I kind of like it is you don’t always see a sunset - because normally it’s really quick’. Emily went on to share a photograph of tulips and roses (Fig. 6.71), (‘because of the colours’) and Gracie produced a photo of her dog (Fig. 6.72) (‘because basically, most of my life is to do with dogs’) before she chose a second image, a photograph of a deer in her garden (Fig. 6.73).

Finally, I asked Spike to choose one of his photographs (Fig. 6.67) to share with the group and to describe it.

Spike: Describing? It is a smiley face in the dirt. (Pause).
RW: Thank you. Can you describe to us why it’s beautiful?
Spike: ‘Cause of it reminds me of, like, happy times and things. Things like that, nice memories, smells.
RW: Tell me more.
Spike: As in, like – when you, like, if there was a sad face, you think of, normally – or not normally, I don’t know – you’d – well I think you’d think of something sad. Then you see, like, a happy face, you think of something happy. And it’s cool because it’s in the dirt. That makes it beautiful.
RW: Did you say, that makes it beautiful – because it’s in the dirt? Can you explain what you mean, why does it make it beautiful because it’s in the dirt?
Spike: 'Cause - it’s ironic. ‘Cause dirt’s not described as beautiful. Regularly.
RW: What do you mean by ironic?
Spike: Ironic basically meaning opposite. ‘Cause if you had dirt you wouldn’t think of it as, like, pretty or beautiful, you’d think of it as worthless, something you can just get off the floor. But then like, you can almost use the dirt, in a way, to make things beautiful.
RW: Thank you Spike, that’s really interesting. Does anyone have a question for Spike? Gracie.
Gracie: When you, um, said it, do you basically mean - I know you love drawing and doodling - so basically do you mean it’s a work of art?

Spike: Yyyyy…. it’s almost like a natural work of art because there’s - because art’s, like, different, because all art’s beautiful in a way, but like um, but I just think natural, because it’s all outside, rather than all cramped up on a piece of paper, when it’s outside you can just make it as big as you want, small as you want, detailed as you want… but then as well that just makes it more calm, rather than all busy and things, it makes it like, more beautiful.

Gracie: Yep, that’s really good.

Spike: I was searching the internet on ‘beautiful’ when I first got it and there was like, loads of different things like people, and animals and places, things like that, and then like, my dad helped me, but like, he was saying that, that there is no one meaning of beautiful, that, like, you just know, like, if you see it, you almost like know when it’s beautiful, you can’t like just describe it, you just see it and know, somehow.

Spike’s opening contribution had raised the question of whether a response to beauty something that was instinctive, or something that was cultivated? Gracie was inclined towards the instinctive:

Gracie: There’s a part of us inside that just dives in and it’s beautiful, you can just see it. It may not be beautiful in someone’s, to meet someone’s eye, but someone else may think different. So what we think is like junk could be someone’s treasure that they love.

Spike: Following what Gracie said, when I like first said to my friend, ‘Oh I’m doing the beauty project’, he said oh you should, like zoom in on a leaf and say ‘Wow!’ and say ‘That is really beautiful’, and I was saying that it may be for you but it’s not for me. But everything’s basically like what Gracie was saying: everything is beautiful in one way… then there are always people who don’t think things are beautiful, which isn’t wrong, which is just their opinion. So, like, beauty for me is just all on opinion, ‘cause there’s no one meaning, it’s just on opinion.

Gracie: Well, actually now I’ve just thought what Spike said, when he said like his friend, he thought to zoom in on a leaf would be beautiful, but then Spike thought different… what someone else thinks is different to what they think - so they, like, bond together and they can make something they both like.

Anya chose to photograph her collection of teddy bears on her pink bed (Fig. 6.68), because ‘it’s really colourful and it makes me feel peaceful and homely and it’s things I love - and because it’s my room I feel like it’s my place’. I wondered whether the group thought it would be possible for a boy to find the picture beautiful, prompting Gracie and Spike to resume their places at the centre of discussion: ‘Well’, Gracie explained, ‘Some people are, like, tomboys and some people are, like, really girly girls
who think ‘*Ooh, my whole bedroom is going to be pink!*’ while Spike returned to the metaphor of the witch’s cauldron he had used in the previous interview:

Um, two things… If you were going to have a cauldron to make beauty from, like a wish, you’d almost have *all* the opinions in… and then you’d also have, like, emotions and memories… with all the emotions - like Anya was saying, like quiet, like peaceful - *(that)* made her think *(her image)* was really beautiful, like all the emotions going in like almost changes your opinion…

If someone had ordered you to make beauty, it would almost be impossible, because you need their opinions, you need their emotional thoughts, you - it’s all - beauty is all about *decisions*, it’s not like lo - happiness or sadness where you just know you’re happy or know you’re sad, it’s just like, you have to have your opinion, it has to be more about you than others.

This was the last of the 18 interviews, and I concluded it by asking children what they thought about participating in the research.

**RW:** We’re into the last minute and I just wanted to ask you what you think of being involved in this project. So, tell me about this project; are you surprised, or are you, you’ve enjoyed it, or you… Anya?

**Anya:** I enjoyed it, I thought it was different to what we’d usually do. It’s quite a hard thing to think about ‘cause you don’t really think about it every day, but it was fun.

**RW:** Thank you. Emily?

**Emily:** I found it fun – but why are we actually doing this?

**Spike:** ‘Cause he works at, like, universities and, like, lectures,

**RW:** I’m interested in finding out what your experience of beauty is and I’m kind of interested especially in whether it’s important to you…

**Anya:** I found it really fun, ‘cause it’s, like, loads of like fun things to do.

**Spike:** I found it beautiful!

**RW:** … And there aren’t any hard and fast answers at the end; I can’t hold a piece of paper up and say *“And the correct answer is...”* because I don’t know. Even if we met here every week for a year we might still not know what the answers are. But it’s interesting to think about them anyway. I’m going to let Gracie have the last word.

**Gracie:** Just what you said, there is no answer. ‘Cause everyone has their different opinion, and the last thing I’m just going to say, really quickly… is I’ve really enjoyed it here and I think if I was to do it again I would love to do it again. I feel it’s been a good experience. And it’s been fun.
Chapter 7: Children’s perceptions of beauty

Introduction

This chapter is the first of two that interpret the data gathered from the interviews in order to provide answers to my research questions:

How do children represent their perceptions of beauty?
How do children reflect upon and articulate their perceptions of beauty?
How do children’s perceptions of beauty relate to philosophical thinking about aesthetic experience?
What role can photography play in exploring children’s aesthetic experience?

The first half of the chapter reflects on the connections between the children’s perceptions of beauty and their understanding of images as a means of expression. It explores the ways in which they described their personal and emotional associations with the images and articulated their understanding of how the images represented emotions to viewers. The second half reflects on children's awareness of visual aspects of beauty in their images, and examines their understanding of how colour, pattern and composition contributed to their perception of the beauty of their images. The chapter begins with some reflections on how I made the transition from carrying out the interviews to writing the two interpretation chapters.

7.1 Identifying themes from the interviews

There were several stages to the process of identifying the themes of the interviews. I began by transcribing interview recordings and matching images to transcripts, a
process that enabled me to see the data as a whole for the first time, to ‘immerse’ myself in it, and to begin ‘to understand it both at a gut level and as a whole’ (Savin-Baden and Howell-Major 2013: 420). Having listened repeatedly to the interview recordings I was able to ‘hear’ children’s voices on the page as I read and re-read the transcripts and wrote the summaries of the interviews presented in the previous chapters. While I was excited and intrigued by the data and confident that it offered much in terms of answering my research questions, I was also conscious that I should avoid making judgments or drawing conclusions too quickly. Periodically, I stepped back from the images and interviews for weeks or even months, each time planning to return to it with an open mind and be prepared to revise my impressions.

During this time, I decided to share some of the data through presentations to trainee teachers, MA students and fellow research students as well as a number of teachers and parents of children from Old Oak School. I found that not only were people interested and engaged by children’s words and images but also that each audience had a specific interest in the data, and each experience prompted me to look again at it from a slightly different perspective. For example, fellow research students were struck by the levels of sophistication of some of the children’s ideas, while the children’s teachers were less surprised by this and more interested in how the group interview situation encouraged certain children to articulate ideas far more confidently than they normally would in class. Both the diversity of children’s images and their levels of engagement with the theme of beauty impressed art students on teacher education programmes, and they were also intrigued by the contrasting ways in which children from different social and cultural backgrounds talked about images. Most of all, I was encouraged by how people sometimes engaged with children’s ideas on a personal level. I was particularly touched by the response of a close friend who, after
reading Gracie’s contributions to her group’s interviews, told me he had never wanted to be a father, but that she had made him change his mind.

From this point I developed a different sense of momentum for the research. Whereas previously I had been in the position of persuading others that my research might uncover some interesting data, I now had evidence that I knew would enable me to answer my research questions. I recall describing how I felt at this point. It was as if I had spent two or three years carefully constructing an aeroplane alone in a hangar, and I had finally rolled it outside and found it could fly. One of my supervisors offered a similar, yet contrasting image. Waving a draft chapter at me one morning, he announced, ‘We have the gold!’

The problem I now faced was to make sure other people could see the aeroplane fly and the gold shine. While I was pleased with the positive response to the data, when people asked me So what have you found out? I realised I was unable to answer the question with any conviction.

This focused my mind on the process of finding and articulating clear answers to my questions, answers others would find accessible, engaging and convincing. As I transcribed the interview data I began to identify a number of recurring themes in the discussions. Several were immediately apparent as children mentioned them frequently, while others emerged more slowly. Each interview was characterised to a greater or lesser extent by two or three key discussions, occasions when certain images acted as triggers that prompted more children to become involved and to make more reflective responses. These discussions feature prominently in both this and the following chapter, which interpret the interview data to examine how children reflect upon and articulate their perceptions of beauty.
Some of the responses discussed in this chapter are typical of those made by several children during the interviews. For example, many of those in Greystones School talked about how they would not worry if others disagreed their image was beautiful. Other responses, such as Spike’s contributions to his group’s interviews, were far more individual and distinctive. However, while such responses were unusual, children nonetheless appeared to understand or appreciate them when they heard them, which suggested to me they were able to engage with some relatively sophisticated ideas about beauty, certainly to a greater extent than previous studies of children’s aesthetic experience had indicated. In Chapter 4 of the thesis I described how Strauss and Corbin’s concept of the ‘explanatory power’ of qualitative data (1990: 61) influenced my approach to the interpretation of the interviews, and how Larsson (2009) argues that it is more appropriate to think in terms of explanatory power rather than generalisability. If the reader understands the context within which the research was carried out, then they should be able to judge its relevance to other contexts, and it is for them to decide to what extent such responses are representative of a wider population.

7.2 Beauty and expression

This section of the chapter reflects on children’s understanding of images as a means of expression. It reflects on a number of discussions from the interviews in order to explore the ways children described their personal and emotional associations with images and articulated their understanding of how they can represent and communicate emotions.

The review of literature in Chapter 2 reflected on the how research into children’s responses to art has often focused on their sensitivity to the expressive qualities of an artwork. It discussed how Osborne distinguished between two
characteristics of expression; one in which artists aimed to deliberately express emotion through their work, the other in which the viewer brings their own individual experience to the artwork and ‘perceives [it] emotionally’ (1970: 74). Recently, Dutton proposed the human response to artworks that depict, express or evoke emotions is instinctive and has evolved over thousands of years. In particular, viewers are sensitive to the ‘individual artistic expression of emotion’ encapsulated in visual images (2009: 234).

The notion that viewers engage with the expressive qualities of paintings was central to Parsons’ (1987) stage theory of aesthetic development. He proposed that children’s engagement with paintings is influenced at the earliest stages by their preferences for certain colours, by associations with particular subject matter and by the extent to which they perceive an image as a realistic portrayal of its subject matter. He argued that only later do they become concerned with the artist’s expression of ideas and more interested in how the emotional impact of a painting may be dependent upon its form and style. In theory, Parsons concluded, viewers might appreciate the beauty of paintings at any one of these stages; in practice, however, he associated respondents’ references to the beauty of an artwork with a relatively low level of aesthetic development compared with those that reflected on their expressive qualities. In doing so, he implied children should be taught to look beyond the beauty of an artwork towards the meaning or message intended by the artist.

I was surprised to find how often children related their images to emotion and expression. At Greystones School, where children talked about their emotional associations in almost every interview, this was immediately evident. In Old Oak School children’s emotional engagement with images was less obvious, mainly because, as described at the beginning of Chapter 5, children very rarely shared images that represented loving relationships in the way those in Greystones School did. However,
there were several discussions in which children at Old Oak School discussed their own individual conceptions of how beauty was linked with emotion and expression.

7.2.1 ‘I was so touched when I saw it I felt like crying’: beauty, love and relationships

At Greystones School more than half the children chose to represent beauty by sharing photographs of themselves, their mothers, siblings or cousins, and eight of the ten interviews at the school included at least one discussion in which children associated beauty with love and relationships. It was clear from several of these discussions they thought their photographs were beautiful because of relationships they depicted, rather than any visual qualities that might interest others. Children often shared photographs of family members with little or no concern that others might challenge their choices, and generally believed their images were beautiful regardless of whether or not others agreed.

Fig 7.1 Danyaal’s cousins
Danyaal, for example, chose three photographs of his baby cousin (Fig 7.1) ‘because I really love him and he’s really cute – and I always play with him and he’s beautiful… It’s nature, innit?’ (Interview A2). His photographs were small, pixelated and slightly blurred, and I thought it unlikely he had sifted through several options before selecting those he thought might appeal to others. He made no reference to any visual qualities of the images, and what mattered most were not their aesthetic qualities but their emotional content, the relationships they represented. Danyaal did not explain what he meant by his concluding remark (‘It’s nature, innit?’), but it may be he meant humans have a biological impulse towards loving their babies and finding them beautiful. He aligned himself with the idea that beauty and love are inextricably linked. Children did not question either his choice of images or his reasons for choosing them, perhaps for the same reason as me. In the circumstances it might have seemed a little rude: for my part, this was only the second interview I had conducted, and I was anxious to avoid questioning children in ways they might find intrusive. Danyaal appeared to remain confident in his choice of subject matter. A month later he re-photographed several more images of his cousins to share with his group.

Like Danyaal, Breana’s reasons for choosing her image, a mother and daughter portrait (Fig 7.2), related to her perception of the connections between beauty and love and, like Danyaal, she seemed unconcerned if her photograph lacked visual qualities that could appeal to others. Unlike Danyaal, however, she used her image, to allude to more complex emotions, which she hinted at by introducing it in a mock-dramatic manner:
Breana: I was so touched when I saw it I felt like crying. This is the best, best picture we have in this house and in this school and in all the houses in the world!’

(laughs from the group)

RW: Breana, you’re making us laugh and you’re doing a good job, but I think you’re actually making a serious point as well, aren’t you? Because you do feel emotional when you look at it, don’t you?

Breana: (nods) Mm-hmm. Because sometimes I don’t really get the love that I really wanted but in this time I was really happy to have this picture because I don’t see many pictures like this… it shows how much I was happy when I was a little child. (Interview A4)

Breana’s perception of beauty, as evidenced by this extract, is entirely bound up with emotion. However, while the photograph represents the loving relationship between her and her mother, it also seems to represent other, more complex emotions. She described the photograph from the perspective of a parent rather than a child, and drew attention to the fact that she was now much older than her baby self depicted in the picture. She now looked less like the baby and more like her mother, and she seemed to acknowledge this by talking about the picture as if she were already an adult, parodying sentimentality in a way that she knew the others would find amusing.
My questioning of children during the first two interviews at Greystones School had been a little tentative; however, by the fourth interview I felt sufficiently confident in my role as interviewer to challenge Breana’s initial, lighthearted description. She responded by becoming more reflective and her subsequent confession that ‘sometimes I don’t really get the love that I really wanted’ signaled a change of tone and approach. A minute previously the photograph had appeared to be beautiful because it represented love and happiness; now it was a poignant reminder of a former state of happiness that seemed to contrast with her current insecurities. While she could have chosen to keep her feelings to herself, Breana chose to communicate them; she began by wanting to make the children laugh, now she wanted to make them feel sorry for her.

It may be Breana chose her image because she believed it was beautiful, before sharing her thoughts spontaneously; or perhaps she chose the image precisely because she knew it would offer an opportunity to express her emotions. I suspect both explanations are partly true, and that for Breana, like Danyaal, experiences of beauty and emotion were closely intertwined. At the end of the interview she returned to the photograph and talked more about her emotions:

> When I look at this picture (her own image) particularly I see, umm – the real beauty in me because – not all the time I get what I want and I’m not always smiling but I know – in this picture – when I always look at it I’m always smiling because… Sometimes I may be upset and bad things happen but I know when I look at this picture I will always be smiling, no matter what. (Interview A4)

Aged only 11, Breana was already looking wistfully back to a previous point in her childhood. In a sense she was suggesting that she was now mature enough to begin to explain her changing perceptions of herself. The photograph was beautiful, then, not only because it represented her changing relationship with her mother but also because it represented her changing relationship with herself.
7.2.2 ‘The first time I ever saw pink waves’: beauty, emotion and memories

Fig. 7.3 Ilham’s images

Fig. 7.4 Ilham: waves

Some children found images that held particular emotional associations but which also included visual features they thought others might find beautiful. At Greystones School, Ilham shared several images depicting subject matter ranging from an Abu Dhabi mosque to Californian palm trees (Fig 7.3) and she briefly showed them all to her
group before selecting one to talk about. The image depicted waves crashing on a shore (Fig 7.4), and she described why she found it beautiful:

I think it’s beautiful because of the colours – because there is green and then there’s pink and then there’s blue. And when I was there it was the first time I ever saw pink waves and I thought it was really beautiful… I went to Egypt and on a beach and when we came there was nobody there and so we took a picture of it and it was really beautiful. (Interview A1)

For Ilham, the visual qualities of her photograph are intertwined with emotions, memories and associated meanings. She mentions colour before any other quality, but quickly moves on to emphasise the uniqueness of her experience, the fact that it took place in a distant location and that she and her family had found themselves alone on the beach, which made the shared experience of the sunset all the more memorable. She describes her sensory associations with the image, how she felt ‘like the water was just on me… it feels like I can feel another water running through my hands’, and there was a clear sense that her memory of the experience remained vivid to her through the photograph.

Whereas some children chose images purely because of their associations with family members and regardless of their visual qualities, others chose their images partly for
their associations but *mainly* for their visual qualities. Billy’s photograph (Fig. 7.5) also had both visual and emotional qualities. His photograph depicted an illuminated sparkler on a dark background that concealed an invisible child, enjoying the sparkler’s brief existence:

> I chose it because… first of all it reminds me of bonfire night and it was when you use the sparkles and everything. And if you look at it closely it looks like something’s going up into the air, sort of like a firework but it’s sort of different. Because before my Dad moved to go into a different house he used to like flying stuff a lot. So I chose that picture because it reminds me of my Dad a lot. (Interview A5)

The first part of Billy’s description of the image concerns his immediate associations with the sparkler, with bonfire nights and memories of creating drawings in the darkness. This prompts the second part, in which he imagines the photograph to represent an object spiraling away into the distance. Then the description takes an unexpected turn towards memories of how his father ‘used to like flying stuff’ before (it can be assumed) his parents separated and his father left home. In contrast to Breana’s direct description of the emotional associations her images held for her (‘sometimes I don’t really get the love that I really wanted’, Interview A4), Billy only briefly alludes to a family upheaval without dwelling upon it, merely saying ‘my Dad moved to go into a different house’.

Within the context of a research interview, it was inappropriate for me to encourage children to divulge any more information about specific emotional associations. My experience as a teacher informed judgments about whether to prompt children for further explanations and, whereas I felt Breana seemed intent on using her images to open up conversations about her emotions, I doubted Billy felt the same way. Therefore I can only speculate that he chose an image of a sparkler partly because of its associations with his absent father; it is possible he chose the image simply because it appealed to him, and that while he talked about it he was reminded of his father. The delight he took in describing his image appeared to outweigh any sadness he might have
felt at the absence of his father. The shift in emphasis here may be subtle but it is nonetheless notable, particularly from the perspective of art educators. Parsons (1987) concluded children’s early aesthetic responses are largely concerned with their associations with the subject, before they move on to become more interested in the expressive qualities of images. It may be for children such as Billy and Ilham, these concerns are simultaneously present.

When children explained their experiences of beauty in terms of emotional associations, it would seem they were responding in much the same way as the youngest participants in Parsons’ research, who were concerned solely with the subject matter of an image. However, I would argue children such as Billy and Ilham associated beauty with love for more complex reasons. Principally, they understood how expressing their ideas about beauty helped them to define themselves. I often sensed during the interviews at Greystones School that children regarded the process of selecting, sharing and photographing images as an opportunity to assert their identity within their peer group, and to reveal certain aspects of their home lives that might otherwise remain hidden. For children such as Danyaal and Breana, this outweighed the motivation to find images that others might agree were beautiful. In a recent exploration of the impact of digital technologies on family photography, Rose (2014) identifies the extent to which people are unconcerned by any technical deficiencies of their family photographs, because they perceive them less as beautiful images and primarily as social artefacts:

> What is important in a family photograph is: who took it; who it shows… who those other people are; and how it gets looked at by all those people… family photography does not consist just in a certain kind of photograph. Rather, it is a social practice. (Rose 2014: 71)

On reflection, this is much the same message children in Greystones School were telling me, whether it concerned the memory of a distant beach on a family holiday or the love
they felt for family members, present or absent. They were developing their awareness of the potential of images as a form of social currency, artefacts that could communicate those aspects of their lives, beautiful or otherwise, they chose to share. Being asked to find and share an image they thought beautiful became a trigger that started the process.

7.2.3 ‘What happens on the inside’: beauty, intention and expression

As described in Chapter 4, I took care to present the research tasks to children in a context that was not art-specific, and I avoided using the word ‘art’ with children. I was concerned that, if they perceived me as an ‘art teacher’ and my research as an ‘art project’, they might assume I would judge their images as artworks. Nonetheless, I found some children at Old Oak School approached the tasks in much the same way as an art teacher might expect them to approach an art project. While their images featured visual properties that others found appealing, these children made it clear they had chosen them not simply for their aesthetic appeal but because they wanted to express broader ideas they had about the nature of beauty. Four of the eight interviews at the school featured discussions that revealed children’s understanding of how it is possible for an image to represent an emotion without explicitly illustrating it.
When I saw Jasmine’s photographs (only one of which she shared during an interview), my impression was that she was experimenting with different ways of approaching the task (Fig. 7.6). Whereas most children searched for images of subject matter they considered beautiful, Jasmine approached the task by reflecting on what beauty meant to her, before locating or creating images that encapsulated her thinking. In some respects, her subject matter – landscapes and loved ones – was similar to that chosen by children at Greystones School. Yet her depiction of these subjects and her description of the reasons why she chose them suggested her perception of beauty was more complex in nature.

Of the nine groups I interviewed at the two schools, Jasmine’s was the quietest and most serious. While none of the children were particularly confident or outspoken, each listened closely and was supportive of the others’ attempts to articulate their responses. Towards the end of the group’s second interview I asked the children how they felt when they saw something beautiful. Bonnie quietly replied:
When I see a beautiful picture I don’t feel like I’m alone, though? It might be weird but I don’t feel like I’m alone. I see a beautiful picture I don’t think I’m alone. I think I’m with someone and I know they’re there. (Interview B2)

I found this description of the experience of beauty very moving. Bonnie’s words captured something about the experience of beauty that I felt I had for some time understood yet had been unable to articulate to myself until I heard her say it.

Like Bonnie, Jasmine was interested in images that expressed her notion of a shared, communal sense of beauty, one she valued above individual experience. During the first interview with her group, she shared an image of a distant view of the earth she had located on the Internet (Fig. 7.7). She described how she had chosen the image partly for its harmonious composition, though her explanation also alluded to a broader notion of environmental harmony.

Well it’s the world – because it’s like everyone says the world’s a small place but actually it’s really big, and everything lives on earth and everything can survive on earth. And it’s like the colours blend in and the clouds blend in with the blue ocean and the lands. You can see where you are … and everything blends in, the ocean, and all of the land, just sort of come together … I thought of the idea of earth so I went on the computer and I typed in ‘pictures of the world’ and then that one, it just really caught my eye and I thought it looked really nice. (Interview B2)

In her description of her approach to the task Jasmine implies she thought carefully about her choice of image and the idea she wanted to communicate. Although she liked its visual qualities, they did not influence her search. Rather, as she says, she ‘thought of the idea of earth’ and located an image to illustrate her idea. Although she does not explicitly state she intended the ‘coming together’ of land and sea to represent a broader sense of harmony on earth, the two aspects of her description are intertwined. Her observation that ‘everything lives on earth and everything can survive on earth’ suggests a conception of the earth as a shared environment, while her comment that ‘you can see where you are’ could be interpreted as ‘you can see how you fit in as part of a bigger picture’.

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During the second interview with her group Jasmine offered further evidence of her understanding of how an image can symbolise an idea without explicitly illustrating it. Her approach to the second research task was unusual in that she deliberately staged a scene intended to illustrate her thinking about beauty, by photographing her sister’s and grandmother’s interlinked hands (Fig 7.8).

**Jasmine:** Well, these are members of my family and I think that if members of a family are together … it just, like, represents love and happiness. And [as] I said before, beauty is not just on the outside, it’s also in the inside.

**Bonnie:** Yes, because, like Jas said, it’s what’s on the inside that counts, so it kind of relates to that. And they all link in together because beauty and love and happiness, they’re all kind of in a big umbrella-thing because – well, they are all what happens on the inside, not what’s on the outside.
Ben: At first I thought – ’cause I didn’t really look at the picture properly – I didn’t know why Jasmine chose it. I thought ‘How could an old wrinkled hand be beautiful?’ But when Jasmine made her point about how it’s beautiful, it started to change my mind”. (Interview B6)

Jasmine intentionally composed her photograph in a way that ensured neither of her subjects was identifiable, thereby de-personalising it and emphasising its appeal to others. It is possible she removed the ‘surface layer’ of her image in order to make her observation that beauty, love and happiness are all ‘what happens on the inside’. Had she decided to include more information about her subjects this could have reduced its emotional impact: as she explained, her concern was to represent the concepts of love and happiness, rather than to illustrate her personal experience of these emotions.

Jasmine’s images offer an interesting contrast with those chosen by children at Greystones School. For Danyaal and Breana, the most important feature of their images was the identity of the people they represented and their relationship to them. Jasmine preferred to conceal the identity of her subjects because she was thinking about the viewer’s understanding of the meaning of her image rather than their perception of her in relation to its subject.

Jasmine’s images acquire a deeper resonance not only in the context of her explanations, but also when they are viewed alongside each other. In one way, the images could not be more different: one subject is photographed from a distance of thousands of miles, while the other is within touching distance of the camera. Yet Jasmine emphasised their common ground, and her description of how ‘everything … just sort of come[s] together … everything can survive on earth’ evoked a panoramic, holistic vision of the earth as an integrated whole. Her image of interlinked hands could be read as a tiny detail of this harmonious vision. If the camera were able to zoom in far enough to the surface of the earth, then this is what the harmony might look like close-up. The images are also linked by the theme of age and time. The photograph of
hands, one old, one young, offers a reminder of how humans change over a lifetime, while the image of earth viewed from space suggests the opposite, that over the course of a million years the earth appears to have remained the same.

Photographs of the earth viewed from space are familiar to us today, and it is easy to forget they are a relatively recent phenomenon. The novelist Julian Barnes has written of how such images depict the earth ‘in luscious colour, with feathery cloud cover, swirling storm systems, rich blue seas and rusty continents’ (2014: 27), echoing Jasmine’s description of how ‘it’s like the colours blend in and the clouds blend in with the blue ocean and the lands’ (Interview B2). He also describes the emotional impact of the images on those who photographed them, quoting astronaut William Anders:

We were looking back at our planet, the place where we evolved. Our Earth was quite colorful, pretty and delicate… I think it struck everybody that here we’d come 240,000 miles to see the Moon and it was the Earth that was really worth looking at.
(Barnes 2014: 27)

The poignancy of Anders’ observation lies in his, and our, knowledge that the world in the 20th Century was rarely perceived as ‘colorful, pretty and delicate’, and this was a notion that Ben alluded to during the interview. Looking at Jasmine’s image, he observed: ‘It looks quite peaceful, but … when you’re actually down on earth – from up in space it looks peaceful but in some parts of the earth it’s definitely not peaceful.’ (Interview B2). Like the astronauts looking at earth from space, Ben understood that it was strange to find beauty in something so complex. As Barnes concludes, the photographs ‘were as disturbing as they were beautiful; and they remain so today’ (2014: 27).

My interpretation of Jasmine's response to both tasks was that she approached them in much the same way as an artist or designer might, by making a number of decisions. She made initial decisions about the message she intended to express, before making further decisions about what needed to be included to communicate the
message. She anticipated the responses of other children, yet did not select images in order to please them, and while their impact on other children was not immediate, the images held their attention for some time. The longer children talked about them the more beautiful they appeared. As Alistair said, ‘At first I thought – ‘cause I didn’t really look at the picture properly and I didn’t know why Jasmine chose it – I thought, how could an old wrinkled hand be beautiful? But when Jasmine made her point about how it’s beautiful, it started to change my mind.’

Fig. 7.9 Spike’s drawing of a dragon

Spike brought to both interviews drawings he had made. The first was a pencil sketch of a dragon made when he was five years old (Fig. 7.9), and he introduced it by explaining that the memory of making it was central to his perception of it as beautiful:

Spike: Well, there are a few reasons. One, I chose it because I did this when I was younger and … I remember when I was doing this and I couldn’t draw very well, I put so much effort into it. It made me feel, like, really proud of it which makes me feel it’s more than beautiful ‘cause I’d put effort in, I’d managed to do that all on my own and normally I wouldn’t be able to do it so … it makes me feel better about myself, which makes me feel like it’s really beautiful.

RW: Did you hope that other people would find it beautiful – or expect them to?
Spike: I was thinking – most people will not find this beautiful but then – knowing me as a bit of an addicted doodler – they’d probably know why I think it’s beautiful because of the effort and things I put into it. At that age, those pictures took me around a day because they were so hard to do.
Anya: Do you think it’s beautiful to look at? Or just the pleasure of thinking that you’ve achieved it?
Spike: Well actually, I feel it both ways. I feel it’s beautiful for my effort and achievement but then [also] on how it looks. You’ve got to, like, almost understand, you have to be passionate about a drawing yourself… ‘cause, to, like, most of you here, you think ‘Ooh, he’s done a bunch of scribbly lines, that looks weird’ and then, like, when you understand, when you’ve looked at some of your other things, you think, ‘Oh, that’s beautiful’... it’s unlike what everyone else has done... I find, like, it is beautiful but in two different ways. (Interview B4).

Spike’s explanation reveals how his perceptions of beauty relate to his conception of himself as a maker of images. Though he does not refer to himself as an artist (he is merely an ‘addicted doodler’) he nonetheless communicates his commitment to the subject (‘you have to be passionate about a drawing’). He also describes the sense of achievement he feels through making art, which increases his self-esteem, and how his image is beautiful because it symbolises this process. Spike goes on to claim that the drawing is ‘more than beautiful’ because ‘it makes me feel better about myself’, implying that its beauty of the drawing is located not in its appearance but in the circumstances in which it was made. It is not the product that is beautiful, but the creative process it represents.

There was a sense in our discussion that Spike was always one step ahead. When I offered him a choice of two responses he took neither; when Anya offered two options he took both. His concluding remark – ‘it’s unlike what everyone else has done’ – encapsulated his approach, which he maintained for the second research task.
Spike chose to share another drawing during his group’s second interview, a smiley face that he had drawn in sand and then photographed (Fig. 7.10). When I looked at the photograph before the interview, I wondered whether he really thought the image was beautiful, whether it was intended as a challenge for me or for his group, or whether he had intentionally chosen an image made in a few seconds in order to provide a contrast with the dragon that his five-year-old self had taken all day to draw. While the dragon drawing was unique and personal to him, the smiley face in this one was less distinctive and more anonymous; a clichéd emoticon widely used in emails and text messages. I was initially unconvinced that Spike had taken the task seriously. After all, in his previous interview he proudly described how his drawing of a dragon was ‘more than beautiful’ because he ‘put so much effort into it’ (Interview B4). When I asked Spike why it was beautiful, I was surprised to hear him refer to emotions and memories: ‘It reminds me of, like, happy times and things. Things like that, nice memories, smells.’ (Interview B8). Why would he subsequently share an image made with minimum effort? As he continued I changed my mind:

Spike: And it’s cool because it’s in the dirt. That makes it beautiful.
RW: Can you explain what you mean, why does it make it beautiful because it’s in the dirt?
Spike: ‘Cause – it’s ironic. ‘Cause dirt’s not described as beautiful. Regularly.
RW: What do you mean by ironic?

Fig. 7.10 Spike’s smiley face in the sand
Spike: Ironic basically meaning opposite. ‘Cause if you had dirt you wouldn’t think of it as, like, pretty or beautiful, you’d think of it as worthless, something you can just get off the floor. But then like, you can almost use the dirt, in a way, to make things beautiful. (Interview B4).

Spike’s explanation revealed his intention. The smiley face alone is not beautiful, the dirt is not beautiful – but when combined they become beautiful. Individually each component is easy to overlook, but together they become meaningful. The smiley face did more than simply remind him of the ‘happy times’ and ‘nice memories’ he associated with the landscape, it symbolised those experiences. Though it was not clear whether or not he had planned to draw and photograph the smiley face in the dirt to communicate this message, he nonetheless recognized its potential to do so. Like Jasmine, Spike conceptualised the task as an opportunity to create an artwork, a point recognised by other children:

Gracie: I know you love drawing and doodling – so basically do you mean it’s a work of art?
Spike: Yyy…. it’s almost like a natural work of art because there’s – because art’s, like, different, because all art’s beautiful in a way, but like, um, but I just think natural, because it’s all outside, rather than all cramped up on a piece of paper. When it’s outside you can just make it as big as you want, small as you want, detailed as you want. But then as well that just makes it more calm, rather than all busy and things, it makes it like, more beautiful.
Gracie: Yep. That’s really good. (Interview B4).

Here Spike describes how he finds beauty in the freedom of expression he associates with making art. Though he talks about the way a piece of paper can restrict creativity, it is almost as if he is talking about the confines of art lessons. Given the freedom to express himself, Spike deliberately chose not to showcase his artistic ability, and it is the simplicity of this drawing, rather than its complexity, that makes it beautiful. Five years on from his drawing of a dragon, Spike knew he had the technical ability to create images that would impress the other children – yet he chose not to, preferring instead to revert back to an earlier stage in his development, though accompanied by the knowledge he has subsequently acquired. His decision brings to mind Picasso’s
assertion that he spent years trying to re-capture the simplicity of the art of children (Read 1967) (Fig. 7.11).

![Image of Pablo Picasso's painting](image)

**Fig. 7.11** Pablo Picasso, *The Young Painter, oil on canvas, 1972. Musée Picasso, Paris*

Spike’s reflections on his images provide a contrast to previous accounts of children’s perceptions of beauty. Parsons (1987) concluded that children of Spike’s age admire the technical ability involved in creating paintings and that they highly value the extent to which paintings are realistic representations of life. Furthermore, in what he described as the ‘transparency view of painting’, he argued that children believe paintings can only be beautiful if they represent beautiful subjects: ‘Beauty is transferred, as it were, from the subject to the painting… A painting could not be beautiful if it pictured my old and rusting automobile.’ (1987: 40). And while Spike’s perspective was unusual, was it unique? There are other Spikes in other schools. And, more importantly, when Spike shared his thoughts with his group, other children were not bemused or bewildered; they seemed to understand what he was talking about.

Having previously shared with his group a drawing that demonstrated his technical proficiency, Spike’s decision to share a second drawing that deliberately
eschewed traditional notions of artistic skill was one that was difficult to anticipate. The drawing was full of intention, and my interpretation of its message was: ‘Although I have the skill to create beautiful things, I believe that it is equally important to take pleasure in everyday things. If you look closely and immerse yourself in the experience, you will find something beautiful’. As described in Chapter 2, the notion of finding beauty – and art – in everyday life was one of the five principles for art education identified by Eisner:

Art education programs should make special efforts to enable students to secure aesthetic forms of experience in everyday life. As one Chinese scholar is said to have commented, “First I see the hills in the painting, then I see the painting in the hills.” The outcomes of art education are far wider than learning how to create or to see the objects populating museums and galleries. The world at large is a potential source of delight and a rich source of meaning if one views it within an aesthetic frame of reference. (Eisner 2002: 44)

By choosing to share his smiley face, Spike was inviting other children to view their world ‘within an aesthetic frame of reference’. Viewed independently, Spike’s image is unremarkable; studied in the context of his commentary on the image, it is a striking representation of his perception of the relationship between emotion, expression and beauty.

It is tempting to conceptualise children’s responses as representative of stages in their aesthetic development similar to those identified by Parsons. It may be that young children begin by associating beauty with love, before they begin to consider the tastes of others and eventually develop individual concepts of what beauty means to them, coupled with an awareness of how their concepts can be communicated to others. However, without the evidence that a longitudinal study might provide, I find this explanation unconvincing. I would be more inclined to argue that it would be more accurate to conceptualise the three approaches are as representative of strands of children’s conceptions of beauty, or types of response to beauty, rather than stages in
aesthetic development, and that one such type of response would be an emotive response. Further reflection on these types of response, and on whether children progress from one type to another, is provided in the following chapter.

In his assessment of children’s aesthetic development, Parsons was, to say the least, cautious about the extent to which children are able to fully engage with the meanings of art when he said ‘There is no point in pretending that young children have the abilities of adult artists or critics. It is romanticism to think that their experiences in the arts are equal to those of adults … Many significant aesthetic qualities are inaccessible to them and their experience of art lacks the richness available to adults’ (1987: 27). This may be true of the majority of children, but it risks underestimating the capability of a minority. Not only did Jasmine and Spike invest time and thought in selecting their images, they also arrived at the interviews knowing that others would only be able to understand and appreciate their images once they had explained why they had chosen them. It is worth noting how quickly and warmly children received their ideas; though they may not have conceived them themselves, they could nonetheless understand and appreciate them once they had heard them expressed. As Gracie said in response to Spike’s reflections on his smiley face in the dirt: ‘Yep. That’s really good.’
7.3 The visual aspects of beauty

This section of the chapter reflects on children’s awareness of the visual aspects of beauty, by analysing their images and interpreting their contributions to interviews. It explores their awareness of how colour, pattern and composition contributed to the beauty of the images they found and photographed, notes evidence of variations in children’s preferences and concludes with a discussion of children’s awareness of the composition of images.

7.3.1 ‘The leaves are glowing as if they were pieces of gold’: beauty, colour and light

This section of the chapter explores children’s perceptions of how colour contributes towards the beauty of images. Chapter 1 of the thesis noted the deep-rooted connections between beauty and colour: the term ‘hue’ is derived from the Medieval English word *huw*, which meant beauty; in the 13th Century Thomas Aquinas proposed that *claritas*, or luminosity, was a requirement of beauty, while the Hebrew and Arabic words for beauty both relate to colour (Pipes 2008; Eco 2004; Sartwell 2004). In his proposal that there is an evolutionary element to aesthetic preferences, Dutton (2009) argued that human perceptions of beauty are intuitive and deep-rooted impulses account for our aesthetic responses to colour. Previous studies of aesthetic experience (Machotka 1966; Brunner 1975; Parsons 1987) concluded that younger children are more likely to respond to the colours of an artwork than any aspect other than its subject matter, while eight-year-olds interviewed by Parsons valued images that had ‘many good colours’, ‘bright colours’ and ‘colour contrast’, while 12-year-olds praised paintings with ‘pretty or eye-catching colours’ (1987: 97).
In one respect, the findings of my research concurred with those of Parsons, in that the children I interviewed often talked about colour. They referred to it more often than any other visual quality, between 20 and 30 times in almost every interview. However, children rarely identified colour as the only reason why an image was beautiful, and almost invariably mentioned it in conjunction with other qualities. For example, Ilham described how her image of waves (Fig. 7.12) was beautiful because of its colours as well as her associations with it (see previous section); similarly, Anya explained that she had photographed her collection of teddy bears on her bed (Fig. 7.13) not only because ‘it’s really colourful’ but also because the scene ‘makes me feel peaceful and homely and it’s things I love’, and while Callum liked the way the colours of his football badge (Fig. 7.14) ‘sort of go well together’ he was primarily concerned that the badge represented his team rather than any other. Colour often influenced children’s choice of images, but it was rarely the only reason why they found them beautiful.
At Greystones School, Kamaudin provided a striking example of how colour could work alongside other visual qualities to create a beautiful image. He was among the last group of children to borrow cameras, and by this point I had grown accustomed to the weekly process of retrieving the cameras and transferring the images from them onto my laptop ready for the next interview. I rarely paused to study the photographs before sharing them with the children, but when I saw Kamaudin’s images, a sequence of images taken from the balcony of his flat on a nearby housing estate, I did what people often do when they see something beautiful, and stopped and stared.

![Image](image.jpg)

*Fig. 7.15 Kamaudin’s view from his balcony (tree)*

When I saw Kamaudin’s photograph of a view from his balcony (Fig. 7.15) I was struck by several qualities. There is a sense that he took the photograph at precisely the right moment. The shadow of the building has moved across the picture frame and appears to have paused at diagonal path. The path bisects two tones of green, the darker immersed in shadow, the lighter exposed to sunlight, while the same shaft of light.
illuminates the yellow leaves of the tree against the shaded backdrop of the red brick wall. While I was aware that my response to Kamaudin’s photograph was shaped by my experience of studying images in range of contexts, I was interested to find out whether the children in Kamaudin’s group would perceive similar qualities in the image. In another context, as a teacher, I would have encouraged them to notice such qualities, but in the interview context my priority was not to explain why I thought the photograph was beautiful but to facilitate children’s responses to it. Kamaudin’s own description centred on his love of colour:

I chose – I chose this because – ummm, I thought it was beautiful. And, like, it was, like that – you know that thingy, walking place – path – I was sitting here. I think it makes it more beautifuller. And the tree as well, that tiny tree. And the colour, I love the colour. It’s not just one whole colour, it’s like, you know, mixed. Ummm – and, yeah, it’s beautiful. (Interview A10)

Kamaudin’s description centred on his love of colour, though the first feature of the image he mentions (albeit obliquely) is the diagonal path that runs across the picture frame. Though his fractured sentences are a little difficult to decode, there is a suggestion that he understands the compositional role played by the path. By bisecting the two tones of green it ‘makes it more beautifuller’.

Although I found several children’s images beautiful, this was one of very few occasions when I had to restrain myself from celebrating the beauty of one of the children’s images. I was pleased to find that others agreed with Kamaudin, when Billy commented on ‘the lightness and darkness… on one side it shows all nice and bright coloured and on the other side it’s all dark’, and surprised when Yonis suddenly objected:

I disagree with Billy because – I could take that every time! I could take that at the middle of the day. It’s that walking down to the shopping. What’s so beautiful about this? This is green. That’s a tree. And a path… Half of it’s shaded! … It’s just some greenery and blackery. (Interview A10)
Yonis’s objections to the image centred on the ‘everyday’ qualities of Kamaudin’s photograph that I had found so engaging. He seemed almost offended by the minimal amount of content in the image and particularly by the idea that something he saw so frequently should be photographed and discussed (and it is interesting to note that an image he chose to share had other-worldly qualities far removed from a London housing estate). His outburst prompted Valeriy, and subsequently the rest of the group, to defend Kamaudin’s photograph:

I disagree with Yonis because where the sunlight is going it looks like the leaves are glowing as if they were pieces of gold. And the building, it looks like as if [the tree] was being protected… from where he done it he chose a perfect spot to make the picture. (Interview A10)

The disagreement proved productive. Although children in this particular group often found it difficult to express themselves, the ensuing discussion encouraged them to ‘dig a little deeper’ into their ideas about the picture and to articulate their responses more forcefully. Billy, for example, seemed to recognise that beauty could be found in everyday experiences, though he found it hard to articulate:

The stuff that you see that you usually see, like, you see grass every day, sometimes change and look more beautiful than you often see it and so… yeah, you can see stuff more beautiful than what you often see, like. (Interview A10)

How might these children have been represented in previous studies of children’s aesthetic experience? Parsons, for example, might have regarded Kamaudin’s description of his photograph (‘the colour, I love the colour) as further evidence that children associate beauty mainly with ‘many good colours’, ‘bright colours’ and ‘colour contrast’ (1987: 97). While it was clearly evident that the children I interviewed valued colour, their comments, as illustrated by this discussion, suggest that they perceive it as only one of several visual elements that work alongside each other to make an image beautiful.
During the discussion of Kamaudin’s photograph, Valeriy was the only child to note the effect of sunlight on the leaves and how it made them glow ‘as if they were pieces of gold’ and, although children often shared images that were illuminated by light, it was a quality they mentioned only rarely during interviews. Curiously, the theme of light features only peripherally in the literature on aesthetic experience. In his *Philosophical Enquiry* of 1756, Edmund Burke included it in his somewhat exhaustive list of ideas of the sublime and the beautiful, pointing out that ‘[as] all colours depend on light [it] therefore ought … to be examined’ and acknowledged that it was a quality that the viewer could all too easily overlook when he said: ‘Mere light is too common a thing to make a strong impression on the mind, and without a strong impression nothing can be sublime’ (2008: 73).

*Fig 7.16 Rafeeah’s stadium*
While children sometimes noted the effects of light in their images, they never dwelt for long on the theme. Nonetheless, the images they found and photographed offer evidence of its role in their perceptions of beauty. At Greystones School, Rafeeah chose her aerial view of the closing ceremony of the 2012 Olympics (Fig. 7.16) ‘because of the lights... and because of the fireworks’, while Mohad noted of his view of the Thames (Fig. 7.17) ‘how the sun bounces off the river… when it’s night there’s usually lights in the buildings so you can see them in the far distance’. Sometimes the presence of light inspired imaginative contributions from children: Kyra, for example, thought that the sunlight coming through the window in one of Ammar’s images (Fig. 7.18) looked ‘like a passage to a new world… like a bright light and maybe angels could live in there’.

Despite how frequently distinctive qualities of light featured in their photographs (Figs. 7.19-7.22), only a few children in Old Oak School commented on the presence of light in their images. Noah showed that he was aware of the effects of sunlight on the landscape, noting of Cameron’s image (Fig. 7.19) how ‘the light shining through the trees on the snow (is) making the snow all glittery’, while in the same interview, Cameron referred to ‘the sun shining on the light and stuff’. Elysia was
aware of the effects of sunlight and the way it intensified colours, and explained her reason for selecting a photograph of a landscape illuminated by sunlight (Fig. 7.21) when she said: ‘Well, it’s got a really bright sun in the middle and some clouds round the outside and on the left, by the sun, I really like that the clouds are a bit blue-ey and grey’. Implicit in Elysia’s description was an awareness that that the wide range of tonal values, centred on the intense light of the sun, enriched the beauty of the image. Overall, however, though children often commented on the colours of their images, they rarely acknowledged the role played by light: it was always present, yet rarely noticed.

Fig. 7.19 Cameron’s photograph of snow

Fig. 7.20 James’s photograph of sunlight
7.3.2 ‘I was like, I want something more colourful!’: beauty, colour and aesthetic preference

One of the striking features of Kamaudin’s photographs was their intensity of colour, and children in both schools often chose images with rich, vivid colours (Figs. 7.23, 7.24). I was initially inclined to conclude that children shared a preference for colourful images, regardless of whether they lived in urban or rural environments. Such a conclusion would have gone some way to confirming the findings of previous studies.
that described how children associated beauty with bright colours, and it would have suggested that their preferences were not influenced by social, cultural or environmental variations.

From a distance, the two sets of images appeared to feature a similar range of colours; studied more closely, they told a different story, and I gradually came to realise that the colour preferences of children in one school were quite different to those in the other. Although children at Old Oak School sometimes chose intensely coloured images, they
were almost invariably accurate representations of subjects that were intensely coloured, such as Noah’s images of distant landscapes (Fig. 7.25). At Greystones School, however, children often chose images that had been digitally manipulated, with colours that had been artificially intensified (Fig. 7.26).

Fig. 7.25 Noah’s landscape photographs

Fig. 7.26 Children at Greystones School - images with highly saturated, intense colours
Evidence of this difference in children’s preferences emerged during the interviews. Only two children at Old Oak School shared images with digitally manipulated colours, and others found these colours slightly problematic. Josie approached Cameron’s close-up of bright flowers (Fig. 7.27) with caution, and said that: ‘You don’t always find like flowers [with] loads of different colours and they, look like they’ve been made especially for this photo – because they’ve all been set out and they’re all, like, perfect…’ Josie used the word ‘perfect’ hesitantly, in a way that I interpreted to suggest that she thought the flowers were a little too perfect. She had similarly mixed feelings about Issy’s image of a flower with multi-coloured petals (Fig. 7.28) and suggested it was unlikely that natural causes could account for its unusual colours when she said that: ‘That could be the only flower that’s created when, like a rainbow happens, because it could be like the reflection that… shines onto a flower… [but] I don’t think that that would be real’. I asked her whether, if we were to agree that the image were not real, it should prevent us from finding it beautiful? ‘No’, she replied, ‘It is beautiful, but… if I had to write a list of five things that I think are beautiful I don’t think that would be one of the five’.

Aside from these two examples, the colours children at Old Oak School chose images with natural colours. Noah’s landscape photographs (Fig. 7.25) were full of intense colours, while James chose dramatically coloured images of tornados, waterfalls
and stars and Bonnie shared intensely coloured images of the natural environment. Though visually striking, none were digitally manipulated. In contrast, more than half of the images found by children in Greystones School images featured highly saturated, intense colours. (Fig 7.26). Yasmina, Mustafa, Ilham and Valeriy all chose landscapes with deep, contrasting tones of blue, pink and purple, and Yasmina also chose an image of a flower and she explained that it was beautiful ‘because it’s not only pink, it has purple and blue, and where the droplets of water are they are the same colour’ (Interview 2). Mohad chose his image of a bright blue flower because ‘I like the petals on the flower... it has a lot of elaborate colours’ (Interview 2) while Enesa confided that she chose her rose because ‘my favourite colour is purple and it’s bright and colourful’. Aside from landscapes and flowers, some children photographed patterns they found on fabrics at home, while chose colourful abstract images. Ammar described his:

Because it’s like a rainbow, it has lots and lots of colours and it just looks so realistic. And there's a bit of water down here that reflects it and makes it look even more nice – beautiful. The background I think is really, really good because when the colours are shining on to the background it just looks like, you know, so real. But if you pick another colour like green, say or yellow... it wouldn't be as good as it is when the background is black. (Interview A2)

At the time I was a little surprised to hear Ammar describe his image as ‘realistic’, and on reflection I wish I had asked him to explain a little more. In the absence of an explanation I would argue his description provides a clue about his aesthetic preferences and those of several of his classmates. For many children at Greystones School, it was irrelevant whether or not their images were realistic representations of nature. While they were confident about their beauty, they were unconcerned about their accuracy. Each of the images in Fig. 7.26 has been either digitally manipulated or digitally generated, and each is designed to appeal to the viewer. The images resemble those used in advertisements, illustrations or animations and, even if they are perceived as beautiful in themselves, they are not true representations of beautiful things, but of the
imagination: they are improvements on nature rather than depictions of it. Each image has a ‘wow’ factor, as evidenced by Ammar’s description of how he located his:

I got it from my dad's album. He printed it a couple of years back and he thought it was really beautiful. When I asked him, yeah, and he gave me it and I was like – he gave me another one first that was definitely not as beautiful as this one – I was like, I want something more colourful! And then he searched through his drawers, you know, stuff like that, picked one out and gave it to me and luckily it was this one. Yeah, that's where I got it from. (Interview A2)

Ammar rejected the first image his father offered him because he wanted to find something more colourful, but he also wanted something more colourful than real life. He was one of several children at Greystones School who associated beauty with imagination more than experience, and their aesthetic preferences appeared to be more conditioned by design than by their own direct engagement with the visual world.

The contrasts in children’s preferences could be summarised as follows: In the rural environment of Old Oak School, children liked bright, intense colours, and colourful images of nature. However, it was important to them that the colours in these images were real and natural, rather than digitally manipulated. In the urban environment of Greystones School, children preferred bright, intense colours, often in images that had been digitally manipulated or digitally generated. They also liked colourful images of nature, though they were not concerned whether these images looked real, because the intensity of the colours was more important.

There was, however, another finding related to colour preferences. Children could, in certain circumstances, override their preference for bright colours, when they considered they did not fit happily within with the overall composition of the picture. The final section of this chapter reflects on examples of children’s thoughts on how composition could play a role in the beauty of an image.
7.3.3 ‘That’s a bit *packed* for a small picture, for me’: beauty, colour and composition

Composition was not a term that children used explicitly during the interviews.\(^1\) However they sometimes demonstrated their awareness of how people’s perceptions of the beauty of an image could be influenced by the way its elements were combined, and some children’s photographs indicated that they had a strong awareness of the importance of composition. A small number of discussions provided evidence of children’s sensitivity to relatively minor compositional issues, and on two particular occasions the composition of images prompted lengthy discussions.

![Fig. 7.29](image1)  
Noah on Cameron’s flowers: ‘I think that’s a bit packed for a small picture, for me’

![Fig. 7.30](image2)  
Cameron on Noah’s landscape: ‘It’s a bit too green. Maybe if the yellow flowers were a bit brighter...’

Cameron’s multi-coloured flowers featured in the previous section of this chapter. Not only were other children were concerned that the image was not ‘real’, they also

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\(^1\) My use of the term here refers to the way the contents of an images are arranged within its frame
criticised its composition. Henry proposed it would look better with ‘a bigger background’ and Noah described how he thought it was overcrowded when he said: ‘I think that’s a bit packed for a small picture, for me. They’ve taken it up close and so all you can see is the flowers basically coming out straight at you and that’s all you can see.’ (Interview B3) I asked him how he might have photographed the flowers differently, and he suggested that the photographer could have ‘stood on the side and then taken a picture of all the… flowers as one big group.’ Such observations provided evidence that children were sometimes able to look beyond the subject matter of a photograph to the decisions made by the photographer. Finding beautiful objects was not enough. They had to be presented in ways that emphasised their beautiful qualities rather than detracted from them.

In contrast to Cameron’s ‘packed’ image, Noah’s photograph of trees in the African Savannah featured a huge expanse of space, and he described it as if he were a painter making decisions about the composition:

I find it beautiful because… I like landscape… I like the few, the yellow flowers in the front and then just the trees dotted about. Like, if you’re painting, you’d put things in certain places, but it’s like they’ve randomly gone in different places and I like that. (Interview B3)

Noah has some interesting thoughts about composition. He is aware of the photographer’s decisions regarding composition, but he likes elements that are accidental rather than intentional. When he suggests: ‘If you’re painting, you’d put things in certain places’ he acknowledges the control artists can exercise over composition – yet identifies this approach as one he would choose to reject, preferring to see the trees ‘dotted about… like they’ve randomly gone in different places and I like that’. Cameron, slightly stung by Noah’s comments on his own image, took the opportunity to respond:

Cam: If it was me – I don’t want to be mean – but it doesn’t really show much because the landscape, it’s a bit too green – because everything you can see is
mainly green except for some trees and some yellow flowers. Maybe if the yellow flowers were a bit brighter and a bit bolder then it might have, it might show up a bit more.

RW: Can you explain why you think that?
Cam: Because… it’s got too much of one colour. And the trees are, like, dotted around so it looks like there’s no order to anything. It just looks like there’s been some random trees planted in some random places in a field…

( Interview B3)

While Cameron disagrees with Noah, he too talks about the photographer’s decisions. The yellow flowers should be ‘a bit brighter’; the image features ‘too much of one colour’; ‘there’s no order to anything’ – his comments could be a transcription of the thoughts of a painter struggling to conjure an effect on canvas. Regardless of his approval of the content of the image, Cameron’s perception of its compositional deficiencies prevents him from finding it beautiful. Although the other children in the group were not directly involved in this discussion, they appeared to be influenced by it. Later in the interview, for example, Izzy reflected on how her understanding of beauty had changed as she became more aware of the role of composition:

I think I understand it better, because (before) when you say the word ‘beautiful’ I did just think about flowers and nature – but… since we started I think that I understand it more, like with the backgrounds and how things are placed in pictures.
( Interview B3)

One of the central points of Parsons’ (1987) research concerned whether a painting could be beautiful if its subject matter was visually unappealing. As discussed in Chapter 2, the extent to which his research was heavily weighted towards this particular discussion is evident from the six images he presented to interviewees. With the exception of a Renoir’s Luncheon at the Boating Party, each was an expressionist painting from the early to mid-20th Century. He concluded children found it difficult to perceive artistic qualities in paintings such as Albright’s portrait because they believed that (a) paintings should be beautiful and (b) a beautiful painting needed to be of a beautiful subject. Yet some of the children I interviewed at Old Oak School demonstrated the opposite could also be true. Yes, they agreed, flowers are beautiful,
and yes, colour is beautiful. However, they argued, that doesn’t necessarily mean pictures of colourful flowers are beautiful, and bright colours will always work well in a composition. This idea also emerged from a discussion at Greystones School.

Fig. 7.31 Enesa’s view from her balcony

Enesa shared her photograph (Fig. 7.31) with her group with an almost apologetic air, intimating that she had remembered her homework task at the last moment and hurriedly taken some photographs from her balcony. However it prompted the single longest discussion of the 18 interviews, one in which children talked for 20 minutes about how colour could sometimes be a problematic element of an image. The discussion centred on the presence of a yellow car in Enesa’s picture. Mia initiated the debate:

Mia: I like the picture but I don’t think it’s really, like, really beautiful because – the bit what kind of ruins it is that I can see cars (murmurs of agreement around the table) and if you could see it without the cars it would look really nicer – but I understand that you couldn’t get rid of them.

Enesa: Yeah. I tried to cut the cars out.

Abi: I don’t really like the cars but I don’t think there’s anything wrong with them. I don’t really think they actually really affect it because you can see the birds and the bright sky. You don’t actually notice it until you actually, actually look at the cars so I think it don’t actually ruin the picture, because you can see the big trees and you can see the trees in the distance and see the background which is really nice.
Mia: Umm - I kind of disagree because … - the cars kind of do ruin it. ‘Cause… they’re all big and they’re just in the way when you want to take a picture of just the green.

Sheri: The whole picture’s nice but the cars are not. When you look at the picture the first thing you recognise is the cars (voices: ‘yes’) and they don’t look nice, especially this yellow one… your eyes are mostly drawn to the yellow one.

Musta: Yeah – it’s just big and bright and you don’t really want to see it.

RW: I thought we liked bright things – you chose something bright (to share with the group).

Musta: Yeah, but it’s kind of different – because in my picture it’s just leaves and grass and stuff like that, but in this one it’s, like, a car and you wouldn’t want to see a bright yellow car in the middle of your picture. (Interview A8)

Mia begins the discussion by making a general point about the cars – without them, she says, the picture would look nicer. Abigail is less concerned by the cars and suggests the presence of the birds and the sky provide a balance to the picture, while Sherika is troubled by the way the cars dominate the viewer’s first impressions of the scene and Mustafa agrees, emphasising the brightness of colour of one of the cars means ‘you don’t want to see it’ – the viewer would prefer it to be removed from the picture. Several of these children had previously chosen bright, colourful images to represent their ideas of beauty – and now here was a bright, colourful object in what was otherwise a dull landscape – yet most agreed it spoilt the photograph and prevented it from being beautiful. As Mustafa said, ‘You wouldn’t want to see a bright yellow car in the middle of your picture.’

I was intrigued to find out how the children could reconcile their negativity towards the yellow car with their preferences for bright colours expressed in their previous interview. To investigate this idea I employed an art-teacher strategy designed to encourage children to look at one part of the picture in isolation. I used several pieces of paper to construct a makeshift frame around the yellow car, fragmented through the leaves of the tree, so it was removed from its context and suggested to children it resembled lemons growing on its branches (Fig. 7.32).
Fig. 7.32  Enesa’s view from the balcony (detail)

Did it look any better now? No, the children replied. Why? ‘We know it’s not meant to be there’, Sherika explained, ‘When you look at the picture your eyes are drawn to the yellow bit… it’s just a big yellow thing in the middle’. She related the debate to an earlier discussion:

You know when you said Mia’s picture, that it had bright stuff on it as well? But I think she means that it blends in with the leaves – but in this one it’s not like this was part of the tree. If it was, like, part of the tree and the leaves were, like, turning different colours it would sort of ‘go’ a bit more. But it’s not. You can just see it in between the leaves. So I think it would look better if that yellow car wasn’t there. (Interview A8)

It could be argued that the children were objecting to the yellow car because it was a car rather than because it was yellow. However, there were several other cars positioned more prominently in the picture, yet the children referred to none of them, perhaps because the colours of these cars blended in more easily with those of the background. Essentially, children valued colour as a visual quality of an image, but they also understood how it might cause problems in terms of its composition.

Children had other thoughts about the composition of Enesa’s image. Despite its prominence, a large block of flats in the background of the photograph had attracted little attention during the discussion and, after 15 minutes of debate about the yellow
car, I was curious to hear what children thought about the local architecture. I decided not to mention that the location of Enesa’s photograph was familiar to me; for ten years I cycled through the same estate on my way to teach in a nearby school and my perspective was the building was a faceless, functional, 1970s lump of concrete – I thought it was ugly. The children, however, thought differently. They thought the block of flats belonged there as part of the composition:

RW: Do you see (the block of flats) as part of the beauty of the picture?
Abigail: The block is not necessarily really beautiful – but if the block was removed there wouldn’t be nothing there to complete the picture.
Sherika: I think the block should be in the picture because if you take out the block… you might be able to just see, like shops and things… It doesn’t really look that bad because it sort of blends in with the trees…
Mia: I would say that the block is a good bit of the picture because it’s just at the back and you won’t really, like, focus on it. And it’s a really nice bit because you can just see the sun reflected on the windows, so the windows look really bright. (Interview A8)

Children’s comments suggested that they perceived the contents of Enesa’s photograph almost as abstract elements rather than features of a familiar landscape. The car was an incongruous yellow shape in an otherwise harmonious composition of earth tones, whereas the block of flats harmonised with the overall colour scheme of the image. They perceived the aesthetic qualities of individual parts of the image as irrelevant if that part did not ‘fit’ with the picture as a whole, and the coherence of the composition was more important. Enesa’s photograph would be more beautiful if the yellow car were not there, partly because it was a car, but mainly because it was the wrong colour: it represented an unwanted element of the composition, an accidental brushstroke that needed to be removed.
Two weeks after Enesa photographed the yellow car from her balcony, her classmate Kamaudin stood on another balcony on the same housing estate and suddenly noticed the leaves on the little tree below him. This section of the chapter began by exploring Kamaudin’s use of colour in his photographs, and it concludes with observations on how he composed his images in ways that enhanced their beauty.

If I were Kamaudin’s teacher, and if he had drawn or painted his scene rather than photographed it, I might have suggested it was unfinished. After all, there’s not much to look at: a wall, a tree, a path through grass. I might have encouraged him to develop the composition further, to try to create a stronger sense of space, to add a little detail here and there. But the image is not a painting it’s a photograph, and the question is not about knowing when to stop but knowing when to click. The notion of ‘capturing a moment’ has become something of a cliché in photography but, nonetheless, that is what Kamaudin did, in the process creating a beautiful image. Had he walked on to his balcony a few minutes later, the shadow that is perfectly poised on the path would have drifted one way or another, altering a composition so rigid it might have been drawn
with a ruler. In the foreground is a triangle of bright green grass, in the background a quadrant of dark green grass. A thin grey cable delineates the edge of a parallelogram of hundreds of little rectangular bricks, hundreds of tiny yellow leaves are splashed like paint against the wall. Similar compositional qualities are evident in Kamaudin’s other photographs: the pattern of the shadows cast by a fence, the shape of a shadow on another brick wall (Fig. 7.34; Fig. 7.35)
The visual properties of Kamaudin’s photograph invite the viewer to read something of a narrative into the scene. The image could even be conceived as existing within a tradition of photography, one that draws on certain conventions of painting while rejecting others. Alfred Steiglitz’s 1901 photograph of a tree on a New York street (Fig. 7.36), for example, is unconventional in terms of its composition – the image is cropped into an elongated rectangle that isolates a single tree – yet conventional in terms of its symbolism. Steiglitz chose a tree whose growth was supported by a little circle of wooden strips, and it is difficult not to perceive its struggle to survive in a harsh
environment as symbolic of the endeavor of human life in the city. Those little wooden strips re-appear a hundred years later, supporting Kamaudin’s tree and, just as Steiglitz’s photograph can be read as a reflection on human existence in an urban environment, Kamaudin’s image can be interpreted as a self-portrait, of a child growing up on a housing estate in west London. The beauty of the photograph lies partly in its artistry – its formal contrasts between light and dark, between the natural and built environment and between the solidity of the brick wall and the fragility of the tree – and partly in its artlessness – its quiet, modest, everyday qualities that do not demand to be recognised as beautiful. As Valeriy said, ‘from where he done it he chose a perfect spot to make the picture’.

Clearly, these observations and reflections are mine and not Kamaudin’s, nor any of the children taking part in the research. Nonetheless I would argue that, by identifying ideas and reading meanings in children’s photographs, I am working within a long tradition of art education. Kamaudin could not articulate all the reasons why his images were beautiful, but it would be unreasonable to expect him to do so, just as it would be to expect children to articulate all the reasons why they make drawings. Understandably, most young children, particularly those such as Kamudin who sometimes struggle to articulate their ideas, might find it difficult to identify exactly what it is about a photograph, painting or any image that is either beautiful, or effective. Nonetheless, several children interviewed for this research indicated that these ideas were beginning to take shape in their minds.

There are messages here for teachers not just about children’s perceptions of beauty but also about the potential of photography in (and beyond) the classroom. Photography can play a role in raising children’s expectations of the images they create. Teachers should build upon children’s existing awareness of the visual properties of
images and encourage them to develop a critical strand to their engagement with photographs. They should encourage children to understand that, despite the increasingly widespread perception of photography as a convenient means of communication, it is also a valid art process and they should aspire to create photographs that have aesthetic value and that can withstand critical reflection from others. For those interested in understanding children’s aesthetic development, photography has the potential to play a significant role in developing our understanding of children’s aesthetic experience. When combined with group interviews, it can be a highly effective method of exploring children’s perspectives on a range of issues and aspects of their lives.

Conclusion

The discussion of evidence from the interviews in the two schools indicates that children associate beauty with emotion and expression in a number of ways. Some associate beauty principally with people they love and choose images that represent these people with little concern whether others will find them beautiful. Others allow emotions to influence their choice of images but are also aware of aesthetic qualities within the images that might appeal to others. A few children are able to explore the relationship between beauty and expression in more complex ways and choose and create images that represent their thinking about experiences of beauty.

While children often find beauty in colour they rarely identify it as the only reason why an image is beautiful and often cite it as one of several reasons why an image is beautiful. Children’s preferences regarding colour may vary according to
where they live. Those in the London school tended to prefer images with intensified, digitally enhanced colours and often found beauty in colourful abstract patterns. Children in the Surrey school preferred images with natural colours and criticised those with artificial colours for not being ‘real’. In both schools, children occasionally perceived colour as a problematic compositional feature that detracted from the overall beauty of an image.

Children’s perceptions of beauty are sometimes influenced by social, environmental or cultural factors. Most children in the Surrey school live in rural areas and often photographed landscapes, flowers and animals, suggesting that a direct connection with nature influences their perception of it as beautiful. Children in the London school also found beauty in the natural world but were equally likely to choose digitally enhanced images of nature, and it may be that such preferences are partially determined by their limited experience of natural environments. These children were much more likely to choose images of family members to represent their perceptions of beauty, suggesting they strongly associate beauty with love, emotion and the home environment. These findings are discussed further in the concluding section of the thesis; the final chapter explores evidence that emerged from the interviews of children’s thinking about beauty.
Chapter 8: Children’s thinking about beauty

Introduction

This chapter reflects on evidence of children’s thinking about beauty. The first section reflects on children’s thinking with reference to notions of interest and intersubjectivity in aesthetic experience, while the second explores children’s thoughts about their experiences of beauty relating to the natural environment. The chapter concludes with some brief reflections on further themes that emerged during the interviews.

The interview data revealed some distinct differences between the responses of the children in the two schools in terms of their thinking about beauty. While those in the London school sometimes agreed each other’s images were beautiful, they were generally more interested in their own aesthetic preferences and how they found certain things were beautiful to them. Their perceptions of beauty frequently related to personal preferences, to pleasurable experiences they associated with their images and to their sense of their own personal identity. By contrast, children in the Surrey school were much more aware of distinctions between personal and shared experiences of beauty. Most chose images that they hoped or expected others would find beautiful, while a few questioned whether images that depicted personal subject matter could or should be regarded as beautiful. Several children articulated their ideas about the concept of beauty and speculated on its possible meanings for other people. In almost every interview at the Surrey school there was at least one discussion in which children exchanged thoughtful ideas about beauty. Though they often disagreed, children worked towards understanding each other’s ideas and, in doing so, succeeded in engendering a sense of community within the group.
8.1 Interest and intersubjectivity in children’s perceptions of beauty

I began this research with the idea that theories of aesthetic experience conceived by David Hume and Immanuel Kant in the 18th Century could inform my investigation into children’s perceptions of beauty. Chapter 3 of the thesis explored the philosophical ideas that underpinned the research and explained how these theories continue to be relevant today. Specifically, it explained how Hume and Kant captured important intuitions and explicit views about art, such as the possibility of intersubjective agreement concerning aesthetic judgements and the notion of a disinterested aesthetic appreciation of art and nature.

In ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ (1757), Hume explored the problem of ‘how judgments of taste manage to combine the objectivity of judgments with the subjectivity of tastes’ (Shelley 2013: 145). He argued that those with ‘true’ taste can quickly distinguish between the two and to appreciate the value of aesthetic experiences that are based on more than personal, emotive responses. In the Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790) Kant proposed that the first ‘condition’ of beauty is disinterest, and that something can only be beautiful if it instils in the viewer a satisfaction unrelated to any personal interest. In doing so, he argued that: ‘If the question is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it in mere contemplation’ (§2). In other words, the viewer should be concerned solely with their aesthetic experience of an image and the pleasure it affords, rather than whether they benefit from the existence of the object, people or place it represents.

Humean and Kantian notions of interest and intersubjectivity influenced both my design and management of the interviews. As explained in Chapter 3, their aesthetic theories informed my line of questioning in terms of the way I phrased
questions or responded to their ideas; rather than force certain ideas about aesthetic experience into the discussions, I remained alert to occasions when children’s responses related to philosophical theory and took opportunities to question them more closely on these occasions. This is evidenced by the interview summaries provided in chapters 5 and 6, several extracts from which illustrate key points in this chapter.

In the event, the themes of interest and intersubjectivity were embedded in discussions in both schools, though in different ways. At Greystones School, children were generally happy to accept that their perceptions of beauty were often influenced by their personal interest in the subject matter of their images. At Old Oak School, children more often perceived such attitudes as problematic, and occasionally explored and articulated their ideas about interest and disinterest in experiences of beauty. Most children at the school shared their images with the hope or expectation that others would find them beautiful, but some questioned whether images that depicted personal subject matter could or should be regarded as beautiful. Although these two points are closely related and easily conflated, Hume and Kant’s explorations of aesthetic experience demonstrate that they are in fact quite distinct. While one indicates the (often implicit) expectation of agreement, the other is the explicit questioning (or criticism) of personal perceptions of beauty. This section of the chapter explores examples of discussions from interviews at both schools that illustrate this point.
8.1.1 ‘We all have it in different ways’

Fig. 8.1 ‘I really like the sense of taste in your picture. I love it!’ (Ammar on Mohad’s found image, Interview A2)

At Greystones School children often described their images as beautiful purely because of their subject matter and regardless of any aesthetic qualities that might appeal to others. Several indicated that, though they would be happy if someone agreed their image was beautiful, it wouldn’t matter if they did not. Sadiya, for example, appeared unconcerned whether or not others appreciated her photograph of a brooch when she said ‘It doesn’t make much difference to me – because, if they don’t like it, it’s up to them… it’s not gonna change me’ (Interview A10), while Kyron argued that ‘if a picture’s very, very special to me [but] no-one really cared about it I wouldn’t mind’ (Interview A5). However there was one brief discussion at the school about the concept of taste. I was a little surprised when Ammar welcomed Mohad’s image of a blue flower (Fig. 8.1) by saying ‘I really like the sense of taste in your picture. I love it! I love your taste, I think it’s really nice.’ (Interview A2). I asked him what he meant:

Ammar: You know when in music, yeah, like, you like good music…
Danyaal: I get what you mean.
Ammar: It’s like having a taste in music, a taste in everything, yeah.
Danyaal: Food.
Ammar: Nah – that’s just – nah – everyone has a taste in food – anyways, like music, books, recorders, you know…
Danyaal: Like a little chart.
Ammar: Exactly! And I like your taste in pictures, it’s really, really nice. Keep it up! (Interview A2)

I was impressed with Ammar’s efforts to articulate his thoughts about different types of taste. Like many children at Greystones School, English was his second language; nonetheless, he was sufficiently motivated to articulate quite subtle differences between definitions of ‘taste’. I encouraged him to expand upon these distinctions:

RW: Is it like your taste in food?
(Voices): No.
Ammar: There’s two different types of taste. One is when you taste food, another is like, when you have a good sense in, um, certain things.
(Voice): When you like something.
Ammar: Exactly. (changes his mind) No – no, no, when everyone agrees it’s like you have a good thing going with certain things. That’s when we say Ah, you have a good taste, it’s literally a shorter way of saying you have a good sense in music [or] something. (Interview A2)

Ammar’s attempt to differentiate types of taste prompted me to question him further, as I was interested in finding out if or how his ideas related to Humes. Hume proposed that one of the qualities of the ideal critic is that they should be in possession of ‘strong sense’. However, Ammar’s idea of ‘good sense’ relates more closely to the Humean notion of ‘delicate sentiment’, which he used to describe the critic’s ability to understand and appreciate these qualities based on their previous experiences. His conclusion to the discussion was one that Hume would have found problematic:

RW: It’s an interesting thing to say, because when you described Mohad as having ‘good taste’, do you mean that he has similar taste to you? Or is it different?
Ammar: No, it’s different from mine – no, no, no. People have different taste – but I like his one. It’s not my taste – my taste is like, colourful and stuff when I think of beauty. His one’s colourful as well but I just like his taste better than I do of mine. (Interview A2)

Ammar’s concept of taste is curiously half-formed. It might be assumed that if he could recognise another’s good taste then it would be a shared one, but this was not the case. He seemed to think that taste is ingrained in people and is something over which they have little control: sometimes other people’s taste is better than our own.
Though none of the children at Old Oak School explicitly referred to the notion of ‘taste’, several of their discussions can be examined in the light of philosophical debates about interest and intersubjectivity in aesthetic experience. In the first interview at their school, children in Nell’s group found her family photograph (Fig. 8.2) problematic. Charlie began by questioning whether Nell should expect other people to think it was beautiful: ‘Umm… to you and your family, that is obviously beautiful because it’s got all your girl cousins in it – but to us – umm, some of us – we don’t really get the point – why it’s so beautiful to you?’ (Interview B1) Although Charlie phrased his question tentatively he also seemed to assume that he spoke for others. Callum was less cautious. When he said ‘I don’t think it’s beautiful because I do not like dresses and I do not know any of the people in that picture’ (Interview B1), he marked out his position as the member of the group least sympathetic to Nell’s picture: he had no interest in it and almost resented having to look at it.

It appeared children were on the point of dismissing Nell’s photograph on the grounds that it appealed only to audiences with an interest in its subject matter. However, and perhaps in response to the bluntness of Callum’s remarks, they began to
gently explore ways to resolve the issue. James perceived the problem as a

disagreement drawn along gender lines and offered a resolution: ‘I probably think most

of the girls like it ‘cause of the dresses, but the boys kind of see it in more other terms,

like more colour terms and stuff, more actual beauty … structured beauty, whereas girls

find it a different way.’ (Interview B1). Though James was a little presumptuous in

assuming that girls prefer certain subject matter, he nonetheless invited the other boys in

the group to notice qualities of ‘actual’ and ‘structured’ – formal beauty – and implied

that if boys could admire these qualities in other contexts they might also appreciate

them in Nell’s image. In other words, they could try to ignore the fact that the dresses

were dresses, and to enjoy a disinterested appreciation of their colours and patterns in

what Kant called ‘mere contemplation’ (§ 2).

Megan also sought to resolve the disagreement, by prompting others to reflect

on their own preferences. She argued that, even if people agree something is beautiful,

they may do so for different reasons: ‘Well, I find it quite beautiful – but I was

wondering how Nell finds it beautiful. Because we all have it in different ways … We

all have different thoughts about what beauty is, and for Nell, that would be what she

thinks beauty is.’ (Interview B1). Megan agreed that Nell’s image was beautiful but

simultaneously refrained from aligning herself with her. Her idea that no two people

have the same perception of beauty may have influenced Charlie, who moderated his

initial response by saying:

At first, I didn’t think it was beautiful to me, but I knew it was to Nell. Then I just took

a moment to look at it and realised that it was beautiful in a different way – ‘cause Nell

thinks it’s beautiful because of her whole family and it’s just nice to have it.’

(Interview B1).

Though Charlie began by questioning how Nell could expect her image to appeal to

other children, he eventually conceded that it could be beautiful. Having initiated the

discussion assuming a position of disinterest (‘we don’t really get the point’), he
concluded by offering a more inclusive perspective that invited agreement and promoted a sense of community. He said: ‘I’ve just got a phrase… and then that’s all I’ve got to say – beauty is in the eye of the beholder.’ (Interview B1) I decided to feign ignorance and in order to encourage him to expand upon his statement:

RW: What does that mean? I don’t understand.
Ch: … Any of the pictures here – it could be beautiful to someone but to someone [else] it couldn’t be. That doesn’t make it not beautiful and it doesn’t make it beautiful.
RW: … Was it true of the first picture we looked at? Because everyone agreed about the sunset and the silhouette.
Ch: But maybe the whole of [Class] 6LS [next door] think it’s not beautiful. (Interview B1).

Charlie sought to conclude the discussion by arguing that all experiences of beauty are essentially subjective. On reflection, I suspect that his last comments were directed at me. I think he was questioning what I hoped to learn from listening to children talk about beauty, and warning me that I should not expect to draw clear conclusions. After all, he argued, what might have happened had I chosen to interview another class instead of his? Even if we all agreed about beauty, the room next door might be full of people who all disagreed.

This was the first interview at Old Oak School, and evidence was already beginning to emerge that some children thought differently about issues of interest and intersubjectivity than those at Greystones School. None of the children I had interviewed previously had theorised that there another class of children might have ideas that were different from their own. Although they sometimes disagreed about images, they never disagreed about each other’s right to choose whatever image they wanted.
8.1.2 ‘If you were going to have a cauldron to make beauty...’

One child at Old Oak School appeared intent on single-handedly constructing his own explanation of the experience of beauty. The previous chapter explored how Spike used his drawings to help explain his thinking about beauty, and in his group’s second interview he used another image to communicate his ideas, though this image existed only in his head. He likened this to a cauldron in which, he explained, different aspects of experiences of beauty could be combined to great effect.

![Fig. 8.3 Anya’s found image of bloissom](image)

Before exploring further aspects of Spike’s ideas about beauty, it is worth noting the spirit of enquiry in which he approached the interviews. Firstly, when Anya explained that her photograph of pink blossom (Fig. 8.3) was beautiful because it was ‘pink and sort of fluffy and quite delicate’, he asked, ‘What do you like about it being pink?’ (Interview B4). It was an awkward question for Anya to answer it and offered an early indication that Spike was intent on digging below the surface of a discussion to excavate explanations. Secondly, he showed that he was prepared to challenge convention: when Anya described her picture as ‘quite girly’, he said: ‘I don’t think it’s that girly … you can’t really say something’s girly … you [might] say a dress is girly but then out there in the world some man might think dresses are not girly and might
walk around in dresses.’ (Interview B4) Thirdly, when children discussed differences between beauty and prettiness, Spike suggested that while the latter is superficial the former is reflective. In other words, an experience of beauty involves thought, whereas people describe something as pretty without ‘thinking at all’. (Interview B4) ‘Thinking’ was central to Spike’s perception of beauty. An analysis of the transcript of his group’s first interview revealed 124 occurrences of the word ‘think’ (or ‘thinking’) and Spike was responsible for 60 of them. As will become clear, his thinking about beauty touched upon several aspects of the philosophical debate about notions of interest and intersubjectivity in relation to aesthetic experience, namely: subjectivity, rarity and immediacy.

Spike expressed several insights into subjectivity, the first of which emerged in his response to Anya’s photograph. He suggested that, whereas describing something as pretty can simply mean that it looks good, something beautiful needed to have ‘its own touch’:

For an example, Anya said ‘This is beautiful’ so that’s got its own touch for her, it’s got the pink, it’s got the elegant-ness. But then I might say a tractor’s beautiful because it’s got things that I like, touches that I put in. So we all, like, have our own touches put in to the beauty … We each have, like, our own ingredients to make something beautiful. (Interview B4).

Here, Spike’s explanation is rooted in the idea of taste, and how different people find different things beautiful. He illustrates his explanation with an image of a tractor, chosen perhaps because its suggests a masculine, noisy, disruption of nature that contrasts with the quiet, natural ‘elegant-ness’ of Anya’s pink blossom, and characterises these preferences as the ‘ingredients’ (or ‘touches’) that combine to create an experience of beauty.

Spike’s next insight into subjectivity was concerned with diversity of response. When Barney shared a photograph of a football stadium, I asked if anyone agreed it was beautiful:
It depends on how you think … All the girls will be thinking “Help me, I don’t really like football that much”, so they probably think ‘For me that’s not beautiful’, but then for some boys they think ‘Oh yeah, Chelsea, that’s beautiful for me’ and [others] think ‘Oh yeah the structure, that’s beautiful for me’… some of us in the room might now think ‘Oh that’s ugly’ but then some of us might think that’s beautiful. It depends on how we’re thinking about it. (Interview B4).

Spike suggests that people’s responses will all be different, and even if they all agree a picture is beautiful that does not necessarily mean that they each find it beautiful in the same way. Similarly, when Emily shared a photograph of a butterfly, he said he could understand why she thought it was beautiful, even though it wasn’t beautiful to him. His argument was that diversity in aesthetic response does not stem simply from that fact that everyone is different, but from the fact that people think about beauty in different ways. Therefore (he implied) we can learn to think differently about beauty.

Learning about beauty involves more, however, than simply adopting other people’s opinions. Spike’s final idea about subjectivity engaged with the notions of the integrity of the viewer’s response. In order to explain this idea he coined the term ‘pure’ beauty:

RW: A minute ago you used the words ‘pure’ beauty, what does that mean?
Spike: I find it – in – as in, like, you can get beauty where you’ve just been told by people and that wouldn’t be real beauty, that would just be like if you were with your best mate and he said ‘Stamford Bridge is amazing’, and [even though] you hated Chelsea, you might be, like, ‘Oh yeah, yeah, definitely.’ That wouldn’t be real beauty. Like, beauty is your opinion, not somebody else’s – unless you’re agreeing on it.

RW: So your opinion stops being pure when somebody else…
Spike: … Has, like, said, if you don’t actually like it and you’re just saying it because somebody else is, perhaps your best mate is saying it. And that, like, changes the whole effect of beauty because that way, almost like copying, if you had an idea but then someone else said ‘Oh, this is better,’ you’d go for what everyone else thinks just to make yourself look cooler…

RW: And am I right in thinking that you value pure beauty more highly?
Spike: Yeah. So I’d rather have a friend that says, ‘No, you’re wrong, I think this is beautiful’ rather than someone who copies me. (Interview B4).

Spike suggests here that the problem with different opinions about beauty is that people regard some opinions as more important than others. He was aware that people may succumb to pressure to conform to others’ expectations and their responses may lack
integrity. When they do, their opinion is no longer ‘pure’, because what they say does not accurately reflect what they think.

Spike’s idea of a pure aesthetic response was also linked to ideas about rarity. When Emily shared a photograph of a seal, he suggested she thought it was beautiful because she knew seals are rare, and that this knowledge was problematic because it interrupted the viewer’s engagement with pure beauty:

Rareness gets a bit of a count in what you think of beautiful, because almost as in, if something’s really dull, and there was something really rare – if they’re both, like, the same thing but one was rare-r, you’d think the rare one was more beautiful because something in your head would think ‘Well, that’s rare-r, that’s better’. But then, it’s not real. (Interview B4).

Spike was troubled by the possibility that a viewer’s prior knowledge of an object influences their judgment of it, and if they know it is rare then they are more likely to judge it as beautiful, regardless of how it looks. I interpreted his concluding remark (‘But then, it’s not real’) to mean that the validity of the viewer’s experience of beauty is questionable if their judgment is clouded by their knowledge of its value. What troubled him even more, however, was that people are unaware of the way their knowledge can influence their response:

If you were told [that your response is influenced by your knowledge] you’d probably think “Oh no, no, I never say this, I think it’s actually pure beauty.” But it’s almost like a thing in your head, like a trigger that goes off and thinks ‘Oh it’s rare-r, that’s better’ and, like, you don’t really realise, it just goes on. (Interview B4)

Spike suggested people have only limited control over their responses to beauty because they are influenced by ‘something in [their] head’ that they ‘don’t really realise’. They simply can’t help themselves: the ‘thing’ in their head is ‘like a trigger that goes off’.

The image of the trigger was particularly important to Spike because it evoked a sense of immediacy, and this is also where his image of the cauldron came into play. He introduced the idea during his group’s first interview in order to explain that an experience of beauty is composed of different elements: ‘It’s almost, like, in this
cauldron and you put in, like, your opinion, then you put in some other stuff…’ (Interview B4). One could characterise his concept of the cauldron simply as a large pot in which ingredients are mixed together, something that can accommodate both people’s thoughts and feelings about beauty: ‘Like, if you were going to have a cauldron to make beauty from, like a wish … you’d have all the opinions in … and then you’d also have, like, emotions and memories.’ (Interview B4). In my experience of teaching in schools however, children typically associate cauldrons with magic; they do more than mix ingredients together, they mysteriously transform them: ‘Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and cauldron bubble…’ It’s reasonable to speculate that Spike chose the image of the cauldron not only to encapsulate the way experiences shape perceptions of beauty but also to allude to the fact that the way the mind combines these experiences is a mysterious, almost magical process. Once the ingredients are combined viewers are no longer in control and cannot help but find something beautiful – they are under the spell of beauty.
8.2 Children’s perceptions of beauty in nature

In his third *Critique* Kant frequently illustrated his theory of aesthetic experience with examples drawn from nature. A key idea in Kant’s thinking about aesthetic judgment was that, although aesthetic judgments are subjective, they come with the requirement of intersubjective agreement. (I feel aesthetic pleasure when I see the landscape; therefore I judge it in a positive way, describe it as beautiful and expect others to agree.) While children at Old Oak School were sympathetic to the principle of individual preference, they were simultaneously drawn to the idea that they could all agree that some images are beautiful, and in most cases these images represented nature. This section of the chapter explores children’s responses to images of nature in various forms, ranging from close-up photographs of individual flowers to panoramic views of distant landscapes. It begins by exploring their perceptions of natural beauty on a small scale, before reflecting on how they experienced beauty in their local environment and finally in the context of remote, distant landscapes.

8.2.1 ‘It represents, like, the process of life’: beauty in flowers

‘We find nothing… so beautiful as flowers’ wrote Edmund Burke in 1757, and flowers feature frequently in the literature on aesthetic experience. Sartwell’s recent (2004) account of the etymology of beauty explores how in some cultures the word itself is synonymous with flowers and natural growth: the Hebrew word for beauty, for example, is *yapha*, which means to be bright, to glow, or to bloom; in Arabic *wadu’a* means to become beautiful, while *ward-un* means rose or blossom. Sartwell suggests that the etymological links between flowers and beauty offer insights into how human conceptions of beauty arise ‘not, for example, from the awesome majesty of a forest, mountain, sunset, but by the sudden burst or blossom of energized colour into the field...’
of vision: the flower, the fruit, the butterfly, the bird’ (2004: 28).

Perhaps it was inevitable then, that in response to a request for images of beauty many children would choose flowers. Yet despite the frequency with which they appeared, children had relatively little to say about them. Enesa chose her digitally enhanced image of a rose (Fig. 8.4) ‘because my favourite colour is purple and this is purple’. When I asked her how she selected the image she told me she ‘typed in “beautiful pictures” and it just came up’ (Interview A3). Sherika chose her rose (Fig. 8.4) because ‘it’s bright and colourful and I like the shapes of the leaves. I like roses. That’s it.’ (Interview A3) When I asked whether she was surprised that other children in her group had chosen images of roses she replied ‘No, because lots of people like roses’. I suspect that the children who chose to share images of flowers were keen to secure agreement from other members of their group and chose images they thought the others would like. On the other hand, it could be that they were less confident about making choices than other children and more concerned with finding images they thought might be seen as ‘the right answer’ to questions about beauty (if in doubt, pick a flower).
When children photographed flowers themselves it was often with a greater sense of purpose. During the second round of interviews in both schools, several children described flowers they had photographed as beautiful because they symbolised new life. In London, Kyra explained that her photograph (Fig. 8.5) was beautiful because it was, ‘like, new life for flowers and stuff’ (Interview A7). In Surrey, Bonnie photographed a vase of daffodils (Fig. 8.6) ‘because it shows the circle (life cycle), because there are new buds and then they’re fully bloomed buds’ (Interview 12). Alistair photographed a vase of tulips (Fig. 8.7) because ‘flowers remind me of new life and new life can be beautiful in a way. It’s starting to grow, it gives me all the good memories I have from growing up’ (Interview B6).
At Greystones School, Ilham photographed flowers in her local park and talked about how she perceived them as symbols, not only of new life but also of its brevity:

This is beautiful to me – because I look at this and I see nice fresh flowers and then afterwards I look at these [dead flowers] and I am like, “What happened? It is so dark and… dead.” It makes me feel upset because it goes round in a family circle – like, you are young, you are fresh and then you are old and then you die. (Interview A6)

For Ilham, the presence of fresh flowers in the park served to emphasise the sadness of ‘dark’ and ‘dead’ corners elsewhere in the landscape. Like Bonnie, she alluded to the ‘circle’ of life, but while Bonnie’s description of the life cycle emphasised growth and renewal, Ilham’s dwelt upon decay. Whether or not she took this photograph with the intention of symbolising the life cycle, this was the idea that she chose to share with the group. The question of when children conceived their explanations for their photographs is explored in the next section of the chapter.
As described in Chapter 7, while children in Old Oak School preferred images of real flowers, those in Greystones School were more likely to choose digitally generated images. Nonetheless they still identified them with the theme of growth and renewal. When Mustafa shared a highly stylized digital painting of a flower growing in a purple landscape his description ignored its surreal features in favour of its symbolic qualities (Fig. 8.9)

I like how it showed how that the flower was blossoming. I also think it represents, like, the process of life. And thinking of the flower and the scenery, it looks very beautiful. And it all connects well together. ‘Cause, like, it started off small, then it grows. Like when you start up as a baby you grow into an adult and then – life cycle – and it goes on. (Interview A3)

I was surprised by the quiet confidence with which Mustafa decoded the symbolism of the image. It is possible that he perceived the artist’s hand as more visible in a digital painting than a photograph, and this allowed him more freedom to interpret their intentions. Other children were impressed with his reading of this image: Mia liked it ‘because if I didn’t see the picture and he described it to me, I would kind of get a picture of what it looks like’, and Abigail announced ‘My gosh! I want to take out his brain and put it in mine!’ (Interview A3). Even though other children did not initially notice the symbolism of flowers, once Mustafa pointed it out they seemed to recognise it immediately. While flowers often appeared to be a shorthand symbol for beauty, but for some children they also resonated with deeper meanings.
Children at both schools frequently experienced beauty in local landscapes. In London, Daniel photographed a local park (Fig. 8.10) and talked about how, though other parts of the park were busy, ‘here’s peaceful’, somewhere he could watch the ‘leaves falling in mid-air’ (Interview A9). Mohad photographed a sequence of riverside images (Figs. 8.11 and 8.12) and talked about ‘how the sun bounces off the river… when it’s night there’s usually lights in the buildings so you can see them in the far distance’ (Interview A6). Some of the children who were most effusive in praising these landscapes chose to photograph family members. Mahdi and Breana, for example, were both particularly vocal in praising Daniel’s image. Mahdi thought it was beautiful ‘because it looks like Heaven, I’m not lying!’ and Breana observed that ‘it looks like it’s painted very neatly’ (Interview A6). These comments suggested to me that these children were surprised to find that photographs that lack any specific emotional interest could nonetheless hold a more general aesthetic appeal. They perceived these images as having the qualities of ‘professional’ photographs, and even of paintings. In fact, it is the case that Daniel and
Mohad’s photographs were both a little reminiscent of Monet landscapes (Fig. 8.13), and perhaps both the subject matter and compositions of their photographs were influenced by a nascent awareness of certain conventions of landscape painting.

![Fig. 8.13 Daniel and Mohad’s photographs by were reminiscent of Monet paintings](image)

Ilham took a sequence of 14 photographs of her local park (Fig. 8.14-8.16) ‘because it’s where I spend most of my time at. I feel – it feels peaceful because I – you can hear the water running and you just feel calm’ (Interview A6). It may simply be a characteristic of her speech, but Ilham’s grammatical twists simultaneously offered alternative descriptions of the experience of being in the park. She begins by talking about how ‘it’ feels peaceful in the park, implying that her judgment was one she would expect others to share; she then modifies her perspective to indicate that her observations relate specifically to herself (‘I feel peaceful because I can hear the water running’), before implying that others would probably feel the same way (it feels peaceful because you
can hear the water running and you just feel calm’). In the context of the interview, it was clear that Ilham used the word ‘you’ in the colloquial sense (meaning ‘one’ rather than addressing another member of the group). However I sensed that she wanted to communicate the uniqueness of her personal experience of the beauty of the landscape, while simultaneously suggesting this is an experience she expected others to share and understand.

Another comment by Ilham illustrated how the landscape provided her with a sense of refuge. In one of her photographs the branches of a tree filled the frame, flattening the space between the viewer and the landscape (Fig. 8.14). She talked about how ‘It feels like I’m covered or like, safe or something, like something is covering me up from, like, rain’ (Interview A6), and her description was echoed several months later at Old Oak School when Heather gave her reasons for choosing her image of a bumblebee in a foxglove (Fig. 8.16)

I’ve just lived in the countryside all my life and I’ve seen busy cities and I don’t like them. I think that [this picture] is really quiet and nice if you’re just in the garden and the bee’s, like, peacefully minding its own business and flying into flowers… I just imagine like in a big forest, field area with a few plants, when you’re just sitting there relaxing and thinking about things and you just see a nice… and you hear the birds and then you see a bee flying into a flower. (Interview B2)

Heather perceived the landscape as a space for contemplation and envisioned herself ‘sitting there relaxing and thinking about things’, in the same way that Ilham had
described how ‘you can hear the water running and you just feel calm’ (Interview B2). These descriptions suggested that, despite the contrasts between their local environments, children experienced landscapes in similar ways, one of which centred on their perception of the landscape as a place for contemplation.

At the time of the interviews I was impressed by the poetic qualities of these children’s descriptions of their engagement with landscapes. On reflection, I am more intrigued by the question of when they conceived these explanations. At which point in the process did they begin to articulate their experiences? There are three possible answers. Firstly, it may be that each child set out, camera in hand, with the intention of finding and photographing a scene that encapsulated their feelings about a landscape; secondly, it may be that they came across a scene that appealed to them, photographed it and subsequently thought about how they wanted to explain it to other people. Thirdly, it could be that they only became aware of the qualities of the landscape once they looked at their images during the interview, and at this point only did they formulate their ideas about their experiences in nature.

Each explanation is plausible and each relates to Kant’s notion of ‘aesthetic ideas’. For Kant, an aesthetic idea is a ‘representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking’ (§49). He suggested that images allow the imagination ‘to spread itself over a multitude of related representations, which let one think more than one can express in concept determined by words’ (§49) and that aesthetic images enable us to imagine things we would otherwise be unable to express. These children talked about their landscape photographs in ways that were imaginative rather than merely descriptive. They either (i) imagined or recalled a landscape and set out to find and represent it; or (ii) found themselves in a landscape that triggered a response, or (iii)
simply took photographs of things that appealed to them, and only when prompted created narratives around them.

8.2.3 ‘There’s a part of us inside that just dives in’: beauty and remote landscapes

At several points in this chapter I have discussed tensions or contradictions between children’s perceptions of their experiences of beauty. On the one hand, they often believed that their thinking about beauty was individual to them; on the other, they acknowledged that they shared common elements with others. This section explores conversations in which children found common ground in their perceptions of beauty, and centres on their responses to images of remote landscapes.

Chapter 3 reported on how Hume and Kant examined the universal aspects of aesthetic experience. Hume suggested that ‘the general principles of taste are uniform in human nature’ and that, despite changing tastes over time, people appreciate works of art or literature ‘which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments’ (§11). Kant proposed that viewers who judged something to be beautiful are declaring more than personal preferences and that they are demanding that others agree with their judgment. He argued that, although cultural influences might prompt disagreements about aesthetic judgments, logically there should be uniformity to human nature. Chapter 1 reported on Dutton’s theory that humans are drawn to images of ‘blue watery landscapes’ that feature calm stretches of water, open spaces of grass and a diversity of plant life because they resemble the savannahs of East Africa where human life evolved.
There was little evidence in the data from Greystones School that children preferred such environments. The only images that slightly resembled a ‘blue watery landscape’ were Yasmina’s waterfalls (Fig. 8.17) and Mustafa’s surreal image of flowers growing by a moonlit lake (Fig. 8.18). Yet neither offer the calm, peaceful atmosphere that might make a viewer want to enter into the landscape and both could be interpreted as hostile environments. The waterfalls in Yasmina’s landscape threaten to engulf the trees, while there is a slightly narcotic, nightmarish quality to Mustafa’s image: one might want to look at his flowers but think twice about touching them.

In Old Oak School, however, six children, almost a quarter of the class, found images that encapsulated the idea of blue, watery landscapes. Charlie and Anya chose almost identical photographs of a sunlit waterfall cascading into a pool of water (Fig. 8.), Charlie described the scene as follows:

Um, it’s beautiful because it’s calm and remote… When the world was made by… we don’t know, whatever… um, there were no cities or anything and now the world’s evolved and it’s mainly cities and there’s not much countryside. So there’s this part and it’s just nice countryside which has obviously never been touched… people might have been swimming in it but it’s never been changed… It just looks beautiful with the sun shining through. (Interview B1)
Fig. 8.19 Images of Plitvička Forest, Croatia found by Charlie, Anya and Elysia

There are two strands to Charlie’s understanding of the beauty of the landscape. Firstly, he recognises the ‘calm, remote’, unspoilt nature of a landscape that has evaded human intervention. Secondly, he implies that not only is it a perfect landscape, but also that it has been photographed at a perfect moment, ‘with the sun shining through’; and thirdly, he alludes briefly to a spiritual dimension of the image: ‘When the world was made by... we don’t know, whatever...’ (Interview B1). Other children appreciated not only the formal qualities of the image, such as the light and the contrasting colours but also the sense that it was ‘out of the ordinary’ and enticed them to enter the image, to swim, sunbathe or climb trees.

Three weeks later, Anya presented an almost identical photograph and explained that it was ‘quite tropical’, that she ‘liked the colours in it’, and that it was ‘just quite calm and peaceful’ (Interview B4). It was left to Gracie to articulate a fuller response that was immediate and intense. This was the first time she had seen Anya’s image, and as she talked she stretched across the table to point at different parts of the image on the laptop screen:

Gracie: I think it’s like, I think it’s like natural, it’s nature really, it’s just like – not like there’s rubbish everywhere, it’s just natural, nature, it’s together, it’s beautiful. And I really like the way like the trees, it’s like a ‘V’ shape, it looks like they’re all... holding hands, if you see it like that... Everything’s like really peaceful and calm, loving and caring, in a way.

RW: You used the word ‘loving’ and I was quite surprised and interested. Could you explain what you mean by this, the sense of loving?
Gracie: Well, it’s quite hard to, like, explain, but it’s basically everything’s, like, in order, it’s loving, everything’s, like, basically got a partner, ‘cause like, (pointing to parts of the picture) that’s got that, that one’s got like the nature bits are like around here, that’s got that, the sky’s got the that, so basically they’re all joined together like it’s a family of green, a team, it’s like it’s working together, basically, to run this, to make it beautiful. (Interview B4)

I found Gracie’s engagement with the photograph striking. While her response partly echoed Charlie’s description she offered her own reasons why she found Anya’s image beautiful. She drew a parallel between the way different components looked good together and worked well together in a ‘real-life’ context, using the composition of the image as a metaphor for its meaning. She made a visual connection between the two diagonal lines of trees and the shape formed by two people holding hands, before ‘partnering up’ other elements of the composition (‘that’s got that, the sky’s got the that’, Interview B4). She highlighted the symmetrical shapes formed by the trees, and how they provided a sense of unity in the landscape.

Whereas Charlie’s reading of an almost identical scene alluded to symbolic notions of purity, eternity and spirituality, Gracie’s response was located firmly on earth. For her, the image represented life sustained through an ecosystem she perceived as loving, caring and entirely benevolent. And whereas Charlie had apparently taken time to reflect on his reasons for choosing his image before sharing it, Gracie’s responded to Anya’s image within moments of seeing it for the first time. Her response is persuasive evidence of the extent to which some children’s understanding of beauty is immediate and instinctive, and Gracie herself summarised the experience this way a month later, during the group’s second interview: ‘There’s a part of us inside that just dives in and it’s beautiful, you can just see it.’ (Interview B8) While Charlie drew upon his prior knowledge and understanding of landscape to analyse his image and articulate reasons why he believed it was beautiful, Gracie’s was intuitive: she threw herself in to the experience of beauty the landscape offered.
Fig. 8.20 Calendar, Pipasha Tandoori Restaurant, Churt.

Though no other child could quite match Gracie’s enthusiasm for the waterfalls in Plitvička Forest, all those who saw the images agreed they were beautiful. Some evolutionary psychologists might claim that this is evidence of a shared aesthetic sensibility and an instinctive appetite for beauty that is deeply rooted in humans. Dutton discusses how similar landscapes in various locations feature in calendars worldwide, and Charlie and Anya’s waterfalls would not look out of place in one of his calendars (or, for that matter, the one in my local Tandoori restaurant, Fig. 8.20). Dutton argues that the ‘blue, watery landscape’ transcends cultural divides, and its frequent appearance in these children’s images suggests this argument should be taken seriously. Water was by far the most prominent feature of children’s landscapes. All those chosen by children living in London included water, and water (or snow) featured in 22 of the 28 landscapes chosen by children living in Surrey. The human preference for such landscapes, Dutton argues, is closely intertwined with a survival instinct. Though children might not be explicitly conscious of the extent to which the features of their landscapes were ‘designed’ to sustain human life, these features were present in all their
images of landscapes, implying that there may be some truth in evolutionary theories of aesthetic preference.

8.2.4 ‘As if it was there a thousand years’: children’s images and the sublime

Chapter 3 of the thesis summarised notions of the sublime and how it relates to broader conceptions of beauty. Whereas an object may possess a natural beauty that pleases the viewer, an experience of the sublime is more complex and is often prompted by the viewer’s awareness of their potentially hazardous relationship with the landscape depicted. Kant’s conception of the sublime relates to limitlessness, which he positioned in contrast to the limitation imposed by the form of an object. He proposed that the satisfaction the viewer gains from encountering the sublime is derived from their understanding of their own diminutive scale in relation to the landscape depicted. Kant asserted that while the experience of looking at a beautiful image is directly pleasurable, the pleasure derived from an image of the sublime is dependent upon the viewer’s understanding that they are potentially at the mercy of the environment depicted (§ 23). The notion of the sublime, therefore, is quite distinct from the more general idea of an intersubjective perception of beauty in nature, one in which these children frequently agreed that certain landscapes were beautiful. Nonetheless, it is included in this section because several children chose images that suggested they had some level of awareness of the nature of the sublime.
Six children, three from each school, provided images of subject matter that could be conceptualised this way. Curiously, they were also the children who shared the highest number of images: whereas most chose to share only one or two images, they each chose five or more (Fig. 8.21). At Greystones School Ilham, Valeriy and Yasmina gathered a total of 25 images, while at Old Oak School James, Noah and Cameron contributed 24; between them, these six children accounted for more than a third of all the images the 51 participants found. It is not difficult to imagine each child locating an image that captured their idea of beauty then striving to find another, followed by another, believing that there might always be one more even more striking than the last.

It was also notable that children rarely selected these images to share with others during the interviews; while they were drawn towards them, they did not seem inclined to talk about them. Therefore, this section of the chapter reflects on evidence of these children’s perceptions of beauty that relates to notions of the sublime in terms of their images rather than their words, and examines the sublime qualities found in natural landscapes, fantasy worlds and urban environments. (A brief note: so far, in both this and the previous chapter, I have centred my interpretation of children’s perceptions of beauty mainly on their descriptions of images and related experiences. This section of
the chapter is different in that it focuses solely on my own interpretation of the children’s images, and I acknowledge that any conclusions to be drawn from this section are tentative.)

At Old Oak School, Cameron’s and Noah’s images depicted natural beauty on a grand scale (Figs. 8.22, 8.23). Cameron’s featured forests of pine trees, branches heavy with snow, set against backdrops of mountains illuminated by the setting sun. Though the softness of the trees and light make the landscapes appear less menacing, the environments are inhospitable and the viewer’s experience of their beauty is partly dependent upon their understanding of the inherent danger. In some respects Cameron’s images are reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich’ paintings, discussed in Chapter 3 (Fig. 8.24). Although in geographical terms the arid landscape of Ayers Rock in Noah’s image represents a contrast with Cameron’s snow-covered mountains, the images share a sense of vastness that is central to the notion of the sublime.
At Greystones School, another aspect of the sublime featured in images of fantasy landscapes. Valeriy chose images of the online game ‘Dragon Quest’ (Fig. 8.25), depicting elaborate structures located in inaccessible landscapes, that I perceive as contemporary equivalents of Friedrich’s landscapes in that they are intimidating as well as beautiful. The scale of the structures, evident from details such as archways, doorways and trees, seems designed to intimidate and, despite their enormity, each is apparently weightless and floats mystically above the clouds. Though the structures are reminiscent of futuristic landscapes, Valeriy perceived them differently. He said one ‘looks ancient, as if it was there a thousand years!’ (Interview A4). There is, then, a timeless quality to the structures, a sense that they have existed for centuries, will continue to exist in the future – and will outlive the viewer.

Although children were attracted to such dangerous scenes, they only reflected on the potential dangers they represented on one occasion. When children in Elysia’s group agreed that her image of a waterfall (Fig. 8.26) was beautiful, Ben challenged this: ‘I don’t think it’s really beautiful because I just think of lethal rocks. I went on a walk once, I think it was up a mountain in Italy. I slipped on a rock, fell in the freezing
cold water, swallowed a load and scraped my back’ (Interview B2). Ben’s story impressed the other children and they were happy to accept that he was right to allow his traumatic experience to impact upon his engagement with the image. He might have thought the mountain was beautiful on the way up, but had second thoughts by the time he came down.

![Image of waterfalls](image1)

*Fig. 8.26 Elysia’s found image of waterfalls*

![Image of waterfalls](image2)

*Fig. 8.27 Yasmina’s found images of waterfalls*

Ben might have felt much the same had he seen Yasmina’s images of waterfalls (Fig. 8.27). These were similar to Charlie and Anya’s images of Plitvička Forest in several ways: remote landscapes, with water cascading down mountains and no sign of human
life – yet the way in which these features were integrated within Yasmina’s image is quite different. In the images of Plitvička Forest, the trees grow on cliffs and nestle alongside a single stream of water that falls gently into the lake, creating an atmosphere of calm and stillness. In Yasmina’s landscapes, the mountains are grey, austere and treeless, or covered in cascading water, and the trees are not part of the mountains but dwarfed by them. In both of Yasmina’s images a single tree is isolated from the others and silhouetted against water rushing around it, and it is difficult not to see each as representing something almost human in scale against the vastness of the landscape. In Charlie and Anya’s images, water is represented as a nourishing presence, enough to sustain life; in Yasmina’s images it is a destructive force, enough to drown in. There is a sense of the environmental threat to human life.

Yasmina’s images were digitally generated, and (arguably) deliberately designed by the artist or photographer to evoke feelings of awe and wonder. There was also a faint echo of the sublime in the photograph that she took later and presented to the group (Fig. 8.28). The jagged edge of local rooftops silhouetted against the sky of called to my mind the mountains of her distant landscape, while the complex pattern of clouds hints at limitless sky beyond. Inevitably though, given the limited range of locations
accessible to children, there was less evidence of the sublime in their own photographs. Nonetheless, Spike and Barney photographed hilltops that afforded distant, empty views with no sign of human life (Fig. 8.29).

Fig. 8.29 Barney and Spike’s photographs of local landscapes

Finally, one child described some images in ways that evoked feelings of the sublime yet were located in urban environments. The idea that an urban landscape can relate to the sublime may be contentious, but Rafeeah’s response to her local environment strongly reminded me of notions of the sublime. She explained that her photograph of the Empress State Building was taken ‘near my house… because I don’t really go far to go and do things. When I always look outside my window I just keep staring at it and I can’t, like, stop looking at it because it’s a beautiful place.’ (Interview 9) The building had fascinated her for some time: ‘When I first came to this country I saw this building and I was, like, wow! Yeah, that’s how I felt. And I was always saying to my dad I want to go in that building, I want to go in that building’. Her photograph, with its exaggerated perspective of the view from the ground as she craned her camera skyward, was a striking image that captures something of the ‘wow’ factor she described, and the little rooftops in the foreground served to emphasise the huge scale of the structure behind.
The Empress State Building is more than 100 metres tall and towers over every other structure in the area; for Rafeelah, however, it is her neighbour. Yet despite its proximity to her home, the building remained mysterious to her. She doesn’t know who works inside it: she thinks it might be ‘the police... and – and like, just ordinary people’.

Most children photographed people, places or objects with which they had a clearly defined relationship (this is my mother, my cat, my bag); Rafeelah’s images were distinctive because of her ambiguous relationship with the building, and her description of it reflects a uniquely urban experience: she is drawn to the building, every day she sees people entering and leaving it, she finds it beautiful – yet she has no idea of its purpose. Whereas children seemed to understand images of natural landscapes and felt compelled to enter them, Rafeelah’s experience of the urban landscape is the opposite: she is on the outside, wondering what goes on inside.

There may be other explanations, however, for these images that recall the sublime. It may be that children chose images of hostile locations, fantasy landscapes and mysterious urban environments principally because they found them compelling rather than beautiful. Given the opportunity to find or photograph images to bring to school and talk about, perhaps they chose ones they were most curious about. Alternatively, it may be that children’s choices were influenced by their preferences for certain formal qualities. For example, when I compared Rafeelah’s photographs with
the images she found, I noticed a consistent aesthetic preference in terms of formal properties rather than subject matter. While her choice of subject matter was diverse each image featured a single, huge object (a local building, the Olympic Stadium, a whale) that dominated the frame (Fig. 8.30). Finally, it may be that children’s engagement with images of sublime nature is influenced by the depiction of certain environments in popular culture. In terms of children’s literature and the cinema, for example, the landscapes of *The Hunger Games* (Fig. 8.31) offer a contemporary vision of the sublime, while drawing on conventions that Friedrich and Kant might have recognised. These are only tentative conclusions, and further research could be done to investigate such connections.

![The Hunger Games (film still)](image)

*Fig. 8.31 The Hunger Games (film still)*

### 8.3 Further lines of enquiry
This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of other themes that arose during the interviews. The first concerns children’s ideas about distinctions between beauty and prettiness; the second centres on their ideas about beauty and gender; the third reflects on some curious incidents when children lied about their images or experiences and the fourth summarises children’s perceptions of the status of beauty.

8.3.1 ‘Beautiful sounds much more powerful I think’: beauty and prettiness

The perception of ‘prettiness’ as a poor relation to beauty is widely held yet rarely explored. Parsons (1988) dismissed the term as trivial and, in an observation that is representative of the status of prettiness in the eyes of art educators, drew a rough comparison between artworks that were ‘significant and meaningful’ rather than [merely] pretty object[s]’ (1988: 108), while Kant differentiated between beauty and prettiness by associating the latter with a lack of ‘spirit’, the ‘animating principle in the mind’ (§ 49).

At Greystones School children referred to the prettiness of pictures on several occasions, though I neglected to ask children to explain exactly what they understood the term to mean. I later realised that this was a missed opportunity, and when the theme arose again at Old Oak School I pursued it: ‘Is ‘pretty’ the same as ‘beautiful’?’ I asked one group. ‘They kind of mean the same thing’, Issy replied, ‘But, like, they have different meanings’ (Interview B3). Issy was one of several children who tied themselves in knots trying to distinguish prettiness from beauty, and I found it more productive to ask them whether specific pictures were pretty or beautiful.
When he looked at his image of a starlit sky above an African plain (Fig. 8.32), Noah was better able to articulate the distinction. He talked about how certain individual features could be described as pretty and concluded that it was the way these features combined that made the image beautiful: ‘I wouldn’t say the whole thing is pretty – but I’d say like the star, line things in the sky is pretty, and the landscape and the whole thing put together is beautiful.’ (Interview B3). Josie was interested in the way the long exposure of the photograph revealed arcs of light created by the passage of moon and stars across the sky: ‘Well I would call that beautiful [rather than pretty]… because it’s like a way of nature and it happened and the way it happened is fascinating.’ (Interview B3). She suggested that her understanding of the phenomenon depicted in the image leads her to find it beautiful, which is more important than simply appreciating pretty aspects of the photograph.

Several other children at Old Oak School shared ideas about what distinguished beauty from prettiness. Gracie associated prettiness only with the physical appearance of an object and thought beauty was more concerned with ‘what’s on the inside’ (Interview B4); Spike suggested that ‘pretty means almost attractive, you think it looks good, and then “beautiful” just means you think it’s different, it’s got its own touch’
(Interview B4), and all the children in Barney’s group agreed with him when he said: ‘Beautiful sounds much more powerful I think’ (Interview B4).

8.3.2 ‘You can’t really say something’s girly’: beauty and gender

When I began my research I anticipated that gender would be a factor in three respects: firstly, that girls and boys would find different things beautiful; secondly, that both girls and boys would be heavily influenced by media images that promote a narrow, western, feminine ideal of beauty; and thirdly, that boys’ awareness of the associations between beauty and femininity might limit their level of engagement with the project. These assumptions were shaped by literature highlighting the problematic role of beauty in contemporary society and noted in Chapter 1 (e.g. Wolf 1991; Steiner 2001; Beech 2009). Wolf (1991), for example, argues that contemporary notions of feminine beauty have been deliberately constructed and stereotyped by men, and I anticipated that the research would provide evidence that children are strongly influenced by these stereotypical portrayals of beauty.

Fig. 8.33 Nell’s photograph of a cake

Although children occasionally described how they associated prettiness with femininity, I was surprised that ideas about gender and aesthetic preference rarely arose
in interviews at either school. I recall introducing the project and checking boys’
reactions when they heard the word ‘beauty’ because I was worried they might
immediately dismiss it as a feminine notion. My concerns proved to be unfounded.
There was no evidence that boys were less engaged with the project than girls, very
little evidence of gender influencing aesthetic preferences and even less evidence that
children were influenced by media images of beauty. Only occasionally did boys reject
images they perceived as feminine: at Old Oak School, for example, Callum thought
Nell’s cake (Fig. 8.33) ‘would be beautiful if it didn’t have love hearts and pink’
(Interview B5). Boys were just as likely to challenge convention, for example when
Spike protested that ‘you can’t really say something’s girly’ (Interview B4). Overall it
was rare for children to share images that reflected gendered perceptions of beauty.
This was particularly true with regard to Greystones School where, although several
boys were relatively assertive, they were not afraid to choose images that reflected some
gentler aspects of their male persona. Once again, the interviews proved valuable in
uncovering elements of children’s thinking about beauty that might easily have been
missed had their images been the only research data, as shown by the following
example.

![Mustafa's clothes and jewellery](image)

*Fig. 8.34 Mustafa’s clothes and jewellery*
I initially interpreted Mustafa’s photograph of a baseball cap and coat (Fig. 8.34) as an expression of masculinity and thought he was more interested in using the project to explore identity rather than beauty. However, in his description of the image Mustafa pointed out a barely visible bracelet and necklace carefully placed on the cap. When I mistakenly assumed they belonged to his sister he politely corrected me, and his lack of affront suggested to me that he did not, as I had done, judge the jewellery to be feminine. This suggested to me that he perceived the ‘rules’ of gender and beauty to be more fluid than I had assumed.

Mustafa’s lack of concern about this was reflected in some boys’ comments in another discussion. Talking about Sadiya’s pink bag, Kamaudin admitted that, although he wasn’t fond of the colour, ‘some boys like pink’, which prompted Sadiya to say ‘that’s the ones that play with Barbie’. This was the closest any child at Greystones School came to making a negative judgment about gender and aesthetic preference and boys in the group were quick to challenge her assumption. Kamaudin confessed that ‘I have a kind of, like, a shirt that’s kind of pinkish. Yeah, I have a pink one and I have a purple one as well’, which prompted Kyron to add ‘I don’t have a purple one but I have a kind of, like a shirt, it’s like in between kinda peach colour and pink, red and pink, kind of’ (Interview A5). While such discussions were too infrequent to inform any real conclusions about gender and aesthetic preference, they do suggest that children at this age may not be as easily influenced by gender stereotypes as it is sometimes assumed.

There was also evidence that children were not interested in images that represented conventional notions of feminine beauty. When I first discussed my plans for the research people often raised concerns about children growing up in a society that values synthetic rather than natural beauty. Chapter 1 of the thesis referred to the problematic relationship between gender and beauty in contemporary culture and
reported on how authors such as Freedman identify men as ‘the architects of beauty [who] work to fashion our visions of our bodies’ (2003: 123) and on how this has led to the narrowing of definitions of beauty. I suspected that children would not be immune to these messages and anticipated that they might gather a range of photographs of glamorous women. Alternatively, I thought they might choose images found through generic online searches for ‘beauty’ that invariably locate images related to beauty products (Fig. 8.35)

![Beauty products](image)

Fig. 8.35 Beauty products

I was wrong. The work of the ‘architects of beauty’ was nowhere to be seen, and children were not consumed by media-driven visions of feminine beauty. With one or two exceptions, the only women depicted in their images were mothers and sisters. At Greystones School, Sandy chose five images torn from the same edition of the ‘Metro’ newspaper (Fig. 8.36), and while three of them were of women, the others depicted football kits and a puppy, which led me to conclude that her perceptions of beauty were less concerned with the female form and more with what images could be conveniently located. Teyamo said she chose a poster of a princess from a Disney film (Fig. 8.37) because ‘loads of people know it and like it and the princess matches with the dress and the atmosphere outside of the picture’ (Interview A4). This was the kind of image that
many might expect a ten-year-old girl to choose to represent beauty, yet it was highly unrepresentative of children’s aesthetic preferences as a whole.

At Old Oak School, princesses and beauty queens were also conspicuous by their absence. Megan’s photo of Kourtney Kardashian (Fig. 8.38) provided the only image of conventional feminine beauty and even she had reservations about it, suggesting that Kardashian represented ‘the average celebrity, a bit stressy, a bit spoilt… somebody
who looks after themselves but is spoilt to themselves.’ (Interview B1). Though the image prompted some playful banter between the boys in her group, they seemed to concur with Megan’s assessment and their judgment that celebrities were ‘self-absorbed’ dissuaded them from finding them beautiful. Finally, Maddie and Nell chose images of celebrities who have each actively challenged audiences’ perceptions of conventional beauty (Fig. 8.39). At the time of writing both Jo Brand and Miranda Hart have achieved widespread acclaim for their refusal to conform to stereotypical expectations of feminine appearance, and I believe that Maddie and Nell were aware of this when they chose them as subjects because they each took the opportunity to make a visual statement that challenged conventional notions of beauty.

8.3.3 ‘The others were from the computer. But this is real.’ beauty and truth

The roots of the idea that beauty and truth are related can be traced back to Plato. However, this section of the chapter reflects on a curious way in which notions of beauty and truth arose during the interviews, by exploring how some children told lies about their images, both in terms of how they located or made them and what they represented.

The extent to which children are reliable subjects for research is open to debate, as the literature on research methodology tends to focus more on respecting children’s rights as participants and less on their reliability as interviewees (e.g. Arksey and Knight 1999, Greig, Taylor and MacKay 2007, Kellett 2010). I would suggest there are several reasons why children may give inaccurate answers in interviews: they may seek to please the interviewer; they may misunderstand a question, or they might exaggerate the truth, perhaps in order to impress the interviewer. The possibilities multiply in the context of group interviews, particularly those in which children feel relatively
confident in each other’s presence. This requires the researcher to (i) be aware of occasions when children are less than truthful, (ii) make initial judgments during the interview about whether or how to challenge them and (iii) make further judgments about the reliability of children’s contributions when analysing, interpreting and reporting the interview data.

![Chloe’s London Eye](image1.png)

**Fig. 8.40 Chloe’s London Eye: ‘It’s kind of like, been this great experience’**

**Fig. 8.41 Mustafa’s flower: ‘I went on Google and then I wrote down ‘beautiful flowers’ and then I was scrolling down, then ... I found this’**

There were occasions during the interviews when I knew immediately children were not telling the truth and other occasions when I initially believed what they said, only to find out later that they had lied. At least four children at Greystones School lied about their images. Chloe photographed the London Eye from her flat on the seventh floor, and said: ‘I’ve never actually been there. I’ve only been there once. And it’s kind of like, been this great experience and that’s why I wanted to choose it.’ (Interview A6). More than 50 million people have visited the London Eye but, judging from her description, I suspect Chloe was not one of them. Nonetheless she described it as a ‘great experience’. My interpretation of Chloe’s contradictory description is that the structure is so familiar to her she feels she has been there. Mustafa described how he located his surreal image of a flower that represented ‘like, the process of life’ as follows: ‘I went on Google and then I wrote down “beautiful flowers” and then I was
scrolling down, then … I found this and I thought, Oh that looks really nice…” (Interview A3). Mustafa’s story was convincing at the time. However, the following week it transpired that he had actually stolen the image from Yonis’s envelope, leaving Yonis to arrive empty-handed at his own interview.

As reported in Chapter 7, several children at Greystones School chose to re-photograph images to share with others. However, Sadiya refused to acknowledge her act of appropriation and made up a story about how she photographed a kitten (Fig. 8.42) ‘because I thought it was so cute. And it was coming to me whilst I was holding my camera when I was at my cousin’s house. It keep on coming to me.’ (Interview A10). When I challenged her and asked ‘Is this a picture of a picture or is it a picture of a real cat?’ she stuck to her story: ‘It’s a real cat.’ A similar image from Sadiya’s camera (Fig. 8.43) confirmed that it was nothing of the sort, and I later discovered that a third image of a tropical bird that she attributed to her cousin was widely available on the Internet (Fig. 8.44).

Finally, I was a little disappointed to find that Ilham’s photograph of pink waves crashing on a beach (Fig. 8.45) is also widely available online (Fig. 8.46), despite her description of how she and her family had witnessed the scene. When other children had suggested that she had found the image online she convinced them (and me)
otherwise: ‘The others,’ she had explained, ‘were from the computer. But this is real.’

(Interview A1).

Fig. 8.45 Ilham’s image: ‘The others were from the computer. But this is real.’
Fig. 8.46 Identical image found online

There were almost certainly other occasions when children did not tell the truth about their images. Why did they lie? It may be that some children deliberately sought to undermine the project because they considered beauty a superficial subject that is difficult to take seriously, but I think this unlikely. I suspect that children lied about beauty because they took it seriously. They wanted to impress each other (and perhaps me) by exaggerating or inventing their experiences; they clearly enjoyed it when others responded positively to their images and to subsequently confess that the image was found online, or in a classmate’s envelope or on someone else’s wall would risk losing the group’s admiration. Children never lied about their perceptions of beauty, only...
about their *experience* of it, and in my view their desire to impress was rooted in their perception of beauty as something that is important – important enough to lie about.

8.3.4 *‘Beauty is not important because beauty is not in your exams’*: the value of beauty

On completing the interviews, I was satisfied that I had learned a great deal about children’s aesthetic experiences, aesthetic preferences and aesthetic development. The interviews at the two schools provided much evidence of children’s high levels of engagement with ideas about beauty, of their ability to reflect on experiences of beauty and of the diversity of their perceptions of beauty. As a teacher, I was convinced that the children’s experience of sharing images and ideas had revealed how important beauty was to them, and I was beginning to think about the implications of this for art education.

However, when I concluded interviews by asking children whether they thought beauty was important, they often said no. At the end of almost every interview I asked children questions about their perceptions of the value of beauty beyond the images they had discussed. I turned their images face down on the table or switched off the computer in order to emphasise that this was an opportunity to think beyond their own images and explore questions about their broader perceptions of beauty. Having listened to children describe a wide range of reasons why they found images beautiful, I was surprised when their responses almost invariably referred to narrow, generalised notions of beauty unrelated to anything they had previously discussed. As soon as their own images were out of sight, children reverted to generalised perceptions of beauty as a trivial, superficial concern.
Children explained that they regarded visual beauty as superficial compared with ‘beauty on the inside’, and that they associated beauty almost entirely with human appearance, rather than nature, colour, pattern, or any of the themes that had driven our conversations. Children repeatedly referred to the notion that beauty was only important ‘on the inside’:

Even if they look ugly, it’s what’s on the inside that counts, like the heart and the things what they say, the kindness of what they are. (Gracie; Interview B4);

Every human is beautiful in their own way - and it doesn’t have to be just looks, it can be beautiful inside and outside or they can just be beautiful inside. (Jasmine; Interview B2);

Beauty is not important because a person is a person and that's how they were made so, like, you shouldn't like judge them because it doesn't really matter how they look. It matters about their personality, like what kind of person they are. (Ilham, Interview A1).

Beauty is not important because, if you’re in a marriage and you only like them because they wear make-up they look really nice and that... You have to like them... how they act and everything. Don’t just like how they look.’ (Billy, Interview A5).

Children in both schools consistently communicated the same message. Furthermore, it was not the case that these children had hitherto remained detached from discussions, biting their lips while others talked about beauty. Gracie, Jasmine, Ilham and Billy were among the most enthusiastic of participants in the interviews, yet despite their previous levels of engagement, they disagreed with the idea that they were discussing something important.

Listening to children’s rejections of beauty at the end of each interview felt a little like coming back down to earth. Yasmina, for example, who had gathered no fewer than ten images for her first homework task, was adamant that:

Beauty’s not important because – let’s say you’re in Year 11 and you have to go college and that stuff, if you just think about, like, beauty, beauty, beauty, and don’t care about your work... Beauty is not important because beauty is not in your exams. (Interview A5).

It was almost as if children chose to conclude each interview by gently leading me away from thinking about beauty, back towards the real world where educational priorities lay
elsewhere. Why should we waste time thinking about beauty when it won’t help us to pass our exams? While the interviews were characterised by the breadth and diversity of children’s ideas, their conclusions were influenced by narrow, mainstream conceptions of beauty.

Perhaps I should have been less surprised by children’s conclusions. When they dismissed beauty as irrelevant they were reflecting the conflicting beliefs that many adults also hold: they were certain that beauty is a trivial concern while simultaneously believing it is important to them; and, while it is a word many use on a daily basis, children rarely, if ever, hear people reflect upon the meanings of beauty. Children’s perceptions of the value of beauty reflect the extent to which it remains a curious, contradictory, problematic presence in society.

Conclusion

Evidence from the interviews suggests that children’s thinking about beauty can be explained in the context of philosophical theories about aesthetic experience. Children have experiences of beauty in a wide range of contexts and (like many adults) they often simultaneously perceive beauty as both a universal and individual experience. Some talk about their own experiences of beauty in ways that relate to aspects of aesthetic theory while others, though apparently less able to conceive or articulate such ideas, are nonetheless receptive to classmates’ ideas when they heard them.

Generally, children in Old Oak School were more able or inclined to reflect on their experiences of beauty in reflective ways. Despite their slightly younger age they were more likely to relate their own experiences of beauty to those of others, more
aware that subjective perceptions of beauty were potentially problematic and more interested in exploring and resolving these issues through discussion. Their discussions alluded to notions of interest and disinterest explored in the literature and reflected a fragmented awareness of the complexities of aesthetic experience. Some talked about their experiences of beauty in ways that related to aspects of aesthetic theories while others, though apparently less able to conceive or articulate such ideas, were nonetheless receptive to classmates’ ideas when they heard them. In contrast, at Greystones School children rarely described their perceptions of beauty in ways that acknowledged peers’ perspectives, and several explained that they were unconcerned if others disagreed that their image were beautiful.

Some children clearly valued intersubjective agreement about aesthetic experience. At Old Oak School some demonstrated a capacity for reflecting in depth on their own aesthetic experiences, were able to articulate their own perceptions of beauty and to speculate on its possible meanings for other people, while others chose to share images that they did not necessarily consider visually beautiful but which enabled them to articulate their thinking about beauty. These findings, with those from the previous chapter, inform a number of implications for theory and practice in art education that are presented in the conclusion to the thesis.
Conclusions

Introduction

This section of the thesis begins by identifying the contribution the research makes to knowledge in art education. It presents a summary of the findings in relation to the research questions, before identifying a number of implications for theory and practice and concludes with some reflections on the research.

The research makes a contribution to knowledge in art education in three areas. Firstly, the findings indicate that children are able to describe, analyse and reflect upon their personal experiences of beauty and that these experiences are often valuable and meaningful to them. Secondly, it provides evidence that children are motivated to locate, create and share images that represent their perceptions of beauty, to explain their ideas about it and to engage with and respond to the ideas of others. Thirdly, the research challenges previous assumptions in terms of both children’s aesthetic development and aesthetic preferences, by suggesting that children’s perceptions of beauty are far more diverse than previous studies have suggested, and that this diversity could be linked to their social or cultural environment. Finally, it demonstrates to researchers that facilitating opportunities for children to generate images to share through group discussions can be a very effective way of enabling researchers to further our understanding of children’s experiences. These findings have implications for art educators, for teachers, and for theories of aesthetic development.
Summary of findings

What are children’s perceptions of beauty?

When asked to find and photograph images that represented their ideas of beauty, the 51 children in the study located and photographed more than 600 images, 150 of which they shared during 18 interviews. Children chose a wide range of subject matter, including landscapes, people, architecture, objects and abstract patterns, suggesting that their perceptions of beauty are far more diverse than indicated by previous studies.

The two schools were located in contrasting locations, and there is evidence that children’s perceptions of beauty may be partly determined by their environment. Most children living in the rural area around Old Oak School found and photographed images of landscapes, flowers and animals, suggesting their direct connection with nature influences their perception of it as beautiful. Those at Greystones School in London also found beauty in images of nature but often chose digitally generated, graphic images that exaggerated natural forms rather than representing them faithfully. It may be that their preferences are partially determined by their lack of direct experience of the natural environment.

While children often experienced beauty in colour, they tended to cite it as only one of several visual features that could make an image beautiful. Colour preferences varied between the schools. Whereas children in London tended to prefer images with intensified, digitally enhanced colours and they were more likely to find or photograph images of colourful abstract patterns, those living in the rural area preferred images with natural colours and some criticised those with manipulated colours for not being ‘real’. Occasionally, children perceived colour as problematic when it didn’t ‘belong’ in an image, thereby serving to detract from its beauty.
Children in Greystones School frequently photographed family members, suggesting that they associated beauty with feelings of love and emotion. In contrast, children at Old Oak rarely chose or photographed images that featured people, and the few who chose to share images of family members found their choices were questioned by other children. In both schools there was evidence of consistency in children’s choices, in the sense that their photographs and found images often depicted similar subject matter. There was very limited evidence of gender influencing aesthetic preference in either school, suggesting that for these children, environment is more likely to determine aesthetic preference than gender.

_How do children reflect upon and articulate their perceptions of beauty?_

The research revealed that most children were highly motivated to articulate their ideas and feelings about perceptions of beauty. Many reflected thoughtfully on images and some were able to explain their individual ideas about experiences of beauty. During the interviews children analysed and compared images, explored connections and contrasts between them and expressed their own views while also listening to and engaging with those of others.

Children often reflected on and articulated their perceptions of beauty in terms of the expressive qualities of their images. While some children in Greystones School shared images purely because they depicted loved ones, others allowed emotions to influence their choice of images but were also aware of aesthetic qualities in them that might appeal to others. A few children at Old Oak School were able to explore relationships between beauty, emotion and expression in more complex ways, by deliberately choosing and creating images that represented their thinking about experiences of beauty (see below).
The children’s images, their descriptions of their experiences and explanations of their preferences provided a range of evidence that they perceive beauty as a theme that is engaging, meaningful and relevant to their lives. However when they were asked directly whether it was important to them, children often said no, and, outside of the context of looking at their own images, several of them talked about it in ways that suggested they regarded it as superficial.

*How do children's perceptions of beauty relate to philosophical thinking about aesthetic experience?*

The findings of this research suggest that, like many adults, children sometimes simultaneously perceive beauty as both a purely individual experience yet also one that they would expect others to share. During the interviews several talked about their own experiences of beauty in ways that related to Hume and Kant’s theories about the subjectivity of aesthetic experience while others, though apparently less able to conceive or articulate such ideas, were nonetheless receptive to these ideas when they heard them.

It may be that social, environmental or cultural factors influence children’s thinking about their experiences of beauty. While children in both schools were able to relate to others’ experiences of beauty, those in the rural school tended to reflect in greater depth and were generally more receptive to each other’s ideas. Most chose images that they hoped others would like, while some questioned whether images that depicted personal subject matter could or should be regarded as beautiful. This suggests that these children were more aware of distinctions between personal and shared experiences of beauty and that they found subjective perceptions of beauty problematic.
Children sometimes sought to explore and resolve issues of intersubjectivity through discussion and the ideas that emerged from these discussions often reflected a fragmented yet growing awareness of the complexities of aesthetic experience. A few were able to articulate highly individual perceptions of beauty and to speculate on its broader meanings for others and shared images that, though they did not necessarily consider visually beautiful, nonetheless enabled them to articulate their thinking about beauty.

Although children at Greystones School often responded positively to each other’s images, they rarely described beauty in ways that acknowledged other people’s perspectives. While they sometimes agreed that certain images were beautiful, they were generally more interested in how certain things were beautiful to them. Several who shared images of family members, for example, explained that they were unconcerned whether others would find them beautiful, a point of view that the other children never challenged.

*What role can photography play in exploring children’s aesthetic experience?*

Children’s high levels of engagement with making and responding to photographs suggest the medium has the potential to play a more prominent role in art education as a means of expression. Children were more likely to locate photographs to represent beauty than images in other media: 90% of those found by children in Old Oak School and two thirds of those at Greystones School were photographs. Children in both schools were confident in articulating their opinions about their own and each other’s photographs, and it may be their sense of ‘ownership’ over the photographs helped them to express themselves more confidently.
Whereas children interviewed about paintings in previous studies often indicated their awareness of artistic decisions, those in the current study rarely referred to the intentions of photographers. This may be because children perceive photographs as unmediated representations of subject matter. Children were, however, more aware of the role of the photographer when responding to photographs taken by classmates, and in this context were more likely to comment on other children’s decisions.

**Implications for theory and practice**

This section of the chapter identifies a number of implications of the findings for art educators (including lecturers in teacher education), teachers (including primary and secondary teachers), and for theories of aesthetic development. The three principle themes that run through this set of implications are: (i) the value of beauty in children’s aesthetic experience; (ii) children’s levels of engagement with beauty and (iii) the diversity of children’s perceptions of beauty. There are also a number of additional themes, namely: beauty as a motivation for expression; beauty as a means of promoting a sense of community in classrooms; and the role of digital photography in facilitating opportunities for researchers to explore children’s aesthetic experience.

**Implications for art educators**

The main implication for art educators is that they should reappraise the value of beauty in art education. The research findings challenge widespread assumptions that beauty is a superficial concern associated mainly with passive appreciation, and provide evidence
that children have meaningful and relevant experiences of beauty that are at best under-valued and at worst ignored in schools.

Art educators should consider how experiences of beauty could increase children’s levels of engagement with art. The research shows how children can be motivated to describe, analyse and reflect upon their experiences of beauty and their reflections offer valuable insights into the nature of their broader engagement with the visual world. Art educators should reflect on how this evidence of children’s interests offers an alternative means of increasing increase levels of engagement and widen participation in art. The research findings should also help art educators to develop a clearer understanding of the diversity of children’s perceptions of beauty in terms of their aesthetic preferences, levels of engagement and capacity for philosophical reflection. Children’s images and their explanations of their experiences of beauty are diverse and reflect their different ideas about aesthetic experience, and art educators should consider how these ideas are compatible with principles of participation, individuality and self-expression prevalent in current thinking about art education. They should consider how a focus on beauty might potentially increase children’s levels of engagement with art and ultimately raise the profile of the subject within the school curriculum.

Art educators should reflect on the extent to which the process of sharing experiences of beauty can help to create a stronger sense of community in the classroom. Through discussing aesthetic experiences children can develop a deeper understanding of themselves and each other, exploring both similarities and diversity of experience within their classroom communities. Art educators should also recognise that children’s responses to beauty are not merely passive but also expressive. Experiences of beauty can motivate children to create and share images that connect
with their personal lives and express their ideas and emotions, and there should be a clearer awareness that when children locate, create and share images that represent their perceptions of beauty they are engaging in a valuable form of self-expression.

Researchers could adopt the methodology used in the study to explore perceptions of beauty across a broader range of populations, for example in terms of age or social/cultural/economic background. It would also be informative to replicate the research in education systems with either alternative aims for art education or different curriculum content and to carry out a comparative study involving children from different communities or countries.

**Implications for teachers**

The research findings indicate that teachers should encourage children to engage with, reflect upon and value their experiences of beauty. They should facilitate opportunities for children to locate and share images that they find beautiful and to notice beauty in a range of contexts including the natural and built environments as well in artworks and visual images.

Teachers should support children as they develop their thinking about the nature of beauty, encourage them to talk about their experiences of beauty and to reflect on how it may be relevant and meaningful to them. They should take advantage of opportunities for children to broaden their aesthetic experience through exploring beauty in a range of contexts and in curriculum areas such as English, mathematics, history and music.

Teachers should encourage children to articulate their responses to images. Children should have opportunities to share their ideas and experiences of beauty
through structured classroom discussion in the form of thinking circles or communities of enquiry. Specifically, they should:

- encourage children to recognise connections and contrasts between their own and others’ experiences of beauty and to understand how their ideas can be changed, developed or influenced by others
- draw on the range of children’s aesthetic experiences in order to promote classroom communities in which diverse perspectives are encouraged and celebrated
- acknowledge the extent to which children increasingly make, share and respond to photographs outside of education and to highlight its potential for exploring their own and others’ aesthetic experiences
- build upon children’s existing awareness of the visual properties of images and encourage them to develop a critical strand to their engagement with photographs
- encourage children to understand that, despite the increasingly widespread perception of photography as a convenient means of communication, it is also an art process that offers unique opportunities for them to create images

Each of these areas offers a potential focus for further research in the classroom.

Implications for theories of aesthetic development

Current assumptions about children’s aesthetic development should re-assessed in the light of the research findings. Previous studies have characterised children’s references to beauty in artworks as representative of lower stages of aesthetic development. The findings of this research challenge these assumptions and show that some children
approach images in the context of their own personal experiences, coupled with an emergent understanding of the visual world. Children are able to articulate thoughtful reasons why they find images beautiful; they can reflect on their experiences of beauty and identify connections and contrasts between their own and others’ preferences in ways that illustrate the depth of their thinking about beauty. While some are concerned solely with their individual experience, others aspire to a more inclusive, communal vision of aesthetic experience in which they seek agreement from others on judgments about beauty.

The findings suggest that it may be more appropriate to think about types of aesthetic response rather than sequential stages of aesthetic development. Several children found beauty in images with content identified by evolutionary psychologists have identified as evidence of pre-determined aesthetic preferences, and the findings may provide evidence to support existing theories in the field of evolutionary psychology concerning a human instinct for beauty.

Further research could investigate whether children progress from one type of response to another and, in the context of a longitudinal study, whether their types of response remain consistent over time.

Finally, researchers of children’s experiences should reflect on the potential of photography as a means of understanding children’s experiences, specifically in terms of how they perceive it as a means of making ‘direct’ representations of subject matter. The research provides evidence that, when combined with group interviews, photography can be a highly effective method of stimulating discussion and exploring children’s perspectives on their experiences.
Reflections on the research

While I am satisfied that my methodology succeeded in enabling me to find answers to my research questions, several features of the study were problematic, and they are briefly explored in this section of the text.

Firstly, the research design required a great deal of preparation and organisation. I was fortunate to be able to gain access to two schools that represented such contrasting social, economic and cultural contexts, while my previous experience of teaching and supervising trainee teachers in a number of schools meant that I was able to engage confidently with staff and children in each setting. Other researchers intent on carrying out a similar study are likely to be in a less privileged position, which may give cause for concern in terms of the replicability of the study. It may be that they would need to ensure that several essential features of the research design remain consistent, such as the status of the researcher in relation to the subjects, the choice of participants and the methods of data collection and interpretation.

Secondly, before carrying out the interviews I researched a range of literature on the philosophical theories of aesthetic experience, principally so that I would be ready to recognise instances when children’s ideas connected or contrasted in some way with these theories. While I am confident that I took advantage of some of these opportunities, I am sure that I missed others, particularly during the earlier stages of the process. Some lines of enquiry could have been pursued further, and the interviews would have benefitted from the presence of an additional researcher who could have remained alert to opportunities to question children further, or perhaps to signal to that children were ready to interact directly with each other rather than through me.
Thirdly, though I am satisfied that semi-structured interviews were an effective means of gaining an understanding of children’s perspectives, I am conscious that some children were more able to express their ideas than others. A comparison of interview transcripts illustrates that children in Greystones School were generally less articulate than those in Old Oak School and this may have slowed the pace at which they could new ideas during discussions (see examples, Appendices 5.2 and 6.9). It may be that children in Old Oak School were able to generate a wider range of ideas about beauty partly because they were able to articulate and understand each other’s responses more quickly. Further research in a broader range of schools would provide more insight into this issue. I am aware that any conclusions about children’s perceptions of beauty drawn from this study relate specifically to its participants and that I can make only tentative claims regarding its generalizability to a broader population. I found the contrasts in the data between the two schools intriguing but further research needs to be carried out in order to determine to what extent these findings are representative of larger numbers of children.

Fourthly, it could also be argued that any study that focused specifically on children’s perceptions of beauty would inevitably uncover a wider range of responses than previous studies designed to investigate children’s more general understanding of artworks. I am aware that the more questions I asked about beauty the more likely it was that I would receive a diverse range of responses.

Fifthly, I found the process of analysing children’s images problematic. One of the principles of content analysis is that the researcher should devise mutually exclusive categories. In theory this principle is sound yet in practice I found it difficult to apply. Reducing the description of an image to a single feature could mean that its subtleties were lost; for example, how should one categorise a child’s photograph of a painting of
a flower in a landscape? I also found the process of describing images solely in terms of their content drained a little life from them, and that the process of comparing $x$ number of flowers with $y$ number of landscapes lacked the ‘explanatory power’ of the interview data. There is a clear message here for future researchers. While images are central to a study of this kind, quantitative accounts of their contents are likely to raise more questions than answers and they should ideally be interpreted alongside the words of the children who made and responded to them.

Finally, I found the process of interpreting the interview data hugely challenging yet intensely rewarding. I was extremely concerned that I should do justice to the thoughts, ideas and feelings of the children who participated in the research. While writing the second half of the thesis their voices were an almost constant presence in my head, urging me to present their ideas faithfully and in ways that others would understand.
Conclusion

The research provided evidence that children are able to look, think and articulate responses to images. Chapter 1 of the thesis concluded with Wim Wenders’ prescient prediction that ‘images are escaping our control: they are like a currency of which a whole suitcase is need just to buy one piece of bread’ (Malcolm 1988: 1). Since taking part in this research, each of the 51 children I interviewed has probably used their mobile phone to take hundreds more photographs, and used the Internet to view thousands more. I sometimes imagine images accumulating on cameras like drawings scribbled on millions of pieces of scrap paper, studied for only a few seconds before being discarded. Yet during the research interviews many children showed they could talk about a single photograph of an everyday scene for five, ten or even 15 minutes, whether it depicted a yellow car parked on a housing estate, a tree illuminated by autumn sunlight or a smiley face drawn in sand. Such discussions bring to my mind Eisner’s assertions that teachers should ‘enable students to secure aesthetic forms of experience in everyday life’ (2002: 44) and, thirty years earlier, that, ‘the arts contribute to the fund of our experiences, develop our perceptivity, and hence enable us to savour the previously insignificant’ (1972: 281).

Eisner’s words also lead me back to the photograph that, ten years ago, first prompted me to think about beauty (Fig 9.1). When I struggled to formulate an argument that would persuade students to look at Richard Billingham’s portrait of his mother I surprised myself by describing at it as ‘beautiful’. I still think it’s beautiful, but I think I now understand a little more about how and why it is beautiful. It is partly because of its colours, its restricted palette of red, yellow, blue, black and white, seen in the pattern on the dress, the puzzle pieces, the cushions and the tattoos; partly because of its emotional intimacy, the son capturing his mother’s child-like absorption in the
puzzle and partly because it has what Arthur Danto describes as a beauty that is ‘internal to the meaning of the work’ (2003: 13), a portrait of someone piecing together a picture, trying to make sense of what she can see. Colours, patterns, emotion and meaning: I learned some of these ideas from reading Hume and Kant’s theories of philosophical aesthetics but most of them came from listening to the children who took part in this research.

Fig. 9.1  Richard Billingham Untitled (RAL 20) 1996
Two of the images from this research that will remain in my memory are of brick walls. The first was photographed by a secondary school student in the 1980s (Fig. 9.2), documented by Taylor (1989) and discussed in Chapter 1. Taylor used the image to illustrate his description of how he liberated his students from the restrictions of conventional aesthetic values, and how one of them abandoned plans for a project on Degas to take photographs of brick walls instead. On a conciliatory note, I like to think that Taylor’s student saw something beautiful in his brick wall, but chose to keep his thoughts to himself.

The second brick wall was photographed by Kamau from his balcony in London, patterned with a shadow of leaves. When I look at the image I am reminded how easy it can be to overlook everyday beauty, and also of my belief that it is important to engage children with the beauty of nature at a time when technology threatens to remove them increasingly further away from it. In 2015 Robert MacFarlane described how words such as acorn, buttercup and conker have disappeared from the latest edition of the Oxford Children’s Dictionary, to be replaced by attachment, broadband and cut-and-paste. None of us is immune to the insistent
presence of technology. In May this year I was woken one morning by what I thought was the ringtone of a mobile phone. It took me several seconds to realise the sound was coming through the open window, from a cuckoo in my garden.

There have been times since beginning this research when I have found it difficult to justify even thinking about beauty, let alone spend several years reading and writing about it. Listening to the radio, driving to work, I sometimes heard people talk about beauty, but more often they talked about other, much darker things. This thesis has been written during a period of time in which millions of people in Syria, Iraq, the Ukraine and other places have lived with conflict, tragedy and suffering. Yet another voice I heard on the radio made me think that perhaps beauty might not be entirely forgotten, even in the most extreme circumstances. Describing the tragic devastation of Syria’s heritage, archaeologist Emma Cunliffe talked about how it represented the abandonment of deeply rooted traditions within a culture. Heritage, she explained, ‘is part of the glue that keeps societies from tearing themselves apart in the future… the market in Aleppo is part of the World Heritage Site and is considered to have universal outstanding value. It’s very old – and it’s very beautiful.’ (2012 n.p.) (Figs. 9.4; 9.5). The destruction of precious aspects of culture causes a particular kind of pain, and their beauty is irreplaceable.

Fig. 9.4 Jack Hill  Great Mosque of Aleppo, 2012  
Fig. 9.5 Jack Hill  Great Mosque of Aleppo, 2012
Some of the most memorable images of the consequences of conflict, however, are also the most beautiful. The photographs on the following pages feature moments of beauty captured by photographers Gleb Garanich, Muhammed Muheisen and Wathiq Khuzaie in the Ukraine, Iraq and Pakistan. While I am conscious that some may consider it problematic to find beauty in these circumstances, I would argue that such images challenge the viewer to deepen their engagement with the plight of their subjects. The beauty of the images makes us want to keep looking and that the more we look, the more deeply we engage.

If I found myself in a school again tomorrow I would ask children to find, photograph and share images that they found beautiful. If they asked me to do the same, I would think about how art education should encourage participation, engagement, inspiration, risk, imagination and challenge, and these are the photographs I would share with them.
Fig. 9.6 Gleb Garanich: Debaltseve, eastern Ukraine, February 2015. (Reuters)

Fig. 9.7 Muhammed Muheisen: Displaced children on the outskirts of Islamabad, December 2012. (AP Photo)
Fig. 9.8 Wathiq Khuzaie: ‘Iraqi boys make the most of a burst water pipe in Sadr City’, May 2008. (Getty)

Fig. 9.9 Muhammed Muheisen: ‘Pakistani children, who were displaced with their families by 2010 floods from a village in Pakistan's Sindh province, enjoy jumping on a trampoline, in a slum on the outskirts of Islamabad, Pakistan’, February, 2013. (AP Photo)
Finally, the idea of beauty emerging from conflict was central to what was widely perceived as one of the most memorable works of art of recent years. In Chapter 1 of the thesis I described how Arthur Danto’s reflections on Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* of 1982 helped me to conceive my research as being located at an intersection between art and life, and the thesis ends with another war memorial. In 2014, 888,246 ceramic poppies were planted in the moat of the Tower of London tower, one for every British soldier killed in the First World War a century earlier, to form Paul Cummins’ *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*. An estimated five million people visited the artwork, and millions more saw it depicted in the media. As a contemporary artwork it was innovative, purposeful and it encouraged participation and engagement. It was also very moving and very beautiful. When I think about my own experiences of beauty they are often connected with a sense of passing of time, of permanence and transience, of an awareness that the experience cannot last yet that it will never really end. My two children were with me and we stood and looked at the poppies for some time, surrounded by thousands of other people, staring. I was reminded me of something I’d heard the year before, at Old Oak School, something Bonnie said about beauty.

> When I see a beautiful picture I don’t feel like I’m alone, though?
> I see a beautiful picture I don’t think I’m alone.
> I think I’m with someone and I know they’re there.
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Appendices

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Dear Sue Hayward,

I’m a lecturer in art education at Roehampton University and I’m writing to ask about the possibility of carrying out a research project in your school. The focus of the research is beauty. Specifically, I’m interested in finding out about children’s notions of beauty, and how they reflect upon and articulate their personal preferences. Briefly, the research would involve making a series of visits to your school, asking children to find images that represent their ideas of beauty and using these images as starting points of discussion. I plan to bring some images of artworks in to share with them, and there would also be opportunities for children to take photographs that represent their individual ideas of beauty. I’m particularly interested in working with Year 5 classes.

I have a particular reason for writing to you. 20 years ago, in January 1992, I was a PGCE student starting my first school placement. I was placed in a Year 3 class at Sir John Lillie, with a teacher called Bev - I think you were teaching in Year 1 at the time. I have very positive memories of this time - Sir John Lillie was the first school I visited that made me certain I wanted to be a teacher. I had hoped to work at the school when I qualified, but there were no jobs available that year and I ended up further along Lillie Road, at what was then Normand Park School. Since 2000 I have been teaching at Roehampton and have occasionally supervised trainee teachers at Sir John Lillie. I now live in Hampshire, where my two sons attend a local school that I hope will also be involved in the research, and my plan is to make a series of weekly visits to each school during the summer term.

I appreciate that you and your staff are very busy and that this is yet another demand on your time, but I feel sure that this is a project that will be interesting and engaging for the children and informative for your staff. I would be very interested in coming in to talk to you and your colleagues about the details of the project.

Please feel free to email or call – I look forward to hearing from you.

All best wishes,

Robert Watts

Senior Lecturer in Art and Design Education
Roehampton University
r.watts@roehampton.ac.uk
Appendix 4.2 Overview of the proposed research for Greystones School, May 2012

Robert Watts: Children’s notions of beauty - Information about the proposed research

This document provides a brief overview of my proposed research project, the aim of which is to find out about children’s notions of beauty. On these pages I have tried to anticipate some of the questions that teachers may have about the project.

Who are you?
I trained and worked as an artist during the 1980s before qualifying as a primary teacher in 1992. My first school placement was at Sir John Lillie and I taught for ten years in Hammersmith and Fulham. Since 2000 I have lectured in art education at Roehampton University, teaching art and design modules on BA, PGCE and MA programmes. I’ve co-edited two books on primary art education and published around 150 articles and projects in education publications, some of which can be found at my website www.artandeducation.co.uk. The proposed project forms part of my PhD research.

Why have you chosen beauty as a focus for your research?
Until around a century ago, beauty had a clear role to play in art and art education. Artists often created paintings that recorded the beauty of the natural world and children were taught drawing skills and techniques that would help them emulate these artworks. When people travelled overseas they would send sketches to their friends and families of landscapes they found beautiful.

For the past 100 years, however, beauty has been marginalised in art and art education. It has often been regarded as an ‘old-fashioned’ concern, as the influence of the Romantic era declined and artists and art educators became more interested in ideas and concepts rather than beauty. Beauty has become increasingly associated with superficiality and artificiality in our culture: an online search for images of beauty, for example, is likely to lead towards a range of beauty products rather than artworks.

Yet despite its marginalisation in art, beauty is frequently referred to in a diverse range of contexts, from the head teacher in assembly describing children’s artwork to the football commentator on TV describing a winning goal. Children hear the word frequently, in a wide range of contexts. They must, therefore, have some notions of what beauty might mean – but what exactly are these notions?

Aren’t you likely to find out what we all know – that beauty is in the eye of the beholder?
Prior to the mid-18th Century, it was widely believed that there were certain rules and principles that determined whether something was beautiful. The idea that we each have our own individual notion of beauty dates from Enlightenment philosophers who
theorised that responses to beauty are subjective rather than objective, that beauty was something that existed in the mind rather than in the object.

Today, it seems that many of us hold conflicting views about beauty: it is something that is simultaneously universal and personal. We believe that while certain people, places, objects or phenomena are widely agreed to be beautiful (e.g. a sunset) others are purely personal (e.g. my cat is more beautiful than your cat). I’m interested in finding out about children’s perspectives on these experiences, and to what extent they are aware of the role of objectivity and subjectivity in these experiences.

What do you want to find out about children’s perspectives?

My aim is to gather evidence about children’s experiences of beauty. The key questions I want to explore are:

- What do children find beautiful?
- How do they articulate why they find some things beautiful?
- How do they respond to other people’s ideas of beauty?
- How is beauty important to children?
- Do children’s notions of beauty vary according to their gender, environment or ethnic background?
- How do children’s notions of beauty connect or contrast with philosophers’ theories of beauty?

Very little research has been carried out into the nature of children’s experiences of beauty, and I anticipate that my research may prove valuable in terms of understanding the experiences of their pupils and recognising their interests in images and representations of the visual world.

How will you find answers to your questions?

I aim to find answers to these questions through a research project that involves data collection in several schools.

Through making weekly classroom visits over a number of weeks, I aim to provide children with opportunities to (a) find images that represent their ideas of beauty, (b) create images that encapsulate some of these ideas and (c) respond to images of beauty through group discussions. The discussions will be structured in a similar way to those outlined in the Philosophy for Children (P4C) programme. The aim of the discussions will be to provide children with opportunities to explore the questions outlined above, with each discussion focussing on an image or images. These discussions will be recorded, transcribed and analysed and the findings will be written up as part of my PhD thesis.
As well as working with children in London I will also be carrying out an identical investigation with children in a school in rural Surrey. The locations of the schools have been chosen to reflect some of the cultural diversity of the school population in London and surrounding areas.

**Will children have a chance to create artworks of their own?**

Children will have opportunities to create digital photographs as part of the project. I will provide a set of six cameras that children will borrow for a week at a time. I hope that there will be an opportunity at the end of the project to display children’s images in the school, together with some of their written reflections on the project.

**How will children benefit from the experience?**

This project is about the value of the experience of the individual. It will provide pupils with opportunities to express their individuality through sharing with each other images that they have chosen and created. It will develop their capacity for critical thinking, for taking into account the opinions of others and for expressing their own opinions. By placing a strong emphasis on images, the project may also encourage children to take a keener interest in the visual world and in responding to it, both through discussion and through making images of their own.

In *Philosophy for Young Children: a Practical Guide* Berys and Morag Gaut write about how the experience of philosophical discussion can also build children’s self esteem and confidence and to become more active and independent learners. They also identify a number of skills that children typically develop through the process, including creative thinking skills, concentration skills, communication skills and social skills.

**What might teachers gain from involvement with the project?**

Teachers in primary schools have for some time been under pressure to ensure that their pupils attain specific standards as measured by their performance in national tests in English and Mathematics in a system widely perceived as one that has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, a marginalisation of other curriculum areas and restricted opportunities for individuality in children.

A project that places the experience of the individual at its centre offers opportunities for teachers to build on these experiences in a range of ways. It might be, for example, that a teacher chooses to extend the project through providing opportunities for children to create visual or written work related to theme of beauty.

**What opportunities will the experience provide for children to learn across the curriculum?**

As well as developing children’s knowledge and understanding relating to art and design, the project will also offer opportunities for children to use ICT to locate and generate visual images. Children will be encouraged to use expressive language to describe their individual experiences of beauty, and I anticipate that for some children
there will be a spiritual or moral dimension to the project. Depending on the images by
the children, other curriculum areas such as History, Geography and Maths could also
be touched upon.

*Why work with Year 5?*

Research shows that children of this age are able to engage with philosophical ideas. At
this age many children are at an interesting mid-point between early childhood and
adolescence. Their confidence in articulating their own opinions is developing rapidly
and they are increasingly likely to articulate their views in a reflective manner.

*Should parents be informed about the project?*

I am happy to write to parents/guardians in order to inform them of the project. I intend
to collect signed consent forms from parents and I would also be happy to meet with
parents interested in finding out more about the project. Some may be interested in
providing support for their children with the homework task, though this shouldn’t be
necessary. My experience so far is that many parents are interested in the project and in
what their children produce in response to it.

*How will you share the findings of the research?*

The findings of my research will be disseminated through articles for academic journals,
through my teaching on BA, PGCE and MA programmes and through a book based on
the research.

*What potential problems do you anticipate and how will you address them?*

Any project that involves children, images and new technologies is bound to raise
concerns. The problems I anticipate are linked with (a) children locating images using
the Internet, (b) children respecting the decisions others have made regarding their
choice of images and (c) children not having access to technology outside of the
classroom that will enable them to generate their own images. Appropriate steps will be
taken to ensure that each of these issues will be addressed. I would aim, for example, to
motivate children to collect images without wishing to influence their choice of images.

*How long will the project take?*

My suggested plan is as follows *(see Appendix 4.3)*

I hope that this summary has provided you with some basic information about the
project. This is something that I have been working on for three years and your co-
operation in helping me to make progress with the project would valued.
### Appendix 4.3

Interview schedule, Greystones School September 2012  
*(revised November 2012)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Work alongside children on whatever they’re doing that week.</td>
<td>This will be an opportunity for me to get to know the children a little. Children need not know that I am an ‘art teacher’ or that this is an ‘art project’. The fewer their preconceptions, the better.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2    | Work alongside children on whatever they’re doing that week.  
Set first task:  
*Find an image that represents an idea of beauty. Keep it a secret. Put it in this envelope. Bring it to school on Monday. You can choose to share it with other people or not if you prefer.*  
Collect images from school before the second visit. | Children will probably want more guidance. They may feel that the more information they are given about a task, the better chance they have of ‘getting it right’. However, the danger is that if they are given more specific guidance, e.g. ‘You might choose a sunset or a rose’ then children will choose sunsets and roses! |
| 3    | 1) Work with three groups of five or six children; 30 minutes with each group, either in or out of the classroom. Groups could be ability-based or mixed ability. Children will be discussing the images they have brought to school.  
2) Provide set of six cameras for Group 1 to borrow for a week.  
Set second task:  
*Your challenge is to take a beautiful photograph. You can photograph whatever you like and you can take as many photographs as you like - but you need to choose one to share with the class.* | I have tried these discussions with whole-classes but some children are less able to articulate their views in this context. I am aware that working with one group at a time has implications in terms of children missing out on other class work and hope that I can help to ensure that disruption is minimised, e.g. by providing extra support in the classroom to help children catch up with missed work. |
| 4    | Work with three further groups of five or six children for 30 minutes each (as above).  
Move set of cameras on to Group 2 to borrow for a week to work on second task. | As above. It’s likely that some children won’t have brought images in. I would hope to be able to have access to a PC that would enable them to locate an image online that they would like to discuss. |
| 5    | Move set of cameras on to Group 3 to borrow for a week.  
Discuss images made by Groups 1 and 2. | At some point during the latter weeks of the project children could complete a short piece of writing in which they describe their reasons for their selection of images. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Move set of cameras on to Group 4 to borrow for a week. Discuss images made by Group 3.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Move set of cameras on to Group 5 to borrow for a week. Discuss images made by Group 4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Discuss images made by Group 5. Review learning through the project with the whole class. Provide opportunities for children to raise questions about the project</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initially, six cameras were purchased for the research at Greystones School. For the second task, midway through the project, children each borrowed a digital camera for one week in order to take photographs that represent their ideas of beauty and it is relevant to highlight here a minor issue with the arrangements. Children frequently forgot to return cameras to school as requested, meaning that cameras sometimes needed to be passed on from one member of the class to another in my absence between visits. The cameras were not numbered, which meant that the process of establishing the authorship of images contained on each camera’s memory card became increasingly problematic and two of the 29 sets of images from Greystones School were lost. Three additional cameras were subsequently purchased for use in Old Oak School and each one was numbered to facilitate the identification of children’s images.

In all other respects, the use of cameras in the research was unproblematic. Before handing cameras to the first group of six children I demonstrated to how to them, though I quickly realised that they needed little support. Following a conversation with a Year 6 teacher, who advised me that ‘you can’t teach ICT – you can only facilitate it’, I decided to refrain from offering children technical advice unless they specifically asked for it. None did.
Appendix 4.5  

Ethical Issues Application Statement

**General ethical issues**

From an early stage in the research I was aware of the importance of reflecting on the ethical dimension of the project, and that a range of issues should be taken into consideration before beginning the research. As Greig, Taylor and MacKay (2007) suggest, “It can be argued that ethics is the one part of the research process that can never be learned in practice and that the would-be researcher should have ensured that all the potential ethical dilemmas have been considered prior to embarking upon the research” (2007: 169). Below is a brief summary of general ethical issues, followed by an overview of a number of issues specifically concerned with researching children’s experiences and the use of visual materials.

Ethical considerations are essentially concerned with ‘rules of conduct… a set of principles’ (Robson 1993: 29). The essential principle, as identified in guidelines published by the British Psychological Society (BPS), is that the investigation should be considered from the standpoint of all participants rather than simply that of the researcher (BPS 1991). Further guidelines produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) identify that ‘researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported’ (BERA 2004: 7).

The design of the research took into account the recommendation that participants should have confidence in those carrying out the research (BPS 1991). Over a period of time I built up positive working relationships with staff in both schools through my work as a supervisor of student teacher placements. I established clear channels of communication with head teachers and teachers in each of the schools and kept them informed of progress during the research. I was aware of the possibility that children may not view me in quite the way I would prefer, as a dispassionate and non-judgmental individual simply interested in finding out about their vision of the world. The fact that I engaged with them via the traditional ‘gatekeeper’ route of their teacher and headteacher was potentially problematic. Even though I made it clear that all responses were welcome and that there was no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ response, I was nonetheless aligned with their teachers and, as such, represented a form of authority.

My aim was to provide as much clarity and reassurance about the research process to all concerned. I needed to gain the trust of pupils over a period of time, and the ways in which I responded to their contributions to discussions was particularly important. Specifically, I was conscious of the need to value all contributions, including those that may not be well-received by other pupils. The more I could present myself as an objective researcher, one genuinely interested in what children have to say, the more likely I was to gather interesting and relevant data.

To some extent, much of the above is also true with regard to my dealings with teachers in the schools. Having taught in primary schools for ten years and visited schools regularly for the past ten years, I was acutely aware of the extent to which teachers are sensitive to critiques of their practice. Regardless of what I might say to reassure them that their classroom practice is not under scrutiny, it would be understandable if teachers doubted the wisdom of allowing me to visit their classes for reasons that appeared to suit me more than anyone else. In my initial dealings with teachers (in the form of informal and exploratory conversations about the proposed project) I found that it was useful to be sensitive to their specific needs and interests. One teacher, for example, was principally interested in improving the quality of her
pupils’ literacy, and she immediately visualised the research project as an opportunity to enable her pupils to gather visual resources that could inspire their writing in her lessons. I was quite happy for this to be the case, and interested to see the extent to which the project could impact on areas of learning other than those I had envisaged.

Working with visual materials

I was aware from the start of the research that parents and teachers may have specific concerns about a project that involves the use of photography with their children. I wrote to parents, explaining the aims of the project and the nature of their children’s involvement in it (Appendix X). The letter was presented to teachers and head teachers for comment before being sent to parents of pupils in each school. I also made myself available at each of the schools to parents on specified dates in order to address any concerns that they may have about the project.

A further concern was the role of photography in the research. I asked participants to take photographs in and out of school, which raised issues of consent of those people depicted in the photographs. As Mason (2002) observes, ‘documents and data can take a very private or confidential form, and it can be difficult to establish informed consent for their use because they may refer to or implicate people other than their owners or keepers’ (Mason 2002: 118). In particular, Mason highlights the fact that, although the use of images can prompt ‘profound responses’ and generate ‘very rich data’, the researcher should anticipate that their subjects might find it difficult to talk about the images:

Those who use visual methods as a way of eliciting talk… will need to consider the range of responses, including sometimes highly emotional ones, that… photographs can evoke… Sometimes, photographs might cause an interviewee to recall something previously forgotten, or something they might not normally wish to discuss in an interview (Mason, 2002: 118).

Children’s printed images were scanned and digital images were copied and returned to them within days of collection from each of the schools. Permission was sought to publish selected images generated by children together with a selection of quotations from the interviews.

Considering children’s needs and experiences

Finally, there was a range of issues of which I was aware when planning, carrying out and reporting the research. These issues are addressed here sequentially, beginning with those that need to be addressed before the research takes place.

Before

- Participants were informed that their school was one of two involved in the research.
- As the empirical research was carried out in schools and during school hours, teachers were consulted on the educational value of the research; this included details of both the anticipated short-term benefits for the children involved and teachers involved.
- Letters were sent home to the parents / carers of all children involved in the research explaining the purpose of the research, the methods used in the
classroom and included an invitation to attend a meeting to explain and discuss the research (Appendix X)

- Consent forms were sent along with the letters; these specifically invited parents to provide written consent for their child to take part in the research (Appendix Y)
- I strove to ensure that participants’ consent was fully informed and that they had opportunities to withdraw their consent at a later date if they so wished (Mason 2002: 81)

During
- Expectations of all participants, including teachers, remained reasonable: for example, it was anticipated that arrangements for school visits may need to be changed due to teachers’ other commitments
- Confidentiality – Children were offered the option to present their images anonymously and not share them with the class
- Children who expressed any discomfort with the process were offered the option of presenting their images to me individually rather than working in a group or whole-class context
- Children were not required to share any opinions with the whole class or group if they preferred not to.
- All participants’ needs and feelings were considered and children were exposed to a minimum of stress

After
- All data was stored securely on the network drive at Roehampton University. A back-up copy was stored offsite. No data was stored permanently on memory sticks, CD’s, etc.
- In writing up the research I strove to represent the views and responses of all participants accurately and responsibly
- I shared conclusions with teachers and parents and children (through school staff meetings and planned publications)
- Following the process of data collection provided participants with opportunities to reflect on the process that had taken place and with any necessary information to complete their understanding of the nature of the research (BPS, 1991).
- All written material concerned with making observations or judgements on the images provided by children or their comments on the images was carefully considered in order to avoid misrepresentation or a negative portrayal of children and their preferences (“Research involving children, great caution should be exercise when discussing the results with parents, teachers or others… since evaluative statements may carry unintended weight” BPS1991).
- Special permission was obtained from the owners of any images that may subsequently published in related journal articles.

Finally, I strove to reflect on the following questions:
- Did I honour my commitments about confidentiality and privacy?
- Did I act in the spirit of the informed consent which I received?
- Did I fulfil my responsibility to produce good quality research?
- Are generalisations I have made appropriate?
- Did I anticipate how others might use my research and explanations?
• Am I clear about my rights and responsibilities in respect of my data, my analysis and my explanations?

(adapted from Mason, 2002: 201)
Appendix 4.6 Ethical Approval, July 2010

The research for this project was submitted for ethics consideration under the reference.....in the School of Education and was approved under the procedures of the University of Roehampton’s Ethics Committee on 12th July 2010

Dear Robert,

**Ethics Application**

**Applicant: Robert Watts**

**Title: Notions of Beauty: investigating children’s aesthetic experience**

**Department: Education**

On behalf of the Ethics Committee I am pleased to confirm that ethics approval for your project entitled “Notions of Beauty: investigating children’s aesthetic experience” was approved by the School of Education in 2010.

Please note that all data should now be stored for 10 years.

Please advise us if there are any changes to the research during the life of the project. Minor changes can be advised using the Minor Amendments Form on the Ethics Website, but substantial changes may require a new application to be submitted.

Many thanks,

Jan

**Jan Harrison**

Ethics Administrator - Research & Business Development Office

University of Roehampton | Froebel College | Roehampton Lane | London | SW15 5PJ

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Watch us on YOUTUBE | Check in on FOURSQUARE

Consider the environment. Please don't print this e-mail unless you really need to.
Appendix 4.7  Participant consent form, July 2012

ETHICS BOARD
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM PRO FORMA

Title of Research Project:
Notions of Beauty: Exploring children’s aesthetic experience

Brief Description of Research Project:
The central aim of the proposed research is to explore children’s notions of beauty and aesthetic experience. The research is located within the field of art education and the broad context is one in which notions of beauty and aesthetics have for some time been widely regarded as peripheral to the concerns of artists and art educators. The research will provide children with opportunities to share their ideas of visual beauty and aesthetic preferences through the use of photography. Analysis of their images and responses to images will determine the extent to which their notions of beauty resonate with key theories on aesthetics such as those developed since the 18th Century. The empirical research will involve around 90 children in three schools and be carried out over a period of two years. Through disseminating the outcomes of the research it is hoped that teachers will be encouraged to re-assess the role that an awareness of beauty and aesthetics could play in enriching children’s educational experience and also to consider the potential of photography as a unique means of visual expression for children.

Investigator Contact Details:
Robert Watts
Dept of Education
Roehampton University, Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5PJ
Email r.watts@roehampton.ac.uk
Tel. 020 8392 3871

Consent Statement:
I agree to take part in this research, and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the investigator and that my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings.

Name ………………………………………
Signature ………………………………
Date ……………………………………

Please note: if you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the investigator. However if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Head of School or the Director of Studies.

Director of Studies Contact Details:
Professor Rachel Mason
Dept of Education
Roehampton University,
Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5PJ
Email r.mason@roehampton.ac.uk

Head of School Contact Details:
Marilyn Holness
Dept of Education
Roehampton University,
Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5PJ
Email m.holness@roehampton.ac.uk
Your own idea of beauty

Your homework:
Find an image that represents your idea of beauty.
Put it in your envelope, and bring it to school on Wednesday 19th September.

Some help you might need:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The image you have chosen is...</th>
<th>What to do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In a newspaper, book or magazine</td>
<td>Bring it to school. We will scan the image and return the newspaper, book or magazine to you next week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the Internet</td>
<td>Either:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1) Print it and bring the image to school in your envelope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Save it as a picture file on to your CD and bring the CD to school in your envelope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Carefully write down the website address where you found the image, write a short description of the image and put this information in your envelope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a family album</td>
<td>Ask permission to remove the picture from the album, bring the picture to school and we will scan it and return it to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhere else</td>
<td>Ask your family for advice!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You can choose more than one image if you want to.

If you don’t want to show your image to anyone else, you don’t have to.

Every Thursday afternoon, one group of children will be chosen to share their images and talk about them. You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.

Later in the term everyone in the class will be able to borrow a camera to take home to take photographs of their own.
Dear Parent/Carer,

This letter provides you with some background information about a project that your child is invited to take part in this term.

I am a Lecturer in Art and Design Education at Roehampton University, London and I am carrying out a research project that aims to explore children’s ideas about beauty. The project involves children aged 10-11 years in a number of schools in and around London. In each school I am asking to bring to school an image that they have found that represents their own idea of visual beauty. Today your child has been set this task for homework.

You may find that your child will ask you for help in locating an image. It may be that they would like to locate an image of something but are unable to do so without help. Please feel free to support your child in any way, but try to let them make their own decision about which image to choose. Your child will have further information about the task on a sheet they have brought home.

I hope your child will find this an interesting and enjoyable project to work on. Please could you remind your child to return the image to their teacher on Monday 17th September.

During the next few weeks, your child will be set a second homework task. They will be asked to take some photographs that represent some of their ideas of beauty. Your child will be able to borrow a digital camera for one week in order to take these photographs.

If you would like to receive further information about this project, please contact me through your child’s class teacher. I would be very happy to discuss any aspect of the research with you. If you would prefer your child not to take part in the project, please indicate this on the form below.

With best wishes,

Robert Watts

I am happy for my child.....................................................to take part in this project.

I would prefer my child not to take part in this project.

Signed .................................................................................... (Parent / Guardian)
Appendix 5.1  Alternative presentation of quantitative data on children’s images

(i) pie chart

(ii) Venn diagram
Appendix 5.2  Interview questions, Greystones School, September 2012

1 - Description
(2) Describe your image to the rest of the group
Prompts:
content (people, trees, sky, etc.)
media (photograph, painting, drawing, etc.)
visual elements (shapes, colour, tone, texture, etc.)

2 - Analysis
• Look at the image you’ve chosen to share with the rest of us. Think in your head about why you think your image is beautiful.
• Now talk to your partner and take turns to describe why each of you thinks your own image is beautiful.
Prompt:
Is the image beautiful because of what it represents, or because of the way it represents something? Or is it both of these things at the same time?
How do the visual elements (shapes, colour, tone, texture, etc.) of the image affect the way we see it?
• Who would like to share their thoughts and ideas with the rest of the group?
(2) Which of these two pictures do you think is the more beautiful? Why?
(images of the same subject provided by the researcher)

3 – Reflection

Thinking about yourself
• How do you know when something is beautiful?
• How do you feel when you see something beautiful? Why do you think this is?
• Can you decide what you find beautiful, like you can decide on a favourite book?
  Or is it more like food, where you can’t help what you like and don’t like?
• If I found a photograph of a dog/cat/baby brother that looked the same as yours, would you still think the picture was beautiful?
• Is beauty important? How?

Thinking about others
• Is one person’s idea of beauty always different from another’s?
• Which of these images do you think everyone should find beautiful?
• When we call something beautiful, do we just mean that we like it – or should we expect others to agree?
• Do you think girls and boys find the same things beautiful?
• Do you think adults and children find different things beautiful?
• Do some people have a clearer idea of what is beautiful than others?
• Can other people make you change your mind about what you find beautiful?
Advanced questions

Beauty and experience

- What do you get from looking at beauty?
- If you don’t find something beautiful today, could you find it beautiful in the future?
- If you had never visited this place / met this person would the picture still be beautiful to you?
- Do we know that something is beautiful? Or do we think that something is beautiful? Or do we feel that something is beautiful?

Beauty and art

- Should works of art be beautiful? Why?
- Are there rules that make things beautiful?
- Have you ever made something that you thought was beautiful, or that other people thought was beautiful?

Beauty and knowledge

- Imagine an ugly man. Is it possible to make a painting of him that would be beautiful? Is it possible to take a photograph of him that would be beautiful?
- If you found out that the person in this picture had committed a crime, could they still be beautiful?
Appendix 5.3  Transcript, Sir John Lillie Primary School Interview 4, 4th October 2012

Valeri m
Rafeeah f
Breana f
Teyamo f
Yonis m
Daniel m

(Rules for discussion are agreed)

RW – I’m here to listen. I’m interested in your voices and your ideas and I’m interested in the questions you ask each other and the answers you give each other. I’m only going to ask you three or four questions and you can ask each other some questions as well.

Now the first thing I’m going to ask you to do is to look at one of the pictures you’ve brought along and to think in your head why you think it’s beautiful. Think in your head why you think your picture is beautiful.

RW - Now – I have a difficult decision to make because I need to choose somebody to go first. T, who do you think I should choose to go first? I’m looking for somebody who is going to be really thoughtful about their picture.

T – R.
RW – OK, R, would you like to describe to us why you think your image is beautiful?

R – Because… of the lights… and… because of the fireworks… and the lights in the stadium.

RW – Because of the lights in the stadium. Tell us more about why you think it’s beautiful.

R – (pause)

RW – If you want to ask whether anyone has any questions about your image, they might give you some ideas.

B – You chose this from a newspaper. How did you get the newspaper? Do you read newspapers?

R – Umm…

RW – Let’s think about ideas about beauty.

B – Were you there?

R – I wasn’t there.

B – Well, if you were, you would take a picture of it, isn’t it?

R – Yeah.

Y – Umm… when you look at it, how do you, like, feel? Like, how do you feel, ‘cause it was a celebration and…

R – Happy… and… and…

Y – Please make up your mind.

R – And joyful.

RW – And joyful. That’s an interesting question, Y, why did you ask that?

Y – Because like, you know the Olympics is like a special game, and I thought – and I was thinking – I think she like, umm, picked it up because, like, all the celebration and the beautiful lights and people applauding the countries, so that’s why I asked her.

RW – That’s really thoughtful of you. Well done, Y. R, you’ve got some more people who want to ask questions.

D – Umm – don’t you think it’s… don’t you think it’s… quite a enjoyable picture because that event is where… because that event is where loads of -

B – People come together and celebrate.
R – All the countries.

D – All the athletes and all the swimmers and they’re all taking place in the Olympics and the audience is just… they’re… how can I say it…?

B – Applauding?

D – Being helpful by… umm… don’t know the word.

Y – Supportive?

D – Yeah. Supporting… supporting the athletes.

B – ‘Cause maybe sometimes they might have, like, done something wrong and their country’s still, like supporting them, saying ‘You can do this, come on’ and maybe they have a second chance to prove theirself.

RW – Can I interrupt? Everyone needs to speak a little louder.

Voices – OK

RW – Also - we’ve talked about different aspects of this picture – different ways of looking at this picture. We’ve talked about the colours and the shapes in the sky. But we’ve also talked about what we know is happening. I think we all recognise where this photograph was taken, don’t we?

Voices – In London.

RW – And it was taken at a particular time of the Olympics, when?

B – 2012.

RW – But when in the Olympics?

B – July.

RW – Which part of the Olympics?

R – When it was finished. Closing -

RW – The closing ceremony, good. Now, because of what we know about the Olympics, one or two people have started to describe some beautiful things about the Olympics themselves. R, was this something you were thinking about when you chose the picture? Or did you choose it just for the colours and the shapes?

R – I choosed it for the colours and the shapes because… the colours stand out, and when you like, just look at the picture you just want to say, like, yeah I want this – because it’s beautiful.
RW – You want this? How do you mean you want this?

R – Because… umm…

RW – Is it hard to describe. OK, this is the first picture, does anyone have any more questions for R? Any more questions for R about her image? Does anyone agree that it’s beautiful?

(Voices) – Yes

D – And the atmosphere inside it. Not just the colours and the shapes. Maybe inside – the athletes trying their best to win.

RW – So it’s beautiful not just because of the colours and the shapes but because of the…

D – Feelings.

RW – … the atmosphere and the memories that we have. Thank you.

V – Yeah it looks like it’s been drawn because these fireworks don’t look like lifelike.

B – They took a picture of it.

RW – I know what you mean. We kind of know that it’s a photograph, don’t we? But it looks like someone’s drawn fireworks on the photograph. I like that, clever boy!

OK – our second person has waited patiently. B, can you explain to us why you chose this picture to represent your idea of beauty?
B – I chose this picture because I don’t have much pictures of when I was young, in Britain really. I thought this was a very nice picture because it shows part of my family and how much I love my mum… and how colourful I was, with red and purple… and really *(mock tearful, like a proud parent)* I was so cute! *(lots of laughs)* I was so touched when I saw it I felt like crying. This is the best, *best* picture we have in this house and in this school and in all the houses in the world…

RW – B, you’re making us laugh and you’re doing a good job, but I think you’re actually making a serious point as well, aren’t you?

B – Mm-hmm.

RW – Because you do feel emotional when you look at it, don’t you?

*(Voice)* – Sometimes you cry.

B – *(nods)* ‘Cause sometimes I don’t really get the love that I really wanted but in this time I was really happy to have this picture because I don’t see many pictures like this and some people are just upset to see this and say they don’t have a family so I’m happy that I have a family that loves me.

RW – That was a really sensitive description and one or two people will have some thoughtful questions for you about your picture. Let’s see who’s got some really thoughtful questions. We’ve had some great questions already. We haven’t heard any questions from T, though. So let’s hear one from T.

T - Why did you pick this picture in particular?

R – Because…it’s… first of all because it’s the best picture that I have in my room and on the wall… and it shows how much I was happy when I was a little child and how much I loved my mum and my family cared for me. I just felt really happy to have this picture.

RW – Good question. D?

V - Do you remember when you got this photo done?

B - Good question, good question. Umm, I think it was when I was like…

V – But do you remember when you actually got the photo done, like…

B – Probably when I was around, about two thousand and six…

V – No, no, no. When they were taking the *picture*, did you remember that they were taking the picture or you don’t remember?

B – I wouldn’t remember that. But I remember what year I was, I think it was three… two.

RW – Why do you think she doesn’t remember?
V – Because she was really small. But maybe she would remember if she has a good memory!

(sneeze)

RW – Have we got questions or sneezes?

D - Sneezes and questions.

RW - Sneezes and questions. D, would you like to ask a question?

D – Umm… are you describing the picture and the time… or are you describing yourself as beautiful or your family or…

B – I’m describing how I was beautiful and my family is beautiful and describing… well…my family and how they love me… and given me…(mock tearful again, playing for laughs) and I have a Godsister and I’m going to be her Godsister forever… and a Godsister… and a Godsister…(laughter)

RW – OK, we get the picture!

B – Wait – and I have a Godbrother… wait…

RW – We’ve got time for a couple more questions for B.

B – Ooh - I have my own question.

RW – You’ve got a question for yourself?

B – Yeah, can I answer it? B? Yes? (laughter) You chose this picture because of your family. Is there any other reasons? Oh yes there is, there’s quite a lot. And there’s two more. The first one is because my friends like it and because I like it and it’s the best picture, as I said, in the whole family. I was the cutest baby of every person in my family. When I was born.

RW – Last question for B, anyone? B, can you choose who goes next?

B – T.

RW – Now T has the biggest picture (it’s a poster). Can we have a little bit of quiet please for T, so that she can describe why she thinks this is a beautiful image.
T – I think this is a beautiful image because it’s colourful and it… loads of people know it and like it and the princess matches with the dress and the atmosphere outside of the picture.

RW – Very good. Did you say ‘lots of people know it’? Can you describe to us what you mean by that?

T – Well… it’s been in the cinema about a long time ago and I think that, like, not a lot but like a few people still remember The Princess and the Frog.

RW - People remember The Princess and the Frog. And the other reason you said was about the atmosphere. What do you mean by ‘atmosphere’?

T – Well, the things around her, like these colourful flowers… and the butterflies and the lights outside and… umm… leaves.

RW - I think lots of people are going to have questions for you about your image. Thank you very much, would you like to choose someone? B?

B – Have you watched the movie before? Did you like it and where did you get this from?

T – I did like the film and I got this from a magazine that I bought from the shop.

B – And another question. Why did you like this picture?

T – Well, because she does have beauty inside. And she does has a beautiful dress that’s puffy and it’s green.

B – So which do you like about the colour and why it’s green?
T – Well it matches up.

RW – Can I ask a question about something you just said? You said ‘she has beauty inside’. I don’t understand. Tell me more.

T – Oh, from outside.

B – She means, like, she’s beautiful in how she looks and how she dresses and even if she works very hard to get her dreams she, she still tries and has beauty in everything she does.

RW – T, do you want to add anything to that? Did you say she has beauty inside?

T – Well… yeah.

RW – What does that mean, if you have beauty inside?

T – I don’t know! (laughter).

RW – Is it possible to have beauty inside? D?

D – It’s like a feeling, for example, a personality, or a personality… the thinking… the kindness… how they act and their actions.

RW – So it’s possible to be beautiful on the outside and also to have beauty on the inside? Thank you D. Very, very good response. B?

B – Just - as what Daniel said, it’s not just how she looks, her heart is kind and grateful and pure and everywhere she goes she’s still nice. Not one place she’s nice and in the other she’s mean and she just goes and be means to people - she’s nice everywhere she goes. She just has a personality that I don’t think much people have so I think she - she’s blessed.

RW – So this represents beauty on different levels. A kind of surface level and an inside level. Y?

Y – You know when you got this poster, when you got this, like off the magazine, why did it, like, inspire you to, like…

RW – Can you repeat the question?

Y – Why did she pick it to expire beauty?

B – Inspire.

T – Well… because that’s the only picture that looks beautiful.

RW – Do you have this on your wall at home?

T – Yes.
RW – So when I was in your classroom three or four weeks ago and I said think of something in your head that is beautiful did you think of this picture on your wall?

T – Yes.

RW - A question from R.

R – Why did you choose this picture in particular?

RW – We’ve talked about this a little bit, haven’t we?

T – Yeah.

RW - Who can remember what T said? D?

D – She said she liked the colours, she liked the beauty and she liked the inside personality and how she acts.

RW – Is that right?

T- (nods).

RW – Good – people are listening to you, aren’t they? Any last questions for T before we move on? OK, I’m going to show you an image that Y has chosen. Because his image got lost in the classroom he’s chosen one similar (to share at the table via the Internet) – is it similar?

Y – It’s not that similar but…

RW – I think what I’ve found with all the groups so far is that there are lots of different things we find beautiful – there’s not just kind of like one thing. So well done, Y for choosing another one.
B – Wow… it’s colourful.

RW – Y is going to describe to us why he chose it. You were looking for flowers, weren’t you? What made you choose these particular flowers?

Y – Because – umm – what I looked at, yeah – Well, if you look, like, really closely it looks like a face, like a woman’s hair, like a woman’s hat and eyes. You can see it like that like a woman. And I thought that was very funny, but I still liked it. I chose it because it has loads of colours, like ispir- ispir (inspirational?), it has loads of colours like in an African way.

RW – In an African way? Can you describe what you mean by that?

Y – What I mean is… I can’t really explain it… but, like they have colourful clothes and colourful things and colourful houses and that’s why I picked it.

RW – So it reminded you of African cultural things? Is there anything else you want to say about the picture before you ask people for questions?

Y – No.

RW – OK, who are you going to choose? I know someone who’s keen to talk…

B – Why did you choose flowers? Why did you think flowers was the best thing to pick?

Y – ‘Cause you know, flowers are, like, colourful and some are, like, beautiful and some are like good-looking flowers, yeah? I picked flowers because, like, the way of the - when I went to my house I saw my mum had a flower pot so like, the first time you told us you were doing the, um, challenge I thought flowers would do it. And then I went on the computer.

RW - Another question?

T – Why did you choose an African type of picture, why didn’t you choose a Somalian flower?

RW – Did you say Somali?

T – Yeah.

RW – But Somalia’s in Africa.

T – Well… yeah… (laughs).

Y – Oh because like, I didn’t pick Somali because like – I know Somali people are like, colourful and like good at their jobs and all that stuff. But yeah – but I picked African, like, flowers because, like, I just liked it. I can’t really explain it, but I just liked it.
RW – It’s difficult to explain sometimes, isn’t it? But I think B is going to try to help us explain it.

B – I have a statement on what you said. I understand why you picked the African because Africans don’t have much food and shelter and clothes – so I think inside of me, why you picked that picture – and I would pick that picture – because Africans aren’t very… Well they’re very clever and they also make a lot of medicine and things. But I would definitely pick that picture because Africans don’t have clothes and most things around them, like – some things that they make and grass and hay, sometimes they make as (into) clothes and sometimes they sew things… I think Africans are very important because they’re not all so poor but they’re blessed to have such talent. Because some people just look at Africans and say ‘they’re poor’, stuff like that but people have things to do too and it’s not just English people that can do things, it’s other people that can do things.

RW – Very nicely put, Y – you wanted to say something in response to that?

Y – That’s why – when B was talking she said they have good talents – it’s like – that’s why I picked it.

RW – You picked it to do with a particular thing that B said which was…?

Y – African people have talent, like art talent.

RW – It’s interesting. I just tapped into Google ‘flower Somalia’ and lots of lovely images have come up.

Y – Can I see it? Oh yeah, that’s a Somalian flower. That’s nice…

RW – Now, we’ve got two more people. Thank you Y, you spoke about your picture really nicely and you spoke about it really nicely as well, B.

RW – We’re going to listen to D now talk about why he chose his picture of beauty. D?
D – Well – I chose this picture because it’s part of nature…. And it has some artistic colours and the emotion of this flower makes me feel happy and it feels good to be in nature… and this, like, is not a flowerpot it’s… it’s a vase – or something like that - and I thought it would be – well, at first I thought it was beautiful so…

Y – Can I ask a question? Why did you say it was beautiful?

D – Yeah, it was – because I chose it.

Y – When you said ‘it was’…I thought it was a different statement…

D – It was. Because the time I looked at it was one week ago… ummm…so that’s in the past tense. B?

B – Where did you get that picture from and how did it inspire you? How did it make you feel when you saw that picture?

D – Well, first of all I felt… in nature – and also – umm – inspired me by… once again, nature and I got it from the Internet. At first I put it on a disk. He printed it out for me.

B – When your parents saw it, what did they think of it?

D – They thought, yes, it’s nice and, yeah, they thought, yes, it’s really nice. You can put that. They agreed. Any more… T?

T – Why did you love this picture? Why didn’t you pick another one?

D- Well – because this picture is part of nature. It’s artistic and… and umm - you don’t – or I don’t see purple roses that much. I only see red, yellow…

RW – Can I ask a question?

D – Yeah.

RW – You said your parents agreed that it was a good choice. How did that make you feel?

D – I felt, yes they can feel the emotion in the picture… and… and the beauty.

RW - Do you like it when people agree with you about the things that you like and the things you find beautiful?

(Several voices) – Yes.

RW – R? Tell me more. Why?

R – Because… it’s like… they’re thinking what you’re thinking and… you’re in – inside you’re feeling happy – and you want to like, say – umm… you just like, want to say thank you, yeah – yeah, I feel what – I feel, like, the same because that’s the picture I chose and that’s the picture you like too, so… yeah.
RW – How does it feel when the people you care about agree with the way you feel about something?

B – It feels very – I feel very grateful when they agree with me because – not all the time they agree with me and maybe this time it’s very important to me and this time I really wanna try my best to do something that I might have never done before. And I went to show my parents something and they have said they agreed with me and I feel very proud of myself because not all the time my parents agree with me and this, this probably is the main thing that would be happy for me so… That’s just an example.

RW – A very good example. We’re going to come to V in a minute. D has talked very thoughtfully, Any other questions for D? V?

V – Which part of the picture is your favourite part?

D – I would say – the whole picture – the flowers, the vase. I’ll pick the flowers.

RW – Your first answer though was the whole thing – it all comes together.

D – Actually, the vase because the vase is holding the nature and doing, like, the flowers a favour, giving it nutrients, water. If it was just there – like, on the floor – it would have no nutrients, no water, only sunlight.

RW – We’ll move on to the last person now. V brought me in a CD with eleven images on, which was more than anyone else brought in. I wish we could stay here ‘til it got dark and we could spend ages looking at all of them…

V – I’m going to do one.

RW – You’re going to choose one. OK, would you like to turn it around so we can see it?
V – I chose this picture because it has loads of little details and it makes it a huge detail, and there’s, like, loads of colours. And it’s… in the sky, there’s nothing that you can see here. And it looks ancient, as if it was there a thousand years. And, umm, there’s not much going around there but I can see loads of things were happening there. And not all of it… not all of it… loads of the parts are like actually in the clouds. And the clouds have all white and blue in them.

RW – You’ve got some friends who want to ask you questions.

V – D?

D – Do you think this is… do you think this is… nice… and do you think this is… bit comfortable…no, not comfortable… What did you feel when you saw this, what was your emotions?

V – As if I was in the picture. Right on the really top, of the castle.

D – Do you have any ideas why there’s a tree growing on the top of it?

V – Well, it’s actually one of my favourite games. It’s because, umm, angels live there – well, they’re constellations(?).

D – Maybe it’s pointing to the top, it’s like the really top because more light and more place so it can grow… do you think?

V – Well… this is more like fantasy, because it can grow up there…

RW – OK, we’re going to move on because we have one, two, three people who want to ask questions.

B – I get what you say. If I was to pick that, I would say firstly in my head, umm… this picture I wouldn’t see very often and if it was on earth would I – would I – do I think I would be living in it? Do I think to myself would a king live in it? Would a queen live in it? Would homeless people be – umm - in there to be supportive? Umm – to be support – to be really helped to get some food. And I would ask myself who would be in there and why?

V – Well… it’s actually a king and it’s like a… it’s like earth, loads of people are in there. And then I – it’s actually like all the time outside and… The king lives there and loads of people so it’s like earth and it’s on top of a planet. T?

T – The first time you saw this picture, did you think it was Heaven or did you think it was something else?

V – Well… I was thinking it was something else, like a castle going up to the clouds… but I didn’t know that but…well… I can actually see there’s somebody in the sky because… because… because… near to space.

R – Why did you choose a game for an image instead of, like, a real picture?
V – Because, umm, this game actually has loads of beautiful pictures. And I don’t have a big amount of real pictures that are actually beautiful.

RW – Can I ask what you mean by a ‘real picture’?

R - Because like – like, umm – I mean like – well…games, yeah like… it doesn’t – umm…

RW – What do we mean by a ‘real picture’?

V – I think I know what she means. It’s like, an actual picture of my family and something…

B – I don’t think she actually means, like, a real, real picture like D’s picture (of the flowers) where, maybe it’s not real but it – it’s something to do with real life. Maybe it’s a real picture, maybe not, but it’s something to do with the world and real.

RW – OK. What do we mean by a ‘real picture’? Any other ideas? Y?

Y – I think B is right… let’s say, like, we go outside and you take a picture of something – normally you put on Google Images and why did - V maybe get Google or get a camera and would take a picture of it.

RW – So, we’re talking about ‘real pictures’ being photographs, do you mean?

(voices) Yeah.

RW – Because, in a sense this (V’s picture) is a ‘real’ picture because somebody’s made it – but this (D’s picture) is a photograph of reality. Do we agree that this (V’s picture) is not reality but this (D’s picture) is reality?

Y – That is reality (to someone?)

D – As you said, maybe someone made that (D’s picture) – don’t you think someone would of made that (V’s picture) as well?

RW – It’s been painted or drawn on a computer.

D - And can I add to what he said? Don’t you think that if it was a reality picture it wouldn’t be floating in the sky?

RW – A couple of words that I wanted to ask you all about with (regard to) this picture. We haven’t talked about beauty very much for the past few minutes – but we’ve talked about Heaven and we’ve talked about fantasy, haven’t we, and things not being real. So – is there some connection between beauty and fantasy and the mystery of this picture?

(voices) Yes.

RW - Are they connected in some way? D?
B – Because fantasy - this is made of colours and beauty is made of colours at the same time – and colours combine together – combine together with different kind of things, like grass, umm, clouds and different things combine together. So a house, maybe – it doesn’t matter what but a colour would still go with something.

RW – Good. Any other comments? Y?

Y – Umm – like, what you meant – I can’t really explain this, but – you know, when you take a picture of, like, something on Google Chrome and – whatever – Images – yes – it doesn’t have to be real. There’s some pictures, like dwarves and tiny little elves and that stuff. That’s still a picture – but the colours – the colours that make that creature, is like the fantasy part.

RW – Good. I want to get back to the idea of beauty and I want to ask you a question now. Think in your head before you answer and then put your hand up. How do you feel when you see something beautiful? There’s lots of different answers to this, I think. D?

D – I feel – when I look at - when I look at beauty – I feel the atmosphere of - I can feel the atmosphere around it at that picture and I can understand what the emotion of picture is and how the feelings and why that person named it beauty and added to the picture.

RW – Thank you. B?

B – When I look at this picture (her own image) particularly I see, umm – the real beauty in me because – not all the time I get what I want and I’m not always smiling but I know – in this picture – when I always look at it I’m always smiling because… Sometimes I may be upset and bad things happen but I know when I look at this picture I will always be smiling, no matter what.

RW – That’s a lovely answer, thank you. T? How do you feel when you see something beautiful?

T – When I see something beautiful I feel like… exactly like… I want to be exactly like her because she’s beautiful.

RW – Y?

Y – Every time when I see like – every time when I see something like, beautiful and my picture – it feels like – well – I get this feeling like – I can’t really – like a ticklish feeling inside and – I can’t really explain it – but like, it’s - sometimes -sometimes a tickle in your head for some reason.

RW - A tickle in your head! We’re very nearly finished and it’s nearly home time so I’m going to rush you a little bit, I’m sorry. How do you feel when you see something beautiful?

R – When I see something beautiful I feel like, yeah I wanna take this because it’s beautiful. And this is something that I would like to see every time and this is something that would make me smile. And – things that – not always things that are
beautiful but things like – things, umm – like things you like outside of like, different countries things are beautiful not only in one particular place but different places too.

RW – Last person – and then one last question.

V - I’m actually saying what I feel.

RW – How do you feel when you see something beautiful?

V – I feel like as if I want to be in that picture… and umm…you know if it’s like… not lifelike. It feels like I’m in it already.

RW – I’m going to speed on to the last question ‘cause I don’t want you to be late. Is beauty important?

(voices) – Yes / no.

RW – T. Is beauty important?

T – No. Because if you’ve just finished Year 7 and you want to go to Year 8 and you’re still – Oh I’m gonna think about beauty much in Year 8 - that’s wrong because you can get more levels there and you can do great. You’ll get higher levels.

RW – You mean it’s important to concentrate on your school work? Good. V. Is beauty important?

V – Yes. Because umm… without beauty – umm… I can’t actually explain it – no-one will – umm… If beauty wasn’t here… I can’t explain it… (loses track)

RW – I’ll come back to you. B?

B – I’m disagreeing with what he said – because – I’m looking at these houses (through the window) right now and I’m not seeing much beauty because some houses, you don’t see much beauty in them and people still live in them because they might not have the money or they might have the money but they just don’t wanna…Because most people – maybe the Queen and famous people think about beauty because they were made to do beauty but - us as kids and – I’m not begin rude but – old people – sometimes we don’t think about beauty because sometimes we just wanna – It doesn’t matter who you are or what you are… Homeless people, they think about beauty. It’s not all about beauty because – someone else is doing beauty, it’s your personality, it’s you. You don’t always have to think about what other people think. So I think beauty isn’t that important.

RW – Thank you. D?

D- Well it could be and it – it can be because if you were to look at someone it’s not all about their beauty it’s about how they act, their personality. And another – actually I disagree with you if (you are saying that) things have to be beautiful because it’s how you act, personality and actually how…

RW – Y?
Y – Beauty’s not important because – let’s say you’re in Year 11 and you have to go college and that stuff, if you just think about, like, beauty, beauty, beauty, and don’t care about your work you’re just gonna be a tramp on the street.

RW – You’re going to be what?

Y – A tramp.

RW – Last word to V.

V – I agree with beauty because without beauty the whole world would be different. Umm… say, a picture could help someone do something. A picture… they can send something and they see what it is.

RW – Shall we stop there?

 voi ces) Yes.
Appendix 6.1  
Letter to Head Teacher, Old Oak School, September 2012

RESEARCH PROJECT: CHILDREN’S NOTIONS OF BEAUTY

Dear Ms. Redman,

I am a Senior Lecturer in Education at Roehampton University, London and a parent of two children at Waverley Abbey. I’m writing to ask about the possibility of carrying out a research project in your school.

The focus of the research is beauty. Specifically, I’m interested in finding out about children’s notions of beauty and how they reflect upon and articulate their preferences and ideas. The research would involve making a series of visits to your school, asking children to find images that represent their ideas of beauty and using these images as starting points for discussion. There would also be opportunities for children to take photographs that represent their individual ideas of beauty. I’m particularly interested in working with children in Year 5 classes and have already discussed the project with Fiona Massari.

I am currently gathering data for the project in a primary school in west London. I am making a series of ten weekly visits, working outside the classroom with a different group of six children each week. Children take turns to present an image to their group, talk about it and invite questions from other children. Each session lasts an hour. I also have a set of six cameras that children are borrowing in order to create images that they will each bring to a second discussion with the same group. I work closely with the class teacher, head teacher and deputy head teacher to ensure that all participants are happy with the progress of the project. Letters were sent home to parents to inform them about the research project and children were given the option not to participate in the research if they preferred. The data I have gathered so far, in the form of children’s images and children’s voices, is fascinating and I would be happy to share this with you.

I appreciate that you are very busy and that this is yet another demand on your time, but I feel sure that this is a project that will be interesting and engaging for your pupils and informative for your staff. I would be very interested in coming in to talk to you and your colleagues about the details of the project.

Please feel free to email or call – I look forward to hearing from you.

All best wishes,

Robert Watts  
Senior Lecturer in Art and Design Education  
Roehampton University, London SW15 5PJ  
r.watts@roehampton.ac.uk
**Appendix 6.2**  
Draft schedule for data collection, Old Oak School, January 2013

Robert Watts - Waverley Abbey: Draft schedule for research project, Jan–Mar 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activities with children</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autumn term</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Secure agreement for project from HT and Y5 teachers; consult Gen Rivers in order to identify 24-28 children from four classes to take part in the project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday 17th January</td>
<td>Preliminary visits to classrooms for an hour each (5FM and 5DG)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday 21st January</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Send letters to parents of selected children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Thursday 24th January | Preliminary visits to classrooms for an hour each (5SH and 5GR)  
Meet at 3pm with the selected children in order to set task for following week: *Find an image that represents your idea of beauty.* | Provide children with envelopes / blank CDs, summary of task.                |
| Wednesday 30th January| -                                                                                        | Return to school to collect children’s images and permission slips; scan all images. |
| Thursday 31st January | 5FM Discussion group from 3:30-4:30.  
Set second task: *Take some photographs that represent your idea of beauty.* | Provide six cameras for 5FM group                                           |
| Thursday 7th February | 5DG Discussion group from 3:30-4:30.  
Set second task: *Take some photographs that represent your idea of beauty.* | Provide six cameras for 5DG group  
Transfer images from 5FM group cameras                                    |
| Thursday 14th February| 5SH Discussion group from 3:30-4:30.  
Set second task: *Take some photographs that represent your idea of beauty.* | Provide six cameras for 5SH group  
Transfer images from 5DG group cameras                                    |
| Thursday 21st February| 5FM Discussion group from 3:30-4:30.  
Transfer images from 5GR group cameras                                     | HALF TERM                                                                     |
| Thursday 28th February| 5GR Discussion group from 3:30-4:30.  
Set second task: *Take some photographs that represent your idea of beauty.* | Provide six cameras for 5GR group  
Transfer images from 5DG group cameras                                    |
| Thursday 7th March    | 5FM Discussion group from 3:30-4:30.  
Transfer images from 5GR group cameras                                     |                                                                              |
<p>| Thursday 14th March   | 5DG Discussion group from 3:30-4:30                                                       |                                                                              |
| Thursday 21st         | 5SH Discussion group from 3:30-4:30                                                       |                                                                              |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>March 27th March</th>
<th>5GR Discussion group from 3:30-4:30</th>
<th>NOTE – AS THURSDAY IS THE LAST DAY OF TERM I SUGGEST WEDNESDAY INSTEAD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Beauty project – Class 5DG

Jasmine – Bonnie – Heather – Alistair – Ben

This is a reminder that you will be in school until **4:30pm** on Thursday.

Mr. Watts will meet you in the playground at 3:20pm and bring you back to the playground for 4:30pm.

Thank you!
Appendix 6.4   Interview questions, Old Oak School, January 2013

1 – Description

Can you please describe your photograph for us?

2 – Analysis

Can you explain why you took it to represent your idea of beauty?

Who has a question for X about their picture?

3 – Reflection

Thinking about yourself

How do you know when something is beautiful?

How do you feel when you see something beautiful?

Can you decide what you find beautiful, like you can decide on a favourite book?
Or is it more like food, where you can’t help what you like and don’t like?

Thinking about others

Which of these images do you think everyone should find beautiful?

When we call something beautiful, do we just mean that we like it – or should we expect others to agree?

Can other people make you change your mind about what you find beautiful?

Is beauty important? How?
Checklist

Reminder letters sent out at beginning of the week
All images delete from spare cameras
All batteries charged

CRB certificate
ID badge
Laptop
Mains lead
Extension lead
Voice recorders x 2 plus lead
List of questions printed
Files numbered and copied from Dropbox to laptop and desktop
Blank paper
Pens
Homework task 2 – letters printed
Spare cameras
Water

Collect cameras before 3pm
Load images from cameras to laptop
Recharge batteries
Insert spare batteries
Meet children 3:20pm
End 4:30pm

5FM - Isaac – Callum – Charlie B – Nell – Maddie – Ellie – Megan - James
5DG – Jasmine – Bonnie – Heather – Alistair - Ben
5SH – Cameron – Josie – Issy – Noah – Charlie G
5GR – Gracie – Emily – Spike – Barney – Anya
Your own idea of beauty

Your homework: *Find an image or images that represent your idea of beauty.*
Put them in your envelope, bring it to school and give it to your teacher on Monday 28\textsuperscript{th} January.
Some help you might need:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The image you have chosen is...</th>
<th>What to do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In a newspaper, book or magazine</td>
<td>Bring it to school. The image will be scanned and the newspaper, book or magazine will be returned to you next week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a family album</td>
<td>Ask permission to remove the picture from the album, bring the picture to school and we will scan it and return it to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the Internet</td>
<td>Either:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1) Print the image and bring it to school in your envelope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Save it as a picture file on to your CD and bring the CD to school in your envelope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Carefully write down the website address where you found the image, write a short sentence that describes the image and put this information in your envelope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhere else!</td>
<td>Please ask your family for advice on what to do.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You can choose more than one image if you want to.
Please check with a parent that you are allowed to bring the image to school.
You might need some help to find the image you want. You can ask for help from your family but remember that it should be *you* who chooses the image!
If you don’t want to show your image to anyone else at school, you don’t have to.
Over the next few weeks you will be able to borrow a camera to take home for a week. You can then take photographs that represent your idea of beauty.

Thank you!

*Robert Watts*
Dear Parents,

This letter provides you with information about a project that your child is invited to take part in this term. I am a Senior Lecturer in Education at Roehampton University, London and also a parent of two children at Waverley Abbey. I am writing to you because I am carrying out a research project that involves a number of children at Waverley Abbey and also at a primary school in west London. The project aims to explore children’s ideas about beauty, and your child has been selected by their teacher to take part in the project.

In each school I am asking children to bring to school images that they have found that represent their own ideas of visual beauty. Your child will be set this task for homework on Thursday 24th January. Over the next few weeks the children will have the opportunity to share their images with five other children from their class and talk about them.

The discussion that includes your child will take place on:

**Thursday 28th February between 3:30 and 4:30pm.**

Your child will have further information about their task on a sheet they will bring home next Thursday. During the next few weeks, your child will be set a second homework task. They will be loaned a digital camera for one week and asked to take photographs that represent their ideas of beauty. These photographs will be discussed in a second group discussion that will take place on:

**Wednesday 27th March between 3:30 and 4:30pm.**

Discussions will be recorded and transcribed for the purposes of the research, and all transcriptions of discussions will be made available to interested parents. If you would like to receive further information about this project, please contact me through your child’s class teacher. I would be very happy to discuss any aspect of the research with you.

I hope your child will find this an interesting and enjoyable project to work on. Please could you remind your child to return the image to their teacher by **Monday 28th January**. If you would prefer your child not to take part in the project, please indicate this on the form below.

With best wishes,

Robert Watts

.............................................................................................................................

I am happy for my child......................................................to take part in this project. [ ]

I would prefer my child not to take part in this project. [ ]
Beauty project – Homework task no. 2

Your homework task:
Use your camera to take beautiful photographs.
You can take as many photographs as you like.
You can delete any images you don’t want to keep.
Bring it back to school by next Wednesday.
You will have a chance to share your images with your group in a few weeks’ time.

Thank you,

Mr Watts
Appendix 6.9 Transcript, Old Oak School, Interview 4, 28th February 2013

An – Anya
Em – Emily
Spi – Spike
Ba - Barney
Gra – Gracie

RW – Now, I’ve got a folder on this computer which is 5GR and we’re going to look at images in turn. Now the first thing I’m going to say for each image is, I’m going to ask the person who chose the image if they would like to describe the image for us. So, Anya, would you like to start please?

An – It’s pink and it’s sort of fluffy, I don’t know how to explain it…it’s flowers and…it’s quite delicate.

RW – That’s a lovely description, thank you. Now can you explain to us why you chose this picture to represent your idea of beauty?

An – Because…I’m not sure….because, because it’s quite sort of girly. (everyone laughs)

RW – That’s interesting, Barney if you could, everyone’s going to get a turn. That’s quite an interesting word, is there any other reason why you chose it?

An – Um, because I like those sort of things and…
(Interruption)

An – I think it’s quite, I like that sort of stuff and that’s what I think is pretty.

RW – Thank you. I’ve got some questions for you but I think other people have questions for you as well, so if you’d like to ask Anya a question, put up your hand up please. Anya, you can choose someone.
An – Gracie.

Gra – What exactly like, how did you think of choosing this picture, have you seen it somewhere or did you think ‘I think I like this because it’s got nice character to it’; what do you think you, like, did it for?

An – I think ‘cause I’ve seen it, I’ve got a tree in my garden and I think it’s nice.

Gra – I agree.

RW – That’s a lovely question, Gracie, well done.

Gra – Thank you.

An – Spike?

Spi – What do you like about it being pink?

An – Because, I don’t know, it’s just quite a nice colour. I like the pink on it.

RW – I was wondering if other people at the table agreed with Anya that it’s a beautiful picture; can you put your hand up if you do?...so three people completely agree and one person kind of, your hand’s up but you’re kind of, not quite... hands down, everyone, thank you. Emily, would you like to explain why you agree with Anya?

Em – Well it’s just like a pretty picture, ‘cause it’s like the beauty of nature,

RW – Good, thank you. Barney, what do you think?

Ba – Well, ‘cause flowers, they aren’t really my favourite thing, but still they are quite pretty but they’re just like not my favourite type, if you know what I mean.

RW – So you can appreciate that some people like it,

Ba – Yeah, I can,

RW – But it’s not necessarily your favourite thing.

Ba – It’s not my favourite thing.

RW – Can I ask a really tricky question, put your hand up if you want to answer; we’ve used the word ‘pretty’ quite a lot but is ‘pretty’ the same as ‘beautiful’ or is it different? Gracie.

Gra – Well, it’s not really like, pretty is sort of, it’s like ‘Oh look, she looks really pretty,’ but beauty, it could be anything, let’s say someone was like, even if they look ugly, it’s what’s on the inside that counts, like the heart, on the inside, and like the things what they say, the kindness of what they are,
RW – So it’s people’s personality and their kindness, that’s very thoughtful, thank you. Spike and then Barney.

Spi – I think like ‘pretty’ means almost attractive, you think it looks good, and then ‘beautiful’ just means you think it’s different, you think it looks, it’s got its own touch, it looks nice.

RW – It’s got its own touch. Can you explain what you mean by ‘beauty has got its own touch’?

Spi – Well, like, for an example, Anya, Anya said ‘This is beautiful’ so that’s got its own touch for her, so it’s got the pink, it’s got the elegantness, but then I might say a tractor’s beautiful because it’s got like things that I like, touches that I like put in. So we all like have our own touches put in to the beauty - ingredients to make something that’s beautiful.

RW – Okay - if you take your hand away from your mouth - you’re saying really interesting things. You said something about ‘We each have our own ingredients’; can you say that again?

Spi – We each have like own ingredients that we put in to make something beautiful so we all think that something else is beautiful to others.

RW – And, it’s different with pretty because you can look at something and you can agree that it’s pretty without really…

Spi - … Just thinking at all, you just think it’s pretty because it looks, looks attractive.

RW – That’s interesting. Bonnie, were you going to say something as well?

Ba – Um, well ‘beautiful’, I think it’s just a stronger word than ‘pretty’, basically.

RW – I see what you mean, it sounds stronger.

Ba – ‘Cause ‘pretty’, the sound of it, and ‘beautiful’, it sounds much more powerful I think.

RW – The other thing that I was very interested in was one of the first things that Anya said, do you remember, she said it was ‘girly’? (laughter) And I thought, hmm, that’s an interesting description. Would anyone like to comment upon this, the idea of this picture, the flowers, being girly? Gracie.

Gra – Well I will admit it does look quite girly ‘cause like some boys don’t really like pink but what I would say is some people like my Dad, like, or a person, I can see why they’ve chosen that, it wouldn’t be like my cup of tea but I actually quite like really like it, it’s lovely, it’s, maybe if it was like my sort of time, like it let you see a different flower, then maybe someone would like it a bit more, maybe like, they like basically, it’s what they’ve chosen and what Anya’s chosen I think is really good.
RW – Thank you, Gracie. Spike.

Spi – I don’t think like it’s that girly ‘cause you can’t really say something’s girly ‘cause you can say a dress is girly but then out there in the world some man might think dresses are not girly and might walk around in dresses, so like I find like almost like nothing can be girly or for boys, so if like some boys like monsters, there might be girls that like monsters, things like that, so I would say, I think it’s beautiful, yeah, but I don’t think it’s like all girly,

RW – So you think we should be more…

Spi – I think like anyone could love it.

RW – So we should be more open-minded about whether something is appealing to girls or boys or men or women?

Spi – Yeah.

RW – And it’s interesting, the example you chose because when we think of a dress, for example, we do tend to think of women wearing dresses, but then flowers aren’t female or feminine in the way that dresses are; we don’t look at a flower and think ‘Oh that’s a female flower’, do we? So why do we think about girls, why do we think about a girly beauty as you said? Emily, you haven’t said much, would you like to say something?

Em – Most girls do like pink though so I know why she said it looks girly though. But some boys like, my brother likes pink so, so it like,

RW – We’ll move on from this in a minute. I just wondered why, you’re all wearing blue but you’re nearly all eating pink lollies and I just wondered if anyone had any ideas about why? Why girls might prefer pink to blue or why boys might prefer blue to pink? Gracie.

Gra – Well sort of, like basically their character, so let’s say, so what if a boy likes pink, so if people make fun of it, it’s what they like so don’t take mind of what they think, it’s what you think that matters, basically.

RW – You shouldn’t worry about what other people assume?

Gra – Yeah.

RW – Thank you. Shall we move onto the next picture? Before we do, I just want to say I’m really impressed with how thoughtful you’re being so thank you very much. And this is another one from Anya, we’re going to go in order, but it’s not of a flower. Anya, can you explain why you chose this picture, please?
An – Because I like dogs and I think they’re very beautiful. I like the fact that they’re very, sort of, I don’t know, I think they’re very nice and er, it’s hard to explain, I really think that they’re very sort of…

RW – Would you like to choose someone to ask you a question and that might help you get going.

An – Gracie.

Gra – Like when you, when you say, like, did you choose it for its feelings, for like its character, what exactly, I know it’s hard to explain but what did you like, do it for its feelings or character, what really?

An – I think I chose it because it looks very, sort of, solemn,

RW – Solemn?!

An – Yes.

Bo? – What does that mean?

RW – Good girl for asking, a lot of people would have just gone… I won’t ask, good girl for asking. Can you describe what you mean by solemn, please?

An – Quite, sort of, sad and sorry for itself.

RW – Ah, that’s lovely.

Gra? – Do you mean like artistic in a way like it’s an artwork? A piece of like, art, in a way?

RW – Solemn means, kind of, it’s often, it’s got a sad, in a very old, grown-up way. A very sort of wise, solemn, old man, very serious – serious and sad. Would anyone else like to ask Anya a question about her picture? Can I ask a question?
An – Yes.

RW – Is this your dog?

An – No, that’s not my dog.

RW – Do you have a dog?

An – Yes, I do have a dog.

RW – Did you consider choosing a photograph of your own dog?

An – Yes I did but there aren’t much, many pictures on there of her so I chose that.

RW – And how did you find this one?

An – I looked dogs up on the internet.

RW – Was this the first one you saw?

An – No, I liked the look of that one because all the others were sort of all jumping about and stuff
and thought, this one looked quite, solemn! (laughter).

RW – Thank you very much.

An? – Peaceful and calm.

RW – Ah, clever girl, I think you’re right. He does look calm and peaceful.

Boy? – It’s not like it’s using energy, it’s not like…

Girl? – It’s not like it’s a busy road, like everyone in the playground, like ‘Right, let’s play!’ It’s like nice and peaceful.

Boy? – Like standing in the countryside.

RW – So can you imagine two photographs of this dog, one jumping around, going ‘Woof, woof, woof’ loudly and two, sitting down, looking rather solemn. This is the one you would have chosen?

An – Yeah.

Boy? – I can imagine that one, I can just see him going…

An - Because it’s just too normal. I like…

RW – Do you mean the other one?

An – Yeah, I like,
RW – So this is less normal, is it?

An – Yeah,

RW – We don’t think of dogs as being so solemn. Okay, time is marching on so we’ll look at the next picture which is Anya’s, this is your last picture, isn’t it?

An – This is my last picture.

RW – This is a different picture again; we’ve had flowers, we’ve had a dog and we’ve now got…

![Waterfall](image)

RW - How would you describe this picture, its not…
An – I’d say it’s quite tropical and I like the colours in it, they’re not too big and bold, I think it’s just quite calm and - what’s the word? -calm and peaceful.

RW – As well as beautiful?

An – Yeah.

RW – It’s calm, it’s peaceful and it’s beautiful and Gracie would like to ask a question, or make a comment.

Gra – I think it’s like, I think it’s like natural, it’s nature really, it’s just like - not like there’s rubbish everywhere, it’s just natural, nature, it’s *together*, it’s beautiful. It’s basically, and I really like the way like the trees, it’s like a ‘V’ shape, it looks like they’re all, like, it’s like a holding hands, if you see it like that, it’s like…

? – Oh yeah…

Gra – Everything’s like really peaceful and calm, loving and caring, in a way.
? – Water’s calm as well.

RW – Would anyone else like to say anything about the photograph because if, we’ll come back to some of the words you chose in a minute because I want to ask you about some of those words. Spike.

Spi – I like, I like how it’s peaceful and calm but as well I like how, from my instinct, when I saw that picture, I thought ‘Oh I like that!’ because I can imagine myself climbing up a mountain and falling down a waterfall - almost like you can imagine yourself in it because it’s so, you’ve got a painting in front of you so you can imagine yourself having a blast there, rather than having yourself, like sitting down really bored.

RW – The idea that you can imagine yourself climbing the rocks; is that part of its beauty or is that something different?

Spi – I think just like the texture and the beauty from the artwork in the picture, that makes it like, easier to imagine yourself there because it looks like the real thing.

RW – It looks like the real thing. Bonnie, what do you think?

Ba – … I like the waterfall, that’s my favourite bit about it, I think, ‘cause it’s not too big and it wouldn’t make that much noise, I’d say I’d like that, and it’s like a sunny day and the water, it’s very calm and everything. You can imagine the wind.

RW – So you can imagine the parts of the picture that we can’t see, as well?

Ba – Yeah I can.

RW – Does it make you want to be there? Or not really?

Ba – Kind of.

Em – It does to me. It looks really like sunny and everything, it’s really nice.

Ba – I can just imagine behind the camera, so like there’s lots of bushes and then like on the TV and then you go through the bushes and then you’ve got the…

Gra – Portal

Ba - … and things like that.

RW – You mean you discover this?

Ba – You discover something, you go through the bushes you can’t see past and then you just take them out of the way and you can see that… it happens on movies sometimes.

RW – So there are qualities about the picture…
Ba – I like surprises if you know what I mean - it’s like going into a football stadium 'cause it’s quite, it’s like stairs and you walk up and then you can see the whole crowd and the stadium, that’s what I really like.

RW – Ah, I see what you mean.

Ba – I like that stuff.

RW – We might come back to that idea in a minute. I’m just going to ask Gracie a couple of things. You described this picture as, you used the word ‘loving’ and I was quite surprised and interested. Could you explain what you mean by this, the sense of loving?

Gra – Well, it’s quite hard to like, explain, but it’s basically everything’s like in order, it’s loving, everything’s like basically got a partner, ‘cause like, that’s got that, that one’s got like the nature bits are like around here, that’s got that, the sky’s got the that, so basically they’re all joined together like it’s a family of green, a team, it’s like it’s working together, basically, to run this, to make it beautiful.

RW – Did the rest of you hear that description?
Several – Mmm.

RW – What do you think of that description? Anya?

An – I thought it was like was quite a powerful description about… and I agree with it, I think it’s, it’s a good description of it, I don’t know how to say it but…

RW – How does it make you feel to listen to people talk so intelligently and thoughtfully about the picture that you chose?

An – I feel quite happy that some people agree with what I think is beautiful and I feel quite…

RW – Maybe you feel like it’s someone else’s turn?

An – Yeah.

RW – It’s nearly four o’clock and we’ve got four more people but I think, I’m not sure that anyone else chose three images…

Gra? – I did. But I don’t like one of them so I only have two, really.

RW – If you don’t want to talk about one of the pictures, you don’t have to. Barney, this is your image, could you please first describe to us what we’re looking at.
Ba – Stamford Bridge.

RW – And Stamford Bridge is…?

Ba – Chelsea Football Club. Stadium.

RW – And could you describe why you chose this image to represent your idea of beauty?

Ba – ‘Cause I, ‘cause the front of the stadium is one of my favourite bits ‘cause it just looks, I don’t know how to describe it, it just looks, it’s not like some other stadiums, like Reading, that’s just got rusty metal around. That, it looks really rich if you know what I mean.

RW – I don’t know what you mean by ‘it looks rich’.

Ba – I know, I can’t think of a word for it, um…because I don’t know how to describe it.

RW – Could you just, before we ask other people, could you say a little more about why you think it’s beautiful?

Ba – Because I think football stadiums, I like them, I like the look of them. And I like how they’ve been put together.

RW – You like the way they’re put together?

Ba – Yeah, I like the inside, ‘cause like when I walk in…? and stuff like that.
RW – Thank you. Gracie?

Gra – I see what he means like it’s rich because I’ve been to a lot of football stadiums because my Dad loves it and supports Liverpool, and I can see what he means by like rich in a way, because it looks quite posh,

Ba – Yeah, in that way,

Gra – It’s interesting, curious in a way and I really like it all in here because like all the houses are like joined together like it’s a group and they’re like, that one goes to that, that one goes to that, and so on, so on, so on, it looks like really complete, it looks like a complete picture.

RW – Thank you. Spike?

Spi – I like how the stadium’s, I said earlier I’ve never seen Stamford before, it just looks like big and bold, and you can really, you can easily tell it out, and like if you’re looking at some of the features, they look absolutely like one of a kind, as in like the roofs, and you can see, if you look closely, you all the seats and things and it just makes you think, that must have took (sic) loads of effort which makes it even better because some stadiums, they haven’t put any effort in, they’ve just put loads of bricks in and said it’s a stadium, but at Stamford it takes ages so it’s even better with all the effort put in.

RW – Good. Barney, can I ask you a question? You chose this particular stadium, is it because it’s the best-looking one or because you liked it the best?

Ba – Because I support Chelsea and because I do think it’s the best-looking one. Lots of other ones have got rusty metal. Apart from Old Trafford which is quite…

Girl? - What happened to the light one, the changing-colour one?

Ba – The stadium of light? Oh the one that changed colour? Oh, it’s ?, that’s in, by ?, that’s quite, that’s a good one but I don’t really like the shape of it. Because it’s just like…

RW – So you, you chose this, not just because it’s the team you support but because of the way it looks, the design of it?

Ba – Yeah.

RW – Gracie?

Gra – Some bits I agree with you but some bits I don’t, ‘cause like even if a football stadium is rusty it means it’s been well used, it’s been like, it’s had a nice, a good time and everything, in a way, so it’s basically it’s had use so it doesn’t mean it’s not really that much special than the others, that are really posh,
Ba – This stadium has been used for London Athletics Club, two centuries ago, something like that? So it’s quite, it’s really old but they’ve like, kept it in good condition.

RW – Thank you, do we have any other questions about…? Okay, I’ll ask one more question. Did you look at several pictures of the stadium?

Ba – Yeah, because in that book, there are loads of them but other ones, they’re just, I don’t like, this one and I like how, where they took the photo from, ‘cause other ones they’ve took (sic) photos from…

RW – What have they chosen to include that you, do you think makes it more beautiful?

Ba – The River Thames and stuff like that and like big buildings, I like big buildings, and that bit on the left, that big circle, whatever it is.

Girl? – A park.

RW – Would anyone agree that it’s a beautiful picture?

? – Yeah, sort of,

? – Depends how you think.

Ba – Yeah, it depends how you think, I do agree,

RW – Spike?

Spi – Or I think it depends, I think, ‘cause, I may, well all the girls will be thinking ‘Help me, I don’t really like football that much,’ so they probably think ‘For me that’s not beautiful,’ but then for some boys they think ‘Oh yeah, Chelsea, that’s beautiful for me,’ and some they think ‘Oh yeah the structure, that’s beautiful for me’, but then it depends how you’re thinking about it because some of us in the room might now think ‘Oh that’s ugly,’ but then some of us might think that’s beautiful, it depends on how we’re thinking about it.

RW – It depends on the individual. Emily, then Gracie.

Em – Well, I do see why it’s beautiful but then it’s not got like much bright colours in it so…

Ba – Yeah, that’s the point because London isn’t bright colours if you…

Em – And also a bit crowded and everything,

Ba – That’s what London is though, crowded,

Em – Yeah, I haven’t been there for a long time,

RW – Gracie?
Gra – Um, basically like I do quite agree with the River Thames in and like this area but I think if it had like a bit more um oomph, like oomph into it, it would be a bit more,

Ba – Yeah, if London were done up as well,

Gra – Like a bit more oomph like a bit more punch in, like putting a bit more trees and a bit more…

RW – A bit more trees, well I wondered because,

Ba – Well they have got quite a lot,

RW – It’s interesting you mentioned the trees because I want to go back for a second to the last image we looked at, another photograph, a different landscape...

Gra? – That’s really bright,

RW – And I wonder if it could be more different? The two photographs are so different, aren’t they, and it’s interesting that you, several of you agree that both are beautiful. One, we talked about what qualities of this – how do the two photographs contrast? Gracie?

Gra – Basically because like this one’s it’s like a tropical like, probably like a lot people would dream of going because like our British weather it’s raining and all that literally every day and horrible and grubby,

Boy? – It’s not raining now,

Gra – This, it’s like, it’s got like and the like the London, it’s got the connection, it’s got like the river, the River Thames, it’s basically it’s got like there’s the trees it’s just a bit down-er because if it was sunnier weather the trees would probably be more, be brighter probably, which we knew that, but London’s literally rainy, it’s naturally rainy, but I quite, what I really like is this picture, like here,

RW – The left corner?
Gra – It’s actually really nice, I really like that because the house is really, character-like, and I like the light-green glass there, it’s quite nice and sort of like coloured trees, that to me would be a very nice picture.

RW – Thank you. Barney?

Ba? – I was going to choose Charlton Athletic Stadium ‘cause it was at night at it was really lit up but I didn’t really like the angle of it because you couldn’t really see the side of it, it was just down, so that’s why I didn’t choose that one.

RW – Thank you. Spike?

Spi – I think it’s basically the same but they could be the same image but in London, one it’s just more industrial, so they’ve got buildings everywhere, roads, and two, it’s like, more gloomy, ‘cause in the other picture it was all shining and it didn’t really look as realistic as it would in here but it looks like it’s got like mat (?) three suns around it shining everywhere but then it’s, at the London picture, at Stamford Bridge, there’s no light at all, it’s really dark.

RW – Anya?

An – I think they’re very different and very similar at the same time.

RW – How are they different and how are they similar?

An – I think they’re similar because they’re really sort of, there’s loads there, there’s loads of trees in the other one, there’s loads of buildings and then, this one, and they’re very different because that’s sort of people-y and then the other one’s more sort of…more plants and nature.

RW – So do you think we’ve learned that people can like beautiful images that are very different from one another?

All – Yes.

RW – Did you know that anyway?

Alll – Yes.

RW – I thought so. This is the next picture and it’s from Emily, now Emily you want, did you say you wanted to…

Em – Oh yeah, not that one!
RW – Okay, you want to choose the first one?

? – Oh, whose is that?

? – That’s Gracie’s, I think.

? – Can we see all of them?
RW – Okay, so we’ve got the butterfly and we’ve got…

Em – Not that one, not that one,

RW – And we’ve got,

Em – Not me though, the seal…

RW - Do you want to start with the butterfly? Or would you like to talk about one of the others?

Em – Um, I don’t really like any of the others, though.

RW – Let’s talk about the butterfly, then.

Em – Um, I like this one because it’s like, a butterfly’s like a really beautiful creature and it’s like really delicate and everything. Um, and there are loads of butterflies but this was the big one, it’s quite big, I think it’s called a Great something and it’s like a really big one. I don’t know why I think it’s beautiful it’s just like the beauty of nature, like flowers and everything…I don’t know why I like it.

RW – Would you like to ask a friend?

Em – Gracie?

Gra – I think I really like how you’ve chosen the butterfly and the colours even blend together but what I’m not that sure, like I did say like on the outside, it doesn’t matter what’s on there, but it’s, that butterfly sort of freaks me out a teeny bit, but I’ll show you why ‘cause it’s got those big bright blue eyes and then it’s got that green, it looks like a really mysterious creature, like I’m a bit scared of it, now, and it looks like scared from that sort of like side and angle of it. Normally I like butterflies but some butterflies I’m a bit scared of ‘cause they look a bit freaky.

RW – And does that stop you finding it beautiful?
Sometimes, yes.

Spike.

I like how, I can understand why she thinks it’s beautiful, I like the flowers, the scene, the butterflies, the elegance. One of my favourite things I like about it is the pattern on the butterfly’s wings which makes me think it’s like true nature because if you look closely it’s almost like little green leaves in the background and then in the centre, like a little banana sort of tree.

Oh yeah!

Bananas, I like bananas!

It looks like a palm tree.

Yeah. Well a banana tree’s the same thing.

It’s a bit different though.

An – I think it’s nice because there’s lots of different colours and it’s quite bold because it’s all sort of dull around there and then there’s a big colourful flowers and the butterfly in the middle.

Does anyone disagree that it’s beautiful? You’re in two minds, aren’t you?

Sort of.

Is it that you can imagine a butterfly being beautiful?

I can imagine a butterfly being beautiful like a brown and red sort of one because if you get an angle of it like flying, it makes it a bit more, in a way, graceful-er, graceful more, more graceful, sorry! And basically it probably looks more delicate and graceful like on that side to me but to Emily, she likes it this way and I think that, if that’s what she likes, then that’s what she likes.

Thank you. Would you like to talk about one of the pictures?

But not that one.

I think you kind of want to talk about this one a little, don’t you?
Em – I don’t know how to say why the beauty of it, though, I just like it though because seals are really rare, you like never see them and then you do see them they’re really pretty and everything.

RW – So did you say seals are really rare?

Em – Yeah, they’re quite rare because you’re not really seeing them any more. You don’t really see them much, so…

RW – Is there some sort of connection then between something being rare and something between beautiful?

Em – Er, I don’t know really…there’s probably some connection but I don’t know it though.

RW – Okay, Spike?

Spi – I think, like, two things. One, I think, when everyone’s saying like ‘Um, I don’t know’ I think it’s because like just in your head, if you look at an image you will find it beautiful or ugly or in between and I think with this she’s just looked at it and thought ‘Well that’s beautiful,’ and with like, with the connection between rare and beautiful, with beautiful it’s like, almost like in this cauldron and you put in like your opinion, then you put in some other stuff, and with rareness, rareness gets a bit of a count I what you think of beautiful, because almost as in, if something’s really dull, you, and there was something really rare, if they’re both like the same thing but one was rare-r, you’d think the rare one was more beautiful because something in your head would think ‘Well, that’s rare-r, that’s better,’ but then you, it’s no real, that’s just like, if you were told this you’d probably think ‘Oh no, no, I never say this, I think it’s actually it’s pure beauty,’ but it’s almost like a thing in your head, like a trigger, that goes off and thinks ‘Oh it’s rare-r, that’s better,’ and like you don’t really realise, it just goes on.

RW – A minute ago you used the word ‘pure’ beauty, what does that mean?

Spi – I find it in as in like you can get like beauty where you’ve just been told by people and that wouldn’t be real beauty, that would just be like if you were with your best mate and he said ‘Stamford Bridge is amazing,’ and you hated Chelsea, you might be like ‘Oh yeah, yeah, definitely’. That wouldn’t be real beauty, like beauty is your opinion, not somebody else’s unless you’re agreeing on it.
RW – So your opinion stops being pure when somebody else…

Spi - …Has like said, if you don’t actually like it and you’re just saying it because somebody else’s, perhaps your best mate is saying it. And that like changes the whole effect of beauty because that way, almost like copying, if you had an idea but then someone else said ‘Oh, this is better,’ you’d go for what everyone else thinks just to make yourself look cooler or a different image, you almost like…

RW – And am I right in thinking that you value the pure beauty more highly?

Spi – Yeah. So I’d rather have a friend that says ‘No, you’re wrong, I think this is beautiful,’ rather than someone who copies me in saying ‘Oh that is’…

RW – So, do you understand what I mean by ‘integrity’?

Several – No! (laughing)

RW – If we get time, we’ll come back to that. I think what you’re describing is the notion of integrity where you respect a person who has their own idea about something and is not too influenced by other people that they think they should be influenced by. Thank you Spike, that was really interesting. Um, this is Gracie’s picture and can you describe your picture for us, please?
Gra – Well, it didn’t generally become popular when I was about three or two, I can’t literally remember, if you were to ask me I’d think ‘Oh my gosh, I can’t remember this!’ But I have, I have, I do remember it quite good (sic) because it, it had lovely sea, if you can see.

RW – Is this your parents?

Gra – Yeah, that’s right, that’s my Dad, that’s my brother,

? – That’s you, where are you?

Gra – I’m being held…

RW – Okay, so tell us a little bit about why you chose this to represent your idea of beauty?
Gra – Well, I think it’s beauty because, one, it’s a moment that I loved; secondly, it’s like, I love like the shape of it, and the texture of like, this bit here and I really love, it’s like a paradise, in a way,

? – It looks like it’s going to rain,

? – Any moment!

RW – Can we just let Gracie speak first and then I’m sure she’ll be interested.

Gra – I will tell you, it does look like it would rain but actually, I thought it was going to rain too, but actually, if it was ever to rain but it didn’t rain, if it was to rain it would rain hot-ly, it would be hot water, not cold rain water, it would be raining hot water, it happened in America, and I almost got burned when it happened,

RW – Wow,

Gra – ‘Cause it was really hot then and what I really like is like if you can see there’s like pulses in a way, if you were to go through that it would go all weird, and so…

RW – Did you say ‘pulses’?

Gra – Yeah.

RW – In the water?

Gra – ‘Cause like when someone was, you swim, you get a big like pulse coming all the way, sorry! (laughs).

RW – Lesson number one – don’t go swimming with Gracie, (they laugh) you’re likely to get poked in the eye.

Gra – You want to wear some goggles though. And like it was, basically, I really liked like when it happened and that was like one of those things when you can’t really see much of it but that was it there, and every time I would sit up and think normally I would think ‘Oh my gosh, it’s such a boring day, it’s raining and horrible’ but there it was just…amazing, it was like my dream, dream place, it was just like there was literally you would never be bored there. There was fun, there was games, there was kids’ club, you could go in go in the swimming pool if you were too freaked out, you could just like, put your feet in and relax and paddle if you don’t like the water much, um, or you go like under there and do some sunbathing, or you could like go in the Jacuzzi, you can’t really see much of it when my Mum, when a man took it for us, but it’s there, it’s would probably be, that’s probably been my best holiday I’ve ever had, to be honest.

RW – And when you decided, when you were asked to find an image that represented your idea of beauty, did you think of this holiday straight away, or this photo?

Gra – I thought of this photo straight away because I literally, I have it, I had it in, I’ve got another picture of it because we had two copies and just, I’ve got a picture of it in
my frame so every morning when I think ‘Oh, it’s raining,’ I just look at that picture and I go, like, it’s like, it just makes me smile, in a way.

RW – So let’s imagine for a moment that we were each looking at a beautiful image. How would we, would it change our feelings, because Gracie’s just described very, very nicely how looking at this photograph, which she thinks is beautiful, makes her feel happy. So if we look at a beautiful image, can it change the way we feel? Spike?

Spi – Well, ‘cause you know me quite well, I’m quite negative sometimes, and this, when I’m like, it depends on how negative I am, on a scale of one to ten, if I’m like five or over a negative-ness-ness, I’d be, if I looked at the most happy time in my life, I’d still be quite annoyed, but then if I was on like quite a low scale I’d just be get much happier, but it depends how bad the crime is.

RW – How bad the ‘crime’ is? That has been committed against you, do you mean?

Spi – That makes me angry.

RW – Any other thoughts? How do you feel when you look at an image that you find beautiful, does it make you feel any different at all? Anya?

An – It makes me feel, it makes me, it makes me feel quite happy because I remember that that was a good time and so if I am feeling a bit sad, if I think of it, it makes me feel a bit better.

RW – Whilst we’re thinking of you, we’re going to reverse, once again, to one of Anya’s pictures, because I was reminded of this picture, of the water here, when Gracie was speaking a minute ago. Gracie used a couple of words that I thought were really interesting; ‘paradise’, ‘rare’ and ‘it was my dream place’. And when you said those three things, I was reminded of Anya’s picture again. Can you explain to me why I might have been reminded of it? Spike.

Spi – Well, you, I think like from you’ve been looking at it, we all described it and Anya’s been telling us about it and then you’ve been like look – inspecting it, you like, you’ve gone into that, you’ve been thinking about that image and it’s made you think of paradise and then, in the back of your head, when you think of paradise, maybe that will come up in your head one day, when you’re like thinking of paradise, those people have described it as paradise.

RW – Thank you. Gracie?
Gra – Basically, I thought my picture was paradise and together, I think this is paradise too because it’s got the nice, blue sea waters and it just makes me feel lovely and happy. It’s just got like the bright colours, the life in it, the character, the greenery, the nature, basically everything, I like everything about, like, I like everything about like, the pictures.

RW – When we look at Anna’s – I’m so sorry, when we look at Anya’s picture, we think of, several people have talked of ‘paradise’; is it different when we look at Gracie’s picture of her holiday? Do you look at this picture and think of paradise?

Spi – Well, I can see why Gracie thinks it’s paradise but then, with Gracie’s family on top, for me I’d think, it’s Gracie’s family, for me that’s not paradise, but then, it depends like, if we’ve got our own image of it. From all I’ve been saying earlier, like we all have our own touch in, but it depends on if there was something like you disliked or someone you didn’t know, it could probably change the whole effect of what you think of paradise, or not.

RW – So this idea you have of, we all have our own ‘touch’, so this is Gracie’s own ‘touch’ in a sense, because it’s her family that we’re looking at.

Spi – Yeah. Well we’d probably all, if we were imagining paradise, we’d probably all, we’d think of something like where they are, or something different, but like then with Gracie’s family on, if you have the same idea of that paradise, that with Gracie’s family there, Gracie’s own touch there, rather than like my touch, so I was like, imagining that, I wouldn’t like have Gracie’s family standing there.

RW – Whereas when we look at the picture of the water and…the hills…

Spi – You can like, you wouldn’t imagine some people you didn’t know there. It’s like clearer but then it’s still a paradise.

RW – Because what you said about this, Barney, was that you imagined coming through the bushes and discovering it,

Ba – Yeah,

RW – So you could imagine yourself in that location whereas you can, Gracie, you can see yourself, in this location.

Gra – I know that I’ve been there. But what I will say, if you were to go there, I’d say it would be like a magical moment for you because when, I was very young there, I was about two or three, I really can’t remember, I just thought it was amazing, every day you just, it’s like peace harmony, and that’s like, I can see what you mean by that’s like my family being in it, but if you like, let’s say your family would be in there, would you have a change so your family was there instead of mine? What would you think of it now, then?

Spi / Ba? – Paradise. (all laugh)
RW – Anya, you’ve been waiting to say something.

An – I think they’re both paradise in a different way, that one, Gracie’s one, is paradise because her family is there and she’s having fun, and there’s, it’s a holiday, and look on my one, it’s very quiet and peaceful and it’s quite similar but in a different way, it’s like no one there.

RW – Good. Okay, we’ll move on because we’ve got one more, this is our last one here, we’ve got one last picture, we’ve got five more minutes and I would like to ask Spike just the same question I asked everyone else; why did you choose this image to represent your idea of beauty?

Spi – Well, there are a few reasons. One, I chose it because I, when I, I did this when I was younger, a bit younger and it made me like think, I remember when I was doing this and I couldn’t draw very well, I put so much effort into it, it made me feel, like, really proud of it which makes me feel it’s more than beautiful and powerful but then like as well, it makes me feel ‘cause I’d put effort in, I’d managed to do that all on my own and normally I wouldn’t be able to do it so it’s more like an improvement, it makes me feel better about myself, which makes me feel like it’s really beautiful and I like the texture and the detail I’ve put in some of it, in some of the pictures.

RW – So you’re talking about the achievement?
Spi – Yeah,

RW – And can you explain to us the connection between the achievement and the beauty of the image?

Spi – Well when you feel like proud of something, like you’ve taken a picture or something, you think ‘Oh my God, that’s so beautiful’ and you wouldn’t think ‘Oh that looks ugly’ if you were proud of it, when you’re proud you generally think ‘Oh that’s beautiful because it’s got all my effort in,’ things like that, and it makes it just generally feel more beautiful than ugly. But then, if I did one like now, if I did a picture of a dragon and some stuff without putting any effort in, I’d generally just ignore it rather than this one where I’ve put loads of effort in, it makes me feel proud of it.

RW – Did you, when you chose it, did you hope that other people would find it beautiful or expect them to?

Spi – I, well because I found that, like I was searching through a pile of my drawings on the bed and I came across this one, I was thinking, most people will not find this beautiful but then like them knowing me as a bit of an addicted doodler made me like, they’d probably know why I think it’s beautiful because of the effort and things I put into some of it.

RW – So if we had looked at this image before anyone else’s, you feel confident that people would have recognised it instantly as…

Spi – Yeah,

RW – …As yours. Who has questions for Spike? Gracie has a question.

Gra – Well basically, I can see why you think it is beautiful, in a way, it’s a bit, not to be like rude or anything, but to me, it’s sort of a bit dull, in a way, but I can see how you feel, like you’ve put the effort into it. What I like the most about it is like the head, it’s really character-like, I love how you’ve done that. I’d say that would be the best bits about it, because on the tail, the middle, I think, if you were to do that picture again would you be more proud of it or would you not?

Spi – It depends. If I did it again and because I’m a lot older – I was about four or five when I did this…

Ba – It looks amazing for four or five,

Spi – Yeah, I did it when I was four or five, when I did it, I was like really proud of it ‘cause at that age, those pictures took me around a day ‘cause they were so hard to do, I’d try to do it eight times or so, but then if I did it nowadays, unless I made it really realistic, twice as good as that, I’d just think, I wouldn’t be as proud, I wouldn’t think it was as beautiful.

RW – Thank you, Spike. We started the afternoon with Anya and I think we’re going to finish with Anya.
An – Okay, um, do you think it’s beautiful to look at or just the pleasure of thinking that you’ve achieved it?

Spi – Well actually, I feel it both it ways, I feel it’s beautiful for my effort and achievement but then on like how it looks, you’ve got to like almost understand, you have to be passionate about a drawing yourself, and you have to like understand like, how that looks good, ‘cause to like most of you here, you think, ‘Oh look, he’s done a bunch of scribbly lines, that looks weird,’ and then like when you understand and when you’ve looked at some of your other things, you think ‘Oh that’s beautiful’ compared to this and it’s like, it’s unlike what everyone else has done like, almost like objects, and I’ve done something that I feel proud of, so in that way I find like it is beautiful but in two different ways.

RW – I did say last word to Anya but I’m very easily swayed, Gracie!

Gra – Basically, I can see why you think like some people would probably go ‘Oh my gosh, that’s hideous, it’s a load of scribbly lines, he hasn’t put any effort in,’ but I don’t think that at all and especially as you were four, whoah, I’m amazed! I like, when I was four I used to do like a circle and that’s all I really did and just try it, ‘cause I literally couldn’t do, I wasn’t that bothered about it much, but now I’m a bit more connected to it, like, how did you think of this picture, may I ask?

Spi – Well, this is probably what, I’ve always been interested in drawing, when I started school I, in my first year, I think you probably heard of it and everyone in our class probably heard of it where we do this thing called ‘draw words’ where it’s like stick men, we have this really weird war, I was in the middle of doing one of these really weird war things and then I suddenly did these big googly eyes, accidentally, trying to do a head and I realised I can do much better than a head, the little stick man, so I tried doing some monsters and that, in the top left corner, that’s the one I first did, and then underneath it there’s two small ones, they’re the first two ones I did, when I figured I can actually draw properly.

RW – So this drawing has a special place in your memory of making art?

Spi – Yeah.

RW – I would love to say we’ve got another hour to talk but we’re already late. I really appreciate how thoughtful you’ve been this afternoon…

End.