

Aesthetic Experience: A Review

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The problem of aesthetic experience is twofold: (i) to establish that aesthetic experience is qualitatively distinct from nonaesthetic experiences, such as religious, sexual, etc., and (ii) to show that it is in some way relevant to critical discourse—to our analysis and appreciation of art works. Critical attitudes towards the concept have shown extreme reactions—from the one that denies that there is an experience called the aesthetic to that which says that it is useless to standardize it and talk about it, since it is altogether too subjective and variable to be of any use in our discourse concerning the arts. Contemporary aesthetics has, in fact, called in question the very notion of the “aesthetic” (Sparshott 1982, 467-86). The protagonists of aesthetic experience insist, however, that there is a peculiarly distinct sort of experience that arises only in the context of our encounter with aesthetic objects. Sure enough, there is some experience—experience, too, of a pleasurable nature—that we all derive from works of art and objects of nature, for otherwise, why would anybody attend to them at all? But then, there are difficulties in identifying and defining aesthetic objects. Artworks may be easier to isolate since they are the product of human intention and purpose, and they are often put out into the world with the label “art” attached to them. However, there are also a vast number of crafts or products of human skill that may be regarded as artworks—regarded, that is, for their perceptual interests. But can they be said to generate aesthetic experience? The case of natural objects is even more difficult to deal with. But inasmuch as some of them evoke feeling in use their identity as aesthetic objects has to be established purely in terms of the experience they evoke. Even accredited artworks do not produce the same kind or measure of response in all people, with the result that we do not seem to have a stable entity called aesthetic experience to talk about.

Be that as it may, we could still perhaps give a description of the kind of experience that some of us may be believed to derive from aesthetic objects and what happens in it. But we would have a hard time, purely in terms of its internal properties, demarcating the boundaries between it and other related experiences, between one kind of pleasure and another. An easier way to distinguish it may be to start with the aesthetic object and define aesthetic experience as the kind of experience that arises from the object and that is appropriate to it. Since every experience must be an experience of something and there can be no experience without an object and since the content (and the character—pleasant, unpleasant, etc., too) of an experience is to a large extent determined by the nature of the object, it would seem to be the right step first to identify the aesthetic object before we discourse about the experience relating to it.

What then is an aesthetic object? This of course is a tantamount of asking “What is beauty?” “What is art?” — A question that has bedeviled philosophers over the ages and that proves to be particularly difficult in our age when any object whatever, any contraption or even a pile of junk items can be regarded as aesthetic objects provided they come with an institutional stamp or are backed up with a theory of art. However, for convenience, we may confine our discussion to those objects only that are widely agreed to be beautiful and worth while, and attempt an answer to the question in the following ways. The answer would range from the object-pole of the question to its subject-pole.

I. In objectivist terms, an aesthetic object may be defined as any object, natural or man-made, possessing certain qualities that arrest our attention and evoke in us a pleasurable or gratifying feeling that is marked out in some respects from other sorts of experiences. This is a view maintained by Beardsley, among others, although his theory is confined largely to artworks or intentional objects. For Beardsley, there is such a thing as an aesthetic point of view and an aesthetic experience, which can be distinguished from nonaesthetic experiences in terms of its own internal properties and which derives from an objective field of observation, namely, the artwork characterized by certain value-grounding qualities or aesthetic qualities. Corresponding to these “phenomenally objective” qualities are the “phenomenally subjective” features characterizing the aesthetic experience. A work of art, in his definition, is any perceptual (sensuously presented) or intentional (imaginatively intended) object that is deliberately regarded from the aesthetic point of view. The aesthetic point of view is not,

however, a special mode of perception but simply the capacity to perceive the various elements of the artwork "synoptically" in their mutual relationships.

II. In subjectivist terms, an aesthetic object is any object, natural or man-made, to which we bring a special kind of attention—different from ordinary kinds in that it focuses on the object for its own sake and not for any practical/utilitarian reasons. This is the root take by the "aesthetic attitude" theorists from Kant down to our own time, although these theorists would seem to assume that the object must, in some unspecified way, be worthy of contemplation in virtue of its qualities.

Now, the first approach assumes that qualities are phenomenally object and hence available for critical analysis. The second makes the perception of an object as an aesthetic object dependent upon the percipient's adopting a particular attitude towards it. The aesthetic is a mode of perception, not an aspect of the object. On this view, any material thing whatever—a blackbird or a wheelbarrow—is, at least theoretically, capable of becoming an object of aesthetic appreciation. III. An attempt to mediate dialectically between the two poles is that of the phenomenologists—Ingarden, Dufrenne, Iser, etc., (ignoring marginal differences)—an approach that is consistently applied to aesthetic questions ably defended by Mitias (1988 A, 1988 B). According to this, the putative aesthetic object becomes so both in virtue of certain qualities or properties possessed by it and the perception of the percipient which, in several ways, complements, contributes to, and thus constitutes the object of appreciation. In dialectical terms, there is first the artwork which, mediated by perception, emerges as an aesthetic object. A distinction is made here between what are strictly the material, objective features of the art object and the perception of them as value-grounding qualities or aesthetic qualities, between the artwork and the aesthetic object (a distinction also observed by John Dewey). The aesthetic object is then, on this view, both objective and subjective in terms of its ontic status. While the complete idealist would say with Coleridge that "We received but what we give," the phenomenologists would go with Wordsworth in saying that we "half receive and half create."

Several problems emerge out of this brief profile of views on aesthetic experience; first, a definition of the aesthetic object and its ontic status: second, a clarification of the terms "aesthetic qualities," "aesthetic values," "aesthetic point of view," and "aesthetic attitude": and finally, an examination of aesthetic experience or "aesthetic emotion" and its psychological lineaments.

I. The aesthetic object; its mode of existence

The problems involved in this concept are; is an aesthetic object an object out in the world as any other object, ready made and found, or does it become so under certain perceptual conditions? If the latter is the case, then, what precisely is the nature of its transformation from one condition to another, or in other words, what was it before, and what is it after, the transformation? And again, is there a real metamorphosis of the object? A material change in the object under any perceptual conditions is of course inconceivable. Hence the change can only be in the viewer's perception, under ideal conditions of observation, and validated inter-subjectively. But perceiving an object as an aesthetic object required not merely certain perceptual conditions, but also innate capacity in the perceiver to recognize or project, as the case may be, the aesthetic character of the object—since any object by itself is a neutral entity and can be viewed in nonaesthetic ways or put to alien uses. This capacity may be one that is acquired through training and cultivated or it may be a distinct faculty called "taste" (in terms of faculty psychology), or a disposition in the humans to appreciate whatever is aesthetic about an object. In any case, unless the perceiver is the kind that takes interest in nature or in art objects and brings to them the proper attention these things will not be seen as aesthetic objects. Much depends then on the perceiver or connoisseur (*rasika* or *sahridaya* in Sanskrit). It is in and by his perception that a non-aesthetic object—that is, an object that was not aesthetic before—is transformed into an aesthetic object. But this transformation is not a real event in the world; it is an appearance. The fog in the sea, the painting, the piece of music or whatever remains just what it was before I perceived it as aesthetic or discovered in it, or projected onto it, some special significance or value. This conclusion is implicit in the aesthetic attitude theory. Even according to Beardsley's "aesthetic point of view" theory, it is only when an object is viewed from that point of view that it will be recognized as an aesthetic object and will come to light in its own character. Here of course the implications that the object is that the object was already aesthetic (remember that Beardsley is talking about art-kind instances mainly) and it is only perceived for what it is, whereas the aesthetic attitude theory assumes that the attitude alone does the whole work and posits the aesthetic object.

But here the question is whether anything that is not intrinsically what it is seen to be or regarded as can become what it is not except by an act of the creative imagination or delusional vision, in which a rope can be seen as a serpent,

inanimate objects humanized and profound meanings read into a sunset, trees, hills, and cataracts, as in Wordsworth's nature poetry. Natural objects, obviously not being aesthetic by intention (Arnheim's "weeping willow" is obviously a case of pathetic fallacy), need to be looked at with a special attitude or in a particular frame of mind in order that they may be regarded as aesthetic at all—regarded, that is, for their own sake, for the perceptual or imaginative pleasure that they are capable of yielding. The aesthetic attitude theory, as conceived by Kant, is based primarily on the model of mute natural objects which are innocent of any aesthetic purpose and which depend on the viewer's perceptual attitude or point of view to give them any significance aesthetically. And since the attitude is what confers aestheticity on the object, the object by itself has no role in the aesthetic experience. In this case then, the principle of distinction between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic should be sought, not in the object, but in the interest taken.

But the same is not the case with intentional objects or objects that are deliberately designed as aesthetic objects or artworks. A poem, a painting, a sculpture, a piece of music, a building with decorative motifs, etc. has no other use to function than to be viewed aesthetically. These objects are deliberately put together in a purposeful manner so that their objective form alone, as an "embodied intention," should be able to reveal the purpose for which they are intended. Even where an artwork is expressly intended for some other purpose, such as religious or moral, in its own identity as a formal organization it is first an artwork and then, secondarily, and instrument of use: first a poem, then a message; first a sculpture, then a sacred image, and so on. Works of art are aesthetic objects in their own constitution and identifiable by certain built-in features—such as, formal devices, presentational or performance context, etc., which serve as markers. They do not, like natural objects, need the esemplastic imagination of the perceiver for their being what they are perceived to be. Hence Beardsley understands the term "aesthetic object" as synonymous with "work of art," but insists that unless one regards it from the aesthetic point of view one is not likely to see it for what it is—a demand that is justly made, because an artwork can go unnoticed qua artwork without the awareness of a percipient. It appears from this that the conditions of what is called aesthetic object are not the same in all cases, and that in defining it we have to draw a line between natural objects and man-made works that are expressly designed as aesthetic objects.

A further distinction is also necessary among the art objects themselves on the basis of the mediums in which they are embodied. While all art forms require an aesthetic point of view or sensibility to be fully apprehended for their significance, some of them call for the viewer's or percipient's own imaginative capabilities in a greater degree than others to provide them with any significance or meaning at all. Thus the verbal and dramatic arts—poems, plays, novel, stage drama, and expressive dance, and the visual arts of the representational type—are fully objective and autonomous in so far as their meanings are contained within their own formal bodies. These may be termed “self-expressive” as they all carry their meaning on the face—they are pictorial representations of objects, persons, actions, etc., or they employ signs—words, gestures, and movements expressive of inner feelings and thoughts. On the other hand, instrumental music, and among the visual arts, abstract painting and sculpture, and architecture depend, much like natural objects, entirely on the listener/viewer for their aesthetic significance to be realized, although they can be readily recognized by any person as art objects by virtue of their artifactuality. Even in the self-expressive category, no doubt, the meanings of shapes, words, gestures, and actions may not be readily apparent: there will be problems of interpretation and need for elaborate construal—filling the gaps, supplying of missing connections, drawing out the implications, etc. But such problems can be met successfully with the help of the well-known canons of interpretation and artistic conventions. At any rate, it should be admitted that the meanings of any human action, or handiwork in the self-expressive mode are utterly contained in the mediums in which they take form, although the perceiver too may have to exert his mind in interpreting them. But interpretation is always of a finished product, of a stable and reidentifiable entity, not of an “emergent” object.

The aesthetic attitude theory has no doubt come under fire from the objectivists. But there is something to be said for the basic premise from which it stems and which it shares with Beardsley's “aesthetic point of view,” namely, that there are certain values that may fairly be called aesthetic and that people generally perceive in aspects of external and human nature, and in art creations, and that move them. Poets, painters, song writers, actors, dancers, and so on love to recreate such aspects in various ways in art mediums and the general public tend to appreciate them when they recognize them in artworks. Love of nature and the mimetic instinct are common to both the artist and the audience. An art object of the representational or self-expressive type may therefore be

said to consist of a representation of an object, situation, or any element or aspect of human perception, experience or consciousness that is of common human interest and that appears significant or arresting to the artist, who tries to capture it in a medium other than that in which it exists in nature (painting, poetry, sculpture, etc.), or in the same medium under simulated conditions, mimetically, that is—music, dance, acting. Some might even go so far as to argue that even nonobjective art must ultimately draw its categorical traits from natural or human models—colours, sounds, shapes, angles, and kinaesthetic elements. But we need not press this point for our present purposes. At any rate, when an object possessing certain discernible value-bearing qualities is sufficiently entrancing, then the aesthetic attitude or point of view plays its role: a disinterested attention will help active participation in and enjoyment of the properties of the object. But it is not often the case that one enters into an attitude volitionally in order to be drawn to the object. The object itself, if it is worth its salt, may be expected to dictate the kind of attention that is required for its appreciation.

II. Work of Art vs. Aesthetic Object: Aesthetic Qualities vs. Aesthetic Values

Let us now examine the distinction maintained by the phenomenologist between the work of art and the aesthetic object, setting aside the question of natural objects for convenience. This distinction is perhaps also implied by Beardsley's "aesthetic point of view" to the extent that it says that an art object must be seen from a certain point of view in order to be discovered for its aesthetic significance. The perception from the aesthetic point of view is simply a perception of those qualities in the object that are intrinsically interesting to humans—such as, harmony, balance, order, proportion, expressiveness, etc., which are regionally emergent qualities and which it is possible for anyone to see. This perception is thus anaesthetic quality (A-Quality) perception or "regional perception." But, as we noted above, Beardsley's A-Qualities are "phenomenally objective" and reside in the artwork; it is just that they are recognized as value-bearers from the aesthetic point of view. It follows from this that aesthetic perception is value perception.

For the phenomenologist, on the other hand, the work of art is but the material basis or "the perduring structural foundation" (Dufrenne, trans., xxiii), which can be put to any number of nonaesthetic uses, but which becomes metamorphosed into an aesthetic object when realized in perception. Its material character consists of paints, stone, sounds, or words, as the case may be, or lines, colours, figures, tunes, or meanings, when the same are formally organized. And

they become aesthetic through a specific act of perception and are contingent on that act for their aestheticity. The aesthetic character of the artwork, for Dufrenne, is its felt dimension or its affective quality, which is realized only in the consciousness of the spectator.

For Dufrenne then, neither the formal organization nor the expressed content of the artwork is yet aesthetic: the meaning of the poem, the melodic-rhythmic structure of the music, the representation in the painting or sculpture are still its sensory material body. They lack the "felt dimension" which alone makes them aesthetic objects. The aesthetic object has a double existence: as an art object and as an object aesthetically—that is, subjectively—realized. It is suspended between the formal/objective structure of the artwork and the subjective consciousness of the percipient, or better still, it is a *tertium quid*, a new reality or creation arising from the union of the two. The dialectical structure of this argument is obvious and it stems from the phenomenological premise that knowledge is at once sub-objective or inter-involved. The identity of the object depends on a perceiving subject; there is no object without a subject.

This line of reasoning is applied consistently by Mitias to the question of aesthetic qualities, which, he observes, are the real principle of aesthetic distinction (Mitias 1988b). The aesthetic object, like any material object, may be broken down into a complex, or more accurately, a congeries of qualities or properties. But a distinction may be made, albeit arbitrarily, for our purpose, between the terms "properties," and "qualities," let us say, has objectivist implications: A property is what belongs to the object and what goes into its constitution, whereas a quality—aesthetic quality, that is—in the phenomenological view, is that property of the object which is perceived as being aesthetic, i.e. as having aesthetic value. Mitias does not make this distinction, but it is implied in his argument throughout. Discussing the ontological status of aesthetic qualities. He argues that aesthetic qualities are not readymades or the objective properties of the work, but that they "emerge in perception" as values (1988b,29). The contemplative look on the face of da Vinci's *A Musician*, the sadness of *Valse Triste* by Sibelius, or the tragicalness of *Anna Karanina*, or the look of peace and dignity on the face of Vermeer's *Kitchen Maid* are not altogether in the work although they are anchored in it and determined by its material medium, its ontic base. They are there only as potentialities to be actualized or realized as values in the perceiver's consciousness. Consequently they have their locus in aesthetic perception. The

objective properties of the work are, on the other hand, such things as the bright patch of colour representing the flood light streaming through the window in the *Kitchen Maid*, the organized notes in a musical piece, or the linguistic structure and the described events of *Anna Karanina*—and they form the physical base for the perception of the corresponding aesthetic qualities.

At this point it will be instructive to probe a little into the question of aesthetic qualities. A review of the scholarly discussion on the subject will reveal the following (Beardsley 1982; Hermeren): (i) Aesthetic qualities (A-Qualities) or aesthetic attributions are not all of the same type: Some are evaluative and others are descriptive or objective properties perceived as value-grounding or VG qualities, while yet others are variable depending on the circumstances. (ii) Some may be attributed literally to artworks, while others (affective or purely value-based terms) are imputed to artworks and can only apply to them by metamorphic extension. (iii) An A-Quality must be some aspect of the object that is perceived as a value or as being capable of providing aesthetic gratification. An aesthetic value may be defined as any property of an object that is held to be a source of contemplative pleasure to a perceiver and that bears repeated contemplation.

Thus, qualities like “delicate” (meaning, having thin fine lines or contours), somber (dark—of colours and landscape), vivid—are phenomenally objective or descriptive properties. “Unified,” “coherent,” “complete,” “Balanced,” “tightly knit,” “harmonious”—are gestalt or structural or “regional” qualities. “Tragic,” “joyful,” “serene,” “solemn,” “sad,” “cheerful,”—are emotion qualities or expressive qualities, perceived directly in art forms of the self-signifying type (literature, figurative painting and sculpture, expressive dance and stage acting), but imputed to pure music, landscape, and nonobjective painting and sculpture, in the nonself-expressive medium. “Bold,” “nervous,” “tense,” “impatient,” “relaxed,” “restless,” are behaviour qualities, ascribed metaphorically to artworks. “Shocking,” “stirring,” “funny,” “trite,” “boring,” “beautiful,” “impressive,” are reaction qualities and value-loaded, and designate affective responses to artworks. They are applied metaphorically to art works.

It also follows from (iii) above that the so-called A-Qualities—whether objective or purely evaluative/affective—are aesthetic values, perceived as such by a viewer or a community of viewers. Value perception takes someone to discover for himself the values in things. Aesthetic judgement is then necessarily a judgement of values, and to that extent it may be allowed that the percipient

plays an active, creative role in the perception. He interprets the qualities residing in the object as value-bearing and capable of yielding aesthetic enjoyment. And these qualities should include, not only the formal qualities of the medium, like colours, shapes, and sounds, but also the representational elements—meanings, pictures, and the like. What then are potential in the object and are “actualized” in the perceiver’s consciousness are aesthetic values, not the value-bearing properties themselves. Values come into being in and by the act of perception. An observed property, when seen as a value, becomes an aesthetic quality. As an event in consciousness, an aesthetic quality cannot be deemed to belong to the artwork. What belongs to the artwork is some perceptible property—visual, auditory, or cognitive (perceived as meaning). While thus all values depend on a perceiver for their realization, there seem to be different degrees of this realization and different ways in which it is effected. In some art forms, the values themselves may be said to be given in some sense and not merely perceived. In the case of the verbal and dramatic arts, and in other forms of the self-expressive medium, qualities like “sad,” “cheerful,” “comical,” etc. are descriptive properties. The art form consists of them. Moreover, these may be, not only objective properties, but also the values expressed by the work. The tragicalness of *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, the serenity on the face of the Buddha image, the erotic gestures and movements of a dancer are palpably manifested in the work as values. They do not emerge in perception or await actualization by the percipient. They are there insofar as they can be expressed at all, in life or in art. Perceiving the look of peace on the face of an actual person is the same as perceiving it on the face of a painted image of him, except that the latter is an imitative reproduction or representation. We just see it for what it is, recognizing it by its tokens.

But, can they still be said to be expressed as values by the work itself? The tragicalness (pity and grief) of *King Lear* is a feeling registered by Lear and other characters in the play. But it is not a “pleasure-yielding” aesthetic value to them: it is an insufferable condition. The spectator, however, takes pleasure in reliving and empathizing with that condition and hence it is a value to him. Similarly, the look of agony on the face of Christ in a crucifixion painting. On the other hand, the joy of reunion of lovers in a romantic comedy drama is a valuable experience both to the characters and the spectator, who is happy in their happiness. Buddha’s serenity, if you know his story, was a value to him, which he cultivated and, presumably, also relished, and hence a value in the

imaged person in that the image exhibits it. The erotic behaviour of a dancer or stage actor is even more manifestly an "expressed value," a valuable experience equally to the performer and the spectator. In such cases, we can say that the already actualized affective values of the artwork are simply replicated or reverberated in the consciousness of the spectator. You feel what Buddha felt, or more accurately, what the image "feels," in a manner of saying. But here one could make a hair-splitting distinction and say that the feeling felt by the spectator is not the same raw emotion that is expressed by the character or exhibited in the image. What the spectator feels is "aesthetic emotion" (*rasa*, in Indian poetics), and accordingly, one could give it a different nomenclature. While this may hold true of the disagreeable or painful emotions—like grief, anger, fear, disgust—which turn out to be pleasurable in life as in art. But are not even the disagreeable emotions—Lear's grief or Christ's agony—qualitatively the same as those felt by me when I identify with those characters—except that they are distanced and imaginatively recalled? A maxim in Sanskrit has it that the poetic or dramatic experience is the same for the poet, the hero, and the audience. However, you may wish to call these very distanced or "imagined" feelings "art emotions" and hence aesthetic values. But even so, they can be seen as already manifested in the work, at least in their substantial forms.

There is another sense in which aesthetic values may be said to be expressed by the artwork, not existing merely as a basis for potential realization. The artwork, as an illocutionary act, was made with the purport of conveying certain values—valuable insights or experiences—and it does so in the only way possible, namely, through the medium of the art form and the properties appertaining to it. The serene look of Buddha and the agony of Christ on the cross are the expressed content of the respective images—expressed through visible, objective signs—and at the same time they are the values purported by the expressions and found worthy of contemplation by the art lover. In the other self-expressive mediums too, the work occasions sad or cheerful feelings in the reader or spectator because the dancer, the actor, the speaker, the poet himself in his own person or his persona expresses those feelings. These feelings, when they are replicated or echoed in the reader's or spectator's consciousness are different from those expressed in the artwork only in the sense that they appear in a different substratum, where of course they will become intermixed with subjective elements. But they should still be deemed to remain unchanged in their qualitative essence. Otherwise, they could not even be traced back to the

work that endangered them, not to say that we can have a shared experience of them.

These affective values, it may be admitted, are "realized" in their affective depth only in the experience of the percipient. They are grasped from the artwork cognitively or perceptually (as the case may be) and then realized affectively. And in that sense, they are potential in the work. But they are potential only in the way that certain food values, like protein and vitamins, are said to be contained in certain varieties of food. The value of these elements is realized only when the food stuff containing them is consumed and takes effect on the body. But what precisely is the nature of this realization in the case of art? The values conveyed by the artwork produce certain reactions in the perceiver—they evoke certain affective responses in him. It is the perlocutionary end of the communication act. Considered as communication, art is no different from other kinds of communication. Someone makes an art object for the purpose of evoking a certain response in the viewer. The viewer responds and has an aesthetic experience. Beardsley's theory supports such a causal explanation of aesthetic experience. The phenomenally objective features of the work of art (82). This being the case, the beholder's role consists only in recognizing the values residing in the form and content of the work and responding to them in wise passiveness. He does not have to reshape or in any way complement or complete the work, as the phenomenologist claims. The value of course takes effect in his consciousness, and in this sense it is potential in the art work, as it is in any cause-effect situation. But the artwork, as a meaningful structure, has discharged itself whether the response (perlocutionary effect) takes place or not, just as a command given is complete in its meaning whether the perlocutionary action ensues or not. Hence its objectivity.

In the nonself-expressive, nonobjective forms—music, architecture, abstract painting, abstract dance (if ever there was such a thing)—the values cannot be said to exist even as potentialities in any constant or definite way as they are not amenable to objective tests. There the sound structure, shape, mass, colour, steps, geometrical figures, etc. cannot be said to be value-bearers except (a) by convention, or (b) when regarded as intentional objects whose purport is to convey certain values—sheer perceptual pleasure or some arbitrarily imposed symbolic or expressive significance. Even so, in the absence of any specifiable signification, such as a title, declared theme, or narrative context, one cannot say that aesthetic qualities or values, like sadness, cheerfulness, etc. "emerge"

out of the formal elements of these arts. Thus the sadness of a musical piece is actually projected onto it and hence metaphorically ascribed, for the music has no potentiality to occasion sadness in the absence of an invariable relation to overt expressions of sadness. To say with Langer that it is iconic of forms of feeling (the appeal to inner happenings). However, it could arouse emotions in virtue of some formal features ("Contours," Peter Kivy calls them) that are isomorphic with features of behaviour expressive of them—such as, tonality, rhythm, tempo, etc. (the Bowasma thesis)—in which case, such features would be descriptive qualities or properties of the object, not "aesthetic qualities" arising out of the contact of the listener's consciousness with the object. The same argument holds for abstract dance. But the recognition of such values will be, to a large extent, contingent upon the listener's personal attunement and cultural exposure. An Indian audience would not be able to feel any deep appreciation for Western music or ballet, although they can still identify the sounds as music and the movements as dance movements. But non genuine aesthetic experience may be expected from such encounters.

In any case, it is only instances of the nonself-expressive category that the percipient has to add to the artwork, bringing to it experiential material from the storehouse of his consciousness. But in instances of the other category—in the self-expressive mediums—there is no need for supplementation by the imagination. Their meanings are contained in their forms. One perceives such objects, makes out their form and their meaning, and then one may be affected by them in some way. But the objective reality of the thing remains unchanged. There is no interanimation or cooperative effort between the art object and the percipient.

But here the phenomenologist may point out that what the words of a poem, the gestures and actions of a performing artist, or the representation in a painting may be said to contain is only an "ideal signification" (Dufrenne, 218) or a "schema" (Mitias 1988b,32), not the sensuous body of the experience itself, and that in this sense the aesthetic object is realized and "completed in the consciousness of the spectator" (Dufrenne, 204). There is the objective reality of the artwork and then there is the subjective content which the work stirs up in the mind—emotions, images, memories, sensations—the effects that bring the object to life as an aesthetic object. Here we must remind ourselves that any artwork or any act of expression, for that matter, in the verbal, physical, or plastic medium can go only so far and not hand over experience in the body. It

can only be a schema. Moreover, the meaning of any sign or sememe (meaning-bearing entity) comes to light only when there is an uptake. But the meaning is always there, situated in its context, whether someone decodes it or not. But this is not the sense intended by the phenomenologist. The meaning, he would say, acquires its identity in being experienced. However, the case of the dramatic arts—stage acting and dance—which are in the action medium—is somewhat different. There the contents of the experience are presented directly and immediately as a live spectacle, as a “happening,” not merely as a schema. So much so that the audience has only to vibrate in sympathy or relive the event empathetically. Even so, no doubt, the manner of realizing the spectacle will vary from individual to individual, each person bringing to his experience a wealth of meanings drawn from his personal psyche and his cultural frame of reference. But over such subjective reactions the art object has no control. Much less do these reactions form part of the meaning of the work. For all meaning, or all that is supported by a semantics—a sign-signifie, expresser-expressed (*vacya-vacaka*, in Sanskrit) relation—is by definition limited and definite. The elaborations or extensions of meaning, imaginative and conceptual proliferations, that a Mona Lisa or a poem by Keats may spur in the mind of a person with a fertile imagination, although they no doubt may flow from the object, cannot with any justice be called the meaning of that object. No doubt, too, that invariably the object is realized in this subjective fashion and is, in the process, enriched by what the individual adds to it in terms of his own constructive imagination. But I should argue that all this does not strictly fall within the bounds of what the work itself purports to convey. At any rate, the spectator cannot be said to be “constituting,” or “completing” the aesthetic object through his act of perception. He can only be extending its meaning, value, or significance. For the work itself, as a finished product—whether a poem, a play, a picture, or a dance—contains its own significance, is self-complete and self-revealing (inasmuch as any such thing can be said to be) even without the mediation of the spectator’s consciousness. Hence its objectivity, its autonomous status.

We have seen that an artifact—regardless of whether it is completely objective or partly actualized in consciousness—is distinguishable from the rest of the phenomenal world by virtue of its artifactuality. It is either an imitative reproduction of nature or a formulation, shaping, or organization of its elements (categorical traits), or an expression of ideas and feelings in a conventional

medium, although many other artifacts (machines, tools, etc.) would also qualify for this designation. But is the experience generated by it so distinguishable from other kinds of experiences? It has been argued by the critics of aesthetic experience and aesthetic attitude that art is continuous or coextensive with like, that there are no elementary aesthetic interests or emotions, and that all the interests, emotions, and urges that prompt people in real life appear in art as well. However, something like an aesthetic interest or aesthetic sense can perhaps be isolated from other life interests—from the utilitarian, heuristic, religious, intellectual and the like. First, people enjoy making pictures of things or producing imitations of objects and actions. This is Aristotle's mimetic instinct. Second, they like to create shapes, make formal patterns of objects, sounds, movements, weave structures of different kinds, and so on. This is Aristotle's instinct for harmony and rhythm. Third, they also like a pleasurable exercise of their emotions, what Hazlitt called "gusto" (*rasa*, in Sanskrit), or an excitation of their senses by colours, sounds, and the like. Fourth, there is the instinct for ornamentation (*alamkarana*, in Sanskrit), which is amply demonstrated by all sorts of decorative motifs appearing in traditional architecture—temples, churches, and mosques—and on images, and by costumes, jewelry, and the like, which serve no other function than simply beautifying the appearance of things and persons. In both Indian and Western poetics, rhetorical figures are held to be ornamental additions to the poetic idea, a means of enhancing the meaning. Artistic activity as well as aesthetic appreciation may be traced to these urges. There is no need to explain the whys and wherefores of this phenomenon. So one can conclude that there is a thing called pure aesthetic value that is distinct from practical, theoretical, and other values. And if there is such a value, the experience resulting from the pursuit or contemplation of it must also be distinct from experiences resulting from other sorts of activities and objects. Aesthetic activity may be called a self-rewarding activity or play, and an end in itself. But this feature of the aesthetic experience may not be a sufficient condition for its being a distinct kind of experience, since there are evidently many other activities—games and sports, for example—there are also self-rewarding, in which case, we can only say that aesthetic activity is but part of a larger family of autotelic activities. Besides, as pointed out by Dickie and other objectors, one may not value an art object for its aesthetic interest alone. The aesthetic interest may coexist with the practical, acquisitive, intellectual, and other interests. While this may be granted, it is possible to argue that, in its purest

state, albeit maybe for a short duration, the aesthetic interest can be isolated and that the quintessential function of the object that provokes that interest is to gratify that aesthetic in the viewer, and not to provide some other kinds of satisfaction.

In any case, it is necessary to outline the character of this experience before we can make out a case for it in terms of its possibility and worthwhileness. Contemporary discussions of this subject have generally followed Beardsley's formulation—which has its source in the tradition of Kant and Schopenhaver. According to Beardsley, the five characteristics or “internal properties” of aesthetic experience are: object-directedness, felt freedom, detached affect, active discovery, and wholeness. Attentional focus on the aesthetic object, disinterestedness and psychical distance, and the consequent freedom from mundane concerns are also common to the phenomenological and aesthetic attitude theorists. Both Beardsley and the phenomenologist also emphasize the affective character of this experience. But for Beardsley, the affective element is strictly under the control of the perceptual elements of the artwork.

Much the same account can be heard from the ancient Indian theorists, chiefly Abhinavagupta whose formulations of the “Rasa” theory, following Bharata's *Natya-sastra*, have been taken as canonical over the ages (*Abhinava Bharati*, I & VI). Although the *rasa* experience is generally equated with aesthetic experience by scholars, it must be noted that in its original intent it related mainly to poetry and stage drama and not to the plastic arts or even to music and dance in their abstract form, taken in isolation from the theatrical context. Poetry was considered separately as a verbal art and the theatrical spectacle was a mix of dialogue, action, song, and dance (both pure and expressive). The *rasa* experience was the total experience of the dramatic spectacle. Both Bharata and his commentators, including Abhinavagupta, recognize that music and abstract dance are powerful affective tools, especially in the theatre, but they argue that they possess no definite emotive significance as they have no semantic or cognitive content—a situation consisting of the objects and behavioural expressions of an emotion. In latter day literature, the *rasa* concept was applied to the figurative arts, namely, painting and sculpture (*citra* and *silpa*), and expressiveness was held to be of the very essence of the art of portraiture, as it was of stage acting and expressive dance. The association of music with *rasa* was taken as axiomatic though it was recognized that musical notes and tunes (*ragas*) had by themselves

no exact signification. Emotions can be expressed only in two mediums: speech (*vacika*) and bodily action and gesture (*angika*), which are self-signifying vehicles, while musical sounds, dance steps, and abstract figures have no expressive power of their own and are parasitic on the concrete emotive situation for their evocative function.

Understood in the context of the theatre—poetry too is a dramatization of the emotions, according to Abhinavagupta—*rasa* is an affective experience, not merely a cognitive perception. The primary object of art is not referential, to convey information or to yield any new knowledge, but to evoke pleasurable responses in the spectator. On the much debated question of whether aesthetic experience is a conceptual or a nonconceptual, nondiscursive state, the *rasa* theory maintains that the essence of this experience is an affective quality provoked in the artist as well as in the spectator by whatever is the subject matter of human experience—an object, person, thought, or situation. *Rasa* is an emotionalized perception of the world as opposed to the purely intellectual or theoretical. Representational art is no doubt made up of reference to objects and states of affairs. But mere referentiality or exemplification does not confer value on the art object (contra Goodman). What is aesthetically valuable can be determined only by the quality (specifically emotive quality) of what is referred to or exemplified. The *rasa* theory assumes that affective states (emotions or *bhavas*), like the tragic, the comic, the erotic, the serene, etc. are given a priori—they are embedded in human consciousness as latent traces or impressions, to be sparked into action at the least touch of their objects. (Cf. Dufrenne, 437-0439 on “aesthetic a priori.”) *Rasa* experience is no doubt still a cognitive process—the instruments of empirical knowledge (*pramanas*) do operate in so far as it involves the construal of the data of the presented object or spectacle, and it draws upon sense perception, inference, and memory as in ordinary cognition. But the resultant of these processes is a pleasurable thrill termed *camatkara*, *spanda*, while the cognitive activity is the penultimate stage of aesthetic perception. In its ultimate stage of enjoyment, Abhinavagupta insists, *rasa* is a variety of apperception or self-reflexive activity, in which the mind oversteps all the cognitive baggage and rests in its own consciousness. Moreover, the objectively presented emotions are not so much cognized as they are “recognized” (cf. Dufrenne: *Ube reconnaissance*). In terms of his own idealistic epistemology, Abhinavagupta holds that all knowledge is a recognition of the world as oneself.

If *rasa* can be called "aesthetic emotion" it is not, however, in the sense in which it is understood in Western aesthetics—a pure etherealized feeling, such as even the colours and lines of an abstract painting, or the sounds of a musical piece, or the figure, rhythm, and movement in an abstract dance are believed to evoke, an "art emotion" pertinent to the so-called aesthetic surface (as Clive Bell, Beardsley, Peter Kivy, and others would have it). The implication is that it is a full-blooded emotion of the ordinary sort (the "garden variety," if you like), but occurring in a characteristic way in the context of art (particularly in poetry and drama). That is to say that emotions like love, anger, fear, etc. are the very substance of the *rasa* experience, but they are experienced differently from emotions in real life owing to the peculiarity of the situation—call it the aesthetic situation—in which they occur, and they are all savoured, become objects of gustation in a way that they are not in real life. Love wonder, heroism, humour, and serenity, which are relished in real life, unlike fear, grief, anger, and disgust, are transformed in art even while retaining their own distinctive flavours. Even the disagreeable emotions are savoured when they are presented through the medium of art (cf. Aristotle). What differentiates life emotions from aesthetic emotions and bestows value on them is the fact that when they are artistically represented they are rendered relishable and capable of being enjoyed repeatedly (*punah-punar-anusandhanatma*). *Rasa* experience is a cognition tinged by (*rusiti-vikaipu-samvedanam*) and of the same nature as the mental states like joy and sorrow, which are the stuff of poetry and drama.

However, Abhinavagupta insists that the aesthetic emotion is distinct from life emotions and that it is of quite another order—unique and nonordinary (*alaukika*). And he adduces the following reasons on support of his claim:

(i) It is different from ordinary modes of consciousness as is not subject to obstacles, such as practical, utilitarian concerns, or a complete surrender to the objects of desire (*visayavesa-vaivasya*). It is also distinct from Yogic consciousness in which there is a complete turning away from sensuous objects. In the poetic or dramatic experience, on the other hand, the mind is entranced by the object, although it is not totally immersed in it, as in some blind appetite, but retains a degree of contemplative detachment, such that it enables one to turn the object over, so to say, and savour it. (cf. Dufrenne, 358.) *Rasa* experience consists of the relishing of the contents of the dramatic or other presentation.

(ii) One of the central tenets of the *rasa* doctrine is "Genrealizarion" (*sadharani-karana*). The dramatic or poetic emotions, presented as being undergone by the character or by the speaker in the poem in particular situations, take on a generic significance and are felt by the spectator/readers if they were his own. They are divested of their diectics (determinations of person, place, time, and gender) in the spectator's apprehension and enjoyed for their general human significance. The spectator has no thought of ascertaining the veracity of the events, for the events are deparicularized in the spectator's cognition and freed of their ontic determinations. *Rasa* is simply the life emotion freed of its limiting factors. This generalization of the emotions, together with their situational setting, is due to the very nature of the context in which they are experienced, namely, a) the objects of the emotions are not those of the spectator, b) the characters undergoing the emotions are not related to the spectator in any intimate way, nor are they actual personages, but projections of human types. Similarly, the actor too is taken to be such a projection as the situation in which he is acting out his feelings through word, gesture, and movement is entirely fictitious. The lyrical voice of the poet, too, even if he were voicing the emotions actually felt by him, is in terms of the verbal presentation, that of an imaginal person. Thus the whole experience of poetry and drama is a visualization (*anuvyavasaya*) or imaginative projection. In other words, the very fictionality and distance of the poetic or dramatic situation will act as a bar to too close a personal identification with the presented persons and happenings. However, there is yet a degree of identification due to the power of sympathy, in which the spectator's own personal being is involved as if the events of the drama were happening to him. He imagines himself being in a similar situation with persons whose lives touch him most intimately. This peculiar state of mind during the experience of the drama is described by a commentator as follows: "This is another's (experience); no, this is not another's, this is mine. No this is not mine. Here in the savouring of the events of the drama, no such discrimination exists."

The dramatic or the poetic situations therefore necessarily distanced from the practical or personal concerns of the spectator. The poem or play does not convey any specific injunctions to the spectator as to his actions or duties. Its emotions too are generalized in the way mentioned, so as to prevent wrong identification. The mechanics of the stage presentation, together with the various theatrical conventions will also aid the necessary "break with reality" so that the

spectator becomes immersed in the world of the drama to the extent that all his worldly interests and concerns are suspended for the time being. Hence Abhinavagupta calls the dramatic experience other-worldly. This is how "disinterestedness" and "aesthetic or physical distance," which are a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition of aesthetic experience, are to be understood. In terms of the *rasa* theory, aesthetic detachment is detachment, not from human concerns, as Dickie understands it, but from concerns of a practical or immediately personal nature. The pleasure of *rasa* experience is born of our deep involvement in matters of life that are equally our own and of the rest of the world, but appearing at a remove from actual life because of the assumed otherness and imaginariness of the presentation. There is the awareness in the spectator back of his mind that the whole drama is an imaginative exercise or play. As Dufrenne put it, the world of the artwork is "derealized" by its being a representation of the real world (360).

Abhinavagupta maintains that the *rasa* experience is, in the ultimate analysis, a subjective event—the locus of the experience is the spectator's consciousness, which is a repository of all kinds of memories and residual traces, so much so that what the spectator savours is his own consciousness, the artwork merely serving to awaken it. But he says there is also a sense in which the *rasa* is in the poem or play, since it is the emotive apparatus presented in it that is the basis for delectation and the object of contemplation. Also, the *rasa* experience lasts only as long as contemplation is fixed exclusively on the object with no sense of cause and effect. The objective presentation is thus inextricable from that state, although what is objectively presented is quickly internalized and assimilated into the subjective consciousness or appropriated to the self, with the result that the subject-object distinction seems to disappear for the moment. Abhinavagupta characterizes this as the "state of being filled with the (aesthetic) object" (*tanmayibhava*), in which the object blossoms in the consciousness like some wonderful flower (*adbhutupspavat*).

Several features of this account of *rasa* may suggest resemblances to the phenomenological account of aesthetic experience, especially in its emphasis on the affective character of the experience and its freedom from ontic determinations, and in its focus on the consciousness of the reader/spectator. But the important difference is that the *rasa* theory does not conceive of the aesthetic object as in any way being a creation or "emergent" of the percipient's consciousness. The sense of "thatness" is never lost in the experience. The

work of art itself is an entirely accomplished thing, the experience being in the nature a re-envisioning or re-enactment (*anusandhana*). The poetic or dramatic emotions are those that are brought into being by the poem or play (*kavyena bhavyante*). Abhinavagupta no doubt writes elaborately about the deeper dimensions of the *rasa* experience, waxing lyrical on its blissful nature. But he never forgets for a moment the objective character of the thing that gives rise to that experience. While he maintains the uniqueness and other-worldliness of the experience, he comments that as the *rasa* excitement of the spectator is inconstant and variable, the work has to be judged only by its objective presentation as this is only fit for discourse. Abhinavagupta would thus fully agree with Beardsley's emphasis on the object-directedness of aesthetic experience as well as with the other criteria laid down by him, such as unity, felt freedom, and detached affect. Both these critics are one in stating that aesthetic experience is a derivative of an already completed aesthetic object. Its course is dictated by the object. The object itself must of course possess some virtues, must be sufficiently enticing in order that it may cause in the qualified viewer the experience appropriate to it. Thus, is first the initial perceptual/imaginative hook-up, then the disinterested attention, then the cognitive, analytic discrimination of the objective properties, followed by the enjoyment of the object in a synoptic perception, although these stages may not always seem perceptible.

But neither Abhinavagupta nor Beardsley succeeds in showing that these features of aesthetic experience are sufficient to differentiate it from other experiences marked by a measure of intensity, such as religious or sexual ecstasy. In fact, Beardsley admits that experiences with an aesthetic character may be found to overlap with other kinds (292). Some of Abhinavagupta's critics raised the same objection. Again, if, as Beardsley argues, the experience and the object share the same set of features, although in two different existential modes (one being phenomenally subjective and the other objective), what is the use of elaborating on the subjective field, especially when the concern of the critic and the aesthete is with the objective features of the work rather than with what happens when he encounters an art object? Abhinavagupta too does not work out a satisfactory justification for his excursions into the mystique of *rasa* experience, except that he seems to suggest that art experience should be held in the highest esteem as it is comparable to the supernal joy of realizing the supreme reality (Brahman or the world-soul).

The attempt to show the interdependence of the phenomenally objective and phenomenally subjective aspects of the aesthetic encounter comes from the phenomenologist. But even he, as I have shown above, fails to account for the autonomous character of art objects that are in the self-signifying mode. The phenomenological approach would work well with the natural objects and art forms in the nonself-expressive mode depend on the percipient's realization for their status as aesthetic objects, he runs against the common perception of their givenness, their objective character. The argument that the aesthetic object is objective in some respects and subjective in others is at best dubious epistemology. In trying to ensure a place for the reader/perceiver in the aesthetic encounter, the phenomenologist may be guilty of wanting to eat his cake and have it too!

It cannot of course be denied that there is an aesthetic kind of experience that is intrinsically gratifying and that people derive from art works. But this experience can vary in intensity depending on individual taste and sensibility, and on the nature of the art form—some people find greater excitement in drama, music, and dance than in painting, and so on. It is doubtful, too, that all art forms are capable of generating the same sort of excitement that Abhinavagupta attributes to the dramatic arts, or even that the experience generated by them is of the affective kind at all. Some artworks, like an abstract painting or a musical elaboration performed by an Indian virtuoso, will provoke a critical/analytic awareness in the connoisseur rather than a profound affective experience. One might, however, say with Beardsley that in such cases the sense of active discovery—of form and meaning—is the reward. But then, such discoveries or “eureka” experiences are common to nonaesthetic situations as well. Again, as Dickie and others have argued, artworks may be valued for many reasons—for cognitive, moral, and other values—not only for aesthetic pleasure. But it can still be maintained that in most cases—in dance, portrait painting, music, and arguably in literature too, pleasure rather than information is the immediate aim of art. However, pleurability cannot be used as a criterion of aesthetic merit because it is not accessible to critical analysis; there are no tools to measure it. What it all boils down to is that aesthetic experience is a subjective matter and known only by acquaintance—it must be felt in order to be known. Therefore the Indian theorists appeal to its introspective validity and aver that, in the ultimate analysis, *rasa* is its own proof (*svatah-pramana*) like direct perception, and beyond the limits of discourse. (It is perhaps best to keep it that way!)

The real issue then is not whether there is an aesthetic experience, but what its usefulness is for critical discourse. In evaluating artworks, we no doubt judge their goodness in terms of their efficacy to communicate a valuable experience, and we judge certain artistic devices or compositional features for their effectiveness in delivering specific effects. It may also be granted (contra Dickie) that unity and its family of related qualities, dependently or independently valuable in works of art, can be predicated of aesthetic experience, although they are not exclusive to it. But they can be taken as axiomatic and artworks analyzed in terms of them, without having to expatiate on their effective or phenomenally subjective counterparts, even as the laws of identity, noncontradiction, unity of meaning, and so on are the norms in logic and semantic analysis, but one does not dwell on the states of mind corresponding to these objective features. Thus, in saying that a poem or a play is unified, has a complex organization, or that it exhibits emotional tension one has said it all. The corresponding affects at the subjective level may be expected to follow. Since any talk about the phenomenally subjective features will only push us back into the work, the work alone ought to be our concern, first and last. Here one must agree with Dickie.

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