

The Aesthetic Experience of Artworks and Everyday Scenes

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ABSTRACT

Some of our aesthetic experiences are of artworks. Some others are of everyday scenes. The question I examine in this paper is about the relation between these two different kinds of aesthetic experience. I argue that the experience of artworks can dispose us to experience everyday scenes in an aesthetic manner both short-term and long-term. Finally, I examine what constraints this phenomenon puts on different accounts of aesthetic experience.

Looking isn't so simple as it looks. Art teaches people how to see.

Ad Reinhardt

I. INTRODUCTION: ART VERSUS AESTHETICS

It has been repeatedly pointed out that aesthetics and philosophy of art are very different disciplines. The most important attempts to draw a line between aesthetics and philosophy of art were fuelled by a certain mistrust of all things aesthetic. The general line of argument, by George Dickie and Noël Carroll, among others (Dickie 1964, 1974, Carroll 2000, 2001), is that too much attention has been given to 'the aesthetic' in the discussion of art. Aesthetic response (or aesthetic experience or aesthetic appreciation, whatever any of these concepts may mean, see below) is only one possible response to art. There are others. And we have no reason to privilege the aesthetic response (again, whatever that means). Thus, they conclude, when we discuss philosophy of art, we are better off doing so without any necessary reference to aesthetics.

But we can apply the same argument to aesthetics as well. Following the logic of the Dickie and Carroll style arguments entails that any talk of aesthetics would be better off with no necessary reference to art built into it. We should detach aesthetics from art, but do so carefully (see Davis [2011, 4–5] for a similar methodology). Questions in aesthetics are often about art, but they don't have to be.

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And one underexplored field within aesthetics is about the aesthetics of everyday scenes. We sometimes have strong aesthetic experiences of everyday scenes. Here are some literary examples from Albert Camus, Camille Pissarro, and Giorgio de Chirico, respectively:

In the cloisters of San Francisco in Fiesole, a little courtyard with arcades. Red flowers, sunshine and yellow and black bees. In a corner, a green watering can. Flies humming everywhere. In the warmth, the little garden breathes gently. [. . .] I want nothing else but this detachment and this closed space—this lucid and patient intensity.¹

Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing.

One clear autumnal afternoon I was sitting on a bench in the middle of the Piazza Santa Croce in Florence. It was of course not the first time I had seen this square. [. . .] The whole world, down to the marble of the buildings and the fountains, seemed to me to be convalescent. In the middle of the square rises a statue of Dante draped in a long cloak, holding his works clasped against his body, his laurel-crowned head bent thoughtfully earthward. The statue is in white marble, but time has given it a gray cast, very agreeable to the eye. The autumn sun, warm and unloving, lit the statue and the church façade. Then I had the strange impression that I was looking at all these things for the first time.²

Sometimes we experience everyday scenes like the courtyard or the piazza in an aesthetic manner. Some other times, we don't—for example, when we need to rush through the crowded piazza to catch our bus. And the same goes for the experience of works of art: we may or may not experience works of art in an aesthetic manner. We experience works of art in all kinds of ways: sometimes we are only paying attention to their price or to their color (as in the proverbial case of buying an artwork to match one's sofa). These experiences are unlikely to be aesthetic experiences. Yet, what we experience in these examples are works of art. Also, presumably art thieves don't have aesthetic experience when they are robbing a museum.

Conversely, we can have aesthetic experience of nature and of ordinary objects (see Carroll [1993] and Irvin [2008] respectively). In short, the concept of aesthetic experience should be detached from art: some, but not all, of our aesthetic experiences are of artworks and some, but not all, our experiences of artworks are aesthetic experiences.

So, we get two orthogonal distinctions: between works of art and ordinary scenes³ and between aesthetic and nonaesthetic ways of experiencing (works of art or ordinary scenes). In other words, aesthetic experience is neither necessary nor sufficient for the experience of works of art. And this gives us four different categories:

- a. Aesthetic experience of artworks
- b. Aesthetic experience of everyday scenes

- c. Nonaesthetic experience of artworks
- d. Nonaesthetic experience of everyday scenes

One grand question in aesthetics is about the difference between (a) and (b) on one hand and (c) and (d) on the other—about what aesthetic experience is. This paper is about a much more rarely explored question: the relation between (a) and (b). I distinguish two senses in which (b) depends on (a) and then argue that the relation between (a) and (b) has indirect consequences for the grand debate about the nature of aesthetic experience—that is, the question about the difference between (a) and (b) on one hand and (c) and (d) on the other: if it is true, as I argue, that the experience of artworks can dispose us to experience everyday scenes in an aesthetic manner, this puts constraints on how we can and should think of aesthetic experience.

II. EXPERIENCING ART VERSUS EXPERIENCING EVERYDAY SCENES

The claim I want to explore is about the relation between our aesthetic experience of artworks and our aesthetic experience of everyday objects. I argue that our aesthetic experience of everyday scenes depends on our experience of artworks both long-term and short-term. I take the long-term influence first.

A radical version of the claim about the long-term influence of our aesthetic experience of artworks on the aesthetic experience of everyday scene is the following: experience of artworks is a necessary condition and prerequisite of our ability to experience everyday scenes in an aesthetic manner. We can put this claim in a counterfactual form: if we had never had aesthetic experiences of artworks, we would not be able to experience everyday scenes aesthetically.

Ernst Gombrich held a similar albeit arguably somewhat weaker version of this claim: he said that art “teach[es] us to see in nature new beauties of whose existence we have never dreamt. If we follow them and learn from them, even a glance out of our own window may become a thrilling adventure” (Gombrich 1950/1972, 11). According to Gombrich, aesthetic experience is something learnt and we learn it from engaging with artworks. When we have learned how to experience artworks in an aesthetic manner, we can use this acquired skill to experience everyday scenes, like the view from our window, in an aesthetic manner.

But Gombrich is surprisingly unspecific when he talks about “new beauties” and the “thrilling adventure” of looking out of the window. Here is a much more thorough and much more helpful (and much longer) description of the same phenomenon by Marcel Proust:

Since I had seen such things depicted in water-colours by Elstir, I sought to find again in reality, I cherished, as though for their poetic beauty, the broken gestures of the knives still lying across one another, the swollen convexity of a discarded napkin upon which the sun would patch a scrap of yellow velvet, the half-empty glass which thus shewed to greater advantage the noble sweep of its curved sides, and, in the heart of its translucent crystal, clear as frozen daylight, a dreg of wine, dusky but sparkling with reflected lights, the displacement of solid objects, the transmutation of liquids by the effect of light and shade, the

shifting colour of the plums which passed from green to blue and from blue to golden yellow in the half-plundered dish, the chairs, like a group of old ladies, that came twice daily to take their places round the white cloth spread on the table as on an altar at which were celebrated the rites of the palate, where in the hollows of oyster-shells a few drops of lustral water had gathered as in tiny holy water stoups of stone; I tried to find beauty there where I had never imagined before that it could exist, in the most ordinary things, in the profundities of 'still life'. (Proust 1970, 325)

Proust gives a very vivid description of how looking at Elstir's paintings changed the way Marcel was attending to various seemingly irrelevant features of the otherwise not particularly remarkable interior of the restaurant. I will come back to Proust's emphasis on attending to various features in Section III. But before I do so, I want to shift to another way in which the aesthetic experience of artworks can and often does influence the aesthetic experience of everyday scenes.

Gombrich and Proust talked about long-term effects: For Gombrich, engaging with an artwork can teach us ways to experience everyday scenes ever after. And Proust could see the oysters and the folds on the tablecloth the way he did years after seeing the Elstir paintings.

But the aesthetic experience of artworks also has a much more immediate and short-term effect on our aesthetic experience of artworks. It has a lingering effect.

One's experience of artworks can have a more direct and immediate influence on one's experience of all things. When you spend an entire day in the museum and you walk home afterwards, the drab bus stop may look to you like one of the pictures in the museum. And when leaving a good concert or movie, the ugly, grey, dirty streetscape can look positively beautiful.

This lingering effect of the aesthetic experience of artworks is difficult to explain. It seems that aesthetic experiences often do not stop when the contemplation of the object of the aesthetic experience stops. After leaving the concert hall or the cinema, one may still see the world differently.

Whether this 'lingering effect' is better described as the continuation of our aesthetic experience or as the aesthetic experience coloring and altering the ensuing experience depends on how one individuates experiences in general. But the main point is that after having spent a day in the museum, our experience of the banal scenes on leaving the museum tends to retain some kind of aesthetic character (it is important that this doesn't happen all the time—something often distracts us—but it tends to happen nonetheless). Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet's film *Une visite au Louvre* (2004) emphasizes this odd feature of aesthetic experiences, when they follow up forty-five minutes of footage of brilliantly filmed artworks with a scene of the poplar tree outside of the Louvre. Our aesthetic experience of the tree outside is as strong as that of the paintings inside.

There is nothing beautiful about the drab street corner or the ugly streetscape around it. How come I experience it aesthetically—the same way I experienced the paintings in the museum a moment ago? In the next section, I argue that the two phenomena just described—the long-term and the short-term influence of the

aesthetic experience of artworks on the aesthetic experience of everyday scenes—is difficult to explain if we accept some widespread accounts of what aesthetic experience is, but becomes much easier if we take aesthetic experience to be an experience marked out by the way we exercise our attention. In short, the long-term and the short-term influence of the aesthetic experience of artworks on the aesthetic experience of everyday scenes puts some important constraints on any account of aesthetic experience.

III. THREE ACCOUNTS OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

There is no shortage of various ways of explaining what makes an experience ‘aesthetic’. Up until this point in the paper, I used an ostensive definition by referring to some famous descriptions of aesthetic experience by some literary luminaries. But this hardly gives us a definition of what aesthetic experience is. Rather than going through all attempts at a definition, I want to overview three more general ways of defining aesthetic experience. We seem to have three options here:

- a. Aesthetic experience is defined in terms of the properties it is directed at.
- b. Aesthetic experience is defined in terms of the relation between this mental state and some of our other mental states.
- c. Aesthetic experience is defined in terms of the intrinsic property of this mental state.

I will argue that (a) and (b) are not very well placed to explain how the aesthetic experience of artworks influences the aesthetic experience of everyday scenes. But at least one version of (c), the least popular suggestion of the three in recent decades, is in a much better position to do so. I outline these three ways of thinking about aesthetic experience in this section and then return to the question of everyday aesthetic experiences in Section IV.

III. a. Attributed properties

The first suggestion is that aesthetic experience is defined in terms of the properties it is directed at (or, to put it differently, in terms of its formal objects). Aesthetic experiences, like experiences in general, attribute properties to objects.⁴ Depending on what kinds of properties are being attributed, we get different types of experience. If the attributed properties are of a certain special kind, we get aesthetic experience.

This analysis leaves open what these ‘special’ properties are supposed to be. Clive Bell famously suggested that what he called ‘aesthetic emotion’ (what we’ll call aesthetic experience) is directed at significant form. Hence, the properties aesthetic experience attributes are formal properties: “lines and colors combined in a particular way” (Bell 1914, 17). If we accept this way of thinking about aesthetic experiences, this would open up the very concept of aesthetic experience to the standard anti-formalist objections (see, e.g., Wollheim [2001, 127], Budd [1995, 49], Lopes [2005, 120]). Monroe Beardsley extends the list of what he calls ‘aesthetically relevant features’, that is, properties that aesthetic experience attributes, to include unity,

complexity, and intensity (Beardsley 1981, 456–70). This move may deflect some but definitely not all antiformalist objections (see esp. Budd [1995, 51ff]).

The most important contemporary proponent of the view that aesthetic experience should be defined in terms of the properties it attributes is Noël Carroll. As he says,

If an experience of an artwork is a matter of [...] the detection of its aesthetic and/or expressive qualities, then it is an aesthetic experience. (Carroll 2001, 60. See also Carroll [2000, 207] and Carroll [2006])

Carroll calls this account of aesthetic experience ‘deflationary’ as it talks about aesthetic experience in the same way as it talks about any other mental states: they attribute properties to objects. If these properties are aesthetic and/or expressive properties, then the mental state that attributes them could be described as aesthetic experience.

III. b. Relation to other mental states

The second suggestion is that we should define aesthetic experiences in terms of the relation between them and some of our other mental states: the ways in which they are connected to other mental states or the ways in which other mental states are representing these experiences. What makes an aesthetic experience aesthetic is not something about this experience itself, but rather something that happens to this experience in our mental economy. Here is Gary Iseminger’s account:

I shall call the aesthetic state of mind appreciation, and I propose the following structural (as distinct from phenomenological) account of its essence: Someone is appreciating a state of affairs just in case she or he is valuing for its own sake the experiencing of that state of affairs. (Iseminger 2006, 99. The account has its roots in Iseminger [1981].)

In other words, what makes aesthetic experiences special is that we value them for their own sake. This way of thinking about aesthetic experiences could be combined with a version of the attributed properties view above. This is what Jerrold Levinson does when he claims:

Aesthetic experience is experience involving aesthetic perception of some object, grounded in aesthetic attention to the object, and in which there is a positive hedonic, affective, or evaluative response to the perception itself and/or the content of that perception. (Levinson 2013, section 5)

Levinson in turn defines aesthetic attention as “attention focused on an object’s character, or otherwise put, its perceivable forms and properties, for their own sake, in their full individuality, apart from the utility of so attending, on whatever content emerges from such forms and properties, and on relationships among such forms,

properties, and contents” (ibid). “Aesthetic perception can be understood as the upshot of aesthetic attending” (ibid).

III. c. Intrinsic properties

The oldest and most widely discussed account of aesthetic experiences defines them in terms of their intrinsic properties. Some of the most famous candidates for intrinsic properties that aesthetic experiences have but nonaesthetic experiences lack are detachment, disinterestedness, and disengagement (Stolnitz [1960] emphasizes disinterestedness, whereas Bullough [1912] emphasizes emotional detachment). The (Kantian) idea is that our aesthetic experiences are different from our other experiences in as much as they are free from our everyday worries and practical outlook (see Zangwill [1992] for a careful analysis of how contemporary concepts of disinterestedness relate to the Kantian one).

The first thing to note here is that it is not entirely clear whether this way of thinking about aesthetic experiences is in fact emphasizing their intrinsic properties. Is disinterestedness an intrinsic property or a relational one, namely, the lack of some interfering interest? The answer to this question will depend on taking sides on a much more general debate in the philosophy of perception about how ‘thin’ or ‘thick’ experiences are (Siegel 2006; Siewert 2002; Schwitzgebel 2002). For simplicity, I follow the aesthetic experience literature in treating these views as ones that aim to define aesthetic experience in terms of its intrinsic property.

The concept of attention has been very important both in the expositions of and in the objections to the ‘disinterestedness’ accounts of aesthetic experience. Eliseo Vivas, for example, defines aesthetic experience as “an experience of rapt attention which involves the intransitive apprehension of an object’s immanent meanings and values in their full presentational immediacy” (Vivas 1959, 227). Jerome Stolnitz also appeals to the concept of attention in his definition of the aesthetic attitude as “disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone (Stolnitz 1960, 33–34).⁵

This emphasis on some special way of exercising attention as a mark of aesthetic experience is not limited to analytic aesthetics. It is very much present in Proust’s description of aesthetic experience as well, as we have seen in the quote above. But here is an even more vivid description of what is distinctive of aesthetic experience:

But even the ugliness of faces, which of course were mostly familiar to him, seemed something new and uncanny, now that their features,—instead of being to him symbols of practical utility in the identification of this or that man, who until then had represented merely so many pleasures to be sought after, boredoms to be avoided, or courtesies to be acknowledged—were at rest, measurable by aesthetic coordinates alone, in the autonomy of their curves and angles. (Proust 1928, 469–70)

The reason why Proust’s experience is different in this passage is because he attends to seemingly irrelevant and unusual features of the scene before him—not to features that have to do with practical utility, but rather to features that are ‘measurable by

aesthetic coordinates alone'. These features were there in front of his eyes all along. But it is attending to them that turned his experience into an aesthetic experience.

This is not a surprising approach. We know from perceptual psychology that attention can bring about radical changes in our perceptual experience. As the inattention blindness experiments show (see [Simmons and Chabris 1999](#); Mack and Rock 1999), when we are not attending to a stimulus (because our attentional resources are used up for another task), we tend not to be aware of stimuli even if they take up a large part of the visual field.

An example: you see a clip where people pass a basketball around. You are supposed to count how many times the team whose members are dressed in white pass the ball among themselves. Most participants who do this fail to notice that a man in a gorilla costume walks across the screen and takes up a significant part of the screen for a long period of time ([Simmons and Chabris 1998](#)). Subjects are not aware of the gorilla, because their attention is directed elsewhere (to the passing of the basketball). If there is no counting task to perform, everyone immediately notices the gorilla. There is a debate about whether we really fail to see the gorilla or maybe we were conscious of the gorilla, but we immediately forgot it: whether we should talk about inattention blindness or inattention amnesia (see [Wolfe 1999](#)). But regardless of which way we go, it remains true that different ways of attending influences our experience radically. But if we treat aesthetic experience as a kind of experience, then it should also be true that the way we are attending is a crucial feature of aesthetic experiences.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF EVERYDAY AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

I aim to show that the deflationary and the 'valuing for its own sake' accounts of aesthetic experience have troubles accommodating the phenomenon that our aesthetic experience of everyday scenes depends on our aesthetic experience of artworks. The attention-centered account, in contrast, has all the resources to explain this phenomenon. In short, other things equal, the considerations from everyday aesthetic experience militate against the deflationary and the 'valuing for its own sake' accounts and point towards an attention-centered approach to understanding what is so special about aesthetic experience.

The deflationary account does not seem to have the means to explain why the aesthetic experience of everyday scenes would depend on the aesthetic experience of artworks. And this is true regardless of how liberally or conservatively one conceives of the aesthetic/expressive properties that do all the work in the deflationary accounts. If we think of aesthetic/expressive properties very conservatively, restricting the set of aesthetic/expressive properties to ones we typically find in artworks, then the entire phenomenon of the aesthetic experience of everyday scenes would be difficult to explain (as more work needs to be done on what aesthetic/expressive properties everyday scenes instantiate [to be fair, the arguments in [Carroll \(1993\)](#) go a long way towards this]).

But even if we allow for a more liberal conception of aesthetic/expressive properties, which would allow aesthetic/expressive properties to be instantiated by everyday scenes, we still have a problem. After the film or concert is over or when we leave the museum, the properties we are detecting change. We were detecting the properties

of the film/musical piece/artwork before (at T1), but now (at T2) we are detecting the properties of the drab street corner where we need to wait for the bus. If we had an aesthetic experience at T1, this means, according to the deflationary account, that we were detecting the aesthetic/expressive properties of the film/music/artwork. And if this aesthetic experience lingers, this means that at T2 we are also detecting aesthetic/expressive properties. But these aesthetic/expressive properties are very different from the ones we were detecting at T1: we are looking at a very different scene now. Nothing in the deflationary account explains why we are detecting aesthetic/expressive properties at T2.

And the deflationary account also runs into problems when it comes to longer-term influences of the aesthetic experience of artworks on the aesthetic experience of everyday scenes. The tablecloth and the plums on Proust's table had the very same properties before and after his encounter with Elstir's paintings. So they had the very same aesthetic/expressive properties as well. Nonetheless, Proust only had aesthetic experiences of these everyday objects after his encounter with Elstir's art. The properties there to be detected at T1 and T2 were the same, nonetheless, he had an aesthetic experience in one case (at T2) but not in the other (at T1).

The dependence of the aesthetic experience of everyday scenes on the aesthetic experience of artworks is also an unresolved problem for the 'valuing for its own sake' account. While it may sound convincing to say that we value our experience of the concert or the theatre performance for its own sake, it is difficult to see why anyone would value the experience of looking at random street scenes after leaving the building for its own sake.

Similarly, it follows from the 'valuing for its own sake' account that Proust did not value his experience of the folds of the tablecloth before his visits to Elstir's studio, but he did value his experience of the folds of the tablecloth afterwards. This may be so, but this is hardly an explanation: what any account of aesthetic experience should tell us is *why* he valued his experience after but not before. Presumably it's because the experience was different. But then the 'valuing for its own sake' account owes us an explanation for how the two experiences are different.

And this is where the attention-centered account is in a much better position to explain the phenomenon at hand than the alternatives—given that we have independent empirical reasons to hold that experience depends systematically on the allocation of attention, as we have seen in the last section.

If the allocation of attention is indeed a central feature of aesthetic experience, then what we should expect is that our way of attending will be slow to change—because we do not have full control over the way we exercise our attention (a point already emphasized by Leibniz [1704/1981, §54]). But then just because the movie or the concert is over or just because we have left the museum, the way we exercise our attention does not have to, and often does not, change—it is the aesthetic way in which we are attending to the world that lingers.

Similarly, looking at Elstir's paintings taught Proust to attend to some seemingly irrelevant features of the everyday objects around him and this new way of allocating his attention is what changed the phenomenal character of his experience—that is what turned them into aesthetic experiences.

V. CONCLUSION

I have not said anything about just how our attention is exercised when we have an aesthetic experience (of artworks or of everyday scenes). The aim of this paper is not to give a fully worked out account of what aesthetic experience is. The aim is, rather, to show how the aesthetic experience of everyday scenes and the way it depends on the aesthetic experience of artworks puts constraints on how we should think about aesthetic experience in general. The general lesson was that the deflationary and the ‘valuing for its own sake’ accounts do not seem to be too promising and we should instead explore the attention-centered accounts. Just what ‘aesthetic attention’ would amount to is something I wanted to leave open here (but see the references in Section III. c and [Nanay forthcoming](#) for various different ways in which the attention-centered accounts could be fleshed out).

What makes aesthetic experiences aesthetic is of course difficult to capture. But one indication that the attention-centered approach is on the right track is that it can explain much more prosaic experiential shifts in our perception of everyday scenes that result from engagement with artworks.

One such shift is described at length by Noel Burch: There are some features of everyday scenes that we fail to notice if we see the everyday scene, but that we immediately notice if we see a film or photo of the very same scene ([Burch, 1973](#), 33–34, see also [Matthen \[2010\]](#) who makes a very similar point about music). One of the examples Burch mentions is the spatial alignment of objects. When we look at a streetscape, we tend not to notice that a lamppost is directly behind the policeman. But if we see a film or photo of the very same scene, we do notice this—and this is something film directors are normally trying to avoid as it often looks as if the lamppost were sticking out of the policeman’s head. If we watch a lot of films, this way of trying to avoid unfortunate occlusions can also influence the way we see everyday scenes in general. And this influence can be explained in terms of attention: trying to avoid occlusion of this kind (basically, trying to avoid that the line that connects two of the filmed or photographed objects would also go through the camera) makes one attend to this normally unattended feature of scenes and this way of exercising one’s attention spreads to the everyday perception of everyday scenes as well.

Seeing lampposts and policemen aligned or avoiding to do so is not in any ways an aesthetic experience. But this provides a nice demonstration of how our engagement with an artwork can change our attention in a way that can then influence our perception of everyday scenes. And if attention can serve this role in the occlusion case, it can also do so in the case of aesthetic experiences. As D.H. Lawrence says: “The essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention, and ‘discovers’ a new world within the known world” ([Lawrence 1928/2005](#), 107).⁶

NOTES

1. [Camus 1937](#).
2. [de Chirico 1912](#).
3. I will not try to define what works of art are—whatever definition one uses, there is a distinction between works of art and everyday scenes.
4. I use the term ‘attribute’ instead of ‘represent’ because it has been argued that perceptual experiences do not represent anything, rather, they put us in direct contact with the world ([Campbell 2002](#), [Travis 2004](#), [Brewer forthcoming](#), [Martin forthcoming](#)).

5. This view of aesthetic experiences has been heavily criticized, mainly by George Dickie (1964), but also by Zemach (1997). See Nanay (2015; 2016) for responses to this line of criticism.
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