

## Orgasm and art

Karl Pfeifer\*

<sup>1</sup>Department of Philosophy, University of Saskatchewan, Canada. [karl.pfeifer@usask.ca](mailto:karl.pfeifer@usask.ca)

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** Karl Pfeifer argues against the view that an aesthetic experience *must* be a uniquely special kind of experience by means of an analogy with sexual experiences. Nonetheless, he leaves open the possibility that *some* aesthetic experiences might still be of a special kind.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic Experience, Aesthetics, Philosophy of Art, Terminology

Aesthetic experiences are typically said to be evoked in appropriate circumstances by objects with aesthetic qualities such as beauty, harmony, grace, elegance, style, aptness, grandeur, or vividness, to name but a few. However, it is still a prevailing view in some quarters that such an evoked aesthetic experience is by definition a uniquely special kind of experience. Mostly such a claim is made casually and uncritically in passing, but one still finds researchers who make this bold assumption the organizing principle of their investigations (Marković, 2012). As a corrective, I offer the following brief discussion, whose remote ancestor was a commentary on an unpublished conference paper by Stan Godlovitch (1981). The position advocated is that of pluralism regarding what can count as an aesthetic experience. Let me explain and try to convince you by changing the subject and talking about sex.

The stout heroine of Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* recounts her first sexual experience as follows:

He knelt down in front of me, right in a mud puddle – it was April and had been raining – and buried his face against my enormous stomach. What did I do? I was stupefied; I was compassionate; I stroked his hair. My hand smelled of Brylcreem for days. After a few minutes of this, he got up, the knees of his pants dripping wet, and walked away. That was my first sexual experience. I went home and ate my sandwich (Atwood, 1976: 98).

One may well feel some impatience at this point, but it is nonetheless clear that an experience of a sexual nature did take place. Some sort of sexual happening was “lived through” by the heroine – though if we take the author at her word, the “living through” was not psychologically distinguished but just plain old stupefaction and compassion. To me, claiming that in order to have an aesthetic experience, one has to have a special experience is like claiming that one has to have an orgasm in order to have a sexual experience. Admittedly, some kinds of sexual experiences spring to mind more readily and also are regarded as more paradigmatic than others. Not having an orgasm might be said to be missing out on the sexual experience par excellence. But so might merely having one. Ambiance and allure, tenderness and charm, are also important and often more so. The occurrence of orgasm, even if exclusive to sexual experience, may be deemed in many cases to be of secondary importance.

The moral is that there are multiple criteria for what counts as a sexual experience [as Bill Clinton to his dismay was finally forced to reluctantly admit: vide *The New York Times on the Web* (1998, September 17) and Lacayo (1998, August 24). A special occurrence may or may not be required. Sexual devices, sex toys, and/or partners may or may not be involved. A special biologically unique event need not take place [cf. the discussion of “games” in Wittgenstein (1968: §§ 66–67). Aesthetic experience, prior to attempts at persuasive definitions (Blackburn, 1996: 284) in support of an ideological stance, is in salient respects analogous to sexual experience: just as is the case for the expression “sexual experience”, there are many different criteria for correct uses of the expression “aesthetic experience”.

Aesthetic experiences are commonly and perhaps paradigmatically occasioned by art in some way or other. Nature may be conveniently subsumed as a species of “found art” (*The Cass Art Blog* n.d.) – Freud, after all, found sex in new places too. We don't always require the art to be good or beautiful or apprehended as

intended by the artist or apprehended as required by critical practice or even regarded favorably. We can distinguish kinds of aesthetic experience here and that is enough; we don't need to attribute a feature that is unique to them all in order to regard them as aesthetic. To say that a particular one of these kinds to the exclusion of the others is *really* aesthetic experience would be merely stipulative, in the sense of a "definition stipulating how a term is to be used, rather than answering to some previous rule or pattern of usage" (Blackburn, 1996: 363; Nordquist, 2021). The relative importance of the different kinds of experience may be another matter. It may even be an ideological matter in some sense, though I do not hold the ideological to be beyond the pale of philosophical justification.

An interesting question that remains is whether there are "orgasms" in aesthetic experience. (As it happens, for the case of music this question has already been answered in the affirmative and in a closer to literal sense than one might have expected (Harrison & Louie, 2014). Even more interesting perhaps is the question, so what if there are? In the case of sexual experience, for example, the mere presence of orgasm is not an indication that a satisfying and meaningful experience has occurred, and in fact, orgasm may even be gratuitous for such an experience. An experience, though special and unique, might still be of secondary importance or even irrelevant. This question I leave for others.

Notwithstanding what has been presented so far, we might still ask ourselves, are there *any* special and uniquely aesthetic experiences at all? I hold this to be an empirical question, which also has a philosophical or conceptual side. Even with multiple criteria operating, we do need to say something about the limits to aesthetic experience, and we do need to say something about what counts as special. Once these philosophical details are settled, though, I do not think the situation is in principle any different from what it would be if we were faced with the claim that some person was capable of hearing sounds of a frequency that no one else could hear. We would first determine that it wasn't just some delusion of his by looking for an objective presence, for example, the existence of vibratory phenomena, to which we all are exposed. Then we would look for something different about him that would account for his ability. If we found relevant differences and he continued to make correct frequency discriminations outside the normal human range when certain vibratory phenomena were present, we would eventually accept his word regarding his having special auditory perceptions. For special aesthetic experiences, the relevant differences may be more difficult to determine. They may even forever elude us. But we should not equate epistemological indeterminacy with conceptual failure.

To recapitulate, two conclusions were intimated in the foregoing. First and foremost, it was maintained that the *general* claim that aesthetic experience is uniquely special is unwarranted. The analogy drawn between aesthetic experiences and sexual experiences strongly suggests that multiple criteria are at play for both these phrases as commonly used. Hence, a pluralist construal of aesthetic experience is indicated. Secondly, it was maintained that this does not preclude the possibility that *some* limited number of aesthetic experiences might still be uniquely special (or at least special, if not uniquely so).

## ORCID

Karl Pfeifer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8059-6008>

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