

## **The End of Aesthetic Experience**

Experience, quipped Oscar Wilde, is the name one gives to one's mistakes. Does aesthetic experience then name the central blunder of modern aesthetics? Though long considered the most essential of aesthetic concepts, as including but also surpassing the realm of art, aesthetic experience has in the last half-century come under increasing critique. Not only its value but its very existence has been questioned. How has this once vital concept lost its appeal; does it still offer anything of value? The ambiguous title "the end of aesthetic experience" suggests my two goals: a reasoned account of its demise and an argument for reconceiving and thus redeeming its purpose.

Though I shall briefly note the continental critique of this concept, I shall mostly focus on its progressive decline in twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy. Not only because here its descent is most extreme but because it is in this tradition -- that of John Dewey, Monroe Beardsly, Nelson Goodman, and Arthur Danto - - that I situate my own aesthetic work. While Dewey celebrated aesthetic experience, making it the very center of his philosophy of art, Danto virtually shuns the concept, warning (after Duchamp) that its "aesthetic delectation is a danger to be avoided".<sup>1</sup> The decline of aesthetic experience from Dewey to Danto reflects, I shall argue, deep confusion about this concept's diverse forms and theoretical functions. But it also reflects a growing preoccupation with the anaesthetic thrust of this century's artistic avant-garde, itself

symptomatic of much larger transformations in our basic sensibility as we move increasingly from an experiential to an informational culture.

To appreciate the decline of the concept of aesthetic experience, we must first recall its prime importance. Some see it as playing a major role, *avant la lettre* and in diverse guises, in premodern aesthetics (e.g. in Plato's, Aristotle's and Aquinas's accounts of the experience of beauty, and in Alberti's and Gravina's concepts of *lentezza* and *delirio*).<sup>2</sup> But there can be no doubt that its dominance was established in modernity, when the term "aesthetic" was officially established. Once modern science and philosophy had destroyed the classical, medieval, and Renaissance faith that properties like beauty were objective features of the world, modern aesthetics turned to subjective experience to explain and ground them. Even when seeking an intersubjective consensus or standard that would do the critical job of realist objectivism, philosophy typically identified the aesthetic not only *through* but *with* subjective experience. "Beauty", says Hume in arguing for a standard of taste, "is no quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them", though some minds are, of course, more judicious and authoritative than others. Kant explicitly identifies the subject's experience "of pleasure or displeasure" as "the determining ground" of aesthetic judgement.<sup>3</sup> The notion of aesthetic experience moreover helped provide an umbrella concept for diverse qualities that were distinguished from beauty but still closely related to taste and art: concepts like the sublime and the picturesque.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, aesthetic

experience gained still greater importance through the general celebration of experience by influential *Lebensphilosophies* aimed at combatting the threat of mechanistic determinism (seen not only in science but in the ravages of industrialization). Experience here replaced atomistic sensation as the basic epistemological concept, and its link to vividly felt life is clear not only from the German term "*erlebenis*" but from the vitalistic experiential theories of Bergson, James, and Dewey. As art subsumed religion's role by providing a non-supernatural spirituality in the material world, so experience emerged as the naturalistic yet non-mechanistic expression of mind. The union of art and experience engendered a notion of aesthetic experience that achieved, through the turn of the century's great aestheticist movement, enormous cultural importance and almost religious intensity. Aesthetic experience became the island of freedom, beauty, and idealistic meaning in an otherwise coldly materialistic and law-determined world; it was the locus not only of the highest pleasures but a means of spiritual conversion and transcendence; it accordingly became the central concept for explaining the distinctive nature and value of art, which had itself become increasingly autonomous and isolated from the mainstream of material life and praxis. The doctrine of *art for art's sake* could only mean that art was for the sake of its own experience. And seeking to expand art's dominion, it argued that anything could be rendered art if it could engender the appropriate experience.

This hasty genealogy of aesthetic experience does not, of course, do justice to the complex development of this concept, to the variety of theories and conceptions it embraces. But it should at least

highlight four features that are central to the tradition of aesthetic experience and whose interplay shapes yet confuses twentieth century accounts of this concept. First, aesthetic experience is essentially enjoyable and rewarding; call this its evaluative dimension. Second, it is something vividly felt and subjectively savored, affectively absorbing us and focussing our attention in its immediate presence and thus standing out from the ordinary flow of routine experience; call this its phenomenological dimension. Third, it is meaningful experience, not mere sensation; call this its semantic dimension. Fourth, it is a distinctive experience closely identified with the distinction of fine art and representing art's essential aim; call this the demarcational-definitional dimension.

These features of aesthetic experience do not seem, *prima facie*, collectively inconsistent. Yet, as we shall see, they generate theoretical tensions that propel recent analytic philosophy toward growing marginalization of this concept and have even inspired some analysts -- most notably George Dickie --to deny its very existence.<sup>4</sup> Before concentrating on the Anglo-American scene, we should note the major lines of recent continental critique. For only by comparison can we grasp the full measure of the analytic depreciation of aesthetic experience.

## II

From the Frankfurt school to hermeneutics and deconstruction, the continental critique of aesthetic experience has focussed mostly on challenging its radical demarcation and its phenomenological

immediacy. The next section of this paper shows how these two main critical thrusts are developed in the theories of Adorno, Benjamin, Gadamer, and deconstruction. But lacking the time to present them, let me simply summarize their best arguments. First, aesthetic experience cannot be conceived as an unchanging concept narrowly identified with fine art's purely autonomous reception. For not only is such reception impoverished, but aesthetic experience extends well beyond fine art (to nature and festivals for example). Moreover, it is conditioned by changes in the non-artistic world that affect our very capacities for experience. The second charge, that aesthetic experience requires more than mere phenomenological immediacy to achieve its full meaning is equally compelling. Immediate reactions are often poor and mistaken, so interpretation is generally needed to enhance our experience. Moreover, prior assumptions and habits of perception, including prior acts of interpretation, are necessary preconditions for aesthetic responses that are experienced as immediate. This insistence on the interpretive is also the crux of the Goodman-Danto critique of aesthetic experience. So when Gadamer urges that "aesthetics must be absorbed into hermeneutics" (TM 146), he is expressing precisely the dominant analytic line. However, the claim that aesthetic experience must involve *more* than phenomenological immediacy and vivid feeling does not entail that such immediate feeling is not important to aesthetic experience.

The decline of aesthetic experience in analytic philosophy is partly the result of conflating these different propositions and consequently depreciating affect. But it also stems from other confusions arising from the changing role of this concept in Anglo-

American philosophy from Dewey to Danto, and especially from the fact that this diversity has not been adequately recognized. Viewed as a univocal concept, aesthetic experience seems too hopelessly confused to be redeemed as useful. So the first task is to articulate its contrasting conceptions.

### III

These are best mapped in terms of three axes of contrast whose opposing poles capture all four of the features already noted. Is the concept of aesthetic experience intrinsically honorific or instead descriptively neutral? Second, is it robustly phenomenological or simply semantic? In other words, are affect and subjective intentionality essential dimensions of this experience or is it rather only a certain kind of meaning or style of symbolization that renders an experience aesthetic? Third, is this concept's primary theoretical function provocational-transformational, aiming to enlarge the aesthetic field, or is it instead demarcational, i.e. to define, delimit, and explain the aesthetic status quo?

My claim is that, since Dewey, Anglo-American theories of aesthetic experience have moved steadily from the former to the latter, resulting eventually in the concept's loss of power and interest. In other words, Dewey's essentially evaluative, phenomenological, and transformational notion of aesthetic experience has been gradually replaced by a purely descriptive, semantic one whose chief purpose is to explain and thus support the established demarcation of art and aesthetics from other human domains. Such changes generate

tensions that make the concept suspicious. Moreover, when aesthetic experience seems in principle unable to discharge this definitional duty, as Danto concludes, the whole concept is abandoned for one that promises to perform this function -- interpretation. That aesthetic experience may nonetheless be fruitful for other purposes is simply, but I think wrongly ignored. To substantiate this line of narrative and argument, we must examine the theories of Dewey, Beardsley, Goodman and Danto.

Dewey's prime use of aesthetic experience is aimed not at distinguishing art from the rest of life, but rather at "recovering the continuity of its esthetic experience with the normal processes of living", so that both art and life will be improved by their greater integration.<sup>5</sup> His goal was to break the stifling hold of what he called "the museum conception of art", which compartmentalizes the aesthetic from real life, remitting it to a separate realm remote from the vital interests of ordinary men and women. This "esoteric idea of fine art" gains power from the sacralization of art objects sequestered in museums and private collections. Dewey therefore insisted on privileging dynamic aesthetic experience over the physical objects that conventional dogma identifies and then fetishizes as art. For Dewey, the essence and value of art are not in such artifacts *per se* but in the dynamic and developing experiential activity through which they are created and perceived. He therefore distinguished between the physical "art product" that once created can exist "apart from human experience" and "the actual work of art [which] is what the product does with and in experience" (AE 9,167;329). This primacy of aesthetic experience not only frees art from object fetishization but

also from confinement to the traditional domain of fine art. For aesthetic experience clearly exceeds the limits of fine art, as, for example, in the appreciation of nature.<sup>6</sup>

Dewey insisted that aesthetic experience could likewise occur in the pursuit of science and philosophy, in sport and *haute cuisine*, contributing much to the appeal of these practices. Indeed, it could be achieved in virtually any domain of action, since all experience, to be coherent and meaningful, required the germ of aesthetic unity and development. By rethinking art in terms of aesthetic experience, Dewey hoped we could radically enlarge and democratize the domain of art, integrating it more fully into the real world which would be greatly improved by the pursuit of such manifold arts of living.

Its potential pervasiveness did not mean that aesthetic experience could not be distinguished from ordinary experience. Its distinction, however, is essentially qualitative. From the humdrum flow of routine experience, it stands out, says Dewey, as a distinctly memorable, rewarding whole -- as not just experience but "*an* experience" -- because in it we feel "most alive" and fulfilled through the active, satisfying engagement of all our human faculties (sensual, emotive, and cognitive) that contribute to this integrated whole. Aesthetic experience is differentiated not by its unique possession of some specific element or its unique focus on some particular dimension, but by its more zestful integration of all the elements of ordinary experience into an integrated, absorbing, developing whole that provides "a satisfyingly emotional quality" of some sort and so exceeds the threshold of perception that it can be appreciated for its own sake (AE 42,45,63).<sup>7</sup> An essential part of that appreciation is the

immediate, phenomenological feel of aesthetic experience, whose sense of unity, affect, and value is "directly fulfilling" rather than deferred for some other time or end.

The transformational, phenomenological, and evaluative thrust of Deweyan aesthetic experience should now be clear. So should the usefulness of such a concept for provoking recognition of artistic potentialities and aesthetic satisfactions in pursuits previously considered nonaesthetic. It is further useful in reminding us that, even in fine art, directly fulfilling experience rather than collecting or scholarly criticism is the primary value. Nor does this emphasis on phenomenological immediacy and affect preclude the semantic dimension of aesthetic experience. [Meaning is not incompatible with qualia and affect.]

Unfortunately, Dewey does not confine himself to transformational provocation, but also proposes aesthetic experience as a theoretical definition of art. By standard philosophical criteria, this definition is hopelessly inadequate, grossly misrepresenting our current concept of art. Much art, particularly bad art, fails to engender Deweyan aesthetic experience, which, on the other hand, often arises outside art's institutional limits. Moreover, though the concept of art (as a historically determined concept) can be somewhat reshaped, it cannot be convincingly defined in such a global way so as to be coextensive with aesthetic experience. No matter how powerful and universal is the aesthetic experience of sunsets, we are hardly going to reclassify them as art.<sup>8</sup> By employing the concept of aesthetic experience both to define what art in fact is and to transform it into something quite different, Dewey creates considerable confusion.

Hence analytic philosophers typically dismissed his whole idea of aesthetic experience as a disastrous muddle.

The major exception was Monroe Beardsley, who reconstructs this concept as the core of his analytic philosophy of art, which, like most analytic aesthetics was preoccupied with projects of differentiation. Rather than Dewey's quest to unite art to the rest of life, the aim was to clearly distinguish art and the aesthetic from other practices. This meant renouncing the transformational use of aesthetic experience. Instead this concept serves to define what is distinctive of works of art and what is constitutive of their value [(issuing in what Beardsley calls a "persuasive analysis of artistic goodness",APV 79)].

Beardsley's strategy is to argue that art can be defined as a distinctive function class, if there is a particular function that works of art "can do that other things cannot do, or do as completely or fully"(A 526). The production of aesthetic experience is claimed as this function, and so we explain both the general value of art and the differing value of its particular works through the basic value and intrinsic pleasure of that experience; better works, for Beardsley, are those capable of producing "aesthetic experiences of a greater magnitude" (A 531). Beardsley thus retains the evaluative, affective, and phenomenological features of aesthetic experience. It is, he says, an "intrinsically enjoyable" "experience of some intensity" where "attention" and "the succession of one's mental states" is focussed on and directed by some phenomenal field in a way that generates a satisfying "feeling" of coherence or "wholeness" and "a sense of actively exercising constructive powers of the mind"(A 527;APV 287-9). And he clarifies such defining characteristics of this

experience in considerable detail.<sup>9</sup>

After careful scrutiny, analytic aesthetics has rejected Beardsley's theory on three major grounds. One is scepticism about its phenomenological validity. George Dickie, the most cogent advocate of this line of critique, offers two principal arguments.<sup>10</sup> First, Beardsley must be wrong to describe the aesthetic experience as unified, coherent, etc. because doing so is simply a category mistake - - treating the term "experience" as if it denoted a real thing that could bear such descriptions instead of recognizing that it is merely a vague term that denotes nothing real. Talk about aesthetic experience is just a roundabout and ontologically inflationary way of talking about the aesthetic object as perceived or experienced. Beardsley's claim of the "unity of experience" is simply a misleading way of describing the experienced, phenomenal unity of the artwork. It alone can have such properties of coherence or wholeness. Particular subjective affects resulting from the work cannot have these properties, and the global aesthetic experience that purports to have them is just a linguistically constructed metaphysical phantom. Secondly, Dickie argues that even what is wrongly identified as aesthetic experience does not always have the affective content that Beardsley claims; and this critique can be extended to traditional claims that aesthetic experience is always pleasurable or unified.

What should one make of these two arguments? To the first we can reply that empirical psychologists accept the reality of experiences (including aesthetic ones) and the validity of describing them in terms of predicates (like unity, intensity, etc.) that, admittedly, are more often used to describe the objects of such

experiences.<sup>11</sup> Of course, one could challenge this response by dismissing it as confused folk psychology and adopting the trend in philosophy of mind toward dismissing the role of consciousness or first-person experience. For many reasons (including aesthetic ones), I think this trend should be resisted, but making my case would require too long a digression into philosophy of mind (which could however be pursued in later discussion).<sup>12</sup>

The argument that Beardsley's phenomenological ascriptions of affect, unity, and pleasure are in fact phenomenologically incorrect can be considered along with the second major criticism of his theory: that (the capacity to produce) aesthetic experience just cannot serve to identify and demarcate works of art. Here the standard strategy is to show that such definition would be both too wide and too narrow. It has been charged, for instance, that by Beardsley's criteria of aesthetic experience, good sexual experience would be falsely included as art, a conclusion Dewey would have welcomed but which runs against Beardsley's analytic aim of explaining established classifications.<sup>13</sup> Most criticisms, however, focus on his definition being too narrow. It wrongly excludes all the many artworks that are not capable of producing enjoyable experiences of unity and affect. Some argue that certain good works neither produce nor even try to produce such experiences, but clearly the problem is most severe with bad works of art. Since Beardsley's concept of aesthetic experience is essentially honorific and definitional, it cannot accommodate bad works as aesthetic objects or art, and yet clearly this is how we analytic philosophers think they must be classified. The concepts of art and aesthetic must allow for bad instances. Being a work of art cannot

entail being a good work of art, otherwise negative evaluations of artworks would be impossible.

This leads to the third major difficulty: the inadequacy of Beardsley's theory of aesthetic experience to explain our judgements of value. Because this experience is by definition enjoyable or positive, it can in no way account for strongly negative aesthetic judgements (e.g. of hideousness, repulsion, etc.), which cannot be explained by the mere absence of a positive aesthetic experience. Yet negative verdicts are central to the field of aesthetics, and any concept which claims to define this field must be able to account for bad as well as good art.<sup>14</sup>

Two conclusions emerge from all this critique. If aesthetic experience is to do the job of demarcating the entire realm of art, then its essentially evaluative content must be abandoned. Moreover, if one embraces contemporary scepticism about subjectivity and immediate feeling, then one must find a notion of aesthetic experience not centered on first-person phenomenology but rather on non-subjective accounts of meaning. These two inferences determine the new semantic direction of Nelson Goodman's theory of aesthetic experience. Though sharing Beardsley's analytic goal of demarcational definition, of "distinguishing in general between aesthetic and nonaesthetic objects and experience" (LA 243), he insists that such distinction must be "independent of all consideration of aesthetic value", since the existence of bad art means "being aesthetic does not exclude being... aesthetically bad"(LA 244,255). Aesthetic experience must also be defined independent of phenomenological accounts of mental states or immediate feelings

and meanings. For Goodman rejects intentional entities, explaining all meaning in terms of varieties of reference, just as he renounces the very idea of an immediate given before or apart from its symbolic representation. Nor can aesthetic experience be distinguished by its peculiarly emotive character, since "some works of art have little or no emotive content". Even when emotion *is* present, its role, Goodman argues, is simply the cognitive one "of discerning what properties a work has and expresses" by providing "a mode of sensitivity" to it (LA 248, 250,251), but such cognitive use of emotion (as Dewey also tirelessly urged) is equally present in science. Goodman concludes that while emotion is not an aesthetic constant, cognition of some sort is. He therefore defines aesthetic experience as "cognitive experience distinguished [from science and other domains] by the dominance of certain symbolic characteristics"(LA 262).<sup>15</sup>

Goodman calls these features "symptoms of the aesthetic" and individuates five of them:

"(1) syntactic density, where the finest differences in certain respect constitute a difference between symbols -- for example, an ungraded mercury thermometer as contrasted with an electronic digital-read-out instrument; (2) semantic density, where symbols are provided for things distinguished by the finest differences in certain respects (not only the ungraduated thermometer again but also ordinary English, though it is not syntactically dense); (3) relative repleteness, where comparatively many aspects of a symbol are significant -for example a single-line drawing of a mountain by Hokusai where every feature of shape, line, thickness, etc. counts, in contrast with perhaps the same line as a chart of daily stockmarket averages, where all that counts is the the height of the line above the base; (4) exemplification, where a symbol, whether or not it

denotes, symbolizes by serving as a sample of properties it literally or metaphorically possesses; and finally (5) multiple and complex reference, where a symbol performs several integrated and interacting referential functions" (WW67-68)

If an object's "functioning exhibits all these symptoms, Goodman claims, "then very likely the object is a work of art. If it shows almost none, then it probably isn't" (OMM199). Although these symptoms may fall short of being disjunctively necessary and conjunctively sufficient conditions for defining our concept of art, Goodman blames this on the fact that ordinary usage of this concept is too "vague and vagrant" to allow any clear definition and thus requires reform (WW69). His symptoms are therefore offered provisionally in the "search for a definition" (OMM 135) that will achieve this clarification.

Rather than focussing on provisional symptoms, criticism of Goodman's theory of aesthetic experience should be directed at the underlying premises that generate their proposal. Three problems seem most central. First is the premise of radical aesthetic differentiation, with its consequent presumption that the function of the concept of aesthetic experience is to explain art's compartmentalized distinction. Goodman's theory, like Beardsley's, is haunted by this goal of clearly defining art from all other realms, of seeking (in his words) "a way of distinguishing aesthetic from all other experience" (LA251). Thus, though keen to emphasize the great affinities of art and science, he feels compelled to seek a definition that will clearly mark off aesthetic from scientific experience. Invoking his symbolic symptoms to achieve this, he rightly worries

that they cannot adequately do the job by providing necessary and sufficient conditions.

Yet such worries only arise by presuming that the concept of aesthetic experience should be coextensive with art, that aesthetic experience cannot occur in science and other standardly non-artistic pursuits, but must apply in all art no matter how bad. There is ample testimony to challenge this presumption, but Goodman must ignore it. Methodologically wedded to the project of demarcating art by aesthetic experience, he cannot recognize a concept of aesthetic experience that cuts across disciplinary boundaries while maintaining its evaluative sense as enjoyably heightened, vivid, and coherently meaningful experience. Yet such a concept exists in common usage, not only in Dewey.

A second problem with Goodman's definition of aesthetic experience is that it seems to render the very notion of experience -- the conscious, phenomenological feel of things -- entirely superfluous. If the aesthetic is defined entirely in terms of the dominance of certain modes of symbolization, with no essential reference to sentience, immediate feeling, and affect, then what is the point of speaking about aesthetic experience at all? We might as well simply talk about the semantic symptoms of art and aesthetics, and simply drop the term "experience" (as Goodman indeed does in his most recent discussions). But apart from today's fashionable suspicion of consciousness, is there any reason why the concept of aesthetic experience must omit this phenomenological dimension with its immediacy of quality and affect? Goodman's discussion intimates (though never articulates) the following argument: Aesthetic

experience is essentially meaningful and cognitive through its use of symbols. Use of symbols implies mediation and dynamic processing of information, while phenomenological feeling and affect implies passivity and immediacy that cannot account for meaning. Hence, aesthetic experience cannot be essentially phenomenological, immediate, or affective.

This argument is very problematic. First, even assuming all its premises, what follows is only that aesthetic experience requires *more* than these phenomenological features, not that they are not central to such experience. Secondly, we can challenge the premises by arguing that phenomenological consciousness can include immediate perceptions of meaning, even if such immediate understandings on the conscious level require unconscious mediated processing or rely on a background of past conscious mediation. Further, one can argue that phenomenological feeling involves more than immediacy, just as affect (on both psychological and physiological levels) involves more than passivity. Finally, if Goodman brings the argument that affect is not central to aesthetic experience because it is not always present in the experience of artworks, we can counter by challenging the presumption that aesthetic experience can only be understood as an artistically demarcational concept, applying necessarily to our encounter with all (and only) artworks no matter how feeble the encounter and the works may be.

Not only does Goodman's theory of aesthetic experience neglect the phenomenology of experience, it is also wholly inadequate for its designated role of demarcating the realm of art. For its use in this role requires that we already know whether or not we are dealing with

artworks. Here is the argument. According to Goodman an object is an artwork when its symbolic functioning saliently employs the symptomatically aesthetic modes of symbolization. But an object does not wear its symbolic use on its sleeve; a visually identical sign may function differently in different symbolic systems. For instance, as Goodman remarks, the same drawn line may be a replete character artistically representing a mountain or instead a non-replete character merely representing profits in a chart. But we do not know which symbolic functioning the object has until we know whether the object is an artwork or just a chart. Hence symbolic functioning (and thus aesthetic experience as symbolic functioning) cannot be the basis for defining the artistic status of an object.

This argument is, of course, a variation of the argument from indiscernibles, employed so powerfully by Arthur Danto to argue that perceptual properties alone, including those involved in aesthetic experience, are insufficient for distinguishing between artworks and nonartworks, between Warhol's Brillo Boxes and their nonartistic counterparts. Our experience should differ, Danto says, "depending upon whether the response is to an artwork or to a mere real thing that cannot be told apart from it." But "we cannot appeal to [such differences]...in order to get our definition of art, inasmuch as we [first] need the definition of art in order to identify the sorts of aesthetic responses appropriate to works of art in contrast with mere real things"(T94). If this circularity does not altogether damn its definitional hopes, aesthetic experience has the further problem, Danto notes, of being traditionally defined as inherently positive, while many artworks, being bad, induce negative responses (T92).

Since aesthetic experience cannot adequately demarcate art, Danto virtually ignores it, subordinating it to another concept that he thinks can do the definitional job (and do it with the same semantic emphasis that Goodman advocated). This concept is interpretation. "There is", he says "no appreciation without interpretation", since "intepretations are what constitute works"; and "interpretation consists in determining the relationship between a work of art and its material counterpart" (T113;PD45). As I argue in "Beneath Interpretation"<sup>16</sup>, I think these claims are problematic. But even granting them does not nullify the idea of aesthetic experience. Its failure to provide a non-evaluative definition of our current concept of art does not entail that it has no important role to play in aesthetics, though we need, of course, to specify what role this could be.

Danto, however, suggests a further argument. The concept of aesthetic experience is not only useless but a "danger", because the very notion of aesthetic intrinsically trivializes art by seeing it as "fit only for pleasure", rather than for meaning and truth. (PDxiv,13). This argument not only falsely equates the aesthetic *per se* with the narrowest of Kantian formalisms. It also wrongly suggests a divide between pleasure and meaning, feeling and cognition, enjoyment and understanding, when instead, they tend, in art, to constitute each other. As Eliot remarked, "To understand a poem comes to the same thing as to enjoy it for the right reasons"<sup>17</sup>

We can reinforce this point and the centrality of aesthetic feeling by adopting Danto's argument from indiscernibles, but applying it this time not to objects but to subjects. Imagine two visually identical art viewers, who offer identical interpretations of the very powerful

paintings and poems before them. One is a human who thrills to what he sees and interprets. The other, however, is only a cyborg who, experiencing no qualia, feels no pleasure, indeed no emotion at all, but merely mechanically processes the perceptual and artworld data to deliver his interpretive output. We would surely say here that the cyborg, in an important sense, doesn't really understand these works. He doesn't, in a big way, get the point of such art, even if he recognizes that some feeling he cannot feel is somehow appropriate,[and so is smart enough not to turn to his emotionally moved companion (as does the cyborg in *Terminator 2*) asking "why is there water on your eyes". For the point is precisely to feel or savor art's qualia and meaning, not just compute an interpretive output from the work's signs and artworld context.

For this reason, even if the cyborg's interpretive outputs were descriptively more accurate than the human's, we would still say that the human's response to art was superior and that the cyborg, since he feels absolutely nothing, doesn't really grasp what art is all about. Now imagine further that aesthetic experience was entirely expunged from our civilization, since we were all transformed into such cyborgs or exterminated by them. Art might linger on a bit out of inertia, but could it continue to flourish and robustly survive? What would be the point of creating and attending to it, if it promised no enriching phenomenological feeling or pleasure?

The uncertainty of art's future in such a sci-fi scenario implies the centrality of aesthetic experience -- in its evaluative and phenomenological sense -- for the concept of art. Though surely neither a necessary or sufficient condition for application of this

concept, it might be regarded as a more general background condition for art. In other words, though many works fail to produce aesthetic experience -- in the sense of satisfyingly heightened, absorbing, coherently meaningful and affective experience, if such experiences could never be had and never had through the production of works, art could probably never have existed.<sup>18</sup> If artworks universally flouted this interest (and not just on occasion to make a radical point), art, as we know, it would disappear. In contrast to necessary and sufficient conditions that aim at mapping art's demarcational limits, such a background condition concerns the point rather than the extension of the concept of art. In naming and so marking this point, aesthetic experience is not a useless concept.<sup>19</sup>

My futuristic cyborg parables are not so hard to imagine because they reflect real developments in recent aesthetics and contemporary life. Rejecting what he calls the traditional "strong and cold" "grip of aestheticism on the philosophy of art" (PD 33), Danto joins Goodman and many others in what might be called a radical anaestheticization of aesthetics. Felt experience is virtually ignored and entirely subordinated to third-person semantic theories of artistic symbolization and its interpretation. Once a potent embodiment of art's sense and value, aesthetic experience is hermeneutered.

Forsaking such experience for semiotic definitions of art was not merely an arbitrary whim of linguistic philosophers addicted to semantic theory. Goodman and Danto were sensitively reflecting developments in the artworld, which required ever more interpretation as art became more cerebrally conceptual in pursuing what Danto called its Hegelian quest to become its own philosophy: art as theory

of art. Goodman and Danto were similarly responsive to artworld realities in claiming against Beardsley that much contemporary art neither evokes nor aims to evoke powerful experiences having enjoyable affect and coherent meaning.

So much the worse, one might say, for contemporary art, which having completed its philosophical transformation and lost the financial prop of eighties' speculation, now finds it has also lost an experiential point and public to fall back on. For the public retains a need for aesthetic experiences, and as these became artistically *depassé*, it has learned to satisfy them outside the official realm of contemporary art, beyond the white cube of gallery space. So aesthetic interest is increasingly directed toward popular art, which has not yet learned to eschew the experiential goals of pleasure, affect, and meaningful coherence, even if it often fails to achieve them. Mourning the artworld's loss of public, the prominent artists Komar and Melamid (together with *The Nation*) commissioned a scientific marketing-survey of popular aesthetic taste in the quest to develop a new plastic art that would engage people as broadly and as powerfully as popular music does. One point emerging from the polling statistics is the demand that art provide positive affective experience through coherence.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, the presence of such experience does not entail the presence of art; so it cannot in itself legitimize popular art as true art, just as it cannot alone justify the claim that a given work is good art. In all these cases, since experience itself is mute, critical discourse is needed. Still, the power of aesthetic experience impels one to undertake such legitimating discourse through its felt value, just as it

impels the public toward the arts wherein it can be found. If the experience has this power, the concept of such experience has value in reminding us of it and directing us toward its use.

If art is *in extremis*, deprived (through completion) of its sustaining narrative of progress and thus groping without direction in what Danto calls its postmodern "posthistory"; if art's groping is as lonely as it is aimless, cut off from the popular currents of taste in a democratic culture, then the concept of aesthetic experience is worth recalling: not for formal definition but for art's reorientation toward values and populations that could restore its vitality and sense of purpose.<sup>21</sup>

Art's turn from aesthetic experience is no more an act of perverse wilfulness than Danto and Goodman's semantic anaesthetics. Like them, contemporary artists are simply responding to changes in our lifeworld, as we move from a more unified experiential culture to an increasingly modular, informational one. This results in art that highlights fragmentation and rapid, complex information-flow that is often too helter-skelter to provide the coherence needed for aesthetic experience's pleasurable sense of focussed, funded affect. Already in the 1930's Walter Benjamin drew a stark contrast between experience and information, expressing the fear that through the fragmentation of modern life and the disjointed sensationalism of the newspapers, we were losing the capacity for deep experience and feeling. We have since undergone a far more extensive series of informational revolutions - from television and facsimilie to the internet and newer interactive systems of cyberspace and virtual reality.

Given this informational overload, it is not surprising that "the

waning of affect" (in Fredric Jameson's phrase) is diagnosed as a prime symptom of our postmodern condition.<sup>22</sup> There is growing concern, far beyond the academy, that we are being so thoroughly reshaped by our informational-technology that our experiential, affective capacities are wearing thin, so thin that we risk assimilation to the mechanical information processors that are already our most intimate companions in work and play. This worry is expressed nowhere more clearly than in cyborg fiction. The only way of distinguishing humans from their physically identical cyborg Terminators or Replicants is the human capacity to feel, which itself is continuously buffeted and jeopardized by the unmanageable flux and grind of futuristic living. In the story of *Blade Runner* (though not in the film) there is even a crucial device to reinforce these affective experiential capacities -- an "empathy box" that produces through virtual reality a powerful aesthetico-religious experience of empathetic fusion with others likewise plugged in.<sup>23</sup>

It may seem very *retro* to suggest that aesthetic experience can function something like an empathy box, restoring both our ability and inclination for the sorts of vivid, moving, shared experience that one once sought in art. Perhaps our informational evolution has already gone too far, so that an evening of beauty at the Met can do nothing to counter a life on Wall Street's chaotic trading floor. Perhaps aesthetic experience, and not just the philosophical value of its concept, has almost reached its end. How could philosophy do anything to forestall its total loss?

Aesthetic experience will be strengthened and preserved the more it is experienced; it will be more experienced, the more we are

directed to such experience; and one good way of directing us to such experience is fuller recognition of its importance and richness through greater attention to the concept of aesthetic experience. We thus find at least one good use for philosophical recognition of this concept: its orientation toward having the experience it names. Rather than defining art or justifying critical verdicts, the concept is directional, reminding us of what is worth seeking in art and elsewhere in life. Wittgenstein said: "The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose."<sup>24</sup> If the same holds for philosophical concepts, that of aesthetic experience should not go unemployed.

## Notes

1. See Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 13; henceforth referred to as PD. I shall also be using the following abbreviations in referring to other works of Danto, Beardsley, Dewey, and Goodman: Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), TC. Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958), A; *The Aesthetic Point of View*, (Ithaca: Cornell, 1982, APV; John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), AE. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), LA; *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), WW; *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), OMM.
2. See, for example, the account offered by the Polish historian of aesthetics, W. Tatarkiewicz in *A History of Six Ideas* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1980), 310-338.
3. See David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste", in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 234; and Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 41-2.
4. See G. Dickie, "Beardsley's Phantom Aesthetic Experience", *Journal of Philosophy*, 62 (1965), 129-36. Eddy Zemach also argues that there is no such thing as the aesthetic experience in his (Hebrew) book, *Aesthetics* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1976) 42-53.
5. Dewey thus sees aesthetic experience as central not only to art but to the philosophy of experience in general. "To esthetic experience, he therefore claims, "the philosopher must go to understand what experience is"(AE 11)
6. Though I think this is obvious, there is an argument that denies it, asserting that our appreciation of natural beauty is entirely dependent on and constrained by our concept of fine art, as indeed is all our aesthetic experience. For a critique of this argument and a fuller discussion of

Dewey's views, Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1992), ch.1,2.

7. As Dewey later adds, "The experience is marked by a greater inclusiveness of all psychological factors than occurs in ordinary experiences, not by reduction of them to a single response" (AE 259).

8. Even if we could, Dewey's definition of art as aesthetic experience would remain problematic. For this experience is itself never clearly defined but instead asserted to be ultimately undefinable because of its essential immediacy; "it can", he says, "only be felt, that is, immediately experienced" (AE 196). For more detailed critique of Dewey's definition of art as experience, see *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, ch.1,2.

9. Beardsley's precise list of defining characteristics of aesthetic experience changes slightly over the years, but almost all his accounts insist on the features I mention. Apart from his book *Aesthetics*, his most detailed treatments of aesthetic experience can be found in "Aesthetic Experience Regained" and "Aesthetic Experience" both reprinted in APR (77-92; 285-97).

10. See his "Beardsley's Phantom Aesthetic Experience", and his *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

11. Beardsley himself cites Maslow's psychological research into peak experiences (APV 85). See A.H.Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962). Use of the notion of experience and its characterization in terms of coherence and intensity, is also found in more contemporary experimental psychology. For one example, see the influential work of Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

12. For a vigorous defense of the centrality of consciousness, see John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). For a defense of the notion of immediate experience against charges that it is cognitively empty and entails commitment to foundationalism's myth of the given, see *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, ch.5.

13. See Joel Kupperman, "Art and Aesthetic Experience", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 15 (1975), and Beardsley's response in APV 296.

14. There is also the problem that aesthetic experience in itself is too elusive, ineffable, subjectively variable, and immeasurable in magnitude to provide sufficient grounds for justifying particular evaluative verdicts. Thus, when it came to actual critical practice, Beardsley recognized that one had to demonstrate the unity, complexity, and intensity of the actual work, not of its experience. However, he held that demonstration of the former could allow inference of capacity for the latter, and it was the latter (i.e. experience) that constituted actual aesthetic value.

15. Since these characteristics make no reference to phenomenological consciousness, Goodman's concept of aesthetic experience can be characterized as semantic rather than phenomenological. Like Dewey and Beardsley, Goodman insists on the dynamic nature of aesthetic experience, though he does not also emphasize as they do the passive aspect in which one surrenders oneself to the work. This idea may require to much an emphasis on subjectivity and affect; yet the notion of such submission is even hinted at by the word "understanding".

16. See *Pragmatistic Aesthetics*, ch.5.

17. T.S. Eliot, "The Frontiers of Poetry", in *Of Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber, 1957), 115. Eliot adds that this means "enjoying it to the right degree and in the right way, relative to other poems...It should hardly be necessary to add that this implies one *shouldn't* enjoy bad poems -- unless their badness is of a sort that appeals to our sense of humour."

18. A growing number of sociobiologists further maintain that the gratifications of aesthetic experience not only explain art's emergence and staying power but also help account for the survival of humanity itself. Such experiences, says the Oxford anatomist J.Z. Young, "have the most central of biological functions -- of insisting that life be worth while, which, after all, is the final guarantee of its continuance". J.Z. Young, *An Introduction to the Study of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 38. A more recent and detailed case for the evolutionary value of art and its affective experience can be found in Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where*

*Art Comes From and Why* (New York: Free Press, 1992). See also Nathan Kogan, "Aesthetics and Its Origins: Some Psychobiological and Evolutionary Considerations", *Social Research*, 61 (1994), 139-165.

19. The idea that aesthetic experience fails miserably at formally defining art's extension but nonetheless is essential for understanding art's point and value is developed in more detail in my *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, ch.1 and 2. I emphasize there (and the point bears repeating) that art's valuable uses go far beyond the creation of aesthetic experience. I should also note that Richard Wollheim draws a somewhat similar distinction between a concept's "conditions of application" and its background "assumptions of applicability" in "Danto's Gallery of Indiscernibles", in Mark Rollins (ed.), *Danto and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 28-38.

20. See "Painting by Numbers: The Search for a People's Art", in *The Nation*, March 14, 1994, 334-348, particularly questions 68 and 70, which relate to art's coherence and ability to "make us happy".

21. These values include not only heightened, positive affect but an enhanced appreciation of the non-conceptual and sensual. Another possible value of aesthetic experience comes from its making us aware, through its power to transport us, of the benefits that can be derived by opening or submitting oneself to things typically seen as mere objects submitted to our own domination and use. This holds, of course, as much for the experience of nature as well as art, and it bespeaks of the transformational role of experience in which, as Dewey insisted, we are subjects as well as agents, undergoing as well as acting. Heidegger makes a similar point: "To undergo an experience of something...means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us." Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 57.

22. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Contradictions of late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 10-16.

23. See Philip K. Dick, *Blade Runner* (originally, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*), (Ballantine: New York, 1982).

24. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956), para.127.