

The Role of Theory in Aesthetic Experience

Humanities Honours Thesis

Ward Huetink

3787885

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Supervisor: Rob van Gerwen

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Beardsley's Account of the Aesthetic Experience.....	5
1.1 Introduction	5
1.2 The Early Beardsley and Objections	5
1.3 More Objections and the Later Beardsley	9
1.4 Conclusion	12
2. Aesthetic Experience in Adorno's Critical Theory.....	13
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 Instrumental Reason and Ideology.....	13
2.4 The Autonomy of High Art, and the Genuine Aesthetic Experience.....	17
2.5 Conclusion	19
3. Comparing Accounts of The Aesthetic Experience; A Futile Exercise?	20
3.1 Introduction	20
3.2 Comparing Aesthetic Experience.....	20
3.3 ... a Futile Exercise? The Role of Aesthetic Experience in Theory	24
3.4 The Role of Theory in Aesthetic Experience	27
3.5 Conclusion	32
Conclusion	33
Bibliography.....	34

Introduction

Within aesthetics and philosophy of art, the concept of 'the aesthetic experience' as a unique state of mind, associated with the perception of beauty and the appreciation of art, is equally important as it is controversial. Although inquiry into aesthetic experience originated as an analysis of (effects of) the perception of beauty, it became an umbrella term for differing concepts closely related to discussions of taste and art, such as the sublime, the picturesque, charm, and the tragic and comic.¹ Moreover, as art obtained an increasingly autonomous status, separated from everyday life and irrelevant to moral, functional and epistemological purposes, the aesthetic experience served as a pivotal concept to explain art's status, central aim and value.² In philosophy, conceptions of the aesthetic experience were the starting point to explain related ideas such as aesthetic properties, aesthetic attitudes, aesthetic objects and aesthetic judgement.³

However, the concept of the aesthetic experience as a *sui generis* state of mind has become subject to increasing critique in 20th century philosophy. In the wake of Bullough's, Dewey's and Beardsley's conceptions of a distinct aesthetic state of mind, influential objections were made by notable critics. Goodman classified the aesthetic response as a cognitive response; Danto argued aesthetic experience was in fact nothing but interpretation. Dickie notoriously denied its existence altogether, disregarding it as 'mythic'.⁴ Consequently, philosophers such as Sontag, Iseminger and Shusterman rose to its defence with equal vigour. All in all, the debate within philosophy concerning the content, nature or even existence of aesthetic experience is far from resolved.

Meanwhile, the art-world itself is under increasing societal and financial pressure. Subsidies for museums and galleries are reduced. Grants for independent artists and scholarships for art-students experience a similar decline. Politicians derogatively describe art

¹ Shusterman, 'The End of the Aesthetic Experience', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 55, No. 1. (Winter, 1997), pp. 29-41. Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics*, (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1980), Chapter 11, pp. 310-338.

² Shusterman, 'The End of the Aesthetic Experience', 30.

³ Iseminger, 'Aesthetic Experience', in: Jerrold Levinson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 99-116.

⁴ George Dickie, 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 1 (1964), pp. 56-65; George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

as a “leftist hobby”, and parents discourage their children to pursue a career as a painter, sculptor or actor. I believe these are symptoms of an underestimation of the importance and value of art and its appreciation for individuals and society as a whole. An account of how aesthetic experience can and does enrich our lives and develops our understanding of ourselves and our world can contribute to a defence of art as constitutive of our well-being. And finally, the claim that artworks offer us a unique kind of experience that differs from or transcends, for example, everyday emotional affects or even the experience of natural beauty seems to me to have at least a *prima facie* plausibility. But what is this experience? To what purpose is it referred to in theory, and what does this tell us about this concept? These will be my central questions in this thesis.

In order to arrive at an answer to these questions, I will in the first chapter explain the account of the aesthetic experience offered by Monroe Beardsley, and sketch how his definition changes in the course of his notorious debate with George Dickie. In the second chapter I will discuss the conception of an aesthetic experience in Theodor Adorno’s Critical Theory. In the third and final chapter I discuss how these accounts are compared in contemporary literature. Consequently, I argue how these comparisons are incomplete because they compare accounts at face value, overlooking the major differences concerning the role the concept of aesthetic experience fulfils in their respective theories. Finally, I argue these differences reveal there is a structural analogy between the concepts of ‘art’ and ‘aesthetic experience’, in the sense that both are open concepts and susceptible to change. Therefore, no set of necessary and sufficient conditions can be given that exhausts all experiences we want to call aesthetic. I conclude by suggesting we treat conceptions of the aesthetic experience as Morris Weitz suggests of treating proposed definitions of art: as seriously made recommendations of attending a certain way to certain objects, or our reception thereof.

1. Beardsley's Account of the Aesthetic Experience

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the conception(s) of aesthetic experience defended by Monroe Beardsley. There are a few reasons for this. First, Beardsley explicitly refers to a unique aesthetic state of mind as being an *experience* as opposed to a kind of attitude or belief. Secondly, his account has been extensively scrutinized, most notably in the course of an altercation with George Dickie. This debate is often referred to in literature and widely regarded as a turning point in thinking about aesthetic experience.⁵ Responding to the objections raised by Dickie, Beardsley amended his account, and moved from a phenomenological, internalist account to a more epistemic, externalist account.⁶ Thus, in order to clarify the terminology of the debate and the problems for conceptions of aesthetic experience, and to provide a structure to compare the accounts of aesthetic experience analysed later in this thesis, the Beardsley-Dickie debate is an appropriate starting point.

1.2 The Early Beardsley and Objections

Beardsley's first extensive characterization of aesthetic experience as a distinct state of mind is put forward in his 1958 book *Aesthetics*. The first thing to note is that Beardsley here eschews an essentialist definition of 'art'. Rather, he talks about 'aesthetic objects'; he argues we can group together disjunctively all separately defined classes of objects, such as musical compositions, visual designs, literary works, etc. to identify what is characteristic in our intercourse and encounters with such objects – and how this interaction differs from 'regular', everyday experience.⁷ He asserts that introspection by each inquirer concerning these experiences does indeed reveal some particular features they have in common. These are focus, intensity, and unity.⁸ *Focus* means that the aesthetic experience is one in which attention is firmly fixed upon the perceptual object. *Intensity* is not to say that there is an

⁵ Iseminger, 'Aesthetic Experience', 100-107. Shelley, 'The Concept of the Aesthetic', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/aesthetic-concept/>, 2.4.

⁶ Iseminger, 'Aesthetic Experience', 100.

⁷ Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958), 64.

⁸ Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 527-528.

overwhelmingly intense emotion or feeling; rather, Beardsley argues, the experience itself is intense in that it focuses on an unusual narrow centre of concern. The focus on the object shuts out all other concerns such as trivial thoughts or distractions and intensifies the phenomenological perception of sounds and/or sights. *Unity*, finally, indicates both the unusual degree of coherence and completeness of the experience. The experience is *coherent* in that

[o]ne thing leads to another; continuity of development, without gaps or dead spaces, a sense of overall providential pattern of guidance, an orderly cumulation of energy toward a climax, are present to an unusual degree.

(Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 528)

Finally, *completeness*, according to Beardsley, means that the experience contains elements that counterbalance each other and make the whole stand out from the stream of experience. It offers a sense of equilibrium or finality that is achieved and enjoyed. The experience detaches itself from alien influences; it is complete in itself.⁹ The degree to which an aesthetic object incites a sense of unity, intensity and focus on this complexity may, of course, differ. It is however the sum of these that determines the magnitude of the aesthetic experience, and the aesthetic value of the object (artwork) lies in the capacity to induce such an aesthetic experience.¹⁰

In an article that incited the Beardsley-Dickie debate, George Dickie raised a problem for the former's conception of the aesthetic experience, and for phenomenological descriptions of the effects of artworks in general.¹¹ Specifically, he objects to the notion of unity and the elements of coherence and completeness that the aesthetic experience purportedly has. He argues that when Beardsley describes the coherence of an experience as continuous, without gaps or dead spaces, etc., what he is describing is actually the experience of these perceptual properties, instead of *an experience having* those properties.¹² Surely a painting can be stable, balanced and in equilibrium, but what is it to say that the experience

⁹ Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 528.

¹⁰ Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 529-531.

¹¹ Dickie, 'Beardsley's Phantom Aesthetic Experience', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 62, No. 5 (Mar. 4, 1965), pp. 129-136.

¹² Dickie, 'Beardsley's Phantom Aesthetic Experience', 131.

of a spectator is stable or balanced? Essentially, he alleges Beardsley committed a category error.

Beardsley replied in 1969.¹³ His article now starts out with a more formal definition of the aesthetic experience:

[...] a person is having an aesthetic experience during a particular stretch of time if and only if the greater part of his mental activity during that time is united and made pleasurable by being tied to the form and qualities of a sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object on which his primary attention is concentrated. (Beardsley, 'Aesthetic Experience Regained', 5)

Already it is apparent that he is committed to defending the idea of unity, now in terms of unity of mental states within aesthetic experience. Beardsley does so by first discerning two strands of the challenge posed by Dickie, which he dubs 'The Experience Thesis' and 'The Affect Thesis', respectively. He shows that Dickie argues that statements concerning aesthetic experience refer either to a) the artwork as perceived (the music was unified) or b) the affective sensation evoked by the work (the spectator was thrilled or moved by it). The Experience Thesis holds that terms as coherence, completeness and unity are not comprehensibly applicable to (aesthetic) experience as such; The Affect Thesis, on the other hand, entails that terms as coherence, completeness and unity are equally inapplicable to the subjective phenomenological features of the aesthetic experience. Note that The Experience Thesis entails the Affect Thesis, such that the falsity of The Affect Thesis implies the falsity of the former; if there are sequences of affects that can be intelligibly called coherent or unified, they can be related to the perception of a coherent aesthetic object in such a way that the whole experience can be said to be united. And thus, The Experience Thesis would not hold. Beardsley proceeds to show exactly that. He argues that the experience of something coherent – i.e., a coherent musical composition – is different from having a coherent experience, as the latter involves the subjective phenomenological affects (being moved, thrilled, delighted, enchanted). These affects *can* in fact be continuous or discontinuous,

¹³ Beardsley, 'Aesthetic Experience Regained', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 3- 11.

integrated or disintegrated; in other words, coherent. Moreover, these affects can be related in such a way to the objective perceptual elements of the phenomenal object they seem to belong to each other. Hence, an experience can be intelligibly called coherent.¹⁴

As to completeness, Beardsley upholds that, again, the experience of completeness is different from a complete experience. A musical composition may be complete unto itself, but the experience of this completeness or completion is only part of what constitutes a complete experience. A complete experience, however, involves for example the fulfilment of expectation, such that the whole experience seems to have been building to that end. All elements of the perception become significant; the recollection of earlier parts gain a new intensity. He compares it to a catharsis, a climax, an orgasmic release. In this sense, Beardsley concludes, an experience takes on the character of completeness.¹⁵

There are a few points worth noting here. First, Beardsley's amended definition of the aesthetic experience focuses on its unity, as does his defence against Dickie's objections to coherence and completeness, while the complexity and intensity he emphasized earlier are far less prominently present. Secondly, the concept of 'pleasure' is now an essential feature of the aesthetic experience. Whereas earlier Beardsley used the concept of the aesthetic experience to account for artistic goodness, he now assumes an explicitly evaluative position by claiming that the degree of pleasurable-ness of the experience is determinant of *artistic betterness*. Even more strongly, he claims that whatever experience provided by an object is not pleasurable cannot be an aesthetic experience, and whatever goodness the object in case may possess, it is not then artistic goodness.¹⁶ Thirdly, by the proposed new conception, the aesthetic experience is essentially linked to the form and qualities of an object. This seems to suggest that the aesthetic experience is a kind of cognition. Iseminger classifies this as the beginning of a shift towards an epistemic notion of experience, as opposed to a phenomenological notion.¹⁷ But although this might be implied, it is still plausible that this aesthetic experience is still entirely accessible introspectively, since the objects and their

¹⁴ Beardsley, 'Aesthetic Experience Regained', 6-7.

¹⁵ Beardsley, 'Aesthetic Experience Regained', 7-8.

¹⁶ Beardsley, 'Aesthetic Experience Regained', 8-11.

¹⁷ Iseminger, 'Aesthetic Experience', 102-103.

qualities need only be phenomenally objective as, for example, colour or sounds are.¹⁸ Fourthly, and related to the previous point, is that this is the beginning of a shift towards an externalist account of the aesthetic experience, which focuses on the properties or qualities of the object perceived, contrasting phenomenological, internalist emphasis on the sensation undergone by the spectator.¹⁹ And finally, the introduction of mental states other than direct phenomenological affects, such as expectations and cognition, combined with the experience's extension in time, is a move away from the immediacy that was ascribed to aesthetic experience earlier.²⁰

However significant these changes, the debate was not over yet. In what follows, I discuss Dickie's next series of objections and Beardsley's final account of the aesthetic experience.

1.3 More Objections and the Later Beardsley

In his 1974 reply to 'Aesthetic Experience Regained', Dickie begins by conceding some of the assumptions defended by Beardsley.²¹ He grants that both an object's objective phenomenological features (its perceptual experience), as well as the subjective phenomenological affects caused by this can be united, in the sense of being coherent and complete. He disputes however, that the aesthetic experience can be differentiated from other experiences by its internal properties, such as some special higher-order unity consisting of a coherence of affects and perception, as Beardsley claims. The first problem he raises is that there are many instances in which we clearly do classify an experience as aesthetic, although there are no affects evoked whatsoever. He gives the example of the experience of an abstract painting with a simple design that can be taken in at one glance but which does not stir up any affects such as expectations or emotions. Still, frequent attention to such a painting can surely be pleasant, even though there are no affective feelings involved, and surely, Dickie claims, we would call this an aesthetic experience.²² Secondly, in instances

¹⁸ Iseminger, 'Aesthetic Experience', 102-103.

¹⁹ Shelley, 'The Concept of the Aesthetic', 2.4.

²⁰ Shusterman, 'The End of the Aesthetic Experience', 32-35.

²¹ Dickie, 'Beardsley's Theory of Aesthetic Experience', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Apr., 1974), pp. 13-23.

²² Dickie, 'Beardsley's Theory of Aesthetic Experience', 17-19.

where affects are in fact evoked, for example by watching a good production of Hamlet, there is no guarantee they are necessarily united.²³ Thus, Beardsley's account of the aesthetic experience is too narrow in both instances. Aesthetic experiences are far more diverse than Beardsley's account claims. Dickie concludes:

[...] the experiences which derive from intercourse with aesthetic objects do not have any affective features which are peculiarly characteristic and which distinguish them from other experiences. (Dickie, 'Beardsley's Theory of Aesthetic Experience', 22)

Beardsley's response to these objections is found in a collection of essays published in 1982.²⁴ He now admits that only a very small part of our aesthetic life can be captured in the notion of 'an aesthetic experience' in the unified sense he defended earlier. Still, he maintains there are clear instances of such experiences, and thus he reserves the term as a count noun for these special instances. He proceeds to introduce a broader notion of 'the aesthetic *in* experience' on the basis of five criteria, the first of which is necessary for an experience to have an aesthetic character, and either three of the following four are jointly sufficient. These criteria are 1) *Object Directedness*, a willingly accepted guidance over the procession of one's mental states by phenomenally objective properties; 2) *Felt Freedom*, "a sense of release from the dominance of some antecedent concerns about past and future"; 3) *Detached Affect*, "a sense that objects on which interest is concentrated are set a little at a distance emotionally"; 4) *Active Discovery*, "a sense of actively exercising constructive powers of the mind"; and 5) *Wholeness*, "a sense of integration as a person (...) and a corresponding contentment".²⁵ This broader, less restrictive notion of the aesthetic within experience is still designed to discern a distinctively aesthetic state of mind. Beardsley also insists of defining 'the aesthetic point of view' in terms of 'aesthetic value', which itself is defined in terms of 'aesthetic gratification' (a variation on aesthetic experience), as is apparent from the following quotes:²⁶

²³ Dickie, 'Beardsley's Theory of Aesthetic Experience', 19-21.

²⁴ Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, Michael Wreen and Donald Callen (eds.), (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

²⁵ Beardsley, 'Aesthetic Experience', in: *The Aesthetic Point of View*, pp. 285-297, 288-289.

²⁶ Beardsley, 'The Aesthetic Point of View', in: *The Aesthetic Point of View*, pp. 15-34.

To adopt the aesthetic point of view with regard to X is to take an interest in whatever aesthetic value X may possess. (Beardsley, The Aesthetic Point of View, 19)

The aesthetic value of X is the value that X possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification when correctly and completely experienced. (Beardsley, The Aesthetic Point of View, 26)

Gratification is aesthetic when it is obtained primarily from attention to the formal unity and/or the regional qualities of a complex whole, and when its magnitude is a function of the degree of formal unity and/or the intensity of regional quality. (Beardsley, The Aesthetic Point of View, 22)

Thus, Beardsley's final account of the aesthetic experience maintains it is a distinct state of mind, and still defines related concepts in terms of this experience. However, the reference to a *correct and complete perception of an object* entails that aesthetic gratification or -experience can no longer be identified by mere introspection, because that would be unable to determine whether the perception in case is *correct*.²⁷ This is what Iseminger classifies as an epistemic account of aesthetic experience. By the same line of argument, aesthetic experience is no longer constituted of features wholly internal to the experience (such as unity through coherence and completeness of affects and perceptual input), but rather is an experience having aesthetic content – a correct experience of an object having the aesthetic properties that it has. This is an externalist account of aesthetic experience.²⁸ Finally, Beardsley employs this definition to articulate a definition of art, something he so emphatically avoided in *Aesthetics* (see section 1.2 above). According to Beardsley, an artwork is “something produced with the intention of giving it the capacity to satisfy aesthetic interest”.²⁹

²⁷ Iseminger, 'Aesthetic Experience', 105.

²⁸ Shelley, 'The Concept of the Aesthetic', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2.4.

²⁹ Beardsley, 'An Aesthetic Definition of Art' in: Henry Curtler (ed.), *What is Art?*, (New York, NY: Haven, 1983), pp. 15-29, 19.

1.4 Conclusion

Beardsley started out attempting to differentiate the aesthetic experience from other experiences in terms of its internal properties, and to describe the value of art in general, and of certain artworks in particular, in terms of the magnitude of an aesthetic experience they are capable of evoking. Dickie objects to his attempts with two main arguments. Firstly, he argues that what Beardsley is describing are properties of the object perceived instead of features of the experience undergone. Secondly, the definitions Beardsley proposes are too narrow to cover all relevant experiences we would call aesthetic, for example those which do not involve affects or instances of bad artworks that involve negative responses, such as repulsion or disgust. In the course of their debate, Beardsley shifts from a phenomenological, internalist account of the aesthetic experience to an epistemic, externalist one. He maintains that there is a unique state of mind, a kind of experience that can justifiably and comprehensibly be called 'aesthetic' and, moreover, that it is capable of demarcating the realm of art and explaining related concepts in terms of this experience.

2. Aesthetic Experience in Adorno's Critical Theory

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I take up the aesthetic experience as described by Theodor Adorno. The structure of this chapter will be different from the preceding one. This is because Adorno does not provide a 'theory' of the aesthetic in a strict sense of the term, because a theory that claims a truth through clear and transparent concepts is ideology and therefore untrue. In this, he is the opposite of Beardsley, who tries to define the aesthetic experience clearly and systematically revises his attempts to do so. Rather, Adorno's conception of art and the aesthetic are thoroughly embedded in his critique of instrumental reason, ideology and the fetishization of art in the 'culture industry'. It is crucial to understanding the role of art and aesthetic experience to first recognize how these relate to his critical theory. That is why I start with Adorno's objections to instrumental reason and ideology. Here I will often reference Max Horkheimer, in collaboration with whom Adorno developed his thought. Consequently, I explain his concept of the culture industry and the distinction he makes between high and low art. Only in this context can the nature and function of Adorno's account of the aesthetic experience be properly understood.

2.2 Instrumental Reason and Ideology

The first question is: what is instrumental reason? Horkheimer gives a clear account of this concept in *Eclipse of Reason*. He argues that since the beginning of the Enlightenment, there has been a shift from objective rationality towards subjective, instrumental rationality.³⁰ Previously, rationality was conceived as not only a power of the human mind but as an objective force in the world. Indeed, the great philosophical systems in our history – those of Plato, Aristotle and the German Idealists as Kant and Hegel – were founded on such an objective conception of reason. This objective reason focused on ends, rather than means. Actions and goals of man were judged with respect to their being in harmony with this objective reason.³¹ Horkheimer contrasts this earlier conception with the modern conception of 'rationality', which he calls subjective rationality and which he claims started its ascension

³⁰ Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, (London: Continuum, 2002), 4.

³¹ Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 4.

with the start of the Enlightenment. Now, rationality is regarded as a faculty of the mind of an individual subject. Something is 'rational' when certain means are suitably employed in such a way as to attain the subjective goals of that particular individual. This means there is no 'rational' way to discuss ends anymore, as ends are only 'good' insofar they are themselves means to other ends.³² This is the instrumentalization of reason itself. The concepts formerly used by objective reason have become void, or their meaning illusory; reason has become formalized.³³

Adorno's criticism of instrumental reason is most explicitly expressed in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, written together with Horkheimer. They start off by establishing the primary purposes of Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, to be the liberation of mankind of myth, fear and domination, and to establish us as the master of nature.³⁴ These goals are to be attained through rationality. This entails, however, that in order to accomplish this, everything must either be known or knowable; everything must be regarded as alike, because the real source of fear is the 'outside', the unknown. The progression of instrumental reason is characterized by this tendency to subsume the particular under the universal.³⁵ The particular sensuous, social and historical character of things in themselves are disregarded to accommodate the subjective goals of the individual. Subsumption is a new form of domination, one in the conceptual realm. Moreover, as instrumental reason becomes the whole of reason, cognition of things in themselves becomes impossible.³⁶ Without the possibility to consider particulars and rationally discuss ends in themselves, the original goals of the Enlightenment – freedom and happiness – become occluded. The sort of rationality that was supposed to guide us to these ends becomes an end in itself, and thereby establishes an irrational status quo of subjective self-preservation as the ultimate goal. The very reason that was supposed to liberate man from domination allows for a vastly more absolute domination, not only in the realm of concepts

³² Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 4-6.

³³ Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 9-16, 38.

³⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Gunzelin Schmid Noer (ed.), Edmund Jephcott (trans.), (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

³⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2-11.

³⁶ Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, J.M. Bernstein (ed.), (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), Introduction, 4-5.

but also for domination over nature by human beings, the nature within human beings and domination over other human beings.³⁷ Everything that does not conform becomes exploited or eradicated.

This domination of instrumentality is visible in scientific and philosophical theory (positivism and pragmatism) as well as in society (in the form of capitalism) and modern culture. The omnipresence of the confirmation of a false consciousness of sameness, which enforces an increasing alienation between ourselves and the world we live in, is what Adorno calls 'ideology'. The way this ideology is entrenched in and perpetuated by modern culture is exemplified by his conception of the 'culture industry', to which I turn now.

2.3 The Culture Industry, High and Low Art

The way instrumental reason finds its way into modern culture is through what Adorno and Horkheimer call 'the culture industry'. The term 'industry' in this concept is not referring strictly to the material process of production, but rather to the standardization and commodification of culture and its distribution processes itself. They also explicitly refrain from calling this phenomenon 'mass culture'. Horkheimer and Adorno claim the culture industry is decidedly not some artform that arises spontaneously *from* the masses as a form of popular art. Instead, it is created and tailored *for* them. As intended consumers, people are the object of the culture industry, not their subject.³⁸ Now culture, according to Adorno, is no longer a protest against static relations under which people live. Instead of providing a grasp on the good life by expressing suffering and contradiction, it now has become no more than a commodity, like all products in a capitalist society.³⁹ Culture has thus become a *fetish*; it is reduced to its quantifiable exchange value, and the commodities produced by this industry are intended to maximize this value.⁴⁰ As a consequence, they are designed to be consumed effortlessly, passively and even distractedly; the result is a steady, imposing stream of facile

³⁷ Zuidervaart, 'Theodor W. Adorno', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/adorno/>.

³⁸ Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', in: J. M. Bernstein (ed.), *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays*, pp. 98-106, 98.

³⁹ Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', 98-100.

⁴⁰ Van Gerwen, *Moderne Filosofen Over Kunst*, (Zoetermeer: Klement, 2016), 260-262.

and shallow products of mass media, commoditized beauty and standardized entertainment. In this way, the production of cultural artefacts is not only subjected to instrumentality, as means to maximize monetary value, but also ideologically reinforcing it by presenting the same appearance of uniformity and likeness as inescapable and necessary. Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, has become mass deception.⁴¹

According to Adorno, this is a fundamental and pernicious break with the role art had formerly played in society. Of course, Adorno does not offer a transparent definition of art. Instead, he 'defines' art by offering a set of dialectical oppositions in order to avoid conforming to ideology. It is clear, however, that Adorno conceives of art as having a crucial value for the development of the mind and consciousness of human beings.⁴² Although it does not provide propositional knowledge, it plays a role in educating ('Bildung') an individual on affective and sensuous understanding of the human experience and the condition of the subject.⁴³ This is so because works of art are the result of social praxis; over and above the materials and their manner of application, the artist incorporates into the work the current social structure and her experience thereof, and by doing so provides a critical reflection on this process.⁴⁴ In this sense art is heteronomous, insofar it is historically mediated and in part determined by the social-economic structure and processes. On the other hand, art is autonomous in that it *transcends* these circumstances. Modern art, according to Adorno, had freed itself from any instrumental disposition towards external goals and became its own master. It established a formal autonomy, which is at the same time both necessary and illusory (given its modern status and its embeddedness in social processes).⁴⁵ It is precisely because of this paradoxical character Adorno deems art "the social antithesis of society".⁴⁶

This critical, transformative potential of art is present in pre-modern art and contemporary high art but has been eradicated in the products of the culture industry. Adorno argues pre-modern low art - although always containing elements of entertainment

⁴¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94-136.

⁴² Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 7.

⁴³ Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 7.

⁴⁴ Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 8-9.

⁴⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (eds.), Robert Hullot-Kentor (trans.), (London: Continuum, 2002), 8, 17-18.

⁴⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 8.

and amusement - was an expression of dissatisfaction by the people; it showed the untruth of society by displaying the suffering in particular ways.⁴⁷ High art, on the other hand, inspired change through negation of present reality.⁴⁸ The culture industry forces both spheres together, neutering the seriousness and critical potential of either one.⁴⁹ The production of cultural artefacts has become a means to realize value through cheap entertainment, and as such low art has given up its autonomy; it exists no longer for its own sake. The standardized cultural products of modernity no longer inspire change or longing for something better but reflect the social status quo as absolute. The bleak products of mass media and advertisement function as a psychological vehicle for the spectator, who can project his own mental states as an echo onto them. This reified consciousness renders ideology complete.⁵⁰

Still, despite the claims of universality professed by the culture industry, the autonomy of authentic high art has been preserved, precisely because it presents itself as functionless. A genuine aesthetic experience is still possible, as I will show next.

2.4 The Autonomy of High Art, and the Genuine Aesthetic Experience

Adorno claims that high art has been able to maintain its societal function for a few reasons. Firstly, it exposes the false claim to universality of the culture industry, precisely because it comes at the cost of exclusion of the lower classes. The expensive and intellectual character of purposeless high art contrasts sharply with the cheap and easy amusement of products of the culture industry. It is in this opposition that the false truth of modern culture shines through, in the negative dialectics between artforms.⁵¹ Secondly, the very existence of high art challenges universalized instrumental reason. Contrary to modern rationality and the culture industry, works of high art do not have a function; they exist for their own sake. Adorno writes:

What is social in art is its immanent movement against society, not its manifest opinions. (...) Insofar as a social

⁴⁷ Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', 98-100.

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 32.

⁴⁹ Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', 98-99.

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 18-20.

⁵¹ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, Introduction, 7-8.

function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness.

(Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 227)

This functionlessness obviously clashes head-on with the central tenet of instrumental reason. Works of high art serve no other purpose than bringing about an aesthetic experience. The character of this experience is inherently disinterested. Adorno follows Kant in characterizing the aesthetic experience as 'purposive purposelessness'. It is purposive in the sense that we regard an object with intentionality, yet purposeless because we cannot devise it to attain any personal goal. During this experience, our cognitive faculties roam free without trying to subsume the particularity of the experience under some abstract universal. Thus, the aesthetic experience challenges our claims to truth and knowledge and the way we think about the world. However, Adorno goes beyond the Kantian claim that artworks yield only information about our subjective cognitive faculties. In a genuine aesthetic experience, a dialectical confrontation between a subject and an aesthetic object, the object has primacy over the subject and is capable of realizing objective artistic truth.⁵² The recognition of the truth claim made by the artwork involves not only the immediate non-discursive experience of the artwork, but is mediated by discursive philosophical theory, art-criticism, interpretation and commentary.⁵³ The recognition of the relation between art and truth is essential for the aesthetic experience, according to Adorno.

*Artworks are understood only when their experience is brought to the level of distinguishing between true and not true or, as a preliminary stage, between correct and incorrect. The comprehension of an artwork as a complex of truth brings the work into relation with its untruth, for there is no artwork that does not participate in the untruth external to it, that of the historical moment. (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 347.)*

The genuine aesthetic experience is not one of *Erlebnis*, in the sense of immediate, sensuous 'lived experience' caused by an external object, but rather *Erfahrung*, a cognitive process of

⁵² Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 142-143.

⁵³ Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 143-144.

interaction from a subject with the artwork and aesthetic discourse. It involves abnegation of the self and personal desire to self-preservation and instrumentality. Furthermore, it requires analysis of intention, form and content in relation to its material, and recognition of the truth content of the artwork in relation to its historical situation through critical reflection.⁵⁴

2.5 Conclusion

Adorno's account of the aesthetic experience is thoroughly dialectical and embedded in his critical theory. For him, art cannot be seen apart from its societal function. Since instrumental reason has become prevalent since Enlightenment and has infected culture to perpetuate a false consciousness of identity, both theory and culture have become ideology. High art, however, is still capable of criticizing the modern condition by virtue of its embeddedness in society – its heteronomy – and its autonomous, non-instrumental character and non-discursive claim to knowledge. This is however only achievable through the dialectical oppositions within the artwork itself and its moreover dialectical relations to the experiencing subject and external factors, such as the historical situation and discursive theories. The genuine aesthetic experience is the recognition of the truth claim of an artwork through its internal contradictions. This very complex account will be hard to classify, but if these aspects are not all taken into account Adorno's aesthetic theory is reduced to a caricature.

⁵⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 344-348.

3. Comparing Accounts of The Aesthetic Experience; A Futile Exercise?

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I start off by illustrating how accounts of the aesthetic experience are being compared in contemporary literature. For example, both Shusterman and Carroll offer an analysis of how the account offered by Adorno concurs or contrasts with other accounts. However, in doing so they take Adorno's conception at face value and import his remarks concerning the aesthetic experience directly into the parameters set by the analytic discussion on this topic, which I have roughly sketched in the first chapter by expounding Beardsley's account. In the second part of this chapter I argue why these comparisons are incomplete and unfeasible given the major differences in the role this concept plays in their respective theories. Finally, I suggest a different way treating conceptions of the aesthetic experience I do believe to be fruitful, namely the same way Morris Weitz suggested of looking at proposed definitions of art; as inherently honorific and demonstrative. In order to do this, I argue there is a structural, logical analogy between attempts to define the concepts 'work of art' and 'aesthetic experience', respectively.

3.2 Comparing Aesthetic Experience...

At first glance, a comparison between accounts of the aesthetic experience does not seem odd at all. Surely, we can identify both considerable similarities and differences between the accounts I have treated so far. Two authors who have done exactly this are Noël Carroll and Richard Shusterman. I will discuss these in turn.

Noël Carroll compares accounts of the aesthetic experience in terms of what they respectively designate as a necessary condition for such an experience. In this respect, discerns four types of accounts: the traditional, the pragmatic, the allegorical and the deflationary.⁵⁵ The distinguishing feature of the traditional account is that it demarcates the aesthetic experience as fundamentally disinterested. The pragmatic account explains the aesthetic experience in terms of its internal properties. The early Beardsley would qualify as 'pragmatic' because he – heavily influenced by the pragmatist John Dewey – defined the aesthetic experience in terms of its internal unity. The allegorical accounts, most notably

⁵⁵ Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 41-62.

those of critical theorists Marcuse and Adorno, champion the aesthetic experience in terms of disinterestedness and free play of cognitive faculties, liberated from instrumental concerns. Lastly, Carroll introduces the deflationary account, which focuses on the content of the experience; when our experience of an artwork is preoccupied with design appreciation or aesthetic or expressive properties of an object, this experience is aesthetic.

Carroll proceeds to reject the former three accounts with a now familiar line of objections; he claims all three are too narrow. The requirement of the traditional account that an agent has to subjectively value an experience for its own sake in order for that experience to be aesthetic leads to the conclusion that someone who values the appreciation of art instrumentally – for example, because they believe the appreciation of an artwork may serve evolutionary purposes – does not have an aesthetic experience, despite the fact that his mental activity might be type-type identical with someone who values the experience for its own sake. Therefore, disinterestedness cannot be a necessary condition for aesthetic experience because it arbitrarily excludes a subject that has the same aesthetic response but values it for some external reason.⁵⁶ Likewise, the argument against the pragmatic account of an unusually highly united experience is refuted by the Dickiean argument that surely there are many instances of aesthetic experiences that do not involve such affective unity. Carroll brings up the example of John Cage's 4:33, an artwork that intentionally subverts "traditional" aesthetic experience. By 'playing' four and a half minutes of silence, Cage mobilizes the chance surrounding environment to extend the aesthetic experience to 'normal' experiential phenomena, instead of restricting it to a display of musical unity. Yet we would still regard this as an aesthetic experience, despite the absence of affective unity. Therefore, pragmatic accounts like Beardsley's fail to provide a necessary condition for the aesthetic experience.⁵⁷ Third, Carroll addresses what he calls the allegorical accounts of aesthetic experience. He asserts these accounts hinge on the disinterestedness and non-conceptual character of the aesthetic experience evoked by artworks. Again, Carroll argues that neither disinterestedness, i.e. the absence of instrumental rationality, nor the free play of imaginative faculties, i.e. the absence of determinate, universalized concepts, are necessary features of the aesthetic experience. For example, in aesthetic appreciation we generally tend to classify

⁵⁶ Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, 42-49.

⁵⁷ Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, 49-51.

the artwork (is it a painting? Is it a play? Is it an abstract or representational painting? Is it a comedy or a tragedy?) in order to fully appreciate its form and content. Thus, categorical and conceptual thought does play a role in aesthetic experience and so purely imaginative free play of the senses is not a necessary condition.⁵⁸ Finally, Carroll introduces his deflationary account of the aesthetic experience. He postulates that what all aesthetic experiences have in common is that they involve design appreciation or attention to the qualitative expressive or aesthetic properties of an artwork.⁵⁹ Either of these is sufficient for qualifying an experience as 'aesthetic'.⁶⁰ And so, we are back at a purely descriptive, epistemic account of the aesthetic experience.

Shusterman compares different accounts of the aesthetic experience with respect to four features he deems central to conceptions of the aesthetic experience. These are a) the evaluative dimension, b) the phenomenological dimension, c) the semantic dimension and, finally, d) the demarcational-definitional dimension.⁶¹ These features respectively indicate a) what is so valuable or enjoyable about such an experience, b) the immediate, subjective affects it involves, c) its meaningfulness (as opposed to mere sensation) and d) the distinctiveness of this experience as opposed to 'regular' experience and the connection between this experience and the central aims of art. He suggests accounts of the aesthetic experience shift across axes on which these features function as contrasting poles. A conception of the aesthetic experience can be robustly phenomenological, as opposed to purely semantic, and essentially evaluative as opposed to merely descriptive. Given this framework, the early Beardsley would quite clearly classify as a thoroughly phenomenological and evaluative account. He identified the aesthetic experience in terms of its immediate phenomenological, affective properties, which he called unity (coherence and completeness), intensity and complexity. According to this account, the measure in which these affects are evoked by an artwork constitutes the aesthetic value of an artwork, rendering his conception an explicitly evaluative one. The broader, epistemic notion of the aesthetic experience by the

⁵⁸ Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, 51-58.

⁵⁹ Elsewhere he suggests the same criteria but calls it 'the content-oriented approach'. See Carroll, 'Aesthetic Experience Revisited', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2002), pp. 145-168, 163-168.

⁶⁰ Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, 58-62.

⁶¹ Shusterman, *The End of the Aesthetic Experience*, 30.

later Beardsley is a move away from these poles. The introduction of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions indicates a turn towards a more descriptive account of aesthetic experience, as well as the fact that now he *defines art* in terms of this experience. Furthermore, he has now abandoned the emphasis on exclusively phenomenological sensation to demarcate the aesthetic experience in favour of external perception of the contents of an artwork. However, he maintains that aesthetic value can be measured according to this experience and that this experience contains phenomenological affects.

Although Beardsley shifted from the evaluative and phenomenological poles towards the semantic and descriptive, his later account is neither exclusively the one or the other. An example of the purely semantic and descriptive interpretation is the one offered by Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art*. Following the lines of Dickie's objection that Beardsley's account of the aesthetic experience as inherently pleasurable is too narrow, as it fails to allow for bad art or aesthetic experiences that do not involve affects, Goodman asserts that an account of the aesthetic experience should be independent of all considerations of aesthetic value.⁶² By the same token, as affects and emotions are no consistent aspects of aesthetic experience, they cannot be a necessary condition and another constant factor must be distinguished. This leads Goodman to argue that the aesthetic experience is a form of cognition, and that it is demarcated from other experiences "by the dominance of certain symbolic characteristics", which are objectively identifiable in the object of the experience (i.e., the artwork).⁶³ He proceeds to identify five of these characteristics in another article, but for my purpose here this suffices to illustrate how Goodman argues for a strictly descriptive and semantic account of the aesthetic experience. Notice also how this is essentially a culmination of the shift towards epistemic and externalist accounts of the aesthetic experience, initiated by Beardsley.

If we take this paradigm on the ranges of phenomenological-semantic and evaluative-descriptive, where does Adorno fit in? Shusterman observes that Adorno's account does involve immediate, lived experience; it is something phenomenologically undergone or suffered. On the other hand, according to Adorno mere *Erlebnis* does not suffice for a real aesthetic experience. The genuine aesthetic experience acquires its transformative and

⁶² Goodman, *Languages of Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 255.

⁶³ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 262.

emancipatory through critical reflection on not only the artwork itself but also on its place in society and the socio-historical processes that gave rise to this.⁶⁴ Thus, Adorno's account involves both phenomenological and semantic aspects. Furthermore, I suppose his account should be classified as an evaluative one, since for Adorno the ability to evoke a genuine aesthetic experience is what distinguishes high art from products of the culture industry. It is, however, not an unambiguously pleasurable experience, but rather a confrontation between static ways of thought and an object that does not conform to this.

Now, I have shown how accounts of the aesthetic experience are compared in contemporary literature. In what follows, I argue that by comparing these conceptions at face value overlooks the fundamental difference in theoretical function the concept of 'aesthetic experience' fulfils in the respective accounts. Following that, I propose what these differences in content and theoretical function tell us about the kind of concept 'the aesthetic experience' is.

3.3 ... a Futile Exercise? The Role of Aesthetic Experience in Theory

The problem of comparing accounts of the aesthetic experience in this way is the role aesthetic experience plays in the respective theories. I aim to show why Adorno's account of the aesthetic experience cannot be taken at face value and placed within this analytic paradigm. I will do so by firstly showing the differences in assumptions leading to these accounts and, secondly, by showing how ineffective the different objections to accounts of the aesthetic experience would be when directed at Adorno's account.

From the outset, Beardsley's aim in constructing a definition of the aesthetic experience is directed at radically demarcating it from everyday experience and, moreover, defining related concepts such as 'aesthetic value' in terms of this experience. Furthermore, despite his earlier reluctance to supply a definition of art, the later Beardsley maintains that the concept of 'aesthetic experience' is able to do so. Naturally, these presuppositions on the theoretical function of the aesthetic experience bring about severe restrictions as to what this concept must and cannot entail. Given the prime theoretical importance ascribed to this concept, it is no wonder it has received so much scrutiny. In order to fulfil all these intended theoretical functions, Beardsley's conception of the aesthetic experience has to capture all

⁶⁴ Shusterman, 'The End of the Aesthetic Experience', 30-31.

relevant instances aimed at by the theory; that is, it must apply to all artefacts we would like to call 'art', all experiential responses we would like to call 'aesthetic' within all different modes of presentation we call 'artforms'. Furthermore, as the concept of the aesthetic experience is itself the *definiens* of related concepts such as 'aesthetic value' and 'aesthetic properties', he has to define it without reference to these in order to avoid circularity. That is why the earlier Beardsley must resort only to the internal structure of this supposedly unique type of experience to discern what they have in common.

Now, considering what Beardsley aims to accomplish with his definition of the aesthetic experience, the objection that his accounts are too narrow is justified. The early Beardsley's phenomenological account of a united, complex and intense experience fails to capture artworks that intentionally do not evoke affects or instances of bad art that fail to elicit such an experience, while his theory must accommodate for these instances. As he wants to preserve the notion of a unique aesthetic experience, this forces Beardsley to broaden his definition of the aesthetic experience as an experience having aesthetic content; an experience of an object having some properties of formal unity and intense regional qualities that are intended to provide aesthetic gratification. Still, this epistemic account of the aesthetic experience maintains the function it had before; 'aesthetic properties', 'artworks' and 'aesthetic value' are defined in terms of this experience, such that 'aesthetic properties' and 'artworks' are those properties and objects that are intended to evoke such an experience and 'aesthetic value' is the measure in which they succeed in doing so.

But if we look at Adorno's aesthetics, we find no such explanatory function ascribed to the aesthetic experience. Adorno treats art as a given, as an autonomous practice in a world regulated by instrumental rationality.⁶⁵ Insofar theory defends art's existence by pleading its cause, it manufactures more untrue ideology; insofar art is intended to meet a societal need, it is profit-driven and conformist reified ideology.⁶⁶ The products of the culture industry are the most obvious example of this statement. Hollywood movies are manufactured in order to be effortlessly consumed. We identify with the main characters, the heroes, and the bad guy gets what he deserves.⁶⁷ These products have become entirely

⁶⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 18.

⁶⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 17-19.

⁶⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 346.

heteronomous, subsumed under the universality of instrumental reason and the social status quo. The genuine aesthetic experience, for Adorno, is a *consequence* of the unique both autonomous and heteronomous position of high art in our society, rather than an explanation or justification for it. By placing Adorno's account of the aesthetic experience on a par with analytic accounts, the essential difference in theoretical role is overlooked. Above, the accounts of the aesthetic experience are compared at face value; solely with regard to features ascribed to it. But Adorno's purpose is not to provide a real definition in the sense of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions to demarcate the aesthetic experience from other experiences. Rather, he shows how, *given* this status of art in society we can adequately appreciate an artwork, and what this can show about our ways of thinking and modern culture.

The implications of this difference can be illustrated by applying the objections raised to Beardsley's account to Adorno's. The core of Dickies objections is that Beardsley's account of the aesthetic experience is too narrow, as it fails to capture the full range of experiences or objects we would like to call 'aesthetic'. The question is *why* we would want to call all these experiences 'aesthetic experiences'. Beardsley must amend his definition because his theory requires that the definition of aesthetic experience captures all experiential responses to all works of art. But for Adorno, this objection does not hold. His account of a genuine aesthetic experience is *intentionally* bound to exclude a whole range of artefacts that we cannot or do not experience in such a way, most notably the products manufactured by the culture industry. He could just respond that his critics employ a mistaken conception of what is an aesthetic experience, and that his account of a *genuine* aesthetic experience captures the full potential of an artwork as a social monad. The same rejection could be employed against Carroll's objection of the supposed necessity of the conditions of disinterestedness and free play of the imagination and non-conceptual thought. Here it might be remarked that Adorno's account of aesthetic experience does in fact ascribe a crucial role to conceptual thought and discursive theory, as I have shown above. Anyhow, by attacking Adorno on the supposed necessity of these features, Carroll ignores the fact that Adorno is not trying to provide a real definition of the aesthetic experience in the sense of providing a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather provides a seriously made recommendation to fully understand and appreciate works of art. Shusterman as well ignores the difference in theoretical role of the concept 'aesthetic experience' in the different theories. Beardsley

starts out with providing a definition of the aesthetic experience and employs this definition to explain all related concepts. But Adorno starts out with the role and status of art in modern society and finally arrives at what a genuine aesthetic experience would consist of, given all these considerations. Essentially, the difference is a top-down versus a bottom-up approach. Although their analysis concerning the conceptions taken at face value might reveal certain differences and similarities, the fundamental difference in theoretical function of these concepts makes that they are not on a par with one another. What are we to make of this difference in function of the concept of the aesthetic experience? What does this tell us about the way this concept is employed, and what kind of concept we are dealing with here?

3.4 The Role of Theory in Aesthetic Experience

In 1956, Morris Weitz wrote an article called 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', in which he addressed the problem of the definition of art.⁶⁸ The central question he raised is whether it is possible to provide a real definition of 'art' in the sense of postulating a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that apply to artworks and artworks only. More strongly, he pleads for the rejection of this problem because, according to Weitz, it is fundamentally misguided. He argues that such a definition is never forthcoming because it is logically impossible; 'art' is an open concept. By this, Weitz means that the conditions under which we apply a concept are corrigible and amendable; that is to say that there is a situation or case imaginable in which we make a *decision* to apply the concept in this new situation or case.⁶⁹ He asserts this is why all previous definitions of art have failed. The major aesthetic theories he refers to all tried to define art by distinguishing some essential feature that all works of art have in common: significant form for example, or the expression of emotion, or the expression of non-conceptual knowledge. All these proposed definitions are in turn rejected, mostly because they are either too broad or too narrow. New artworks or artforms arise that we decide are art, but that do not fit the offered definition. Moreover, this process is inherent to the creative enterprise that is the creation of artworks.

⁶⁸ Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Sep., 1956), pp. 27-35.

⁶⁹ Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', 31.

Weitz discerns two ways of applying the concept of 'art' to objects. On the one hand, there is the descriptive use of the term, which appeals to 'criteria of recognition'; strands of similarity when we describe works of art.

Thus, mostly, when we describe something as a work of art, we do so under the conditions of there being present some sort of artifact [sic.], made by human skill, ingenuity, and imagination, which embodies in its sensuous, public medium-stone, wood, sounds, words, etc.- certain distinguishable elements and relations. (Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', 33.)

None of these are necessary or sufficient conditions, as we might call an object 'art' but deny any one of them. If none of these criteria were present, we would hardly call an object an artwork because there would be no way of *recognizing* it as a work of art. Contrastingly, the evaluative use of the concept of 'art' is used to praise. So, for example, we might say "Now this is Art" evaluatively because the artefact in question successfully harmonizes its constitutive elements. But this cannot provide a real definition since the spectator adds some preferred feature to the conditions of recognition and now presents this as a definition of art. This will always result in similar problems as we have seen with the concept of 'aesthetic experience'; such an account will be too narrow, as it excludes artefacts we do want to classify as 'art' but that do not harmonize elements (successfully). For example, we can imagine artworks that intentionally disharmonize elements, or bad artworks that fail in their intention to harmonize their form and content. Or, on the other hand, someone who employs the evaluative use of 'art' as a real definition might object that an artefact that does not succeed in harmonizing elements is no artwork at all.

I believe there is a structural analogy between the concepts of 'art' and 'aesthetic experience'. There are a few reasons for this supposition. First, we can discern the same types of usage of the concept. The early Beardsley and Adorno employ explicitly evaluative notions of the aesthetic experience by claiming a specific, preferred feature that makes for a 'genuine' aesthetic experience. For Beardsley this is the affective unity of this experience; for Adorno, it is the recognition of the truth in an artwork through critical reflection. But because it is Beardsley's intention to provide a true definition of this experience, true for all and only aesthetic experiences, his conception runs into the familiar narrowness- and bad-art (or bad-experience) objections. The same would happen if a proposed real definition of aesthetic

experience includes pleasurable or disinterestedness; not all aesthetic experiences are pleasurable, and an aesthetic experience might be 'interested' in that it is valued for other reasons than its own sake. Adorno's response to these objections could very well be to deny that the counterexample the critic is referring to is in fact no genuine aesthetic experience at all, as I have shown above. Thus, these are exactly the type of responses Weitz mentions.

However, if we regard these proposals as honorific recommendations or criteria of evaluation for attending in a certain way to our appreciation of artworks, these objections lose their ground. Consider the compelling examples offered by Beardsley and Adorno supporting their accounts of the aesthetic experience. Beardsley sketches the experience of a symphony where the music evokes affective responses such as sadness and excitement in succession, evoking expectations and fulfilling those, creating a thoroughly felt united, coherent and complete experience.⁷⁰ Certainly, we can all imagine, or even recall a similar experience with a piece of music of our own choosing. Or we can go and listen to Beethoven's *Ninth Symphonie* with Beardsley's description in mind and trace our response; we might even find we recognize his phenomenological description and agree with Beardsley. Adorno often refers to the plays by Samuel Beckett, which he found to be more true than other artworks (and to whom he intended to dedicate *Aesthetic Theory*).⁷¹ We can attend such a play and recognize what Adorno is describing; how thoroughly the play works through its internal contradictions, and how we can see resembled in this the untruth of our own culture.⁷² If we take their accounts of genuine aesthetic experience to heart as serious recommendations of attending to certain artworks, we can recognize what they saw. We can understand and experience the artworks in a similar way. I believe we have no reason to deny that either of these educated, sensitive men had a vividly felt experience they justifiably call genuinely aesthetic, *other than that it does not fit the intended role in theory of providing a true, closed definition*.

Now, it might be objected that the epistemic or content-oriented accounts of aesthetic experience do in fact provide necessary and sufficient conditions for an aesthetic

⁷⁰ Beardsley, 'Aesthetic Experience Regained', 5-6.

⁷¹ Zuidervaat, 'Theodor W. Adorno', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/adorno/>.

⁷² Zuidervaat, 'Theodor W. Adorno'. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 347-348.

experience. The later Beardsley had one necessary condition (Object Directedness) and either one out of four features (Felt Freedom, Detached Affect, Active Discovery, Wholeness) that are jointly sufficient to classify an experience as aesthetic. Carroll's deflationary account suggests merely two conditions, either of which is sufficient; either the involvement of design appreciation or attention to the qualitative expressive or aesthetic properties of an artwork suffices to qualify an experience as an aesthetic one. I want to suggest that these accounts of the concept 'aesthetic experience' are similar to the descriptive use of 'art' as described by Weitz. What these authors are offering are conditions of recognition. If all of these aspects are absent from a specific experience, I suppose we have no reason whatsoever to recognize it as 'aesthetic'. Yet we can go and deny any of these features individually while maintaining that the experience we are having is an aesthetic one. Take Beardsley's necessary condition of the "willingly accepted guidance over the procession of one's mental states by phenomenally objective properties". When we sit down in a concert hall to direct our undivided attention at a symphonic orchestra, this condition makes sense. But imagine a mathematician who solves a complex equation in his head and is overtaken by the sheer elegance and beauty of his solution. Our mathematician could fulfil all sufficient conditions of Beardsley's definition; he might experience a sense of freedom, of affective emotion, of discovery and wholeness. Moreover, he recognizes similarities between this experience and his attendance last night of an excellent performance of Beethoven's *Ninth*. Although these mental states are not guided by phenomenally objective properties of an object, he could call his experience aesthetic – and with good reason, given the strong resemblance of these experiences. By the same token, Carroll's conditions of design appreciation or attention to expressive properties of an artwork can be opposed by an aesthetic experience caused by, for example, a natural vista. Furthermore, his deflationary account of aesthetic experience as including any design appreciation or attention to expressive properties renders the notion of 'experience' entirely superfluous. Design appreciation or attention to expressive properties might bring about no 'experience' in the phenomenological, affective sense whatsoever. We can legitimately ask what is gained by construing 'aesthetic experience' in this way, because every explanatory power of the concept is nullified. I think the only thing this proposed definition does is provide criteria for recognition of when an aesthetic experience might occur, not that it actually does.

The second reason I suppose ‘art’ and ‘aesthetic experience’ are analogous is the fact that both are open to change. In the course of the last two hundred years, we have applied the concept of art to objects we found can be appreciated in ways similar to established artforms. Examples of this include photography, Warhol’s ready-mades and pop-art, Jeff Koons’ kitschy and pornographic works, and the artform Van Gerwen calls ‘implication-art’, which involves the employment of materials previously unavailable for moral reasons, such as human corpses, excrement and suffering, live animals.⁷³ At least some of the works of these new artforms evoke an experience that we want to call aesthetic, even though the contents of these experiences might differ immensely from each other or from experiences evoked by other artforms. The procedure of appreciation Van Gerwen proposes for implication art involves the hindrance of ‘normal’ aesthetic appreciation because this instrumental application of, say, live animals for our pleasure constitutes condoning an immoral act that brought about these works, which infringes upon the disinterestedness involved in ‘normal’ aesthetic appreciation.⁷⁴ In Santiago Sierra’s performance *Group of Persons Facing the Wall and Person Facing Into a Corner*, we watch a group of seven people standing, facing a wall and a corner in an art gallery. Van Gerwen writes: “To stand there and watch them is to personally engage with their predicament”.⁷⁵ The experience of these artworks is one of moral unease, maybe even of guilt or shame. But we can appreciate these works aesthetically, we find reasons to call them art, we perceive the creativity and the hand of the maker, we understand the message of these works, we engage with them and they offer a rewarding and lasting experience; surely, we would call this experience an aesthetic experience, despite it not fitting nor providing a closed definition of this concept. We can choose to extend the concept of ‘aesthetic experience’ to include the experience of these works. Moreover, for the reasons mentioned above, I believe we should do so.

The conceptions of the aesthetic experience of the early Beardsley and Adorno are very different with respect to the content of this experience, their assumptions leading to their accounts and the theoretical motivation for construing their conception the way they do. But they tell us something similar; they urge us to look differently, to attend to different

⁷³ Van Gerwen, ‘Implication Art’, forthcoming.

⁷⁴ Van Gerwen, ‘Implication Art’, 7.

⁷⁵ Van Gerwen, ‘Implication Art’, 8.

aspects of our engagement with artworks, whether phenomenological or cognitive, semantic or sensuous, immediate or through contemplation. They provide us with criteria to evaluate the experience elicited by artworks, with tools to enhance our understanding of this experience and, by extension, the artwork itself. A descriptive conception such as the deflationary account offered by Carroll still fails to provide a satisfactory set of necessary and sufficient conditions but, moreover, loses all theoretical and practical, explanatory and demonstrative substance offered by the evaluative accounts. This is, I believe, no fault of the specific attempts to provide a satisfactory, true definition, but due to the open character of the concept of 'the aesthetic experience'. The logical impossibility to provide a satisfactory definition of the aesthetic experience does however not entail that such an experience does not exist or that the concept itself is meaningless. Like Weitz suggests of proposed definitions of art, they fulfil an important theoretical and practical function by providing criteria of evaluation and reasons to engage with art in the first place. I emphatically suggest we take them seriously.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how accounts of the aesthetic experience are compared in contemporary literature. I have argued these comparisons take the concepts of 'aesthetic experience' at face value and, although they are to some extent accurate and helpful, forego important differences with regard to the theoretical role this concept is supposed to fulfil and the assumptions that lead up to them. Following that, I have argued there is a structural similarity between the concepts of 'art' and 'aesthetic experience', in the sense that they are both open concepts and therefore a real definition with necessary and sufficient conditions is logically impossible. Therefore, I suggest we take these accounts of the aesthetic experience as seriously made recommendations to attend in certain ways to artworks and our engagement with them.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to investigate the concept of 'the aesthetic experience'. In order to do so, I first explained Beardsley's account of the aesthetic experience and the way he amended it in the course of a heated debate with George Dickie, who raised substantial objections to all proposed definitions. In the second chapter I introduced the conception of the aesthetic experience according to Adorno's Critical Theory. In the third and final chapter I showed how these accounts are compared in contemporary literature. Both Shusterman and Carroll compare the different conceptions of aesthetic experience at face value, thereby ignoring the fundamentally different roles these accounts fulfil in the respective theories. Furthermore, I have argued that these differences reveal a structural analogy with the concept of 'art', which is to say that, like Morris Weitz argued, these are open concepts. They group together certain objects – or, in this case, experiences – that differ but are similar in certain ways. We can decide to extend the range of these concepts, based on criteria of recognition, a sort of 'family resemblance'. However, this means a true definition in the sense of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions is logically impossible. Still, proposed definitions or accounts of aesthetic experience are important for our theories of art, and arguably even more for our practice of appreciating art. I have argued we should treat these proposed definitions as serious, well-founded recommendations for attending to our engagement with artworks in certain ways. The way the philosophers discussed in this thesis engage with art is profoundly sensitive, attentive and intelligent. If we listen to them closely, I sincerely believe they provide us with tools to enlarge our understanding of art, to deepen our experience of specific kinds of artworks and to better articulate the importance and potential of art and the experience thereof.

Ward Huetink

Lunteren, June 2018

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