6. Aesthetic Experience

This chapter is devoted to descriptions of aesthetic experience. Description is necessary to identify the way in which the performing arts function in society. Section 6.1 discusses descriptions of aesthetic experience in arts philosophy and sociology. It starts from the Kantian premises that aesthetic experience should be studied on the basis of the mental processes that an object arouses in the subject (in Kantian terms: the free play of the faculty of intellect with the faculty of perception, see section 5.3.1) Section 6.2 deals with the specific artistic aspects of aesthetic experience. This is needed to clarify the obscurity in the use of ‘art’ and ‘culture’ in the cultural policy documents. This will be the topic of the last section, which offers a description of aesthetic experience of the performing arts in order to identify the values and subsequent functions that can be associated with aesthetic experience and which are, therefore, intrinsic.

6.1. Descriptions of Aesthetic Experience


Carroll and Davies have both published introductions to the philosophy of art. They are critical of the functional paradigm, although they concede that the description of the aesthetic experience is an important part of the philosophy of art. Their account of the aesthetic experience links aesthetic experience to the aesthetic properties of an artwork. These properties of the object are response-dependent properties (Carroll, 1999, p. 157) which means that humans attribute the property to the object. Without humans, objects can still have properties, an object may be three metres high for instance, but it would not be possible to say that the object is ‘monumental’. Though aesthetic properties are experienced as properties of the object, they are ‘implicitly connected to the reception side of things’ (ibid., p. 158). To Carroll, aesthetics is a larger domain than the study of arts because one can experience nature in an aesthetic manner as well. Carroll discerns two approaches of aesthetic experience: a content-oriented account and an affect-oriented account. The content-oriented account is straightforward: an aesthetic experience is the experience of the aesthetic properties of a work (ibid., p. 168). The affect-oriented account tries to clarify the nature of the experience rather than what features of a work are being experienced. According to Carroll this account is dominant in art theory.

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1 Carroll is of the opinion that the philosophy of art and of aesthetics can be considered independently of one another, for the philosophy of art is object-oriented and aesthetics is reception-oriented (Carroll, 1999, p. 159). From a functional paradigm, however, this is not true because in this paradigm the definition of art depends on the functions it serves for the audience, therefore it is reception-oriented as well.
A first important feature of an aesthetic experience is the attitude of the viewer. He or she should not be moved by ulterior motives but must allow him-/herself to be guided by the work's structures and purposes. This ‘presupposes playing by the object’s own rules, rather than importing our own (…), placing yourself in the hands of the maker of the object – going wherever she bids you, and attending to whatever she makes salient’ (ibid., p. 171). Carroll associates this attitude with ‘disinterestedness’ such as it has been encountered in Kantian aesthetics. However, he prefers a different term: the viewer should be sympathetic towards the work. With this he means that audience members should take an interest in the work (disinterestedness is not the same as uninterested) but at the same time should surrender to the work and not try to read certain predetermined interests in(to) it. He gives the example of a Soviet official expecting a work to affirm the doctrines of communism. He therefore only experiences the features of the work that affirm these and he rejects other features that might be in conflict with his doctrine. This, of course, is not the way to fully experience a work (ibid., p. 184). This interpretation of disinterestedness is attractive, for it allows for ulterior motives such as socializing and status affirmation in cultural consumption as long as the audience members are sympathetic towards the internal structures, i.e., the formal arrangement of elements in the work. Many customs in performing-arts attendance, such as dimming the lights in the auditorium, a proscenium arch and curtains, the tuning of instruments and the subsequent advent of the conductor, are devices to create the desired attitude in the audience members by separating the real world from the theatrical or musical reality of the performance, which is a reality in itself. Though this account of aesthetic experience seems illuminating, it does not discern between the experience of art and other sensorily perceivable objects or presentations. For instance, when attending a lecture one also must be sympathetic towards the arrangement of formal elements of the work, in other words, allow the structure of the argument presented by the lecturer to convey its message.

A second important feature of the affect-oriented approach to aesthetic experience is contemplation (ibid., p. 171). Carroll writes:

To contemplate an object is to be acutely aware of its details and their interrelationships, (it) calls for keen observation. It also involves exercising actively the constructive powers of the mind, of being challenged by a diversity of often initially conflicting stimuli and of attempting to make them cohere. (Carroll, 1999, p. 172)

This feature of aesthetic experience brings us closer to a truly functional paradigm. Some of the features here resemble functions mentioned in the policy documents (such as training the power of observation and exercising the powers of the mind). The search for coherence in initially conflicting elements also resembles Beardsley’s active discovery of elements. Carroll states that this contemplation can be a source of immense satisfaction:

The active search for details and connections itself can be exhilarating, and the success of such activity, where it occurs, can bestow a kind of self-rewarding pleasure on the activity as a whole. With aesthetic experience, this sort of pleasure is said to be valued for its own sake (…) the mental and emotional workout afforded by aesthetic experience is its own reward. (Carroll, 1999, p. 172)
The last sentence of this quote is consistent with Carroll’s interpretation of disinterestedness as sympathy towards the work. Ascribing contemplation to aesthetic experience makes the concept clearer. It is also consistent with Kantian aesthetics, where the exercise of the powers of the mind is crucial in describing aesthetic experience and the pleasure which can be derived from this: the harder one has to strive to reach success in the active search for connections (i.e., the more diversity the elements of a work contain) the greater the feeling of achievement will be. However, this account describes the aesthetic experience as primarily a cerebral puzzle and leaves the affective side of the experience out of the picture. Furthermore, this description still does not strictly separate artistic from non-artistic (though aesthetic) experiences because all of this - the search for details and connections, active discovery of elements, mental workout – can occur when watching a craftily made detective series. Following a lecture also involves being acutely aware of the elements presented in the lecture and following their interrelationship, or even being challenged by provocative statements of the speaker and trying to make sense of them. In Carroll’s approach it seems that the difference between artistic and non-artistic aesthetic experiences is a gradual one. The more complicated the ‘puzzle’ is, the more likely that the experience will be artistic. This would entail that there is no fundamental difference between non-artistic and artistic aesthetic experience. The difference would be merely based upon the competence of the spectator. Carroll uses the term ‘design appreciation’ to denote the sympathetic attention afforded to the structure of the work (ibid., p. 183). Aesthetic experience involves the constructive powers of the mind which become evident in design appreciation ‘where the challenge of comprehending the diverse elements of an artwork is joined by relating them to the point of the whole’ (ibid., p. 201). But as the example of a lecture demonstrates, design appreciation is not specific to aesthetics experience, though it is an important constitutive part of it.

According to Carroll, aesthetic experience is not a basis to define art and, considering the way he describes aesthetic experience, one has to agree with him. ‘We can have what we call aesthetic experiences of artworks, or of everyday things, like nature. These experiences involve attention and contemplation as their most characteristic elements’ (ibid., p. 183). Though the affect-oriented account claims to describe the aesthetic experience, it actually does not because it still rests on a description of the properties of the artworks. However, the elements of attention and contemplation as part of aesthetic experience do provide insight. Carroll’s account of aesthetic experience comprises some of the functions encountered in the

2 Boorsma, for instance, argues that when the signs in the work (she uses the term artistic metaphors) are decoded in a systematic way, the experience will not be artistic. She argues that the manner in which a metaphor is decoded is key to the artistic nature, rather than the difficulty in decoding it. She points to the fact that free association should be used (see Boorsma, 1998, p. 89). Furthermore, the resulting interpretation of a metaphor should be experienced as new to the consumer and the experience should be subjective and individual. Although she does not rule out the possibility of interpretation through discussion of the experience with others, she points to the fact that this can lead to objectifying the experience and thus applying pre-existent interpretations to it and thus excluding an artistic quality of the experience (ibid., p. 92). Interpretation will be discussed in more detail in section 6.1.5.
policy documents. He also offers an account of intellectual relaxation versus entertainment in the sense of diversion. This account relies heavily on the complexity of the ‘puzzle’ offered by the artwork, and therefore the difference between intellectual entertainment and diversion seems gradual and dependent on the capacities of the observer. There appears to be no clear distinction between the two. It should be concluded that Carroll’s account does not describe the aesthetic experience but the attitude of a viewer towards a work. The attitude of the viewer is merely a prerequisite for the occurrence of aesthetic experience. His account stops at the point of interest of the present research: what makes an experience specifically artistic and to what values and functions does this give rise?

Davies offers an account of aesthetic experience which is similar to Carroll’s. He describes aesthetic properties as follows:

Aesthetic properties are usually characterized as objective features perceived in the object of appreciation when it is approached for its own sake (…)\(^3\). They are directly available for perception in that their recognition does not require knowledge of matters external to the object of appreciation. In particular, their recognition does not depend on information about the circumstances under which the item was made or about its intended or possible functions. These properties announce their significance, as it were, through the experience they provide. (Davies, 2006, pp. 53-4)

This definition concurs with Carroll’s object-oriented account of aesthetic properties. In Davies’ view, aesthetic properties are directly and sensorily perceivable properties of a work. Davies opposes these to artistic properties of an artwork which, in his view, are not directly perceivable. They include conventions of (religious) iconography, quotations or reference to other artworks, the position of a work in the author’s oeuvre or within an art movement (originality, influence by other works or other artists) or a specific function of a work (elegy, portrait, hymn). These are all properties that are beyond a work’s immediate boundaries. This seems an elegant way to discern between aesthetic properties and artistic properties of a work: all properties that concern interpretation are considered to be artistic. But matters are not that simple. In itself, it may be logical to use the word artistic to denote every experience of properties of a work that involve interpretation (ibid., p. 61). But that does not shed any light on the nature and value of such experiences. Davies’ account immediately recalls Bourdieu’s radical contextualization and cultural competence. It is necessary for a spectator to know that, in Christian iconography, a white dove represents the Holy Spirit when this symbol appears in a painting or sculpture in order to be able to decipher the meaning of the work. A viewer without such knowledge will have difficulty understanding the work. Although he or she will experience the work differently, nonetheless there is an experience of it and it cannot be ruled out that such an experience is artistic. Davies’ definition is therefore able to distinguish between aesthetic and artistic features of works, but not of their experience and subsequent value. This is why one can argue that he should have chosen the term ‘interpretative’ properties instead of ‘artistic’, for, in his definition, the distinction is

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\(^3\) It is questionable whether this approach to aesthetic properties is usual in the sense that it is generally accepted within aesthetic theory, as Davies suggests. However, the contemplation of a work for its own sake concurs with the emphasis on disinterestedness in Kantian aesthetics.
based upon the fact that the properties involve interpretation to discern their meaning. This, however, does not pertain to the value of the experience.

For the present discussion it should be added that Davies devotes attention to the value of art (ibid., chapter 8). First he discusses pleasure.

The pleasure is not separable from the artwork that is its cause (...). It requires and arises out of the person’s active perceptual and cognitive involvement with the artwork that is its focus (...). This engagement is concerned with determining the work’s identity and content, so that the work can be recognized and appreciated in its particularity. (Davies, 2006, p. 210)

Obviously Davies hints at the kind of intellectual pleasure that Carroll also indicates, which is important for an answer on the difference between intellectual entertainment and diversion. Davies stresses, however, that pleasure is not the primary reason why people tend to seek out aesthetic experiences. Factors such as habit, curiosity and other factors that pay no regard to pleasure can be their motivation. Davies also points to the fact that art can become a mode of existence for audience members and be part of the self-realization of individuals. If such is the case, the suggestion that one seeks pleasure in art does not come close to the extensiveness of its role in someone’s life (ibid., pp. 211-12). Davies also points to the educative value of art. He uses Collingwood’s definition of art as ‘an act or process of expression through which the artist clarifies her inchoate emotions and states of mind’ (ibid., p. 213). So art is a source of self-knowledge for both the artist and the audience. Furthermore, art can serve as a source of propositional knowledge. ‘We learn from (art) that things are or could be so-and-so, and what this would be like to experience or achieve. And we transfer this knowledge to the actual world’ (ibid., pp. 213-14). Art can serve to refine our perceptive and discriminatory skills and enhance our imagination and it can shape or change our attitudes and values (ibid., p. 215). Davies calls these extrinsic values of art. However,

learning from the work can be intimately bound up with recognizing and understanding it for the artwork it is. To follow Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, the reader must come to appreciate how the heroine can be led to suicide by the events of her life, and it is precisely that understanding that might translate to the real world. We learn through example, mimicry, and experience, as well as by explicit instruction, and artworks provide the opportunity for us not only to observe how fictional characters grapple with and perhaps learn form their situations, but also to imaginatively rehearse our response to equivalent, possibly future, circumstances. It is true that we need to bring beliefs, values, and sensitivities from the real world to our appreciation of the novel, but it is no less true that through appreciating the fiction we may develop, recognize, and refine them. Fictions can represent complex situations in concrete detail and thereby bring to life ideas and emotions we may previously have grasped only in schematic, abstracted forms. (Davies, 2006, pp. 216-17)

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4 The term ‘interpretation’ is used here on a specific level, that of interpreting the meaning of specific (features of) artworks. In the following sections, the term will be used in different ways. Interpreting and interpretation are thus difficult terms that need to be clarified. This is the topic of section 6.1.5.

5 Moreover Davies’ distinction between aesthetic and artistic suggests that artistic properties are not a subset of aesthetic properties. This stems from the fact that Davies makes the distinction on the basis of the properties of the artwork itself rather than on the nature of the experience that is afforded by the artwork. In this research, however, artistic experience will be regarded as a subset of aesthetic experience (see the following sections).
With this description Davies brings the educative power of art so close to its core as art, that it seems strange that he insists these values of art are extrinsic. The cognitive benefits one can gain from reading *Anna Karenina* are linked forcefully to the artistic character of the novel. Fictional art in particular is very suited to highlight significant patterns we might miss in everyday life (*ibid.*, p. 217).

According to Carroll and Davies, aesthetic experience is linked to perception of the aesthetic properties of the artwork itself, which can be described as the formal arrangements of elements in the work that can be sensorily perceived by the audience. It seems that what is being described here is the appreciation of the form of a work, the manner in which its medium has been used by the artist. In common language this refers to the beauty of artworks (or lack thereof) and not to the nature of the experience they afford. This is why one could call their approaches ‘semi-functional’. Though it seems obvious that the aesthetic properties make aesthetic experience possible, in that they require a person to regard the work in a certain way, the semi-functional approach is not sufficient to assess the value and functions of the experience afforded. It does pay attention to the way in which the meaning of a work (or specific features of it) can be deciphered, but it does not shed light on the value of the experience of a work. Moreover Davies’ division between intrinsic and extrinsic functions of art seems strange. Their descriptions of the specific attention audience members should pay to artworks, sympathy towards the formal arrangement of elements in the work, are particularly useful interpretations of Kant’s ‘disinterestedness’.

### 6.1.2. More Criticism of Disinterestedness

There is more to say about the proper attitudes for experiencing artworks, based on the ideas of Zeglin Brand (1998) for instance. She argues that the traditional view on disinterestedness is to disregard any interest in the object’s existence, thus forgoing any desire to own or use the object (Zeglin Brand, 1998, p. 156). This also entails denying any involvement with the work on a personal level, even seeking mastery over one’s own bodily responses. This is why feminists criticize disinterestedness as a gendered reaction in a self-conscious, controlling way which they see as psychological censure (*ibid.*, p. 159). This type of emotional detachment from the work seems at odds with the common experience of art. Works of art that people love and cherish have profound meaning for them and they can feel very much attached to them. Furthermore, disinterestedness logically seems to exclude many works of art from the realm of art, for these works do invite the spectators to take an interest. For instance many artists have called attention to the plight of working classes (such as Heyermans in the Dutch theatre).

Zeglin Brand argues that it is undeniably the case that viewers tend to identify with works of art, they do take an interest in them and, in so far such an interest is self-conscious and self-
directed, this becomes an interested stance (Interested Attention, IA). This is why works of art matter to people, and it usually happens when a viewer learns more about the background of a work (Zeglin Brand, 1998, p. 162). Her argument is not that works should only be experienced on a base of interestedness, but that

the adoption of a stance of traditional disinterestedness (...) is still a possible and appropriate, useful mode of experiencing art (...). What I call Interested Attention (IA) may persist only for the duration of one’s initial encounter. It may last for the first few seconds, or it may come later. It may be interspersed with brief moments or long intervals of what I will call Disinterested Attention (DA). The ‘toggle’ between the two types of attention might be deliberate or not. In any case, one cannot ‘see’ with both types of attention at once. (Zeglin Brand, 1998, p. 165)

So the interested attention may be what draws a viewer to a work, may be the reason why he or she takes notice of it and strives to understand it better. It usually occurs in the beginning of the aesthetic experience. But then the viewer has ‘to engage intellectually and disengage emotionally with the work of art’ (ibid., p. 165), which is to regard it as disinterestedly as possible. Zeglin Brand argues convincingly that a pure disinterested stance is never possible, but one can try to abandon one’s interests as much as possible. This amounts to allowing the formal properties of the work to guide the experience, i.e. sympathy towards the work. Zeglin Brand subsequently describes the toggling between DA and IA as adding lenses to the perception of the work. After allowing DA to the work, the subject should add several lenses to the work’s reception, such as a gender lens for instance, a race lens, or any other designated lens. Note that one cannot experience a work with no lenses at all, but applying a lens of formal appreciation and intellectual analysis (DA) means stripping away as many lenses as possible and subsequently adding specific, interested lenses. This enhances the meaning of the work (ibid., pp. 166-7). Such shedding of lenses might arise involuntarily or it may be a habitual, learned practice. Thus works of art can yield multiple, even conflicting, sorts of experiences.

In 1995 Van Stokkom published an article criticizing Dutch cultural policy. One of his major objections was that views of cultural policy leave little room for new forms of art to be appreciated as such, as is the case with pop music for instance. In his view, such genres may rely on expressiveness and thus an emotional surrender to the work first and foremost. Nonetheless, there is also a lot to be done for audience members who like to reflect on their experience (afterwards) and who like to research form elements of different movements within pop music (Van Stokkom, 1995, p. 332, see also De Vries and Julien, 1998 and Shusterman, 2000). Van Stokkom uses the term ‘absorption’ instead of ‘sympathy.

Absorption, the full surrender to an aesthetic experience, (...) can (...) work in an enriching way. Anyone who ‘sinks into’ the artwork temporarily suspends the capacity to judge in order to experience the view of others. This entails ‘abandonment’, a release of control. In the more reflective stage that follows these experiences, the newly acquired impressions and discoveries may stimulate further research. Self-loss and self-conscious reflection are thus not poles but complements (Van Stokkom, 1995, p. 333).

In order to understand an artwork adequately, it can be necessary to rely on one’s affective abilities to be open to strange and unknown forms. This presupposes a willingness to question conventions and traditional explanations, and to be prepared to follow the
perspective of others (Van Stokkom, 1995, p. 333). This is a somewhat different attitude than sympathy to the work’s elements in order to ‘let it do its job’. Some works require total surrender, their aesthetic properties being of the nature that they induce such surrender. Though disinterestedness traditionally requires a person to distance himself/ herself from the work, Van Stokkom argues that surrendering to the work also is an ‘adequate’ way to experience it. Although he stresses the importance of experience over cognition or interpretation, Van Stokkom does not dispense with cognition altogether. He advocates ‘serious’ attention to artworks over the constant playing with and switching between styles and emotions that has become characteristic of modern experience (ibid., p. 335). In his view, cultural policy should reckon with the specific forms of pleasure which can be derived from participating in cultural events. Diverse attention to cultural forms (switching between different items in order to drown out negative feelings but never really focusing on one item in particular) and comfortable experiences (pleasure which mainly derives from satisfying physical needs) form a separate domain. Both types of attention to works of art have in common that the spectator does not engage in any form of effort and research into the work’s meaning (ibid., pp. 336-7). Benson, who studied what he calls ‘aesthetic absorption’ from a developmental psychological point of view, arrives at the same conclusion as Van Stokkom:

Aesthetic absorption (...) makes different demands on its participants since it demands different forms of engagement. (...) The engagement of self in aesthetic absorption is active, chosen, informed, attentive, demanding and – depending on the quality of the art – enlarging. It is itself the outcome of achievement. It is rooted in interest and not in evasion. (Benson, 1993, p. 184-5)

Absorption thus is not a stupor. It is not a passive state in which subjects allow themselves to be guided by whatever happens, they are actively engaged in the experience. Benson is wary of the negative side of absorption, for the subjects temporarily suspend their powers of judgement. This makes the subjects vulnerable to indoctrination through art. He concludes that without indoctrination no pure art is possible. Therefore, according to Benson, in a truly democratic society the government should safeguard a free space, which is autonomous in the terminology of the last chapter, in which producers can create, relatively free from outward pressures such as religious or political fundamentalism and economic doctrines, either communist or capitalist (see Benson, 1993, p. 183). Note that both Van Stokkom and Benson seem to hold that comfortable experiences are not aesthetic. Van Stokkom equates aesthetic with artistic, for he writes that comfortable experiences ‘do not afford the satisfaction that we can expect from true art’ (Van Stokkom, 1995, p. 336). So, in their theories, the distinction between aesthetic and artistic is not precise. The crux of their argument, that absorption is an active form of experience which can challenge the spectator,

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7 Van Stokkom refers to this as ‘the jazz of modern experience’ (1995, p. 335), though he clearly hints at what has come to be considered as post-modern experience (see Harrington, 2004, chapter 7).
8 Benson’s use of the term indoctrination may be overstating the case somewhat. He seems to hold the view that every attempt at artistic communication is a political act in the sense that a worldview is being ‘imposed’ upon the spectators.
9 In this respect Blokland speaks of the ability of individuals to make independent choices (personal autonomy), which is an important goal of cultural policy. Note that he refers to the broad domain of cultural policy which also comprises education and not only art policy (see Blokland, 1995, pp. 400-2).
is nevertheless of much interest for the present research in determining the artistic moment in aesthetic experience.

Both Van Stokkom and Benson argue that, for the experience of an artwork to have value, the viewer should take an interest. In Van Stokkom’s view, art nowadays is of specific importance, even more so than science and journalism, to convey new insights because (post-)modern society has been pervaded by aesthetics. Science and journalism are bound to have little impact on subjects. Therefore a pure (and modernistic) interpretative approach to art:

(...) has little impact and denies the experiential value (...) it seems better to choose another option: a sensitive aesthetics that problemizes the real world rather than the artwork. (...) The result is impact: the viewer is captivated, the articulated longings and fantasies remain etched in memory for longer, and, at the same time, the viewer is left with ambiguous question that encourage reflection. (Van Stokkom, 1995, p. 338)

Thus Van Stokkom is critical of the self-reference of contemporary art. In his view, art should promote questions about real life and should not be a reference to itself, a criticism also voiced in the policy documents. His approach suggests that cognition in art occurs through the experience of emotions. The benefit is that a feeling of importance is linked to the cognition realized. Also an important feature of Van Stokkom’s account is the fact that cognitive processes occur after the aesthetic experience, just as in Davies’ and Carroll’s view.10 However, the question should be raised as to whether such cognitive processes after the aesthetic experience are part of the experience itself or whether they merely are a reflection on the experience. A last remark should be made. In his effort to define renewal in the arts as content renewal, Van Stokkom seems to neglect the importance of the development of the medium in which the art work is executed. When we accept Eldridge’s formula that ‘works of art present a subject matter as a focus for thought and emotional attitude, distinctively fused to the imaginative exploration of material’ (Eldridge, 2003, p. 259), Van Stokkom clearly totally disregards the imaginative exploration of the material, the ‘formal dimension of the work’ in Eldridge’s terms (ibid., p. 259). Research should be performed on the possible value of the renewal of artistic styles as such (see section 7.3).

Van Stokkom and Zeglin Brand regard the aesthetic experience as a powerful mechanism to convey content to spectators. Their approaches concur in that the viewer should take an active interest in the work and embark on a research path to discover its meaning and value. Zeglin Brand points to the fact that this can only be done by turning attention to the formal properties of the work, by first subtracting specific interests one might have in the work as much as possible (DA) and subsequently adding specific, but varying interests (IA). Then the full meaning of a work can be discovered. Toggling between DA and IA is necessary for an

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10 Although Van Stokkom is not eager to use the term ‘interpretation’. He prefers the term ‘intervention by the artist’ which immediately ‘makes clear the suffering and fury behind everyday routine’ (Van Stokkom, 1995, p. 338). When interpretation involves the study of new form experiments in art, Van Stokkom is quite wary of it. Nevertheless his approach does not exclude cognitive interpretation after an experience, as long as it refers to cognitively digesting art’s messages about circumstances in real life rather than about design appreciation itself. But he seems inclined to think of it as an integral part of the experience because he stresses the immediacy of intervention.
aesthetic experience to become artistic in nature. Both seem to argue for works of art that refer to the real life world, that have meaning outside the artworld itself. However, they leave little room for the importance of the development of expressive media, of artistic languages themselves. Granted, this may have become too important in cultural practices, but the value of the development of artistic languages should not be disregarded in this research. In Van Stokkom’s view, experiences that are not followed by a process of (cognitive) interpretation can still be meaningful experiences as long as the experiences challenge the spectator and are not just a diversion and/or merely physically gratifying. In his view, absorption into the work is a ‘correct’ way to experience the artistic nature of artworks, even if such absorption is not followed by a cognitive process of consciously discovering a work’s meaning. However, both Van Stokkom and Zeglin Brand stress the importance of such a process. They do not make clear whether this process is part of the experience itself or whether it is a reflection upon the experience. Van Stokkom seems to suggest that interpretation occurs immediately, within the experience, Zeglin Brand is not clear about whether adding and shedding lenses occurs only during or after the experience, or both.

6.1.3. Pragmatist Aesthetics
The previous chapter already alluded to the aesthetic theory of Shusterman. He regards himself as a pragmatist in aesthetic theory and derives this position from Dewey. Pragmatist aesthetics departs from the value which aesthetic experiences hold for the subjects and their responses to the experience. Aesthetic experience is not something to be put on a remote pedestal, but forms part of everyday life. Shusterman points to the fact that aesthetic experience includes more than ‘independent thinking’ which is stressed in Kantian aesthetics and by theorists such as Bourdieu.11 There are also somatic responses, such as dancing to rock music which can be linked to overcoming embarrassment and self-consciousness by the subject (Shusterman, 2000, p. 44). Shusterman argues for the value of the experience of popular and ‘high’ culture alike.

If popular art can reward without serious intellectual effort, this does not mean that it cannot profit by and reward such effort. If it can be enjoyed mindlessly, it does not follow that it must be so enjoyed and has nothing else to offer. (Shusterman, 2000, p. 45)12 He discredits some of the usual misconceptions of popular culture. Popular culture often is about issues which are important in real life, whereas high art usually has a more ephemeral content. Some popular art forms do contain subtleties and complexities in their use of aesthetic language which may require considerable skill in deciphering them. The

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11 It thus seems that Kant’s major contribution to aesthetic theory lies in the fact that the notion of disinterestedness separated the aesthetic experience from the practical and conceptual realms: to be disinterested was to be without interest in the object’s existence. Thus the focus of aesthetic theory shifted from the work of art itself to the experience it affords (see Zeglin Brand, 1998, p. 156). The main criticism of pragmatists such as Shusterman is that the description of the aesthetic experience has become too limited, disregarding the emotional and physical responses to art, even discrediting them in favour of cerebral interpretation.

12 Note that Shusterman here writes ‘art’ and not ‘culture’ inferring that artistic experience can be afforded by experience of the products of what is generally denoted as popular culture.
stratification of these art forms is even necessary in order to appeal to a variety of groups with often conflicting interest. Moreover, some popular art forms were started in order to convey important and subversive messages, such as rock ‘n roll (arguing for moral and sexual freedom) and rap (arguing against discrimination of blacks). Finally popular culture contains originality and innovation just as much as high art, though Shusterman concedes that it also contains many standardized works, produced according to a formula. But nevertheless, even works considered as important artworks depend for their status on the existence of a tradition and corresponding expectations in the public in order to be recognizable as breaking with these traditions. In short, many of the characteristics valued in art can also be found in popular culture, if one is willing to see them. In Shusterman’s view ‘the philosophy of any cultural form (including philosophy itself) is unwise to ignore the socio-cultural space that shapes the production and use of its products’.

He thus argues vehemently for the meaning of rap music which, in his view, functions artistically (especially in its initial stages at the end of the 1970s), contributing to the development of music styles and technologies and representing a black identity as an oppressed group denied entry to the multimedia world. As mentioned in the previous chapter, rap developed the same ‘Bourdieuian’ mechanisms as present in other autonomous cultural fields, such as its own distinctive language system which needs to be decoded on the basis of competence in Afro-American verbal prowess and in terms of its own record labels and price systems. Likewise, Shusterman argues for the value of the experience of country music (and country musical films) which has a deep impact upon its dedicated audience due to its sentimentality, its message of authenticity and purity which is mainly told through its negation of an urban lifestyle replete with commercial tastes and trends, although country music in itself is deeply commercial in its nature. The conformist lifestyles and values of the performers in real life are used along stylistic lines, such as simple musical arrangements which focus on the lyrics to convey country’s traditional and conformist message. Though its musical traditions heavily borrow from Afro-American culture, country is seen by a vast majority of white people as ‘the expression of a deep collective memory, recalling the sadly universal (archetypical) realities of lost innocence, corrupted values, betrayed love, disappointed hopes, the common failures of life, and the inevitable loss of death’.

Pragmatist aesthetics accept that people have a need for such emotions, a need that can be described in the same manner as a habitus. Shusterman convincingly

13 Furthermore, Shusterman challenges the notion that aesthetic value only is real if it stands the test of time and the universality of good art. In his view, post-modern aesthetics proclaim the temporality of any cultural form (Shusterman, 2000, p. 66). However, it seems more viable to suggest that some forms – be they from popular culture or from the realm of high art – have universal value and thus stand the test of time, such as the works of Shakespeare and ‘evergreen pop-songs’, whereas others can only function artistically in their specific social and historic circumstances. Most engaged works seem to do so. Likewise some art or cultural forms only have meaning in specific cultures or subcultures.

14 Although rap musicians did gain entrance to Western media once the music became popular among larger audiences and the conditions of reproducibility expanded, they have since held an ambivalent attitude towards it, both scorning and exalting the media, see Shusterman, 2000, chapter 3.
demonstrates that much of the devices of high art, such as habitus and cultural competence in deciphering the cultural codes of the cultural forms in question and field mechanisms, also apply to popular culture.

Pragmatism (…) is a philosophy of embodied, situated experience. Rather than relying on a priori principles or seeking necessary truths, the pragmatist works from experience, trying to clarify its meaning so that its present quality and its consequences for future experience might be improved. Experience is evidently contextual (…) a philosophy that argues from experience and recognizes its contextuality should be reflective enough to declare its own experiential situatedness. (Shusterman, 2000, p. 96)

Thus Shusterman’s pragmatism is not far from Bourdieu’s radical contextualization. Shusterman’s criticism is that Bourdieu has extended his theory only to high art, which is contemplated in a disinterested fashion. It seems that this is stretching Bourdieu’s position somewhat, and that Shusterman does not fully realize that he has more of an ally in Bourdieu than an opponent. However, in his theory of interpretation, Shusterman does deliver a more sophisticated account than Bourdieu’s notion of deciphering the cultural code of the work.15

He argues that there is a ‘functional distinction’ (ibid., p. 118) between interpreting and understanding an aesthetic experience (note that he does not write ‘artistic experience’). Even without interpretation, an aesthetic experience can still be meaningful. Shusterman argues that the sensory immediacy of aesthetic experience has been neglected in the philosophy of art (ibid., pp. 132-3). Although understanding and interpretation can be linked to the same object, they differ in the sense that understanding has an immediate quality, it occurs unconsciously and frequently gives rise to an emotional or somatic response (dancing, mimicking music or an emotion presented on stage). Interpretation involves a conscious and deliberate process of thinking. ‘We can understand something without thinking about it at all; but to interpret something we need to think about it’ (ibid., p. 125). Moreover, interpretation involves testing understandings that have come to us intuitively (it seems). Interpretation and understanding thus revolve in a cycle, ‘what is immediately understood may once have been the product of a laboured interpretation and may form the basis for further interpretation’ (ibid., p. 132). He describes the process as follows:

Though frequently what we encounter neither demands nor receives interpretation, many things are felt to be insufficiently understood until they are interpreted by us or for us. We seek

15 Perhaps Shusterman’s conception of Bourdieu’s work originates mainly from La Distinction which he quotes frequently. However, Bourdieu’s later writings on field theory and the production of belief in the field concur with much of Shusterman’s position, though Bourdieu does not overtly extend his analysis to popular culture. But his interest lies in discerning heteronomous influences in the field, more specifically, the economic forces and power relations in society that undeniably play an important role in shaping popular culture. Shusterman’s examples of rap and country music confirm rather than refute field theory (see section 5.2.4). What remains is Shusterman’s criticism of ‘the pure gaze’ which is at the basis of distinction theory and field theory. But Bourdieu also considers the concept of the pure gaze to be a socio-historical fabrication. It seems that Shusterman’s criticism boils down to the fact that distinctive attention to stylistic features in popular culture can enhance the aesthetic experience of such forms, plus the fact that there is more to the experience of high culture than only the ‘cerebral’ process of interpretation.
6. Aesthetic Experience

...an interpretation because we are not satisfied with the understanding we already have – feeling it partial, obscure, shallow, fragmented, or simply dull – and we want to make it fuller or more adequate. Yet superior interpretation sought must be guided by that prior, inadequate understanding. We no longer feel the need to interpret further when the new, fuller understanding that interpretation has supplied is felt to be satisfactory. (Shusterman, 2000, p. 132)

Thus Shusterman explains the feeling of unease that can occur in experiencing art and the subsequent feeling of release when an adequate interpretation is found (intellectual pleasure). With the term ‘understanding’, Shusterman seems to point to several features of the aesthetic experience which, in his opinion, should receive more attention for they are an important aspect of the aesthetic experience:

- The response to a work is emotional and/or somatic (dance, movement, mimicking). These can be taken to be signs that a subject understands what is being presented and is attentively following the structure of the work.
- The emotional response can generate a sense of importance and thus an interest in interpreting the work when the understanding is only vague. Thus understanding is a prerequisite for interpretation (compare with Bourdieu’s cultural competence in deciphering the work’s codes, but Shusterman’s notion of understanding is broader than only knowledge of the codes).
- Vague understandings may be tested through interpretation if the feeling of unease is significant enough for the spectator. However, if understanding is non-existent, the experience has no meaning at all for the subject and will be rejected as worthless.

It is interesting to see how one can ascertain that interpretation has occurred for the subject. Shusterman writes:

A criterion for having an interpretation of some utterance or event would be an ability to express in some explicit, articulated form what that interpretation is. To interpret a text is thus to produce a text. Understanding, on the other hand, does not require linguistic articulation. A proper reaction, a shudder or tingle, may be enough to indicate one has understood. Some things we experience and understand are never captured by language, not only because their particular feel defies adequate linguistic expression but because we are not even aware of them as ‘things’ to describe. They are felt background we presuppose when we start to articulate or to interpret. (...) The ineffable but manifest is as much ordinary as mystical, and it is mystifying only to those disembodied philosophical minds who recognize no understanding other than interpretation, and no form of meaning and experience beyond or beneath the web of language. (Shusterman, 2000, pp. 135-6)

He thus puts up a defence of ordinary experience and feeling as opposed to the usual emphasis on cerebral interpretation as the only worthy experience of art. He emphasizes the value of unconscious or emotional understanding and rightly claims that it is a prerequisite for aesthetic experience. Shusterman uses ‘understanding’ to denote an intuitive and unconscious grasp of what is being presented. This does not refer to understanding in terms of grasp of certain (theoretical) concepts. The understanding takes place within perception. In his own words:

understanding something is not the mirror-like capturing of replication of some fixed and determinate intentional object or semantic content. It is fundamentally an ability to handle or
respond to that thing in certain accepted ways which are consensually shared, sanctioned, and
inculcated by the community but which are nonetheless flexible and open to (divergent)
interpretation and emendation. What counts as the proper response of true understanding not
only depends on the normative practices of the given society but also varies with respect to
different contexts within that society and its subcultures. (Shusterman, 1992, p. 90)

His defence of immediate emotional responses to aesthetic experiences seems to validate the
claim to art status of the more abstract art forms such as dance and music. Their experience
may give rise to interpretation in a linguistic form, but more often it seems that they do not,
or that the linguistic interpretation does not fully grasp the meaning of the experience. They
seem to be linguistically inarticulate expressions because the art forms they refer to defy
linguistic description, thus their interpretation in linguistic terms may also be difficult.16
However, if one allows for the imperfection of the linguistic grasp of interpretations – and
that is what they are, interpretations and not experiences themselves – the argument still holds.
In that case, one will allow for seemingly inarticulate interpretations such as ‘Oh, that was
beautiful’ and infer that the spectator’s previous understanding of beauty may not have been
adequate to accommodate the beauty of the experience he or she has just had. The
understanding of beauty may therefore have undergone an interpretation extending the
possibilities of beauty for that person. Shusterman’s understanding-interpretation cycle
seems perfectly able to accommodate this kind of experiences. He also emphasizes that
experiences which are artistic in nature can occur outside what is normally considered as the
art world. He not only defends the value of popular art forms such as country music, but
also argues that the borders between aesthetic experience and other experiences in life are
extremely vague, inferring that the lifestyles of people, including their sense of fashion,
decoration and body adornments, form a continuum with their cultural activities such as
theatre or concert-going. Because the present research is limited to the realm of cultural
policy and thus to institutionalized cultural forms, this aspect of Shusterman’s work is not
further elaborated. However, Shusterman’s notion that understanding without interpretation
is of eminent value in itself is an important notion for the present research. As Shusterman
himself puts it, there is something ‘beneath interpretation’ (Shusterman, 1992, chapter 5).17

For the present research Shusterman’s theory is certainly of importance though it does not
provide new insight into the differences between art and non-art. Shusterman himself does
not even distinguish between artistic and non-artistic experiences, although it is obvious
that, to him, the need for an interpretation indicates whether an aesthetic experience is artistic
in nature. The conclusion can be drawn that when a subject develops an interpretation, the
experience that necessitated it has been artistic to the subject. But when the subject has not

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16 Shusterman is adamant that interpretations are expressible in linguistic terms because, in his view,
interpretation involves ‘conscious, deliberate thought (...) the articulation of previously unstated
formal or semantic relations between elements’ (Shusterman, 1992, p. 133, italics QLvdH).

17 Shusterman elaborates this most extensively in Pragmatist Aesthetics (1992), chapter 5, where he
argues against what he calls the ‘universalist view’ of theorists such as Gadamer who claims that ‘all
understanding is interpretation’ (ibid., p. 120). Shusterman’s argument is that most understanding
does not involve interpretation, unless the understanding is not satisfactory to produce a meaningful
been able to develop an interpretation (as of yet), the experience can still be artistic in nature.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, it can be concluded that Shusterman would agree with Van Stokkom’s (1995) notion of challenging experience. However, he seems to attach value to understanding itself, whereas Van Stokkom clearly only values challenging experiences.

One problem with Shusterman’s pragmatist aesthetics remains. It is odd that a theorist who so adamantly argues in favour of the value of the experience as opposed to the cognitive side has chosen a word (‘interpretation’) that so obviously relates to cognition. It even weakens his defence of country music, rap and raves. It remains to be seen whether ‘interpretation’ is the most adequate word, and what it should signify in the theory of aesthetic experience. Suffice it here to say that, although aesthetic experience definitively has a cognitive dimension, the experience itself is regulated by the intrinsic satisfaction it generates. This satisfaction does not manifest itself after the experience – something that might be induced by the concept of interpretation versus understanding – but during the experience and it is an integral part of it (Schaeffer, 1998, p. 51). However, one can easily imagine that generating a coherent interpretation of an experience, although it may take months or even years after the experience, may enhance the significance of the experience for the individual. For the moment, the most important feature of pragmatist aesthetics is that it overcomes the divide between high art and popular culture which is present in both Kantian aesthetics and field theory. Popular culture affords meaningful and valuable experiences as well.

6.1.4. Structure of the Aesthetic Experience

Eversmann proposes that though the content of aesthetic experiences may differ from art object to art object and observer to observer, the structure of these experiences is the same. The experiences are usually described as fully concentrated, involving a heightened consciousness, they are deeply moving, there is a loss of the sense of time (and place), the end of the experience feels as waking from a dream, and the experience results in a sense of liberation and/or personal growth (Eversmann, 2004, pp. 139-40). These elements can easily be related to some of the concepts of other theorists described in this chapter. ‘Heightened consciousness’ resembles Kant’s description of aesthetic experience. The concept of absorption is reflected in the concentration, loss of sense of time and waking up from a dream. The development of cognition through emotion, as described by Van Stokkom and Shusterman, is also reflected in the fact that the experiences are deeply moving and therefore have an impact on the spectator. The sense of personal growth is mirrored in Shusterman’s concept of the understanding-interpretation cycle.

\textsuperscript{18} This rather seems to be an extra defence for Shusterman’s argument for the value of popular culture. As was argued in Chapter 5, popular culture is experienced by lower and higher education-level groups alike. It is logical to assume that higher-education groups may have developed a \textit{habitus} of reflecting on their experiences more than lower-educated groups. With Shusterman, one can argue that this does not make their experiences more valuable than those without reflection. It simply means that different groups seek different gratifications in the same cultural products.
Eversmann uses the concept of flow experiences to search for the common structure of aesthetic experiences.\textsuperscript{19} A flow experience occurs when one is involved in 'activities in which one does not engage for the sake of an external result or reward, but because they are experienced as intrinsically pleasurable' (ibid., p. 145). It involves doing things that are fun, such as a hobby for instance. Usually such activities involve a great deal of investment in order to develop the appropriate skills (in Bourdieu’s terms: cultural capital). Eversmann uses the four dimensions of the aesthetic experience that Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson applied to the visual arts:

(1) \textit{Perceptual}. This involves the direct experience of stimuli offered by the work of art, such as colours, light, composition, etc. without interpreting or attaching meaning to the experience. This dimension also involves kinetic responses to these experiences, such as involuntary mimicking expressions of actors, or miming to the movement of a melody or rhythm. Shusterman calls these somatic responses, in other words: understanding occurs at the level of perception.

(2) \textit{Cognitive}. This dimension concentrates on the theoretical and art-historical aspects of the work. Earlier experience in art reception and expectations of a performance play an important role in this dimension. For dramatic art forms, this dimension involves following the story-line and making sense of the performance. Recognizing oneself or familiar circumstances in a play is an important aspect of the theatrical experience, or one can imagine oneself to be in the circumstances which are depicted in the play.

(3) \textit{Emotional}. Here the emphasis is on emotions as expressed by the work, and on personal associations. This dimension seems to be more important than the cognitive dimension. It deals with feelings that are connected to the content of the work but also to emotions that are connected to theatre-going itself. Eversmann points out that one of the most important emotions is the feeling of being carried away by the performance, a feeling that is generally pleasurable and can occur independently of cognitive insights.\textsuperscript{20} The emotions seem to be physically more intense than in real life, hence the experienced heightened consciousness.

(4) \textit{Communicative}. This dimension integrates the others. ‘The art object is now seen as a means to communicate with the artist and/or the culture in which that object was created. This dimension also incorporates the use of the work of art as a means to engage in a dialogue with oneself. And finally, references to transcendental experience (sense of the absolute, affirmation of a higher order, etc.) find a place under this heading’ (ibid., p. 146). In theatre reception, there are two levels of

\textsuperscript{19} He follows the research done by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson who described the experience of visual arts in terms of flow experience (see M. Csikszentmihalyi and R. Robinson, 1990). Relating aesthetic experience to flow experience has one drawback: it only refers to successful, i.e., meaningful aesthetic experiences.

\textsuperscript{20} Eversmann also adds that the emotions evoked in the theatre have a very strong physical component that is absent in the reception of other forms of art (Eversmann, 2004, p. 156). However, such strong physical responses can also be present in the reception of music, especially rock music, so it is unclear why Eversmann singles theatre out in this respect, although he is undoubtedly right that strong physical emotions are usually more common in a performing-arts setting than in a museum setting. As Eversmann suggests, the collective nature of experience can explain this.
communication possible. The first is an active internal debate about the issues raised by the performance. The second is communication with other spectators which again can have two forms: a feeling of community (usually during the performance) and discussion of the event with the other spectators (afterwards).

Based upon interviews with experienced theatre-goers, Eversmann describes the structure of the theatrical experience as follows: there is either question of an ‘initial hook’ or a gradual process by which one comes to be intrigued by a work. Attention is focused on the performance. The result is an extra interest to know more about what is happening, which is:

- an emotional reaction expressing an interest in the performance, such as total concentration on the performance, with the effect that everyday life recedes into the background (absorption);
- a cognitive process which may be set in motion. The experience ‘appeals to the intellectual skills (…) by framing the performance (or some aspect of it) as a challenge, a puzzle that has to be solved’ (ibid., p.160). This process may be connected to an initially negative feeling (usually irritation that ‘something is not quite right’). During the performance, perceptual and emotional dimensions take precedence over cognition.21 Cognition may only be limited to following the storyline and storing the performance in memory. (ibid., pp. 159-61).

Immediately after the performance, the reaction is usually described as an emotional one. After the performance, the cognitive processes are most important.

Of course this process is not only influenced by the (aesthetic) properties of the performance itself and the personal circumstances of the spectator (education, previous experience with theatre, his or her normative views on what constitutes good theatre and the reasons for attending the specific performance). The event is framed by physical circumstances (the theatre building, etc.) and the cultural context in which the performance takes place. Eversmann describes the skills necessary for theatre reception, as they were reported by his expert respondents. Theatre-going is not regarded as a blissful capacity in every case experience because it can inhibit the capacity to be open towards the performance, which is described as the most important skill for an aesthetic experience (ibid., pp. 161-3). However, experience with theatre enhances the analytical skills and appreciation of the craftsmanship of the theatre makers.

Tulloch is critical of Eversmann’s approach although he does think the ‘map’ of theatrical experience that Eversmann provides is useful (Tulloch, 2004, p. 203). His main criticism is that Eversmann’s approach is too limited. The theatrical experience – and thus the aesthetic experience – is influenced by more factors than Eversmann describes. ‘The horizon(s) of expectations brought by an audience to the theatre are bound to interact with every aspect of the theatrical event and its general implications’ (ibid., p. 179). In his view, factors from the

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21 Eversmann describes the perceptual dimension in the same way as Shusterman does understanding: ‘experiencing without interpreting or attaching meaning to the experience’ (Eversmann, 2004, p. 151).
field of economics (with this he refers to aspects of Bourdieu’s field theory, both in terms of
the socio-economic positions of audience members and their corresponding habitus and the
material circumstances within which the production and reception are realized) and the kind
of theatre (is it mainstream or canonical, is the building a metropolitan or regional theatre?)
influence these expectations. In his view, it is important to know whether respondents who
emphasize emotional before intellectual experiences are ‘expert’ audience members or ‘lay’
audience members (ibid., p. 180).

Since Eversmann tends to universalize his ‘theatrical event’ (…) we have absolutely no way of
knowing what kind of respondent actually said ‘I feel it in my stomach …’. By whom, where, in
what local circumstances and in relation to which daily experience of the event? (Tulloch, 2004,
p. 181)

In short, Tulloch’s criticism is that the theatrical event should be framed within the daily
circumstances of audience members en theatre makers alike to be able to indicate which
values of the experience are being generated. However, it is likely that Eversmann will agree,
because his aim is to develop a structure of the aesthetic experience and he is not primarily
interested in researching the values that such an experience will generate. Therefore, in order
to measure the effects of theatrical participation, the theatrical event should be framed within
its daily context. Tulloch also hints at another specific weakness in Eversmann’s research.
His research involves expert respondents who are either theatre students or are
professionally involved in the theatre (programmers, educators). Eversmann chose these
respondents because they could be expected to be able to analyse their own reception of
theatre. However, this creates a bias towards experience in theatre-going and professional
reasons for attending performances. A more average public might go more for the fun of it,
and be less keen in discerning which reactions the performance evokes and how.
Nevertheless, these expert respondents also stress the importance of the emotional aspects
of the experience. In Shusterman’s terms, the expert respondents may be more inclined to
articulate their interpretations of an experience. However, this does not point to the fact that
the expert are more prone (or less prone) to indeed have artistic rather than non-artistic
aesthetic experiences.

6.1.5. Interpreting
The term interpretation has featured in several of the theories discussed in this section.
Before a thorough theory of aesthetic experience can be developed the term should be
clarified. Davies’ approach suggests that interpreting is paying attention to the artistic
properties of a work which he defines as properties that are outside the direct bounds of the
artwork. This means regarding the work within the canon of works and applying culturally

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22 Tulloch provides some practical examples such as the visitor who celebrates her birthday and was
presented the ticket for the show by her husband or a pensioned visitor who is brushing up on his
cultural education. Both can visit the same performance of Chekhov’s Cherry Orchard for very
different reasons and thus the experience can result in very different values and functions for them.
These differences seem almost practical in comparison to the differences in cultural competence and
position in the field of power that Bourdieu points to.
dependent codes to the work such as iconography. This resembles Bourdieu’s decoding of a work. However, Bourdieu himself recognized that decoding the work, discovering its meaning, is not the same as artistic pleasure. In Bourdieu’s theory, the ability to decode a work is merely a prerequisite for artistic pleasure and he points to the fact that this ability to experience artworks is not distributed evenly in society and different groups in society seek different gratifications in the experience of art. This suggests strongly that interpretation is not the same as the artistic nature of the aesthetic experience. Zeglin Brand uses the concept of adding and shedding specifically interested lenses to fully understand the meaning of an artwork. To her, interpretation is testing the work against varying different perceptions. As ‘toggling’ between disinterested and various interested stances is the cornerstone of aesthetic experience to her, she seems to imply that this only occurs during the experience. However, she does not exclude this occurring after the experience. To Van Stokkom, interpretation is only valuable when it means reflecting upon what art objects communicate with regard to real-life circumstances. Such reflection occurs immediately; this is what makes the experience challenging. Van Stokkom does not seem to exclude that interpretation occurs after the experience. Shusterman uses the term ‘interpretation’ extensively in order to argue that there is something ‘beneath interpretation’, which he indicates as understanding. Understanding means developing an immediate adequate response to the work, whereas, in his view, interpretation denotes a cognitive process which occurs when understanding the work does not suffice to afford a meaningful experience. In the future, new interpretations can be used for understanding other works. He is not clear as to whether interpretation occurs within or after the experience. Eversmann does not use the word ‘interpretation’. From his assertion that, during the performance, emotional processes are dominant and that after the performance cognitive ones, it can be deduced that he equates interpretation with cognitive processes that are deployed to search for the meaning and importance of an aesthetic experience.

Based upon the foregoing discussion, interpretation can be defined as a cognitive process in which the subject searches to find the meaning of an experience. The subject will be able to reflect on the experience afterwards and tell why it is important, though possibly in verbally crude terms. As some people may have a habitus of developing interpretations, they will be more prone to do so than others. Thus the term ‘interpreting’ does not relate to the nature of the experience or to any characteristics of the work. Note that cognitive processes, such as ‘decoding’ the messages that are embedded in the work’s formal arrangement, which occurs either through design appreciation or through paying attention to the symbolic quality of the formal arrangements in the work and relating these to the cultural codes of the culture from which one regards the work, are not part of interpreting. They also occur within understanding. Interpretation can involve objectifying the experience by either discussing its

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23 See Bourdieu, 1984, p. 2, and 1993b, p. 216, where he argues that knowledge of the codes in which the work is executed is only a precondition of its appreciation, and also 1996, p. xix, where he argues
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artistically aesthetic experience</td>
<td>The delight of the experience of something new and the development of an articulation what it is and why it is important.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-artistically aesthetic experience</td>
<td>Confirmation of already known meanings. <em>(comfortable experience)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No meaningful experience</td>
<td>The formal arrangement of the work (or its cultural codes) are unknown to the subject**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>(no meaningful aesthetic experience takes place)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This can include experiences where the subject rejects the interpretation. The work will be experienced as incorrect or inappropriate. It can be assumed that these will be quite shocking and uncomfortable experiences. However, the subject will experience these as meaningless (see 6.2).
** Either because one does not recognize the codes used and thus can make no sense of the work (neither understand nor interpret it) or one does not know or one is uncomfortable with the attitude that is needed to realize the aesthetic value of the work. This occurs when teenagers are not willing to listen to a whole classical concert for instance, or are unwilling to concentrate long enough to follow a play.

Table 6.1. Understanding and interpretation in relation to aesthetic experience

Types of techniques used. Such a process may occur after and not during the experience. When a satisfactory interpretation is reached, the subject may be able to verbally express it. This kind of expression only is an approximation of the experience, it is not the experience itself. It should be noted that aesthetic experiences which do not involve interpretation can be valuable to the subject. In this respect, Shusterman is right in supposing that there is ‘something beneath interpretation’. The distinction between comfortable and challenging experiences or, in Shusterman’s terms, the felt need for an interpretation, seems accurate to establish whether an aesthetic experience is artistic in its nature or not. Interpretation itself is not a suitable indicator in this respect. Table 6.1 summarizes the relationship between interpretation and aesthetic experience.

6.2. The Artistic Nature of Aesthetic Experience

Van Maanen (1998 and 2004) has developed a model to describe what is specifically artistic about aesthetic experience in more detail than presented the descriptions in the first section of this chapter. It also makes clear how knowledge production occurs through aesthetic experience based upon the difference between comfortable and challenging experience, that sociology can intensify the artistic experience through clarifying the social conditions of the production and reception of a work, rather than reducing or destroying it.

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which also incorporates the development of the medium in which an artwork has been implemented. His model therefore incorporates the theories of Bourdieu, Shusterman and Van Stokkom and can be used to answer the question which has been raised with regard to Eversmann’s description of theatrical experience. In essence, Van Maanen regards the theatrical event as

something happening among and between people who are playing the game of theatre (…). What happens between both parties can be described as theatrical communication, that is to say, an exchange of signs, produced by the use of the body (and voice) which make sense in the perception system of the people involved within the borders of the ‘game’. (Van Maanen, 2004, p. 247)  

This means that the perception system of the spectators is confronted with that present in the performance. On the basis of their preparation, the performers have the most influence on the communication that takes place, but ‘the most important results of it occurs on the side of the spectators, who complete the total process by producing images in their own way’ (Van Maanen, 2004, pp. 247-8). Artworks can be considered as aesthetic sign systems in which the perceptions of artists have been produced. This means that the substance and form of a performance can be considered as the signifier. The concepts to which the signifier refers form the signified. In order to attach meanings to signs, one has to be able to refer to a body of more or less concrete objects and experiences on which the concepts are based (referent).  

Aesthetic communication takes place on the level of perceiving rather than on the level of thinking or feeling. When a comfortable aesthetic experience takes place, the perception scheme of the spectator is not challenged by the aesthetic sign system, this means that the signifier, signified and referent cohere and fit the perception schemes applied to the performance by the spectators. A meaningful perception is the result. This process occurs automatically in aesthetic experience, the thinking is subservient to perception (ibid., pp. 249-50). This process is what Shusterman refers to as understanding. However,

If the signifier manipulates the signified (the concepts) by the uncommon ways in which it refers to the referent, the sign loses its coherence and solidity and no longer can automatically be assimilated into existing perception schemes, nor smoothly be transcribed into a meaningful perception (…). In that case, a temporary accommodation of the perception schemes is demanded to follow the players and the play and not to give up. (Van Maanen, 2004, p. 250)

Because the perception scheme consists of fixed, existing concepts, it cannot generate this temporary accommodation. The use of imaginative power is necessary to generate an

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24 Van Maanen here uses the word ‘game’ in reference to Gadamar (1993), who compares aesthetic pleasure with playing a game. In order to take pleasure in the game, one follows its rules, i.e., one follows the formal arrangement of the work.

25 Van Maanen here uses a combination of the semiotic theories of Saussure and Peirce. Saussure, who researched the structure of linguistic signs, distinguishes between a material component (the actual sound of a word), which he calls ‘the signifier’, and a semantic part (the meaning evoked in the listener), which he calls ‘the signified’. Saussure also identifies ‘the referent’ which denotes the actual physical object or the idea to which the sign refers. Peirce represents a sign therefore as a triad using the words Interpretant, Object and Representamen to denote the referent, signifier and signified. Van Maanen therefore seems to use Peirce’s triad while using Saussure’s terms (see Balme, 2008, p. 79 for a short explanation of both theories).

26 Zeglin Brand describes basically the same process. ‘One’s initial confusion upon encountering a work of art is a preliminary configuring of our mental set to construct both a pattern and an
‘imaginative thought’.27 The imaginative power partly takes over the organization of the perception so that the existing perception schemes can be manipulated and thus co-operate, in such a way that the ‘imaginative thoughts’, which harmonize with the offered sign system on the one hand and are sufficiently meaningful for the spectator on the other (Van Maanen, 2004, p. 250) can be produced. This means that the imaginative thought has to be ‘new’ to accommodate the perception scheme provided in the performance, but it also has to relate to the existing perception scheme of the spectator in order to be meaningful.28 The imaginative thought can install itself in the existing perception schemes of the spectator. The process has been schematically outlined in Figure 6.1, where the numbers refer to the order in which the process takes place.29 The fact that the imaginative power needs to be invoked in order to generate a meaningful experience is a necessary precondition for the experience to have meaning.

Van Maanen’s approach thus explains the difference between non-artistic and artistic aesthetic experiences within the experience itself rather than explaining what happens after the experience. In concurrence with Shusterman’s pragmatic aesthetics, it leaves room for the specific effects to which both types of experiences give rise. As the artistic nature of the experience derives from the operation of the imaginative power in Van Maanen’s view, artistic effects should result from this. He discerns two forms of artistic enjoyment: the

_interpretation from what is perceived’ (Zeglin Brand, 1998, p. 165). Schaeffer refers to the aesthetic experience as a cognitive relationship in which all our senses and conceptual frameworks collaborate. Multiple imaginative activities are induced by the encounter of the perceptual data with our conceptual classifications (Schaeffer, 1998, p. 50). Because both Zeglin Brand and Schaeffer refer to the experience of visual arts, it can be concluded that Van Maanen’s account of aesthetic experience and artistic experience has wider significance than only for the theatre. Schaeffer argues that the experience is guided by the satisfaction it induces and not by the cognition it generates (Schaeffer, 1998, p. 51). That means that the experiential quality is not dependent on the cognition realized, but resides in the perception process itself.

Note that in using the word ‘thought’ it is not implied that an imaginative thought is generated through cognition. It is generated within perception. Once installed in the perception scheme it may become available for cognition. Furthermore, note that the imaginative thought need not be expressible in words as it is not a cognitive thought. It is a temporary accommodation of the perception scheme of the subject. Probably most perceptions in the perception scheme are not linguistic but deal with form and rhythm.

Note that Van Maanen uses both the terms ‘imaginative power’ and ‘imagination’. With the imaginative power he refers to the capacity to develop imaginative thoughts which is a process that involves both the imaginative power and the perception of a spectator. With ‘imagination’ (here: imaginative thought) he refers to the temporary scheme of perception that is the result of the combined effort of the perception and imaginative power of a person (Van Maanen, 2004, p. 251). This points to the fact that artistic reception involves a skill that can be trained.

Figure 6.1 has been altered at two points from Van Maanen (2004). First, Van Maanen represents the relationship between the signifier and the signified as strained. However, within the sign itself there can never be tension between the signifier and the signified. For instance, a tree leaf painted blue (signifier) can relate perfectly well to the concept of ‘a blue tree leaf’ (signified). As tree leaves are never blue in real life - they are green in spring and summer and yellow and/or red in autumn – the tension in the sign system occurs between the signifier, signified on the one hand and the referent on the other. This is why there is a straight arrow between signifier and signified. Second, the word imaginative thought has been used, rather than ‘imagination’.

27 Note that in using the word ‘thought’ it is not implied that an imaginative thought is generated through cognition. It is generated within perception. Once installed in the perception scheme it may become available for cognition. Furthermore, note that the imaginative thought need not be expressible in words as it is not a cognitive thought. It is a temporary accommodation of the perception scheme of the subject. Probably most perceptions in the perception scheme are not linguistic but deal with form and rhythm.

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6. Aesthetic Experience

Delight of using one’s imaginative capacity and the experience of new perceptions which derive directly from the use of one’s imaginative power. These are values of the experience. The experience of new perceptions can lead to changing understandings and views in the spectator. This means that the imaginative thought is ‘internalized’ in the spectator’s perception scheme and thus becomes the basis for new understanding. Furthermore Van Maanen discerns two values which derive from the experience but they are not necessarily based upon the artistic nature of the experience: excitement caused by the perception of things that are not really happening, and the experience of emotions by empathizing with the feelings expressed by the actors. These are values of the aesthetic experience as well, only they do not depend on the artistic nature and also occur for non-artistic aesthetic experiences. Even more so, it is easy to imagine that, for aesthetic experience which are in nature, these two values will be enhanced. The emotions imagined can be new emotions (and therefore need imaginative thought to be perceived meaningfully) and the non-present situations can be close to or further away from the known experience of a spectator (and therefore in need of new imaginative thought as well). The artistic nature of the experience enhances these common features of aesthetic experience. One more remark ought to be made concerning these two values. When experiencing the emotions portrayed by the actors, this can emphasize the importance of the new understandings which are generated in the

Figure 6.1 The process of producing an artistic aesthetic experience
(edited from: Van Maanen, 2004, p.251)
spectator. The same can be argued for the perception of non-present worlds. When one is intrigued by the world that is being presented in the work (because it is beautiful, magical or a hitherto unknown musical universe) this can add significance to the resulting
One important feature of art, as opposed to science, is that the knowledge one receives is imbued with a feeling of the importance of this knowledge. In other words, the cognition that is generated in art (through the change in one’s perception scheme) is not value-free. This is why there are arrows connecting these values to the change of views and insights in Figure 6.2. Finally, empathy with imagined emotions and the excitement of the perception of non-present worlds lead to the sublimation of needs and satisfaction of sublimated needs.

The effects of artistic and aesthetic experience have been depicted in Figure 6.2. This figure differs from that of Van Maanen (2004) in three ways. First – as has been mentioned above – arrows have been added to indicate the significance aesthetic values can give to the resulting change of views. Second, to mark the difference between the non-artistic and artistic nature of the experience more clearly, a box has been added around the grey area which represents the artistic nature in order to denote the non-artistic nature. Third, the process involving the use of the imaginative power has been elaborated in the figure. A step has been added: the use of the imaginative power gives rise to two types of values, the delight of using one’s imaginative power and the experience of new perceptions. These may lead to testing of one’s existing perception schemes. In the long run, the experience can lead to a change of one’s views and understandings. This function lies outside the experience itself, it is a consequence of it and is cognitive rather than perceptual. Thus, the fact that the experience of new perceptions does not automatically give rise to the development of new views and understandings is incorporated in the model. There are several possibilities:

- After a long or shorter period of interpretation, the imaginative thought turns out not to be new at all. A person’s views and understandings may not need to be changed at all, they are actually confirmed by the experience. But some perceptions that had previously lain in the background of the perception scheme have now been highlighted and have become more prominent. This means that the perception scheme has indeed changed; its arrangement now has a different order. A spectator’s reaction to the performance might be: ‘This is what I have always felt to be true and how clever of the artist(s) to make this so poignantly clear.’

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30 Van Maanen himself does not seem to recognize this for the latter value. In his view, only the empathizing with imagined emotions can be linked to the artistic nature of the experience. However, he does not explain why this is not possible for the excitement resulting from the perception of non-present worlds as well.

31 This category may very well comprise the vast majority of aesthetic experiences which are artistic in nature, as Kieran writes, following Carroll:

> Normally, art seeks to deepen our pre-existent understandings by drawing out the implications of certain already-held presumptions (...). Indeed, art works often do not even so much as deepen our understanding, but serve to revivify impressions or understandings we have already (...), by foregrounding in peculiarly vivid and striking ways aspects of ourselves, or others or the world (Kieran, 2001, p. 221).

As discussed in section 6.1.5, the use of the term ‘understandings’ is problematic. Because Kieran also refers to impressions (and writes in the plural, not the singular understanding) it can very well be concluded that he refers to what Van Maanen denotes as ‘perceptions’.
• The imaginative thought may not be new in the sense of ‘hitherto unknown’ but the experience may prompt a spectator to apply it to a different situation in which he or she had not thought that the specific perception was appropriate to use. This is what happens for instance when a spectator is overwhelmed by the beauty of an experience.

• The imaginative thought may be in serious conflict with the perception scheme of a spectator. In this case, he or she needs to make a major accommodation in his/her perception scheme (which will probably only occur when such conflicts arise repeatedly and are not based upon one single experience) or he/she will reject the imaginative thought as not relevant or viable after a process of consideration; in so doing, he/she will confirm his or her views and understandings.\[32\]

• The imaginative thought is new but the spectator is able to accommodate it. This will lead to new views and insights. However, one should note that it is not possible to indicate when this will exactly happen. It might occur directly after the performance, it might also take years for the spectator to mull over the experience. What may happen, though, is that the spectator will be able to formulate an articulation of the experience which either indicates the questions he or she is considering, or the conclusions he or she has reached on the basis of the considerations. This type of articulation is neither part of the experience, nor is it an indicator that the experience has become artistic.\[33\] Furthermore, the new insight can also recede into the background of one’s perception scheme, or be rejected after new experiences which contest it. A person might even revert to his or her ‘old’ views.

These instances make clear that an aesthetic experience which is artistic in nature does not automatically have lasting cognitive effects which lead a person to think and act differently. However, the use of one’s imaginative power can give rise to such pleasure (or delight) that the experience is characterized as meaningful, without it leading to new understandings and views. This is why the use of the imaginative power is the crucial characteristic of the experience. Consequently, all four instances above are instances in which the aesthetic experience is artistic in its nature. A verbal articulation of the experience is possible – not necessary – only in the last two instances.

Van Maanen’s view on the artistic nature of aesthetic experience may seem very strict. This distinction, however, does not coincide with the difference between subsidized and non-subsidized culture, or ‘low’ or ‘popular’ culture and ‘high’ or ‘elite’ art. In principal aesthetic

\[32\] It may seem odd to include this last possibility. However, not changing one’s views and understandings does not simply imply that the experience has not been challenging for the subject. He or she has been invited to deliberate on existing perceptions, but opts not to respond to this challenge by changing his or her views and understandings. Such an experience will be more demanding than a comfortable experience where no debate on views and understandings is evoked at all.

\[33\] The opposite may even be true, for one can suggest that when an experience is comfortable, i.e., it fits in the existing perception schemes of the subject, a subject may be capable of developing a linguistic expression of the experience more easily than when the experience has been challenging.
experiences of more complex or less complex art languages can be artistic in nature, provided that the imaginative power has to be invoked to aid perception (Van Maanen, 1998, p. 42). This means that in popular culture aesthetic experience also can be artistic in nature. This concurs with the pragmatist view of aesthetic experience as voiced by Shusterman (see section 6.1.3). This certainly does not mean that all cultural experiences are equally valuable from a policy point of view and thus eligible for government subsidies, as some relativists on cultural policy have suggested. The artistic nature of the experience is indeed something special with its own value, even though it can occur with or without direct government intervention. It does not depend on either the complexity of the art work or on the competence of the spectator in deciphering cultural languages or codes.

Van Maanen seems to be well aware that this is a quite strict interpretation of art. He refers to it as ‘art in a narrow sense’ (‘kunst in enge zin’, Van Maanen, 1998, p. 30, and 2005b, p. 70). Art can be defined as aesthetic symbol systems that afford an experience in which the imaginative power has to be invoked. Art forms part of the aesthetic symbol systems which merely address perception (‘kunst in ruime zin’ [art in a broad sense] or ‘cultuur in enge zin’ [culture in a narrow sense]), which in turn form a part of the culture in general: systems for rendering meaning such as religion, the press, science, education and art (Van Maanen, 1998, p. 31; see also Pantser of Ruggegraat, 1995, p. 4). In his quest to identify the specific artistic nature of the experience, Van Maanen seems to disregard effects that can arise from non-artistic aesthetic experience. In the preceding discussion, this has been added to his analysis. Furthermore it is important to note that the experience is framed not only by the culture in which the performance occurs but also by organizations in which the performance takes place. Van Maanen discerns the communicative frame which ‘forms itself during the event on the basis of what the perception systems of the spectators have in common with the perceptions materialized during the performance’ (Van Maanen, 2004, p. 254). Aesthetic experience takes place within the communicative frame, albeit conditioned by the other frames. The communicative frame is encapsulated by the organizational frame which ‘organizes the physical aspects of the meeting within which the theatrical event takes place’ (ibid., p. 260). Specifically, it organizes the aesthetic and social conditions under which the theatrical event occurs, including mechanisms to induce the proper attitude to experience a work. The last frame is the institutional frame, which consists of a move from individual

34 And subsequently in non-subsidized settings.
35 In part, Van Maanen’s article from 1998 is an attack on a Dutch study on the values that visitors to non-regular performing-arts events (i.e., amateur arts and events occurring in bars and other non-regular venues) attach to these events, which according to this research do not differ from the criteria that the advisory boards for cultural subsidies use (Van der Blij, 1995). The research led to some debate on the exclusion of parts of cultural life from government support, such as the circus (see Van der Blij and Langenberg, 1996). Van Maanen’s effort was to clarify the mystification of the terms art (kunst) and culture (cultuur) which was present in the policy documents as well (see section 4.1.1).
36 Note that the organizational frame is not flexible enough to adapt to all types of aesthetic experiences. This means that the organizational frame imposes certain reception conditions and therefore encourages certain types of works. Consequently, dedicated organizational settings for various art forms have developed.
performances to the level of ‘the abstract structure of historically developed relations between institutes’ (ibid., p. 267). More specifically, the historically developed systems of production, distribution and reception of theatre – in short: the artworld or theatre world – condition the theatrical event. Each frame influences the perception systems of the spectators and the artists (and thus the perception system presented in the performance), thus shaping the possible communication that can take place between these perception systems. Moreover, the frames influence the conditions under which this communication takes place. With the description of the organizational and institutional frames, the institutional approach is combined with the functional. For the purpose of this chapter, however, the description of the core of the theatrical event suffices. In Chapter 10, the organizational and institutional frames will be added to the analysis under the term ‘organizational setting’.

With this account of aesthetic experience, the discussion focuses on the experience of theatre. Although this account can be applied to other art forms, it seems that it is particularly suitable to the fictional and dramatic nature of theatre, and it may also apply to the more abstract forms of the performing arts, such as music and dance. However, as already noted, Van Maanen’s account concurs with observations by Zeglin Brand (1998) and Schaeffer (1998), who write about the experience of visual arts. Furthermore, the fact that it also may be applied to other art forms can be demonstrated by deliberating on the experience of beauty. McMahon argues – in concurrence with Kantian aesthetics – that though there may be no principles of beauty, judgements of beauty are universal (McMahon, 2001, p. 229). However, she allows that some judgements of beauty may be universally shared, others depend on the specific aesthetic practices of the culture from which the subject originates (such as Japanese tea ceremonies for instance) and thus can be inaccessible to ‘the uninitiated’ (ibid., p. 236). Nevertheless, she proposes that the structure of the experience of beauty is the same. In her view, the experience of beauty is a matter of becoming aware of the principles of form which are embedded in the visual system of the beholder.

These perceptual principles would constitute a part of the architecture of the mind, and as such, could not themselves be represented explicitly and unequivocally in language (...). Perhaps certain relations in the object, in the course of being perceived, challenge or stretch the relevant perceptual principles in an unprecedented or non-typical way. On the other hand, the relation of the elements within some objects, such as natural forms (and those art works which mimic these forms), might epitomize these principles. (McMahon, 2001, pp. 235-6).

McMahon’s assertion that the perception principles of beauty cannot be represented in language although they are a part of one’s ‘architecture of the mind’ relates her concept of beauty to Van Maanen’s perception schemes. What McMahon describes is the process of challenging a perception scheme, in this case, a person’s perception of what beauty is or can be. Thus, it can be inferred that Van Maanen’s aesthetic theory also comprises the experience of beauty and that perception schemes should not be regarded as only applying to linguistically expressible schemata. As a result, the theory presented here is not restricted to ‘linguistic’ forms of art such as dramatic arts and literature, but can be extended to the experience of abstract art forms such as music, dance and abstract visual arts as well.
6. Aesthetic Experience

6.3. Summary: Intrinsic Values and Functions of Performing Arts

Based upon the foregoing discussion, it is now possible to give a description of the aesthetic experience of performing arts. The aesthetic experience is not an experience that is separate from daily life. It forms an integral part of the experiences of life and is an important building block of people’s life styles. Aesthetic experiences are a way to express one’s identity, and also to examine it. This means that the experience can occur in popular culture as well as in elitist forms of culture, and has value for people. The aesthetic experience involves knowledge of the sign languages employed in the object, otherwise the experience will have no meaning. The knowledge necessary is a complex matter, encompassing different layers:

- Everyday knowledge to be able to understand what is being represented.
- Iconographical knowledge to decipher specifically culturally embedded codes (such as religious iconography).
- Knowledge of the signs within a specific art form (e.g. musical or theatrical signs)
- Knowledge of codes within specific subcultures.
- Knowledge of the appropriate attitude to experience the work (and the willingness and capability to adopt such an attitude).

This knowledge results in what can be denoted as cultural competence. Cultural competence is not evenly distributed in society. It is learned through the education system and through prolonged contact with cultural goods. The match between the sign systems used in the cultural object and the cultural competence of the subject largely influences the pleasure gained from the experience. This does not mean that there should always be an exact match. The experience can be stimulating on the basis of the fact that the subject has to learn new codes because his or her competence is not sufficient to fully understand the object’s meaning immediately. The subject is challenged to embark on a process of discovery of the object’s meaning. But the opposite can also hold true: the subject is more than competent to understand the object. In that case, the experience can be relaxing or even boring.

It is important to note that the pleasure derived from the experience not only depends on the competence of the subject but also on his or her state of mind at the time of consumption. For instance, fatigue or preoccupation with something else can greatly influence the experience. This point relates to the attitude of the subject. Though there is some debate about the ‘proper’ attitude for aesthetic experience, there seems to be agreement on the fact that the subject should focus on the object and allow the formal arrangement of the work to guide the perception (sympathy towards the work). However, there are different types of this attitude. The subject can either distance himself/ herself from the work, i.e., contemplate it or become immersed into the work, which is called absorption. The formal arrangement of elements in the work can be expected to be designed in such a way as to induce the most proper attitude to experience the work. Good art enforces the attitude in which it should be properly perceived. For the performing arts, specific customs, such as dimming of the lights, tuning of the instruments, are designed to induce this kind of focus on the work itself (these are
devices from the organizational frame). The value of an aesthetic experience is in the perception of the object. This means that the value of the experience lies on the perceptual level. However, an aesthetic experience can yield emotional and cognitive values.

It should be recognized that aesthetic experience cannot be disconnected from daily life. Several authors point to this, most explicitly Shusterman and Tulloch. Therefore, the aesthetic experience should always be framed within its specific context because this context generates meaning and value in the experience; it is not only the artwork – in the performing arts, the single performance – that generates meaning. In general, these contexts are generated from different frames with an ascending order of generality:

- **Characteristics of the physical location.** Different types of locations for the performing arts confer different meanings and values upon the experiences offered there. A performance in a tent or the open air can provide totally different values than a performance in a classical theatre venue or concert hall (organizational frame).
- **Personal circumstances of performers and audience members.** The events of the day or week surrounding the aesthetic experience influence the meaning that will be generated for audience members as well as the reasons why they visit a specific performance.
- **Personal characteristics of the audience.** Audience members differ in their knowledge of cultural languages, their socio-economic status and (ethnic) sub-group identities. This will be reflected in their value orientations which direct the types of values they seek to realize in aesthetic experience and strategies of experiencing. Most notable is the fact that people who have enjoyed more education tend to be more omnivorous in their taste preferences than people with lower education levels. Nevertheless, all groups realize certain value in aesthetic experience, this is not the privileged domain of the cultural ‘haves’ which is defended against the ‘have nots’ (cultural competence and perception schemes of spectators including the proficiency in deciphering cultural codes and in engaging the imaginative power).
- **Subcultural differences.** Different groups in society will have different value orientations which place specific values on specific cultural practices. These differences exist between ethnic sub-groups, or they can be based on regional cultures or education or occupation. For the performing arts in particular, the different cultural position of outdoors leisure activities can influence the value of an experience (cultural competence, specifically knowledge of the proper attitude to experience the work).
- **Societal differences.** The arts or the particular art form in question can have a specific position in society which affords it a specific meaning. The economically oppressed position of black music in the United States is an example. The position of the artworld within a general culture is what is being referred to here. For instance, the position of historic artefacts differs immensely between the Western world and fundamental Islamic cultures as has been shown by the destruction of Buddhist
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This means that aesthetic experience cannot be studied as an autonomous phenomenon. The value generated by these experiences is not determined by the artwork in and by itself. Different people seek different types of values in the aesthetic experience, and thus employ different strategies in their experiencing. Accordingly, different art forms can have specific homogeneous audiences. However, the performing arts in particular are effective in uniting different public members on the same experience, although this experience will rarely afford the same values for all audience members.

The experience of the performing arts has a specific three-phase structure. In the first phase, there is either an initial hook or a gradual process by which the subject becomes intrigued by the performance. This means that the subject lets his or her perception be guided by the elements in the work. During the second phase, the subject follows the performance on a perceptual level. Cognitive activities are usually constricted to following the action of a play or the movements of dancers or themes in a concert. This can either mean that the subject is absorbed by the performance or that he or she alternates between different perspectives to follow the performance. The demarcation between the first two phases is blurred with regard to time. The experience may be followed by a third phase which occurs after the performance has ended. In this phase, the cognitive processes take over. These processes are most markedly present when the experience becomes artistic: the subject tries to meet the challenge put forward by the performance and to make sense of it. The subject might use different perspectives (interests) to make sense of the performance and thus enhance its meaning. This can also occur through conversation with fellow audience members. However, cognitive processes of this kind can also occur during the performance when the performance poses a limited challenge for the spectator, which is met during the performance itself. This phase can be called the interpretative phase. However, its occurrence or absence is not indicative of the artistic nature of the experience.

Non-artistic aesthetic experiences and artistic aesthetic experiences give rise to certain values which, in turn, can give rise to functions. These are indicated in Figure 6.3. All of these values and subsequent functions are linked to the intrinsic aesthetic and artistic nature of the experience. It therefore seems necessary to distinguish between aesthetically intrinsic values and functions and artistically intrinsic values and functions. The next step in the research is to relate these values and functions, as they have been determined on the basis of the discussion of art-sociological literature, to the functions that have been found in the policy documents. This is the topic of the next chapter.
Figure 6.3 Intrinsic values and functions of aesthetic experience.