Shared Aesthetic Experience, Community, and Meaningfulness

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ABSTRACT: Aesthetic communities offer us opportunities for collective, communal, and value-disclosing shared aesthetic experiences. This paper develops an account of shared aesthetic experiences and provides an answer to the question of their significance: when they occur within aesthetic communities, their distinctive phenomenology is a powerful resource for creating a sense that our lives are aesthetically meaningful.

What has become a common refrain in recent analytic aesthetics is the observation that the aesthetic domain is a *social* one. Offered as a corrective to the modern tradition in philosophical aesthetics largely focused on individual artistic agency and appreciation, recent work has instead turned to consideration of the social practices of aesthetics. These practices anchor the norms and standards which give shape to our aesthetic lives; they underwrite rich opportunities for interaction, sharing, and collaboration; and, perhaps, they even ground aesthetic value and normativity at a basic level.

Much recent work in the "social turn" has focused on how *aesthetic agency* is socially structured and shared within the context of aesthetic social practices (Lopes 2018; Wolterstorff 2015; Kubala 2020; Riggle 2024a). The emphasis in this work is largely *practical*, and this is perhaps unsurprising: our coordinated aesthetic activities are the most easily observed evidence of our shared aesthetic lives.[1]

What has attracted comparatively *less* attention in recent years is the thought that, in addition to sharing in social forms of aesthetic *agency*, our *aesthetic experiences* themselves might *also* be social and capable of being shared. This might strike us as counterintuitive, especially if we take on board traditional assumptions that aesthetic experience—especially insofar as it grounds aesthetic judgment—is something private and individual (Zangwill 2012). But we needn't take on such assumptions; as several promising recent arguments have demonstrated, there may be reason to think of our aesthetic experiences themselves as genuinely sharable and social (Polite 2019; Cochrane 2009; Drummond 2024). Once we recognize this possibility, it becomes clear that our social aesthetic practices aren't just structures for facilitating collective aesthetic agency; they are also mechanisms for realizing shared aesthetic experiences.

What exactly is the significance of such shared aesthetic experiences? What do they offer us over and above individual aesthetic experience, such that we structure our shared aesthetic practices around facilitating them? In this paper, I argue that shared aesthetic experiences are a central constituent of what I've previously referred to as *aesthetic communities* (Cross 2024). I develop this thought in the first section of

[1] Much of my own previous work has followed this trend. (Cross 2017) argues that art criticism functions as a kind of *practical* reasoning for coordinating engagement with aesthetic objects, while (Cross 2024) develops an account of aesthetic communities and traditions largely focused on collective and coordinated aesthetic agency over time. More on this below.

the paper, drawing not only on recent work in analytic aesthetics, but also on the work of the early 20th century phenomenologist Gerda Walther.

What makes the connection between shared aesthetic experience and community especially significant? The main claim of this paper is that aesthetic communities offer us a means of subsuming ourselves (and our individuality) within a collective, communal, and value-disclosing shared aesthetic experience. As Sean Kelly and Hubert Dreyfus have argued, being swept up in such communal experiences is an especially significant resource for experiencing the world—and our place within it—as meaningful and valuable. These experiences carry with them the sense that we are participating in something larger than ourselves (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011). This provides an answer to the question of the significance of shared aesthetic experiences: when they occur within aesthetic communities, their distinctive phenomenology is a powerful resource for creating a sense that our lives are aesthetically meaningful. I discuss this line of argument at length in the second section of the paper.

In the final section of the paper, I discuss several concerns about shared aesthetic experiences. Being "swept up" in this way into collective aesthetic experience may be an important part of living an aesthetically meaningful life, but at the same time it might seem to present major risks: first, it might seem to involve diminishing our aesthetic autonomy. Insofar as collective aesthetic experiences aren't entirely up to us or under our control, we seem to be ceding some significant portions of our aesthetic lives to others. This is at odds with the modern tradition in aesthetics, which takes aesthetic autonomy to be at least one of the main desiderata for an aesthetically good life (Riggle 2024b; Marín 2024; Nguyen 2020b). Second, we might worry that we are susceptible to being swept up in shared aesthetic experiences which, despite being meaningful to us, are nevertheless ethically reprehensible. The shared experience of the violent mob seems to be equally powerful to the experience of the audience at the rock concert. I conclude by suggesting that a flourishing aesthetic life requires developing a balance between individual aesthetic autonomy and immersion within aesthetic communities.

1. Shared Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Community

The starting point for much modern aesthetic theory is the individual spectator, undergoing aesthetic experience all by themselves—an experience which then grounds individual aesthetic judgment. However, we don't have to look far to find plenty of cases in which we have aesthetic experiences together with others: we attend concerts with large crowds; we watch movies and TV shows with our friends; and we enjoy meals together with our loved ones. Furthermore, once we recognize that aesthetic experiences also occur in contexts of participatory and collaborative aesthetic agency, the category is even broader: we dance together, we tell jokes to each other, we play games together, and we make music in groups.[2] While this much should be obvious to any ordinary observer of aesthetic life, it is a further step to claim that these are not just aesthetic experiences that we have together, in parallel, but rather that the aesthetic experiences are in some more substantive sense *shared aesthetic experiences*.

The notion of a shared aesthetic experience might initially strike one as counterintuitive, given standard assumptions about the connection between aesthetic experience and putatively private mental states such

[2] As Thi Nguyen argues, in such cases we appreciate not just the aesthetic objects that we collectively produce, perform, or enact; we also experience and appreciate our collective agency itself (Nguyen 2020a).

as pleasure. The Kantian tradition in aesthetics, for example, takes aesthetic judgments to be a response to an internal feeling—one of pleasure or displeasure.[3] One might conclude, as Nick Zangwill does for the case of listening to music, that aesthetic experience is necessarily private and cannot in principle be shared:

> Listening to music together is like eating or smelling together in that there is an illusion of sociability, of shared sensations, whereas in fact the sensations are usually private. The consequence of the fact that the grounds for aesthetic judgements are feelings of pleasure and displeasure is that we necessarily listen alone, and we cannot listen together. Musical listening is essentially individualistic (2012, 385).

Zangwill's argument focuses primarily on the idea of shared *musical* experience, but the point generalizes: we might think that, in virtue of the fact that our aesthetic experiences involve a kind of private and internal phenomenology, they can't in principle be shared. This concern might be deepened by noting that we often have different experiences even when attending to one and the same object.

However, as Brandon Polite has effectively argued, this assumption seems to stand in tension with the fact that we often *do* converge in our ascriptions of aesthetic qualities to objects (Polite 2019, 436-439). You and I can both hear the grooviness of the beat, and the audience of the body-horror film can all agree that what they've seen is gross. Such convergence might lead us to believe that the contents of our individual experiences overlap to an extent sufficient to underwrite our shared ascriptions of aesthetic qualities—and, by extension, to open the door to the idea that we are sharing aesthetic experiences in some sense. This point would hold even if there were still slight divergences in our individual experiences. Consider the case of ordinary perception: If you and I are standing together looking at a street sign, we allow that you and I both have a visual experience of the sign even though our exact visual phenomenology differs due to differences in our individual perspectives.

I think this is reason enough to dismiss any initial skepticism about the possibility of shared aesthetic experience. However, more needs to be said about what exactly such shared aesthetic experience consists in. Below, I'll build on recent work in analytic aesthetics to offer an account of the nature of shared aesthetic experience in contexts of both shared appreciation and shared aesthetic agency (Cochrane 2009; Zangwill 2012; Shanklin and Meyer 2019; Drummond 2024; Polite 2019). I'll then draw on the work of Gerda Walther—an early 20th century phenomenologist—to draw an important connection between shared aesthetic experience and the creation and maintenance of aesthetic communities.

1.1 An Account of Shared Aesthetic Experience

What is it for an aesthetic experience to be shared among more than one individual? I will argue that shared aesthetic experiences result from *joint attention* resulting in substantial overlap in the content of the experiences of those jointly attending. If this condition is met, then individuals will have *matching* or *synchronized* aesthetic experiences; however, I introduce two further conditions that yield a richer form of shared aesthetic experience. First, joint attention is often but not always accompanied by a *we-intention*, such that those attending form a plural subject; and second, in some cases, particularly those involving

[3] It's not clear that Kant himself insisted on any sort of individualism about aesthetic appreciation or judgment; for an argument that Kant's theory of taste is in fact communitarian, see (Williams 2024).

shared aesthetic agency, there is a felt sense that these experiences are fundamentally collective and cannot be reduced to a set of aggregated individual experiences. If these further two conditions are met, in addition to substantial overlap in experiential content, then the experiences are *constitutively shared*.[4]

Let's begin with the first condition for shared aesthetic experience—that of joint attention. Joint attention involves the following conditions: first, one or more people must be co-present and attending to some object. Second, these individuals must be aware of each other, and to some extent monitoring each other's attention. Finally, there is an openness to coordinating one's own attention with that of the others—to modify what one attends to and how one does so in order to bring one's attention into line with the attention of the others (Campbell 2002). This coordination can occur both explicitly through communication, e.g. "Look at this part over here!", but also through psychological mechanisms such as gaze direction and emotional contagion.[5] When we engage in joint attention, as Tom Cochrane puts it, we aim to "objectively fix the content of attention" (2009, 65). In other words, the aim of such joint attention is that our aesthetic experiences will ultimately match in terms of their content.

To illustrate, let's take Cochrane's example of attending a concert together. Even in a mostly silent concert hall attending a performance of western classical music, we are nevertheless aware of the crowd around us. We are aware of their focused attention, and subtle bodily cues communicate their emotional engagement to us. This functions to direct our own attention to a common object, leading in the ordinary case to substantial overlap in our experiences. As Robert Shanklin and Michael Meyer note, it may also serve to add to the intensity of our experiences and deepen our emotional arousal; this feedback loop is one respect in which shared aesthetic experiences differ substantially from solitary aesthetic experiences (Shanklin and Meyer 2019, 109).

If we shift the context slightly to consider a rock concert in which norms for audience responses are looser, coordination of joint attention becomes more obvious. As the crowd cheers, whistles, boos, sways, dances, and explicitly communicates with each other, there is an even stronger degree of coordination of attention and, correspondingly, overlapping aesthetic experience. This sort of "noisy" joint attention may in fact lead to strong pressures to conform to the group's response; one might even be to some extent swept up in a joint experience due to these pressures (Cochrane 2009, 71).

The extent to which our aesthetic experiences *do* overlap as a result of joint attention will depend on several additional factors, including the degree to which we share certain background knowledge, interests, and levels of aesthetic expertise (Polite 2019, 444-446). In cases where those engaging in joint attention have much in common—say, a crowd of Wagnerians attending a performance of *Tristan und Isolde*—there will likely be a great deal of overlap in the content of their experiences. Their aesthetic experiences will likely be more synchronized than, for example, a mixed crowd not well versed in the conventions of opera. Even so, the latter crowd is still capable of *some* degree of overlap in the content of their aesthetic experiences, although it may be much less robust.

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[4] This taxonomy is similar to that introduced by Harry Drummond in (Drummond 2024); the differences are largely terminological.

[5] The phenomenologist Howard Schutz argues similarly that there is a pre-reflective process of "mutual tuning-in" required to synchronize our experiences of music (Schütz 1951).

When a group of individuals jointly attends to some object and thereby secures some degree of overlap in their aesthetic experience, they *do* have a shared aesthetic experience. However, it is shared only in a minimal sense: the *content* of the experience is shared. One might worry at this point, along with Zangwill, that even if individuals do have experiences with overlapping content, this wouldn't count as a genuinely *shared* experience—at best, it would be a kind of synchronization of private experiences, maintained indirectly through the mechanism of joint attention. To answer this worry, we need simply point out that there are more substantive forms of shared aesthetic experience—which I refer to as *constitutively shared* aesthetic experiences—which involve two further conditions: the formation of plural subject of attention, as well as the felt sense that the aesthetic experience is irreducibly collective. Let me say a bit more about each of these further conditions:

First, shared aesthetic experience is often but not always the result of group agency. Those who share an aesthetic experience often do so because they collectively intend to do something together—namely, engage in joint attention—and because of this they form a plural subject that is at the very least committed to the task of joint attention (Cochrane 2009; Shanklin and Meyer 2019, 107).

Harry Drummond has convincingly argued that group agency isn't *required* for joint attention. Consider the example discussed above of attending a concert with a largely anonymous crowd. In this case, it's not clear that all members of the audience have in fact committed to such a collective aim; consider the fact that we wouldn't rebuke someone who drifted off to sleep during the performance for failing to contribute to our collective project of joint attention. Drummond argues that what does the work of establishing joint attention in these contexts is the existence of shared, public norms for behavior at a concert that each of us follows individually (Drummond 2024).

Even so, many instances of shared aesthetic experience *do* result from group agency. Drummond himself provides the example of a smaller group of friends who plan to watch a film together. In this scenario, individuals *do* form a plural subject of joint attention, and this commitment leads to more substantive interaction effects. In other words, the friends will have a more significant impact on shaping each other's aesthetic experiences than would, say, an anonymous audience viewing the same film. They will engage in more substantive coordination of their aesthetic experiences through explicit communication—e.g. talking about the film and their responses to it—as well as more responsiveness to non-explicit emotional cues. Drummond refers to this as *participatory sense-making*: we come to understand what it is that we've experienced through our interactions with others (Drummond 2024). Shanklin and Meyer claim, similarly, that in forming a we-intention to engage in joint attention, we become "interlocutors" committed to better appreciating the aesthetic experience that we are sharing (Shanklin and Meyer 2019, 110). This points to a sense in which our aesthetic experiences may be shared in a way that goes beyond mere overlap in content: our interaction with others itself plays a role in *determining the content* of our experience, such that our aesthetic experiences can't be understood without reference to the way that *we* collectively have made sense of them.

This points to the third condition for a shared aesthetic experience: the felt sense that the experience is collective—the product of a *we*—and that it cannot be reduced to a set of aggregated individual experiences. In some cases of shared aesthetic experience, there is a sense that our experience is integrated so tightly as a result of our group agency that it cannot be reduced to each individual's contribution. This is

perhaps most clear in cases of shared aesthetic experiences resulting from group aesthetic agency. Drummond insightfully draws on Simon Høffding's interviews with the Danish String Quartet about the phenomenology of their performance (Drummond 2024; Høffding 2019). Members of the quartet report that they do not feel as though any one individual is performing the music, but rather that they experience the music as emerging through the interaction between them. There is therefore an *identification* of the experience as the experience of the collective—the way that *we* experienced the music, together.

Full identification of one's aesthetic experience with the collective is far less common in the context of shared *appreciation*: when we watch a film together, even if we do so collaboratively as a plural subject, it's less likely that we would *fully* identify our experience with the collective. However, in such cases there seems to be some degree to which we acknowledge the contributions of others in determining the content of our own experiences through participatory sense-making, e.g. "we didn't quite know what to make of the ending."

If these further two conditions are met, then individuals have a *constitutively shared* aesthetic experience.[6] As I will argue in the next section, there is an important connection between constitutively shared aesthetic experiences and the formation and maintenance of aesthetic communities.

1.2 Shared Aesthetic Experience and Community

Recent discussions of shared aesthetic experience have often observed a connection between experiential sharing and community. Even if individuals simply overlap in the content of their aesthetic experience—that is, they have *matching* aesthetic experiences—their mutual awareness of this may deepen their sense of community with each other (Cochrane 2009; Polite 2019).

However, I think that there is a deeper sense in which *constitutively* shared aesthetic experience may play a role in the generation and maintenance of aesthetic communities. To make this case, I'll draw on the work of Gerda Walther—an early 20th century phenomenologist and student of Husserl. Walther's dissertation, *A Contribution to the Ontology of Social Communities*, offers an analysis of community that foregrounds a form of constitutively shared experience (Walther 2021).

Walther's central aim is to distinguish genuine community from what she labels mere *society*—a term she borrows from sociologists such as Weber and Simmel. A society for Walther is a grouping of individuals who have coordinated their activities and interaction with each other around some intentional object. As an example of a society, she introduces a case of workers from different backgrounds working together at a construction site. They don't know each other well, but they are coordinated in their activities around the plan of constructing a building (Walther 2021, 292-293). Their interactions are also governed by social norms: for example, they're all committed to safety protocols and completing construction to code.

Despite this degree of coordination, Walther argues, we would stop short of calling them a *community*. This is because they might nevertheless regard each other with suspicion, indifference, or even outright

[6] I think that there is a strong case to be made that their aesthetic experience is *socially extended* across a group of individuals (León, Szanto, and Zahavi 2019). However, I won't make this case here. What is most important for my purposes is the *phenomenology* of constitutively shared aesthetic experiences—that we experience them as the product of a collective *we*.

hostility—as rivals for construction wages, say. The lesson according to Walther is that genuine community needs more than just social coordination. She argues that in addition there must be what she calls an "inner oneness" or a "feeling of belonging together":

> Only through its inner connectedness, that feeling of belonging together— however loose and limited it may be— does a social formation change into a community.… We stand on the same ground here as those researchers…who see the essential feature of community in "that *feeling of belonging together*," that inner oneness. All social formations that exhibit such inner oneness of their members, and *only* these, are communities, in our opinion (Walther 2021, 294-295).

But how exactly should we understand this feeling of belonging together? In what does it consist?

Walther unpacks this notion in terms of shared experience. In particular, she argues, members of a community regard their experiences as in some sense emanating from their communal life in a way that implicates the others as constituents of these experiences:

> The subject's life, insofar as it is community life, is not just *its* life, does not only pour out from *itself*, as a single individual, but emanates from its unity with the others *within* itself. In this case, lived experience is characterized for the experiencing subject not as just "I experience like this," but as "*we* experience like this": "I *and the others*"— with whom I am united— "are experiencing *like this in me*" and we are one in this, in our lived experience (Walther 2021, 299).

Crucially for Walther, members of a community are connected by a kind of communal *we-experience*—an experience that is felt to originate not simply in oneself, but rather in the collective, such that the other members of the community are both collective authors of, and present in the experience itself (Pezzella 2018; Szanto 2018; León and Zahavi 2016). There is a sense that my experience depends on and incorporates the others, just as theirs depends on and incorporates me. It is because of this felt sense that our experience is collective that we consider ourselves members of a community—of a "we" rather than a mere aggregation of individuals.

I think it's clear that Walther's approach is not the only way that we might distinguish a community from mere society. For example, Andrew Mason has argued more recently that communities are to be distinguished from societies by way of *identification* with the community by members of the group, mutual recognition of such identification, and—at least for a "moralized" community—relationships of solidarity (Mason 2000, 25-28). Even if we don't adopt Walther's approach as an account of the essential nature of community, full stop, I think that her approach does serve an important explanatory purpose: it highlights *one* way—and perhaps one *central* way—in which we account for both the nature and, ultimately, the value of our communities. What is central to Walther's account of community is a kind of communal experiential sharing that is strikingly similar to what I described above as a constitutively shared aesthetic experience. Although Walther understands hers to be an account of the nature of *any* genuine community, my suggestion is that Walther's account, insofar as it focuses on shared experience, will be especially apt as a means of characterizing *aesthetic communities*.

I have discussed the idea of an aesthetic community in previous work (Cross 2024). As I've previously understood them, aesthetic communities consist of groups of individuals collaborating within some shared

aesthetic practice who share a sense of recognition towards each other as sharing in the practice as members of a community. In previous work I've given special weight to the *practical* engagement of members of aesthetic communities: to the shared aesthetic agency of members of the group, coordinated through the norms of the practice that all the members of the community share.

What I think that Walther's work points to is the significance of constitutively shared aesthetic experience for the purpose of establishing and maintaining aesthetic communities. Being a member of an aesthetic community involves robust and interdependent participation in aesthetic practices, but there is also a phenomenological dimension: one must experience a felt sense of belonging with other members of the community. This can be established through constitutively shared aesthetic experiences: by creating a plural subject of joint attention, we contribute to each other's experiences such that these experiences are collectively determined *and* experienced as belonging to the community.

This is not to say that aesthetic communities must be limited in scale only to cases where the members can all meet face to face at the same time. Walther discusses what she calls *iterated* communities: larger communities in which smaller subsets of members are connected to each other and share distinct "we-experiences" (Walther 2021, 297-298) As a result of these smaller cases of iterated shared experience, members of the community come to identify not only with those individuals with whom they've shared aesthetic experiences, but also with the larger community of which the members are a subset. Return to the example of Wagnerians attending *Tristan und Isolde*: through their shared aesthetic experience, members of the audience come to identify not only with each other, but also with the broader community of Wagnerians who have had similar experiences over time in response to the same intentional objects.[7] The lesson, then, is that while joint attention and shared aesthetic experience may be a significant component for establishing and maintaining aesthetic communities, there isn't a requirement that *all* members of the community be co-present simultaneously, engaging in a single shared aesthetic experience. All that is required is that certain (and perhaps overlapping) subsets of the members of the community share aesthetic experiences.[8]

Why might this phenomenological dimension of aesthetic community be significant? In the next section, I argue that the phenomenology of constitutively shared aesthetic experiences—insofar as they involve a kind of subsumption of our individuality into more collective modes of experience—serve to amplify our sense that our lives are aesthetically meaningful.

2. Meaningfulness and Shared Aesthetic Experience

In *All Things Shining*, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly develop an account of the communal experience of the sacred, which they characterize alternately through the ancient Greek term *physis* and their favored translation, "whooshing up" (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 199-204). They characterize this experience as

[7] Do all the members of the extended community of Wagnerians share an aesthetic experience, insofar as they've all experienced *Tristan und Isolde*—albeit on separate occasions? Here, I think it's important to note that constitutively shared aesthetic experiences require joint attention and, more substantively, the formation of a plural subject of experience. This requires some measure of co-presence that would be lacking for the broader community. At best, they might have a *synchronized* or *matching* aesthetic experience—although this would be unlikely without the mechanism of joint attention to create convergence in aesthetic experience.

[8] Note that this approach also allows for the possibility of significantly temporally extended aesthetic communities—namely, aesthetic *traditions*. I also discuss aesthetic traditions in (Cross 2024).

communal, *nonvoluntary, value disclosing*, and as *meaningful* for members of a community who experience it. In this section, after characterizing this sort of experience more fully, I'll argue that shared aesthetic experiences within aesthetic communities are, if not exactly *instances* of it, nevertheless closely related. This means that these experiences offer an important way in which aesthetic communities help to create a sense amongst their members that their lives are aesthetically meaningful.

Let's begin with Dreyfus and Kelly's central example. Although the experience of *physis* has been largely banished from modern secular life, they argue that it can still be found in certain instances of collective appreciation. Their favored case is the group appreciation of sports. Consider a transcendent basketball game as the clock winds down, with the score tied in the closing moments: the star player calls for the ball, evades their guard, and launches a three-pointer at the buzzer to win the game. In the moment, everyone in the stadium is swept up in something overwhelming—a kind of shared experience of the sacred, argue Dreyfus and Kelly:

> The great athlete in the midst of the play rises up and shines—all attention is drawn to him. And everyone around him—the players on the field, the coaches on the sidelines, the fans in the stadium, the announcers in the booth—everyone understands who they are and what they are to do immediately in relation to the sacred event that is occurring (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 201).

The greatness of the player's performance is "whooshed up" to the attention of all in the stadium: it becomes, for a moment, the focus of everyone gathered. This focus gives the crowd a shared sense of why they're there—to witness greatness in sport—and what they should do: marvel in wonder first, and second, applaud thunderously.

Let me note a few of the key features of their notion of *physis*. First, as they understand it, these experiences are *communal* and individually *nonvoluntary*. They are not entirely up to us; we are swept up in something beyond our control, at the mercy of the collective. We as individuals are subsumed within the crowd, and to some extent drawn out of or beyond our own individual responses. Dreyfus and Kelly characterize this as a kind of powerful wave—one that sweeps us up into it, carries us where it will, but eventually and inevitably subsides (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 199).

Second, these experiences are *value-disclosing*. As Dreyfus and Kelly understand it, *physis* involves an experience in which certain things in the world—an athletic performance, for example—present themselves to us as sacred and valuable. Importantly, this is not experienced as *individual* valuing. Instead, it is experienced as an instance in which a *community*'s values are disclosed and made concrete to all of its members. Dreyfus and Kelly also argue that these experiences *focus* and *organize* the community: each member is revealed as oriented towards the same goods, and each has a sense of why they are there.

Finally, Dreyfus and Kelly describe these experiences as deeply *meaningful*, in large part because they offer a tangible sense that one is part of something that transcends one's individual capacity to contribute to it. In these experiences, we are taken out of ourselves and focused on the world revealed to us as valuable; we also know what we are *to do*, collectively, in relation to it.

What are we to make of Dreyfus and Kelly's account of *physis*? Their aims in introducing it are ambitious; they argue that these sorts of experiences are, at least in part, an antidote to what they take to be an

epidemic of contemporary nihilism. My aims in discussing it here are considerably more modest: what I want to suggest is that the sorts of shared aesthetic experiences I've been discussing to this point are, if not exactly *instances* of *physis*, nevertheless a kind of closely related phenomenon. If I am right about this, then we should be able to draw on some aspects of Dreyfus and Kelly's account to better understand the connection between shared aesthetic experiences within aesthetic communities and a sense that our lives are aesthetically meaningful.

Let me first note the parallels between *physis* and constitutively shared aesthetic experience: First and most centrally, constitutively shared aesthetic experiences are communal, in that they are experienced as irreducible to the contributions of any one individual. There is a sense that the experience is sourced in *us*, collectively, rather than in any one member of the community. Second, constitutively shared aesthetic experiences are value disclosing: they involve joint attention to some particular object, and the result of this attention is acquaintance with that object's aesthetic qualities.

Are constitutively shared aesthetic experiences *nonvoluntary*? In some contexts, yes: recall the noisy rock show, in which there is a strong psychological pressure to conform to the emotional response of the audience (Cochrane 2009, 71). In such cases, there may not be much difference between the rock venue and Dreyfus and Kelly's sports stadium. However, not all instances of constitutively shared aesthetic experience are like this. Consider the string quartet performing together; even if their aesthetic experience of their performance is constitutively shared, it doesn't seem to involve the same kind of overpowering emotional "wave" of the sort Dreyfus and Kelly describe. Even so, I think there *is* a sense in which these experiences do feature a kind of surrender of individual autonomy: the players allow the *interaction itself* to guide them, and, as Harry Drummond argues, there is an experience of submitting to a kind of collective and emergent autonomy that isn't felt as being the product of any one participant (Drummond 2024).

Finally, what about the experience of *meaningfulness* that is supposed to be characteristic of *physis*? Here too, I think there are important parallels: constitutively shared aesthetic experiences can also help us to experience our lives as aesthetically meaningful.

To make this case, I'll need to draw on my previous work, in which I've argued for a connection between our involvement in aesthetic communities and living lives that are aesthetically meaningful. Here is the argument in a nutshell: Each of us is significantly limited in our aesthetic capacities. Given that most of us are not groundbreaking tastemakers or revolutionary artists, and given limits on our time and resources, we might worry that our aesthetic lives won't amount to much. Aesthetic communities offer us a practical solution to this concern. They offer us the opportunity to subsume ourselves within a community: to take on a role within the community contributing to some larger aesthetic project realized collectively—one that outstrips anything that we might do individually. This, I argue, is one of the central values of aesthetic communities: they give us an opportunity to render our lives aesthetically meaningful by way of our practical contributions to them. We become a part of something bigger than ourselves (Cross 2024, 5).[9]

[9] My understanding of meaningfulness is indebted to Susan Wolf's account, developed in (Wolf 2012). To clarify, the notion of an *aesthetically* meaningful life would be a life that is meaningful insofar as it is oriented towards projects of positive aesthetic value. Therefore, aesthetically meaningful lives are one species of the broader genus of meaningful

What I want to suggest is that the phenomenology of constitutively shared aesthetic experiences within aesthetic communities harmonizes with and amplifies our sense that our practical investment in aesthetic communities renders our lives aesthetically meaningful. What I have in mind parallels some of what Ted Cohen has argued about the role of joke telling in facilitating a feeling of community. Cohen argues that when a community is focused on a joke, they are bound together by the shared practice of joke telling, along with their background values, commitments, shared knowledge, and so on. However, when they *laugh* at the joke together, their collective appreciative experience highlights and amplifies their sense of what they already share. It is a felt awareness of the intimacy of the members of the community (Cohen 1999, 29).

The point holds more generally for constitutively shared aesthetic experiences within aesthetic communities: they present us with a phenomenological awareness of our connections to others within an aesthetic community. These experiences highlight our shared evaluative outlook and our practical investment in contributing to the values central to our aesthetic community. There is a felt sense of subsumption within the community, and of being a part of something bigger than oneself. This harmonizes with our actual, *practical* investment in the community, and furthermore serves to reinforce and amplify it. The result is not just that our lives *are* in fact rendered more aesthetically meaningful as a result of this practical involvement, but that we furthermore *experience* them as meaningful in the same way.

At this point, I want to step back from the account that I've been developing to contrast it with another recent discussion of aesthetic community; this will allow me to make a more general point about the value of aesthetic communities and our involvement in them.

In a series of recent papers, Nick Riggle has developed an account of the value of aesthetic community that foregrounds the importance of discretionary valuing and volitional openness (Riggle 2022; Riggle 2024a). Discretionary valuing for Riggle consists in the capacity to choose what to value among a rich variety of things; doing so expresses who we are as individuals. The good of aesthetic community, for Riggle, consists (in part) in its ability to facilitate a kind of mutual appreciation of this sort of discretionary valuing:

> Discretionary valuing is good…. But only in aesthetic community can it fully flourish. Aesthetic community brings discretionary valuing to fruition because it places it in the realm of interpersonal reason, where one's decisions about what and how to value are sensitive to the attitudes and responses of other discretionary valuers who support, improve, expand, challenge, refine, or affirm one's practical attitudes and emotions. In doing so, aesthetic community socializes the emotions and reasons for action involved in exercising discretionary valuing (Riggle 2024a, 130).

While I think that Riggle is right to highlight the significance of individuality and its expression through discretionary valuing, I think that there is reason to question its central significance in accounting for the value of aesthetic community.

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lives. Whether there are reasons to pursue an aesthetically meaningful life in particular—as opposed to some other sort of meaningful life—is a question I won't aim to answer here.

If my argument to this point is good, then many aesthetic communities seem to exist precisely to facilitate experiences that *de-emphasize* the significance of our individual aesthetic characters and instead encourage us to identify with the collective or communal. Furthermore, this seems to me to be central to their value; by coming to identify with something larger than ourselves, we are able to transcend the limitations on our individual aesthetic capacities, thereby rendering our lives more aesthetically meaningful than they would be otherwise.[10]

This isn't to say that my account is entirely incompatible with Riggle's. For one, Riggle understands genuine participation in aesthetic communities to involve a kind of *volitional openness*: a willingness to be open to the direction of others within our aesthetic communities, and to respond to, support and amplify their own aesthetic valuing. This may go some distance towards accommodating the idea that participating in an aesthetic community involves relinquishing some measure of individual control. Second, it may be an exercise of one's discretionary valuing to opt-in to an aesthetic community in the first place—a point I return to in the next section. Finally, I think it's possible that there are different kinds of aesthetic communities, realized around different sorts of values: perhaps Riggle has characterized one kind of aesthetic community, oriented towards the goods of discretionary valuing and volitional openness; on the other hand, as I've argued, there may be other kinds of aesthetic community focused primarily towards a kind of *subsumption* of individuality.

3. Causes for Concern: Autonomy and Moral Danger

In this final section of the paper, I take up two potential concerns about the argument to this point: First, one might worry that overemphasizing the significance of aesthetic community and the shared aesthetic experiences that they facilitate will lead us to shortchange another aesthetic good: that of *aesthetic autonomy*. Second, given that shared aesthetic experiences are to some extent nonvoluntary, there is a worry about their *riskiness*: what's to prevent us from being swept up in the wrong kinds of experiences, or involved in the wrong kinds of communities—including those which are morally or aesthetically problematic?

Let's begin with the concern about aesthetic autonomy. The Kantian tradition in aesthetics presents an ideal of autonomy in aesthetic engagement according to which each individual's aesthetic judgments are grounded in their own experiences, guided by their own capacities and knowledge, and ultimately expressive of that individual's aesthetic personality.[11] A life lacking such autonomy—even if it includes substantive aesthetic engagement—would be in some sense lacking. Consider C. Thi Nguyen's discussion of "Audio Tour Brandon", an individual who constantly defers to museum audio tours to guide his experience,

[10] There is a tradition in Western aesthetics of emphasizing a kind of transcendence of individuality that attends aesthetic experience; examples might include Schopenhauer on the suspension of the will, Clive Bell on aesthetic emotion, and Iris Murdoch on the phenomenon of "unselfing" (Schopenhauer 1969, 195-200; Bell 1914; Murdoch 1999). Where I take my approach to differ from this tradition is that I emphasize that such transcendence occurs through *collective* engagement in shared aesthetic experience—and the consequent immersion in aesthetic community—as opposed to through an *individual* aesthetic experience.

[11] These three dimensions of aesthetic autonomy roughly correspond to Irene Martínez Marín's notions of *experiential* autonomy, *competence-based* autonomy, and *personal aesthetic* autonomy. (Marín 2024)

engagement with, and judgment of art. As Nguyen argues, Brandon's aesthetic life is significantly impoverished as a result:

> Brandon's life is missing something important…. His aesthetic life seems not to be fully realized. He lacks independence, we want to say; he does not fully engage with artworks in the right way… What's wrong with Brandon's conduct is not a lack of acquaintance; it is that he is aesthetically subservient. He is failing to reach his conclusions through the application of his own faculties and resources. He is letting another direct his attention and suggest interpretations and conclusions (Nguyen 2020b, 1132-1133).

Notice, however, that what Nguyen points out to be the problem with Brandon—letting others direct his attention and suggest interpretations and conclusions—seems to be *exactly* what occurs when we immerse ourselves in constitutively shared aesthetic experiences. In these circumstances, we *are* letting others guide and shape our experiences and allowing ourselves to become "aesthetically subservient" to the aesthetic community. Does this mean that there's a fundamental incompatibility between being aesthetically autonomous and participating in aesthetic communities?

First, a concessive reply: Even if we do allow that full participation in aesthetic communities involves relinquishing aesthetic autonomy, there nevertheless might be strong reasons in favor of it. I've argued above that aesthetic communities offer us powerful resources for rendering our lives more aesthetically meaningful, especially given the limitations for most of us on our individual aesthetic capacities. It may be that such meaningfulness is an important condition for an aesthetically flourishing life. Relinquishing our individual aesthetic autonomy in *some* circumstances would simply be the price we need to pay in order to realize this important good. Note furthermore that my proposal is not that we should *entirely* neglect aesthetic autonomy; what is called for instead is striking a balance between the goods of aesthetic autonomy and aesthetic community.

A less concessive reply would be to deny that full participation within aesthetic communities *is* in fact incompatible with aesthetic autonomy. First, note that in most cases we have a choice of which aesthetic communities we participate in. As such, we might view this choice of participation—if not the participation itself—as a manifestation of aesthetic autonomy: it is *my choice*, say, to be a Wagnerian, a die-hard Swiftie, or a crust punk—even if the kinds of experiences and agency that I'm drawn into in my participation aren't entirely up to me. Second, it's arguable that we may need to immerse ourselves in aesthetic communities in order to develop the skills and competencies required in order for us to be aesthetically autonomous. Shared aesthetic experience and shared aesthetic agency serves educational function, insofar as our responses and actions are shaped and guided by a community that may include those who are aesthetically more expert than we are. This guidance may ultimately support our development as aesthetically autonomous agents. These two considerations provide support for the idea that participating in aesthetic communities may both express our individual autonomy and furthermore serve to reinforce and develop it.

Finally, in connection with the two considerations above, note there are some accounts of aesthetic autonomy according to which such autonomy *requires* a kind of participation in an aesthetic community. For example, several commentators have recently argued that Kant's own account of aesthetic autonomy is

ineliminably social, insofar as it involves a commitment to either a *common sense* (Matherne 2019; Williams 2024) with others or to a kind of second-personal address of our own taste to others (Gorodeisky 2024). Nick Riggle develops a view of aesthetic autonomy according to which the *goal* of developing aesthetic autonomy is ultimately to allow us to participate in aesthetic community (Riggle 2024b). If these accounts of aesthetic autonomy are persuasive, then perhaps we shouldn't be so worried about any sort of incompatibility between aesthetic autonomy and aesthetic community in the first place.

Still, one might worry that there is something problematic about the *nonvoluntary* nature of shared aesthetic experiences that I've argued are central to aesthetic community—especially when these experiences are substantially similar to Dreyfus and Kelly's notion of *physis*, in which individuals are swept up in a communal wave that they are powerless to resist. The worry is that these experiences are *risky*, insofar as an individual might be swept up in the wrong sorts of experiences—especially those which are morally or aesthetically problematic. The same kind of communal awe we feel in the presence of great athletic achievement might be instead directed towards a tyrant or dictator: as Susan Sontag notes, "the exaltation of community does not preclude the search for absolute leadership; on the contrary, it may inevitably lead to it." (Sontag 1980, 196) The same is true for the aesthetically problematic: consider being lost in the crowd's enthusiasm at a Nickelback concert. How do we avoid getting swept up in the wrong sorts of things?[12]

First, an important disclaimer: not all of the shared aesthetic experiences that are central to aesthetic communities will involve the wavelike, nonvoluntary phenomenology of Dreyfuss and Kelly's *physis*. As I argued in the previous section, many of these experiences *do* involve a sense that our participation is voluntary, even if we've ceded full control over the form that this participation takes to the collective. The players in the string quartet *do* have control over their individual involvement in the performance, even if they take their playing to be largely responsive to and guided by their collective interaction.

Even so, some aesthetic communities do feature cases of overwhelming and non-voluntary shared aesthetic experience; is there anything that we can do to avoid being caught up in the wrong sorts of responses? Thankfully, yes: I think that in practice, it is often possible to exercise a kind of reflective, rational control over being swept away. Consider a comparable case: we are often swept up in romantic love for another person. We fall hard, and in the moment we might seem to be largely at the mercy of our attraction for them. However, over time, most of us are able to step back from our attraction and to ask whether our investment in this relationship is ultimately a good thing. And, although we may not be able to completely eliminate our attraction, we can sometimes exercise indirect control over it—choosing, for example, to exit a relationship or, for that matter, to commit ourselves to it more strongly.[13] I suspect that the same ought to hold for our engagement in aesthetic communities: even if we are caught up for the moment in collective experience, we are usually able to step back to evaluate these experiences, and the communities in which they occur. Granted, it may be just as difficult to extricate ourselves from them, and from the powerful sense of meaningfulness they may offer, as it is to control our romantic attractions. Notice,

[12] This is certainly a concern for Dreyfus and Kelly themselves, but their response is underdeveloped. They claim that what's needed is a kind of skill in determining when and whether to be swept away: a skill that allows us to evaluate our engagement and ensure that it's directed towards the right ends. However, they offer precious little elaboration on what such a skill might look like or how it might operate. (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011:219-22)

[13] For an argument that romantic love is both assessable for rationality and responsive to reason, see (Brogaard 2024).

furthermore, that doing so will require recruiting individual autonomy—which is just to reiterate my earlier contention that an aesthetically flourishing life may require a *balance* between embracing autonomy and relinquishing it, if only for the moment, in aesthetic community.

By way of conclusion, I think it's worth stepping back to reiterate that both of the concerns I've identified emerge from the modern, Western tradition of aesthetic theory—a tradition that prizes individuality, autonomy, and rational control as being central to our aesthetic lives. It is perhaps unsurprising that this tradition has largely overlooked the significance of collective and communal aesthetic responses of the kind that I've discussed here—in large part because these have been taken to be anathema to the ideal of autonomous aesthetic engagement. I have suggested that these experiences offer us a feeling of meaningfulness that complements and amplifies our actual practical investments in aesthetic communities. Together, these give us a means of both *feeling* and *being* a part of something larger than ourselves and correspondingly rendering our lives aesthetically meaningful even in the face of significant limits on our individual aesthetic capacities. That a large part of our aesthetic lives seems oriented around facilitating these kinds of social engagements indicates their significance to us.

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