

High Art

Simon Fokt, HTW Berlin

Abstract

Artists rarely shy from a drink and other psychoactive substances, yet it seems that there has never been much of a discussion on what aesthetic or artistic relevance this has to their works and their reception. I outline the scale of the phenomenon focusing on some prominent examples and distinguish a subset of what I call ‘high artworks.’ In such artworks, drug experiences are encoded: their drug-related contextual and intrinsic properties or content are aesthetically or artistically relevant and should be mentioned in any in-depth analysis. I then further argue that it is impossible or at least very difficult to fully appreciate or produce optimal evaluations of a high artwork, unless one has oneself had drug-induced experiences of the kind encoded in the work. This is because such experiences afford one the relevant phenomenal knowledge, which is otherwise inaccessible, yet required to gain an adequate level of competence allowing one to fully grasp the work.

Keywords

aesthetic evaluation, art appreciation, art audiences, drugs, epistemic competence, Witkacy

This is the pre-print version of the following article:

Simon Fokt (2024). High Art, High Artists. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 82 (1): 61–73.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpae012>

There is no poetry among water drinkers.
Ovid

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, a.k.a. Witkacy, was a Polish modernist writer and painter. His play *Szewcy* (*The Shoemakers*) is on the standard school curriculum in Poland, exhibitions of his paintings abound, and his avantgarde rebel life is an inspiration to all Polish high-school misfits.

Many of Witkacy's paintings bear a curious signature – a series of letters and numbers resembling a code. For example, his *Portrait of Edwarda Szmuglarowska* (Fig.1) bears the signature: (T. Peyotl+C+Co+C). Fortunately, there is no difficulty in decoding it, as Witkacy was quite open about his inspirations and even wrote a whole book about them. The code means: painted while high on mescaline, alcohol, cocaine, and more alcohol, and the book is simply titled *Narcotics* (Witkiewicz, 1975).¹



Figure 1. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Portrait of Edwarda Szmuglarowska*. 1930, National Museum in Warsaw.

Witkacy wasn't just high all the time. He was devoted to careful experimentation, taking detailed notes on the effect different drugs had on him and his creative output, published

later in the aforementioned book. His favourite was mescaline, a psychedelic drug derived from the peyote cactus. But he was also quite partial to cocaine, ether, hashish, and naturally, caffeine, alcohol and nicotine. In *Narcotics*, he clearly shows that he was not only aware of the effects those drugs had on his works – he very specifically prepared himself the right mixtures of drugs to put himself in a desired mental state he saw as enabling a specific type of creativity. Moreover, he tracked not just intoxication but also sobriety, leaving specific time-indexed signatures to indicate how long since he last had alcohol, nicotine or caffeine.

Witkacy isn't exactly alone in his fascination with substances, though not many artists have been quite so open, scientific, and even proud of their experiments. Picasso smoked opium multiple times a week

¹ English translation by Soren Gauger (2018) *Narcotics*. Twisted Spoon Press. A helpful list of shortcuts compiled by the Słupsk Art Gallery which holds the largest collection of Witkacy's works: <https://www.muzeum.slupsk.pl/index.php/witkacy/skroty>

between 1904 and 1908, which, as Richardson (1991) suggests, likely inspired much of his Rose Period paintings: the dreamy, drowsy mood, the trancelike, expressionless faces of harlequins and waifs. The opium-induced sense of having fallen out of time could have even inspired the founding premise of cubism – adding the time dimension to the spatial dimensions. It certainly played a huge role in the lives of surrealist artists: Jean Cocteau, Antonin Artaud and Andre Masson praised it as a great aid in writing and automatic drawing, sharing the drug with such people as Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Max Ernst, Man Ray (Cocteau, 1930; Kempley, 2019; Pollock, 2001).

But this isn't just about the rebel modernists: examples abound throughout time, media, genres, found in high and popular art alike. Rock stars might have been particularly fond of opioids, but so were Hector Berlioz, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Oscar Wilde, while Thomas de Quincy's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* detail the impact the drug had on his art (Wolf, 2010). Close encounters with the Absinthe green fairy are a staple point for most *fine da siècle* artists, with Arthur Rimbaud's poetry offering particularly vivid accounts of his drunkenness (Peschel, 1974). Modest Mussorgsky only finished Boris Godunov because Nikolai Rimski-Korsakov fed him a bottle of vodka a day, Stephen King said he never wrote a word sober, and Vincent Van Gogh never said no to absinthe (Cotton, 2011; King, 2000; Lerner, 1998). Jazz and blues of the 1920s and 1930s was strongly associated first with cocaine and soon with marijuana (Mezzrow & Wolfe, 1946), while Madonna and The Beatles reference their drugs of choice in album and song names (*MDNA* and *Lucy and the Sky with Diamonds* respectively). Damien Hirst openly spoke about the impact ecstasy and psychedelics had on his early works, Syd Barret's love for LSD defined the Pink Floyd sounds, Philip K. Dick and Andy Warhol were both quite partial to amphetamine. And although most artists kept their habits in check or kicked them later in life, we cannot forget the tragic cases, from Jean Michel Basquiat to Jimmie Hendrix, who all created great things under the influence and died of overdose.

This is naturally but a short taster list. Yet, despite the sheer scale of the phenomenon, the unapologetic attitude of artists and rich documentation by biographers, historians and critics, aestheticians have remained conspicuously silent on the topic. This is a shame, as interesting questions abound. What impact, if any, does the artist's drug-taking experience have on their art? Does it have a moral significance and if so, does this impact the aesthetic value of their works? How do chemical 'helpers' impact our view of the artist's achievements? Should they be counted as a form of human enhancement with respect to artistic creativity? What are the differences in how we perceive artists who create under the influence, compared with those who use narcotic experiences as inspiration but create sober? What does it mean for our appreciation and evaluation of such art? Does it place any epistemic requirements on the audience?

In what follows, I will explore the last of those questions in more detail. Broadly, my thesis is this: many of the artworks which have been created under the influence of a drug or were inspired by experiences of that drug, cannot be fully appreciated unless the person appreciating them has cognitive capacities which can only be gained through personal experience of that drug (or, on a weaker reading, are very hard to gain without it).²

Drugs and art

Before I lay out the argument, let me first specify the class of artworks it will apply to.

(1) Some artists keep their drug intake and their creative output separate. They might only have a glass of wine with dinner or they might party hard, but either way: they create sober, do not use drug-induced experiences as inspiration for their art, and there is no causal relation between the two. In those cases, the artists' personal life may have no important impact on their works and thus on their interpretation.

(2) Other artists might use substances in order to 'get their artistic juices flowing'. For example, Stephen King or Modest Mussorgsky seem to have just needed a drink to start writing and were drunk while writing. But while alcohol might have been causally related to the creation of their works (e.g. 'if Mussorgsky didn't self-medicate with alcohol, he wouldn't have written *Boris Godunov*'), the causal relation has no aesthetic import (e.g. 'if Mussorgsky didn't self-medicate with alcohol, *Boris Godunov*, if ever written, would not have been aesthetically/artistically different').

(3) There are works which explicitly reference drug use by containing narratives which involve them, referencing the artists' experiences with them, and so on, but these references have little or no impact on the aesthetic properties of the works. For example, crime films such as *Scarface* might have a drug-soaked narrative, and classic jazz tunes such as Cab Calloway's 'Reefer Man' might share some personal experiences, but aesthetically, such works are perfectly sober. In fact, *Scarface* is often given as an example of a film which wildly misrepresents drug-induced experiences (e.g. Hirschman & Mcgriff, 1995).

In (1) and (2), drug use is present in the work's history, but not in the intrinsic or contextual properties relevant to its proper aesthetic understanding, appreciation and evaluation. Such cases might be interesting when discussing some of the other research questions identified above, but in the present

² In this article, I refrain from any judgement on the moral value of drugs, their positive or negative impact on artists' lives, or the artists' own attitudes to them. Further, I make no distinction between legal and illegal drugs. Drug taking might be morally relevant and its moral or legal character might affect the aesthetic quality and appreciation of a work, but this is a subject for a separate discussion. I will also intentionally mix examples from high and pop art to highlight that the issues discussed are not specific to one or the other.

context I shall put them aside. In (3), drug use might be relevant insofar as the parts of the narrative involving drugs impact the aesthetic understanding, appreciation and evaluation of the work. In many other cases, the aesthetic relevance of drug use is even clearer.

(4) Artists might create art while under the influence, allowing their experience to noticeably mark their work. Artaud's and Masson's automated drawings, Rimbaud's poetry, and Jimmy Hendrix's intense solos would fall here. Witkacy's visual works are a clear example, as they can be typically identified with respect to the substances used while painting and drawing. Compare the following three portraits of Nena Stachurska (Fig.2): the first was drawn on cocaine, showing the intensity and feeling of power associated with the drug; second on mescaline, with distorted shapes and dynamic lines indicating movement in still but visually busy surfaces, typical of the hallucinatory experience; the last was drawn after three days of not drinking, and looks significantly more measured and, well, 'sober'.³

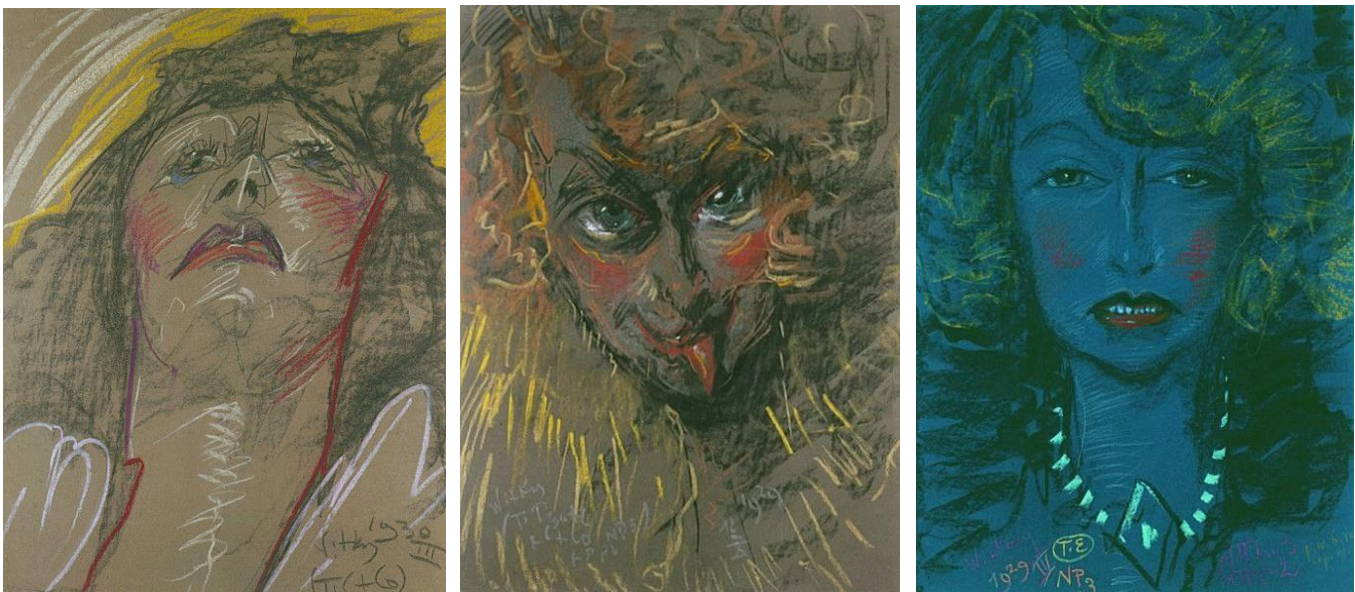


Figure 2. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, three Portraits of Nena Stachurska, 1930, 1929 and 1929. Muzeum Pomorza Środkowego in Słupsk.

(5) Other artists might not have been creating while high, but they used their narcotic experiences as inspiration for their works. Picasso's rose period paintings, Much of Basquiat's output, and many surrealist works would fall in this category. A specific example might be Damian Hirst's Kaleidoscope series, which is visibly inspired by the artist's experiments with psychedelics and ecstasy, which can produce kaleidoscopic, fractal-like, and vividly coloured hallucinations.

³ Throughout the paper, I base the descriptions of the effects of different drugs on information shared by DrugWise, an independent online resource which provides 'drug information which is topical, evidence-based and non-judgemental.' <https://www.drugwise.org.uk/> [accessed 11/07/2022].

(6) There is a class of artworks which more or less clearly indicate that they are intended for (and likely created by) people who have had experiences of a drug, or even to be enjoyed while under the influence of that drug. With such genres as psychedelic art or stoner rock, the clue is in the name. Various forms of dance music might not explicitly reference any type of substance, but they are directed at people who go to clubs, raves, and discos where the use of alcohol and stimulants such as cocaine or ecstasy is the norm. Bonnie MacLean's concert posters (Fig. 3) are a great example. The vivid colours, the wavy, barely readable font, the surreal creature which blurs the boundaries between depiction and abstraction, the face of a visibly intoxicated person blending with the psychedelic experience – all of these features are carefully crafted to be seen by audiences who know exactly what it is like to feel the way encoded in the poster.



Figure 3: Bonnie MacLean, *Fillmore poster*, 2007

(7) Many artworks can combine two or more of the above. For example, John Coltrane recorded his infamous album *Om* under the influence of LSD, expressing his drug-inspired perceptions of Indian spirituality, and the music itself has a repetitive, trance-like, chaotic character which captures the experience of the drug. Coltrane himself did not prescribe that one should have the experience of LSD while or prior to listening to the album, but its popularity in the late 60's hippie culture suggests that this is how it has been in fact often appreciated. Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a novel by an avid user and defender of drugs and involves drugs in its narrative. Terry Gilliam's film adaptation has formal properties such as episodic narration, elements of surrealism, rushed expositions, odd camera angles, unexpected cuts, and juxtapositions of unrelated elements which mirror the drug experiences of the characters. Although Gilliam did not openly endorse this, the Internet is full of accounts and recommendations to watch the film while high, effectively creating a culture in which such reception is not uncommon.

In cases (4)-(6), and (7) insofar as it involves one or more of (4)-(6), drug-related contextual and intrinsic properties of the works, as well as their content, are aesthetically relevant: the work would

be aesthetically different if drugs were not involved. Drug-induced experiences are thus encoded in the work. From here on, I will refer to works which have drug experiences encoded in them, as ‘high artworks.’

It seems reasonable that any in-depth analysis of a high artwork should mention its connection to drugs. For example, it would be odd to answer the question: ‘why does X have the property P?’ without ever mentioning the fact that the author used a drug which typically evokes experiences which can inspire or are similar to P, P can evoke certain experiences in people who are familiar with the drug, and so on. However, my main argument goes further. I claim that it is impossible or at least very difficult to fully appreciate or produce optimal evaluations of high artworks, unless one has oneself had drug-induced experiences of the kind encoded in the work.

What is it like to be high?

People might disagree on whether it is metaphysically possible for Mary to know what it is like to see red before she left her room (Jackson, 1986), or for you to infer what it is like to be a bat without having the capacity to fly or echolocate (Nagel, 1974), but even most staunch defenders of eliminativism about mental states will likely admit that gaining such knowledge without direct experience is at least very difficult. After all, Mary isn’t just anybody, she is a super-scientist. Thus, phenomenal knowledge of what it is like to X is either impossible (strong reading), or at least very difficult (weaker reading) to gain without experiencing X first-hand.⁴

Knowledge of what it is like to experience the effects of a given drug, seems like a good example of phenomenal knowledge. Experience of psychedelic drugs such as psilocybin, mescaline or LSD, has been reported to

include alterations in the user’s perceptions (in all the sensory modalities), changes in the emotions and expansion in an individual’s sense of thought and identity. A particular feature of the experience – that is encompassed by all the above characteristics and has special relevance to the creative process is, that of a general increase in complexity and openness, such that the usual ego-bound restraints that allow humans to accept given pre-conceived ideas about themselves and the world around them are necessarily challenged. Another important feature is the tendency for users to assign unique and novel meanings

⁴ Note that this is different from the controversial Acquaintance Principle, which states that one needs to be directly acquainted with an aesthetic object to gain aesthetic (rather than phenomenal) knowledge of it. Nothing of what follows depends on holding that principle.

to their experience – together with an appreciation that they are part of a bigger, universal cosmic-oneness (Sessa, 2008: 823).

Other drugs, such as ecstasy, ketamine or hashish, might induce a different experience of space and time, of colours and shapes, experiencing synaesthesia, etc. It might involve a capacity to draw connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena, finding some of them more or less interesting, or opening up to new interpretations. Further, some drugs can facilitate otherwise difficult or impossible management of own emotional and cognitive states which might be standing in the way of new forms of perception or reflection – for this reason, psilocybin and ecstasy have been found useful in the treatment of depression and PTSD (Grob et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2021).

There is further evidence suggesting that such knowledge can have impact on artistic practice, with various studies finding that artists under the influence of or after taking psychedelics had ‘a tendency towards more expressionistic work, a sharpening of colour, a greater freedom from prescribed mental sets, an increased syntactical organisation, a deeper accessibility of past impressions and a heightened sense of emotional excitement’ (Sessa, 2008: 824).

Most of such experiences and their impacts are drug-specific and very difficult if not impossible to achieve in any other way. Just as knowing what it is like to echolocate is impossible or at least very difficult to achieve without direct experience, so is knowing what it is like to see time as a physical dimension or feel love for the entire world, induced by psychedelic or euphoric drugs.

The next premise does the heavy lifting in my argument, so let me introduce it with an example. John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* is a bestselling non-fiction novel. It follows the story of Jim Williams, an antiques dealer who is on trial for the murder of a male sex worker – but this is not really what it is about. What it is about, is the city where it is based: the 1980’s Savannah, US. Capturing the atmosphere of the place, with all of its colourful characters, fantastic architecture, and a distinctive feel, is by far Berendt’s greatest achievement. Williams’ passion for restoring Savannah’s neglected architectural splendours and the various characters’ strong emotional ties with the city fuel the narration, while the aestheticised, ironic, meandering writing style bordering on magical realism encapsulates Savannah’s hot, eccentric, mysterious, Southern feel. The 1994 *New York Times Book Review* (reprinted on the back cover) was prophetic in stating that the book ‘makes the reader want to book a bed and breakfast for an extended weekend at the scene of the crime.’ *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* inspired a huge and sustained increase in visitors who ‘often carry a copy and identify landmarks,’ and in Savannah it is known simply as ‘The Book’ (Nussbaum, 2019).

The readers of *The Book* are onto something. Inspired by it, they now want to know what it is like to be in Savannah – a kind of knowledge that only a visit to the city can afford. But this works both ways: a visit to Savannah can also help one better appreciate the book. One need not look far in the reader reviews to find quotes such as: ‘when I had the opportunity to visit the city in person, I found myself craving another opportunity to read this story and let the details of Berendt's tale sink in’ or ‘tour of the Mercer House [gave me] a better appreciation of the settings [as] the storylines come to life and show a slice of history from a very unique perspective.’⁵ Indeed, it seems all but natural to say that a full appreciation of this book in which Savannah is so deeply encoded, requires one to visit Savannah.

Another example is Kay Redfield Jamison’s *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*, an autobiographical account of a struggle with bipolar disorder. The author documents the seductive power of the exhilarating manic highs and the devastating force of the deepest depressive lows she experienced, mixing the medical clarity of a psychiatrist with deeply personal introspection. Reviewers who themselves suffer from bipolar disorder typically praise the work pointing at Jamison’s skill in capturing their experience when she writes: ‘My body is uninhabitable’ or ‘Which of my feelings are real?’ (Moezzi, 2009). It seems natural to think that readers who know what it is like to experience mania and depression, will be able to appreciate the work on a level that those who do not might never attain.

Similar examples abound, and the general thought I want to derive from them is this: when a given work encodes knowledge what it is like to X (be in Savannah, have bipolar disorder), then knowing what it is like to X can yield an otherwise inaccessible capacity to interpret, appreciate and evaluate that work. Those who do not know what it is like to X can engage with it, of course, and even have an inkling of what it is like to X, but at least some aspects of the work will remain inaccessible to them.

What aspects are those? On the most direct level, knowing what it is like to X can afford one an ability to more accurately assess how the work depicts, represents, or otherwise captures aspects of X. For example, one might only really be able to appreciate how *skillfully* or *faithfully* Berendt captured Savannah’s Southern feel after experiencing it first-hand. Further, a night visit to the Bonaventure Cemetery to find out what it is like to feel its eerie atmosphere, could afford one a new capacity to appreciate how *atmospheric* and *magical* the final scenes of *Midnight* are. Next, knowing what it is like to X might allow one to better understand why an artist made specific choices: used a particular device, chose this rather than that perspective, and so on. For example, personal experience of bipolar disorder could allow a reader to appreciate how Jamison’s writing style in particular parts of the book

⁵ Reviews by Pupdrivesmenutz (21/11/2017) and abcalderswood (11/12/21) quoted from the reviews section at Amazon.com. <https://www.amazon.com/Midnight-Garden-Good-Evil-Berendt-ebook/dp/B003JMFVKV/>

traces the mental states she describes. All of this might lead to a more informed identification of the relevant aesthetic properties and their evaluation. For example, a neurotypical reader might perceive aspects of Jamison's memoir to be *unfocused* or *overly analytic*, while a person who knows what it is like to be in her shoes might be better qualified to judge them as *insightful* or even *humorous* in their depiction of the author's mental states.

We also judge works for their capacity to inspire us, teach us something or guide us through life. Berendt's book can thus be valued as a guide to the city of Savannah, a way to enhance one's experience of the city, to explore places and notice things one would otherwise miss. It does this via distinctly aesthetic means that go well beyond what a regular tourist guide might offer – it *enchants* the reader, its *impressionistic, mysterious* feel inspires curiosity, while its engaging narrative can bring locations to life in the visitor's mind. Naturally, one will only be able to judge how well the book does all of those things after actually visiting Savannah. Similarly, Jamison's memoir can become a guide through the experiences of manic depression, but naturally only people who actually suffer from it will be able to benefit from and accurately evaluate it in this respect.

This list is far from exhaustive, but I hope that it is enough to support my point. In all of those cases, one could imagine an aesthetic disagreement between A who knows what it is like to X and B who does not. In such a disagreement, A's judgement is likely to be more informed and accurate. A might be unable to articulate or support it without referring to their experience, and they would be in their right to simply say: 'it's hard to explain, you'd know if you'd been there.'

Knowing what it is like to experience the effects of a drug is not qualitatively different from my less risqué examples: knowing what it is like to be in Savannah or experience manic depression (or being in love, or being a parent, and so on – the list could be long).⁶ In each case, the phenomenal knowledge simply makes one more qualified to accurately perceive, interpret and evaluate the drug-related aspects of artworks in which this knowledge is embedded.

Take for example Witkacy's paintings created under the influence of mescaline (Fig. 1 and 2.2). As a psychedelic similar to LSD or psilocybin, the drug is likely to cause 'visual effects such as intensified colours, distorted shapes and sizes, and movement in stationary objects' (DrugWise). Already this general description allows one to look at the portraits in a new light, noting the vivid colours, the shape distortions, and the dynamic lines suggesting movement Witkacy might have hallucinated in the model's face. But without knowing what it is like to experience a psychedelic drug oneself, a viewer

⁶ One could go further here to suggest that taking a drug is what Paul called a 'transformative experience.' Similarly to having a child or converting to a religion, it can fundamentally alter one's perception of the world, mental capacities, and so on (Paul, 2014).

might never fully appreciate how well its experience is captured in the work; or might perceive the colours and distortions as an aesthetic choice while in fact they could be merely depictive of what the artist experienced; or note the playfulness of the second portrait and contrast it with a more sombre character of the first, failing to focus on the more important similarities between them. One might further fail to value the paintings for their capacity to capture and articulate an experience one is familiar with – the same way a person who was never in love might not value a romantic poem for its capacity to capture and articulate how they feel.

These sorts of disparities in judgement exist not just in theory. John Coltrane's 1965 album *Om*, also created under the influence of psychedelics, was met with some very mixed reviews: while some saw it as *screechy, disjoint, chaotic, muddy* and even *amateurish*, others highly appreciated it for its pure release of energy, finding it *freeing* and *revolutionary*. "Compared to the other LPs of that year (1965), *Om* lives on another planet... This journey is not for beginners... It would be fair to listen to this performance without any reference to jazz or to any other disciplined utterance of music" (Mazzola & Cherlin, 2009: 24). But it certainly seems that those who had some experience of LSD, have appreciated it a fair bit more: the album was not initially released in fear of unfavourable reception, until in 1968 Bob Thiele, Coltrane's producer, correctly predicted that *Om* will land very well indeed amongst the psychedelic-fuelled audiences of the Summer of Love (Kahn, 2006: 184). These listeners, knowing what it is like to hear patterns in the chaos, to feel seemingly disjoint elements form a beautiful whole, or to experience an intense, unstructured, spiritual elation, might have well been better cognitively equipped to appreciate and evaluate this particular work. This was true not just of free jazz:

The pharmacology of hallucinogens did not create the Acid Rock sound of the late 1960s, but it did make people sensitive and more receptive to different types of innovation in playing and listening to music [...] Acid rock was shaped, in part, from hallucinogenic drug effects, including short attention span, emotional ambiguity and lack of unequivocal attitudes, interest in novel sensations, egalitarian fascination with everything, and a desire to explore complex and subtle phenomena (Lyttle & Montagne, 1992: 1170).

Electronic dance music, such as Acid House which was inspired by Acid Rock, is typically created for audiences who are either familiar with the experience of hallucinogens or stimulants such as LSD or ecstasy, or are under their influence while dancing. The 'smiley face' became a primary symbol of the movement, most often used on promotional materials in an equation: A + E = 'smiley face' (Acid house

+ Ecstasy = Happiness). Lyttle and Montagne list multiple drug references in album titles, lyrics, artist names, as well as references to losing control and other drug-induced experiences (ibid.: 1164).

Roger Scruton once described such music as offering merely a ‘pulse regular enough to jerk the body into reflex motion, like the legs of a galvanised frog,’ further claiming that what the clubbers do ‘is related to dancing in something like the way a group speechlessly scoffing hamburgers in the street is related to a formal dinner party’ (Scruton, 2016). Given his commitment to conservative values and involvement in projects directly aimed at heavier regulations and penalties for drug use (see e.g. The Bow Group, 2017), it seems likely that Scruton had limited or no personal experience of clubbing or drugs other than alcohol. If I am right, this would render him less competent at issuing judgements on the related aspects of electronic dance music. For one, he seems to approach it the same way one would approach a symphony, a ballroom waltz or a folk jig. But naturally, dance music is meant to be enjoyed by dancing, not by mere listening, and the dancing is not meant to look good or follow some learned structure, but to feel good and be an amateur, non-performative expression (Wiltsher, 2016b).⁷ One might as well be surprised at the blandness of the experience when trying to enjoy a formal dinner party by merely watching it, or complain that the eaters lift their forks in a haphazard, unsynchronised way.

Furthermore, dance music should be enjoyed in a state of elation and deep emotional involvement, not impassionate armchair reflection. In fact, the very point of clubbing (as with many subcultural, (neo)tribal and lifestyle movements, as well as many ‘Dionysian’ art movements), is to question the mainstream focus on rationality, being always in control and reflecting on things at a distance, and instead to promote intense, direct emotional experience often associated with intentionally ‘losing control’ (Roholt, 2014; Wiltsher, 2016a). Such a state is often achieved through the use of drugs, and the music is often specifically designed to work with drug-induced experiences:

At the physiological level, the nature of Acid House music, especially the drumming aspect, seems instrumental in providing altered states of consciousness. [...] the music contains a high number of beats per minute, with a percussion and synthesizer-based pop style meant for vigorous, nonstop dancing over many hours. [...] The use of hallucinogenic drugs and their effects modify and enhance some of these physiological responses. It has been argued that given the dissolution of ego

⁷ The ‘pulse regular enough to jerk the body into reflex motion’ is something positive to a person who knows what it is like: ‘we might evaluate dance music in functional terms: a record is good if it gets people dancing’ and ‘a DJ’s fundamental aim should be to move a crowd, both in body and in spirit’ (Wiltsher, 2016b: 426, 429). Wiltsher mentions his clubbing experience and past career as a DJ in his paper, thus it is safe to assume he has the relevant phenomenal knowledge of clubbing, even though any mention of drugs (including alcohol) is conspicuously missing in his account.

boundaries that are produced by hallucinogens, often resulting in anxiety states, music can replace these lost structures with its own implicit ones, thus aiding the drug user in negotiating a way through the experience (Lyttle & Montagne, 1992: 1172).

This passage indicates that the properties Scruton identifies as negative, such as *repetitiveness*, *tendency to 'jerk the body into motion'*, or *sustained high intensity*, are what makes such music good to a person who knows what it is like. Moreover, having no experience with drug-induced states would prevent one from appreciating the music's capacity to guide one through such states, to intensify or direct them. While it is understandable that any given critic might prefer to refrain from taking drugs even if they could improve their judgement of high artworks, it seems odd that they should nevertheless judge them professing expertise in the subject. One might as well go to a classical concert refusing to take out earplugs, and then judge the symphony as disappointing, because the way the orchestra looked was *not dynamic*, the musicians' movements were *repetitive* and the sound was *muffled and indistinct*.

Should you get high?

With all premises in hand, I can formalise the argument:

1. Knowledge of what it is like to X is either impossible (strong reading), or at least very difficult (weaker reading) to gain without experiencing X first-hand.
2. Knowledge of what it is like to experience the effects of a particular drug, is an instance of such knowledge.
3. When a work encodes knowledge of what it is like to X, then knowing what it is like to X can yield an otherwise inaccessible capacity to appreciate that work.
4. Knowledge of what it is like to experience the effects of a particular drug is either impossible or at least very difficult to gain without experiencing the effects of that drug first hand (from 1 & 2).
5. When a work encodes knowledge of what it is like to experience the effects of a particular drug, then knowing what it is like to experience a particular drug can yield an otherwise inaccessible capacity to appreciate that work (from 2 & 3).
6. Experiencing the effects of a drug encoded in a given work can yield an otherwise inaccessible (strong reading) or at least very difficult to access (weaker reading) capacity to appreciate that work (from 4 & 5).

In other words, a person who has no experience of the relevant drugs, will never fully understand nor be epistemically competent to adequately evaluate a great deal of art, starting from much of surrealism, Picasso's rose period and Witkacy's portraits, through a great deal of jazz and rock, all the

way to electronic dance music. They will understand them to some, even large extent, but not fully. On the weaker reading, a great deal of education on the topic might be enough to bridge the gap.

This conclusion relies to some extent on the assumption that aesthetic interpretation, appreciation, and evaluation have an epistemic component, and that some ways to interpret, appreciate and evaluate are objectively or at least intersubjectively more correct, accurate, or fitting. I hope that this is not hugely controversial, but still, it is worth mentioning that this reliance is not very strong. I am not claiming that one cannot interpret or appreciate high artworks at all if one had no experience of the relevant drugs. I am merely claiming that when one does, one will be likely to miss something. And perhaps this something need not even be epistemic, as one might be missing a certain way a work could make one feel, an impression it could evoke, and so on.

Those committed to formalism might resist my conclusion, claiming that contextual properties such as 'created while high' do not impact the work's artistic or aesthetic properties anyway, and thus need not be considered in its interpretation. However, extreme formalism has been successfully argued against and seems to have few modern defenders (Levinson, 1990; Walton, 2008; and others). Moderate formalism, if successful, could afford one a way to resist with respect to e.g. club music, but not when representational works such as Witkacy's paintings are considered (Fokt, 2013; Zangwill, 2001). Still, most consider inquiring into the context of a work's creation a *sine qua non* of interpretation and there seems to be no reason why such inquiries should exclude the artist's use of drugs.

Similarly, anti-intentionalists might deny that understanding an artwork requires understanding its author and their intentions, including those related to drug use (e.g. Sontag 1966). At least for works of type (6) identified above referencing such intentions certainly makes it easier to motivate my argument. However, this is not a hard bullet to bite. Firstly, it is not clear that this would be a worry for works of types (4) and (5) where it is the context of creation rather than intentions that matter. Secondly, commitment to hypothetical rather than actual intentionalism would suffice in most cases (Levinson 1996). For example, we can know that Bonnie MacLean aimed for her posters to be appreciated for their capacity to evoke psychedelic connotations without this being explicitly stated, simply given their historical context and audiences. Thirdly, references to intentions can be often entirely replaced with knowledge of a genre. Thus, it is relevant to judge how well an acid house set guides one through a drug experience irrespective of whether it was intended to do so, simply because this is the genre standard.

Lastly, one might claim that since the phenomenal knowledge of drug experiences is encoded in high artworks, it is possible to simply decode it and thus gain the relevant epistemic competence without

a need for first-hand experience. This would be parallel to the competence Mary would have gained by reading everything there is to read about the colour red without seeing it. As adjudicating such questions is far beyond the scope of this paper, I offer a strong and a weaker reading of my conclusion. However, even on the weaker reading acquiring complete phenomenal knowledge through engagement with high artworks but without direct experience, would be very difficult – perhaps as difficult as for a colour-blind person to really learn through art what it is like to see colour.

The question, of course, is whether my conclusion places any requirements on a person who wants to fully appreciate high artworks. Insofar as one's aim in appreciating and evaluating art should always be to do so as well as possible, it seems that it does. This is especially true in cases where we express our evaluations publicly aiming to influence or inform others, such as public writing, art criticism, or philosophical aesthetics. However, such epistemic requirements would have to be subject to practical, moral and other limitations. After all, it might be perfectly fine to require a critic wishing to review *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* to first go visit Savannah, but it would hardly be appropriate to require a critic wishing to review *An Unquiet Mind* to first give themselves manic depression. Moreover, some limitations are impossible to transcend – a modern white critic wishing to review James Monroe Whitfield's poetry can neither change their ethnicity nor travel in time.

But what about a critic wishing to review *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Witkacy's portraits, or Coltrane's *Om*? Requiring them to first gain experience with a drug seems less outlandish than asking them to develop bipolar disorder, even if it might be more demanding than a visit to Savannah. However, doing so naturally involves taking a risk, both in terms of own health and possible legal consequences in countries where some drugs are prohibited. It might also require some to compromise their moral or political convictions, which in some cases will be unacceptable. Thus, the stringency with which we should require people to gain relevant experiences enabling them to become epistemically competent to judge high artworks, will vary.

However, it seems appropriate that people who do not wish to or cannot, for whatever reason, acquire such epistemic competence, should acknowledge their limitations in their ability to adequately judge high artworks. Further, they should welcome receiving and following expert opinion on the subject from others who do have the relevant epistemic competence. This is no novel requirement, either – we would expect a white modern critic to preface their review of Whitfield's poetry by acknowledging the unbridgeable ethnic and temporal distance between them and the work and proceed with this limitation in mind. Meanwhile, a critic who feels no need to acknowledge such limitations would be similar to, for example, a well-off liberal city-dweller who, despite having limited knowledge of what it is like to live in the countryside and experience many negative impacts of globalisation,

authoritatively evaluates the frustrations of protesting farmers; or a cis-man who, despite having limited knowledge of what it is like to be a woman, feels entitled to criticise feminist arguments concerning issues faced by women.

Naturally, this is not to say that a person who does not have the relevant phenomenal knowledge cannot offer valuable judgements concerning high artworks (or protesting farmers, or issues faced by women). It is merely to say that that they might never understand such artworks fully and thus their judgements should come with a caveat. They might further attempt to educate themselves just as Mary educated herself on what it is like to see red, thus certainly improving their capacity to appreciate and evaluate high artworks. But whether such education can ever fully succeed is an open question, just as it was with Mary. Depending on one's views on learning from fiction, one could further hold that such education could be best done by engaging with high artworks.

Conclusion

Stephen Davies, writing about capacity for art interpretation, asks: 'how many gins is a theatre-goer allowed in the interval?' (Davies, 1991: 63). This might be a valid question to ask when approaching much 'sober' art. I argued that there exists, however, a rather rich category of artworks which I called high artworks, for which this question should be flipped: 'how many gins *should* one have before approaching them?' This category comprises artworks in which drug experiences have been in some way encoded, typically through the fact that the artist was under the influence of drugs while creating and this influence left a mark on the work, or that the artist was inspired by prior experiences of drugs, or that a work is outright intended for consumption while under the influence or in contexts where drug use is common. Far from marginal or unimportant, the category would include many works by core figures such as Breton, Picasso, or Basquiat, and entire genres of art and music, both popular and fine or classical.

Approaching such artworks without having first had a few gins, or at least knowing what it is like to have had a few gins, will result in a limited capacity to enjoy, understand, interpret, and evaluate them. This is because, amongst other things, one will likely fail to notice some relevant properties (e.g. how the rises and drops of dance music guide one's experience of dance on stimulants), misinterpret the function of some of the artist's choices (e.g. see the repetitiveness of dance music as indicative of the artist's limited capability rather than their skill in moving the crowd), or attempt to evaluate the work using criteria appropriate for a category of art it does not belong to (e.g. dance music as if it were a really bad case of classical music). In fact, if my analysis is correct, then what is commonly raised as a derogatory comment on some forms of art, i.e. 'one needs to get drunk/high to enjoy it', is merely

a correct instruction for achieving optimal epistemic conditions allowing competent appreciation, interpretation and evaluation.

More broadly, I hope that this article might break the taboo surrounding art and drugs in philosophical aesthetics. Art historians and critics seem to have little trouble in adequately recognising and discussing the impact psychoactive substances had on particular artists and their works, and the subject seems ripe for parallel philosophical discussions.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Panos Paris, Clotilde Torregrossa, and anonymous reviewers for useful comments on the drafts of this paper.

Bibliography

- Cocteau, J. (1930). *Opium: Journal d'une Déintoxication*. Libraire Stock.
- Cotton, S. (2011, May 1). Vincent van Gogh, chemistry and absinthe. *Education in Chemistry (Royal Society of Chemistry)*.
- Davies, S. (1991). *Definitions of Art*. Cornell University Press.
- Fokt, S. (2013). A critique of moderate formalism. *Estetika L/VI (1)*, 41-52.
- Grob, C. S., Danforth, A. L., Chopra, G. S., Hagerty, M., McKay, C. R., Halberstadt, A. L., & Greer, G. R. (2011). Pilot study of psilocybin treatment for anxiety in patients with advanced-stage cancer. *Archives of General Psychiatry, 68(1)*, 71–78.
- Hirschman, E. C., & McGriff, J. A. (1995). Recovering Addicts' Responses to the Cinematic Portrayal of Drug and Alcohol Addiction. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing 14(1)*, 95-107.
- Jackson, F. (1986). What Mary didn't know. *The Journal of Philosophy, 83(5)*, 291–295.
- Kahn, A. (2006). *The House That Trane Built: The Story of Impulse Records*. W. W. Norton.
- Kempley, E. (2019). Julian Trevelyan, Walter Maclay and Eric Guttmann: Drawing the boundary between psychiatry and art at the Maudsley Hospital. *British Journal for the History of Science 52(4)* 617–643.
- King, S. (2000). *On Writing: A Memoir Of The Craft*. Simon and Schuster.
- Lerner, V. (1998). The Pathography of Composers: Modest Mussorgsky. *Journal of Medical Biography, 6(3)*, 175–181.
- Levinson, J. (1990). What a Musical Work Is. In J. Levinson (Ed.), *Music, Art and Metaphysic*. Cornell University Press.
- Levinson, J. (1996). *The Pleasure of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. Cornell University Press.
- Lyttle, T., & Montagne, M. (1992). Drugs, Music, and Ideology: A Social Pharmacological Interpretation of the Acid House Movement. In *The International Journal of the Addictions (Vol. 27, Issue 10)*.

- Mazzola, G., & Cherlin, P. (2009). *Flow, Gesture, and Spaces in Free Jazz: Towards a Theory of Collaboration*. Springer.
- Mezzrow, M., & Wolfe, B. (1946). *Really the Blues*. Random House.
- Mitchell, J. M., Bogenschutz, M., Lilienstein, A., Harrison, C., Kleiman, S., Parker-Guilbert, K., Ot'alara G, M., Garas, W., Paleos, C., Gorman, I., Nicholas, C., Mithoefer, M., Carlin, S., Poulter, B., Mithoefer, A., Quevedo, S., Wells, G., Klaire, S. S., van der Kolk, B., Doblin, R. (2021). MDMA-assisted therapy for severe PTSD: a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled phase 3 study. *Nature Medicine*, 27(6), 1025–1033.
- Moezzi, M. (2009, April 13). "Unquiet Mind" Reveals Bipolar Disorder's Complexity. *National Public Radio (NPR)*. <https://www.npr.org/2009/04/13/102691854/unquiet-mind-reveals-bipolar-disorders-complexity>
- Nagel, T. (1974). What is it like to be a bat? *Philosophical Review*, 83, 435–450.
- Nussbaum, K. (2019, January 13). 25 years of Midnight. *Savannah Morning News*. <https://eu.savannahnow.com/story/news/2019/01/13/25-years-of-midnight-the-book-made-indelible-impact-on-city-of-savannah/6294085007/>
- Paul, L. A. (2014). *Transformative Experience*. Oxford University Press.
- Peschel, E. R. (1974). Arthur Rimbaud: The Aesthetics of Intoxication. *Yale French Studies*, 50(Intoxication and Literature), 64–80.
- Pollock, J. (2001). Opium and the occult : Antonin Artaud and Samuel Taylor Coleridge . *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 300, 567–577.
- Richardson, J. (1991). *A Life of Picasso*. Random House.
- Roholt, T. C. (2014). *Groove: A Phenomenology of Rhythmic Nuance*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Scruton, R. (2016, August 3). *The Lost Love of Dancing*. Sir Roger Scruton, Writer & Philosopher. <https://www.roger-scruton.com/homepage/about/music/understanding-music/173-the-lost-love-of-dancing>
- Sessa, B. (2008). Is it time to revisit the role of psychedelic drugs in enhancing human creativity? In *Journal of Psychopharmacology* (Vol. 22, Issue 8, pp. 821–827).
- Sontag, S. (1966). *Against Interpretation*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- The Bow Group. (2017). *Facts and Evidence-A Case for the Eradication of Cannabis*.
- Walton, K. L. (2008). *Marvelous Images. On values and the arts*. Oxford University Press.
- Wiltsher, N. (2016a). The Aesthetics of Electronic Dance Music, Part I: History, Genre, Scenes, Identity, Blackness. *Philosophy Compass*, 11(8), 415–425.
- Wiltsher, N. (2016b). The Aesthetics of Electronic Dance Music, Part II: Dancers, DJs, Ontology and Aesthetics. *Philosophy Compass*, 11(8), 426–436.
- Witkiewicz, S. I. (1975). *Narkotyki – Niemyte Dusze*. Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Wolf, P. L. (2010). Hector Berlioz and other famous artists with opium abuse. *Front Neurol Neurosci.*, 27, 84–91.
- Zangwill, N. (2001). *The Metaphysics of Beauty*. Cornell University Press.