

The Hope of Agreement: Against Vibling Accounts of Aesthetic Judgment

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Stanley Cavell's account of aesthetic judgment has two components. The first is a feeling: the judge has to see, hear, or 'dig' something in the object being judged; there has to be an 'emotion' that the judge feels and expresses. The second is the 'discipline of accounting for [the judgment]', a readiness to argue for one's aesthetic judgment in the face of disagreement. The discipline of accounting for one's aesthetic judgments involves what Nick Riggle has called a norm of convergence: the judge aims to get one's audience to taste, see, or hear what the judge tastes or sees or hears in the object being judged. Because of the unmistakable difficulty in reaching agreement in aesthetic judgment, Riggle has denied that aesthetic judgment requires a convergence norm and has proposed instead that it requires 'a kind of harmony of individuality' (which Riggle calls 'vibling'). We argue that Cavell offers a version of the convergence norm that is distinct from those that Riggle criticizes, namely Kant's demand for agreement and Andy Egan's presupposition of similarity in dispositions in 'non-defective' aesthetic conversations. Cavell's version of the convergence norm is 'the hope of agreement'. One can hope that one's audience will agree with one's aesthetic judgments even when one isn't in a position to demand agreement or to presuppose similarity in the dispositions that would make agreement more likely. Cavell's distinct convergence norm avoids Riggle's criticisms and contributes to a richer account of what's going on when we disagree about aesthetic matters.

1. The Ultimate Argument Settler

'Rock, Rot, and Rule' is a recording of a satirical call-in radio show that aired in 1997 on New Jersey's independent freeform radio station WFMU. The recording documents a conversation between the host, comedian Tom Scharpling, and his collaborator, Superchunk drummer Jon Wurster, who plays the character of a fatuous rock critic named Ronald Thomas Clontle. Clontle is on the show to promote his new book, *Rock, Rot, and Rule*, which he advertises as 'The Ultimate Argument Settler'. Clontle says that the idea for the book came to him

while watching MTV with his roommates and he was ‘perplexed and intrigued by the difference of opinions’ they had in response to Nirvana’s ‘It [sic] Smells Like Teen Spirit’. Clontle reports that ‘some said it rules, some said it rocks, some said...um, I don’t know if I can say this word on the air...can I say “sucks”?’ The book is supposed to put an end to this kind of disagreement by giving a definitive, putatively ‘scientific’ ranking of rock bands, based on conversations with music aficionados in Lawrence, Kansas and Gainesville, Florida (two mid-sized college towns). The book places bands into three categories: ‘rock’ (positive), ‘rule’ (‘rock’ plus ‘extra oomph’), and ‘rot’ (which Clontle says replaced ‘suck’ ‘in order to avoid controversy’). Scharpling spends much of the interview asking Clontle for his rankings of bands, which provokes increasingly heated calls from listeners, who appear not to realize that Clontle and his book are fictions.

Part of what rankles the callers is the definitiveness with which Clontle categorizes bands: Ratt, AC/DC, the Beatles, and Nirvana *rock*; Queen, Madonna, Madness, and Puff Daddy *rule*; and, most controversially, Frank Zappa, David Bowie, Neil Young, and Kraftwerk *rot*. These categorizations turn out not to be an argument settler at all—instead, as one caller puts it, they ‘cause arguments’. Clontle is unmoved by this criticism.

The callers raise several further problems for the Ultimate Argument Settler (UAS). They complain that the book is not well-researched enough to claim the kind of authority it is supposed to have, either because Clontle has not actually listened to many of the albums discussed or because he makes demonstrably false claims about the bands in question: that Kraftwerk has disbanded, that Stereolab doesn’t use guitars, or that Madness invented ska. But the problems don’t end there.

The deepest problem is that the very idea of the UAS is absurd, so absurd that it couldn’t exist, at least in the sense of being able to do what Clontle wants it to do. The absurdity of the UAS is philosophically useful, however, because it raises the question of why debate and disagreement are such an important part of conversations about art. To answer that question, we begin with a description of a family of theories of aesthetic judgment that reject the UAS as absurd because it leaves no room for debate and disagreement. We call this family of views *process-oriented* because they hold that aesthetic judgments are what they are in virtue of occupying a place in a conversational process. Members of this family include Ngai (2012), Nguyen (2020), Riggles (2021), and Cavell (1976a, 2005a, 2005b). The UAS, by contrast, is *state-oriented*: it

is designed to eliminate aesthetic disagreement by offering a putatively definitive list of aesthetic judgments.

We think process-oriented views make an important contribution to our understanding of aesthetic judgment, but also think that there is a dispute worth having about whether such views should hold that aesthetic judgments aim at some form of *convergence* or *agreement*. [Nguyen \(2020\)](#) suggests that aesthetic conversation doesn't need a convergence norm, and [Riggle \(2021\)](#) explicitly argues that we should reject a convergence norm for aesthetic conversations, on the grounds that it entails that many examples of aesthetic conversations that seem felicitous are in fact defective. [Cavell \(1976a\)](#), by contrast, holds that when we make aesthetic judgments, our conversations are governed by a convergence norm, which he calls 'the hope of agreement'. Our aim in this paper is to defend a Cavell-inspired process-oriented view of aesthetic judgment against Riggle's arguments for giving up on thinking that aesthetic conversations are governed by a convergence norm.

2. Cavell on aesthetic judgment

Cavell's three most sustained discussions of aesthetic judgment are 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy' (1976a), 'Something Out of the Ordinary' (2005a), and 'Performative and Passionate Utterance' (2005b). In these texts, Cavell argues against the view that aesthetic judgments are simply *generic cognitive judgments*, which have a standard of correctness that is independent of our judging activity and our own experience of the objects being judged. The most straightforward mistake the UAS makes is assume that aesthetic judgments are generic cognitive judgments and that debates about art can be settled by an impersonal appeal to the facts, in the way in which debates about the height of the world's tallest man (for instance) are settled (for example, by reference to a text like the *Guinness Book of World Records*). Cavell's account of aesthetic judgment, by contrast, begins by emphasizing the significance of participating in on-going conversations with others about what one takes to be of interest in artworks. Cavell's approach is, as we put it, process-oriented.

Perhaps the clearest way that Cavell makes this point about the process-oriented nature of aesthetic judgment is through his novel reinterpretation of a story about Sancho Panza's relatives that Hume discusses in 'Of the Standard of Taste'. In the story, Sancho Panza's relatives are ridiculed for offering conflicting evaluations of a supposedly excellent hogshead of wine: one complains it tastes of iron but the other claims it tastes of leather.

When the barrel is emptied, a rusty iron key on a leather thong is found at the bottom, revealing that the conflict between their judgments was merely apparent. For Hume, who first invoked this story in the context of offering an account of the nature and basis of aesthetic judgment, this illustrates how aesthetic judgments are vindicated: although Sancho's relatives were initially ridiculed for their different judgments, the discovery of the key and thong shows how both judgments were tracking something in the wine (Cohen 1994). For Cavell, by contrast, this story is *not* a good model for understanding the form of aesthetic judgments, because

[i]t dissociates the exercise of taste from the discipline of accounting for it: but *all* that makes the critic's expression of taste worth more than another man's is his ability to produce for himself the thong and key of his response; and his vindication comes not from his pointing out that it is, or was, in the barrel, but in getting us to taste it there. (Cavell 1976a, p. 87, emphasis in original)

We think that Cavell would hold that the same problem is true of the UAS: it is a mistaken model of aesthetic judgment because it severs our judgments about art from the activity of discussing and arguing about them.

The true absurdity of the UAS is clearest when we ask how, exactly, it is supposed to settle aesthetic disagreements. When Scharpling objects to the verdict of the UAS that Neil Young *rots* on the grounds that Clontle hasn't listened to any of Neil Young's pre-1989 albums, Clontle dismisses the worry and simply repeats the status of the book as the ultimate argument settler, as if it possesses a kind of divine authority: 'For people of our age... it's for them to use as the ultimate argument settler...It's like a bible of pop culture...it should be thought of as something coming from on high.'

Just as it is a mistake for the UAS to present its aesthetic judgments as being independent of our ability to argue for them, Cavell also thinks it is a mistake to treat them as mere expressions of subjective preference. In 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', he illustrates this mistake by presenting a pair of conversations that show how treating aesthetic judgments as mere expressions of subjective preference would eliminate the point of aesthetic disagreement altogether:

Disagreement #1 (disagreement over subjective preferences, 'personal taste'):

A: Canary wine is pleasant.

B: How can you say that? It tastes like canary droppings.

A: Well, I like it.

Disagreement #2 (feeble aesthetic disagreement):

A: He plays beautifully doesn't he?

B: How can you say that? There was no line, no structure, no idea what the music was supposed to be about. He's simply an impressive colourist.

A: Well, I liked it.

Cavell asks, of disagreement #2 (but not disagreement #1), '[D]on't we feel that here that would be a feeble rejoinder, a *retreat* to personal taste?' He says that if A doesn't pursue the argument with B, 'there is a price he will have to pay in our estimate of him' (Cavell 1976a, pp. 91–2, emphasis in original). That A's judgments figure in different patterns of disagreement and reactions in the two conversations indicates that they are different kinds of judgments (or in a different idiom, that they perform different speech acts).

In summary, there are two components of Cavell's account of aesthetic judgment. The first component is a feeling: the judge has to see, hear, or 'dig' *something* (Cavell 1976a, p. 93)—there has to be an 'emotion' (Cavell 2005a, p. 26) that the judge feels and expresses. Accepting the assessments in the UAS does not require feeling anything about the work of a particular band. The second component is the 'discipline of accounting for [aesthetic judgments]' (Cavell 1976a, p. 87), a readiness to argue for the correctness of one's aesthetic judgments in the face of disagreement, with the aim of bringing about a shared feeling or emotion in one's interlocutor. The vindication of the critic's judgment comes from 'getting us to taste' what he tastes in the object being judged (Cavell 1976a, p. 87).

In 'Something out of the Ordinary', Cavell introduces the idea of a 'passionate utterance' as a way of further articulating the form of aesthetic judgments. His central idea is that something is a passionate utterance if

[o]ne person, risking exposure to rebuffs, singles out another, through the expression of an emotion, to respond in kind, that is, with emotion and action (if mainly of speech), here and now. (Cavell 2005a, p. 26)

Cavell's second component of aesthetic claims is *agreement* or *convergence* in aesthetic judgment, a response 'in kind', even if achieving that agreement or convergence is rarely achieved. Cavell puts this most clearly when he says that 'the *hope* of agreement motivates our engaging in these various patterns of support [of aesthetic claims and other claims

that don't compel agreement in the way formal logic does]' (Cavell 1976a, p. 94, emphasis in original). In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell clearly articulates the force of the hope of agreement: 'Without the hope of agreement, argument would be pointless; but it doesn't follow that without agreement...the argument was pointless' (Cavell 1979, pp. 254–5). The flip side of the hope of agreement is anxiety that one won't be able to get one's audience to share one's response to an object of aesthetic judgment:

This seems to me to suggest why one is anxious to communicate the experience of such objects.... It matters that others know what I see, in a way it does not matter whether they know my tastes. It matters, there is a burden, because unless I can tell what I know, there is a suggestion (and to myself as well) that I do *not* know. But I *do*—what I see is *that* (pointing to the object). But for that to communicate, you have to see it too. (Cavell 1976b, p. 193, emphases in original)

If one can't communicate what one sees in an object in a way that enables the audience to see it too, that threatens one's conviction that what one is responding to in the object is really there.

3. Other process-oriented accounts of aesthetic judgment: 'striving' and 'vibing'

Two recent accounts of aesthetic judgment are also process-oriented in the sense just described: they focus less on identifying the conditions under which an aesthetic judgment is true or false and more on the activity of discussing and debating the merits and demerits of artworks. C. Thi Nguyen claims that 'in aesthetic appreciation...we value the *activity* of forming judgments more than we do getting our judgments right' (2020, p. 1129, emphasis in original). For Nguyen, the activity of making aesthetic judgments is analogous to certain types of game play, where we adopt some game-internal aim (scoring goals, checkmating your opponent, knocking them out, accumulating the most Monopoly money) as a way of promoting some other purpose (either intrinsic or extrinsic) like the value of playing itself, or the value of improving one's health or passing the time. Nguyen calls game play that involves adopting temporary, game-intrinsic aims for some other purposes *striving play* (in contrast with *achievement play*, which involves a motivational state that primarily values winning or what follows from winning). He argues that when we make aesthetic judgments, we adopt the practice-local aim of

getting things right but our purpose in adopting that aim lies elsewhere, namely in the activity of having enjoyable conversations about art:

[W]e might have thought that we had long conversations about art in order to get the right judgments. [This] account suggests, instead, that we might be pursuing correct judgments so that we can have all these lovely, careful conversations. (Nguyen 2020, p. 1141)

Nguyen doesn't say what makes for 'lovely, careful conversations' about art. This is where Nick Riggle fills a lacuna in Nguyen's account, by giving a positive proposal for what makes for excellent conversations about art. Riggle proposes that 'the end of aesthetic discourse is not convergence but a distinctive form of community, a kind of harmony of individuality' (2022, p. 615). Riggle calls this harmony of individuality 'viping'.

Riggle in his account of aesthetic judgment shares with Cavell a focus on the activity of conversing with others about art. But, unlike Cavell, Riggle holds that aesthetic theorists (from Kant, 1790/1987 to Andy Egan 2010) are wrong to assume that 'aesthetic discourse aims at convergence'. According to Riggle, convergence is the following idea:

Convergence: When we speak with each other about aesthetic value we presuppose that there is a unique normative standard on which our attitudes ought to converge. (p. 618)

We think Riggle's construal of *convergence* doesn't capture Cavell's conception of aesthetic claims: Cavell doesn't hold that we 'presuppose that there is a unique normative standard on which our attitudes ought to converge'. Cavell's view is that we *hope* for agreement in our attitudes about the object being judged. It is possible to hope that something will happen even when it isn't presupposed that it will. This reveals a neglected way that conversation can be structured by a norm of convergence that Riggle doesn't consider in detail.

Riggle isn't alone in neglecting this type of convergence. In his book *Why It's OK to Love Bad Movies*, Matt Strohl (2022) rejects a strong version of the convergence norm ('demanding that everyone conform to our own [aesthetic sensibility]') and promotes a Riggle-like celebration of 'the diversity of aesthetic sensibilities' (p. 184). But this is a false dichotomy. There is another option besides demanding conformity or celebrating diversity.

Riggle's *convergence* norm is exemplified by Andy Egan (2010), who holds that aesthetic disputes are only 'sensible' if the parties 'are, and reasonably take themselves to be, alike' with respect to their valuing practices (Egan 2010, p. 261). Even though Egan allows for agreement

to emerge through the dynamics of conversation, like the process of accommodation, by which an assertion can be made which brings about a shared presupposition in order to make it felicitous, his view of what makes an aesthetic conversation ‘non-defective’ is still stronger than Cavell’s conception of convergence, which only requires the hope of agreement, and does not require a presupposition of similarity in ‘valuing practices’.

Though Riggle doesn’t seriously consider a Cavell-style hope of agreement as a type of convergence, he does note in passing that Nguyen briefly considers the idea that ‘a hope for convergence is what keeps good aesthetic conversations going’ (Riggle 2021, p. 617):

[Nguyen 2020] opens the door to a rejection of convergence, but it could just as well leave that door shut, if a hope for convergence is what keeps good aesthetic conversations going. In other work, Nguyen [2021] seems to express that hope. (Riggle 2021, p. 617)

In the passage that Riggle is citing as an example of the hope of convergence, Nguyen writes, ‘In aesthetic life, we often hope for the lovely discovery that our sensibilities were similar all along’ (Nguyen 2021, p. 21). But this is not how Cavell understands the hope of agreement. For Cavell, the hope of agreement is not a hope that we will discover an antecedent similarity in our sensibilities. Instead, Cavell holds that when we make aesthetic judgments we are making a ‘claim to community [which] is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established’ (Cavell 1979, p. 20). Coming to share a sensibility can be the outcome of a process of articulating reasons for one’s response to an artwork, without both speaker and audience starting out with the same sensibilities and only later ‘discovering’ that they are shared.

Because Riggle’s *convergence* doesn’t capture Cavell’s view of aesthetic judgment, we propose the following refinement of Riggle’s *convergence* into two distinct norms: we will call Riggle’s notion, which involves presupposing that there is a unique standard on which our attitudes ought to converge, *strong convergence*, which should be distinguished from the *hope of convergence*:

Hope of convergence: When we speak with each other about the aesthetic value of an object we hope that our attitudes about the object will converge.

Riggle criticizes *strong convergence* and wants to replace it with a different organizing norm of aesthetic discourse, namely *community*:

Community: When we speak with each other about aesthetic value we presuppose that we ought to achieve a state of mutual valuing of individuality. (p. 618)

Individuals, according to Riggle, reach the state of ‘mutual valuing of individuality’ when they harmonize, or in his preferred terminology, when they *vibe*.

4. Riggle’s argument against convergence

Riggle argues that *community* does a better job than *convergence* at explaining why different types of aesthetic conversations are worthwhile. He considers five different ‘common’ types of aesthetic conversation:

1. *Full agreement*: We agree on [an object’s] aesthetic character, and we agree on the reasons why [it] has that character.
2. *Verdict agreement*: We agree that [an object] is beautiful, but not on the reasons why, even though we find each other’s reasons intelligible. We see that we will not fully converge.
3. *Verdict disagreement*: We disagree on [an object’s] aesthetic character. You see it as being A...and I see it as being not A. We discuss, see that we will not converge, and come to value each other’s aesthetic perspective. Both of us suspend belief about, or don’t care, whether the other is mistaken.
4. *Strong disagreement*: We disagree on [an object’s] aesthetic character. I think it is worth valuing and you think it is not worth valuing at all. Our reasons are intelligible to each other, but at least one of us is confident that the other is making a mistake.
5. *Estrangement*: We disagree on [an object’s] aesthetic character. I think it is worth valuing and you think it is not worth valuing at all. Our reasons are mutually unintelligible—neither of us can understand how the other could find [the object] to be worth valuing/disvaluing. (Riggle 2021, p. 643).

According to Riggle, ‘Convergence construes *Verdict Agreement*, *Verdict Disagreement*, and *Strong Disagreement* as defective conversations or ones where the interlocutors should prioritize changing each other’s view’ (pp. 644–5). This is a fair criticism of Egan’s strong conception of what convergence involves, namely reasonably presupposing there to be agreement (or bringing about such a presupposition through the process of accommodation). As Egan puts it, ‘The defective disputes are the ones where the parties either aren’t, or don’t reasonably take themselves to be, alike with respect to the dispositional properties that are at stake’

(Egan 2010, p. 261). And by that standard, only *Full Agreement* is an example of a non-defective aesthetic conversation. We agree with Riggle that Egan's standard is too restrictive and that there is reason to reject *strong convergence* as a norm governing aesthetic claims. But if *hope of convergence* instead of *strong convergence* is a norm governing aesthetic claims, then none of the five types of aesthetic conversation that Riggle considers are ruled out as 'defective'—as long as we are permitted to make one change to *Verdict Agreement* and *Verdict Disagreement*. If the phrase 'we see we will not converge' is understood as entailing that we know we will not converge, then that is indeed incompatible with *hope of convergence*, since knowing that not-p excludes hoping that p. But if 'we see we will not converge' only requires expecting that we will not converge or some other belief-like mental state short of knowledge, then it will still be compatible with *hope of convergence*.

Even in *Estrangement*, there could still be hope on both sides of the conversation that the mutual unintelligibility of our judgments could be overcome through some unexpected critical insight or exercise of aesthetic empathy. One example to encourage such hope even in the face of radically disjoint aesthetic judgments is the case made for Céline Dion's music from a professed hater in Carl Wilson's *Let's Talk about Love*, who begins his 'journey to the end of taste' with the following hopeful thought: 'Just think, if we lingered longer, maybe we'd find something "too human to be dismissed" even in her music' (Wilson 2007, p. 22). Riggle assumes that advocates of a convergence norm are committed to the idea that interlocutors' sensibilities are fixed in advance of the developing conversation—whereas we think that one of the things a rewarding conversation about art can do is reveal that your ability to appreciate the artwork isn't immutable, and the conversation itself can be a means by which one comes to be able to acquire that ability. Aesthetic conversations can, in this sense, be transformative.

The fact that even aesthetic conversations that are initially characterized by *Estrangement* could be turned around shows how Riggle is discounting the ways that aesthetic conversations can transform how one responds to an artwork, or even transform what one finds valuable more generally. Even though Riggle has a process-oriented view of aesthetic judgment, he doesn't leave room for the participants in aesthetic conversations to be changed as a result of engaging in the process. Sometimes conversations about art begin with neither party knowing whether they think the work is valuable—the point of the conversation is to figure out whether talking about it yields any insights, whether about the artwork or about one's own commitments. That type of conversation doesn't fit

easily in Riggle's taxonomy of types of agreement and disagreement; it involves figuring out what one's own views are. As Cavell puts this point in his discussion of aesthetic judgments as 'passionate utterances', the felicity conditions for passionate utterances 'are not given a priori but are to be discovered or refined, or else the effort to articulate it is to be denied' (Cavell 2005a, p. 18). Cavell also emphasizes a dark side to the possibility of persistent disagreement. If we discover, after talking to each other, that we still deeply disagree about whether some artwork is worth valuing or not, and despair of ever understanding the reasons for our divergent attitudes, we may come to worry that our own reactions to the work have no basis. Aesthetic claims are 'tinged with an anxiety that the claim stands to be rebuked. It is a condition of, or threat to, that relation to things called aesthetic, that something I know and cannot make intelligible stands to be lost to me' (Cavell 2005a, p. 9). But even a conversation in which we discover that we don't understand our own reactions to a work, in which we discover the limits of our own self-knowledge, is hardly a defective aesthetic conversation.

5. *Anti-community*

Distinguishing *hope of convergence* from *strong convergence* shows how Riggle's arguments only succeed in undermining the strong view. But there are additional reasons to think that *hope of convergence* does a better job of capturing the larger significance of aesthetic conversation than Riggle's replacement norm of *community*. To see this, it will help to spell out what, exactly, Riggle takes the norm of community to consist in, as well as how he thinks it relates to our individual identities and interests.

The central component of Riggle's account of the norm of *community* is that 'we presuppose that we ought to achieve a state of mutual valuing of individuality'. He goes on to say that our individuality is 'largely constituted' by our expressions of aesthetic value: 'our sense of humour, our love of art and food, our interest in clothes, décor, music, literature, landscapes, and so on.' And for Riggle, 'the practice of aesthetic valuing is *discretionary*, in the sense that our aesthetic valuing practices are the product of discretionary choice' (p. 629, emphasis in original). Riggle thinks that the fact that different individuals aesthetically value different objects reflects the discretionary nature of aesthetic valuing:

Some go in for K-Pop, minimalist sculpture, and fine prints; others go in for Norwegian Black Metal, cityscapes, and gothic design; for others still it is rap, art deco, and sleek motorcycles. If someone who

loves minimalist sculpture does not include Norwegian Black Metal in their aesthetic valuing practices, that is ok. (Riggle 2021, p. 629)

In sum, Riggle's norm of *community* has three components: it involves valuing individuality, which is itself constituted by expressions of interest in things like art, humour, food, clothes, and architecture, interests which are themselves discretionary. Crucially, this means that conversations governed by this norm are *not* primarily about learning or contesting anything about the objects of value themselves. The primary focus is on speakers' interest in these objects, as expressions of their own individual identities. This reorientation of focus comes across clearly when Riggle imagines what he considers to be 'an excellent aesthetic conversation' (p. 619), which goes as follows:

S: That bridge is beautiful.

A: Hmm, I think it's clunky.

S: The pillars are robust and stately. Exactly right for a bridge, especially that one.

A: Perhaps for some, but that bridge is squat and inelegant.

S: You do tend to hate any hint of Art Deco.

A: And you can't get enough of it.

S: I love the fanning shapes, the geometric layering. Just beautiful.

A: Have you seen the new building on 54th St.? Lots of fanning shapes.

S: I have! I stared at it for twenty minutes the other day. It's fantastic.

A: Not nearly as stunning as the sleek new library down the block.

S: That thing? It's so boring. (pp. 618–9)

In this conversation, we primarily learn about the preferences of the interlocutors: A hates Art Deco; S can't get enough of it. S likes fanning shapes. A likes sleek architecture. Importantly, we don't get much insight into the objects that they're talking about or why their features are or are not aesthetically significant.

Contrary to Riggle, we submit that this is not an example of an excellent aesthetic conversation, but rather much closer to an exchange of preferences. It illustrates what is so limited about *community* as a norm governing aesthetic conversation: if we give up the hope of agreement, then we're left with nothing more than the activity of expressing and appreciating each other's likes and dislikes. We might call the kind of sensitive appreciation of each other's preferences guided by the norm of *community* (and not convergence) *the concierge view* of aesthetic conversation: the main point of listening attentively to your interlocutor is

to figure out what they value and keep the vibing going by making recommendations or discussing topics that they will enjoy (and have them do the same in return).

Cavell recognizes that aiming at agreement in judgment, even when that takes the form of the mere hope of agreement, can seem dogmatic in a world where it is undeniable that there are widespread differences in what people value. But he thinks the appearance of dogmatism is an acceptable cost, because the alternative is a lack of seriousness:

I think that air of dogmatism is indeed present in such claims; but if that is intolerant, that is because tolerance could only mean, as in liberals it often does, that the kind of claim in question is not taken seriously. (Cavell 1976a, p. 96)

One way to appreciate what Cavell means by a claim not being taken seriously is to note that the interlocutors in Riggles's imagined conversation never make a sustained attempt to spell out their criticisms of each other's views in detail and defend their own views in the face of disagreement. They are both quick to explain their unbridgeable opinions about art deco in terms of pre-existing, static sensibilities, what they hate or can't get enough of. But if vibing only requires recognizing and mutually valuing these sorts of differences, without the hope of agreement it's hard to see how it involves more than the expression and appreciation of personal preferences.

Perhaps the most important question to ask about Riggles's account is what sort of community he thinks emerges from conversations about art that lack a norm of convergence. Riggles himself begins to sketch the contours of this sort of community in his discussion of Alexander Nehamas's rejection of the Kantian demand for universal agreement in aesthetic judgment. Nehamas writes: 'Aesthetic judgment never commands universal agreement, and neither a beautiful object nor a work of art ever engages a catholic community'; '[N]o community I hope to create around something I find beautiful is ever a universal community' (2007, p. 81). In place of a universal, catholic, community, Nehamas's preferred sense of community is 'the pagan cults of Ancient Greece' (p. 82). Another way to describe this sort of imagined aesthetic community that gives up on a norm of convergence is that it is a community in *despair* over agreement. Cavell says, in relation to Thoreau's observation about the 'mass of men "leading lives of quiet desperation"', that it reveals 'despair to be, in a democracy, a political emotion. ... As if we see no hope of making our lives intelligible. Then there is no hope of achieving a moral, an examined, existence together' (Cavell 2004, p. 98).

This difference between Riggle's and Cavell's conception of aesthetic communities has a political dimension. To appreciate it, consider an analogous social arrangement that is built around despair over the possibility of agreement in judgment: the food court. Food courts (or their contemporary incarnations, food halls) are structured around the idea that every individual is free to choose what they will consume in a way that is completely independent of everyone else's choices. If you and I go to the DeKalb Market Hall, for instance, you are free to get a Hawaiian poke bowl at Wiki Wiki while I get a Pakistani burger at BK Jani, and we can each appreciate each other's choices as expressions of our individual identities. Crucially, the inherently discretionary nature of our choices implies that no one could ever seriously contest someone else's preferences. By contrast, aesthetic conversations structured around Cavell's hope of agreement have the structure of attempting to arrive at a judgment of not just which restaurant we should all go to together, but which dishes at that restaurant would be best to share (for an expression of despair over this shared project, see [Bornes 2021](#)). Cavell's ideal is illustrated by our going together to Jiang Nan Flushing and agreeing to share their Peking duck and steamed barramundi. Importantly, for Cavell, this shared project can involve the hope that one's own and other's tastes will be shaped by the offerings on hand (if they are well selected), rather than result simply from a coordination of each individual's prior preferences. In other words, there is room in Cavell's account for the experience of appreciating a shared meal to bring about convergence, rather than just having something for everyone (in the manner of the endless menu at The Cheesecake Factory). In the context of this sort of community-building activity, contesting each other's judgments is built into the structure of seeking out shared objects of appreciation.

Once we recognize the important role that contesting expressions of value can play in aesthetic communities, we can see that conversations in which interlocutors fail to vibe are not automatically defective. There are lots of examples of non-defective aesthetic claims that don't involve vibing (that is: presupposing that we mutually appreciate our discretionary aesthetic valuing). Consider the following non-vibing exchange between Michael Fried and Donald Judd. Their conversation might even be characterized as manifesting *bad vibes*: instead of presupposing a mutual valuing of each other's individuality, they seem to presuppose a mutual devaluing of the other's individuality (at least in terms of their aesthetic preferences). Here is Fried, in 'Art and Objecthood', criticizing Judd's 'literalist' (minimalist) work for not standing up to comparison with past work 'whose quality is not in doubt':

Judd himself has acknowledged the problematic character of the literalist enterprise by his claim, 'A work needs only to be interesting'. For Judd, as for literalist sensibility generally, all that matters is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain (his) *interest*. Whereas within the modernist arts nothing short of *conviction*—specifically, the conviction that a particular painting or sculpture or poem or piece of music can or cannot support comparison with past work within that art whose quality is not in doubt—matters at all. (Literalist art is often condemned—when it is condemned—for being boring. A tougher charge would be that it is merely interesting.) (Fried, 1998, pp. 164–5, emphases in original)

Judd has a blunt assessment of Fried's sensibilities and his criticism:

Fried's article 'Art and Objecthood' in the 1967 summer issue of *Artforum* was stupid.... I was especially irked by Fried's ignorant misrepresentation of my use of the word 'interesting'. I obviously use it in a particular way but Fried reduces it to the cliché 'merely interesting'....

Fried is not careful and informed. His pedantic pseudo-philosophical analysis is equivalent of *ARTNews's* purple poetic prose of the 1950s.

That prose was only emotional recreation and Fried's thinking is just formal analysis and both methods used exclusively are shit. (Judd 2016, pp. 205–6)

Fried and Judd are not vibing. And yet, their conversation is a worthwhile aesthetic exchange, even if they aren't valuing each other's individuality—or even valuing friendly, cooperative inquiry. One attempt to redeem the aesthetic value of Fried's invocation of the 'merely interesting'—meant by Fried (and taken by Judd) as a criticism—is Sianne Ngai's account of the aesthetic category of the 'interesting'. She describes judgments that art is 'interesting' as expression of an indeterminate affective response to a work that awaits some conceptual determinacy. Ngai quotes Cavell's explanation of the role of criticism as providing an explication or elaboration of a text, that 'accounts for, at its best increases, which is to say, appreciates, my interest in it' (Ngai 2012, p. 118, quoting Cavell 2005c, p. 6). A judgment that a work is interesting is a call for further discussion, through which the feeling of interestingness can be made more determinate. And the category of the 'merely interesting', which Ngai says is most fully expressed by the conceptual art of the 1960s, thematizes the way art is part of a 'discursive apparatus', in which

‘the value of any artwork becomes “defined above all by its power to generate discourse about [itself]”’ (Ngai 2012, p. 37). Judgments that an artwork is merely interesting express a minimal, indeterminate emotional response (‘this is interesting’) but call for a maximal effort in accounting for that response.

Riggle’s commitment to vibing being a feature of non-defective aesthetic conversations leads him to claim that ‘contempt rarely if ever feature[s] in aesthetic utterances’ (p. 625). We think this is more than an overly sunny assessment—it strikes us as simply false. Contempt is explicit in Judd’s response to Fried (and implicit in Fried’s criticism of Judd) and is a frequent occurrence in aesthetic conversation. Searching the Corpus of Contemporary American English for examples of ‘your * sucks’ (where the asterisk is a variable allowing for the substitution of any word), turns up many examples of contempt in aesthetic claims, of which the following are a sample:

- (1) The reason the club doesn’t want you back is cuz your band sucks, Sam.
- (2) Cause your music sucks. It’s corny. There ain’t no feeling in it.
- (3) I’m just saying your coffee sucks.
- (4) Your food sucks!
- (5) The reality is your writing sucks.
- (6) Yo, be original, your rap sucks!
- (7) Your script sucks.
- (8) Thanks for checking in on me Dude, your drawing sucks. (Davies 2008)

This particular search is just one way out of many for finding examples of expressions of contempt in aesthetic claims (searching COCA for the strings ‘is shit’ and ‘is garbage’ turns up plenty of examples, and there is even one occurrence of ‘* rots’, used in Clontle’s sense). Contempt plays a larger role in aesthetic judgments than Riggle’s notion of vibing allows. As a quotation attributed to Paul Valéry by Carl Wilson (but whose original source we haven’t been able to find) puts a version of the idea: ‘Tastes are composed of a thousand distastes’ (Wilson 2007, p. 9). Bourdieu puts the point even more forcefully: ‘Tastes are perhaps first and foremost distaste, disgusts provoked by horror and visceral intolerance of the tastes of others’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 56). Expressions of contempt are incompatible with vibing and although they are an unlikely route towards bringing about agreement, they are compatible with the *hope* of agreement.

6. Conclusion

Cavell and Riggles are in agreement about one aspect of aesthetic judgment: they both think, *contra* Clontle and the UAS, that disagreement is a valuable part of our life with art. Moreover, they both think that the activity of arguing about art is more important than simply being presented with a list of true judgments. One of our goals in this paper has been to highlight these similarities between Cavell and Riggles: they both offer *process-oriented* views of aesthetic judgment, as opposed to *state-oriented* views.

That said, there is an important disagreement between Cavell and Riggles. Riggles thinks that we should abandon the idea that conversations about art are governed by a norm of convergence. Furthermore, he thinks we should replace this norm with the alternative norm of mutually valuing each other's individuality ('viping'). We have argued that both of these ideas are mistaken. Distinguishing the *hope of agreement* from *strong convergence* shows how a version of the convergence norm survives Riggles's challenge. And the mutual appreciation of each other's individuality does not capture some of the distinctive characteristics of aesthetic conversations: there are viping conversations that don't go beyond expressions of personal preference and there are acrimonious aesthetic arguments that are still worth having. Accepting a process-oriented account of aesthetic judgment is compatible with retaining the hope of agreement as a governing norm in conversations about aesthetic matters.¹

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