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EXCLUSIVELY FOR EVERYONE
ON THE VALUE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

JULIE KUHLKEN

MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY

For most people using an advertising slogan as the title for a philosophical paper is going to seem, at best, provocative, and at worst, simply cynical. However, this kind of cynical provocation is precisely what I want to address. That is, Marks and Spencer's tagline 'exclusively for everyone' is an affront to rational thought, but this is also the motive for its effectiveness. Rather than simply stating what's on offer, it plays to our dreams; rather than simply offering to match our expectations, it promises to exceed them. Moreover, it does so by bringing together two qualities we desire as customers—open, friendly service and elite luxury—that are, nevertheless, contradictory in practice. For M&S's products to appeal to 'everyone', they must reject the kind of exacting discernment that would make them 'exclusive'—as the word itself suggests, for these products to be 'exclusive', they must exclude certain preferences and tastes. As such, what the slogan implausibly suggests is that the retailer is able to satisfy both the taste of the most philistine and the snobbery of the most disdainful.

Moreover—and this is part of the cynical provocation—this is precisely what art expects to achieve by means of aesthetic experience. Like massmarket retailers such as M&S, aesthetic objects claim to square the circle of universal appeal and distinctive quality. As productive of aesthetic experience, they also undertake to exclude the mediocre from their ranks without becoming simply the preserve of an elite few. As a consequence, any theory that draws upon aesthetic experience is confronted by the dilemma of these contradictory demands.[1]

[1] Ted Cohen (1993) has taken some interesting steps in this direction with his notions of the high and low

I

Therefore, the dilemma of aesthetic experience is, as the notion suggests, a double bind. On the one hand, aesthetic experience is universal; it is 'for everyone'. It is, to use the language of Kant, the product of an aesthetic judgement of taste, 'which can make a rightful claim upon everyone's assent'.[2] If it does not possess this universality, then it loses its unique character and significance. For what makes aesthetic experience so significant—so revolutionary even—is that all of us have the capacity for it simply by being human. Because based in the most fundamental aspect of our existence—our sensorial being-in-the-world—aesthetic experience offers the hope of a common bond, where otherwise there might be nothing but misunderstanding. It is in order to conceptualise this bond that Kant proposes that aesthetic satisfaction must 'be regarded as grounded on what [one] can presuppose in every other person'.[3] It is what explains John Dewey's attempt to understand aesthetic experience on the basis of *an* experience. That is, rather than start by assuming the distinctiveness of aesthetic experience, Dewey does the exact opposite and emphasizes its commonality with experiences as mundane as '*that* meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship'.[4] However, as we recognize in Dewey's subsequent embarrassment to distinguish aesthetic experience from experience more generally, the claim to commonality and universality has its pitfalls. Complete openness risks inaugurating a 'come as you are' affair, where aesthetic experience is no more than the taste of the lowest common denominator, the taste of the massmarket. If aesthetic experience is indeed 'for everyone', it exposes us to everyone's taste.

Thus and on the other hand, the universality of aesthetic experience must be qualified. It

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in art and its audiences. Basing himself on his 'conception of art as the focus of a *community*', he posits a duality in our appreciation of art that reflects a duality in our trans-personal relations.

[2] Kant (1790), §7, 47. Someone might protest that Kant does not propose a notion of aesthetic experience, which is true. Nevertheless, it is important to trace the latter notion back to its roots in Kantian aesthetics, because only in this fashion can we grasp the fullness of its dilemma. Shortly we will address differences between notions of aesthetic *experience* as they develop in the twentieth century.

[3] *Ibid.,* §6, 46. This is not to obscure the fact that Kant does indeed engage the other half of the dilemma, namely that aesthetic experience must also be exclusive. The very fact that Kant develops his aesthetics upon the notion of the judgement of *taste* evokes this exclusivity. As he says, the 'highest model' is an 'archetype of taste…which everyone must produce in himself and according to which he must judge every object of taste, every example of judgement by taste, and even the taste of everyone' (§17, 68-9).

[4] Dewey (1934), 37.

must acknowledge some notion of discernment. In Kant, this appears in the notion of taste itself, whose 'highest model' is an 'archetype of taste…which everyone must produce in himself and according to which he must judge every object of taste, every example of judgement by taste, and even the taste of everyone.'[5] Just the same, emphasizing discernment has its costs, as well. When Monroe Beardsley argues that it 'takes a greater capacity [for aesthetic experience] to respond to Shakespeare than to Graham Greene,' that '[p]eople sometimes give up Tchaikovsky's symphonies for Haydn's but they do not…give up Haydn for Tchaikovsky', we are as much in our rights to question his judgements as we are to wonder at the limited scope of his examples. That is, without exception—and with almost depressing predictability—everyone he acclaims are European males. Now I admit, multicultural criticism can be tedious, and yet if we get beyond the accusations of discrimination—for discrimination, at least, can be addressed by inclusion—what we perceive is how much it reveals about our ignorance. In a context where Beardsley wants to advertise none other than the refinement of his taste, he cannot help but also reveal the limitedness of his aesthetic experience. And this is not a fault that is specific to Beardsley. Quite the contrary, it is very likely that most of us, even with our smattering of women's literature, Chinese painting and Japanese theatre, would end up looking much more aesthetic experience impoverished than Beardsley. As such, we should recognise that the appeal to aesthetic experience is inherently also the exposure to those factors that limit it—whether cultural, political, financial or simply practical—and that to the extent that the notion is used to justify canons, institutions and the like, it cannot avoid also justifying those limitations, and thereby forming the basis for elitism. In other words, if aesthetic experience is exclusive, it cannot avoid excluding.

So what to do? Now obviously one horn of the dilemma is on hand to parry the excesses of the other—just as discernment serves as a response to the appeal of flattering entertainment, inclusion responds to the threat of exclusivity—but these trade-offs still leave open the very important question of where to strike the balance. Where one does this very much depends upon one's perception of the respective dangers. When Kant first formulated his notion of aesthetic judgement, the mediocrity of commercial culture was not on hand to temper his enthusiasm for aesthetic universality—rather it was the French Revolution and its promises of

[5] Kant (1790), §17, 68-9.

democratic liberation that were very much in the air—but one hundred and fifty years later, Beardsley chooses to overturn Kantian universalism in response to very real commercial encroachments. Moreover, this development in the notion of aesthetic experience is important enough to demand further explanation, for it marks an important philosophical impasse, one that opens the ground for our current rediscovery of aesthetics.

II

This impasse concerns the relation between aesthetic experience and the objects that give rise to it. As we have already seen, the term 'aesthetic object' is really not much more than a thinly veiled reference to art objects, and yet by retaining the notion of aesthetics, there is the hope of maintaining a link to wider experience. What the impasse involves is no less than the foreclosure on this hope. For when Beardsley commits himself to the elucidation of an 'objective definition' of aesthetic objects, he does so at the cost of aesthetic experience itself. Such a result would have been predicted by Kant. That is, even though the latter does indeed note that we 'speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a characteristic of the object', he warns that this is only a manner of speaking. Because, if beauty does not involve 'the representation of the object to the subject', its universality will say nothing about our common humanity.[6] As such, when Beardsley distinguishes aesthetic objects from other perceptual objects, *not* by their 'relations to people, but by their own characteristics',[7] he severs humanistic links in favour of cultural distinctions. His 'objective definition' is, as the very name indicates, the result of a concern with *objects,* and not with the people whose enjoyment of them might have moral and political consequences. This is more than simply a *bias* in favour of objects over their subjective reception;[8] this is a *bypassing* of the dilemma of aesthetic experience altogether.

That is, Beardsley's notion of aesthetic experience is indeed the 'phantom' that George Dickie says it is, even if for very different reasons.[9] Whereas Dickie questions whether an experience (called 'aesthetic') could indeed be coherent or unified as Beardsley wants it to be,

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[6] Kant (1790), §6, 46.
[7] Beardsley (1951), 63.
[8] I am speaking most particularly about the assumptions Kant must make about the form of human faculties in order to develop his notion of aesthetic judgement.
[9] This is a reference to George Dickie's essay 'Beardsley's Phantom Aesthetic Experience'.

we can question whether the latter's aesthetics implies any experience whatsoever. Beardsley does not simply locate the force of aesthetics within aesthetic objects, he reclaims the existence of such objects even *against* our experience of them. For him 'a painting never seen by anyone [still] has aesthetic value'.[10] The problem with such a view is not so much that it beggars belief, but that it begs the question of why we bother with aesthetic objects at all. Because his theory does not require that aesthetic experience be 'for everyone'—quite simply, because it is indifferent to our experience, it breeds indifference towards the very aesthetic objects it champions. Its very success in overcoming the dilemma of aesthetic experience is its failure to grasp why there was any dilemma in the first place.

In this light, Danto's notion of an 'artworld' can be seen much less as a repudiation of aesthetic experience than a re-engagement with its dilemma. When Danto claims that '[t]o see something as art requires something that the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld',[11] he is not rejecting our aesthetic experience. Quite the contrary, he is re-establishing the grounds that make it possible. Without the dilemma of an experience that both reaffirms our community with others and threatens to alienate us from those who don't share in it, there is nothing at stake in our reception of works of art. Only as long as aesthetic experience remains problematic, only as long as our aesthetic experience makes us wonder about that of others, do works of art have anything more than novelty value. If art is not simply to be a glorified form of fashion, it must acknowledge what Dewey emphasizes: namely, that life 'is a thing of histories', and that as such, experience only occurs to the extent that it engages our personal and collective memories, and the 'resistance between new and old'.[12]

III

It is the experience of this resistance that Danto brings out in his writings on art. If we simply take one example, the 'Manhattan Telephone Directory for 1980', we start to grasp Danto's engagement with the dilemma of aesthetic experience. This example is a thought experiment

[10] Beardsley (1951), 531.
[11] Danto (1964), 580.
[12] Dewey (1934), 35 and 53, respectively.

about the nature of interpretation, which would seem to make it a poor choice in an examination of aesthetic experience. It would seem that one would need to choose a work of art. However, not only is the Telephone Directory precisely the example that Joseph Margolis identifies in his early recognition of Danto's refutational power vis-a-vis Beardsley,[13] but also the choice of a banal object, a product of modern commercial culture, is very much suited to the task of illuminating the dilemma of aesthetic experience. For as we have said, this dilemma occurs as an unstable balancing act between contradictory demands, and thus in order to strike a sustainable equilibrium, there must be some sort of urgency in the philosophical appeal to aesthetic experience. Only if sufficiently motivated can aesthetic objects provide a focus—to use the language of Ted Cohen—for an 'intimate community', can they forge—to use the language of Danto himself—an artworld.[14] In the case of the latter, the concern that motivates the appeal to art and our experience of it is a concern with modern commercial culture. The very title of Danto's philosophy of art, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, evokes this concern. For him what is at stake in art is the possibility of a transfigurative experience, which would allow us to see beyond the commonplace. Some might dismiss this experience as obscurantist, but quite honestly it is no greater a folly of faith than the belief that we are willing to eschew the possibility of such experiences altogether.[15]

What Danto demonstrates time and time again, then, is the degree to which the task of perceiving works of art engages our conception of the world. When Danto holds up the Manhattan Telephone Directory for 1980, and proposes to see it as a 'piece of paper sculpture, a folio of prints, a novel, a poem,' or even 'the score for a musical composition',[16] he transfigures this commonplace object before our very mind's eyes. 'If it is a novel, we may deplore the exiguities of plot, but hardly if it is sculpture, since sculptures have no plots'.[17] In other words, in every manifestation of the telephone directory, art theory not only identifies

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[13] Margolis (1980), 1-15.

[14] Ted Cohen (1993) has worked substantially with the role of aesthetic experience in community formation. As he says in 'High and Low Art, and High and Low Audiences', 'works of art…are sometimes foci for intimate communities. Such a community is constituted by its shared response to something…and the sense of *community* derives from its members' awareness that they *share*'. It is also significant that Cohen does not limit this possibility to just works of art.

[15] As Beardsley himself says in defending aesthetic experience later in his life, 'it is not as though we were shutting our eyes to reality by resolving to continue our aesthetic dialogue, but rather that we refuse to let certain important things be lost sight of' (1982, 77)

[16] Danto (1981), 136.

[17] *Ibid.*

what kind of work we are dealing with, but also, and critically, achieves this identification by reference to perceptual characteristics. Without art theory, we do not have access to the sort of artworld, do not have the sort of consensus needed to determine which perceptual characteristics are important in a work, and the degree of their importance. As such, without art theory, our experience can never have the coherence needed to be aesthetic. Only with art theory can we face up to the world of the commonplace, and harbour hope for something more and different.

However, what this also means is that, *like* Beardsley before him, Danto's greatest concern is with the well-being of art faced with the overwhelming presence of the commonplace. The theory's openness to community formation, therefore—its notion of an artworld—is qualified. As Richard Shusterman has emphasized in his 'pragmatic aesthetics',[18] it is conceived precisely as against the world of popular culture, and as exclusionary of its objects. The insight afforded Danto by Warhol's *Brillo Box* is precisely that 'the Brillo people cannot manufacture art', and that 'Warhol cannot *but* make artworks'.[19] In Danto's thinking, our aesthetic experience, guided as it is by philosophy, can and must exclude certain kinds of appreciation of the commonplace.

But is this really necessary? Do we really need philosophy to protect us from our taste? Or in the terms of this essay, is it really the universality of aesthetic experience that poses its most fatal menace? For, as Danto's own example of *Brillo Box* incisively illustrates, when art and consumer goods are placed side by side, art usually fares very well in the comparison. Now art theory clearly plays its role in this, as Danto argues, but we also must suspect that no amount of theory could ever transfigure objects that did not participate in their own transfiguration. That is, if we return to the thought experiment of the Manhattan Telephone Directory, what we cannot help but notice is the fact that we are *not* making art. Like the similar thought experiments we undertake in museums and out and about, we fail to transfigure radiators and doorknobs into works of art by sheer bloody-mindedness. Rather, and as Beardsley himself would want to interject right now, aesthetic experience involves an *objective* dimension—a dimension that makes objects 'speak to us', for lack of a better

[18] See in particular, Shusterman's critique of Danto (1993) where he offers a reinterpretation of *Brillo Box* that would contest the 'theology of art' that separates art from life.
[19] Danto (1964), 580.

phrase—that no amount of receptivity or theory can ever overcome. And even though Danto would almost certainly not disagree with this point, it still has implications that reach beyond his theory. For if works of art aren't so dangerously threatened by the commonplace, then what we might be more concerned about is the menace posed by their exclusivity.

IV

Moreover, the danger of this exclusivity is so well-recognised that it has become memorialised in popular caricature: in the figures of the black clad jet set, who look down their noses at the majority just as happy to stay at home and watch TV. As this parody drives home, exclusivity is dual edged. The more the denizens of an artworld exclude the pleasures of the majority, the more they risk marginalizing the very artworld they champion. And history bears this out, because what has happened to the artworld is that it has traded the fervour of a Vienna at the turn of the century for a retreat into insitutions on the model of the Tate museums in London. And even though these institutions eschew elitism and pride themselves on making art as accessible as possible—and one need only to stand in the thronged Turbine Hall on a Saturday afternoon to measure this success—their very aim of accessibility is their implicit admission that their *first* role is to protect art's exclusivity and difference from common commercial endeavours. As such, they cannot help but suggest that aesthetic experience is so precious and fragile as to risk being smothered by the direct light of day.

However, isn't it precisely the opposite that is the case—or more exactly, that precisely the opposite is *also* the case? Isn't it the case that aesthetic experience is as much a victim of its robustness as it is its fragility? Isn't it the case that one of the things that we are *most* certain of is our *own* aesthetic experience, that experience which is *exclusively* our own? If it is reasonable to talk about aesthetic experience at all, it must be because we are confident that we have had some. And yet how do we prove it? One approach is to look for objects that nearly all of us appreciate, with the notion of using them as demonstrative evidence; however, what we quickly realise is that the best source of such objects is *not* art, but nature.

This, again, would be no surprise to Kant. He is well-known for praising the incontestable beauty of flowers. Similarly, Adorno is equally in his rights to suggest that 'no feeling

person…fails to be moved by the sound of a robin after a rain shower'.[20] And if someone were tempted to reject these observations as evidence of incurable romanticism, he would fail to acknowledge to what degree his own dismissal, most often in favour of reason and logic, is itself a manifestation of romanticism's own hope: the hope of an overcoming of our individual experience—the fact that our particular experience is indeed *exclusively* our own—in favour of universality. Just as science turns to nature in search of universal laws, romanticism turns to natural beauty as a model for universal aesthetic experience. As Hegel puts it, the romantic artist draws 'into himself the whole breadth of nature as the surroundings and locality of spirit'.[21] For the latter, the experience of nature is a brush with pristine sensuality, with pure perception devoid of any preconceptions or theories, directly analogous to the type of pure aesthetic experience of works of art theorized by Beardsley.

But to hold that one's aesthetic object is pure appearance is to reclaim the experience of pure presence, of an experience that is direct and without mediation by history, or culture, or society. Not only does such an experience delve into the realms of theology and mysticism, but as Adorno points out, it is also self-contradictory. As *pure* appearance such an object could never fully appear before our eyes. Even as we turned our gaze toward it, we would have already lost sight of the first appearing of its appearance, its appearance *as* appearance. In this sense, romanticism—whether of nature or of a naturalised art—brings into doubt the very experience it wants to champion.

As a consequence and as Adorno himself argues, we must insist upon the mediateness of all experience, with the implication that it is only through culture that the seemingly universal experience of nature—both first and second—can hope to become aesthetic, and thereby protest its fundamental exclusivity. But this, then, is the dilemma of aesthetic experience recast: Whereas in the case of fine art the exclusivity that distinguishes it from consumer culture resists its own defence—to talk about art is to appeal to qualitative judgement, and yet to defend this judgement is to invite accusations of elitism and prejudice—in the case of the natural, its very ubiquity and ease thwarts attempts to specify its universality—that is, the crucial significance of natural experience is its unprejudiced openness to everyone, but this very openness means that each of us is thrown back upon his own *exclusive* experience, unable to convey the

[20] Adorno (1970), 66.
[21] Hegel (1835-8), 525.

universality of this very universal condition. Just as the experience of sunsets eludes photography, the experience of nature evades the mediation—by language, emulsion, or other material—that would make it meaningful, and yet it is only by means of this mediation that we have any way of saying that there was any experience at all. Because the experience of nature is wholly particular, because the only direct way to share the experience of a sunset is to invite others to 'Come, and look!' for themselves, only through culture can we overcome the exclusivity of the original experience—the fact that it is constitutively restricted to those present at some particular place at some particular time—and redeem its universality.

It is with this in mind, then, that Adorno claims that '[w]hat nature strives for in vain, artworks fulfil: They open our eyes'.[22] However, what they open our eyes to is not simply the potential universality of aesthetic experience, but also the natural exclusivity that blocks it. That is, what aesthetic objects can do is to open our eyes in the critical way that knowledge does.[23] They can arouse our scepticism, and in this way make us aesthetically cynical. Now, in that cynicism is very often presented as the enemy of aesthetic experience, the appeal to it may seem strange. And yet, it is important to keep in mind the profound hopefulness of all cynicism. We are not cynical unless we fundamentally believe that things could be otherwise, and what we are decrying in the case of aesthetic cynicism is the limitedness of our own aesthetic experience, the fact that we only have our own. By opening our eyes to the narrow exclusivity of our experience, aesthetic objects can hope to turn us toward that of others. In conclusion, I will address one aesthetic object—in this case a commercial one—that seems to attempt this opening up, and consider the film *American Beauty.*

In terms of provocative cynicism, this film has no inhibitions. The main characters are callous and materialistic to an appalling degree, so indifferent to others that they make their jaded teenage daughter seem a caring soul. During the film, these 'protagonists' wander from one self-indulgence to another, from blackmail to self-prostitution, from adultery to paedophilia. And yet, because we are in no way asked to feel sorry for this couple, we feel no pangs when it comes to their undoing, watching avidly as they are reduced to their bare humanity. Nevertheless, we are jarred when they finally reach rock bottom. Not because we

[22] Adorno (1970), 66.

[23] Because my argument reclaims no fundamental ontological or epistemological privilege for art, there is no reason to think that such a critical function must be limited to just its works.

suddenly start feeling for them, but rather because we don't. Lester's chance death is not, as our good opinion of ourselves would expect, an occasion for the realisation of our common humanity, but rather the stage for ever more spectacle. We are made uncomfortably aware that, like the daughter's boyfriend, we want to stare unashamedly at the creeping crimson pool of blood and wonder how beautiful it is. In this, the film baits our cynicism only to make it turn against itself. We become cynical of our own cynicism, this cynicism that makes us indistinguishable from a Lester Burnham. And as a consequence, we become open to his experience, willing to experience his experience as our own. In this, we catch a glimpse of the universality inherent in the exclusivity of aesthetic experience—the fact, that *all of us* is limited to our own. Like for the dying Lester, very often the experiences that mean the most to us are indeed in the nature of 'lying on my back at…scout camp watching falling stars, and yellow leaves from the maple trees that lined our street, or my grandmother's hands and the way their skin seemed like paper…'[24] and yet we can never experience them aesthetically, experience them in their universality, except mediately, as the experiences of another.

This is the case because the flip side of our cynicism is always our sentimental hope for community—our attraction to exclusivity inseparable from our desire for a universe in which we truly belong. This is what is at stake in the dilemma of aesthetic experience. In this light, what Nietzsche said in defence of aesthetics over a century ago still has resonance. It may indeed be the case that many find it 'distasteful to see an aesthetic problem taken so seriously'[25] when there are so many other problems in the world, and yet without aesthetics we are in no position to reflect upon the latter's presumed greater seriousness. Without aesthetics we are poorly placed to reflect upon how our exclusive experience can indeed form the basis of insights relevant 'for everyone'.

[24] *American Beauty,* Dreamworks, 1999.
[25] Nietzsche (1872), 13.

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