

Art is not Entertainment: John Dewey's Pragmatist Defense of an Aesthetic Distinction

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Introduction

Few areas of human endeavor inspire as much passion and admiration as the arts.¹ Arresting photographs, inspirational chorales, heartbreaking poems, and mouthwatering canapés are just a few conduits through which humans broaden and deepen themselves with the kinds of transformative experiences only art can provide. Because the arts have typically interwoven reason with powerful emotions, philosophy has often taken an ambivalent attitude toward art's philosophical legitimacy. Guardian of both the rational and the really real, philosophers have been ingenious at rationalizing away the apparently volatile emotions and stochastic expressions of artists' media and messages. At times, such rationalizations downgrade or outright dismiss the philosophical validity of artistic human endeavor.

Dewey's approach is different. Dewey liberalizes aesthetic theory, celebrating art as "the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity" (LW10:31).² Rather than shunting art aside, Dewey argues that philosophy ought to consider it as perhaps the *most* appropriate subject matter given that art informs some of the most important philosophical inquiries. For example, there are the traditional inquiries of aesthetics: into the phenomenon of aesthetic experience, the ontology of artworks, the nature and justification of art's interpretation and evaluation, etc. Second, there are art's social dimensions, including the ways aesthetic prejudices can replicate and reinforce cultural prejudices.³ Third, there are art's ethical functions: the shaping of personal and communal character, the symbolic expression of present and future identity and ideals. Fourth, art's political functions are philosophically interesting, since art's communicative functions (propaganda, e.g.) shape power relations within states and countries. Fifth, Dewey argues that aesthetic experience is rich with metaphysical and spiritual dimensions: Art can facilitate and express experience in ideal forms (which he called "consummatory") and such forms constitute a subject matter that metaphysicians can describe and analyze. In short, art cannot remain peripheral to philosophic inquiry; because art touches nearly every important aspect of life, any philosophy

wishing to be adequate to lived experience must address the phenomenon of art.

The Question

Here, an interesting tension arises. Art critics are perhaps best known for dividing things up (“good” versus “bad,” four versus no stars, pop versus serious music, etc.) whereas Dewey is infamous for demolishing dualisms (between fine art and crafts, mental and physical, reason and emotion, etc.). But, surprisingly, Dewey’s aesthetics *keeps* certain distinctions. For example, he argues that the “only *basic* distinction is that between bad art and good art, and this distinction, between things that meet the requirements of art and those that do not” (LW1:283). Given Dewey’s preference to eliminate dualisms, the question arises: How and why did he retain categorical distinctions between good and bad art and between art and non-art?

I argue that Dewey’s justification of a distinction between “good” and “bad” art also functions to segregate art from other expressive works such as entertainment and political art. I’ll highlight these distinctions (which Dewey felt compelled to keep) and ask whether these distinctions are still useful. (For example, are there good grounds for studying Mozart but not Madonna?)

I proceed as follows. First I review the reasons Dewey believed art and criticism served important social functions. Next, I sketch Dewey’s cursory definitions and evaluations of three grades of art-product: great art, entertainment, and political art. Finally, I show how these evaluative categories might be used to argue for the tendentious conclusion that aesthetic philosophy shouldn’t bother with entertainment criticism.

Art’s Existential Importance and the Critic’s Social Function

“At its height,” Dewey writes, experience “signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events” (LW10:25). Potentially, art can evoke the highest and most synthetic form of experience, *consummatory* experience. Such experience is not typical, but insofar as societies profoundly influence the conditions of daily life, much could be changed aesthetically to improve experience. Art critics can contribute by illuminating those living conditions antithetical to aesthetic experience and by promoting art’s ameliorating, enriching potentialities. For example, critics might show how living in harried ways can fragment attention, defeat natural impulses toward inquiry, and coerce the worship of dangerously simplistic efficiencies. In contemporary life,

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Zeal for doing, lust for action, leaves many a person, especially in this hurried and impatient human environment in which we live, with experience of an almost incredible paucity, all on the surface. No one experience has a chance to complete itself because something else is entered upon so speedily. (LW10:51)

Such words may evoke Plato's warnings about the Cave, but Dewey attributed such experience-diminishing conditions not to natural proclivities but to a variety of modern economic, technological, and communicative developments. The need for stimulation and speed, themselves destructive of aesthetic experience, overload us. Unfortunately, our responses are often un-artful, permeated by retreats into passivity:

Experiences are also cut short from maturing by excess of receptivity. What is prized is then the mere undergoing of this and that, irrespective of perception of any meaning. The crowding together of as many impressions as possible is thought to be "life," even though no one of them is more than a flitting and a sipping. What is called *experience* becomes so dispersed and miscellaneous as hardly to deserve the name. Resistance is treated as an obstruction to be beaten down, not as an invitation to reflection. An individual comes to seek, unconsciously even more than by deliberate choice, situations in which he can do the most things in the shortest time. (LW10:51)

The larger effect of dysfunctional routines is to disrupt healthy balances between experiences of doing and undergoing. Alternately racing and dragging, life passes, but without accumulating meaning. Individuals experience a chasm between present, past, and future. "The past hangs upon them as a burden... [invading] the present with a sense of regret, of opportunities not used, and of consequences we wish undone" (LW10:23). Such dysfunctional, anesthetic conditions in life deserve—as much as anything else—the label "existential."

While many modern artists urged that attention be paid to man's existential plight—for example, Miller's "Death of a Salesman"—Dewey urged philosophers to ameliorate conditions by helping the public reconsider art's nature and function. Changes in the public's perception of art could enable artworks to be more boldly intermarried with the contemporary environment while simultaneously enlarging the general imagination as to how ordinary routines could be made more aesthetic: "Only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual. The first stirrings of dissatisfaction and the first intimations of a

better future are always found in works of art” (LW10:348). In short, art can educate how to multiply the aesthetic connections between our imaginative, conceptual constructs and our organic, bodily roots.⁴

Given this basic relation (between art and experience) and Dewey’s reasoned exhortation (that philosophy and criticism improve ordinary experience by making it more aesthetic), we can now identify the parameters (all implied in *Art as Experience*) which can classify works as “great,” “entertainment,” and “political art.”

Great Art

While Dewey offers criteria delineating “great” art, he does not and cannot grant *ultimate* rankings for *specific* works (or even genres) of art. Value judgments are always proffered situationally and art’s expressions function at given times and places in and through interactions with unique people possessing particular cultural backgrounds. These facts together entail that no ranking of “*the great works*” is possible. However, just as there are enduring mathematical and logical principles, one may also discover artworks that endure: Homer’s *Iliad*, Dante’s *Inferno*, Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos*, or Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* make good first examples.

What makes artworks “great,” “universal,” or “timeless”? Such designations cannot rest upon some intrinsic property possessed, nor can it be our acculturation to regard them as great or timeless. Dewey believes such great works are best understood on the analogy of survivors in an evolutionary framework; from this standpoint, we want to know how these works *function* so successfully in experience. For Dewey, Tom Alexander notes, a work’s timelessness is “less like the timelessness of a Platonic essence [and more like]...the timelessness of a species which is highly adaptable to a variety of environments” (Alexander, 1987, p. 237). An artwork’s adaptive “fitness” is demonstrated through its enduring expression of meaning to individuals and societies over generations. Such works typically possess “an intimacy of the relations that hold the parts together,” and those parts “have the unique end of contributing to the consummation of a conscious experience” (LW10:121, 122). We call such works “beautiful.”

Besides having intimately related parts, great art is typified by appropriate portions of order and disorder. It is all in the mix: while appreciators need the serenity of order, we disdain the ennui of repetition; while the novelty injected by disorder adds spice, we eschew the confusion of chaos. Artworks engender experience that is aesthetic (or consummatory) when they provide a balanced ratio of these energies. Put

another way, great art utilizes unity and variety to evoke experience that seems *alive*: “The ballet girls of Degas,” Dewey writes, “are actually on tiptoe to dance; the children in Renoir’s paintings are intent upon their reading or sewing. In Constable, verdure is moist; and in Courbet a glen drips and rocks shine with cool wetness” (LW10:182).

Subject matter of sufficient scope and weight may also account for an artwork’s greatness. Again, no specific, ultimate list of “artful” subject matters can be derived from Deweyan aesthetics, since significance is a function of personal and cultural context. Nevertheless, one may observe how the subject matters of war, romance, birth and death have shown tenacious longevity and judge that there is no empirical reason to expect these topics to expire anytime soon.

We come, now, to the most important element which makes an artwork “great,” namely its *enduring* capacity for intensifying and enlivening ordinary life. Such works afford “continuously renewed delight” and engender *further* consequences that are “indefinitely instrumental to new satisfying events” (LW1:273, 274). This latter point deserves emphasis. The fact that an artwork produces even a sparkling epiphany is nevertheless *not* a sufficient reason to call it “great.” A great work must also lend itself to other, future uses.

A genuinely esthetic object is not exclusively consummatory but is causally productive as well.... The ‘eternal’ quality of great art is its renewed instrumentality for further consummatory experiences. (LW1:274)

This final criterion for “great” art—endurance—will likely seem controversial or unacceptably old-fashioned. Temporary art, site-specific works, or works that depend almost entirely upon striking a certain cultural note at just the right moment, cannot be “great.”

Entertainment

Whether Dewey was right to exclude such works is best left to discussion. For now, I beg you to note how his criterion of “enduring causality” provides a principled way of discriminating between “entertainment” and “art.”

Entertainment, per se, stimulates quickly and dissipates quickly, with little lasting effect. Some esthetic products have an immediate vogue; they are the “best sellers” of their day. They are “easy” and thus make a quick appeal; their popularity

calls out imitators, and they set the fashion in plays or novels or songs for a time. But their very ready assimilation into experience exhausts them quickly; no new stimulus is derived from them. They have their day— and only a day. (LW10:172)

There is stimulation but not growth. This incapacity stems from discontinuities in the work; one kind of discontinuity can be due to the sudden arrest of flow; another may come from the triviality of the stimulation itself. We may call failed works aesthetically dead, melodramatic, even pornographic.

Paintings that seem dead in whole or part are those in which intervals merely arrest, instead of also carrying forward... There are works of art that merely excite, in which activity is aroused without the composure of satisfaction, without fulfillment within the terms of the medium. Energy is left without organization. Dramas are then melodramatic; paintings of nudes are pornographic.... (LW10:182)

Again, it is best not to seek *ultimate* lists of specific cultural products which Dewey would designate “art” and which “entertainment.” In fact, Dewey’s own book, *Ethics*, erroneously dismisses artistic media which many today could argue, on Deweyan grounds, to have produce “art.” In one passage arguing that education, not legislation, is the best method to inculcate more “healthful” tastes and higher standards into art and recreation, Dewey complains that

the greater profit seems to lie in the worse products. The moving pictures, the jazz music, the comic strips, and various other forms of popular entertainment, are not an object of pride to those who have learned to know good art, good music, and good literature. A civilization, in which the average man spends his day in a factory and his evening at a movie, has still a long way to go. (LW7:434)

Such judgments about those art forms and genres were certainly premature. Today, no one doubts that film or jazz (as expressive media) deserves to be called art. But despite Dewey’s precipitous comments, the aim of his criterion is still true. One *may* make discriminating aesthetic valuations within a medium (and across media) by observing whether or not an art form effects enduring growth both in other artworks and in the experiences of appreciators. Works designated as “entertainment” fail to be “art”

because they fail to create and recreate consummatory and growing experiences.⁵

Political Art

The criteria separating art from entertainment also sets aside overtly political art. In Dewey's view, much Socialist Realist or proletarian art fail to produce genuinely aesthetic experiences largely because (as political art) they *primarily* designed to communicate a narrow message to a specific audience. "If the artist desires to communicate a special message, he thereby tends to limit the expressiveness of his work to others—whether he wishes to communicate a moral lesson or a sense of his own cleverness" (LW10:110). Political art's overweening emphasis on political message—its dedicatedly "informational" function—gives it a function more scientific and practical than expressive.⁶ Being insufficiently expressive, it fails to engage perception to the degree necessary to produce *an* experience.

Dewey's critique of information-oriented art isn't mere sensualism, nor is it a romantic demonization the conceptual side of art. Surely art could not produce consummatory experiences in us without conceptual ingredients. However, genuine aesthetic engagement with artworks *must* engage the physical senses, otherwise what is produced isn't *an* experience, the dynamic synthesis of sensation and cognition which engages the *whole* participant.

We cannot grasp any idea, any organ of mediation, we cannot possess it in its full force, until we have felt and sensed it, as much so as if it were an odor or a color.... Whenever an idea loses its immediate felt quality, it ceases to be an idea and becomes, like an algebraic symbol, a mere stimulus to execute an operation without the need of thinking. (LW10:125)

The point at which "an idea loses its immediate felt quality" is the crossroads where political art and entertainment meet—both destined to fail, for Dewey, as "art." For whether a work aims primarily to offer quick pleasure or affirm an ideology, the result is the same: ephemeral stimulation, inexpressive of enduring meaning, quickly aging with the passage of time.

Pragmatic Aesthetic Criticism and Entertainment

With these cursory categorizing principles for great art, entertainment, and political art, we return to the functions of the art critic. At stake is whether

philosophy should ever engage in aesthetic criticism of entertainment.

Art critics are not priests. They are not gatekeepers of Beauty and Meaning, charged to guide the philistine masses toward works of artistic genius. Dewey is a pluralist and a perspectivist—there is no singular, true meaning which everyone must “get” from an artwork; indeed, meanings expectedly vary from person to person, and over time. But even in our culture, despite our infatuation with prescriptive rankings, art criticism can still claim a role. For Dewey, the role is reconstructive and educative; done properly, it empowers students to appraise art themselves:

The function of criticism is the reeducation of perception of works of art; it is an auxiliary in the process, a difficult process, of learning to see and hear.... The individual who has an enlarged and quickened experience is one who should make for himself his own appraisal. The way to help him is through the expansion of his own experience by the work of art to which criticism is subsidiary. (LW10:328)

The pragmatic critic reeducates by pushing students (readers, public) away from “conventional wisdom” toward active, experimental engagements with art. As Alexander notes, “criticism is a pluralistic enterprise having a number of tasks. Instead of seeking to provide fixed, pure methodologies, it can understand itself as genuinely experimental and hermeneutic” (Alexander, 1987, p. 276). Dewey calls such critical education “moral” because through it the student gains new knowledge and an enriched potential to experience life.

The moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive. The critic’s office is to further this work, performed by the object of art. (LW10:328)

Thus, pragmatic aesthetic criticism assumes several pedagogical tasks: retrain the eye and ear, heighten sensitivity to the actual presence and play of artworks’ qualities, and elucidate the ways in which an artwork emerges from and responds to the cultural arenas producing it. It may be true, as Dewey claims, that “art breaks through barriers that divide human beings, which are impermeable in ordinary association” but it is the job of the critic to place such art front and center of the public’s consciousness, to enable active participation, and to hopefully “restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the

everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” (LW10:249, 9).

Thus, the art critic has the potential to help develop more sympathetic attitudes (of people and groups) within and between cultures. Ultimately, critics can help repair and revitalize community if their criticism draws upon their own life, including the moral forces which sustain (or drain) them. “The final task of criticism,” Alexander writes, “is none other than the quest for community, for the elucidation of those values and ideals which create and bind a public together through a recognition of its fate and history as well as its inherent choices and possibilities” (Alexander, 1987, p. 276).

This brings us to our punch line. If one accepts Dewey’s valuational distinction between genuine art and entertainment (and political art), it follows that the critic’s functions cannot be fully exercised with entertainment. Besides entertainment’s inability to produce consummatory experience, the ease of entertainment’s satisfactions and the ephemerality of its social impact disqualifies it from the serious attention of philosophical aesthetics.

Notes

¹ Some material in this paper draws from my (2008) condensed account of Dewey’s aesthetics.

² Abbreviations refer to the critical (print) edition of Dewey’s works: *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston and published in three series as *The Early Works* (EW), *The Middle Works* (MW) and *The Later Works* LW. So, e.g., the abbreviation “LW5:270” would refer to *The Later Works*, volume 5, page 270.

³ For example, the reproduction of cultural and class distinctions through the arts/crafts distinction.

⁴ Such mindfulness demonstrates, too, how past experience can be both explanatory of the present and integral to the creation of a better future. Dewey writes, “Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive. Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is” (LW10:24).

⁵ The causes of its failures will be various—perhaps its purposes are too closely tied to fast commercial success; perhaps its meanings are facile and emaciated; or perhaps its too narrow goal deprives appreciators of sufficient sympathy with the making process. Failure can have many causes.

⁶ Propaganda, whether in the form of a painting or a pamphlet, does not seek such consummations in experience; rather, the primary engagement is

“informational” and, so, participation in feeling isn’t sufficiently provoked for the work to be art.

Works Cited

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