

FILIPPO FOCOSI

BEING TIED TO WHAT, AND WHY?

On the objective side
of (Bertram's notion of) aesthetic experience

Among recent attempts to define aesthetic experience, the one advanced by Georg Bertram in his paper entitled *Aesthetic Experience as an Aspect of Interpretive Practices* (in this issue of *CoSMo*) seems to me very promising. I am sympathetic to it; I think it captures something essential about our aesthetic 'commerce' with the world, especially the art-world. In the present paper, firstly (1) I'll clarify the conception of aesthetic experience defended by Bertram, by pointing out its main statements and arguments. Then (2), I'll show how the insights it offers are consonant with other philosophers' thought about the same topic, as well as corroborated by our first-hand experience of artworks. Finally (3), I'll get to the bottom of the formal/objective side of AE, whose importance, albeit recognized by Bertram, is somehow obscured by other thinkers insofar as they focus on the subjective/phenomenological side, which can allow a vast range of AEs, broader – that's what I'm going to argue – than what a relational account of AE, if rigorously interpreted, allows.

1. The relational account of aesthetic experience

I think appropriate to call Bertram's account of aesthetic experience (hereafter, AE) 'relational', for he basically states that an experience is aesthetic if it is the experience of a distinctive kind of relation between an object and a subject. The relation is described by Bertram with contradictory terms such as "dependence" and "independence", which signal "antagonistic aspects" internal to AE. This antagonism has – Bertram acknowledges – Kantian roots, since the experience of a free play of imagination and intellect, while being caused by the finality internal to an aesthetic object, allows the subject who perceives it to become aware of the possibility of knowledge. Bertram translates this Kantian "conundrum" in more abstract terms: "how can an experience fundamentally rooted in an object have the effect that a subject is confronted with the self?" But all the apparent puzzlement vanishes as long as he points out the peculiar features of the object, as well as of the subject, which enter in the aesthetic relation, and shows how they are complementary.

The object has to be – in order to prompt a specific reaction on the part of the recipient, which marks his ‘entrance’ in the aesthetic relation – a sort of organic whole, in which: a) every unit or part stands in relation with the others; b) there are different kinds (similarity, contrast, repetition, and so on) and levels (thick or thin, for instance) of interrelations, according to the specific weight that each part or unit owns; c) the meaning of the whole is the product of this array of internal relations, as the meaning of each part cannot be assessed independently of the relations in which it stands to other parts; d) the basic elements (words, colors, sounds, etc.) get transformed by their occurring and being combined in new guises, while the dynamic which unfolds between the various elements causes the work to have its own, unique meaning. These features are to be found eminently in artworks, and such a description seems to favor a formalistic definition of them. The aspects of an artwork can be “determinate” (media, materials, basic units such as theme, subjects, etc.) and “indeterminate” (their number, meaning, sense/role).

The subject/recipient has to be: a) receptive, in order to perceive and understand the elements of the artwork; b) “active” – in his passivity – “in order to be guided” by the object’s constellation/configuration of parts and meanings; c) mind-opened, in order to be ready to change his activity, or approaches, in front of original and challenging artworks; d) productive and creative, in order to bring his own approaches, web of comparisons, personal taste, in dealing with artworks.

The relation is one of: a) domination of the object on the subject, and so of dependence of the latter with respect to the former, insofar as the constellation of the artwork, its determinate aspects, its internal dynamic, its self-referentially established relations prompt and guide the interpretative activity of the recipient; b) reconfiguration/re-activation of the object (artwork) by the subject/recipient, and so of independence of the latter with respect to the former, insofar as he reveals the meaning of the elements by means of (bodily, perceptive, cognitive, affective, imaginative) interpretation, unveils their inner sense, their role as intended by the author and in function of the expressive (or representative, symbolic, purely formalistic) aim underlying the artwork, so that the artwork itself gets reenacted. The relation, then, is twofold: and its two sides complete with one another. That’s why it makes sense, from a relational point of view, to say that AE is an experience of a “dependence in independence”.

2. The why-question of art

What is, in my opinion, most noteworthy, is the emphasis that Bertram puts on the ‘positive’ side of passivity, which has to be understood as: a) the *willingness to be guided* by the dynamic structure of the artwork – this is the mimetic behavior that Bertram invokes (quoting Adorno), i.e., a sort of adaptation that the subject undergoes –, to put ourselves in the hands of the work (so to speak), which has to be approached in a

intensely focused, if not detached, way; b) to actively discover the internal relations, to *retrace the formal and semantic configuration* of the work. It is not the activity of determining something; instead, it is *the activity of following* the specific paths drawn by the artist. This is a conception which resonates with the aesthetic thought of a lot of philosophers. It reminds me, in the first place, of Monroe Beardsley, who defines aesthetic experience as a pleasurable experience of coherence and completeness – and consequently, a coherent, unified, and complete experience – which is possible when the mental activity of the perceiver “*is tied to the form and qualities of a sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object on which his primary attention is concentrated*” (Beardsley 1982: 81; my italics). Later Beardsley speaks of “object directedness”, i.e., “a willing accepted guidance over the succession of one’s mental states by phenomenally objective properties (qualities and relation) of a perceptual or intentional field on which attention is fixed with a feeling that things are working themselves out fittingly” (Beardsley 1982: 288). It reminds me also of John Dewey (1934), when he says that undergoing “an experience” is a dynamic process where doing and undoing rhythmically (i.e., organically) interchange and follow one another; and when he speaks of aesthetic experience as inclusive of human desires, impulses and thoughts, which play a role in selecting the material suitable to the subject of the expressive act which gives rise to artistic creation as well as to appreciative interpretation of an artwork.

There are parallels even with Luigi Pareyson’s conception of interpretation as overlapping with execution/performance, insofar as the fidelity of the interpreter with respect to the will of the artwork – the reader/spectator/listener, he says, has to take the point of view implied by the artwork to evaluate if the choices made by the artists are right, that is, if he really made “what the artwork wanted from him to be made” (cfr. Pareyson 1988: 252) – requires the interpreter to reveal himself (his personality) in the interpretation he offers. As for Bertram’s contemporaries, it is remarkable how a philosopher such as Alan Goldman (2013), while offering a phenomenological account of AE – which he conceives as “an intense and meaningful experience” involving the fully active engagement, and the simultaneous and harmonious interaction, of all our mental capacities (“sensuous perception, informed by cognition, enlarged by imagination, and prompting emotional responses”; Goldman 233) –, nonetheless acknowledges its special kind of passivity, since one cannot successfully be so engaged if the work does not sustain such a response, i.e., if the artwork doesn’t exhibit a “perfect union of form and content” (Goldman 329).

Bertram’s account of AE also fits well with our ordinary practice with artworks. Limiting ourselves to the musical field, it is widely acknowledged that listening to a musical composition, most notably if it belongs to Western classical tradition, involves complex perceptive grasping of the dynamic that informs its development – think of counterpoint, melodic variations, harmonic modulations, rhythmic stratifications, and so on – and emotional receptivity (especially with tonal music) to identify the musical

personae (cfr. Levinson 1996: 90-125) that emerge and act through the musical events that traverse the score. Even with ‘trance music’, such as early minimalist compositions, “we half close our eyes ... The mind is listening” (as it is sung in Steve Reich’s *Desert music*). Another musical example comes to my mind: some years ago I was struck by a Radio 3 commentator who, in the course of a program devoted to the history of the classical form of the trio (piano, violin, cello), described the act of listening as a very complex and creative activity, during which the listener has to internally reproduce the process unfolding through the succession and interweaving of musical phrases and try to capture its overarching architecture. (Incidentally the commentator, Paolo Terni, proposed Brahms’ *Second Piano Trio* as the best achievement in the genre).

Be “guided by the constellation” of the artwork is akin to reconstruct, by means of our perceptive, affective and mental activity, the work itself. This entails also choosing a specific point of view, or “bringing up conflicting points”, or bringing forth the perceiver own impulses. Bertram calls this practice “interpretive”, suggesting that interpretation must be conceived not only as a purely linguistic/cognitive one, but rather as a practice that also involves bodily reactions, perceptive grasping, and emotional responsiveness. I would further suggest that emotional interpretation, together with what could be called imaginative interpretation, is the most ‘independent’ part of the interpretive practice, consisting in the continuous effort that the recipient makes to answer to the ‘why-question’ that artworks pose to him. Why that element and not another? Why in that place, or at that moment, and not in/at another? What is the inner sense of the choices made by the artist, of the configuration he has worked out, of the development of the materials he has shaped? It is at this stage that considerations about the expressive purposes come into play. A similar principle, as stated by Peter Lamarque, operates in our appreciative grasp of the significance of a narrative (not its meaning, but how it works and conveys meaning): “for any element (a phrase, a sentence, a passage, as well as an incident, a character, or a description of a place) it is always legitimate to ask what function that element is performing” (Lamarque 2007: 38). I don’t want to say that the why-question arises necessarily at a conscious level – indeed, it mostly arises at a subconscious level –, nor do I want to say that we must always be able to give an answer. The most important thing is that *we feel, or sense, that there is an answer*, and that it would be worth the effort to try to search for it, even if it will not take place during the course of our aesthetic experience or after its consummation. I think that some contemporary artworks are defective in giving the impression that no answer could be possible, because of their excessive complexity or coldness – think of Ligeti’s *String Quartet n. 1* –, or in giving the impression that our search for the answer would come to a trivial end, because of their low degree of elaboration and inspiration – think of Andy Warhol’s film *Sleeping*.

So conceived, i.e., as a stratified interpretative activity, it’s easy to understand why, in the course of AE, recipient’s passivity (his being dominated by the artwork) can bring the subject to self-reflection – to the enlivenment of understanding and

imagination attained in their free play, to speak in Kantian terms – and self-integration (the recipients, Bertram says, are “altered in their very subjectivity”): another feature that Beardsley (1982: 289) indicated as constitutive of aesthetic experience, whose ultimate effect is that of “a sense of integration as a person, of being restored to wholeness from distracting and disruptive influences [...] and a corresponding contentment, even through disturbing feelings, that involves self-acceptance and self-expansion”.

3. The formal and expressive grounds of aesthetic experience

The interpretative activity of the subject – while it employs, most notably, affective and imaginative capacities which can give both rise to associations with personal events and thoughts, which so enter into the building of an AE – is not, Bertram rightly underlines, aimless, i.e., free of constraints: its goals are established by the object upon which his attention is directed. This means, as I read it, that the tighter are the ‘paths’ designed by the artist, the more rewarding is the appreciative ‘walk’ that the subject undertakes towards the world of the artwork. We cannot have aesthetic experience of everything; at least, not of the same kind, i.e., at the same level of intensity and pleasantness. Aesthetic experience is an experience of such and such phenomenal characteristics; that would be wonderful, if they suffice to define it. But given the current tendency to find AE happening in the most disparate fields, it appears to me as a contingent necessity, if not as a general principle, to specify what, an AE, is an experience of. This would render clearer even its subjective *definienda*, in being presented also as the subjective correlative of some – specific and irreplaceable – objective features. The latter, as Bertram and others firmly state, amount to aesthetic form; but can include expressive qualities as well, as they grow out (at least, that’s what I’m going to argue) of a distinctive, irreplaceable and successful (with respect to the expressive intention of the artist) shaping of a (initially) rough expressive material.

As regards global aesthetic form, I think it’s useful to distinguish aesthetic form per se from what I’d call (following Levinson 2006: 201-2) expressive form. We can identify the former with the organic interconnectedness of parts/elements of an artwork, including its semantic or expressive components, albeit considered only as means towards the reinforcement of pure formal unity itself. Think, for instance, of how the introduction of more characters in a novel, of secondary themes in a sonata, or of a background landscape in a portrait, represent additional sources for the artist to achieve a higher order of coherence in the plot, composition, or design, *independent of* the affective, evocative or symbolic import that such characters, themes or sceneries can bring to the work. By expressive form I mean the organic interconnectedness of the semantic and expressive properties of an artwork as considered *also for what they are*, i.e., as embodying a distinctive (representational, symbolic or emotional) content. Think, for instance, of how the atmosphere evoked by a landscape provides a dreamy

background to the intense expression of the figure portrayed, of how the contrasting emotions aroused by the principal melodies of the first movement of a sonata develop separately to reach an harmonic integration in the final section (the recapitulation), or of how our diverse reactions towards the characters and events that we encounter in the course of our reading a novel or watching a film “follow naturally one upon another”, giving a sense of “psychological inevitability” (as Beardsley [1982: 295] remarked, e.g., our emotional experience of a good performance of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*). Aesthetic and expressive form, so conceived, are what prompt and justify – representing the objective/formal grounds of its occurrence – that sophisticated intertwining of sensations, percepts, affects, and thoughts to which AE, from a subjective point of view, amounts.

But some rightly assume that an artwork can sometimes induce an AE in virtue of its expressive properties, even when they are not, at the overall level, highly unified, and so attach only to partial sections of the work. Noël Carroll (2012: 174), for instance, maintains that AE involves focus on *how* an artwork achieves its purposes, and this can be done either “formally” or “qualitatively”, the latter meaning by means of the embodiment of remarkable expressive qualities. But then another puzzlement arises: how can expressive properties alone (such as being strident, serene, melancholy, solemn, and so on) be an objective ground of AE, if their status fluctuates according to the affective responses they call for? My answer is that it is only through an emergent, organic and coherent combination of, e.g., verbal, visual and acoustic means, that an artist can successfully express his view or emotion in the work, and provide it with a wide array of human qualities (as Beardsley [1982: 106-110] calls them). The subtle melancholy of a melody, the serenity of a landscape, or the ambiguous charm of a character, depend on an adequate articulation and synthesis of sounds, colors, words. And this formal background from which expressive properties develop their distinctive profile is what ensures a certain level of objectivity – insofar as an aesthetic discourse admits of objectivity – to the experience they make possible and aesthetically enrich.

To take place, aesthetic experience requires the recipient’s active responsiveness to the object configuration. But it demands also that the work on which our attention is directed is capable of eliciting and supporting our interest. Only formally well-constructed, and semantically rich, artworks, can do this job; and it seems to me that, surprisingly enough, we don’t need to search for new artforms to be so involved with artworks. Interpretive following of a Filippo De Pisis’ still life painting – discovering the significance of each single brushstroke, savoring its delicate chromatic palette, and enjoying its melancholy feeling – can be more interactive than participating at a performance such as the celebrated Marina Abramović’s *The artist is present*, which far from being as it was presented, that is, as a quintessential interactive experience, at best resolves into self-suggestion, due to its lack of interpenetration of the elements (including ourselves) involved in the performance. While sitting in front of Ms. Abramović, our percepts, affects and thoughts are not tied to her gaze – after all, it’s not

a psychoanalysis session –; there's no plausible answer to the question 'why did she choose that disposition for the spectators, or that length of each exchange of glances' (the means are relatively irrelevant for the end to be reached; the 'how it works' of the work is not interesting). The artistry is absent, and the spectator is free to look over and maybe search for a De Pisis' exhibition. That's what we should do, if we care for genuine, intense and enriching aesthetic experiences.

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