

# Art, Pleasure, Value: Reframing the Questions

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Art—literature, drama, music, dance, visual art, decoration, etc.—is universal. All cultures engage in it in at least some art forms; almost all humans enjoy it in at least some forms. This is a Good Thing. Perhaps this is obvious, but being philosophers, we must ask why. Why is art universal? Why do humans enjoy it? Why are these things good?

A second question. In all cultures, there are artistic standards. Some performances, some productions, some creations are thought to be better than others, and while there might not be universal agreement on *which* of these are better, there is general agreement that it takes discernment, knowledge, and taste to appreciate the better ones. In short, there are in every culture some fine things that not everybody can appreciate. Most think that *this* is a Good Thing. But why? What's the value of expending effort in the production and consumption of artistically elevated products? And how does this square with the universal value of art? Isn't it odd that in every society, art is valued, but that at the same time not every member of the culture can grasp the finer points that make it especially valuable?

A final question. Though art is universal, the specific forms that art takes in different cultures are *not* universal. Chinese opera sounds very different from gamelan; yet, each has value to those who know. But how can works that are so different both be valuable? What are the non-aesthetic “natural” qualities that make them good? Are aesthetic standards or values culture-specific? And how does *this* sit with universality? Isn't it odd that while art is valued in all cultures, the actual content of what is valued is different from culture to culture?

In a series of papers, I have been developing a hedonist, or pleasure-grounded, approach to these questions. In order to do this, I have first attempted to define a special kind of pleasure that is especially relevant to the aesthetic context. Crucially, this kind of pleasure is *functionally* defined. This helps me set aside certain objections to hedonism that are based on a view of pleasure as a mere sensation. Then I show that there is a kind of “cultural

learning” that this kind of pleasure induces. This helps me account for the cultural specificity of art appreciation, which on certain other approaches is at odds with the presence of art in all societies. Cultural learning also helps me answer the question of elevated artworks: it is a universal phenomenon that creates heightened sensitivity, but not in all.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Two Approaches to the Universality of Art

Why is art universally valued? Speaking very broadly, there are two approaches to these questions.

*Objectivists* start from the goodness of art itself. Good art is intrinsically admirable—in and of itself, it *ought* to be admired. It is, consequently, *natural* for humans to make and admire it. This is why the production and consumption of art are universal. It is, moreover, why all of this activity is good. G. E. Moore was a thinker in this vein: he actually *defined* the beautiful as that which it is good to admire.

Objectivists have a plausible answer to why not everybody is capable of appreciating art. It is not easy to see what is good about an art work; this requires knowledge and taste. But they have something of a hard time with cultural variability: if there is something objectively good about gamelan, why aren't the Chinese crazy about it?

*Subjectivists* don't think that art is good in itself. They start from the goodness of a motivationally positive response to it. I enjoy watching *Game of Thrones*; this enjoyment is a good thing—enjoyment is valuable as such, provided that it doesn't lead to a

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<sup>1</sup> My aim here is to present these ideas to an audience that includes non-philosophers and non-academics. Though the present paper is new in several ways—particularly in its articulation of certain theoretical problems in sections 2-6, and the emphasis of functional definition—I want to acknowledge that I have developed these ideas in a more specialist form in several other places. These include: “The Pleasure of Art,” *Australasian Philosophical Review* 1 (2017): 6-28, “Constructing Aesthetic Value: Responses to My Commentators,” *Australasian Philosophical Review* 1 (2017): 100-111, and “New Prospects for Aesthetic Hedonism,” in J. McMahon (ed) *Social Aesthetics and Moral Judgment: Pleasure, Reflection and Accountability*. (London: Routledge, 2018): 13-33.

nullifying harm. Art is enjoyable in this way; it has instrumental value. In short, it is not admired because it is good, as the objectivists say; rather, it is good because it is enjoyed. It is *natural*, subjectivists say, for humans to try to make and do things that they and others enjoy. This is why art and its admiration are universal.

*Hedonism* is a special form of subjectivism. It holds that art consumption is motivated by the desire for pleasure, which gives it value when it is achieved. Most aesthetic hedonists think that the pleasure in question is of a special sort, and that this accounts for the fineness and non-universal accessibility of “high” art.

Subjectivists have a hard time with artistic standards and critical values. If art is universal because of an innate tendency to enjoy it, then it is very strange indeed that some people don’t enjoy what is best in it. On the other hand, subjectivists are comfortable with cultural variability. Different people like different things, don’t they?

That’s an overview of the two approaches. Let me now outline and expand on some of the problems that the theorist of aesthetic value faces.

## 2. The Problem of Aesthetic Obligation

Objectivists think that admiring art is good because art itself is good, independently of its being admired. They have a problem because it is pretty mysterious how an objective quality can normatively command admiration. They say, in effect, that I am obliged to admire good art for no other reason than that it is good art. What kind of obligation is this?

The value of aesthetic admiration is mysterious even to one who admits that there are things that *do* enjoin admiration because of their intrinsic value. Suppose that all that we think good about Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa is true—each changed the horrible plight of millions for the better non-violently, but at a huge cost to themselves. I happen to think that it *is* morally deficient not to admire them. Perhaps you disagree. But allow me this for the sake of argument. Nothing turns on this concession as far as art goes.

The question is this. Does a parallel duty carry over to, say, Andy Warhol? I enjoy Warhol’s work (kinda). *I* am better off for this: Warhol provides me with pleasure that I wouldn’t have had otherwise. But aside from an opportunity for enjoyment foregone, why would it have been bad *not* to appreciate his work? Would it

be a *cognitive* failure on my part and bad for this reason? Not necessarily. (And anyway, who says that all cognitive failures are bad?) For I could clearly recognize Warhol's innovations and artistic virtues, but still not feel any admiration for them. He might have left me cold; increasingly, I find that he does. How am I falling short? Perhaps, the novelty is waning—but is the objectivist allowed to tolerate ennui as a legitimate response to objective value?

Objectivists say that Warhol *commands* aesthetic admiration in the way that Mother Theresa commands moral admiration. There is something mysterious about this. Or actually worse than mysterious—pretentious, highfalutin, twee. Nor does it help to go small on the point—to admit that aesthetic appreciation is a small obligation, but insist that it is an obligation nonetheless. The appreciation of art can be big and consuming, but, on the face of it, just the wrong sort of thing to be the subject of approbation and censure. I may miss out when I fail to enjoy a great work of art. But what norm or value have I violated?

This is the problem of aesthetic obligation.

### 3. The Problem of Critical Values

Despite the problem of aesthetic obligation—which, by the way, is very little discussed in philosophical aesthetics—most philosophers of art think that objectivism has had the better of the dispute with subjectivism. I'll mention just two reasons why, and why they don't settle the issue.

The first is that the discourse of artistic evaluation doesn't revolve around personal responses such as pleasure. When we talk about great art, we often talk about how pleasurable it is, but this is always subordinated to considerations of its emotional depth, innovation, intellectual complexity, formal elegance, skilled presentation, and so on. In fact, while many affirm that art ought to be enjoyable, nobody seriously thinks that this suffices—typically, they think that enjoyment should arise from a correct appraisal of the sorts of qualities I just mentioned. To the extent that these qualities are independent of individual response, this is puzzling to the subjectivist.

Sure, it's puzzling to the subjectivist, but isn't it puzzling to *everybody*—including the objectivist? For critical discourse just invites and recapitulates the motivational question raised in the previous section. Sure, Warhol was a very important artist—

innovative, transformative, elegant, skilled, etc. But what if I cognize all of this, but am still not moved by him. What would be wrong, or even reprehensible, with that? Objectivists are not wrong to cite the subject-independent character of critical discourse as a point in their favour. Their difficulties lie not there, but in the motivational and affective force of all of this discourse—they can't account for it, or if they can, they can do so only *ad hoc*, by saying something like, “Of course, I like elegance—doesn't everybody?” But that's not the point: the question is why they *should*.

Secondly, and relatedly, many great works of art are not enjoyable in the most straightforward sense of the term. For one thing, they require effort. Given the choice between reading the *Mahabharata* and reading (or watching) *Game of Thrones*, many would find the first daunting and the second seductive. It's very tempting just to pour yourself a nice cold glass of wine and stretch out with a page-turner. Enjoyment-wise, it's a no-brainer. Yet, the *Mahabharata* is a finer work of art. Doesn't this contradict the subjectivist?

A lot of great art is emotionally and affectively challenging. It's depressing to think of good people coming to bad ends, as so often they do in great novels and plays. And what about atonal music and the like? You can't really say—can you?—that Alban Berg's *Lulu*—in which nothing good happens to anybody and, on top of that, the music is tough to whistle—is more *enjoyable* than *Fiddler on the Roof*. And yet—I'm just going to go out on a limb here—*nobody* would deny it's greater art.

Objectivists are likely to say, for reasons like these, that the questions we asked at the beginning are somewhat confused. What's true is that most people like stories, acting, pretty colours, catchy tunes, strong rhythms, etc. What's *not* true is that they enjoy great art. All cultures produce art, it's true—but it's also true that all cultures place a higher value on cognitively difficult art. And that forces us to distinguish two quite different questions. The first is: Why is story-telling, music-making, dancing both universal and good? The second is: Why do all cultures recognize and value great art, given that only a select few in the culture are able to enjoy it?

It is unclear how subjectivism can provide a satisfactory answer to the second question. On the face of it, it is well equipped to say what is good about Netflix and Spotify, but less well-positioned to navigate the ways of criticism. Unfortunately, though, objectivism doesn't come through this unscathed. For it has a hard time with the first question. If it is cognitively difficult to appreciate high

standards in art, why do all cultures distinguish between elevated and quotidian art, and why do some members of all cultures like the former?

This leaves us in a difficult situation. On the one hand, it doesn't seem that aesthetic norms are motivationally or rationally self-supporting, even if we allow that some moral norms are. As a consequence, it's hard to say what they are based on, if not on audience response. On the other hand, informed aesthetic evaluation seems to be based not on response, but on something much more difficult to pin down—well-informed taste, or something like that. So: what's so great about well-informed taste?

#### 4. The Problem of the Natural Ground

Objectivists think that artworks have intrinsic merit; subjectivists think that they are valuable because of how they affect audiences. For both camps, there is the question: In virtue of what? What natural or non-aesthetic qualities make these things valuable, either in themselves or as objects of consumption by an audience? We've already considered this question in the context of cultural difference. If gamelan is valuable because of some natural quality it possesses, then why is it that cultivated and discriminating people in China, India, and Los Angeles don't immediately recognize its value?

In light of this question, consider now the case of abstract expressionism. This movement was inspired by the urge to erase pictorialism in visual art. Not only pictorialism, but all of the accoutrements of pictures, including perspective, points of view, points of focus, and distance, and to substitute for these other structures that consist of mere pattern, mere colour, and mere material. Now, one can ask: what makes this art, or the response to it, valuable? Subjectivists are going to have a problem answering because so many people in the world find abstract expressionism absurd and trivial. Objectivists are also going to have a problem because though they can say a lot about the formal properties of works in this genre, they have a lot of difficulty saying why anybody should care. And yet, abstract expressionism is a clear case of an art form. It's wrong to dismiss it, from some God's-eye perspective as it were, by calling it 'decadent' or 'delusional' or something like that. And, of course, it would similarly be terribly wrong to suggest that there could be an art-form that captures the attention of many

people in a culture, whether it be gamelan or hip-hop or atonal music, that somehow falls short of the mark.

Now, one way out of this quandary is to appeal to the cultural context of the genre. Here's Peter Schjeldahl, writing not specifically about abstract expressionism, but about a certain ethos in New York City that helped incubate the movement.

To qualify as hip [in New York around 1960], you registered fine distinctions—between a photograph of Marilyn Monroe and Andy Warhol's silkscreen of a photograph of her, say, or between Carl Andre's stack of bricks on a gallery floor and a stack of bricks anywhere else. Skeptical attitudes, averse to mimesis and metaphor, put a withering pressure on painting, including even the simplest abstraction. Barely passing muster were the evenly pencilled grids of Agnes Martin, the broody monochromes of Brice Marden, and Ryman's taciturn brushstrokes. What you saw, while not a lot, stayed seen. (*The New Yorker*, 21-28 December, 2015: <http://tinyurl.com/nto54wg>.)

There are two key ideas in Schjeldahl's evocative description. The first is the prevalence of attitudes that are "averse to mimesis and metaphor." If you try to take in the works of 1960s New York without having thoroughly absorbed these sceptical attitudes, you're not going to find them very interesting. And the second is that you need to "register fine distinctions." You have to be able to tell the difference between a stack of bricks made by Carl Andre in an art gallery and a stack of bricks at a construction site. These ideas go right to the heart of the questions we are asking. How can the objectivist admit that there is such a thing as "qualifying as hip *in New York City*," as opposed to being hip period?—according to her, aesthetic attitudes have universal validity. And how can the subjectivist allow that "fine distinctions" matter, if most people don't even register them?

Now, Schjeldahl's attitude strikes me as correct. But it raises a question. What exactly *is* the difference between Andre's stack of bricks on a gallery floor and a stack of bricks on the street outside? And similarly, what is the difference between Rothko's expanses of colour, and expanses of colour found in nature, or in an elementary school art class? Clearly nothing cognitively obvious: Schjeldahl is

correct to say that the distinction is a fine one. In view of the superficial counter-intuitiveness of abstract art, it is instructive to think about its appeal and value. How does it fit into the universal appeal of art?

The problem of aesthetic obligation is compounded by the highly time- and place-specific appeal of art forms like abstract expressionism. Clearly, there is something in it that *rightly* enthralled mid-twentieth century New Yorkers. Yet that appeal is parochial. Nobody could say that a 19<sup>th</sup> century native of Malabar or a cultivated member of the Ottoman court in the eighteenth century would have been remiss to be unappreciative of Rothko. This is a puzzle for the objectivist: what quality does Rothko share with Osman or with Ravi Varma—what is the quality that in all of them commands appreciation? Classically, the answer was beauty, but the differences among these painters argues against a unitary account. If Rothko is beautiful, why would he not appeal to somebody in the Ottoman court? But it is equally a puzzle for the subjectivist. What is the response that confers value on all three of these artists? Classically, the answer is pleasure. But why is it not shared by all humans?

There is one other way to avoid the problem of the natural ground. One *could* say that the value of a work of art—or even its beauty—depends in an “organic,” or “holistic” way, on not only its intrinsic qualities, but also its historical and cultural context. Now, I am not inclined entirely to dismiss this suggestion. Intuitively, context is relevant in some way to the examples mentioned above: Ravi Varma is valuable in early twentieth century South India, but not so much in mid-century New York City. The difficulty really lies in answering the question, “Why?” What is it about a particular culture that contributes to value? It can’t be mere conformity, because the abstract expressionists were non-conformists, as were so many other artists in history. Nor can it be some purely cognitive factor, like the democratizing thrust of Warhol’s work, because however interesting they might be, these factors don’t command appreciation. Obviously, then, culture plays a role in determining the natural ground of aesthetic value. But unless one can say how and why, this doesn’t take us very far.



## 5. Facilitating Pleasure<sup>2</sup>

Let me step aside from these questions, now, to describe a certain kind of pleasure that I call *facilitating pleasure*. But before I get to that, let me identify and set aside a kind of pleasure that many discussions of hedonism focus on.

Except when they are sleeping (and, actually, even then), organisms constantly find themselves in a condition that is difficult to maintain. Energetic activity brings about fatigue, which makes it hard to continue. Deprivation is also taxing; if one does not eat or drink for a while, one becomes hungry or thirsty. When these conditions come to an end, one feels a sensation of relief—a sip of water when you are thirsty, taking a break from your bike ride or run. This kind of pleasure, which I call *relief pleasure*, is retrospective because it welcomes the end of a state of effort or deprivation. You do something; it causes you pleasure, but this pleasure doesn't affect what you did, because what you did is already in the past.

When philosophers think of pleasure, they often have something like relief pleasure in mind—a rewarding sensation that comes *after* something you do. This is different from aesthetic pleasure as I think of it. In my conception, aesthetic pleasure concurrently affects *how* you attend to a work of art; it isn't merely a retrospective reward.

To introduce the kind of pleasure that I think is involved think first of complexly coordinated acts like drinking water. It may not seem so at first glance, but this is not a simple task. When you drink a glass of water, you have to use your hand to feed liquid into your mouth at the proper rate—you've learned to do it and this seems easy, but take one look at a young child dribbling water as she drinks, and you'll see how coordinated you have to be. Your mouth must be poised to receive and retain the liquid, and then to pass it on to the stomach. The muscular contractions of your mouth, pharynx, and oesophagus must be precisely sequenced and coordinated; your epiglottis must simultaneously be shut off to prevent water being taken into the lungs. All of these movements are repeated rhythmically—gulp, gulp, gulp. If you mistime or omit any—if you take in too much and gag, or too little and swallow air—corrective action is needed. The brain's autonomic control of this coordinated action requires sensory feedback and fine

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<sup>2</sup> The argument in the following sections closely parallels parts of the earlier published papers mentioned in note 1.

adjustment. This requires processing resources in the brain. In those of advanced age, these resources are less abundantly available, and drinking slows down. Drinking is, in short, a complex, patterned activity that can be adjusted and corrected in accordance with sensory feedback.

Now think of the role that *pleasure* plays in drinking water. When you are hot and thirsty, you pick up a glass of clean cool water and gulp it down with scarcely a hitch. But drinking is easily disrupted. It is not easy to gulp a glass of water when you get full, and further consumption is actually painful. The same is true if the water is viscous, brackish, or unpleasant to taste or smell. And drinking is not smooth when other circumstances take priority—for example, if you are in danger, or are emotionally too aroused or too depressed, or are concentrating on something else. Try gulping down a glass of water while also reading. But when the water itself gives pleasure, you are, first of all, highly motivated to keep on drinking, and the act itself is, moreover, made much easier.

Pleasure is an involuntary positive appraisal; the pleasure you take in drinking cool water on a hot day signals that your body “approves” of what you are doing. What I am suggesting is that it does more than approve; it actually helps you execute the task. Taken together, these points suggest that there is a kind of pleasure taken in an on-going complex activity like drinking that releases the brain’s smooth execution of that same activity.

Notice how this is different from the relief pleasure I discussed earlier. It is concurrent with an activity, not retrospective. It has an effect on the activity from which it arises. It may concur with a sensation, but this sensation is not the causal driver. (William James made much of this point in his theory of the emotions: the *feeling* is not what makes you act lovingly or angrily.) This kind of pleasure is defined by the role it plays. We can sum all of this up by noticing how there is a difference between *savouring* a drink of water and *being satisfied* by it. The former is closer to the kind of pleasure I have in mind.

I’ll call this facilitating pleasure. It closes a reinforcing feedback loop. My use of the term ‘pleasure’ here does not refer to a sensation. Rather, it refers to a state that plays a certain role; my concern is functional. Thus:

*Facilitating pleasure* is sensory-affective feedback  
from a complex activity that motivates that activity

and activates pre-assembled routines that enable its smooth execution.

## 6. Aesthetic Pleasure

Now consider the specific activity of mentally engaging with an object. This is a cognitively demanding and difficult task. Even *Game of Thrones* demands intellectual resources; inasmuch as it makes you think about loyalty, love, and duty, the *Mahabharata* demands more. Literature asks for your attention, comprehension, retention, emotional subtlety, self-awareness of how the writer's language is being used to achieve the effect that it has on you. All of this is cognitively complex and demanding. Your enjoyment of *the activity*—the pleasure you take in reading it—facilitates what you are doing. You *want* to keep reading, and this in itself helps you continue. This is important, it is the pleasure of *reading*—of mentally engaging with a work of art—not the pleasure of learning something new that constitutes a distinctively aesthetic attitude.

Additional to this, and no less important, the pleasure leads you smoothly from one narrative moment to the next, sharpens your appreciation of the prose, enables you to overlook the competing demands of hunger and tiredness. When you undertake the activity in what might be called an educated way, it becomes enjoyable and subjectively easier even though it is in fact cognitively complex and difficult. The pleasure generated by reading it in certain ways—e.g., ways that take context into account and flow with the prosody of the writer—help you more than that generated by reading it in other ways. This is not merely *reactive* pleasure; it is not merely a sensation that arises. Nor is it merely a consequence of the activity; it is not idle. It is pleasure that motivates and aids your engagement with the novel.

Contrast the experience of reading the Income Tax Act of Canada in preparation for a meeting. You are not an expert; each sentence poses difficulties of comprehension. You are frustrated and bored. It's all you can do to hang on; everything distracts you. This is the analogue of gagging and sputtering when foul water is all you have to quench your thirst. When you read something boring or you drink a foul-tasting liquid for a specific purpose, you are motivated to do what you need to do. But if the activity is displeasurable, it takes an effort of will to persist, and in any case, the ingestion is not smoothly executed. Similarly, reading the Income Tax Act is unpleasant and requires an act of will. Note,

however—and this is important—that you can get retrospective pleasure from having learned the material, just as you can get retrospective pleasure from having quenched your thirst with stale-smelling water. You can, in other words, take pleasure from learning something new, even when you don't enjoy *the act of reading*. In such cases, your motivation comes from the outside. But when you read something you love, the pleasure of reading helps you concentrate and continue. It's a self-reinforcing loop. So different when you read something difficult for an extrinsic purpose.

My proposal amounts to this:

*Aesthetic pleasure* is sensory-affective feedback from the cognitively complex and difficult activity of mentally engaging with an object that motivates engaging with it and activates pre-assembled routines that enable smooth engagement.

The form of mental engagement can be purely perceptual (looking at a sunset), completely intellectual (reading a book), or partly each (listening to music or looking at art). The essential point is that the pre-assembled routines must be activated by the mental engagement, and not by rewards that are distinct consequences of that engagement. Looking closely at a sunset can give me pleasure because I find evidence in it of tomorrow's good weather. And this may induce me to look at it more closely. But this is pleasure in the nature of the sunset, not in the activity of looking. It may reinforce looking, but it is not self-reinforcing. To be distinctively aesthetic, pleasure must come from and reinforce the activity of mental engagement.

## 7. Cultural Learning

Facilitating pleasure releases the capacity smoothly to execute a difficult and complex activity. As the example of drinking water demonstrated, the complex routine in question can be automatized. But, as I will now show, it can also be learned.

Think of wine-tasting. When you begin, you might use wine to quench your thirst and find that it gives you a pleasant buzz. This becomes your way of consuming wine: quaff and get a little drunk. Later, though, somebody teaches you how to appreciate the structured flavours of wine, and to break flavours down so you can describe and identify wine. Now, you gradually begin to get

pleasure from it in a different way. Let's suppose that this new way of consuming wine is actually more pleasurable than the old—or suppose just that it is a pleasurable alternative. Then you might find that you change your ways. The second way of doing things supplants or supplements the first because it gives you pleasure. This is called reinforcement learning, or as I put it, pleasure-learning. The pleasure of the new activity unlocks and facilitates this new activity. In this particular case, the new activity is more complex, but this need not always be true.

Now, let me introduce one more idea—it's the last one I need for my argument. In any culture, there are creators and consumers of art. In general, the consumers have established ways of appreciating art, and the creators try to make things in the established ways. However, there is innovation. A creator makes something that gives pleasure only if it is consumed in a new way. To get the idea, go back to the wine-tasting example. Suppose there was a time when only the first way of consuming was known. Producers made flavourless beverages with 14% alcohol content; the consumers quaffed them and enjoyed the buzz of being tipsy. The market was in a state of equilibrium.

Enter now a disrupter. She makes something that tastes quite complex, but also has 14% alcohol content. Her product costs twice as much. Consumers have to change their method of drinking in order to appreciate and enjoy the flavour. But when they do, they enjoy the new product in a way that they didn't know before. Gradually, the new product and the new way of tasting become established. They don't necessarily displace the old method, though they may—but one way or another, they simply come to be used. People are willing to pay the extra cost because this is the only way they can participate in the new activity.

Now, notice that this innovation is, at least initially, a local phenomenon. The fact that the new product caught on in Europe does not imply that it will catch on India—at least, this was true before the age of globalization. So, this is a model for cultural learning. A culture will innovate and entrench its own complex ways of consuming products made with skill.

Now, this gives us a model for understanding how abstract expressionism got entrenched. Here's a little parable.

Once upon a time in New York City, a man called Jackson made a painting that negated pictorialism. When he first showed it, the public did not want

anything to do with it. “What is this a picture of?” they asked.

“It’s not a picture,” Jasper replied: “And it’s actually harder than you think to make a completely non-pictorial painting. Look at all the clever things I have done to prevent you from seeing anything depicted there.”

“Oh, that’s pretty interesting,” said the public. “I could spend hours trying to find ways to see a picture here, but still see none. I’ve never looked at a canvas that way before.”

And so, the New York public became fascinated with abstract expressionism. Jackson became famous and made a pile of money.

A few decades earlier, in Germany, a man called Hermann painted people with bright green faces. “Humans don’t have green faces,” said the public...

The parable is, of course, pretty misleading as art history, but it shows how one culture-bound practice could develop in New York and another in Dresden.

Of course, none of this is to suggest the absence of cultural universals. Perhaps, there are themes or tropes in West African sculpture that immediately appeal to people who grew up in nineteenth century Paris in exactly the same way as they appeal to the people for whom these sculptures were created. But it would be surprising if there were no local differences—no aspects of the art to which uninstructed Parisians were blind.

## 8. Art as Instrument

Here’s my hypothesis. Artists make art so that consumers can get aesthetic pleasure from it—aesthetic pleasure as I have defined it. This hypothesis is very different from saying that artists make art so that consumers can get pleasurable sensations from it. The first proposes a fulcrum of intense engagement; the second mere retrospective satisfaction. My idea is that artists make things that audiences will engage with in a manner that intensifies and reinforces that engagement. The manner of engagement can be very different in many ways: it can be a reaction to the strictly perceptual properties of a work of art or to the contrast with the aims of other artists; it could be through delight or through dark

and difficult emotions; it can be spiritual and austere or it can be indulgent and sensual. What is important from the perspective of an artist is that it should engage the audience in ways that she wants the audience to be engaged. Art should be a magnet; it should keep the audience attached. But it should be a magnet in the way intended by the artist.

Viewed in this way, art is an instrument. It is made for a purpose. And it can be evaluated as an instrument. A knife that is made to cut vegetables is a good vegetable knife if it cuts vegetables effectively. Similarly, a work of art is a good work of art if it engages its audience in the ways intended by its maker.

Here, then, is a proposal:

The *aesthetic merit* of a work of art derives from (a) the *aesthetic pleasure* that (b) it is *capable* of giving to a consumer who (c) shares the cultural background of the creator's target audience, and has (d) *culture-learned* optimally to enjoy works that are targeted at this audience.<sup>3</sup>

Note the four salient components of the view marked above: pleasure, capacity, culture, and learning.

## 9. Conclusion

The proposal I have made is subjectivist. It makes aesthetic value instrumental—a good *for* some end, not an absolute good. It addresses the problem of aesthetic obligation by making this obligation relative to a purpose. What obligation do I have to admire Warhol? None, but if I do, I have an opportunity for enjoyment that otherwise I would not have. That is, I would have an opportunity to spend time in the self-reinforcing activity of engaging with Warhol.

Secondly, my proposal makes room for critical discourse. I am at a Bharatanatyam performance. I think it's pretty interesting and I enjoy the experience. But my friend tells me that the dancers are not very good. She points out their mis-steps, their exaggerated expressiveness, their lack of coordination with the subtle rhythms of the music. The next evening, I go to another Bharatanatyam

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<sup>3</sup> This is taken from my paper, "New Prospect for Aesthetic Hedonism," (cited in note 1).

performance. This time, I am looking for all of these subtle virtues. Consequently, I have so much more to occupy my attention. I have just undergone a bit of culture-learning. The critical discourse was the instrument of this culture-learning because it brings out the artists' aims, intentions, and methods. This addresses the objectivist's insight that enjoyment must be based on cognitive assessments. At the same time, it makes a link between cognitive assessment and enjoyment.

Finally, my proposal makes sense of cultural variability. As I argued in Section 7 above, artists innovate, and when audiences learn to take them up, they create an insulated community of knowledgeable consumers who can approach their product in a particular way.

In my view, only subjectivism can address the problem of aesthetic obligation while at the same time accommodating cultural variation. But subjectivists need to make room for the objectivity of critical discourse. I hope that my version of subjectivism, with my account of aesthetic pleasure and its associated cultural learning at its centre, accomplishes this.