

# Aesthetic Experience and the Politics of Art

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## Introduction

There are many things I love about Nick Wilson's book *The Space That Separates*. Above all, it stimulates the reader to think about big questions: What is experience? What is art? What is beauty? How do they relate to human flourishing? The book is also spectacularly ambitious, warm, human, literate, wide-ranging and well informed about the philosophical literature, and it is written with sophistication yet still sparkingly readable. Fascinating topics, then, approached with verve and style. But I'm afraid I don't agree with most of the answers Wilson offers to the big questions he poses for us. My disagreements fall into two main groups: concerns about the plausibility of his core concepts, and his neglect of art's social positioning in a system of inequality.

## What is experience?

The most fundamental concept in Wilson's argument is experience, and yet he seems unable to pin down the meaning of his core term. His summary on pages 61-2 positions experience simultaneously as 'the human capacity for cognitive... knowledge gained through interaction with our environment'; as an entity formed from a related set of parts where the parts are 'the properties and powers of objects we interact with in our environment, our own properties and powers as experiencers, and emergent properties and powers pertaining to the relations between these parts'; as 'an event (or series of events), possessing emergent causal properties, which we can, and tendentially do, experience' (which means that we can experience our experience); and as 'both a real emergent phenomenon and a phenomenon possessing real emergent properties'.

But to make experience all of these things is ontologically incoherent. Capacities are not entities with parts, which are not events, and of these three ontologically different categories only the entities with parts can possess real emergent properties (Elder-Vass 2007a; Elder-Vass 2010). It seems to me relatively straightforward to sort this out: experiences are indeed events, but they are not capacities, and they are not entities with parts and emergent properties. The capacity to gain knowledge through interaction with our environment is a causal power of human beings, but it is not experience: it is the interpreted impression we form through the interaction that is the experience, not the capacity. And while experience is certainly produced in an interaction between our own properties and powers and those of the things we interact with, that doesn't mean that we and they jointly constitute an entity with emergent properties: this is the heart of the critical realist distinction between actual causation and real causal powers (Elder-Vass 2007b).

## What is aesthetic experience?

This conceptual vagueness at the root of the argument paves the way for further looseness as the argument develops. The most striking case comes in the next stage of conceptual development: Wilson's concept of aesthetic experience. This is simultaneously extraordinarily broad and bemusingly narrow.

As he tells us, 'A primary task for any theory of aesthetic experience is to be able to account for what makes it different from experience more generally' (69). A quick look at the dictionary suggests that the aesthetic is concerned with 'the principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty' and is derived from a Greek term that refers to perception (Oxford University Press 1996, 16), and we might expect terms like these to feature in an account of what makes aesthetic experience different. But Wilson takes a very different direction and instead explicitly defines aesthetic experience as 'our emergent experience of being-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world (the real)' (69). This immediately begs the question of when we might be-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world, and once again the answer would seem to be rather straightforward: absolutely everything we do or experience, consciously or otherwise, involves being in relation with the natural necessity of the world, the causal forces that influence every moment of our lives. So far, it would seem, Wilson's definition would seem to imply that all experience is aesthetic experience.

But there is a second part to his account of aesthetic experience: 'It is dependent upon our meta-level constellational capacity to experience beyond the actual' (62). This 'capacity to experience beyond the actual' is itself traced back to the baby's first experiences of interaction with its mother or primary carer, which Wilson calls a variety of aesthetic experience and theorises 'as experiences of energized behaviour and constellational identity' (18) 'in which individual identities are maintained but are nonetheless joined... and partly constituted by "the other"' (19). There is a connection here to the first word of the definition cited in the previous paragraph: Wilson appears to be arguing, in an echo of Bhaskar's work on metareality, that we have the capacity to experience an emergent non-empirical connection to others (and indeed to other objects) and that such experiences are the defining mark of the aesthetic.

He himself connects these sorts of experiences to matters of love and care (19), but ducks the next obvious question: isn't this actually a description of experiences of love and/or care, rather than a description of aesthetic experience? As far as I can see, his claim that the two are to be identified with each other is simply an assertion with no underpinning justification. It is also an assertion that flies in the face of the usual principles of how to define our terms: when we define terms in common use, our definitions should reflect the way those terms are generally understood, even if we attempt to clarify or improve upon common understandings (Elder-Vass 2020; Hodgson 2019). But even if we were to accept this bemusing substitution of love and care for beauty and taste in the definition of the aesthetic, there are still more questions to be answered. In particular: given this definition, what are the implications for which activities are to count as aesthetic? Presumably only experiences in which we feel a caring identity with some object are to count. So, perhaps, finding a symphony boring is no longer an aesthetic experience but cuddling your pet rabbit might be. Wilson himself does not illustrate the argument with examples and so I am second guessing him here. Perhaps finding a symphony boring would count as experiencing a constellational identity with it, but if so, we seem to be heading back towards the position in which all experiences are aesthetic experiences since finding anything at all boring (or vaguely interesting, or repulsive, or amusing, etc) would surely also start to count.

Still, the problem of how to establish what experiences are to count as aesthetic is also shared by prevailing discourses. In those the aesthetic is connected (as one might expect) to perceptions (visual or otherwise) and to evaluations of them, yet there are also undercurrents of exclusion swirling below the surface. The concepts of the aesthetic and its close relative art are implicitly associated with

supposedly elevated cultural sensibilities and forms. These in turn, as Bourdieu so brilliantly exposed, are merely reflections in the cultural sphere of the symbolic power of those classes that command the resources of society and are used to devalue the tastes of the less powerful (Bourdieu 1984). Fine dining comes to be classified as an aesthetic experience, but not eating a Big Mac; listening to a string quartet in a concert hall, but not grime music on a street corner. Perhaps Wilson's desire to substitute other standards is motivated in part by a desire to democratize the aesthetic, but if so, he fails to confront this problem head on. Before I explore it further, let me discuss one more core concept: art itself.

### What is art?

As Wilson argues, 'we need to account for aesthetic experience and art separately. We have aesthetic experiences outside of art. Furthermore, as much as art is dependent upon aesthetic experience, it is not reducible to it' (78). Art is a human practice, perhaps including the creative process, the artworks it produces, and the process of experiencing them. Nevertheless, art remains tightly related to the aesthetic. This is all very reasonable until art is connected back to Wilson's particular view of the aesthetic: 'I have defined aesthetic experience as our emergent experience of being-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world... and art as the skilled practice of giving shareable form to our aesthetic experience' (192). The consequence is that his eccentric definition of aesthetic experience leads to an equally eccentric understanding of art – as the practice of giving sharable form to our experience of being in relation to natural necessity.

Just as his definition of the aesthetic makes it extraordinarily wide, the literal implication here is that his definition of art makes it apply to an extraordinarily wide range of human activity, including for example science and engineering, which seem like quintessential cases of being in relation with natural necessity and giving that experience sharable form, in these cases as written documents or as technological artefacts. I don't for a moment believe that Wilson thinks that these things are artworks, but his definition, via his definition of the aesthetic, fails to establish coherent boundaries to what does count as an artwork.

One part of the problem is that Wilson's definitions don't do the work that definitions need to do because he is using them to do something different instead: he is using them to build a normative agenda under the guise of a theory of what art is. But because he doesn't confront the problem of what art is, he implicitly takes for granted a variety of dimensions of prevailing discourses that shape our understandings of the boundaries of art. Those discourses entail that certain classes of activity, such as painting, sculpture and certain forms of music and spoken performance count as art, and others don't. That may not seem problematic when the question at hand is whether we should exclude science and engineering from our concept of art, but it becomes much more problematic when we recognize that these discourses are not politically innocent.

Wilson is aware of this issue, but largely skirts around it. To his credit he explains clearly Owen Kelly's powerful critique of art as an ideological construction (137-8). For Kelly, art is a system in which some activities – those favoured by the metropolitan ruling class which has the power to shape this system – have cultural value bestowed upon them which is denied to other activities. There are also passing references to other critics including Bourdieu (138). But although Wilson recognizes some value in these arguments, he introduces them primarily in order to respond that they fail to recognize the value of art (139).

### The politics of art

Wilson recognizes that art and the aesthetic have often been understood in elitist and exclusionary ways and perhaps one motivation for his desire to reformulate them in such open terms is to free them of those connections. But what he fails to recognize, I think, is that these elitist boundaries are so intrinsic to contemporary understandings of art and aesthetic experience that the concepts collapse without them. We can agree that art is produced, and that it is produced to be experienced, but beyond

that there is no inherent quality that distinguishes art from not-art except that art belongs to categories that are socially recognized as art. As both Kelly and Bourdieu argue, such social recognition is produced by discursive power. The most convincing answer I am aware of to the question of ‘what is art’, is that offered by Bourdieu in *The Field of Cultural Production*: art is that which is recognized as art by the gatekeepers of the artistic field, those who are invested with the symbolic authority to consecrate works with artistic value. Art, he argues, is not only produced by painters, sculptors, composers – artists of all types – but also by ‘the producers of the meaning and value of the work – critics, publishers, gallery directors and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such, in particular teachers’ (Bourdieu 1993, 37). And those critics, publishers and other movers and shakers of the art world are themselves influenced by structures of symbolic status of different forms of culture that confer distinction upon the tastes of the dominant classes and deny it to those of the less powerful (Bourdieu 1984).

One useful index of the hierarchy of evaluations produced by these classifications is the distinction between art and entertainment, mentioned in passing by Wilson (176). Entertainment is one of the ‘others’ of art in the system of cultural distinction: it is used to dismiss otherwise artistic work that typically appeals to members of the working classes, cultural minorities, and younger people as being something less than, and something less valuable than, ‘art’, and indeed their experiences of it as something less than ‘aesthetic’. The very concept of art as it actually exists is inseparable from its employment to mark cultural forms favoured by social elites as privileged over those of more marginalized groups, and this is never really confronted in Wilson’s book.

### The value of art

A critical realist theory of art, to my mind, would need to examine how fundamental structures like these are to the system of art and the discourses that underpin it. Perhaps Wilson might respond that those are matters for sociology and political theory while he is practising philosophy. But that’s not the kind of philosophy that critical realism is. Critical realism is the kind of philosophy that recognizes that our fundamental concepts exist in the transitive dimension and can only be understood adequately within the context of their social production.

That need not exclude, however, addressing other issues as well. This brings us back to Wilson’s normative agenda. One part of his argument is that art has intrinsic value, and that this is too often neglected (199). On the one hand, this is just the sort of argument that ends up supporting elitist versions of art unless we recognize that art is currently defined in exclusionary ways. On the other, if the definition of art can be widened, not by extending it indefinitely but by bounding it in ways that do not exclude currently marginalized cultural activities, then it becomes useful to ask how it might help us all to flourish.

Wilson’s argument is that the intrinsic value of art arises from its capacity to increase and deepen our interaction (199), both with the capacities of the material world and with each other. Modelling aesthetic experience on our earliest feelings of connection with our carers, he sees the space of aesthetic experience – *The Space that Separates* of the title – as ‘the place where we most fully experience the life we have to live’ (207). ‘[I]t is only through art,’ he says, ‘through becoming more experienced at experiencing the world – that we can learn to live most fully’ (206).

Even here, I’m afraid, I am unconvinced by the approach that Wilson takes. If art is defined so loosely as to include virtually all human activity, these claims are rather pointless. If it is defined more narrowly in functional terms but still widely in terms of whose activities are to count as art, they are probably wrong: there are many other human activities, including non-artistic forms of human interaction, that perform these roles just as well. If art is defined in the exclusionary form implicit in contemporary discourse, these claims are positively elitist.

If we dig deep enough, however, I think there is still a fascinating and worthwhile message at the heart of this ambitious book. It does not succeed, for me, as a book about what art is, but it is much more promising as a utopian vision of what Nick wants art to deliver for us. His message, I think, is that art should aspire to create (and its best does create) a deep sense of connection to something beyond the immediate objects of perception through which it operates.

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