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Further Ruminations on Music

Abstract

This article examines the implications for aesthetics of using music as a model. It pursues the question of how music could stand as the paradigm of art in general as a cultural practice.

Summary

This article examines the implications for aesthetic theory of using music as a model. It pursues the question of what would follow from using music as the paradigm of art in general. How would we project an aesthetics, so to say, if we used music as our model by beginning and ending with the perceptual experience of music? This would lead to rejecting an object-oriented aesthetics that joins with the subjectivity of experience and emphasizing, in contrast, music's performative and embodied character, the ephemeral nature of the musical object, and engagement with music as a field experience that joins creative, focusing, appreciative, and performative features in a complex perceptual whole..

Key Words

aesthetic engagement, aesthetic field, aesthetic theory, exemplary object, performance

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1. Introduction

In an earlier discussion in this journal, I approached the experience of music not by simile or metaphor, which is a common approach, but by dwelling on the intrinsic features of musical experience.¹ While I suggested that these characteristics are found in other arts, I would like to carry this inquiry forward in a more general direction by considering how music could stand as the paradigm of art in general as a cultural practice. How would we project an aesthetics, so to say, if we used music as our model? This is a suggestive question and its response has far-reaching implications for our understanding of arts other than music and for aesthetic theory in general.

Consider the usual way in which aesthetic appreciation is understood. Here the visual arts are taken as the model. We face a two-dimensional object--a painting or other graphic object, and we are invited to gaze at it from a respectful distance, contemplating it disinterestedly (following Kant) for its own sake alone, and using our knowledge of art history to help us grasp the visual array. How we understand this appreciative experience will vary with our educational and artistic background, leading us perhaps to apprehend what we are seeing as representation, to search for a social record or a meaning in the work, or to abstract it as a purely graphic presentation. Implicit here is the characteristic dualism of viewer as subject and the painting as contemplative object. This is a familiar model that is easily exported to other arts, albeit with occasional violence to the experience, as in confounding literature with a printed text, or in regarding sculpture as essentially two-dimensional to be contemplated from an intervening distance and, in yet another instance, considering architecture as a visual configuration of forms. The distortion implicit in the examples of sculpture and architecture is clear, when sculpture is deprived of its mass by being exhibited against a gallery wall and a building is torn from its physical complex and function and reduced to the surface, color, and planes of a visual object.

Because of its elusive substantiality, music, fortunately, cannot be dematerialized so easily. It possesses body in the texture and mass of sound, and its distinctive temporality is multi-dimensional. Besides its forward movement, music may embody the coexistence of separate lines of sound, as in polyphony and the movement of inner voices and of the bass line in

primarily homophonic music. Music also embodies the mnemonic presence of past sound and the auditory anticipation implicit in present sound. Indeed, music seems to lie beyond the paradigmatic configurations of visual art appreciation. There is no comparable object, no perceivable distance, no necessity to supply meaning and, indeed, no "body" at all except as a metaphorical construction. Music thus requires its own ontology.

It would be helpful, then, to delineate the outlines of aesthetic appreciation using music as the paradigm. It is interesting how our very language leads us with metaphors toward conceptions that are visual and spatial. Searching for a place, a starting point, even a direction puts us in a physicalistic realm where the distinctive qualities of musical sound are, so to speak, out of place.. Let me try to sketch this out.

2. The musical occasion

We cannot be far off if we start (and end) with the perception of sound. Although the physical explanations of sound and its reception are important for acoustic engineering and for the psychology of perception, the listener is ordinarily unaware or inattentive to them. Moreover, language to describe the auditory experience is not readily available and we seem obliged to take recourse in metaphor. What would a literal descriptive account look like? For while the basic material (so to speak) of music is sound, sound does not subsist in isolation. It is produced and heard on an occasion and in a situation.

What music requires is fourfold: an originator, an activator, acoustic phenomena, and a listener. These four functions may be combined in the same individual, such as a singer or a jazz improviser, but more usually, as in a classical concert, music involves separate contributors. These four functions seem to be present on any musical occasion and may be called an aesthetic field.²

What is notable here is that these functions take place in a context of mutual interdependence to which each contributes but never stands alone. Thus the auditory function (the listener) cannot be separated from the sound or the performer or, indeed, the composer. Gone is the analytic-synthetic distinction; gone is the perceiver-object division. The musical event offers a distinctive context that is instantiated and realized on each occasion. Questions of identity, style, originality, and the like must be clarified with reference to the entire field. As Justus Buchler has observed, there are no simples, only complexes.³

It is illuminating to apply this model to the other arts. Of course, each art modality requires its own account, but many things become clearer, such as aesthetic appreciation and the identity and differences of the arts. Developing a descriptive analysis will give richness and resonance to our understanding of their values and the distinctive qualities of the various arts.

Music makes a special contribution to our understanding of aesthetic experience and value. By its direct and powerful sensory presence, music returns us to the purity of perceptual experience. It offers compelling testimony to the perceptual mode depicted by the aesthetic field in contrast to the usual cognitive accounts, such as Kant's. For him, cognition underlies all three treatises, and he undertook to devise distinctions and categories to explain orders of beauty and pleasure even though there may be none.⁴ This is not to say that concepts and distinctions may not be useful but rather to affirm that they must be derived from perceptual experience, authenticated and dependent on such experience, not the other way around. Pursuing this line of thought, it becomes clear how frequently what Dewey called the philosophical fallacy is committed in thinking that we can control the world by cognizing it.⁵ This is a strong temptation for many who are philosophically inclined and it is appalling how widespread is this tendency. Returning to the musical occasion, we have a complex situation of many factors and functions. Music is apprehended from a somewhat different perspective through the function of the composer from that of the performer, and similarly from the listener, although all four functions are present in each.

Applying this model to the other arts is equally illuminating. If we give the prime place to the perceptual experience of painting, for example, we recognize the interplay of creation and appreciation where the perceiver becomes active as a quasi-performer of the work, and matters of style and technique are meaningful as they affect perceptual experience. The same is the case with sculpture. In literature, where perception is almost entirely imaginative, the sensory presence is no less important as the reader collaborates with the author in the imaginative sensory evocation of the narrative.

This account of aesthetic experience as a complex field displays the inadequacy of disinterested contemplation as a model of aesthetic appreciation. With all four functions intricately entangled, there is no separation of listener or viewer and object. That is why I have been led to describe such appreciation as perceptual engagement, aesthetic engagement in the occasion.⁶

3. A perspective on perspectives

While not yet widely recognized, this insight into perceptual experience has been explored from many directions over the past century. We can exemplify it concretely by the example of perspective in the visual arts. In his extended essay, "Reverse Perspective" (1920), the Russian scholar Pavel Florensky (1882-1937) took issue with the usual account of visual perspective that considers it an accurate rendering of visual perception.⁷ It depicts, he argued, not our actual perception at all but only one of several possible, essentially symbolic renderings of visual reality. "[A] perspectival picture of the world is not a fact of perception, but merely a demand made in the name of certain considerations which, while they may be very powerful, are absolutely abstract."⁸ Single point perspective is only one of several schemes of linear perspective for rendering space by abstracting from perceptual experience. There can be two, three, and four-point perspective, as well. Still other forms of perspective exist, such as aerial perspective, depicting distance by differences in tone, hue, and distinctness, as well as the extraordinary isometric perspective common in Asian art, in which proportions are not distorted but remain equal. Moreover, visual perception, taken alone, abstracts a single sensory channel for apprehending distance. As Florensky noted, "Leaving aside the olfactory, gustatory, thermal, aural and tactile spaces that have *nothing in common* with Euclidean space..., we cannot overlook the fact that even visual space, the least removed from Euclidean space, turns out on closer inspection to be profoundly different from it."⁹ In multiple ways, then, visual perspective is an abstraction from perceptual experience and not a literal rendering.

Pictorial perspective illustrates in specific ways what is true of perceptual experience in the other arts. While specific sense modalities predominate in some arts and different ones in others, the full range of perceptual sensibility is involved in varying proportions and degrees in all the arts. To bring this back to our starting point, the appreciation of music is an engaged somatic experience that can produce a heightened physical response involving heart beat, muscle tension, and proprioception overall, as well as perception in aural, visual, and haptic sensory modalities.

All four functions—originative, performative, perceptually focused, and appreciative---join and participate in the musical field. As the music moves onward, the performer follows the sonorous course shaped originally by the composer, recreating it in the way laid out by the composer, re-composing, as it were, the musical movement. And the active, participatory listener does both, empathizing directly with the performer in following the course set out by the composer in

realizing the sound. None of these functions proceeds independently of the others. Appreciation is an engaged, integrative experience of living sound.

Music is realized, then, in this complex situation I call the aesthetic field. Taking any of its components alone distorts the situation and is the source of many of the insoluble problems that arise in attempting to explain the music, the performer, or music appreciation apart from the other constituents of the field. The sound originates with the composer, re-originates, so to speak, with the performer, and is re-embodied in the immediately ongoing auditory experience of the listener. When this all comes together in living presence, it is, as Glenn Gould once described 'ecstasy,' a "delicate thread binding together music, performance, performer and listener in a web of shared awareness, of innerness."¹⁰

4. Music as exemplary

By taking musical experience as a model, it is revealing to re-cast our understanding of the other arts. One of the interesting consequences of a musical model is recognizing the central place of music's most salient characteristic, its performative feature. Music seems necessarily to require performance, whether through actions by a live musician or indirectly by someone controlling an electronic playback device.

Yet all the arts require some form of activation in order to be experienced. Recognizing a performative feature in art is to realize the constitutive contribution of the appreciator in arts that have no overt performer, such as painting and literature. Appreciating the visual arts needs more than passive receptivity; it requires an active eye to note the details, tonalities, and movement of the visual array. But more than the eye is involved. Changing the distance to the pictorial surface and the direction from which it is viewed can transform the visual appearance. Moreover, there is a further somatic component in responding to the height from which a painting is viewed and by the body's response in muscle tone and tension, posture, and in varying the distance and direction to the painting. There may also be a perceptual influence from the cognitive contribution of art historical and technical information on the media and craft that are employed. Moreover, in sculpture the body makes an overt, active contribution to the experience. The apprehension of the sculptural material, of its mass, space, and volume, requires physical engagement. Apprehending sculpture's three-dimensionality is a somatic experience in which the viewer participates by regarding the sculpture from different directions and by varying the distance, as well as by responding physically to its mass volume, and surface. All these processes of appreciation exemplify the activity I have termed aesthetic

engagement: the activation of art in appreciative experience rather than by distancing oneself through disinterested contemplation.¹¹

It might seem difficult at first to locate a performer in the appreciation of literature until we recognize that the material of literature is not words, as such, but the imaginative experience that language evokes through linguistic sound, meaning, and action. The reader thus becomes a performer of the text: through active imagination, the reader contributes sensible substance to language. Perhaps this is most obviously visual, but other sensory modes may also be evoked,, often imaginatively but sometimes literally: sound, touch, bodily tension, respiration, and movement. Once we recognize that full appreciation is not passive reception but requires active engagement, we can discover a performative function in every artistic mode.

The musical object is also elusive. Despite the efforts of some aestheticians to ontologize music by somehow constructing it into an object that can be appreciated and judged, this is pure fabrication. No object can be located because there is no object. Musical sound is embedded in the occasion, in the many-faceted experience of active listening. As on every occasion of aesthetic appreciation, there is a perceptual focus. Often this can be located in an object but an identifiable object is not necessary. Focused experience is central. And such focus is not exclusively auditory or visual or the province of any single sense receptor. It is the experience of perceptual engagement of the whole person as a bio-cultural being embedded in a society and a history. The usual way of describing this as disinterested aesthetic contemplation, as psychical distance, to use Bullough's term, is unsatisfactory. This psychologizes the experience, rendering it subjective and wholly mental, ignoring the body's contribution, the effect of the setting, and the other contextual factors that influence appreciation.

A more accurate description of the appreciative occasion is to consider it an occasion of engagement, aesthetic engagement. This is an especially salutary consequence of basing our understanding of the arts on appreciative experience, for it suggests that there may be no object as such in any art.¹² The painting must be seen to be appreciated; without being engaged in experience, it is merely a physical object, a canvas coated with pigment. Similarly with every other art.

Literature offers a comparable example of an art whose object is elusive. Is the printed text the literary object, the poem on the page, the book in the hand? Clearly, here, too, the aesthetic focus must be the experience of literature, the movement of the text as it is read and entered in

experience as a process of living through its narrative sequence of sounds and images, meanings and evocations. The musical model is suggestive here, as well.

As in appreciating music, the interplay of such features in the field experience of literature constitutes the aesthetic occasion. There is a creative contribution in the focusing, appreciation, and performance of perceptual experience so that these functions fuse and can be described only in relation to one another as an activity of human sensibility in full perceptual engagement. On such an account, music becomes truly exemplary. It liberates us from misleading questions, from false quests, from inherited presuppositions, and from other such obstacles to free and engaged aesthetic appreciation. Living in the sound is living in perceptual experience. It is the exemplar of every art and the true substance of appreciation.

¹ Cf. Arnold Berleant, "Ruminations on Music as an Exemplary Art," *New Sound* 40/2 (2012), 201-8.

² See Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas 1970).

³ Justus Buchler, *The Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1966).

⁴ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §5.

⁵ John Dewey, *Later Works*, 6:5 cf. 1:51. See Gregory Pappas, *John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy As Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

⁶ This is developed in my book, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) and elaborated in subsequent writings. Cf. "What Is Aesthetic Engagement?" *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 12 (2013); *Aesthetics in Action, International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Vol. 2014, pp. 17-19.

⁷ Florensky's studies centered on Russian icons but also included Renaissance painting. See Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision, Essays on the Perception of Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 250. [A perspectival artist] "is an observer who brings nothing of his own to the world, who cannot even synthesise his own fragmentary impressions, who, since he does not enter into a living interaction with the world and does not live in it, is not aware of this own reality either, although in his proud seclusion from the world he imagines himself to be that last instance. Yet on the basis of his own furtive experience he constructs all of reality, all of it, on the pretext of objectivity, squeezing it into what he has observed of reality's own differential. This is precisely how the world view of Leonardo, Descartes, and Kant grows out of the soil of the Renaissance; this is also how the visual art equivalent to this world view--perspective--arises." *Ibid.*, p. 264.

"...physiological space cannot be made to fit within it [a Euclidean schema]. Leaving aside the olfactory, gustatory, thermal, aural and tactile spaces that have *nothing in common* with Euclidean space...we

cannot overlook the fact that even visual space, the least removed from Euclidean space, turns out on closer inspection to be profoundly different from it. And it is in fact [visual space] that lies at the core of painting and the graphic arts...." p.266

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

¹⁰ Glenn Gould, quoted on Kultur DVD #D2822.

¹¹ "What Is Aesthetic Engagement?", *Aesthetics in Action*, ed. Krystyna Wilkowszewska. International Yearbook of Aesthetics, Vol. 18/2014 (Libron: Krakow, 2015), pp. 17-19. Also downloaded on academia.edu and ResearchGate.

¹² See Arnold Berleant, "Art without Object," in *Re-thinking Aesthetics, Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Farnham, UK & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 179-193.