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## **Determinants of Impact: towards a better understanding of encounters with the arts**

Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett<sup>1</sup>

The paper argues that current methods for assessing the impact of the arts are largely based on a fragmented and incomplete understanding of the cognitive, psychological and socio-cultural dynamics that govern the aesthetic experience. It postulates that a better grasp of the interaction between the individual and the work of art is the necessary foundation for a genuine understanding of *how* the arts can affect people. Through a critique of philosophical and empirical attempts to capture the main features of the aesthetic encounter, the paper draws attention to the gaps in our current understanding of the responses to art. It proposes a classification and exploration of the factors – social, cultural and psychological – that contribute to shaping the aesthetic experience, thus determining the possibility of impact. The ‘determinants of impact’ identified are distinguished into three groups: those that are inherent to the individual who interacts with the artwork; those that are inherent to the artwork; and ‘environmental factors’, which are extrinsic to both the individual and the artwork. The paper concludes that any meaningful attempt to assess the impact of the arts would need to take these ‘determinants of impact’ into account, in order to capture the multidimensional and subjective nature of the aesthetic experience.

### **Keywords:**

Arts impacts assessment; aesthetic experience; transformative powers of the arts; reception; audience research.

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## Introduction

There are many things that policy makers expect the subsidised arts to achieve. These have to do with, amongst other things, local and national economic development; job creation; the enhancement of self-esteem, personal health and well-being; an individual's competitiveness in the job market; and the reduction of criminal re-offending. As we have put it in an earlier paper (Bennett, 2002), "[i]t really is difficult to think of any other area of public policy which attracts quite such an extraordinary combination of expectations". This paper concerns itself in particular with the belief, central to contemporary articulations of the aims and rationales for public support of the arts, that the artistic experience can have transformative effects on both the individual and society. The following passage from ACE's (2003) manifesto *Ambition for the Arts*, clearly shows the central place that the language of transformation has gained in the official rhetoric that accompanies arts funding in England:

We will argue that being involved with the arts can have a lasting and transforming effect on many aspects of people's lives. This is true not just for individuals, but also for neighbourhoods, communities, regions and entire generations, whose sense of identity and purpose can be changed through art.

In her widely cited, personal essay, *Government and the Value of Culture*, Secretary of State for Culture, Tessa Jowell (2004) suggests that 'poverty of aspiration' can trap underprivileged young people in Britain to day in a condition of physical poverty. The arts, however, have the capacity to transform peoples' sense of what is possible:

... I do believe that the rewards of grappling with great art in any medium are enormous. The reluctance of so many to attempt that challenge is a terrible waste of human potential, with a concomitant loss of human realisation.

Can we be sure, though, that engagement with the arts and culture really does have transformative powers? In other words, what do we actually know about the psychological, intellectual and emotional processes that people go through when they participate in cultural activities or enjoy works of art? This paper explores these questions.

The research presented is the result of the second phase of a three-year project currently under way at the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies at the University of Warwick. The study, co-funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Arts Council England, aims at a critical reformulation of the present debate around the social impacts of the arts. By exploring in particular the activity of theatre-going and reading for pleasure, the research aims to throw further light on the deep-rooted conviction that the 'arts are good for you'. The first phase of the project, culminating in the publication of *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History* (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, forthcoming) has offered a detailed historical analysis of the intellectual origins of the conviction that the arts can transform both individuals and society (for the better *and* the worse).<sup>2</sup>

One thing that our extensive analysis of sources, philosophical, artistic and scientific, was not able to clarify, however, was exactly *how* the arts operated their magic upon people; by what *mechanisms* the arts were capable of leaving a life-altering mark on the human psyche; and what aspects of the aesthetic experience were likely to play the major part in determining or shaping the impact of the aesthetic encounter. This was territory that was still relatively unexplored and where further research was needed. However, the questions opened up by this research did not lend themselves to straightforward answers. The present paper, therefore, represents a first attempt to deal with some of the questions that our critical-historical approach to understanding the social impacts of the arts had thrown up<sup>3</sup>. It will not provide exhaustive answers, but it will begin to explore some fundamental questions

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<sup>2</sup> An introduction to this study can be found in Belfiore and Bennett 2007.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, please refer to Belfiore and Bennett 2008.

that need to be dealt with if we are to make any progress towards a clearer understanding of what the social and psychological impacts of involvement in the arts might be. Such an understanding is essential to any attempt to develop robust methodologies for arts impact assessment.

The paper is structured into three main sections. The first provides a theoretical exploration of the notion of 'aesthetic experience', in an attempt to establish whether the encounter with works of art does indeed result in a type of experience that is inherently and essentially distinguishable from other types of human experience. The second section, by referring to a wide range of material produced within a number of different fields of enquiry (reader-response theory; reception theory; aesthetics; psychology just to name but a few) clarifies what is actually known about people's interaction with the arts and the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that are triggered by the aesthetic experience. The third section, finally, presents a classification of the main factors that we suggest are likely to shape the aesthetic experience, thus determining whether a long-lasting impact might occur and what that impact might be. These 'determinants of impact' are divided into three groups: those that are inherent to the individual who interacts with the artwork; those that are inherent to the artwork; and those that are extrinsic to both the individual and the artwork, and which we might refer to as 'environmental factors'. For obvious limitations of space, this paper will focus principally on the first group of factors, but will also outline the other two categories, point out our gaps in knowledge and identify the areas that would benefit from further investigation.

The first section of the paper, being more theoretical and philosophical in nature, presents a discussion of theories and ideas that have been predominantly elaborated within the disciplinary areas of aesthetics, art theory and cultural studies. The second section, on the other hand, relies on a body of work a substantial part of which we define as 'empirical' or 'scientific'. Our use of these labels probably needs some qualification. These terms, as used in this paper, include – but are not limited to – the natural sciences, encompassing also social research and work in other areas (cultural and

social psychology, for instance) in which conclusions are reached not exclusively through a process of theoretical reasoning and argumentation, but mainly through a process of observation (through field work, for example) or experimentation (as in the case of the study of human responses to audio-visual stimuli). In other words, the principal distinction that the paper makes in categorizing the large body of work consulted relies on a distinction between *theoretical* or *philosophical* approaches to discussions of the aesthetic experience and *empirical* ones, which attempt to describe and account for people's interaction with the arts on the basis of their observed experiences and their responses to the artistic encounter. Insights from both types of research traditions are drawn on in the last section of the paper, in the attempt to provide a rich and multidisciplinary picture of the factors that are likely to bear significantly on people's reception of artworks. As mentioned above, the analysis presented is centred mainly, but by no means exclusively, on the experiences of reading for pleasure and on attendance at theatrical performances. The decision to narrow the focus in this way stems from our doubts over the extent to which experiences of different arts, or, indeed, even within the same art form, can be seen as commensurate. We shall be attending to this issue in the third stage of the project, when we will investigate further what can actually be said to constitute the 'novel' and 'theatrical performance', with a view to determining how far it is possible to generalise about them.

## **Part One: What is an 'aesthetic experience'<sup>4</sup>?**

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<sup>4</sup> In the context of this paper the expression 'aesthetic experience' is used as a synonym of 'artistic experience', to refer to the individual's encounter and interaction with the work of art. The etymological meaning of the phrase, whereby aesthetics is, in Baumgarten's words, "a science of sensual recognition" - or as De Bolla (2002, p.9) paraphrases "a general enquiry into how we come to know the world from the evidence of our senses" - is for practical reasons, not considered here, as it would extend and complicate the discussion beyond what can be dealt with adequately within the constraints of this paper. Indeed, as Arnold Berleant points out, if we were to consider the full etymological implications of the adjective 'aesthetic', "[t]o the extent that every thing, every place, every event is experienced by an aware body with sensory directness and immediate significance, [everything]...has an aesthetic element" (quoted in Maclagan, 2001, p.10).

Understanding what an aesthetic experience is, what it feels like to have one and what emotional responses it provokes is an endeavour fraught with complexities and uncertainties. Indeed, both terms in the phrase represent extremely complex notions that are difficult to articulate. As Iseminger (1981, p. 389) notes, distinguishing the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic has been a constant and persisting preoccupation for philosophers of art. Some have interpreted the distinction as ontological in nature, thus talking about 'aesthetic objects' that display essentially aesthetic qualities or features. Others have viewed the distinction in cultural terms, as a result of cultural and historical conventions, thus giving centrality to notions of 'aesthetic evaluation', 'aesthetic functions' or 'aesthetic institutions'. Others, finally, see the aesthetic as fundamentally psychological, whereby the nature of the 'aesthetic' is tightly linked to notions of aesthetic enjoyment, pleasure and aesthetic perception. The concept of experience is equally problematic; not surprisingly, Hans-Georg Gadamer could refer to it as "one of the most obscure we have" (cited in Shusterman, 2006, pp. 217-8). It would therefore be questionable to assume as a given the differentiation of experience into easily distinguishable types and the possibility of singling out and observing a specifically aesthetic kind of experience (Berleant, 1970, pp. 90-3).

#### IS THERE SUCH A THING AS AN 'AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE'?

Not surprisingly, then, scholars writing within the field of aesthetics have been arguing, during the last fifty years, over whether there is such a thing as an aesthetic experience at all<sup>5</sup>. Whilst the concept of aesthetic experience seems to be going through a phase of academic and intellectual revival (Carroll, 2002, p. 145), the fact remains that a significant number of philosophers have argued that it is pointless to speak about 'aesthetic experiences' on two main grounds. Firstly, it is hard to identify a feature or a quality that is characteristic of and essential to what we, in common speech, refer to as the artistic experience (a quality, in other words, that makes the aesthetic experience

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<sup>5</sup> For an extensive discussion of these arguments and the progressive decline of the concept of aesthetic experience - in particular in twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophical thinking - see Iseminger 2005 and Shusterman 1997.

unique, thus distinguishing it from moral, religious and all other possible types of experiences)<sup>6</sup>. Secondly, the concept of 'experience' cannot be properly qualified by the connotation of being 'aesthetic', on account of the fact that an experience is not an object or a physical thing that can have or possess qualities (Mitias, 1988, pp. 1-4). As a matter of fact, 'experience' is a highly subjective concept, a discussion of which inevitably entails references to a mental event taking place in what could be defined either as the individual's 'mind' or 'spirit', the definition of which is also very difficult and controversial (*Ibid*, p. 11). As Berleant (1970, p. 93) explains:

... a careful description of the full range and variety of human experience must recognize the underlying continuity of its various types. Experiences associated with art are not radically different or sharply separated from other sorts of experiences. [...] Thus while aesthetic experience has an identity, it is not set off from other modes of experience by some unique attribute. Indeed, the aesthetic is not a separate *kind* of experience but rather a *mode* in which experience may occur.

Despite the scepticism raised in some quarters over the possibility of providing a clear and straightforward definition of the nature and characteristics of the artistic encounter, numerous competing and contrasting articulations and explanations of the aesthetic experience have been put forward since the beginnings of aesthetic speculation. Indeed, in many respects, attempts to define and make sense of aesthetic experience came to be identified with the quest for an answer to one of the most complex questions of aesthetics: 'what is art?'. In the fascinating historical review he offers in his *Art and Engagement*, Arnold Berleant (1991, chapter 1) suggests

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<sup>6</sup> Those who argue in favour of the possibility of identifying essentially aesthetic qualities of objects believe that what makes an experience aesthetic is the fact that what is experienced are the aesthetic qualities of a certain object. As Mitias (1988, p. 6) explains, according to this view, in the process of aesthetic perception the experience is 'infected' by the aesthetic nature of the object being experienced, thus colouring aesthetically the experience itself. A proponent of this position, Kinsley Price (1979, p. 139), explains that "what makes an experience aesthetic is not the awareness in that experience, but some property of its object. The concept 'aesthetic experience' finds its character in the fact that it is applied correctly not where awareness is of a certain kind (awareness is always of the same kind), but where the object of awareness is of a certain kind. What makes an experience aesthetic is that it is the experience of an aesthetic object." The contentious element here is due to the difficulties in describing precisely and convincingly the nature of such an 'aesthetic object'.



that the centrality of the notion of experience in thinking about the arts and the mode of our appreciation of them begins to assert itself in the eighteenth century, being prefigured in the writing of the English thinkers Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Reid (see also Mortensen, 1997, pp. 108ff.). It is with Kant, and his notion of 'disinterestedness' as the key feature of the correct response to art, however, that the idea of a specifically aesthetic mode of perception and a type of apprehension of objects distinguished from that of everyday experience is fully developed. Barleant (*Ibid.*, p. 12) explains Kantian 'disinterestedness' as follows:

... an attitude denoting the perception of an object for its own sake without regard to further purposes, especially practical ones, and requiring the separation of the object from its surroundings in order that it may be contemplated freely and with no distracting considerations. Disinterestedness began to emerge as the mark of a new and distinctive mode of experience called 'aesthetic,' a kind of awareness distinct from more commonly recognized alternative modes, such as instrumental, cognitive, moral, and religious experience.

This formulation of an 'aesthetic attitude' is rooted in another important development that took place in the eighteenth century, that is, the emergence of the notion of 'beauty' as "the constitutive feature and distinguishing mark of art (its main aim being to create beautiful objects)" (Dziemdok, 1988, p. 2). In Kant's view, the pleasure afforded by beauty is a type of pleasure caused by an object which is not accompanied by desire for that object. As McMahon (2001, p. 232) explains, "[d]isinterested pleasure means that the basis for the pleasure is not egocentric. The pleasure of beauty is like perceiving a solution to a problem, and enjoying it for its own sake, rather than because personal rewards are anticipated". This idea of the disinterested nature of the experience of beauty in the work of art, therefore, requires a conception of the art object<sup>7</sup> as something isolated from the rest of life and existing in a

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<sup>7</sup> The term 'art object' is used here, and in the rest of the paper, in the broad sense that Jennifer Anne McMahon (2001, p. 227) gives to the expression in her exploration of the notion of 'beauty': "to refer not only to tangible things like paintings and objects of nature, but also to intellectual constructs and temporally extended art works like music and performance". The various philosophical approaches to understanding art, and consequently

separated ideal region that little has to do with the rest of human activity. In order to be properly appreciated, such an object requires the adoption, on our part, of a correct contemplative and, indeed, disinterested disposition, removed from both sensory pleasure and ordinary emotions.

#### AN INTERACTIVE VIEW OF THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

In the view discussed above, the role of the recipient of the beauty of the work of art is on the whole passive, based as it is on the acceptance of the autonomy of the work of art and on the assumption of the correct intellectual posture as a prerequisite for an adequate response to the work of art. Berleant suggests that such a conception of the aesthetic experience reflects the distinction between person and world that characterises philosophical thinking around the eighteenth century (and particularly evident in empiricist theories of knowledge-formation). It is only in the late nineteenth century that attempts to challenge such a duality inspire different conceptualizations of human experience, in which the perceiver and the world are seen as bound together by a relation of reciprocity. This trend Berleant (*Ibid.*, p. 15) defines as ‘the rise of the idea of experiential continuity’, according to which an active engagement between the perceiver and the art object is central to the aesthetic experience<sup>8</sup>.

Berleant compellingly shows how these theoretical developments have taken place, especially in the last century, at least partly in response to the innovative trends in contemporary artistic production. This new conceptualization of the aesthetic experience as characterised by the active involvement of the perceiver only reflects the creation of a type of art, music

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the aesthetic experience, that we have briefly discussed here all conceive of the ‘art object’ differently. Yet all find ways to identify art objects and distinguish them from all the other objects present in everyday life and experience. We discuss this in more detail in Belfiore and Bennett 2006 (pp. 13-18).

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, the degree of such engagement varies depending on the thinker considered. We cannot, for reasons of space, discuss this philosophical development in great detail here, but we would refer the reader to chapter 1 of Berleant’s *Art and Engagement* (1991) for a fuller discussion of this notion of experiential continuity in the thought of Henri Bergson, John Dewey, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Mikel Dufrenne.

and performance that demands an active role and an unprecedented degree of interaction from its public. In Berleant's (*Ibid.*, p. 26) own words, "artists have been forcing us to realize that entering the world of art requires the active engagement of the total person and not just a subjective cast of mind. [...] Art thus remains distinctive without being separate. [...] the idea of aesthetic engagement has become the keystone of the new artistic sensibility"<sup>9</sup>. The changed and more demanding expectations placed by the creators of art on the perceivers are confirmed by this quotation from Pablo Picasso, who reiterated the centrality of the notion of 'engagement' in the aesthetic encounter:

The picture is not thought out and determined beforehand; rather while it is being made it follows the mobility of thought. Finished, it changes further, according to the condition of him who looks at it. A picture lives its life like a living creature, undergoing the changes that daily life imposes upon us. That is natural, since a picture lives only through him who looks at it (cited in Berleant, 1970, p. 97).

In *What is Literature?*, Sartre (1950), likewise, assigns a crucial and creative role to the reader of fiction. He maintains that "[t]he creative act is only an incomplete and abstract moment in the production of a work" (*Ibid.*, p. 29). Sartre argues that literature does have an important social function and that the collaboration - indeed the 'pact' - between author and reader is a necessary precondition for the novel to come to life and become an instrument of social change. In Sartre's (*Ibid.*, pp. 29-30) own words:

If the author existed alone he would be able to write as much as he liked; the work as *object* would never see the light of day and he would either have to put down his pen or despair. But the operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents. It is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and

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<sup>9</sup> Fenner (2003, p. 40) makes an important point with regards to the shift described by Berleant: "The movement from the Taste Theories to those focused on aesthetic experience is not a movement that is over and done with – far from it. There is still (and I think there will always be) a tension between these two very basic aspects of philosophical aesthetics".

imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others<sup>10</sup>.

This notion of the collaborative nature of the interaction between creator and consumer of art has become even more predominant in the last fifty years. [As art historian Clare Bishop (2006, p. 10) points out, since the 1960s, a new wave of artists have devoted themselves to “striving to collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception. Their emphasis is on collaboration, and the collective dimension of the social experience” Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of a ‘relational art’ presented in his influential essay entitled *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) is indeed a clear example of this theoretical trend. Bourriaud’s idea of a relational art - which he (*Ibid.*, p. 14) defines as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space” - indeed entails that the meaning of the artwork is created collectively, rather than resulting from the private space of individual consumption. As Bourriaud (*Ibid.*, p. 13) himself explains, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist”. Kant’s notion of ‘disinterested’ art could have been more thoroughly and explicitly rejected.

Similar views have also been expressed for the forms of cultural and artistic experience that are provided by the mass media. John Fiske, for instance, has commented upon the open and polysemic nature of television, and the active audience it requires:

What television delivers is not programs but a semiotic experience.  
This experience is characterised by its openness and polysemy.

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<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Iser (1972, p. 279), one of the founding fathers of reader-response theory expresses a similar view when he states that “the [literary] work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realised, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader – though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text”. For Iser, it is precisely in the convergence of text and readers that the literary work comes into existence. For a broader overview of the theories that see reading as part of the process that produces the text, see Storey, 1999, chapter 4 and Rosenblatt, 1982.

Television is not quite a do-it-yourself meaning kit but neither is it a box of ready-made meanings for sale. Although it works within cultural determinations, it also offers freedoms and the power to evade, modify, or challenge these limitations and controls (in Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, p. 23)<sup>11</sup>.

Theories that highlight the notion of the perceiver's engagement as crucial to the aesthetic experience are obviously very interesting for the research in hand, for they inevitably draw attention and explore the interaction between individuals and the arts. Some theorists, such as for instance, Malcolm Budd (1995, p. 4; see also Matravers, 2003) have gone as far as proposing an understanding of artistic value in terms of 'the experience a work of art offers'. This means equating the value of the art with the quality and value of the experience it produces: "So a work of art is valuable as art if it is such that the experience it offers is intrinsically valuable; and it is valuable to the degree that this experience is intrinsically valuable" (*Ibid.*, p. 5)<sup>12</sup>. Noël Carroll (2000, p. 204) further explains the theoretical foundation of this perspective of the aesthetic experience as follows:

An experience only counts as aesthetic experience if it is undertaken in the belief that the experience is valuable for its own sake. Those who are prone to contemplate an artwork – appreciating its formal structures, tracking its aesthetic and expressive properties – in the belief that this has some instrumental value are simply not undergoing aesthetic experiences. That is a consequence of the thesis that aesthetic experience is necessarily a matter of experience valued for its own sake.

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<sup>11</sup> Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, pp. 68 ff.) go one step further, and suggest that, due to the pervasive nature of the media in contemporary society, a new form of audience experience is prevalent today. This they refer to as *diffused audience*. The defining characteristic of this type of audience-experience is that "everyone becomes an audience all the time. Being a member of an audience is no longer an exceptional event, nor even an everyday event. Rather, it is constitutive of everyday life". Similarly, Baz Kershaw (1994, pp. 166-7), suggests that we now live in a performative society, "in which human transactions are completely structured through the growing use of performative modes and frames". The implications of such theories would be that a study of the audience experience might ultimately equate to a study of life in contemporary times.

<sup>12</sup> This is, however, a contested view of aesthetic value. Goldman (2006), for example, argues that equating the value of works of art solely - or even primarily - with the experiences they generate ultimately devalues the artworks. For this line of reasoning would lead one to assert that a genuine painting and a forgery have the same value if they are capable of having a similar effect on the viewer, or instigate an equally valuable experience. Goldman suggests that this would be a problematic and ultimately untenable conclusion.

It is interesting to point out how such articulations of the nature and value of the aesthetic experience to individuals is consistent with the very influential notion of the enjoyment of the arts as an instance of *flow experience* put forward by the psychologist and theorist of creativity Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997; 2002; Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990). Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990, p. 73), on the basis of a series of interviews carried out among museum professionals have suggested that:

... the aesthetic experience is a specific form of that more general enjoyment people report when they become deeply involved with opportunities for using their skills – be they sensory, intellectual, physical, or emotional in nature. Like other kinds of flow experiences, encounters with works of art present feasible goals which can be reached by using and refining perceptual skills, a wide range of knowledge, and emotional sensitivity. The application of these skills to the challenges presented by the work of art results in a deep involvement in the transaction, which leaves the viewer in a state that is experienced as autotelic – that is, intrinsically rewarding<sup>13</sup>.

They also (*Ibid.*) point out however, that what distinguishes the artistic encounter from other types of autotelic pastimes and hobbies is the communicative element in the arts. Works of art, whatever their nature and medium, are borne out of the artist's desire to communicate and share thoughts, feelings and experiences with his or her audience. This communicative dimension of the artistic encounter that can operate across cultures and historical times is both the distinguishing characteristic of the particular type of 'flow experience' provided by the arts, and one of the root-causes of its complexity.

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<sup>13</sup> This interpretation of the aesthetic experience as an instance of *flow experience* has become popular in recent years, probably due to the success of Csikszentmihalyi's work on creativity and his guidebooks on how to achieve happiness by fostering flow in everyday life (see, for instance, Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). However, similar definitions of the aesthetic experience have also been put forward by aesthetic theorists. Alan H. Goldman (2006, p. 334), looking back to his past research, summarises his position as follows: "I have characterised [the aesthetic] experience in terms of the simultaneous challenge and engagement of all our mental capacities – perceptual, cognitive, affective, imaginative, even volitional – in appreciation of the relations amongst aspects and elements of artworks. Such engagement creates a rich and intense mental experience imbued with meanings from all these faculties operating in tandem and informing one another".

Coming back to the original question we set out to explore, it is interesting to note how Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (*Ibid.*, p. xiii), whilst suggesting that it is possible to construct a model of the aesthetic experience, are also careful to point out that the question ‘is there such a thing as an aesthetic experience?’, is not one that can be answered easily, or in a fashion that can satisfy criteria of scientific objectivity. As they further explain (*Ibid.*), “[e]xperiences are subjective phenomena and therefore cannot be externally verified. Either one trusts the words of the person who reports the experience or one does not”.

This section of the paper has reviewed philosophical investigations around the nature of the aesthetic object and the kind of experience it can provide to the individuals who observe and perceive it. It has also looked at denials of the very possibility of distinguishing, among different types of human experience, one that can be identified as aesthetic. Finally, it has traced the historical trajectory of theoretical understandings of the aesthetic experience and identified in theories that highlight the centrality of the interaction between creator and audience a good theoretical foundation for our study of the ways in which the arts might affect people. In the following section, we will put to the test Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson’s conclusion that aesthetic experience is always subjective and therefore not amenable to exhaustive scientific analysis. We propose to do this by surveying and assessing the extent to which empirical research can help us to throw light on the cognitive and psychological mechanisms at play in the aesthetic experience.

## **Part Two: What do we *know* about the aesthetic experience?**

One thing that emerges quite clearly from the preceding analysis of different positions *vis à vis* the nature and characteristics, or indeed the existence, of a distinct form of experience originating from the aesthetic encounter is the multifaceted and volatile nature of the *concept* of the aesthetic experience. Inevitably, the complexity of the notion becomes even greater when we move from theoretical debates about aesthetics to more concrete attempts to

understand *actual* experiences of the arts and what their effects might be on specific individuals. As mentioned earlier, a good way to try and assess what the gaps in our understanding of the interaction between people and artworks might be, is to start from what we already know about it. Hence, it is important to ask ‘what do we actually *know* about people’s aesthetic experiences?’, and ‘do aesthetic experiences lend themselves to observation in a scientific setting?’<sup>14</sup>

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson’s (1990) scepticism about the possibility of achieving a ‘scientific’ explanation of aesthetic experiences was recorded above. And yet, that cautious warning appears in the context of a study that claims, on the basis of empirical research carried out amongst a sample of museum professionals, to be able to describe the structure of the aesthetic experience. On the basis of the data gathered, the authors feel able to conclude that, while the thoughts and emotions instigated by a work of visual art are going to be inevitably different for each individual, “the structure of the experience, its quality, the way it feels while it lasts, seems to be the same regardless of its cognitive and emotional content”. It is precisely this general and common experiential structure that they attempt to illuminate through their empirical work<sup>15</sup>.

Attempts to try and find out more about people’s response to the arts in a scientific setting have been, in the course of time, numerous. They have originated from a number of different disciplinary fields, from aesthetics and

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<sup>14</sup> By the expression a ‘scientific setting’ we do not refer here just to experimental research carried out in a laboratory, but rather to empirical observations of responses to the arts that strive to fulfil criteria of scientific rigour and objectivity.

<sup>15</sup> Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) identify four main structural components in the visual artistic experience: a *perceptual* response that has to do with composition, form, balance, proportion, colours, etc.; an *emotional* response, which has to do with matters of interpretation and reactions to the emotional content of the work of art; an *intellectual* response that is determined by a focus on the more theoretical and art-historical questions raised by the artwork; and, finally, a *communicative* response, whereby the work of art is seen as a means to establish a connection of sorts between the individual and the artist’s time, place and cultural climate. It is the interplay of these elements that their model of the aesthetic experience is based on. See Eversmann (2004) for an attempt to adapt this model to the interpretation of the theatrical experience.



psychology to, more recently, marketing and consumer research.<sup>16</sup> In the hope of gaining a better understanding of the ways in which people respond to the arts, scholars from both humanistic and scientific backgrounds have attempted to adapt the scientific model of investigation to the study of individuals' response to the encounter with artworks. This entails applying to the study of aesthetic response a method of analysis based on a series of steps: observation, classification, formulation of hypotheses and their verification through experiments devised to either confirm or discredit the initial hypothesis.

As Molnar (1974, p. 24) observes, this is a problematic proposition from the outset, on the grounds that the scientific method deals with the identification and observation of objective facts, whereas in the realm of the aesthetic "subjective factors rather than objective external physical factors are of primary importance". As Molnar (1974, p. 25) further points out, the ambition to study aesthetic experience 'objectively' and in a scientific setting is also marred by the recent questioning of the very possibility of objectivity in scientific experiments. He refers to evidence showing how the behaviour of animals under controlled conditions in laboratories has been shown to be influenced by the experimenter, and also points towards research showing that some observations made by astronomers had been influenced by their subjective interpretations of data. Hence Molnar's conclusion that "the physical phenomenon under study, the measuring instruments used and the eyes of the experimenter form a linked system in which each component is hierarchically equally important" (*Ibid.*). Nevertheless, numerous attempts have been made to examine the aesthetic experience in a scientific and experimental setting, especially within the field of psychology. These were pioneered by G. T. Fechner's *Vorschule der Aesthetic*, published in 1876, and have resulted in the collection and analysis of a considerable body of empirical data under the labels of 'psychology of art', 'psychological

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<sup>16</sup> As a result of changes in the marketplace, companies now have shifted from attempting to sell goods and services to the selling of experiences. This is why the achievement of a better understanding of the mechanisms by which consumer experiences can be enhanced has become central to marketing theory and consumer research in the cultural sphere as much as in other economic sectors (Joy and Sherry, 2003, p. 259; Miesen, 2004, p. 45).

aesthetics' and 'experimental aesthetics' (; Dickie 1962; Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972; Lindauer, 1973; Maclagan, 2001; Molnar, 1974; Wallach, 1959)<sup>17</sup>.

So, Molnar's reservations notwithstanding, what has the empirical study of the response to artistic stimuli shown? Has the contribution of the natural and social sciences to the understanding of the aesthetic experience proved valuable?

#### UNDERSTANDING THE RESPONSE TO THE ARTS: THE EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

As mentioned above, the psychological disciplines have shown a particular interest in attempting to explore the processes behind artistic reception, so it seems logical to start our review with this body of work. Kreitler and Kreitler (1972) identify four main theories that have provided the theoretical underpinning for psychological studies of the aesthetic experience: psychoanalysis, Gestalt theory, behaviourism or neobehaviourism, and information theory<sup>18</sup>. For obvious limits of space, we cannot assess the contribution of each of these approaches to understanding the experience of artworks. We will therefore focus on those empirical attempts to understand people's encounter with art that have originated from behaviourism. This is, indeed, the oldest approach (having been pioneered, as we have seen, in the mid-nineteenth century, when the other theories had not even been fully formulated), and because of the significant volume of research that has

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<sup>17</sup> The popularity of the study of the aesthetic experience in a scientific and experimental setting is demonstrated by the bibliographical review compiled by Norman Kiell (1965) in the mid-1960s and entitled *Psychiatry and Psychology in the Visual Arts and Aesthetics: A bibliography*. Here Kiell lists in excess of 7000 pieces of research, catalogued by topic and author. Yet, one of the criticisms moved against the book concerned omissions and incompleteness in the listing of the literature (Mittleman, 1965).

<sup>18</sup> The more recent development of a neurological theory of aesthetic experience (Ramachandran and Hirstein, 1999) is a further interesting theoretical direction of recent scientific attempts to grasp the artistic experience. A detailed discussion of the distinctive contribution of each of these theoretical approaches to the study of human responses to the arts is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Kreitler and Kreitler (1972) offer an extensive and insightful introduction to the psychology of art. Zeki (1999a; 1999 b) presents a fascinating account of the contribution of neurology and brain science to the explanation of the aesthetic experience, while Young and Saver (2001) look at the neurological aspects of narrative and story-telling. The reader might also find the critique of such scientific approaches to art offered by Carey (2005, chapter 3) relevant and interesting.

accumulated, over the past two centuries, in this area. Behaviourism has indeed inspired a very large proportion of the studies that have been carried out, since the early twentieth century, into spectator's preferences between different works of art and physiological reactions to aesthetic stimuli (*Ibid.*, pp. 9 ff.). The emphasis on experimentation that characterises the behaviourist approach, and the progressive improvements in the methodological sophistication of the experiments conducted in this field, have resulted in the gathering of a significant quantity of data and information on human responses to various art forms.

By applying the tools of psychological research, for instance, scientists have been able to establish correspondences between certain personality traits and visual preferences. So, evidence seems to show that individuals with an extrovert temperament tend to prefer simple colours and forms, and more expressive paintings. Highly ambitious individuals seem to prefer colours on the cool end of the chromatic spectrum rather than the warmer reds and yellows; sensation seekers, as one might have expected, appear to prefer red (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990, 15). As far as musical preferences are concerned, scientific evidence would appear to show that individuals - and possibly mammals more generally - display a preference for consonant over dissonant tones. Fannin and Braud's (1971) research was inspired by the work of anthropologists, who showed how most forms of polyphonic music around the world, including those of 'primitive tribes', seemed to avoid dissonant tones<sup>19</sup>. In their attempt to decide whether such preference might be dictated by cultural norms, they studied the behaviour of 16 albino rats with no previous exposure to consonant or dissonant tones (and for which, obviously, any kind of culturally determined preference could be safely excluded). All of the 16 albino rats preferred consonant tones, moving the authors to conclude that "consonant and dissonant tones are experienced as

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<sup>19</sup> The discussion of the difference between consonant and dissonant tones falls beyond the scope of the present paper, since it entails tackling the most complex question of "why musical harmony sounds harmonious" (Cazden, 1980, 123). We would therefore refer the reader to Norman Cazden's paper on the difference between musical consonance and dissonance for a full exploration of the problem.

positive and negative, respectively, for reasons other than their discrepancy from learned ‘norms’” (*Ibid.*, 193).

These findings were confirmed by later experiments, leading Trainor and Heinmiller (1998) to conclude that six-month-old infants, like adults, also display a preference for consonant sounds, as testified by their preference for the original version of a Mozart minuet over a version that contained many dissonant intervals. On the grounds of such data, one might be tempted to suggest that there is something intrinsically more pleasurable to humans (and albino rats) in consonant tones, and that, in some way, these might be ‘better’ than dissonant ones (although scientists are very careful not to translate their scientific findings into aesthetic judgements of quality and value).

Similarly intriguing is the research carried out into the so-called ‘golden section’ or ‘golden ratio’. This is believed to be an irrational number, approximately equal to 0.618, which has been credited, since the times of Ancient Greece, with being the key to the mystery of beauty<sup>20</sup>. Believers in the existence of the golden ratio argue that the proportion expressed by the number 0.618 can be seen to be present in many pictorial works, sculptures and architectural designs from antiquity to the present day that have been consistently perceived as beautiful (Green, 1995). Many explanations for the alleged importance of the golden section and its relation to our perception of beauty have been made over the centuries, and many stand out for their inventive nature. Some, for instance, attribute humans’ apparent preference for artworks that display the golden section on the grounds of its correspondence to the ratio of the length and width of the binocular visual field (Boselie, 1984, p. 367). Others, more imaginatively (though probably less plausibly), have suggested that the aesthetic attractiveness of the golden section is related to the features of a woman’s face. As Boselie (*Ibid.*, p. 368) explains, according to this theory, “the facial division of the chin-to-eyes-line and chin-to-hair-line tallies for women (on the average) with the golden ratio. [Hence] the pleasure of the golden section is derived from the mother’s face

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<sup>20</sup> Hochberg lists the golden section among the three “most famous prescriptions for beauty in visual art” (cited in Boselie 1984, p. 367).

because it increases the chances of survival". Fascinating as these theoretical hypothesis are, they are not supported by indisputable scientific or experimental evidence (*Ibid.*), so that, unsurprisingly, the very existence of any intrinsic aesthetic quality of the golden section has been questioned<sup>21</sup>.

Other interesting research has involved the investigation of the extent to which the titles that often accompany a work of visual art are capable of influencing the reception of the painting. Writing from an arts theory perspective, John Fisher (1980, p. 298) has argued that titles have a clear impact on how we perceive and understand paintings, so that "when an artwork is titled, for better or worse, a process of interpretation has inexorably begun". Levinson (1985) similarly argues that titles are an integral part of the work of art, which directs, to a significant extent, our interpretation of the visual stimuli, so as to effectively shape the aesthetic experience. Such positions within aesthetic theory seem to be confirmed by empirical evidence showing that, when different titles are attributed to the same painting, the person's reception of that painting changes - as demonstrated by the individual's verbalization of his or her experience of the painting (Franklin *et al.* 1993). Mills' (2001) research further suggests that metaphorical titles, by constituting an incentive to work harder to interpret the painting, may enhance the aesthetic experience more than descriptive titles (due to the so-called 'elaboration effect'), though this effect is limited to representational artworks and does not occur with abstract pictures. Other experimental research into the aesthetic experience has established that listening to a piece of music several times may increase its pleasantness to the listener, whilst prolonged observation of a picture makes its pleasantness and affective value decrease (Verveer *et al.* 1933). This would lead one to infer that different art forms engage us in different ways, through this insight still leaves open the crucial question of how one particular artwork (whether experienced once only or repeatedly) might engage and affect a particular individual.

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<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Boselie, 1984; Godkewitsch, 1974; Plug, 1980.

If we turn to theatrical performances and reading for pleasure, the areas at the centre of our research project, we see that this type of experimental approach to understanding the encounter with the artwork seems less developed<sup>22</sup>. Research into reading, however, has been increasing since the mid-twentieth century<sup>23</sup>. Research has been carried out especially into text processing and reading or narrative comprehension (Coplan, 2004). Bower and Morrow (1990, p. 247) explain the scientific interest in reading comprehension as follows:

Cognitive psychologists and education specialists focus on research in reading comprehension because it involves many components of intelligence: recognition of words, decoding them into meanings, segmenting word sequences into grammatical constituents, combining meanings into statements, inferring connections among statements, holding in short-term memory earlier concepts while processing later discourse, inferring the writer's or speaker's intentions, schematization of the gist of a passage, and memory retrieval in answering questions about the passage. Thus, the study of comprehension has become for cognitive psychologists what the fruit fly became for geneticists, a means of investigating many issues.

It is therefore quite clear that the motivations and the research questions behind research into reading mechanisms are numerous and varied, so that what this body of work ultimately aspires to illuminate are various specific aspects of the activity of reading, rather than the understanding of what reading 'does' to people, and how people might be affected by what they read. A number of these studies, thus, have focused on matters of identification and empathy in reading (Hjort & Laver, 1997; Oatley, 1994).

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Bennett (1997, especially chapter 3) argues this point compellingly with regards to research into theatrical audiences, and John Tulloch's (2005) interdisciplinary exploration and integration of various methodologies in his study of audiences at theatrical performances also testifies to the need to fill research gaps in this area. Eversmann (2004, p. 149) maintains that "a systematic exploration of the theatrical total experience itself is lacking". This he attributes to the speculative and theoretical nature of the disciplines of aesthetic philosophy and theatre theory, which tend not to rely on empirical data to develop explanations of the theatrical experience; audience research and reception studies, on the other hand, have proved to be narrowly empirical, limiting the analysis to partial aspects of the theatrical experience or to responses to a specific performance. Neither approach seems to have managed to produce a comprehensive and balanced study of the theatrical experience (*Ibid.*).

<sup>23</sup> Victor Nell's *Lost in a Book* (1988) offers a good, if slightly dated, introduction to the psychology of reading for pleasure.

They show, for instance, that readers generally tend to identify with the protagonist of the fictional text, whose point of view they tend to adopt (Bower & Morrow, 1990; Coplan, 2004; Harold, 2005; Morrow, 1985). Empirical research has also shown that committed readers of fiction may unwittingly gain practical and useful information from their activity of reading for pleasure (Ross, 1999); readers may also establish affective relationships with fictional characters and 'learn' from them important lessons about life and the real world (Hoorn & Konijn, 2003; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002).

#### EMPIRICAL APPROACHES TO AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE: AN ASSESSMENT

Aspects of the type of research surveyed so far can undoubtedly offer useful insights for arts impact assessment. However, what this necessarily succinct and inevitably incomplete review of empirical attempts to study the aesthetic encounter in a scientific setting clearly shows is that there is much that is left unexplained and uninterrogated by these studies.

Michael J. Parsons (1987, p. xii), in his critique of cognitive studies in the arts, identifies an important limitation in their scope. He argues that they are based on a limited conception of cognition, where "cognition is taken to be substitutable by some form of behavior, such as preferring, recognizing, categorizing, producing. But behaviours are not equivalent to understanding, and to look at behaviours is at best a roundabout way of finding out about understanding". In other words, to establish that humans show a preference for consonant over dissonant tones is an advance in our knowledge of human response to auditory stimuli, but it tells us very little about how people experience music, are moved (or unmoved) by it and possibly transformed (or untransformed) by it.

Unsurprisingly, then, despite the enduring popularity of behaviourism-inspired experimental studies of artistic perception, a number of voices have raised concerns about the limitations of the insight that they can offer. Significantly,

even the already mentioned Kreitler and Kreitler (1972, p. 10), authors of the influential *Psychology of the Arts*, express reservations about such methods:

... the contribution of this work [behaviourism-inspired studies] to the understanding of art experience is extremely limited unless one is willing to settle for the implied thesis that art experience is but a taste judgement reflected in a preference statement and that degree of preference for the whole work of art is the summation of preferences for its discrete elements, each considered in isolation.

A similar opinion is expressed, from the Humanities' camp, by John Carey (2005, p. 75), who discusses in some detail scientific approaches to understanding art in his recent book *What Good Are the Arts?*. His conclusion is a denunciation of the inadequacy of science to explain the arts and people's fascination with them:

Behaviourism is limited in that it can only record preferences, not explain them. Also, it is rudimentary. To progress from recording people's responses to shapes, colours and sounds, to explaining the effect that painting or symphonies or operas have on them, would be inconceivably difficult, since artworks are not made just out of shapes, colours and sounds but [...] out of highly unstable meanings that differ with different recipients<sup>24</sup>.

Similarly, the psychologists Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990, p. 15) maintain that "the literature concerning visual art preferences is contradictory and confusing [...] as well as quite primitive". One would therefore be justified in concluding that, effectively, not much research has been conducted on *understanding* how people respond to the work of art (Fairchild 1991, p. 267). John Hyman (2000, p. 23) suggests that the shortcomings of the behaviourist approach might lie in "a prevailing tendency to think of perception, as Descartes did, as a purely passive operation in which perceptible objects

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<sup>24</sup> Carey (2005, p. 73) also criticizes scientific studies that extend to human's observations of animal behaviour of the type discussed earlier, and notes: "A primary fact about human responses to artworks is that they vary enormously across times, cultures and individuals, so that comparisons with the automatic responses of rats or seagull chicks are obviously inappropriate".



produce sensory perceptions in the minds of sentient animals by causing changes to occur in their sense-organs". In a similar vein, Maclagan (2001, p. 48) stresses the multidimensionality of the aesthetic experience:

Aesthetic experience involves a much more complex psychosomatic texture than can be accounted for in terms of the detached or disembodied contemplation of formal properties. Yet the idea has persisted that aesthetic qualities are merely a surface allure, or that they are pre-eminently a matter of visual (or as Duchamp scathingly referred to it, 'retinal') apprehension.

It would appear, therefore, that there might be a parallel between a view of perception as a merely passive process (in which the percipient merely responds to the visual, musical or linguistic stimuli) and the traditional Kantian model of the aesthetic experience as a disinterested process of contemplation of the work of art discussed in the first section of the paper. In the same way in which a new articulation of the interactive relationship between individual and artwork was required for the aesthetic experience to become central to art theory disquisitions, we need to bring a new and fuller awareness of the complexities of the aesthetic experience in the study (both theoretical and empirical) of the artistic encounter.

#### THE MISSING LINK: THE EMOTIONAL DIMENSION OF THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Surely one of the most crucial missing elements in the type of studies we have discussed so far is the emotional and psychological component of the experience of the arts. Yet, if we are to really understand how people might be deeply affected by their engagement with artworks, this dimension cannot be overlooked. As Maquet (1987, p. 109) points out, "in our common language, to be "experiencing something" or "going through an experience" is to be deeply and totally involved in some process". In order to grasp the impacts of the arts, we need to make sense of the mechanisms of this emotional involvement. Writing about the activity of reading for pleasure, Susan L. Feagin (1996, p. 1) maintains that:

To appreciate a work is not merely to recognize *that* a work has certain properties, aesthetic qualities, or artistic virtues, not merely to be able to recognize what it is about a work that gives it these qualities or its value. To appreciate a work is, in part, to get the value out of it, and “getting the value out of it” involves being affectively or emotionally moved. It is to experience the work in certain ways; it involves reading “with feeling”.

Similarly, Poet Laureate Andrew Motion, in *Poetry in Public* (2000, p. 2) highlights the centrality of the emotional dimension to the activity of reading poetry for pleasure:

Poetry is vitally, though not uniquely, an art that depends on solitary reflection – solitary in the way that it is meditated and created, and also solitary in the way that it is mediated and received.

That’s to say, the relationship between a poem and its reader is always one-to-one, even when that poem is being recited to a room full of people. We receive it individually, interpret it through the filter of our own individual memories and expectations, and recognise its power as being inseparable from our deep feelings. Indeed, this sense of how a poem connects with our emotional selves is the crucial validating element in our response. Poems are a hot-line to our hearts, and even when we pass on our reading-pleasure to others in the familiar language of appreciation, or in the more rarefied language of academic discourse, we forget this emotional power at our peril. Poetry is always a primitive and visceral thing, however it might be surrounded with various kinds of sophistication.

Inevitably, however, the consideration of the emotional dimension of the aesthetic experience complicates the study of the individual’s encounter with the arts<sup>25</sup>. As we have discussed elsewhere (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Belfiore, 2006), engagement with the arts is likely to have effects and impacts

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<sup>25</sup> This is partly because, as Maclagan (2002, p. 12) shows, the nature of ‘feeling’ is itself most complicated: “The word is both a noun and a verb, referring to processes of sensation or exploration, as well as to emotion as one possible result of such processes. We do not in fact always know which comes first, the perception or sensation, or the emotional response. Academic psychology may find it convenient to assume that one is stimulus and the other response; but it is often hard to tell whether a particular feeling makes us tune into a specific sense impression, or whether the latter somehow prompts the former. There may be an elusive truth embodied in the fact that the word ‘feeling’ refers to both a process and to its result”.

which might take place at the unconscious level, thus making them difficult to study in an experimental setting where people are asked to verbalize and explain their responses to the arts. Any attempt to investigate empirically the aesthetic experience is therefore inevitably going to explore only its conscious aspects and will result in a fragmented and incomplete reconstruction of what it feels like to have an aesthetic experience and the range of effects it can have. Moreover, the idea itself of an individual discussing what it 'feels' to enjoy the arts is fraught with difficulties. Peter De Bolla (2001) raises an important point about the difficulty of expressing the aesthetic experience verbally. He further suggests that this linguistic stumbling block, this 'mutism', might indeed be the most typical and common reaction to engagement with the arts. In Bolla's (*Ibid.*, p. 4) own words:

I believe this "mutism", the sense of running out of words or not knowing how or where to begin speaking in the face of the artwork, to be the most common initial response to works of art [...]. Almost as common is the sense that any attempt at verbalizing a response to an artwork diminishes the experience or even destroys it. [...] A reason for this "mutism" is sometimes given within the technical literature on aesthetics: since, it is claimed, affective experiences do not lie within the realm of the cognitive, there is nothing, as it were, to communicate. The only language that might be appropriate is that of interjection or exclamation – the ah! of surprise. This observation is also sometimes connected to a theoretical elaboration of the concept of art. According to this way of seeing things, the very definition of art is tied to this inarticulacy.

Bolla's suggestion seems to be confirmed by the empirical research undertaken by Peter Eversmann (2004), who has attempted to adapt the model of the aesthetic experience developed by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) for the visual arts to the theatrical experience. In order to do this, Eversmann conducted extensive interviews with theatregoers of different ages and varying degrees of familiarity with the theatre. He reports that one of the main difficulties encountered in the process of data collection was the interviewees' initial reluctance to talk about their theatrical experience.

De Bolla (2001, p. 4) goes on to suggest that our struggle to find an appropriate means of articulating our response to the arts might have less to

do with the dynamics of the interaction between person and artwork and more to do with the shortcoming of our language:

But what if this were not the case? What if this “mutism” were *merely* the result of a fault in our language – the lack of a lexicon for dealing with such experiences – and not a constitutive aspect of arts as a category?

De Bolla (*Ibid.*, p. 14) argues that our limited understanding of the artistic experience might ultimately be a result of the fact that “for many if not most people a certain embarrassment is associated with our attempts to break in upon the affective moment”. The incapacity of our scientific and academic language to deal with the emotional sphere would therefore merely reflect this reluctance to explore in detail our affective life<sup>26</sup>. Arthur C. Danto (2003, p. 132) agrees and points out that “[w]e need only think of quite ordinary works and what they mean to us to realize how inadequate most of what is written and taught about art is for explaining how this [the transformative power of art] happens”. Could it be, then, that affective responses to works of art are under-researched because they necessarily require the use of a lexicon of emotions and feeling with which academic language and discourse are fundamentally uncomfortable?

A similar point had already been made in 1929 by the literary critic I. A. Richards (1929, p. 217), who suggested that we enjoy a very sophisticated logical language that allows us to effectively elucidate the intellectual meaning of the literary works we read. When it comes to feelings, however, our capacities for introspection prove much feebler:

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<sup>26</sup> Eversmann (2004, pp. 150-1) agrees with De Bolla when he suggests that the reluctance to discuss the theatrical experience he observed in his respondents might be linked to people’s disinclination to confide their private feelings and emotional reactions to strangers. Yet, he also suggests that his interviewees, many of whom worked in the theatre sector in various capacities, might be more comfortable discussing the economics of producing and touring theatrical performances, about marketing or programming decisions rather than their own response to theatre. This might be, perhaps, according to Eversmann (*Ibid.*), because “the function and impact of theatrical events get relatively little attention in the ongoing discourse within the theatre world”.

For handling feelings we have nothing at all comparable. We have to rely upon introspection, a few clumsy descriptive names for emotions, some scores of aesthetic adjectives and the indirect resources of poetry, resources at the disposal of a few men only, and for them only in exceptional hours. Introspection has become a byword, even where intellectual and sensory products and processes are concerned, but it is even more untrustworthy when applied to feelings. For a feeling even more than an idea or an image tends to vanish as we turn our introspective attention upon it. We have to catch it by the tip of its tail as it decamps. Furthermore, even when we are partially successful in catching it, we do not yet know how to analyse it.

Indeed, despite the 'emotional turn' which is supposedly taking place in a wide range of disciplines (Wood & Smith, 2004, p. 534), a profound distrust for emotions runs through Western culture, ranging from Plato's suggestion that they originate from the soul's baser part to Darwin's contention that, in human adults, the emotions are little more than an obsolete residue of the evolution and growing up processes (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996, p. 38)<sup>27</sup>. This might go some way towards explaining why, until quite recently, "within research in psychology emotions have been relatively neglected" (*Ibid.*, p. xxiii)<sup>28</sup>. A possible reason for the reluctance of academia to engage seriously with emotions is suggested by human geographers Anderson and Smith (2001, p. 7), who argue that "thinking emotionally is implicitly cast as a source of subjectivity which clouds vision and impairs judgement, while good scholarship depends on keeping one's own emotions under control and others' under wrap". They further comment on the gendered nature of such view:

Emotions are an intensely political issue, and a highly gendered one too. The gendered basis of knowledge production is probably a key reason why the emotions have been banished from social science and most other critical commentary for so long. This marginalization of emotion has been part of a gender politics of research in which

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<sup>27</sup> Despite his disparaging view of emotions, Darwin is credited with one of the earliest attempt in modern science to catalogue the full range of human emotions (Denzin, 1984, p. 3)

<sup>28</sup> This suggested neglect of emotions has not been limited to the psychological sciences. As Anderson and Smith (2001, p. 9) point out, "social relations are lived through the emotions, but ... the emotional qualities of social life have rarely been made apparent within the lexicon of social research".

detachment, objectivity and rationality have been valued, and implicitly masculinised, while engagement, subjectivity, passion and desire have been devalued, and frequently feminized.

Even when emotions are considered worthy of academic enquiry, however, their exploration is fraught with difficulties. As Parkinson (1995, p. 4) explains, such difficulties revolve around the possibility of the very identification of such entities as emotions:

‘Emotion’, to be sure, is a word used in psychological discourse as well as in everyday conversation, but this does not mean that there is a simple object, event or process that is referred to whenever the word is used. Then again, it is not just a word either. Emotion is a concept, a social practice, a way of being-in-the-world.

Parkinson (*Ibid.*) further comments that “[m]any people assume that emotions are just intact and uncomplicated internal feelings, which are immediately distinguishable in terms of their felt quality”. Needless to say, things are much more complex than that<sup>29</sup>, and indeed, the fundamental question ‘what is emotion?’ has been dominating modern psychological and sociological approaches to the study of emotions, engendering a broad spectrum of contrasting answers<sup>30</sup>. Hence the difficulty in studying emotions: since no emotional experience is ever experienced exactly in the same way a second time, inevitably the labels that both lay people and researchers apply to

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<sup>29</sup> Unsurprisingly, Goldie (2000, p. 13) identifies in complexity one of the distinguishing characteristics of emotion.

<sup>30</sup> One of the first academic articles on the topic was penned in 1884 by Professor William James and pertinently entitled “What is an emotion?”, and the academic debate on the very existence of emotions has been very lively ever since. A forceful negation of the usefulness of the notion of ‘emotion’ in intellectual and scientific enquiry has come from Elizabeth Duffy, whose 1941 paper on the topic opens with the following statement: “For many years the writer has been of the opinion that “emotion,” as a scientific concept, is worse than useless”. Duffy (*Ibid.*, p. 292) goes on to conclude: “I am aware of no evidence for the existence of a special condition called “emotion” which follows different principles of action from other conditions of the organism. I can therefore see no reason for a psychological study of “emotion” as such. “Emotion” has no distinguishing characteristics. It represents merely an *extreme* manifestation of characteristics found in some degree in all responses. If there is any particular point at which a difference in *degree* becomes a difference in *kind* this fact has not been demonstrated” (emphasis in the original).

emotional experience are always shifting and can be subject to multiple interpretations; effectively, “the meaning of a given emotion lies in the interpretations a person brings to it” (Denzin, 1984, p. 5). If we add to these considerations the effect that social and cultural norms have in shaping the formation and expression of emotions, we begin to get a sense of the complexity of this area of enquiry (Fisher & Chon, 1989; Kemper, 1981).

The challenge that the volatile nature of emotions poses for the researcher is arguably the reason why the academic world does not seem to have succeeded in providing a theoretical approach that can satisfactorily conclude the arguments briefly outlined above, thus making sense of and analysing adequately both feelings and emotions. Inevitably, despite growing attempts to harness the progress made in studying emotions to the study of the arts and their reception, we are still far from having a full grasp of the emotional dimension of artistic reception<sup>31</sup>. As the Professor of English Literature Christopher Butler (2004, p. 35) has recently pointed out in his book *Pleasure and the Arts*:

Emotions are not just difficult to list and to categorize for critics and clinicians; they are often very difficult to name, even as they occur in ordinary experience. We have a current, culturally determined, rather limited ability to *specify* the emotions we feel. This may just be due to the non-availability of a wide range of linguistic labels for particular feelings, and may be misleading.

This awareness of the shortcoming of reason in making sense of the emotional realm is indeed deep-seated in Western consciousness. As Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990, p. 6) point out, it had already emerged in the seventeenth century, when Descartes - one of the key figures of the Scientific Revolution, who contributed to codifying reason as the most reliable tool for the attainment of true knowledge - also helped to show how little

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<sup>31</sup> Examples of work that explores, from different disciplinary perspectives, the emotional dimension of artistic production and reception that were consulted as part of this research project are: the special issue of *Poetics* (Vol. 23, n. 1 & 2) devoted to the theme ‘Emotions and Cultural Products’; Boruah (1988); Coplan (2004); Kivy (2006); the essays contained in Hjort & Laver (1997); Oatley and Jenkins (1996, 365-374); Yanal (1999); Wood and Smith (2004).

about human experience reason could actually explain, and how strong a hold 'interior' emotions (*émotions interieures*) had on us (Averill, 1996, pp. 24-5).

#### IS THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE UNKNOWNABLE?

If we accept the view that our capacity to analyse and understand, by a process of introspection, our own feelings and emotions is indeed so limited, then we must also accept that the possibility of understanding and studying other people's feelings and the emotions aroused in them by their engagement with the arts might just be beyond our grasp. The idea that other people's feelings and experiences might ultimately be unknowable has indeed been made. Virginia Woolf claimed that "[w]e do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way. There is a virgin forest in each, a snowfield where even the print of birds' feet is unknown" (cited in Carey, 2005, pp. 23-4). American philosopher Robert Nozick (1968, pp. 42 ff.) maintains that unless we were able to build and use 'an experience machine' that could recreate other people's perceptions for us, the possibility of imagining how people's experiences feel 'from the inside' remains irrevocably utopian<sup>32</sup>.

More recently, John Carey (2005, p. 23) has expressed scepticism about the possibility of comprehending our fellow humans' inner world, let alone study their response to art:

... we have no means of knowing the inner experience of other people, and therefore no means of judging the kind of pleasure they get from whatever happens to give them pleasure. A very little self-examination will tell us that the sources of our own pleasures and preferences are by no means apparent, even to us. In each of us there is an undiscovered country.

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<sup>32</sup> In fact, Nozick (1968) goes on to argue that even if such an 'experience machine' existed, there still would be much of other people's inner world of experience that we would be unable to grasp.



In Carey's (2005, p. 48) opinion, then, "the inaccessibility of other people's consciousness, and the variability of personal responses to artworks, makes all statements about art's emotional effects suspect". Interestingly, denials of our capacity to penetrate other human beings' experiences have come from humanists, philosophers, literary writers and scientist alike. Experimental psychologist Robert L. Solso (2003), for instance, underlines the subjectivity - and therefore non-communicability - of our perceptual experience, of the arts as well as of all other aspects of human life. Whilst we share the same physical perceptual systems and processes, and whilst, as humans, we have enough in common to be able to broadly agree about what might be represented in a painting or a dramatic performance, what we make of such representation remains inevitably subjective and thus personal: "Because individual perceptual-cognitive experiences differ for each of us, specific interpretations of art are subjective" (*Ibid*, p. 150).

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) come to a similar conclusion in their elaboration of a theoretical model to explain the aesthetic experience. They advocate caution in making generalisations about people's response to the arts:

... if we expect the aesthetic experience to be a single universal reaction, like the blinking of the eyelid under strong light or the sensation of sweetness at the taste of sugar, then there is no aesthetic experience. But very few human experiences are that simple. Most events in consciousness are built from culturally defined contents as well as from personal meanings developed throughout an individual's life. Thus two persons can never be expected to have the same experience, and the farther apart in time and place they are, the more the details of the two experiences will differ (*Ibid.*, p. 17).

So, must we conclude that the aesthetic experience is ultimately unknowable and impossible to study? Such a view in fact seems excessive. We would rather suggest that the aesthetic theories discussed in part one of the paper might hold the key to a more constructive view of the aesthetic experience and our powers to comprehend it. If we look back at the view put forward, as we have seen, by Picasso and Sartre among others and according to which

the aesthetic experience can be understood as the coming together of a person and a work of art, the possibility is opened up for the study of the interaction between the two. If we are to understand the interaction between individual and artwork that produces the aesthetic experience, we need to know more about the artwork and the mechanisms through which it engages people, and we need to know more about the individual people that encounter that particular work of art at a particular time in their lives and at a particular time in history. We might never be able to fully grasp the aesthetic experience in its entirety, or to account for the interplay of conscious and unconscious impacts of engagement in the arts. In other words, we might never be able to *know* and describe what 'it feels like' for a certain individual to engage with the arts as if we were able to put ourselves through an experience machine. Yet, we would argue, a better understanding of the factors that shape the encounter between individual and work of art would shed some light on the nature and potential impacts of that encounter.

The third and last section of the paper presents our suggested 'determinants of impacts' and identifies different groups of factors that can be plausibly expected to mould the aesthetic response, thus influencing the possibility that it may (or may not) result in long-lasting transformations.

### **Part Three: Factors that shape the response to the arts**

Before moving on to discussing the categories of factors that are likely to affect people's response to the arts it is important to discuss two features of the aesthetic experience that need to be understood and taken into consideration if we are to move towards the elaboration of more rigorous methods of arts impact assessment.

The first point that needs to be considered is that, as we have already seen, the encounter with the work of art is always a historical occurrence, both in the sense that it occurs at a historical time where certain socially-determined type of responses might be more acceptable than others, and also in the

sense that it happens at a specific – and unrepeatable – point of the individual's personal history<sup>33</sup>.

#### THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

It is important to bring to arts impact assessment the awareness that the type of response generated by a certain art form or specific art works is affected by the social norms that dominate in the locality and at the time in which the aesthetic encounter takes place. This point is clearly elucidated by James Elkins' (2001) fascinating book on crying in front of paintings, *Picture & Tears*. The starting point of Elkins' intellectual journey is the observation that, in our present society, it is perfectly acceptable to cry at the theatre, or when reading a novel or watching a film. Yet, crying in front of a painting is not considered a typical response to a work of pictorial art. Nevertheless - in spite of what Elkins refers to as our contemporary 'lack of intensity' when observing art (p. ix) - in the past, crying in front of art was considered quite a normal reaction, as demonstrated by the collection of anecdotes contained in his book. As he himself (*Ibid.*, p. x) explains:

It turns out that viewers cried in front of paintings in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, and again in the eighteenth century, and again in the nineteenth, each time for different reasons and with different pictures. Few centuries, it seems, are as determinedly tearless as ours. Some people still do cry over paintings – a small group, nearly invisible in the masses of unmoved museum visitors.

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<sup>33</sup> Things are further complicated by the fact that for certain activities - such as, for instance, reading for pleasure - temporality is built into the experience. Feagin (1996, p. 31) points out that literary appreciation is a temporally extended activity: "one progresses through a novel sequentially, and readers are only gradually exposed to various structural features, plot developments, and revelations of characters. [...] The fact that reading takes time structures the very possibilities inherent in (and the values of) our involvement with and experience of the medium – in short our appreciation of it". John Tulloch (2005, p. 7) makes a similar point with regards to theatrical performances, when he maintains that "an audience participates in a performance processually, across a changing temporality before, during, and (sometimes long) after the performance".

Elkins's work undoubtedly forces us to refrain from taking the exterior signs of the response to art as a clear indicator of the intensity or nature of the inner aesthetic experience. Indeed, if we agree that our response to a work of art happens within a framework of 'acceptable behaviour' that is determined by the culture and the historical time in which we live, we will then need to conclude that crying or staying dry-eyed in front of a painting is not necessarily a marker of the intensity of the aesthetic experience. Is there any evidence that modern museum audiences are less moved by the beauty of a Renaissance painting than sixteenth-century arts lovers just because they do not express the emotions instigated by the picture through tears? Probably not; yet considerations of the historical dimension of each and every individual's encounter with the arts reminds us of the difficulty of truly capturing the ways in which the arts affect people. As Susan Bennett (1997, pp. 86ff.) points out with regard to theatrical audiences, people respond to theatre on the basis of "culturally and aesthetically constituted interpretive processes"<sup>34</sup>, which we need to understand in order to grasp the audience's experience. Brian Rosebury (2000, pp. 76-7) poignantly encapsulates the crucial historical dimension of the aesthetic encounter:

... for each of us, objects of aesthetic attention subsist, like pearls in the ocean, in some part of a more or less rich and idiosyncratic imaginative medium, which though composed of common elements is unique for each of us because each of us is historically differently situated. [...] I maintain that aesthetic experience is historically contingent: each of us is situated at a unique point in space and time from which we imagine a personal and collective history, and our enjoyment of any object of aesthetic attention is capable of being influenced by associations, that is, by our locating it within some part of that imagined history<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> It is also important to remember that, precisely in the same way in which responses to the arts are to a significant degree shaped by accepted socio-cultural norms, also the *study* of that response will take place within similarly constructed accepted notions of what the arts are and how they (and their effects) ought to be studied. For an interesting example of this, see Tompkins' (1980) historical review of changing notions of literature and literary response from Ancient Greece to the present day.

<sup>35</sup> Crucially, in the same way in which accepted responses to the arts are culturally and historically shaped, the art forms themselves are also determined by the culture and social norms of a certain historical period. See for instance, what Sparshott (1997, p. 122) says of dance: "Dance, if anything is, a culturally emergent entity. Even if there is dance in every society, and even if there are physical and social and psychological constants in human life that account for the universality of dance, what dance is in any culture or historical epoch is always something unique to its time and place, historically determined, conceptualized in

Rosebury's words clearly underscore the importance of exploring the dynamics which make up each individual's personal and collective history and thus contribute to determining each person's reception of a work of art.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

As we have just seen, cultural and societal norms are central to the understanding of the aesthetic response. However, equally important are the set of expectations and motivations that each individual brings to bear on the artistic encounter. Kreitler and Kreitler (1972, p. 257) maintain that, from a psychological perspective, expectations are key in the aesthetic experience, in that they have a direct influence on the individual's responsiveness to the artistic stimulus: the higher the level of responsiveness, the more emotionally involved he or she will become, and more involvement results in a heightened aesthetic experience.

As Parsons (1987, pp. 1-3) explains with regards to visual experiences, "people respond to paintings differently because they understand them differently. They have different expectations about what paintings in general should be like, what kind of qualities can be found in them, and how they can be judged; and these expectations deeply affect their response. Assumptions of this kind are often implicit, not consciously brought to mind". If we consider the case of reading novels, we will see that here too, expectations and motivations play a central role in the reading experience. First of all, behind any decision to spend some time in the company of a book is the central expectation/motivation that reading will be a pleasurable experience (Nell 1988, 8). Secondly, the individual's attitude towards the reading process will instigate a number of expectations that influence the reading act: whether one

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ways inseparable from the ways and views of the dancers and their reference groups, and assigned meanings peculiar to the society and culture". Obviously, a similar case could be made for all other art forms and sub-genres.

is reading to seek information or purely for pleasure (or for both reasons) entails different expectations of the reading experience.

Most young people's encounter with works of literature are mediated by the school: surely whether one is reading a novel out of one's own initiative or as part of schoolwork – in other words, whether the novel represents a welcome pastime or an imposed chore – will make all the difference in the reading experience. Similarly, when reading in an educational context, expectations might be created by teachers and textbooks (Cole & Lindemann, 1990, pp. 13-5). Prior knowledge of the literature genre or the author's other work is also an important determinant of expectations, while parental attitudes towards reading have been found to influence significantly children's and adolescents' reading motivation (Baker & Scher, 2002; Van Schooten *et al.*, 2004). Even a book cover, or its title, can set the reader up with certain ideas of what the reading experience might be like and how to approach a book. As literary critic John Mullan (2006, p. 16) argues, taking Jane Austen's *Emma* as an example: "Even the most common and unremarkable kind of title, the bare name of a novel's central character, will tell us something in advance about how to read".

In her study of theatrical audiences, Susan Bennett (1997) discusses the features that contribute to the shaping of what she refers to as the audiences' 'horizons of expectations', which play a major part in determining the nature and the quality of the theatrical experience. She (*Ibid.*, p. 91) refers to a seminal study conducted in the early eighties by Anne-Marie Gourdon on French theatre. The research looks at various aspects of the audience's perception of performances, and identifies as key the expectations shaped by the place of performance, the history of the institution or company or director, the stage environment, and by the play itself. To this insight, Bennett (*Ibid.*) adds her own detailed analysis of the many factors that contribute to creating expectations in members of theatre audiences.

She draws particular attention to the notion of 'investment in the idea of event': whether an audience member lives in a remote rural community, and

therefore sees a theatrical performance as a rare treat, or whether he is an urban dweller for which a monthly show is a routine social ritual, will be crucial in determining expectations of the theatrical event. Whether an audience member attends a performance as a matter of regular habit, or whether the person in question is a tourist will also make a difference, for tourists tend to see the theatrical event in a much more glamorous light (*Ibid.*, p. 101). Similarly, the audience member at an expensive or star-studded production might approach the performance with a sense of excitement and anticipation that might not occur for a performance of the local touring company: “audiences are prepared to pay for (and indeed then expect) a special kind of theatrical event when icons of the profession are involved” (*Ibid.*, p. 100). Theatre critics might also have a role in shaping the reception of a theatrical performance: empirical evidence from the Netherlands would seem to show that negative reviews especially can have a strong affect on the audience’s perceptions of a performance (Boorsma & Van Maanen, 2003)<sup>36</sup>. Logically, the extent to which a performance lives up to the audience’s expectations (positive or negative) will also be a key aspect of the experience (*Ibid.*, p. 100).

The inevitable conclusion to be drawn from this discussion, therefore, is that no two spectators at a performance will bring with them the same set of expectations and motivations, and no two spectators will thus approach the theatrical event from the same standpoint. Any impact assessment exercise ought to be mindful of such differences and their implications.

#### FACTORS THAT SHAPE THE AESTHETIC RESPONSE: A CLASSIFICATION

As mentioned in the introduction, the factors that are likely to mould the aesthetic experience, thus acting as ‘determinants of impact’, can be divided into three groups: those that are inherent to the individual who interacts with

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<sup>36</sup> A plausible explanation of the reason why a negative review is likely to have a stronger impact on audiences than a positive one might be that negative information in general has more influence than positive information: “Negative information is more surprising, attracts more attention and it appears less ambiguous” (Boorsma & Van Maanen, 2003, p. 329).

the artwork; those that are inherent to the artwork; and those that are extrinsic to both the individual and the artwork, and which we might refer to as 'environmental factors'. The following section of the paper will present a discussion of each of them, although the primary focus of the analysis will be the exploration of the first group.

#### FACTORS THAT PERTAIN TO THE INDIVIDUAL

Earlier sections of the paper have discussed views of the aesthetic experience that revolve around the notion of the active engagement of the individual in shaping the work of art. If we accept this as our theoretical premise, then in order to understand what happens in the encounter between a person and an artwork, we must first understand how *that particular* individual engages with the work of art. As De Bolla (2001, p. 14) succinctly puts it, "[e]xperience is both *nachträglich*, known to us after the fact, and contaminated by the myriad filters through which we perceive and come to understand both the world and ourselves". It is precisely on the examination of some of these filters that this sub-section of the paper centres.

Our previous discussion of the historical dimension of the response to the arts and the impacts of motivations and expectations on how we approach artworks is predicated on the understanding that every human being is the result of a complex set of variables, of a unique combination of circumstances, life experiences, cultural and social conditioning, gender and sexual orientation. All of these factors, by shaping the subject that undergoes the aesthetic experience, effectively determine that person's response to art. If we want to grasp - and indeed measure - the power of cultural activities to produce social and psychological change, we need to research in greater details the role of each of these factors (and their interaction) in shaping reception. The factors that, we argue, can plausibly be expected to play a significant part in influencing expectation, motivations and responses to the arts are: age; gender and sexual orientation; cultural background; social class and cultural capital; emotional and psychological status. We will argue that, in



order to capture the transformative dimension of the aesthetic encounter, a rigorous social impacts assessment method ought to account for these variables.

#### AGE

As was noted above, the encounter with a work of art always has a historical dimension. Furthermore, if we accept that people develop over time and that, as time passes, individuals find themselves at different stages of personal development, then it seems plausible to suggest that - in the natural progression from childhood to adulthood - the developmental level of the individual will affect his or her response to the arts. Indeed, a number of different models of child development proposed by different scholars all seem to agree that different stages in children's cognitive development correspond to different modes of reception of the arts, and that these become more complex and sophisticated the more advanced the developmental level achieved (Fairchild, 1991; Parsons, 1987).

If we take for example a theatrical performance, the younger audience members are likely to react and respond differently to it than older, and therefore ostensibly more mature, spectators. This common sense assumption is confirmed by the study of theatrical audiences carried out by Swedish theatre scholar Willmar Sauter (2000), who has devised a method for the study of theatrical reception called 'talking theatre'<sup>37</sup>. He has found age to be an important determinant in the response to performances. Children and younger people seem to be mostly interested in the fictional story that is presented on stage, and considerations about the quality of the production or the acting are clearly of secondary importance to a good plot. On the contrary, for adult audiences, the quality of the acting is the single most influential factor in determining enjoyment of the performance, irrespective of

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<sup>37</sup>In brief, this consists of eliciting comments and debate from various groups, each composed of around seven theatre-goers, shortly after a performance. The discussion is lead by a researcher, who is in charge of stimulating the debate whilst reducing to a minimum his or her own engagement in it (Sauter, 2000, pp. 176ff.).

the type of performance and the audiences' cultural and social background. The age of twenty seems to be, according to Sauter's data, the dividing line when theatre-goers become more sophisticated in their appreciation of theatre shows, and when acting and other theatrical qualities become more central to enjoyment of the performance (*Ibid.*, pp. 184 ff.).

A solid, comprehensible plot, with a clear beginning, middle and end, and easily-understandable characters that make identification simpler are thus necessary ingredients for an enjoyable children's show<sup>38</sup>. David Wood and Janet Grant (1997), on the basis of their experience of writing, directing and producing theatre for children, agree with Sauter. They explain how crucial identification is for young audiences (much more, in fact, than for their adult counterparts), as this is what allows them to become emotionally involved in the action taking place on stage. Being able to follow the plot is therefore crucial. As actor Peter Duncan is quoted saying:

The thing that stands out most strongly in my mind about playing to an audience only of children is the belief they have in the story and the situation. Children can project their imaginings into reality. In the theatre, when you have convinced a young audience of your character's plight, the silence and stillness is deafening (*Ibid.*, 18).

Children's natural capacity to become emotionally involved in a good story and their tendency to identify with what is portrayed in the arts and media, obviously make them more vulnerable to the potentially harmful consequences of exposure to unsuitable images or performances. Evidence seems to show that media violence has a stronger impact on younger children than on older ones (Valkenburgh, 2004, p. 53). This is precisely because the younger the spectator, the more he or she will interpret the content of what is portrayed as real. Moreover, this high level of impressionability in young children is not dependent upon the type of representation, so that young elementary school children have been found to

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<sup>38</sup> Studies on reading preferences seem to suggest that the plot is also important in determining the quality of young people's reading experiences (Fisher, 1994, pp. 59-63).

be equally affected by a violent cartoon as by a film with real actors (*Ibid.*; Cantor, 1995)<sup>39</sup>

Another area where more research might be useful is the reception of the arts in older people. A Mintel (2003) survey on lifestyle changes in the UK reveals that theatre attendance has been growing significantly among women over fifty-five years of age. Registering that this increase occurs in particular among separated women, the report suggests that the reason behind increased attendance rates might be the desire to socialise and enjoy cultural activities as a way to gain a new lease of life after the failure of a relationship. Data collected by the Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2005) on cultural participation confirms that people in their fifties and of both sexes regularly engage in the arts (more than both their younger and older counterparts). A possible explanation for this pattern of cultural consumption is the high disposable income available to this group, as a result of having paid mortgages and debts, and of not having dependants to support<sup>40</sup>. What is not clear, however, is what the *impacts* of high participation in middle age might be: will people react differently to a play or a novel at this particular stage in their life than they would have done earlier, or they might do later in life? While we know that age is a predictor of cultural consumption and arts attendance levels<sup>41</sup>, we still do not know what the implications are of having certain aesthetic experiences at a certain age instead of another. Furthermore, available data indicates that interest in reading for pleasure tends to decline with age (Fisher, 1994); does this mean that the reading experience becomes less gratifying as we get older? Or is it just one more

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<sup>39</sup> The extent to which children are likely to be affected by violence witnessed through literature and the media has been at the centre of a heated debate for decades. Notions of 'copycat behaviour' (Bondora & Goodwin, 2005; Pirkis & Blood, 2001) and the theorisation of the so-called 'Werther effect' (Phillips, 1985) being just examples of the research that has been carried out in this area. This extensive body of literature cannot, for reasons of space, be discussed satisfactorily here. However, it is important to point out that a body of material rejecting the allegedly damaging influence of violence in the media upon children has also been developed (see for instance, Barker and Petley, 1997), giving rise to a lively debate on the 'ill effects' (*Ibid.*) of violent media products on children.

<sup>40</sup> The report also notes, however, that once people reach retirement age, participation levels tend to drop, so that while, in 2003, 84% of those aged 45 to 54 attended at least one cultural event in the past year, the percentage drops to 47% for individuals aged 75 and over (Office for National Statistics, 2005, p. 87).

<sup>41</sup> Arts Council England's 2004 study of arts attendance in England confirms this (ACE, 2004, p. 37).

instance of life getting in the way of artistic engagement? We simply do not seem to have clear answers to these questions.

Whilst the research discussed here offers interesting insights into how aesthetic preferences are shaped by age, it remains true that, as was noted earlier, understanding children's and adults' *preferences* does not equate to an understanding of what the aesthetic experience *means* or *feels like* for individual people, and whether experiencing the arts at different ages can result in different impacts. There is therefore much still to be understood about the ways in which age shapes arts reception. For instance, one further aspect of the relationship between age, developmental level and the response to the arts that seems to have been under-explored, is the extent to which, re-encountering at a later point in life an artwork first experienced in young age might alter the original reception of the work. In other words, does the interpretation or the perception of a novel change if it is re-read at different life-stages?

The idea of a correlation between arts reception and age has obvious repercussions for social impact assessment and highlights the limitations of a one-size-fits-all model of impact evaluation. Especially when evaluating an arts activity that involves an audience or a cohort of mixed ages, the differences in response-modes are likely to be significant and need to be accounted for.

#### GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Like age, gender is reputed to be an important factor in shaping cultural attitudes and attendance. To what extent it also shapes response, however, seems to be less clear. Surveys of attendance and participation in the arts all seem to register the higher participation of women in all art forms, particularly theatre (ACE, 2004; Mintel, 2003). Statistical data on cultural activities also points to differences in attendance patterns between the sexes, so that, for instance, women are more likely to attend craft events than men (ONS, 2005,

p. 87). Whilst there seems consensus about the fact that women tend to be involved in more cultural activities, there is no clarity over *why* that is the case. Sauter's (2000, p. 183) empirical study of Swedish theatre audiences has tried to put to the test a working hypothesis based on the fact that women go to the theatre more often than men: "This suggests not only that women have a different attitude towards theatre than men, but also that women might experience performances in a special way, displaying stronger empathy or using a wider range of their imagination, understanding, and emotions". These all seem like conceivable possibilities; nevertheless, Sauter's own empirical work could not prove true any of them, leaving unanswered the question 'does gender affect the aesthetic response, and – if this is the case – how?'

If we consider the case of reading for pleasure, we come up with similar difficulties. Reading attitudes also correlate to gender. Women are more likely than men to attend public libraries and to buy fiction, and they tend to read more for pleasure (ACE, 2004, p. 47; Book Marketing Limited, 2002). Women also seem to prefer reading fiction (83% of the women sampled by ACE did so in the previous year compared to 68% of men), whilst men's preferences lie with non-fiction (56% men - 46% women). Whilst ACE's data does not provide information on whether there are differences between the genres of fiction preferred by men and women, this might indeed be the case<sup>42</sup>. The literature on reading preferences clearly shows that already in childhood, there are marked differences between the reading tastes of boys and girls: the former prefer adventure and violent material, while the latter are oriented towards animal stories, fairytales and fiction that is based on relationships and domestic situations (Fisher, 1994, pp. 59-60; Sarland, 1991;).

As Elizabeth Segel (1986, p. 165) observes: "[o]ne of the most obvious ways gender influences our experience as readers is when it determines what books are made available to us or are designated as appropriate or

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<sup>42</sup> Flynn (1983, p. 236) points out that while extensive empirical research has been carried out on the reading preferences and behaviour of school-age children and adolescents, we know very little about the reading patterns of mature readers (of both sexes).

inappropriate for our reading". In Britain, in the early 1930s, books for children were clearly distinguished between books suitable for boys and those suitable for girls, and similar distinctions were made in America at least until the 1960s (*Ibid.*). Whilst distinctions are less marked today - and popular children's books such as the *Harry Potter* series have no immediately obvious gender association - children's reading preferences broadly reflect traditional views of femininity and masculinity which are still prevalent in society.

Janice Radway's (1984) influential study of female romance readers, for instance, identifies escapism from the frustrations of everyday life as one of the principal motivations behind women's interest in romantic fiction<sup>43</sup>:

... romances can be termed compensatory fiction because the act of reading them fulfils certain basic psychological needs for women that have been induced by the culture and its social structures but that often remain unmet in day-to-day existence as the result of concomitant restrictions on female activity. [...] Most important, it provides vicarious emotional nurturance by prompting identification between the reader and a fictional heroine whose identity as a woman is always confirmed by the romantic and sexual attentions of an ideal male (*Ibid.*, pp. 112-3).

Whilst Radway's work is useful in order to make sense of gender-based reading preferences and motivations, the question of whether - or how - gender affects reading is still an open one and needs further exploration (Crawford and Chaffin, 1986).

Similarly under-researched is the extent to which *sexual orientation* might contribute to shaping responses to the arts. For instance, sexual stereotypes attribute a special affinity for the arts to the homosexual population, on account of high participation of this group in cultural activities and their alleged over-representation in artistic or creative professions (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997). But is sexual orientation really a crucial determinant of an interest in the arts? There is very little research in this area, and Lewis and Seaman (2004), whose work represents a rare exception, suggest that this

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<sup>43</sup> Usherwood and Toyne (2002) identify escapism as a prime motivation for reading in both male and female readers.

might be due to the difficulty in obtaining the type of data required for a systematic study of differences in the response to the arts amongst sexual minorities. The research they carried out aimed at scrutinizing some of the most common (and stereotypical) explanations for high levels of engagement with the arts amongst lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (LGBs). Various theories were put to the test, including the idea that LGBs might have an innate creativity that fuels their passion for the arts, and that an interest in the arts among this group might be a side effect of the fact that, traditionally, music hall, theatres and cinemas offered a relatively safe place for homosexuals to meet and socialize (especially in the past, when non-heterosexual behaviour was considered less socially acceptable). Ultimately, however, Lewis and Seaman's research shows that there is no evidence to support any special connection between a homosexual or bisexual orientation and a special attitude for the arts. The only explanations for LGB's high art attendance that are supported by the data are that LGBs tend to have good incomes, to be single and not to have children (which means a good disposable income, more free time and less restrictions to attending the arts), and that arts venues and events tend to provide a more welcoming environment for LGBs than other alternative socialising spaces.

So, are we to conclude that sexual orientation plays no part in shaping the way in which people encounter works of art? Since gender and sexuality are "two of the most basic components of identity", and since "[a] perceived sense of gender and sexuality commonly helps us to understand our own or another's identity" (Juhasz, 2004, p. 135), it would seem reasonable to propose that matters of gender and sexuality are likely to shape most realms of experience, including the reception of art. Kennard (1986, p. 63), for instance, suggests that we need to ask "whether the lesbian reader is not a different reader from the heterosexual woman reader, and what it means to her and to the reading enterprise if she is". She does not suggest any definite conclusions, and laments the paucity of work in this area, but she also raises some interesting issues. For instance, if we accept that pleasure in reading is largely based on reading literature that reflects our own experience (thus facilitating identification), then we would have to conclude that the publishing

world would afford the lesbian reader limited scope for reading pleasure. Yet, this still leaves open to questions whether a lesbian reader interprets works of literature written by heterosexual authors differently from the heterosexual female reader. Furthermore, it has been argued that the ways in which we experience and express emotions are crucial to the shaping and definition of the 'gendered self' (Lupton, 1998, pp. 105 ff.). Since, as we have seen, the emotional dimension is central to the aesthetic experience, the links between gender, sexuality and emotionality ought to be further explored in the study of the aesthetic response.

These questions are obviously very complicated ones, and their full exploration falls beyond the scope of the present paper. Yet what is important to highlight here is the wide and deep gap in our present understanding of the full extent and the ways in which gender and sexual orientation might affect the reception of works of art.

#### CULTURAL BACKGROUND<sup>44</sup>

Does cultural and ethnic background affect the ways in which people engage in a work of art? We know that, in Britain, one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Europe, ethnicity correlates with certain attitudes and behaviours towards participation in the arts. Arts attendance data for England, for instance, reveal that Asian or British Asian members of the public are more likely to attend a culture-specific festival and dance performance (ACE, 2003). Yet, this still leaves our original question unanswered. Interesting insights are to be gained from the psychological and anthropological fields, where an interdisciplinary body of research has been produced on the similarities and differences in emotional meanings across cultures under the label of 'cultural psychology'<sup>45</sup> (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992; Russell, 1991; Shweder 1993, p. 417;

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<sup>44</sup> We are grateful to Mariaelisa Santonastaso, a doctoral student at the Institute of Health and Community Studies at Bournemouth University for pointing us towards useful references for this section of the paper.

<sup>45</sup> Richard A. Shweder (1993, p. 417) defines the purpose of the field of 'cultural psychology' as follows: "The major goals of cultural psychology are to spell out the implicit meanings that give shape to psychological processes, to examine the distribution of those meanings, across



Wierzbicka, 1999). In view of the centrality of emotions to the aesthetic experience, the insights to be gained from this work are potentially significant.

The cultural psychology literature clearly shows that, whilst there might be some 'emotional universals', there are also remarkable differences across different cultures in how emotions are identified, defined, classified and evaluated, and even more so in the meanings they have and the social context in which they are expressed (Heelas, 1996). As Goldie (2000, p. 85) explains, "[e]vidence of what is common points towards an evolutionary explanation, and evidence of diversity points towards the local influence of culture".

Such differences in the conception and the expression of emotions are compounded by the fact that a number of cultures do not make distinctions that are central to the Western understanding of the world, such as those between 'mental' and 'physical'; 'body' and 'mind'; and 'emotion' and 'cognition' (*Ibid.*, p. 174). Linguistic differences also play an important role. As Russell (1991, p. 426) points out, on the one hand, "there are hints of unmistakable similarity in the categories of emotion even across great differences in language and culture"; on the other hand, however, there are many emotions for which equivalent terms are hard to find in different languages. Two typical examples are the German words *schadenfreude* – which refers to the pleasure that derives from another person's displeasure – and *angst* – which is similar, yet not fully equivalent to, the English 'dread' (*Ibid.*)<sup>46</sup>.

Markus (1991) further shows how people in different cultures have significantly different constructs of the self, of others, and of the interdependence between the two<sup>47</sup>. Such constructs are powerful influences

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ethnic groups and temporal-spatial regions of the world, and to identify the manner of their social acquisition".

<sup>46</sup> Anna Wierzbicka (1999, pp. 123 ff.) argues that *angst* is indeed "a peculiarly German concept. The fact that this word has been borrowed and is used in English for a different range of situations, highlights the *sui generis* meaning of the German *Angst*".

<sup>47</sup> Markus (1991), for example, explains that many Asian cultures share a notion of individuality that emphasises the idea of 'relatedness' of individuals to each other. This entails

on the very nature of individual experience, including cognition, emotion and motivation. Nevertheless, despite the growing evidence, provided by psychologists and anthropologists, on how different cultural backgrounds entail different articulations of the self, research models are still largely based on a Western understanding of the individual as an independent, self-contained and autonomous entity. As a result, “much of psychological theory and experimentation is misguided by a cultural prejudice that individual functioning is primary” (Parkinson, 1995, p. 7) and therefore tends to focus on private and intrapsychic aspects of emotions, rather than on interpersonal factors that are likely to play a more significant role in non-Western cultures<sup>48</sup>. This means that much is still to be understood about culture-bound notions of the self and their impact on behaviour, emotion, cognition and motivation, and that even less is known about how cultural background might affect responses to the arts<sup>49</sup>.

#### SOCIAL CLASS AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

There is substantial evidence on the connection between a person’s social class, his or her cultural capital (as expressed by family background and educational attainment) and his or her cultural habits. All the participation and attendance surveys already cited agree that class, education and profession are, combined, clear predictors of engagements with the arts. The better educated, wealthy, and those employed in managerial or professional jobs

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the importance, in those cultures, of looking after relatives and friends, of trying to fit in and live in harmony with the other members of the community. American culture, by contrast, attributes less value to the idea of the interrelatedness of people, and values more individuals who strive to maintain their independence from others, look after themselves and strive for self-expression.

<sup>48</sup> It will not come as a surprise, then, that one of the ‘untranslatables’ referred to above should be the Japanese notion of ‘amae’, which indicates a pleasant feeling of dependence on someone and has no equivalent term in the English language.

<sup>49</sup> An inevitable corollary of the discussion presented in this section is that in the same way in which the aesthetic experience is not universal but is affected by cultural conditioning and shaped by the intellectual and psychological categories of one’s culture, so is any exploration of the aesthetic encounter. Therefore, despite its ambition for academic rigour and scientific objectivity, the present enquiry into the aesthetic encounters is itself – ineluctably - born out of the research protocols and the intellectual horizon of Western academia.

are the most regular and frequent arts attenders<sup>50</sup>. Elsewhere (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008) we have discussed in some detail theories that argue that cultural consumption and taste are a means to establish or reinforce social distinctions and to make public statements about one's social status (by distancing oneself from forms of behaviour and taste perceived to have been appropriated by the lower social strata). For the purposes of this paper, however, it is more interesting to explore the connections between class and educational attainment and certain patterns of cultural consumption.

Recent research (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2005; Roberts, 2004) shows that the traditional association of higher social status with consumption of 'high art' might now be outdated. The middle and upper classes, in fact, distinguish themselves by the consumption of a broad range of cultural products, which encompasses the whole spectrum of high-, middle- and low-brow culture. As Roberts (2004, p. 65) puts it, "the middle classes do more of most things", from going to the opera and the theatre more often than the lower classes, to spending more on alcohol consumption and gambling. Indeed, Chan and Goldthorpe (2005) suggest that a person's breadth of artistic interests and cultural engagement is a reliable marker for higher social status. They distinguish between 'omnivores' - whose hunger for culture is satiated through a combination of high and low cultural activities, and who tend to belong to the well-educated middle class - and 'univores', who tend to stick to a single preferred genre, whose engagement tends to be restricted to more popular forms, and who are likely to belong to the lower social groups.

Things are further complicated by the fact that social norms and distinctions have become incorporated in the broader cultural values of society, and embodied in its cultural institutions (with the implication that alternative or competing aesthetic values are relegated to a secondary role). In his seminal studies of popular theatre, the playwright John McGrath (1981, p. 3) makes a

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<sup>50</sup> In addition to the audience surveys cited so far, see: Aschaffenburg and Maas, 1997; Bennett, 2005; Bourdieu, 1984; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2005; Di Maggio, 1996; Katz-Gerro, 1999; Morrison & West, 1986; Roberts, 2004.

compelling case for the predominance of bourgeois aesthetic values in mainstream theatre:

My belief, and the basis of my practice as a writer in the theatre for the last ten years, has been that there *are* indeed different kinds of audiences, with different theatrical values and expectations, and that we have to be very careful before consigning one audience and its values to the critical dustbin. Unfortunately, almost all the current assumptions of critical thought do precisely that, by universalizing white-middle class sensitive but sophisticated taste to the status of exclusive arbiter of a true art and culture.

McGrath's observations, then, contribute to explaining the correlation between, class, educational attainment and engagement in traditional art forms which represent official (or - as McGrath would probably put it - bourgeois) culture and its aesthetics. Indeed, since Bourdieu's development of the concept of 'cultural capital'<sup>51</sup> to indicate the type of resource which one acquires principally through one's family background and the process of schooling, studies of the influence that different levels of cultural capital have on people's experience of the arts have been numerous. There appears to be a certain degree of disagreement among scholars over which of the two main determinant of cultural capital - family environment or education - is more influential in shaping patterns of cultural consumptions. Some have empirically established links between educational levels and higher arts participation rates and therefore consider educational attainment as the principal predictor of cultural consumption (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Gray, 1998; Kracman, 1996; Morrison & West, 1986). Others (Roberts, 2004; Van Eijck, 1997), on the contrary, argue that the cultural capital and habits transmitted by the family of origin have more influence on cultural consumption than educational success. Van Eijck (1997, p. 196) explains that "[f]amily socialization is thought to inculcate a (class-) specific habitus which determines one's attitude towards the arts, and thereby one's degree of

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<sup>51</sup> Van Eijck (1997, p. 197) summarises the concept of cultural capital as follows: "Cultural capital refers to good taste, appropriate manners, cognitive sophistication, and knowledge of, and receptivity to, legitimate cultural products (such as art, classical music, theatre and literature)".

cultural participation, to a considerable extent". Roberts (2004) suggests that this might occur because middle and upper class parents are more likely to be involved themselves in a wide range of cultural activities, and that this early exposure might create an unconscious predisposition for the arts: "Children in middle-class homes are introduced to the widest ranges of leisure experiences [...] although school education may moderate it never obliterates the leisure effects of family background" (*Ibid.*, pp. 66-7).

The correlation between cultural capital and levels of engagement with the arts have been indisputably demonstrated, yet, there seem to be less research carried out that explores the possibility that cultural capital might not just affect the regularity and variety of cultural consumption but also the nature and quality of the aesthetic experience. Research into the visual arts seems to suggest that 'cultural competence'<sup>52</sup> - or the capacity to read and interpret correctly a work of art - which is tightly linked to cultural capital, has a central role in determining the quality of the aesthetic experience (Kesner, 2006; Smith & Wolf, 1996). As Kesner (2006, p. 5) explains with regards to the museum experience, "[i]ndividual variations in such competence significantly determine the different levels of engagement, ranging from repeated and skilled users to casual consumers, who tend to disperse the object (art) experiences within a broad range of other recreational experiences that the museums has to offer".

Studies that compare the aesthetic judgement of art experts and those of non-experts have indeed shown that there are vast differences between the two group's reaction to paintings (Hekkert & Van Wieringen, 1996). Such

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<sup>52</sup> Like 'cultural capital', the notion of 'cultural competence' was also first elaborated by Bourdieu (1993), who defines it as follows: "Artistic competence is ... defined as the previous knowledge of the strictly artistic principles of division which enable a representation to be located, through the classification of the stylistic indications which it contains, among the possibilities of representations constituting the universe of art and not among the possibilities of representation constituting the universe of everyday objects or the universe of signs, which would amount to treating it as a mere monument, i.e. as a mere means of communication used to transmit a transcendent signification" (pp. 221-2). At the heart of cultural competence is the capacity to read a work of art and note its distinctive stylistic features in relation to the ensemble of the artworks that belong to the same category. This capacity, in turn, requires an early exposure to the arts and regular later engagement with them, previous knowledge and intellectual sophistication – or, in other words, cultural capital.

differences are usually explained in terms of the different weight that experts and lay people attribute to specific features of the artworks. Lay viewers tend to base their judgements on the content or theme of the paintings, and indeed show a preference for realistic and figurative works over abstract ones. This is because the non-experts consider their enjoyment of the artwork as germane to everyday perception, where the search for useful information is crucial (hence the preference for figurative artworks which appear easier to interpret). Experienced and competent art observers, on the other hand, give more weight to formal, stylistic and relational properties of the work of art in their value judgements (Hekkert & Van Wieringen, 1996, p. 391). The originality of a painting in particular, was found to be highly more significant for art experts in shaping perception of the overall quality of the artwork (*Ibid.*).

It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that competence might be an important factor in determining the richness and therefore the intensity of the artistic experience. Bourdieu (1993, pp. 217-8) discussing the centrality of competence – especially in the encounter with the high arts - suggests that inadequate competence is likely to result in a limited experience:

... faced with scholarly culture, the least sophisticated are in a position identical with that of ethnologists who find themselves in a foreign society and present, for instance, at a ritual to which they do not hold the key. The disorientation and cultural blindness of the less-educated beholders are an objective reminder of the objective truth that art perception is a mediate deciphering operation. Since the information presented by the works exhibited exceeds the deciphering capabilities of the beholder, he perceives them as devoid of signification – or, to be more precise, of structuration and organization – because he cannot ‘decode’ them, i.e. reduce them to an intelligible form<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> We would suggest, however, that in the contemporary cultural context, the issue of competence is not limited to the traditional high arts. Certain forms of contemporary artistic creation, such as digital art, or even certain forms of popular music (e.g. hip hop and rap) have their own codes that have to be mastered if the specific cultural object is to be fully understood, and therefore require their own brand of cultural competence. Similarly, writing about ‘media competence’, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, p. 119) note that “[m]odern societies take the media so much for granted that it is easy to forget that the appropriation of the media also does involve the learning of skills of various kinds”.

This appears to confirm our hypothesis that different levels of cultural competences entail great differences in the cognitive and aesthetic quality of the reception of art. It is plausible to assume, indeed, that those individuals who have not managed to master the complex cultural code that deciphering art (both 'high' and 'low') requires, will not have the opportunity to have an aesthetic experience as rich and fulfilling as that of those who master the code, and for whom engaging in the arts is not a foreign ritual but a rewarding experience.

#### EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STATUS

Throughout this paper we have emphasized the centrality of the emotional sphere to the aesthetic experience. It is therefore only logical to hypothesize that the emotional and psychological condition of the person engaging with the artwork is likely to have an effect on the reception of that artwork, thus determining whether short- or long-term impacts will originate from the aesthetic encounter. Elsewhere (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008), we have discussed in detail notions of the healing powers of the arts. By identifying its origins in Aristotle's theory of dramatic catharsis and following its evolution over the centuries, we have traced the intellectual development or the kernel of ideas that has later developed into art-based therapies: art therapy, bibliotherapy and poetry therapy, cinematherapy and creative writing as a means of dealing with illness, grief, and other forms of emotional trauma.

Whilst the scientific evidence is not conclusive, the medical establishment seems, to a large extent, to have accepted the idea that arts activities can have a beneficial therapeutic function (often in conjunction with medication) in alleviating the symptoms of mild psychological pathologies (such as, for instance, minor depression) (Madden & Bloom, 2004). However, it is also important to explore the effects that mood and temporary psychological conditions have on the aesthetic experience of psychologically healthy people. In other words, if we really are to understand how the arts affect people, we need to consider the possibility that mood and emotional status

might filter the perception and reception of the arts, and therefore enhance or inhibit the possibility of impact. For instance, would a book read when in a condition of sadness have a different impact if that same person had read it when in a cheerful disposition? If the answer to this question were to be positive, then we would necessarily have to acknowledge that the possibility of generalising about the impacts of a certain art work or art experience on even a single individual might be undermined, on account of the extreme variations which psychological factors determine:

If one is distracted, sad or in a silly mood, one's experience will be affected. Indeed, psychological influences have a huge effect on the way that we take in the contents of our experiences, the way we meaningfully shape them, and the way we record them in our memories. If one is distracted enough, what might at another time constitute a very powerful experience might on this viewing constitute a minor, even forgettable, experience. If one feels sufficiently negative or negatively critical, what might be the substance of a very valuable experience might go entirely unnoticed (Fenner, 2003, pp. 50-1).

Furthermore, as Hogan (2003, p. 158) points out with regards to reading, "personal memories are crucial to our emotional response to literature". It is likely that whether the memories activated by the act of reading bring with them positive or negative, sad or happy associations will be a contributing factor to shaping the reading experience. However, as Fergin (1996, p. 66) remarks, "many ways in which past experiences affect how new stimuli are processed and what cognitive, emotional and affective connections they have are characteristically not accessed by, and often not even accessible to, conscious awareness". She further (*Ibid.*, p. 67) observes that what *is* accessible to our awareness - in the form of a perception, idea, or experience - is only effectively the outcome of a very complex psychological process. This translates into as of yet unresolved difficulties for arts impact assessment: is it possible to develop methodological tools that can contend with (and take into consideration) the complexity of the emotional dimension in the aesthetic encounter? Can arts impact assessment ever aspire to capture the unconscious dimension of the artistic experience and manage to evaluate impacts of which the individual might have no awareness?



In addition to psychological health, the questions raised by the potential effect of *physical* illness or disability over the response to art need to be further explored. As LeVasseur (1999) points out, “[a] patient’s negotiation of his or her illness can be a powerful experience that is dramatically different from the flow of ordinary, less reflective life. Sometimes it is only at moments of illness that patients stop to reflect, to take stock of their life, and so become newly awakened to life and to experience”. The medical literature seems indeed to agree that disability and serious illness can have a profound effect on a person’s sense of self (De Rozario, 1997; Frank, 1993). In particular, illness and disability have been found to induce a *re-fashioning of the self* that can happen in several ways, such as, for instance, by encouraging spiritual or religious transformation (De Rozario, 1997; Nosek & Hughes, 2001). The English poet John Donne, in his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1623) described his illness as a process of self-change centred around a rekindling of his religious faith (Frank, 1993, p. 39). The loss of self-recognition that can follow from serious illness (and the need to regain or re-create it) is the prime agent behind the process of self-refashioning that takes place in the affected individuals. As medical ethicist William May explains:

If the patient revives after such [life threatening] events, he must reconstruct afresh, tap new power, and appropriate patterns that help define a new existence. One cannot talk simply of a new accessory [prosthesis] here, a change of venue there, but ... of a new Phoenix that must emerge from the ashes (cited in Frank, 1993, p. 40).

This process of re-construction of the self is further complicated by the fact that different types of illness will affect the self in different ways. Research shows that illnesses that are accompanied by social stigma (such as HIV/AIDS) have a stronger negative impact on the self, on the grounds that the stigma entails “membership in a social category that results in a spoiled identity setting the individual apart from others” (Fife & Wright, 2000, p. 50). Whilst there does not seem to be much research carried out on the correlation between these processes of self-change and self-refashioning as a result of illness and disability and changes in the response to the arts, it is

only\_reasonable to assume that dramatic changes to an individual sense of self and identity will also be reflected in the ways in which he or she interacts with the arts.

#### FACTORS THAT PERTAIN TO THE ARTWORK

Having characterised the aesthetic experience as the result of the encounter between an individual and a work of art, and having looked at the social and psychological aspects that can determine the individual's reception of art, it logically follows that the characteristics of the artwork are also central to the moulding of the art experience. We have seen already how, for particular cohorts, stylistic features determine the quality of the experience, while for others semantic features, such as plot and content, are paramount. Our earlier discussion of the differences in the reception of theatrical performances between adults and children is a case in point. It is therefore reasonable to postulate that the different qualities of artworks, their different formal, structural, and semantic characteristics, as well as the social practices that accompany their consumption, will have to be taken into account in arts impact assessment.

For example, comparing the experiences of attending theatrical performances and reading novels highlights the difficulties that are inherent in the attempt to compare a highly sociable cultural activity, which takes place in public spaces, with a largely private pursuit, which tends to take place in the more private sphere of the home or – even when reading in public places is considered – is based on the solitary enjoyment of a text (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, pp. 42-3; Bennett, 1997). Bennett's (1997, p. 153) study of theatre audiences highlights the centrality of the social dimension to the theatrical experience and the effects that it is likely to have on reception: "Semiotic analysis has stressed that the communication between spectators usually determines a 'homogeneity of response' [... ] despite variations in horizons of expectations and/or cultural values brought to the theatre by the

individual spectator. In almost all cases laughter, derision, and applause is infectious”.

Given that there is a significant variation in the characteristics that make up even objects belonging to the same art form, issues of commensurability inexorably arise. In the context of arts impact assessment, it is necessary to ask whether it is possible to identify a connection between specific types of content or specific stylistic characteristics of the art form being evaluated and certain effects on audiences and readers. For example, in the case of the impacts of the novel, we ought to be able to articulate how different novels might have different impacts on people. In an interesting empirical study, Harold Miesen (2004) has investigated the correlation between levels of appreciation of various text attributes that contribute to the complexity of novels (e.g. story-line, characters, place, time and writing style) and the preference for literary or popular novels. His findings show that “readers of literature are distinct from readers of romance in that they appreciate figurative language, several primary plot lines and sidelines, and frequently changing story perspective” (*Ibid.*, p. 53). Readers of romance, on the other hand, prefer to be engrossed by a simpler plot and prefer to avoid linguistic complexity (as confirmed by their reading material of choice)<sup>54</sup>.

However, differences in the reading experience do not relate simply to hierarchies between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural products: even within the category of ‘literary fiction’ one can expect to find a diverse range of material that is likely to affect people differently. In order to understand the potential transformative powers of the novel, it is thus important to develop means of articulating the different social impacts that might accrue from sub-sections of the same literary genre. If we consider, again, the genre of the ‘literary novel’, we cannot but be struck by the diversity of the books that are brought together under that label. Novels as diverse as Jane Austen’s *Pride and*

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<sup>54</sup> Miesen (2004, p. 53) refers to the work of Whissel, who has conducted an analysis of differences in word usage between romance and adventure novels. Her work reveals that romance novels tend to employ more commonly used words and present more word repetitions than adventure novels. Hence, Mieser’s suggestion that, linguistically, romances are less complex than literary novels and require less effort from the reader.

*Prejudice*, Michel Houellebecq's *Platform*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* are all classified as literary fiction, yet are the experiences of reading these books genuinely commensurate? Can we legitimately talk of 'the impacts of the novel', or would this entail an unsustainable generalization?

One further obstacle to easy associations between certain art forms and their potential impacts is represented by the blurring, in today's complex cultural environment, of the boundaries between art forms. If we stick with the example of the novel, the difficulties in defining clearly what we are trying to understand the impact of become clear. Video games are increasingly being described as 'fictional forms', 'game fiction', and 'computer-based narrative forms' (Atkins, 2003); where, then, shall we draw the line between the novel and other narrative-based art forms? In the age that has seen the progressive development and popularity of 'mixed media arts' and 'cross art forms', such definitional difficulties have clear and important implications for arts impact assessment, and for the question of generalising findings across art forms when discussing people's experience of the arts. These issues fall beyond the scope of the present paper, but they will be the object of more in-depth investigation in the next phase of our research.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

We have already discussed the historical dimension of the aesthetic experience: the encounter with an artwork happens at a certain historical time, and it is deeply affected by the cultural and social norms that are prevalent at the time. In his study of theatrical audiences, Sauter (2000, pp. 9-10) highlights the significance of 'context' for both the presentation and the reception of a performance. He identifies four types of contexts, the first three of which are those more closely linked to the theatrical sphere:

The *conventional* context, indicating the traditions and features of a theatre world in a certain place and a certain time; the *structural* context, describing the organization of theatre in a society (subsidies,

locations, legal frames, etc.); and the *conceptual* context, reflecting the ideology which society expresses in relation to theatre, such as the functions of theatre as a means of entertainment, propaganda, or education and the political consequences emanating from the ideological positions, attitudes, and value of journalists, politicians, theatre practitioners, and theatre scholars.

The fourth and last type of context indicated by Sauter as worthy of consideration is the *cultural* context, which includes aspects such as education, history, religion, eating and drinking habits, etc., and marks the interdependence of theatre and other art forms as part of a coherent cultural whole.

In his already mentioned study of British popular theatre, John McGrath (1981, p. 5), points out that, in order to achieve a comprehensive description of the theatrical event, one needs not only to consider the elements that pertain to the *mise-en-scène* (casting, music, lighting, etc.), but also:

... the nature of the audience, the nature, social, geographical and physical, of the venue, the price of tickets, the availability of tickets, the nature and placing of pre-publicity, where the nearest pub is, and the relationships between all these considerations themselves and of each with what is happening on stage. For when we discuss theatre, we are discussing a social event, and a very complex social event, with a long history and many elements, each element also having a long and independent history.

The physical *environment* in which the aesthetic encounter takes place, in particular, can have a significant effect on the quality of the experience. Whilst Bennett (1997) laments the paucity of studies in this area, the existing research seems to demonstrate the impacts of physical environment, and particularly architecture, on the aesthetic experience (*Ibid.*, pp. 127 ff). Bennett's essay, for example, discusses the way in which theatrical architecture can affect the audience's reception and interpretation of theatrical events. This effect takes place, in traditional theatres, as a result of the 'tyranny of architectural grandeur', exemplified by the solemn and grandiose

facades of many older theatre buildings, which highlight how these institutions represent official high culture (thus requiring a certain reverence and a respectful attitude from the audience)<sup>55</sup>. For non-traditional forms of theatre that are usually staged in non-traditional theatrical spaces, however, the influence of architecture on the audience's experience is likely to be less marked.

Similarly, the empirical data gathered by Bourdeau and Chebat (2001) shows that the physical characteristics of the display galleries in art exhibitions (which include the location of the works of art in the gallery space, their labels and display fittings, etc.) not only affect the ways in which visitors move around the gallery, but can actually affect the visitors' interest in the artworks. Bourdeau and Chebat also show how architectural aspects that might appear of secondary importance – such as the location of the entrances and exits to the display area - do in fact condition the level of attention paid by visitors to the works on display (*Ibid.*, p. 64). Carù and Cova (2005), on the basis of their study of audiences attending a classical music performance, conclude that the architecture of the auditorium, the person's location in it (in a good/bad, comfortable/uncomfortable seat), and the behaviour of other members of the audience are central to determining the quality of the experience. Indeed, as Wood and Smith (2004, p. 539) observe, "all performance spaces, whether concert halls, football stadiums or public parks, are distinctive in allowing people to experience themselves and others in 'different' and emotionally intensive ways". In other words, the physical environment of the space in which the aesthetic encounter takes place is not the only type of 'environmental' factor that impact assessment ought to consider, for the interactions between the people that find themselves enjoying the art work together also have a bearing on the experience. As Christopher Small (cited in Wood & Smith, 2004, p. 539) puts it:

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<sup>55</sup> See for instance, the empirical research carried out by Reason (2006, p. 229) on young people's experiences of live theatre, and how one of the predominant and most recurring memories of the interviewees was "of the large and glitzy chandelier hanging in the centre of the auditorium". It is clear from Reason's work that the glamour of the theatre had both an exciting and intimidating effect on the young audience.

We are prepared to laugh, to weep, to shudder, to be excited, or to be moved to the depth of our being, all in the company of people the majority of whom we have never seen before, to whom we shall probably address not a word, or a gesture, and whom we shall in all probability never see again.

A fascinating exploration of the public nature of the theatrical experience is offered by Matthew Reason's (2005 and 2006) study of the ways in which young people experience live performance. The interviews and the workshops that were carried out as part of the research revealed that, for the young people who had attended a performance of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the annoyance with, constant awareness of and fascination with fellow spectators in the audience was a significant element of the theatrical experience. Whilst the public nature of the performance was perceived as a source of enthrallment and excitement for the youngsters interviewed, it seemed also to induce a discomfiting sense of self-awareness and, in those with little previous experience of the theatre and its 'etiquette', a feeling of social and emotional awkwardness. These observations lead Reason (2005, p. 7) to conclude that:

This perception of other people looking and judging you makes the theatre auditorium a fairly exposed and intimidating space. For some young people the result was a sense that the Lyceum Theatre was not a place for them and that they didn't belong there. For others it provoked a level of self-consciousness that prevented them from relaxing and meant that their focus was on the social experience of being in the audience rather than on watching the performance on the stage.

These observations, thus, seem to confirm the point made by Fenner (2003, p. 50) on the importance that factors which apparently have nothing to do with aesthetics can have in the construction of aesthetic experiences. Whether one is a seasoned theatre-goer, whether one happens to be seated

comfortably in a theatre, whether one's neighbours are quiet or noisy can significantly alter our perception of a performance and our response to it.

## CONCLUSIONS

The premise on which the intellectual exploration presented in this paper is based is that, if we want to be able to develop robust methodologies for assessing and measuring the ways in which the arts impact on people, we need a better understanding of the aesthetic experience. We need a clearer picture of what the aesthetic experience is, what its constitutive cognitive and emotional elements are, and what the factors which contribute to shaping it might be.

This paper has attempted to throw some light on these areas. It has first interrogated theoretical elaborations of the aesthetic experience, and discussed shifting notions of the role of the audience in the aesthetic encounter. Empirical attempts to understand the cognitive and behavioural dynamics of the artistic encounter produced within both the natural and social sciences have been reviewed, and we have argued that there are inherent limitations to the possibility of obtaining a full picture of the aesthetic experience through these kinds of study. While the extant empirical research can illuminate some of the basic cognitive and emotional mechanisms behind the aesthetic experience, it falls short of capturing the aesthetic experience in its totality and fails to account for its complexity and richness. We have therefore proposed an alternative multidisciplinary approach that strives to combine, and thus maximise, the contribution that different disciplines bring to the exploration of the artistic experience. Through this holistic approach, we have put forward and discussed three groups of factors that we suggest are likely to influence the response to the arts. We have argued that any rigorous attempt to evaluate the impact of the arts ought to encompass an assessment of the weight of these factors in shaping impacts.



The analysis presented is by no means exhaustive and represents more of an exploratory exercise than a definitive account. In fact, one of the principal aims of the paper is to offer a reflection upon the complexities of the aesthetic experience. Central to this task is an acknowledgement of the challenges, both theoretical and empirical, that the investigation of the aesthetic experience poses, and the difficulties that, as a consequence, inevitably arise from the attempt to capture, describe and measure its potential impact. As Fenner (2003, p. 41) puts it:

Aesthetic experiences are, first, experiences. They are complex things, having to do with things as tidy as the formal qualities of the object under consideration and with things as messy as whether one had enough sleep the night before, whether one just had a fight with his roommate, whether one is carrying psychological baggage that is brought to consciousness by this particular aesthetic object.

Indeed, the picture that emerges from our research emphasises the multidimensionality, the subjectivity and the unpredictability of encounters with the arts. We have identified and discussed the psychological and socio-cultural factors that define the contours of these encounters and it is only by considering the *interplay* of all these variables that we can hope to capture the aesthetic experience in its intricacy. Clearly, any attempt to develop a meaningful methodology for assessing the impact of the arts is going to have to take account of these complexities. This, of course, raises the question of whether, given the limitations of empirical research, such a methodology *can* be developed. Indeed, given the variables we have identified, within the arts themselves and across the diverse populations that engage with them, the paper raises questions about whether *any* meaningful generalizations can actually be made about the social impact of the arts.

This clearly has implications for the practice of arts impact assessment. In the course of the paper, we have rejected the view, endorsed by John Carey amongst others, that an individual's experience of the arts is simply not

accessible to others<sup>56</sup>. We therefore reject the proposition that the aesthetic experience irrevocably belongs to the realm of the unknowable. In fact, one of the aims of the paper is to provide a clearer picture of what is already known about the aesthetic encounter and what is still to be fully understood or has been so far under-researched. However, from the investigations we have undertaken, we know enough of the complexities involved to conclude safely that it is not possible to develop a rigorous protocol for the assessment of the impacts of the aesthetic experience that can be boiled down to a handful of bullet-points and a user-friendly 'evaluation toolkit', to be easily applied to any art form in any setting and replicated whenever the need for impact evaluation arises.

The most useful contribution that this paper, and the research project as a whole, can therefore perhaps be said to make to the debate about the social impact of the arts, is to foster a more critical and a more cautious approach. Indeed, its importance may lie in putting to rest, finally, the idea that the value of the arts to society can somehow be conclusively 'proved' through an intellectually convincing demonstration of their social impact. We shall return to this question in the final phase of the project, when we will consider the full implications of our research for arts policy and the role of arts impact assessment within it.

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<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that Carey himself does not appear wholly convinced of his own conclusion on this issue. Having spent a good half of his *What Good Are the Arts?* (2005) on denying the possibility of making judgements, or even forming opinions, on others' encounters with the arts, he then delivers a peroration on the transformative and ameliorative effects that reading fiction has on young offenders, confidently pronouncing (but in clear contradiction of his own premise) on their emotional involvement in the novels and their inner reception of them.

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