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# THE NATURE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE<sup>1</sup>

GEORGE H. MEAD

Man lives in a world of Meaning. What he sees and hears means what he will or might handle. The proximate goal of all perception is what we can get our hands upon. If we traverse the distance that separates us from that which we see or hear and find nothing for the hand to manipulate, the experience is an illusion or a hallucination. The world of perceptual reality, the world of physical things, is the world of our contacts and our manipulations, and the distance experience of the eye and the ear means first of all these physical things.

Physical things are not only the meaning of what we see and hear; they are also the means we employ to accomplish our ends. They are mediate in both senses. They constitute a meaning of all that lies between us and our most distant horizons, and they are the means and instruments of our consummations. They lie in this mediate fashion between the distant stimuli that initiate our acts and the enjoyments or disappointments that terminate them. They are the proximate goal of our sights and sounds, and they are the instrumental stuff in which we embody our ends and purposes.

Thus on the one hand they constitute the hard physical realities of science, and on the other the material out of which to build the world of our heart's desire, the stuff that dreams are made of.

It is perhaps the most striking characterization which one can make of the thinking of the Western world since the Renaissance, that it has separated these two essential aspects of the world, has indeed made them incommensurable. Science informs us with increasing exactness of the ultimate elements

<sup>1</sup> I have not made specific acknowledgments in the article to Professor Dewey, but the reader who is familiar with his *Experience and Nature* will realize that it was written under the influence of that treatise.

of stuff or energy out of which the universe is made, and how they change. The world that rewards or defeats us, that entices or repels us, our remunerations and frustrations, our delights and distresses, what is finally significant and worthy of our effort, the beauty, the glory, and the dream, cannot be formulated in the language of exact science, nor have we found any common vernacular in which we can speak of the world of physical things and the values which after all they subtend.

This break between the definition of the things that constitute the means and the ends and values which they embody is not confined to the description of physical instruments and their uses, for it bisects the field of the social sciences as well. It has made economics the dismal science. It has mechanized and anatomized psychology. It has made ethics utilitarian, and aesthetics an affair of esoteric formulae.

It is not a break that can be healed by a new philosophic formula, though insight that is profound enough can exorcise metaphysical oppositions that have hardened into accepted realities, and exhibit the break as that which lies between the generalized technique of life and the ends and purposes which we have been able to formulate.

We are all of us engaged in complicated social activities whose accomplishments lie hopelessly beyond our appreciation. History later will lift out the ramifications of the unnumbered co-operative acts which have led up to what will be significant and desirable in human experience, but the individual experiences that have gone to make the achievement will never share in this significance. Closer at hand we see the routine and drudgery of countless uninterested hands and minds fashion in factories and mines the goods for which men give their wealth and themselves, and in the enjoyment of which men may be bound together in common interests which were quite divorced from their manufacture. Indeed, this is the definition of drudgery, the blind production of goods, cut off from all the interpretation and inspiration of their com-

mon enjoyment. It is the tragedy of industrial society that division of labor can interrelate and exploit the social nature of men's technical production so far in advance of their common fruitions, that all the earned significance of the work of our hands is foreign to its elaborate technique.

It has been the inspiration of universal religions, of political democracy, and later of industrial democracy to bring something of the universal achievement, of the solemn festival, of common delight into the isolated and dreary activities which all together make possible the blessed community, the state, the co-operative society, and all those meanings which we vaguely call social and spiritual.

In this intersection of what Professor Dewey has called the technical and the final, this attempted grasping of the consummation of the complex efforts of men in society to infuse meaning into the detail of existence, aesthetic experience may be isolated as a separate phase. What is peculiar to it is its power to catch the enjoyment that belongs to the consummation, the outcome, of an undertaking, and to give to the implements, the objects that are instrumental in the undertaking, and to the acts that compose it something of the joy and satisfaction that suffuse its successful accomplishment.

The beatitude that permeates the common striving of men after an infinite God of their salvation, belongs to the cathedral. The delight which follows upon successful adjustment of one's body to the varied reactions to the elements of a landscape flows over into the landscape itself. The pleasure that imbues our bodily and social balance of reaction to a human form inspires the statue. The felicity that animates harmonious movements of men runs through the dance. To so construct the object that it shall catch this joy of consummation is the achievement of the artist. To so enter into it in nature and art that the enjoyed meanings of life may become a part of living is the attitude of aesthetic appreciation.

I have presented aesthetic experience as a part of the at-

tempt to interpret complex social life in terms of the goals toward which our efforts run. The other parts are the religious, political, educational, hygienic, technical undertakings among others, which attempt to look into the future of our common doings, and so select and fashion the ends we want that we can direct and interpret our immediate conduct. These endeavors do not carry with them the satisfactions that belong to finalities. They are infected by the interest which belongs to the fashioning of means into ends, to the shaping and testing of hypotheses, to invention and discovery, to the exercise of artisanship, and to the excitement of adventure in every field. It is the province of action, not that of appreciation. Our affective experience, that of emotion, of interest, of pleasure and pain, of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, may be roughly divided between that of doing and enjoying, and their opposites, and it is that which attaches to finalities that characterizes aesthetic experience.

And the intellectual attitudes are as markedly different. In the fashioning of means into ends, in the use of tools, and the nice adjustment of people and things to the accomplishment of purposes, we give attention only to that which forwards the undertaking; we see and hear only enough to recognize and use, and pass from the recognition to the operation; while in appreciation we contemplate, and abide, and rest in our presentations. The artisan who stops to sense the nice perfection of a tool or a machine has interrupted its use to appreciate it, and is in an aesthetic mood. He is not interested in its employment, he is enjoying it. The statesman who turns from the construction of his speeches, the ordering of his statistics, the meeting of political opposition, the whole technique of putting across his projects for bettering conditions and life of children, to the picture of their healthful and joyous life, is for the time being no longer in action. He is savoring the end that he is fashioning into practicable politics. When one stops in his common labor and effort to feel the

surety of his colleagues, the loyalty of his supporters, the response of his public, to enjoy the community of life in family, or profession, or party, or church, or country, to taste in Whitmanesque manner the commonalty of existence, his attitude is aesthetic. In the arts it appears in appropriate decoration, that which infuses the spirit of the meaning of the instrument into its structure and adornment, that which informs our equipment and mediate efforts with the significance and splendor of their accomplishments. It adds distinction to utility, and poetry to action, "the joy of elevated thoughts, the sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused" to our best and finest efforts. It comes in healthful pulses in the most strenuous enterprises, as we stop in climbing great mountains to gather not only breath and refreshment, but the charm and magnificence that each fresh *étape* reveals. From time immemorial men have dedicated them as festivals, and solemn courses.

While this aesthetic attitude which accompanies, inspires, and dedicates common action finds its moment of ideal finality in future achievement, the material in which its significance and beauty is fashioned is historic. All the stuff with which the most creative imagination works is drawn from the storehouses and quarries of the past. All history is the interpretation of the present, that is, it gives us not only the direction and trend of events, the reliable uniformities and laws of affairs, but it offers us the irrevocableness of the pattern of what has occurred, in which to embody the still uncertain and unsubstantial objects we would achieve. We import the finalities of past victories and defeats into the finalities of the uncertain future. The solidity and definiteness and clarity of our undertakings are the donation of the past.

All this is healthful and normal. In its perfection it reaches the field of the fine arts, but it involves the creative imagination and aesthetic appreciation of the least artistically endowed of those who are fortunately engaged in the rewarding

undertakings of life. But those that can import the aesthetic experience into activity must be fortunately engaged and engaged in rewarding undertakings. And this means more than the mere adaptation of means to end, the mere successful cooperative fashioning of the goods which are enjoyed in common. The enjoyment of its ultimate use must be suggested by the intermediate steps in its production, and flow naturally into the skill which constructs it. It is this which gives joy to creation, and belongs to the work of the artist, the research scientist, and the skilled artisan who can follow his article through to its completion. It belongs to co-ordinated efforts of many, when the rôle of the other in the production is aroused in each worker at the common task, when the sense of team play, esprit de corps, inspires interrelated activities. In these situations something of the delight of consummation can crown all intermediate processes.

It is unfortunately absent from most labor in a modern competitive industrial society. But the thirst for enjoyment is still there, and the imagination, deprived of its normal function. When the goal is too far removed in time and method of approach, the imagination leaps to the ultimate satisfactions which cannot be fused with the uninteresting detail of preparation, and day-dreaming supervenes and cuts the nerve of action. Normal aesthetic delight in creation is the recovery of the sense of the final outcome in the partial achievement, and gives assurance to the interest of creation. In day-dreaming it is the very lack of connection between means and the end that leads one to the Barmecide feast of an end that is not expressed in terms of means. In the aesthetic appreciation of the works of great artists, what we are doing is capturing values of enjoyment there, which fill out and interpret our own interests in living and doing. They have permanent value because they are the language of delight into which men can translate the meaning of their own existence. But prerogative fine art has never been the dominant language of men's hearts,

and even before the industrial revolution and the introduction of machine production, drudgery occupied most men's hands, and reverie—the field of the day-dream—was the ever-present escape from its ennui. It is silly and inept to offer hopeless counsels of perfection, to undertake by the spread of so-called culture to replace the consummatory objects in men's reveries by the imagery of great artists, or to replace machine production by medieval artisanship. To be sure no one does baldly offer such programs, but so far as the aesthetic character of the reverie has been considered, and in so far as men have inveighed against machine industry as crushing out the artistic impulse such programs would be fair implications. From the standpoint of pathology, Freudian psychology has at least recognized the serious importance of the reverie as a field of escape, while organized labor has at least made evident that the factory organization of drudgery has put a social value into it which lifts it out of the field of mere painful effort.

Under the most favorable conditions, one cannot say under normal conditions, a man's work would be in itself interesting, and apart from the immediate interest in the operation, the sense of the whole that he is completing would grow with the advancing production, and give him aesthetic delight. The imagery which would provide this comes from the stream of reverie, but in the absence of these fortunate conditions, agreeable pictures of satisfied longings are apt to flood his mind, and they are likely to answer to the so-called inferiority complexes. It is true that just in so far as we can endow men with the gift of artisanship, creative impulse in any direction, and provide them with the opportunity of expressing it, in so far we will give them opportunity for aesthetic delight in the midst of their labor, but with humanity as it is and society as it is this is frankly impossible, though just in the degree to which it is possible to add creative interest to work, will aesthetic delight be added to labor.

On the other hand, in the words of Professor Dewey

“shared experience is the greatest of human goods,” and if out of the drudgery that men put through together there arises a social end in which they are interested, achieving this end will have its delight, and in so far as this end can involve the tasks themselves, the dignity and delight of the social realization will suffuse the tasks. This socializing of industry, of which the Guild Socialists have presented a rather impossible program, offers the ultimate escape from unaesthetic toil. Every invention that brings men closer together, so that they realize their interdependence, and increase their shared experience, which makes it more possible for them to put themselves in each other’s places, every form of communication which enables them to participate in each other’s minds, brings us nearer this goal. While we marvel at the new inventions which enable us to pass into the experiences of others, we perhaps fail to realize the unrecognized, unconscious pressure of the isolated individual in modern society. The isolated man is the one who belongs to a whole that he yet fails to realize. We have become bound up in a vast society, all of which is essential to the existence of each one, but we are without the shared experience which this should entail. The pressure upon the inventor will not cease until the isolation of man within society has passed.

Two of these mechanisms have spread the pattern of men’s reveries before our outward eyes, the daily press and the movie film. With marvelous exactness they have copied the type of happening, and the sort of imagery, that run behind the average man’s eyes and fill up the interstices of overt conduct, and they emphasize and expand what is needed to render the reverie vivid and concrete.

The newspaper has, of course, other functions. The most important of these is purveying the news. The theory of an acquisitive society is that news is valuable. One is willing to pay for it. Its value varies with its truth. Theoretically the newspaper which comes into the market with guaranteed

goods will outsell its competitors, but this is to reckon without the host, or in this case without the reverie. There are certain limited fields, such as the stock market, and the results of the last election, in which the truth value of news holds absolutely. Outside of these fields, and the farther one gets away from them, the more does the enjoyability, the consummatory value, of the news bulk in value on the market. The reporter is generally sent out to get a story, not the facts. Furthermore, newspapers are organs—organs of certain fairly defined groups. They demand that the news shall take the forms which conform as far as possible to the results desired by these groups. It is this realm of the reverie—of imagined enjoyable results—which dictates the policy of the daily press.

Whether this form of the enjoyed result has an aesthetic function or not depends upon whether the story of the news, after being thrown into this acceptable form, serves to interpret to the reader his experience as the shared experience of the community of which he feels himself to be a part. The enjoyable imagery may hardly rise above unsatisfied animal impulses of gain, sex, or hate, but in so far as it has what is called the human appeal, or that of nation, town, or class, it serves to give the man the gratification of his experience as shared by the community to which he belongs. These forms are after all the determining forms which interpret his social experience.

It is evident that these forms will change and, if you like, improve, as the group to which the paper appeals realizes itself in the larger interests and undertakings of the community. It does not necessarily lose its peculiar individuality, but it becomes functional in the greater society in a creative sense. In this sense an intelligent newspaper management may lead its readers, but it can never get far away from the form of the news which their reveries demand.

The movie externalizes the reverie even more vividly than the daily press. It was foreshadowed by the picture sections

of the press. And it has come with a peculiar appeal, for it intensifies a certain type of enjoyment of which the reverie is at best parsimonious. Our visual images are slight, incomplete, and not readily controlled. We do our thinking in the form of conversation, and depend upon the imagery of words for our meanings. It is only at favored moments that vivid pictures of the past throng the imagination. Visual imagery operates largely in filling out perception, as in reading or in the recognition of seen objects, rather than in satisfying the inward eye, which was the bliss of Wordsworth's solitude. When motion was added to the stereopticon, a certain sort of widely craved delight was flung at the community with open hands. But while this delight, of which nature has been somewhat penurious with us, is greatly exalted in the movie, the significant value of the imagery is minimized. It does not lend itself readily to shared experience. The movie has no creative audiences such as have been the inspiration of the moving speeches of great actors. Under the power of an orator one is in the perspective of the whole community. He sees the "picture" in his own perspective. The isolation of the members of a compact audience in a movie theater is in crying contrast with the shared response of those that, each at his own breakfast table, read the morning press.

It is reasonable, therefore, that it should be that which is more private and particular in the reverie that dominates the movie, that is, the escape values. For while the reverie provides us with the imagery of common values, the common consummatory experiences, it provides us also with the compensations for our defeats, our inferiorities, and our unconfessed failures. And what the average film brings to light is that the hidden unsatisfied longings of the average man and woman are very immediate, rather simple, and fairly primitive. And this is not without its consolations. The thus unwittingly confessed defeats of men are not of the wide and generous impulses. It is that which is rather primitive in us that is re-

pulsed in modern society. At least, judged by this standard, it may be guessed that whatever defeats meet men's efforts to reach the larger social goods, the efforts themselves in their shared experiences have been rewarding. They do not give rise to inferiority complexes. The compensatory and escape values are not the only ones that find expression in the movie, but I think they are the dominating values, and in large measure fix the public's taste and, therefore, select the themes for most of the films.

One cannot without vivid curiosity watch the effect which the sudden release of this function of the reverie will have on the community. The man who finds sidesplitting humor in the near-disasters of Charlie Chaplin is presumably finding compensation for some repressed primitive tendencies to inflict suffering and pains upon his enemies. Does this discovery of a situation in which one may enjoy unreprieved the terrors and fright of another quicken the old impulse and render him callous to the sufferings of others? I think not. I think the experience is rather a catharsis, in an Aristotelian phrase, than a reversion. Nor does the physically timid man become more courageous from watching with compensatory delight Doug Fairbanks annihilate a nest of bandits. But there should be a certain release, and relief from restraint, which comes from the fulfilment of the escape reaction with a richness of imagery which the inner imagination can never offer. If these escape reactions play any legitimate part in the economy of keeping house with one's self, and I think they do, the elaboration of them at just the point where the imagination fails should emphasize that function, and the enjoyed imagery is genuinely aesthetic.

Whether or not the escape reaction is a dominant interest in the movie public in determining the type of film, there is a vast number of them that do not answer to that motive. Some of them appeal simply to interest in a story vividly told in pictures, to a sympathetic love of adventure, and to the response

to beauty in nature and to delight in picturesque and distant scenes. One captures something of the same values that he seizes in travel and adventurous outings. A genuine aesthetic effect is produced if the pleasure in that which is seen serves to bring out the values of the life that one lives.

In pictures whose attraction is their salaciousness there can be no aesthetic effect. They are sensual rather than sensuous. They are not the cause of finding meaning and pleasure in other things, nor are they informed with the meaning of that which leads up to their own enjoyment. They blot out all but the immediate response.

In closing I wish to refer again to this inchoate phenomenon of the human reverie, which the press and the movie have projected before us.

We are apt to consider it as a purely private affair with each individual, his desultory meanderings of idea and purpose and imagery, perhaps more gruesomely presented in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, than elsewhere in literature. It is, indeed, infected with privacy and therefore subject to disintegration. But it passes into the universal meanings of common discourse and co-operative effort, and out of it arise the forms of universal beauty, the intuitions of the inventor, the hypotheses of the scientist, and the creations of the artist. It is that part of the inner life of man which cannot be given its implicated meaning because of the incompleteness of social organization. It marks man's isolation within society. We have decried its vulgarity when the daily press and the movie films have stripped off its privacy. It is better, however, to live with our problems than to ignore them.

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