

2016

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Recommended Citation

Quacchia, Russell (2016) "The Aesthetic Experiences of Aura, Awe, and Wonder: Reflections on Their Nature and Relationships," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 14 , Article 10.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol14/iss1/10

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The Aesthetic Experiences of Aura, Awe, and Wonder: Reflections on Their Nature and Relationships

Russell Quacchia

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to examine the semantic nature and linkage between the experiential phenomena of aura, awe, and wonder, central to matters of the aesthetic experience. In aesthetic commentary these terms are generally used rather loosely, often independently of each other and, most often, without regard to the connections between them. It would seem worthwhile to examine the nature of each of these terms to move toward understanding them and their mutual relationships. The conclusions drawn are that the aura effect appears to operate universally at the cognitive level of the aesthetic experience while those of awe and wonder appear to be special cases operating at the affective level of the aesthetic experience, wherein our appreciative dispositions, bearing them, take form.

Key Words

aesthetic experience, affective level, aura, awe, cognitive level, special case, universal case, wonder

1. Wonder

Various lists of the Wonders of the World have been compiled from antiquity to present times. Speculation has it that such lists were originally developed as travel guides but were subsequently transformed into a catalogue of the worlds most spectacular man-made structures. The formulation of the concept of the Seven Wonders of the World is generally credited to the historian Herodotus and the scholar Callimachus of Cyrene, acknowledging the extraordinary artistic and architectural achievements of the Persian and Greek peoples up to the fifth century B.C.E. The first formal list of such special monuments is attributed to the poet, mathematician, and engineer Antipater of Sidon, writing in the second century B.C.E. To these early lists of man-made structures a category of extraordinary natural wonders was subsequently added. The list that is commonly accepted as the original list of seven wonders of the natural world was that compiled by CNN in 1997.

Since ancient times compilations of such lists have changed mostly in the form of adding specialized categories and further itemizing recognitions. As recently as 1999, a Swiss group headed by the adventurer Bernard Weber initiated a worldwide survey whereby over two hundred nominations were reduced to a list of "The New Seven Wonders of the World" on the basis of over 100 million votes.^[1] Given various lists developed from ancient to modern times, the Pyramids of Giza, Colossus at Rhodes, Great Wall of China, Machu Picchu, Taj Mahal, and the Golden Gate Bridge consistently count among the man-made wonders of the world, while the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights), Grand Canyon, Yosemite Valley,

Great Barrier Reef, and Victoria Falls are always found among the natural wonders of the world. It has become quite apparent that the special formations and significances these phenomena possess, the powerful impressions they exude, and the positive and intriguing aesthetic experiences they afford serve as the basis for assigning to them the honorific term of being "wonders."

In the course of history, these various lists raise the question of the meaning of this key term, wonder, serving as the affective criteria of recognition in formulating such lists. Wonder is a contemplative emotion tied to a considerable array of sympathetic affections. The word, in its use, associates with the *uncommon* captured under the category term extraordinary and such synonyms as unique, distinctive, special, exceptional, rare, unusual, strange, unexpected, fantastic, phenomenal, and spectacular. It also associates with the all-embracing or absorbing *engagement* captured under the categorical term captivating and such synonyms as spellbound, fascination, enthralled, entranced, mesmerized, bedazzled, seized, arrested, stunned, compelled and awed.^[2] Additionally, it is associated with *impressiveness* captured under the categorical term excitement and such synonyms as surprise, admire, astonish, amaze, astound, dumfound, stunning, stupefy, staggering, startling, and exhilarating. As well, the word is associated with the *inexplicable* captured under the categorical term mystification and such synonyms as bewilder, puzzlement, beguilement, curious, baffle, perplexing, confound, dumfound, unbelievable, incomprehensible, incredible, enigmatic, confounding, unimaginable, ponderous, and daunting. These four affective ramifications of the term lead to its association with the *incommunicable* captured under the category term inexpressible and such synonyms as un conveyable, inexpressible, unutterable, indescribable, indefinable, unspecifiable, and unnameable, suggesting the unimaginable, unbelievable, and ineffable. Such phenomena that appear on "Wonders of the World" lists are of a kind having such character and characteristics that stimulate, in one way or another, these affections. Such listed phenomena are considered significantly extraordinary, impressively exciting, captivately remarkable, mysteriously inexplicable and dauntingly inexpressible in some fashion. In sum, "wonders" are something to behold, be positively moved by and pondered over as objects of awed attention.^[3]

2. Awe & Aura

Wonder is more readily linked with awe, but seldom are these linked to aura. Most often these terms are used without considering their linkage. Awe has received considerable attention in the literature on aesthetic experience. However, the term aura has attracted rather little attention, the exceptions being in Walter Benjamins *Illuminations* and Theodor Adornos *Aesthetic Theory*. Recently Thomas Leddy has brought the term aura to the fore. In the Introduction to his book, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: the aesthetics of everyday life*, Leddy writes, "I have my own theory of aesthetic experience which I develop in this book. This is a phenomenological approach to aesthetics. It emphasizes the way in which an object can take on a quality when it is perceived aesthetically, a quality I call "aura."^[4]

In thinking about the notion of aura I came to associate and contrast it with that of awe. Aura is taken to be preeminently a term referring to an objects presentation and awe is preeminently a term indicating a subjects disposition in their respective emphases. In this connection aura may be considered a stimulus term by virtue of its referring to a stimulus object. Awe, on the other hand, may be considered a response term in virtue of its referring to the internal disposition of the subjects responding to the object. Both terms, each in its own way, are terms of cognition *cum* affection in their thrust. The associating of the two words suggests that there may be a way to extend the notion of aura, giving it greater ramification by connecting it with awe. The association also indicates a need for further delimitation and articulation of the nature and relationship of both terms. Awe seems to imply or suggest attention and the question of how we, as subjects, dispose ourselves while aura seems to imply or suggest manifestation and the question of how things present themselves.

The sense of aura in its cognitive aspect is characterized as a subtle quality whose nature is suggested by such expressions as "an air of," "emanating from," "radiated by," "a surrounding of," "exuded by," "pervasive of," "atmospheric." In terms of its affective aspect it suggests: a feel, mood, or spirit of. On the other hand, the sense of awe is characterized, in its cognitive aspect, as having a strict hold on ones attention and interest, hence having the nature of being captivated, fascinated or absorbed. In its affective aspect it is characterized as a mixed emotion of: fear, dread, respect, reverence, wonder, admiration, amazement, impressive, being stunning, astonishment. The key differentia between them is that aura is an *overall* characteristic of an object, whereas awe is an *overwhelming* characteristic of a sentient-sapient subject.^[5] Aura has to do with the energy capacity of the overall effect of the qualities of the object while awe has to do with the contemplative emotion of the sentient-sapient subject such as we are in our own makeup.

The effective relationship between the two terms is one of power. Aura presents itself in experience in degrees of forceful intensity ranging from negligible to awesome in affect, whereas at the uppermost level of energy intensity, such experience is associated with the aesthetic consummates of the beautiful and the sublime. It is with this effective relationship of power between the two notions that raised my curiosity about our sensitivity to and receptivity for cognizing aura and the possibility of contiguously experiencing awe. It seems to me that at the ordinary level of power intensity of ordinary persons, scenes, entities and events as objects of attention, there is a greater need for self-activation of aesthetic interest to be sensitive to and receptive of cognizing aura. By contrast, at the upper levels of power intensity of extraordinary people, scenes, entities or events, self-activation of an aesthetic interest is virtually not required. The reason for this is that such objects possess the power in their own right to trigger or forcefully *induce* aesthetic interest in us without our having to do so on our own. It is in this connection that the word seductive usually comes to mind as descriptive of the magnetic pull involved in the face of a powerful attractive quality that is found to be irresistible to attention; the affect of

being subsumed by that quality.

If this is so, then there is an *inverse ratio* in the relationship between the intensity of the "aura-power" of such persons, scenes, entities or events and the need to predispose oneself to be sensitive to and receptive of experiencing aura as one encounters higher levels of intensity. On the other hand, there is the possibility of a *direct ratio* of contiguously experiencing awe as one encounters higher levels of aura intensity, that is, at the level of extraordinary phenomena. Examples of the latter can be found in the Wonders of the World list.^[6] As a case in point, if one comes to be standing on the upper rim outlook-location overlooking the extraordinarily majestic Yosemite Valley, one is much more likely to be overwhelmingly taken in awe by the panoramic scene without the need to predispose oneself by taking up an aesthetic interest in order to have an aura experience emanating from the scene. Nor do we have to do so in the presence of a charismatic personality exuding aura. In such cases the aura is forthrightly delivered to one without need of much, if any, effort to activate an aesthetic interest in the object. This is an interesting direction to further examine the implications of the notion of aura by extending its relationship toward awe.

As indicated earlier I was prompted to connect the two terms by the following route. It seemed to me that aura is a stimulus factor that implicates an imposition upon us, while awe, as a response, implicates a disposition by us. The notion of imposing has two contextually salient senses: that of demanding, obliging or force, and that of monumentality, formidableness or awe-inspiring. It is the latter sense of the term 'imposing' that suggested the connection between aura and awe.

The phenomenology of aura seems to have the following two *cognitively* oriented characteristics:

1. An energy aspect: calling up such terms as 'radiating,' 'emanating,' 'shining forth,' 'luminous,' 'diffusion,' 'dispersion,' 'arising out of,' 'issuing from,' 'forthcoming,' 'emit,' 'exude,' 'emergent from,' 'source of,' 'begin with,' 'set out from.'

2. An environment aspect: calling up such terms as 'surrounding,' 'enveloping,' 'encompassing,' 'encircling,' 'halo,' 'enwrapped,' 'atmospheric,' 'circumambient.'

Considering the forceful sense of imposing, hence the *energy* aspect of aura, leads one to its compelling power where the phrases 'urged upon,' 'thrust upon,' 'forced upon,' or 'enlistment of the attention' of a sentient-sapient subject has sway. This is what I would call the pressive-aspect of aura. I view the aesthetic in its cognitive sense to consist in the effective press of the conditions of an object's being in a subject's awareness in the form of sensorial presentations. Based on this view, an aura is an ontological feature possessed by an object, be it a person, scene, entity or event, as a potency where the possibly exists of effecting sentient beings in their awareness and dispositions in coming into experiential contact.

Turning now to the awe-inspiring sense of the term 'imposing,' hence that of the environmental aspect of aura, it appears that in this respect what is suggested by such words as 'circumambient' is the broadcasting of: an air, spirit, quality, feeling, tone or mood. This is what I would call the expressive aspect of aura. One might say then that the energy aspect is the medium side of aura and the environmental aspect is the message side of aura. In the latter regard one might credit aura with a capacity of calling for esteem, illustriousness, notability, influential, credit, worth, importance, exaltation. It is in this way that aura is in the nature of being a show, a display, a disclosure. In this aspect aura comes to be revelatory, that is evidentiary in its nature in the senses of exhibiting, manifesting or presenting qualities as something to behold in our becoming mindful and appreciative *from* it. In this view, an aura, as imposing, is not either self-chosen nor self-constructed on a subject's part.^[7] Aura is the aesthetic presence of objects, be it a person, scene, entity or event, which one comes to be mindful from for their very *there-ness*.

Thus far I have been treating what I would take as the overpowering side of aesthetic experience, where aura has the front end role of attracting attention and concentration of any sentient subject receptive of any aura's imposing action.^[8] In this role, the notions of an aura's allurement, appeal, or seductiveness come to the fore as testimony to its strength. As already indicated, aura is subject to gradient degrees of strength and may be of a level that it does not readily take hold of subjects in getting their attention. On the other hand, sentient subjects themselves are impressionable to varying degrees. Here, there is the contingency of a subject's receptivity, openness or willingness to enjoin and engage with an object's presence. So the greater the object's aura influencing strength, and the greater the subject's receptive sensitivity, the greater the possibility of being moved emotively to an awe-inspiring aesthetic experience.

Together with the overpowering side of experience in connection with aura, there is an overwhelming side of the aesthetic experience. What I would call the cognitive impressive aspect leading to the affective impression aspect; the earlier meaning is that of being taken hold of by in the very beholding of and the latter meaning in effect being imprinted with. The overwhelming side of aesthetic experience is that of awe, the resultant generation of being moved or excited by the aura of a stimulus object to some dispositional mood and affection. Awe, as has been already indicated, is considered to be a mixed emotion often combining reverence, respect, admiration, fear, dread and wonderment, driven by the power of great beauty and sublimity.

The phenomenology of awe as a mixed emotion seems to have the following characteristics:

1. Pervasiveness: seized by, absorbed by, captivated by, enraptured by, engrossed with, mesmerized by, entranced by, arrested by, bound by, gripped by, fascinated by, taken hold of by, consumed by.
2. Astonishment: amazed at, marvel at, startled by, surprised by, unexpected, uncommon,

unusual, rare, seldom, infrequent, extraordinary, spectacular, exceptional, sensational, remarkable, un-surpassing, transcendent.

3. Admirable: charmed by, enamored by, enchanted with, respectful of, approval of, endearing of, overjoyed with, delighted with, and loveable.

4. Perplexity: wonderment, astounding, mystifying, ungraspable, beguiling, bewildering, dumb founding, puzzlement, unbelievable, unintelligible, incredible, enigmatic, confounding baffling, aghast, ineffable, indeterminate, unknowing, inexplicable.

All these distinctive senses tend to comingle, that is, they implicate each other. They tend to blend by nuance into each other forming a subtlety that subdues univocal preciseness and clarity of conceptual formulation of the word 'awe.'

The inclusion of perplexity in the emotive mix of awe carries further implications for both itself and aura. Being perplexed is a disturbance in agitation of something further. What is implied here is that there is a determinate level of what is known by and in the aesthetic experiencing of aura and awe, and also an indeterminate level of the unknown, suggesting that there is always something more, something over and above in becoming mindful of a person, scene, entity or events aura. In effect, perplexity leads to sustaining attention and binding interest.

It can be said that the person, scene, entity or event from which aura is emanating is always over-determined relative to any dynamic manifestation and reception. Consequently one's aesthetic experience on the affective side of awe is always underdetermined. This characteristic of awe is shown by the prolonged attention the object gives rise to over the course of presenting its qualities to the experiencing of it. Such experience is given to an ongoing perplexity aspect commonly referred to as being "betwixt and between." It may be in this respect that the dialectical interplay between the known and unknown, the determinate and the indeterminate, the immanent and the transcendent aspects of the aura-awe experience, involving as it does equivocalness, ambiguity and ambivalence, leads to an enigmatic aspect. This often incites the hesitant forms of fear and dread of the overpowering and overwhelming aspects of the experiencing of aura *cum* awe. The reverence and respect terms noted above as being associated with the term 'awe' comes in play in relationship to the cognitive-affective whole to part contemplation of an object, be it a person, scene, entity or event. It is acknowledging the aesthetic manifestation, not only the unity *simpliciter* of the object but also the heteronomy or complexity of particulars reduced to that unity. It is in the prolonged emergence of an object's *richness* of the particular sensorial qualities, as well as compelling power mediated by means of the intensity level of aura, that excites awe's affective characteristics. [9]

The bottom line seems to be that any aura or wonder experience is never fully intelligible, at least all at once. It

always holds out a surplus, an as yet unintelligible aspect, a remainder enticing further involvement, a renewing prospect for further reward in ones appreciative contemplation of a person, scene, entity or event dynamically presenting itself as itself. There is no closure; there is always an openness, that is, a promising aspect in the qualitative manifestations presented by an object as long as one is given to receptiveness. In other words, there is, relationally, a mutually reciprocal openness between the subject and the object. This open-condition or promising aspect of aura is a significant factor in stimulating awe-inspired wonder as an aesthetic experience.

3. Aura, Awe & Wonder

Having examined their nature, the next question is how the terms 'aura,' 'awe' and 'wonder' contextually relate to the broader topic of aesthetic experience. It would seem uncontroversial that the three concepts immediately relate to the aesthetic domain.^[10] However, are any of these universals to aesthetic experiences or are each special cases?

To put forward a working conceptual framework for this discussion, the term 'experience' in the phrase 'aesthetic experience' consists in the reciprocal relationship between the knower and the known, that is, between the subject and the object mutually determined by their respective characters at the time of the experiential occasion. The word 'aesthetic' has two basic senses, an epistemic-cognitive sense involving sensorial presentations to the perceptual awareness of a sentient subject, and an axiological-affective sense involving appraisal of worth or merit of those presentations by that subject. The cognitive sense of the term aesthetic as earlier indicated consists in the effective press of the conditions of being of the object on the sensorial awareness of the sentient subject. The affective sense of the term aesthetic consists in the dispositional response of the subject constitutive of the subject's appreciation of the stimulus object. The subject's appreciation may draw upon either or both the formal qualities and the expressive significances that are effectively presented by the stimulus object. Doing so may generate a positive, negative or indifferent disposition toward it, conditioned by the subject's interest perspective.^[11] The particular interest perspective may be a practical, aesthetic, moral or theoretical interest. The dispositional outcome is thereby determined on the one hand by what the object brings to the experience, and on the other by what the subject brings to it.

Our affective responses to a phenomenal object emerge on two levels; the sentient and the sapient levels. At the sentient level is the reflexive phase as a spontaneously emoted dispositional stance toward an object in coming into contact. This is to be found in immediately aroused feelings that emerge during contemplation of that object. At the sapient level is a reflective phase of inferentially considered dispositional stance toward the object to be found in thought where active interest in the aesthetic manifestations of an object is operating. As the focus here is specifically on the active aesthetic interest, a subject's appreciation may take the form of valuing the experience itself for its own sake, or valuing the properties of the stimulus object in terms of them giving rise to the kind of experience obtained. The latter is a

case of valuing the experience on behalf of what it is *of* and/or *about*, while the earlier is a case of setting aside what the experience is an experience *of*.

The term 'aura,' as a stimulus force, associates with the cognitive aspect of the aesthetic. Aura in its cognitive aspect leads to the question of how an object of attention phenomenally presents itself where aura is taken to be the effective stimulus capacity of an object's phenomenal manifestation. In its affective aspect, at the axiological level of aesthetic appreciation, aura as a stimulus induces the effects of positive, negative or indifference dispositions. From these conditions it would appear that aura, in its cognitive sense, plays an ever-present role in aesthetic experience albeit with different levels of energy ranging from being a compelling force upon a subject's attention to a weaker minimal force where the subject self-activates attentive interest in an object. It is in this cognitive sense that the phenomenon of aura appears to be a candidate for the claim to universality within the overall context of aesthetic experience.^[12]

The term 'awe' represents a kind of attentive stance in the presence of an object's aura strength, while the term 'wonder' represents a kind of appreciative stance involving the mix of emotions undergone in pondering over that object's or scene's qualities; the distinction between them being one of emphasis. The aura effect appears to operate universally at the cognitive level of the aesthetic experience, while that of awe and of wonder appear to be special cases operating at the level of the aesthetic experience.

4. Conclusion

In overall summary, it would appear that the experience of wonder is itself a special case of awe. In turn, awe is a special case of aura in a pattern of sequential dependency to the occurrence of wonder.^[13] This is to say, relationally, that wonder requires awe and that both wonder and awe require aura in sequential necessity in order for wonder and awe to occur at all. Conversely, wonder and awe are not necessary to the presence of aura experience. Hence awe and wonder bear a contingent-independent relationship to aura.^[14]

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Published on July 20, 2016.

Endnotes

^[1] This particular qualifying exercise as a kind of study represents a case of a longitudinal test of many in contrast to the historical endurance test of time.

^[2] For a neurological science approach to awe and wonder

see Shaun Gallagher, et. al., *A Neurophenomenology of Awe and Wonder* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[3] Consider these bodily referring types of exclamatory expressions associated with occasions of awe-inspiring experiences: breath-taking, open mouthed, eye-opening, music to my ears, makes ones tongue cleave to the roof of one's mouth, turns one's head, carries one off one's feet and the penultimate, it blows me away. Collectively, these suggest something that "boggles the mind."

[4] Thomas Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Broadview Press, 2012), p.11.

[5] It is to be noted that the disciplines of philosophy and psychology have on occasion entertained the view that aura is a projection on to an object in contrast to it emanating from the object. However, the historical use of the term, as well as overall sentiment, readily and steadily assigns the source of aura-power to the objects of attention.

[6] Awe relates to other areas of experience besides the cited "Wonders of the World" lists. Suggestive are the following: W. H. Auden remarks in his *The Dyer's Hand* that "Whatever its actual context and overt interest, every poem is rooted in imaginative awe." Richard Dawkins in his *Unweaving the Rainbow*, says: "The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable." Dean Koontz in his *A Big Little Life* writes: "If we allow ourselves to recognize the mystery and the wonder of existence, our fogged minds clear. Thinking clearly, we follow wonder to awe, and in the state of awe, we are as close to true wisdom as we will ever be." Albert Einstein in his *Living Philosophies*, writes: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed." No less than Immanuel Kant states in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."

[7] Leddy, in the quotation cited from his Introduction, in using the phrase "can take on" in relation to the attribute of aura appears to be doing so from a subjective perspective of an emergent realization by the subject in coming into contact with an object where aura is presumptively emanating from that object itself as a matter of its source.

[8] The "front end role" follows in the vein of C. S. Pierce's Firstness category.

See the discussion in Murray G. Murphey's, *The Development of Pierce's Philosophy*, especially pp. 306-309.

[9] The conditions of unity and complexity are descriptive of the *patterned* qualities of the object, while intensity refers to the phenomenal *power* of the object. One may recognize in this respect Monroe Beardsley's triadic categories of intensity complexity and unity (ICU) as these relate to art objects. See, for example, his *The Aesthetic Point of View* (Cornell U. P.,

1982).

[10] Many but not all aesthetic experiences engage the two dispositional concepts of awe and wonder. It is to be suggested that the concept of aura may well have a constant presence role in aesthetic experiences.

[11] We can distinguish cognitive indifference from affective indifference. Cognitive indifference is the case where a subject takes no attentive notice of a phenomenal entity, event or scene. Affective indifference is the case involving forming a dispositional stance toward a phenomenal entity, event or scene. An indifferent disposition is generated in two basic ways, either the object attended to is found to be devoid of value altogether or it is found to be equal in its positive and negative combined worth so as to neutralize a favoring or disfavoring view of the object leading to indifference.

[12] The question of disinterested interest in an object by a subject is directed at and applied to aesthetics at the appraisal level, that is, at the axiological-*affective* level not the epistemic-*cognitive* level of aesthetics.

[13] Awe in its captivating role in connection with wonder was introduced at the outset of the paper. In connection with the topic of wonder, Jesse Prince advances the suggestion that appreciation itself is a form of wonder. This would tend to assign a universal status to wonder. See Section 2.2 Aesthetic Wonder, of his article, "Emotion and Aesthetic Value" in *The Aesthetic Mind* (Oxford U. P., 2011), Schellekens & Goldie, eds.

[14] I would like to extend my grateful thanks to Thomas Leddy, Jennifer Judkins, Donald Crawford and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their valuable comments.
