

Contemporary Aesthetics

Volume 9 (2011)

2011

Aura, Self, and Aesthetic Experience

Marshall Battani

Grand Valley State University, battanim@gvsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics



Part of the [Esthetics Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search Journal](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Publisher](#)

[Webmaster](#)

Aura, Self, and Aesthetic Experience

Marshall Battani

Abstract

Aesthetic experiences are generated in encounters with cultural objects and such experiences are marked by the free play of cognitive and numinous experience unstructured by concepts. Kant's famous three types of pleasure, made infamous in social theory by Pierre Bourdieu, are examined in relation to the critical theoretical concept of aura, the social psychology of "flow," and cognitive explanations of perception to explain experience in aesthetic fields. Theories of aesthetic experience developed at the crossroad of critical social thought and cognitive science hold promise for a social analysis able to avoid the usual sociological pitfalls of either ignoring aesthetics or reducing it to structurally determined differences of taste.

Key Words

aesthetic experience, aesthetic field, aura, cognition, cultural sociology, disinterestedness, distinction, flow

1. Introduction

Why do people flock to movie theaters to see remakes of old films and sequels to recent ones knowing full well that, in all likelihood, what they are about to see will pale in comparison to their first go around? Why is unrequited love such a compelling feature of our favorite stories? What drives (so-to-speak) such large numbers of people to an interest in NASCAR super-speedway racing? Why do so many people try to hold on to the past with their family snapshots? How is it that the people of one culture find such a wide variety of things compelling?

Sociology, especially cultural sociology because of its penchant for examining esoteric high culture alongside the more quotidian, is a likely source for an answer. Unfortunately, despite its promise, the typical sociological explanation is often superficial. Most of the time sociology simply tells us that there is variation within the cultures of societies, often even enough variation to allow for different recognizable cultures or subcultures and, because of this variation, we are able to see a variety of groups or audiences for different cultural objects. Thus the notion "different strokes for different folks" is elevated to the status of sociological explanation. [1]

I am, of course, being more than a bit too dismissive, but as a cultural sociologist myself, I feel somewhat entitled. These issues *are* more complex than my quick dismissal implies, and notably so, because the idea of societies filled with different taste cultures has been given critical import by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of distinction, an idea that has been more influential to the sociological study of art and culture than any other in recent years. No cultural sociologist's toolkit is really complete without his concepts of capital, and a good understanding of their interplay upon and within social actors' life trajectories. When it comes to art, specifically, Bourdieu shows us in excruciating empirical detail the irony in how the

dominant aesthetic of *disinterestedness* works very much in the *interest* of society's powerful.[2]

This paper looks to another level of analysis, one that is simultaneously more general in its applicability across groups and institutions and more interested in common individual level aesthetic experience as opposed to the social consequences of taste. Why *do* people flock to see film remakes, revel in romantic longing, or watch the Daytona 500 on television? Questions like these are addressed here by briefly examining typical sociological approaches to art and by looking at the idea of "fields" and aesthetic fields in particular. Although sociologists tend to treat aesthetic fields as they would any other, I will argue that they are unique and what sets an aesthetic field apart from others is aesthetic experience.

My explanation of aesthetic experience, in turn, draws from cognitive theories of self, the human desire for numinous experience (often culturally coded as spiritual or enlightening), the critical theoretical concept of *aura*, and the idea of "flow" developed in social psychology. To make this argument it will first be necessary to rescue Kant from current sociological misinterpretations. Rather than censuring the notion of *disinterestedness* or simply identifying the differences between the audiences for different cultural objects, the effort here is to suggest some possibilities for understanding fundamental similarities cutting across the institutions and life-worlds inhabited by different audiences. How might one understand the larger context – an aesthetic field - in which the taste for disparate objects and the desire for certain experiences exist?

2. Social Worlds and Art Worlds

It is difficult for sociologists to give aesthetic analysis its due. Sociology typically takes one of two approaches to aesthetics, neither of which contributes to an understanding of aesthetic *experience*. One common approach, the production of culture perspective, championed by Richard Peterson and canonized in Howard Becker's *Art Worlds*, takes an agnostic position on aesthetics. According to Becker

Aesthetic principles and systems, being part of the package of interdependent practices that make up an art world, will both influence and be influenced by such aspects of it as the training of potential artists and viewers, financial and other modes of support, and the mode of distribution and presentation of works. They will especially be influenced by a pressure for the consistency implicit in the idea of art.

With such a statement Becker (and I doubt very much he would disagree with me for saying so) leaves the definition of aesthetics to someone else, to the participants of the art world in question.[3] In the production of culture tradition, an art world is a sub-category of social world, defined (like all social worlds) as diffuse networks of people with a patterned variety of interaction with one another. The patterns of interaction are directed toward some shared goal, but the definition of that goal and the means to achieve it are much less rigidly defined than they would be in, say, a business organization. Everyone involved in an art world is connected somehow or

other, and the job of the sociologist is to describe the complex and sometimes ambiguous patterns of interaction that emerge as participants go about defining, creating, judging, distributing, appreciating, and whatever else they do in relation to art.

3. Fields, Artistic Fields, Aesthetic Fields

The second major sociological approach to studying art that became dominant after the English translation of Bourdieu's *Distinction* in 1984 examines taste as a component of powerful and exclusive social forces that establish and maintain status hierarchies. In Bourdieu's approach a theory of fields stands in for the descriptive concept of social world. An artistic field is defined as a system of social positions structured by power relations in which social actors struggle over the appropriation of economic, social, and cultural capital.^[4] In other words social actors in an artistic field (in any field really – think of the legal professions for example) seek advantage through the influence of wealth (economic capital), their social networks (social capital), and their taste for and knowledge of those aspects of culture that confer honor and esteem (cultural capital). In this scheme, because status distinctions are associated with appreciation of high culture, Kant's formulation of the disinterested attitude of aesthetic contemplation becomes a tool of domination. In Bourdieu's eye, learned practices of disinterested contemplation of cultural objects serve to camouflage what is, in fact, highly interested action directed, not necessarily consciously, toward deploying and legitimizing power and domination.^[5]

After Bourdieu there really isn't much doubt that our art institutions and practices reproduce and reify social structures.

But isn't it possible that even if aesthetic practices have a structuring power, Kant had it right in describing *experience*?^[6] Surely it is. It is especially so if we take seriously just how Kant conceptualizes the act of judging as opposed to the judgment itself. The judgments themselves are bound by concepts, constrained by social forces, while the process of judging is something else, something Kant calls the free play of cognition not determined by concepts.^[7] Judging something to be pleasurable or good (the two "interested" judgments posed against the "disinterested") requires some set of concepts and sense of purpose. One knows the pleasurable in relation to what one knows of one's self, and certainly knowing what is good requires some objective sense of rules and concepts. The beautiful, on the other hand, animates cognition (just as do the good and the pleasurable) but does so free of any sense of purpose, free from concepts that guide interpretation and constrain meaning. This is the nature of purposiveness without purpose and it is this sense of the aesthetic that is ignored or too easily dismissed by the sociological imagination still under the influence of Bourdieu.^[8]

Bourdieu, in his rather simplistic inversion of Kant, wants us to believe that the pleasures of judging are more fully realized, not in cognitive play but in directed, concept-driven contemplation with a sociological purpose. Pleasure comes from the interest in discovering that which "makes the [art] work necessary" or, in other words, how the particular artistic

field creates the conditions that fundamentally shape expression.^[9] But when Bourdieu is talking about the pleasure to be had from delineating the contours and textures of some artistic field or other (in the quotation above it's Flaubert's literary field), he is talking about a particular kind of discovery that might result from an aesthetic experience but he isn't talking about the experience itself. (Again, he thinks we ought to be leery of the disinterested experience as it masks what is actually going on.) There is something fundamental and experiential being ignored if all we do is talk about the concepts and awareness that *derive from* an aesthetic encounter.

So how do we talk about the experience? Janet Wolff's definitive statement on the dilemmas with, and the need for, situating aesthetic considerations within sociological analysis certainly nudges us in the right direction.^[10] She recognizes correctly that Kant is important to developing aesthetic sociology not only because he figured prominently in twentieth-century debates about, and defenses of, high modernism, but equally because, having relatively little to say about exactly what art is, he instead developed an understanding of the aesthetic attitude. Such an approach, because it is focused on peoples' experiences rather than on cultural objects alone, is, at least intuitively, open to the sociological imagination.

Kant's particular focus on the disinterestedness fundamental to aesthetic experience has been criticized for being impossible and, according to Wolff, phenomenological theories of art, like those of Natanson and Morawski, have been better at explaining the nature of aesthetic experience *per se*.^[11] Arnold Berleant provides phenomenological insight as well. He asserts that "...the phenomena of aesthetics reach to the very source of perception and meaning in direct experience." He provides a detailed description of the particular characteristics of the aesthetic field as "The total situation in which the objects, activities, and experiences of art occur" and argues that the experience of art is fundamentally bound up with the social world "...in spite of the tendency of modern aesthetics to build barriers against the incursions of political uses, social conventions, moral orthodoxies, and cognitive significance."^[12] Wolff would like us to understand that art is both bound up with the social world *and* autonomous:

Art has its own specificity, first, in the relatively autonomous structures, institutions, and signifying practices which constitute it, and through which it represents reality and ideology [and] art also retains an autonomy with regard to the specifically aesthetic nature of the apprehension and enjoyment of works of art. ^[13]

She sees promise in theories of discourse that allow us to understand how we constitute aesthetic experiences as we talk about them, and in psychoanalytic theories for explaining the desire and pleasure underpinning aesthetic experience. But the difficulty remains, she concludes, in bringing these approaches together with the sociological "obligation" (her word, not mine) to investigate empirical phenomena, the "specific social and historical conditions of aesthetic experience

and evaluation.”[14]

4. Aura

An examination of the critical theoretical concept of aura and the social psychological experience of flow sheds light on how one might meet what Wolff calls the obligation to investigate empirical phenomena of aesthetic experiences. Whether it is brought on by a painting, sculpture, film, monument, celebrity, or natural phenomenon one sometimes experiences an almost inexplicable wondrous feeling and the word “aura” seems to capture it. But aura is much more than a simple label for some mystical or pseudo-mystical experience.

The idea of aura as it is developed most famously by Walter Benjamin is, frankly, confusing.[15] Nevertheless, what is clear from his various descriptions of the phenomenon is that aura is experienced as a collapse of the distinction between proximity and distance. Originally art objects were dependent on ritual and were thus only ever fleetingly available. Ceremonial practices such as rites of passage and communion demonstrated that ritual objects were set off from daily life and yet, at the same time, the fate of one’s daily life was intimately bound to them. In the modern era of autonomous art, objects were freed from their “parasitical dependence” on ritual and their literal uniqueness, their status as originals enshrined in museums, imbued them with an appearance of distance. Adorno builds upon Benjamin’s ideas by framing the collapse of proximity and distance as a dialectic of interpretation and indeterminacy.[16]

For Adorno, artworks are puzzles in the sense that they are indeterminate in their nature and thus make possible the free-play of the mind. The indeterminacy of a puzzle both evokes and allows for interpretation, and artworks, as puzzles, are enigmas in that they both speak *and* conceal. They create a dialectic of proximity and distance as they point beyond their obvious apparent meaning and invite interpretation, while also confounding and even refusing it.

According to Yvonne Sherrat we then have a characterization of aura in which it is (from Benjamin) “an appearance of distance” and (from Adorno) a fundamental indeterminacy inherent in the object.[17] The indeterminate nature of the art object leads to the appearance of distance and also to the experience of aura that helps make an object both meaningful and beyond interpretation at the same time. The simultaneous invitation and refutation of interpretation leads to intense engagement with the art object and, according to Adorno, this intense receptivity creates the ultimate proximity in the loss of self as Ego to the object or image. One loses conceptual faculties, the cognitive boundary around the self, and the very sense of self associated with ego. The Id remains, as self, and it is this that merges with the art in an aesthetic experience.

5. Aura and Self: Flow

In one of the relatively few attempts to study aesthetic experience empirically Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson surveyed and interviewed art professionals in an attempt to better understand aesthetic experience and ultimately to propose methods to enhance individuals’ aesthetic

encounters.^[18] Early on in the project the authors recognized that the aesthetic experiences described by the subjects of the study sounded very much like an already well-studied state of consciousness given the name, "flow" by Csikszentmihalyi in 1975.^[19] Flow is a commonly used term that describes an exceptional state of consciousness:

Athletes refer to it as "being in the zone," religious mystics as being in "ecstasy," artists and musicians as aesthetic rapture. Athletes, artists, and mystics do very different things when they reach flow, yet their descriptions of the experience are remarkably similar.^[20]

Flow describes a kind of total immersion in an activity and the accompanying state of consciousness in which all one's experiences are in harmony.

This state of harmony, described both as being at one with one's self and as losing one's self, occurs when people are doing things that they feel are worth doing for their own sake. The optimal experience occurs when a person perceives that there is something for her or him to do, some challenge, and also feels that she or he has the skills to meet that challenge (or to come very close). This relative balance of challenge and skills drives a person having a flow experience toward increasing challenges and levels of complexity in order to maintain the heightened consciousness. Flow facilitates and motivates action in the form of cognitive play. Consequently, flow is often associated with a sense of discovery. One discovers new skills and new senses of self. Such experiences typically occur while engaged in activities that have clear goals and boundaries, and within these boundaries one's sense of the "outside world" is abandoned, one experiences a sense of power and control over the outcome of the activity, and time becomes distorted. George Herbert Mead's "me" is completely overshadowed by the "I:"

In flow the self is fully functioning, but not aware of itself doing it, and it can use all the attention for the task at hand. At the most challenging levels, people actually report experiencing transcendence of self, caused by the unusually high involvement with a system of action so much more complex than one usually encounters in everyday life.^[21]

In the words of Csikszentmihalyi, one has an "autotelic" experience – one that is intrinsically rewarding (it has purpose without purpose).

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson describe the rewards intrinsic to encounters with works of art and, because these descriptions are similar to descriptions of flow, the researchers ask us to consider aesthetic experience as a form of flow. Four dimensions of an aesthetic encounter emerge from the study and they include 1) the perceptual – an experience of physicality, 2) the emotional – including a wide range of emotional responses, 3) the intellectual – an experience of a relatively closed or open-ended meaning, and 4) communication – in the form of a kind of dialog with the artwork or in the form of information about an era or culture. Art professionals tend to become skilled (they "mature") in one

or more of these dimensions.

In an aesthetic encounter one's attention is arrested for whatever reason and then one's skills are applied to the encounter. As challenges are met, attention is refocused at a higher or more complex level and the sequence begins again. New skills open up new challenges, which facilitate attention. Attention is focused at a higher level, which helps develop new skills to meet new challenges. Just as one begins to grasp the meaning (or whatever dimension upon which one's attention is focused), the challenge is renewed: the piece escapes one's grasp and one is compelled to stay engaged. (The object evokes and allows and frustrates contemplation.) While the thing that triggers this experience is certainly socially and historically dependent, the dialectic form of the resulting cognitive experience may not be; it may be an experience that, as Kant would say, is free of concepts, disinterested.

6. Aura and Self: the Numinous

How is such a "non-conceptual" experience possible for human beings? As fundamentally social and reflexive beings, it just doesn't seem plausible that we might, individually or collectively, be able to experience the sort of matter-of-fact wonder and mystery of aura as described by Benjamin and Adorno and documented more contemporaneously as "flow." Harry T. Hunt takes up a closely related set of questions in his examination of what he refers to, following Rudolf Otto, as the "numinous." In Hunt's words (drawing from Blofeld), "...the core of numinous or mystical experience lies in its *nonconceptual*, directly felt realization of an immediate sense of Being, presence, or 'thatness' – also related to the sheer 'suchness' of Zen satori experience."[\[22\]](#) According to Hunt an encounter with the numinous is an experience of *being* itself and understanding such an experience requires a multi-level conceptualization of the self.

Hunt draws from the work of developmental and cognitive psychologists to illustrate multiple levels of self including: 1) a primary "ecological" or "bodily" self basic to perceptual-motor navigation, 2) a self-referential or social sense of self and, 3) a "meta-cognitive," "noetic," or introspective capacity that allows for the representation of "inner" cognitive processes and states of consciousness.[\[23\]](#) The fact that the human self is spread across the central nervous system in this way confirms, according to Hunt, William James' conclusion that a sense of self is unattainable by our self-referential awareness and as such it is only in the ongoing stream of consciousness that the human self might be found. Experience of one's sense of self is thereby set up at the fringes of reflexive consciousness and remains inaccessible via our self-aware conceptualizations. The self, like the auratic artwork described by Benjamin and Adorno, is both proximate and distant – inviting interpretation while refusing it. In formal terms an encounter with aura is much like experiences with the ecological self that disappears the moment we begin to name it and reflect upon it.

James Gibson's theory of what he calls our "ambient ecological array" helps illuminate how such experiences of the ecological self take on the significance that they do.[\[24\]](#) Gibson describes human perception as the sensory activity involved in

navigating through one's "perceptual surround." As Hunt summarizes:

Such active navigation creates an open horizon ahead, out of which streams ambient gradients of surfaces and textures, which, closing behind the moving organism, continuously specify or self-locate its presence within a self-generated "envelope of flow."[\[25\]](#)

Sentience is essentially self-location. Environment and self are co-specified without reflection in ecological perception. This notion, associated with third-generation cognitive science represents what some call a radical embodiment of consciousness and is sometimes derided as "cockroach intelligence" or "phenomenology without a head." Nevertheless, Nagataki and Hirose show that this kind of simple level intelligence effectively explains sentience as ecological self engaging the world in action (they use McBeath's example of the baseball outfielder who engages directly with the environment via a "dynamic coupling" of subject and object as he moves toward the ball and the ball moves toward him).[\[26\]](#)

By adding the cognitive understanding of sentience to the already well-developed sociological understanding of the symbolic and socially constructed self, we can understand that the metacognitive and introspective hallmarks of the reflexive self involve spatial metaphors derived from the ecological array. This is why, according to Hunt as well as Lakoff and Johnson, we so regularly employ basic physical metaphors like "center/periphery, high/low, inside/outside, and varieties of kinesthetic 'forces'" in our attempts to conceptualize the nature of our being in the world.[\[27\]](#) Should we be able to bypass or perhaps intensify these metaphors that mediate direct experience of the ecological self, we may become open to the mystical and ecstatic experiences associated with the dissolve of the boundary between one's self and the world. In such cases "[t]he ecological self reemerges as a 'presence' coordinated with an 'openness' of the encompassing array that is typically 'schematized' culturally as God or Absolute."[\[28\]](#) It should take no great leap to imagine this sort of experience of the "absolute" as on a continuum with the aesthetic experience described by Adorno, in which the self (as Ego) is lost and then "merges" with the art as the self loses its sense of self, its social and introspective dimensions, in favor of its primary ecological functioning self.

7. Aesthetic Fields

An aesthetic field, like any other sociologically defined field, is a system of social agents acting in relation to others. Following Berleant, we can think of the total field as including objects and the perceptions and experiences of the actors, as well.[\[29\]](#) It is the particular nature of these aesthetic perceptions and experiences that differentiates an aesthetic field from other fields. Objects in the environment generate aesthetic fields as people become engaged with them in cognitive play. What might motivate such an engagement is highly variable and an aesthetic field might more likely be generated in an art world, but one can emerge anywhere an object speaks to someone in such a way as to generate the experience of aura and flow. Kant, of course, identified

experiences of pleasure in the agreeable and pleasure in the good (in which reflective and introspective dimensions of self are operating), but if an aesthetic field is generated, then one's social sense of self and place drop away in favor of free play unconstrained by concepts (Kant), a loss of self (Adorno), or flow (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson). Social-psychological theories of field phenomena argue that perception and perception of one's self are wedded in what John Levi-Martin describes as a "theoretically rich dualism."^[30] Aesthetic experience untangles this dualism potentially creating insight on one's own perceptions of self.

What does any of this have to do with the questions asked at the beginning of this essay? Well, maybe what interests people who go to see remakes, revivals, and sequels is not the quality of the sequel or the original but the act of evaluation itself. It isn't about the outcome but the process of comparing the two and the repeatedly experienced fact that the second may come close but will ultimately fail to capture the wonder of the first. This tension experienced as movie-goers evaluate and argue about what they have seen creates an intensification of the metaphors blocking direct experience of the ecological self, spatial metaphors as in "how *close* is one version to another?" The intensity of these debates or self-evaluations, if not literally bringing one closer to numinous experience, at least puts one into a field in which the potential for the numinous (the bridging of opposites, self and world) is experienced, metaphorically, in the possibility and impossibility of reconciliation between the original film and its remake or sequel. This experience is, in turn, *formally* equivalent to the tension created by an artwork's invitation to, and refusal of, interpretation. The possibility of flow or an aesthetic experience has been created.

If there is any potential for a field theory of aesthetics, then the aesthetic experience ought to be visible in a variety of different institutional contexts and across genres. So, following the questions posed at the beginning of the essay, what is it that draws people to watch NASCAR races on television, particularly ones taking place at the legendary super-speedways in Daytona and Talladega? Inevitably, the hours-long broadcast will revolve around the ability or inability of drivers and their crews to get their cars "dialed in." On these enormous tracks the fastest cars are those that find a tenuous balance between a car that floats over the surface of the track (at speeds around 200mph) and yet still has enough friction to steer itself through the corners. The effort to find that balance continues throughout the race and provides the broadcasters with a structure upon which to build their commentary. A variety of adjustments to the suspension of the car and to the air pressure of the tires in relation to the changing temperatures of the racing surface and the length of runs between adjustments are discussed in detail, as is the relative success of each team. The perfect balance is an impossible goal simply because of the unpredictability of the wide array of variables at play.

Experiencing the dramatic struggle to "dial in" is equivalent to the aesthetic/auratic experience of proximity-through-distance. The condition itself is beyond attainability: a state suspended between friction and no friction. Some have

described the super-speedway cars as “[very] low-flying aircraft.” But if they actually fly they will crash and if they maintain contact with the track they are doomed to be slower than might be possible. The struggle to dial-in, like the unrequited love of Romeo and Juliet, is an embrace of the experience of proximity through distance, the effort to obtain the unobtainable, to interpret the unintelligible, to know the unknowable.

A very different activity, the creation and collection of family snapshots, can be similarly described as an experience of the formal characteristics of proximity through distance. Susan Sontag addresses this issue in her popular writing by employing the idea of melancholy.^[31] Sontag is concerned with how people make meaning in light of the apparently direct, but always partial, connection that the photograph has to the world. The connection to the world in front of the camera is paramount, but at the same time photographs are not transparent and direct reproductions of the world. Photographs, for Sontag, are meaningless without explanation. The act of explanation, of providing context and guiding interpretation of the image, is a process that takes place in time, and time inevitably distances the image from the world it depicts.

The play of loss and recovery in much of Sontag's interpretations also plays a central role in the work of the literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes. Barthes describes photographs as sites of personal and cultural experience.^[32] While looking at a photograph, the viewer has a set of cultural conventions or “codes” with which to find meaning, but photographs have a way of challenging those codes. Barthes referred to this phenomenon as an ever-present tension in the process of interpreting photographs between the *studium* (that which is culturally coded) and the *punctum* (that which is not).^[33] Reflecting his post-structuralist semiotic theories of culture and language, Barthes shows, through his own idiosyncratic reading of numerous photographs, that photographic meaning is indeterminate. Though meaning is indeterminate and the possibility of finding it is always tenuous, the desire to find it is, in Barthes’ view, constant and unrelenting. Photographic meaning is elusive to the point of indeterminacy and the effort to find it is an aesthetic experience.

Examples of this *form* of aesthetic experience are also available from the worlds of Western high culture. Yonatan Malin has examined how the use of syncopated or displaced dissonance reinforces the theme of romantic longing that is the hallmark of the German Romantic Lied form.^[34] The distance and proximity collapse that is experienced emotionally in melancholic romantic yearning as a kind of frustrated melodic closure becomes analogous to unrequited love. Much analysis of eighteenth-century bourgeois culture addresses the distance and proximity between novel expression and the constraints of form. See, for example, Witkin on Adorno and classical music, McClary on the sonata form, and Moretti on the literary form of *Bildungsroman*.^[35] Kurt Konigsberger makes similar analyses through a comparison of Arnold Bennett’s novel, *Anna of the Five Towns*, from the early twentieth century, to the popular animated television show,

The Simpsons, from the end of that century.[36]

These few brief examples from film, auto racing, photography, music, and literature hint at the potential of a field theory of aesthetics to incorporate cultural objects from a variety of social and cultural strata and the experiences of a variety of social actors into one compelling explanatory framework. *Romeo and Juliet* are *almost* united. The sequel is *close but not quite* as good as the first installment. Stock cars *very nearly* fly. Snapshots *almost* recreate a moment in time, and the syncopated dissonance of melancholy music leaves one *longing* for resolution.

8. Conclusions

The relationship between auratic form and a socially constructed value given to the desire for the numinous experience described above and the brief description of its operation across genres suggests that we can at least entertain the notion that treating aesthetics as a field phenomenon can push the social analysis of art and culture beyond the typical sociological approaches that either ignore aesthetics or focus only on their consequences for social stratification. The trick lies in creating a sociological imagination for Kant – in conceptualizing the disinterested attitude in terms of social psychology and cognition.

There are those who would have us believe that sociologists simply ought not to tread on such rarified territory as aesthetics. According to Nick Zangwell, for example, the application of sociology to the study of art has a de-aestheticizing effect. Although Zangwell's characterization of the sociological literature and sociological reasoning is largely specious, his central concern, "[t]he idea that [art world] participants might have a motive for participating has slipped from view" is valid and so too is his assertion that "[w]e need a theory that gives a good explanation of why people create and consume art." [37] The pursuit of numinous experience generated in flow may provide such an explanation.

Kant's cognitive free play and the critical theorist's experience of aura meet at the crossroads of cognitive science and social psychology to direct our understanding of aesthetic experience toward social-psychological conceptions of the self and its sense of being in the world. In the aesthetic field generated by one's interaction with a cultural object, we can see the pleasures of Kant's cognitive free play *and* the critical theoretical potential of aura as one's experience of flow generates numinous experience and consequently the potential to reflect upon the relatively fleeting nature of such an experience. This reflection opens up potentially new perspectives on one's social self, on its presence and its absence, and thus taps into the power of self-awareness. The idea of the aesthetic field presented here is sociological without being reductionist. It can embrace the social and cultural variation of a range of settings which may generate aesthetic experience while granting *that experience* some autonomy and acknowledging the possibility that the *form* of the experience is dictated as much by cognitive structure as it is by social structure.

Marshall Battani
battanim@gvsu.edu

Marshall Battani is Chair and Associate Professor of Sociology at Grand Valley State University. Publications include "Photography's Decline into Modernism in Visual Worlds" and "Pop Culture Institutions: From Production to Aesthetics" in the *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. He would like to thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for invaluable comments made on an earlier version of this article.

Published on January 13, 2011

Endnotes

[1] Darnell M. Hunt, *Screening the Los Angeles Riots: Race, Seeing, and Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1992); Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

[2] See especially *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[3] Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 138.

[4] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also John Levi-Martin "What is Field Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, 109 (2003), 1-49, in which he defines field theory in his introduction as "Explanation of regularities in individual action by recourse to a position vis-à-vis others."

[5] From the dominant sociological perspective, the disinterested attitude is the defining feature of Kant that has been institutionalized in art worlds by Prall, Panofsky, Kahnweiler's defense of Cubism, Greenberg's post-war promotion of High Modernism, and in D.W. Prall, *Aesthetic Analysis* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967); Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955; Chicago, 1982), and *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris: His Life and Work* (London: Lund Humphries, 1947) and *The Rise of Cubism* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1949); Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) and *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[6] Herbert Gans, *Popular and High Culture: An Analysis and*

Evaluation of Taste (New York: Harper-Collins, 1974).

[7] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1987), Section 9.

[8] *Ibid.*, Section 14.

[9] Bourdieu 1984, p. xix; and see Allen Dunn, "Who Needs a Sociology of the Aesthetic? Freedom and Value" in Pierre Bourdieu's *Rules of Art*," *Boundary 2*, 25, 1 (1998), 87-110.

[10] Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993).

[11] Maurice Natanson, *Literature, Philosophy and the Social Sciences: Essays in Existentialism and Phenomenology* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962); Stefan Morawski, *Inquiries into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974).

[12] Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1970); and *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 109-110.

[13] Wolff, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

[14] Wolff, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

[15] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt (London: Fontana Press, 1973).

[16] Thodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[17] Yvonne Sherratt, "Adorno's Aesthetic Concept of Aura," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 33, 2 (2007), 155-177.

[18] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson, *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (Malibu, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1990).

[19] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Play and Intrinsic Rewards," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 15 (1975), 41-63.

[20] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 29.

[21] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi, *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 33.

[22] Harry T. Hunt, "Dark Nights of the Soul: Phenomenology and Neurocognition of Spiritual Suffering in Mysticism and Psychosis," *Review of General Psychology*, 11 (2007), 209-234; Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Galaxy Books, 1923); John Blofeld, ed., *The Zen Teaching of the Hui Hai* (London: Rider, 1962).

[23] Hunt, *ibid.*, p. 210. See also Ulric Neisser, "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge," *Philosophical Psychology*, 1 (1988), 35-59.

[24] James Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986).

[25] Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

[26] Rodney A. Brooks, "Intelligence Without Representation," *Artificial Intelligence*, 47 (1991), 139-159; Andy Clark, "Embodied Cognitive Sciences?" *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 3, 9 (1999), 345-351; Michael K. McBeath, Dennis M. Shaffer, and Mary K. Kaiser, "How Baseball Outfielders Determine Where to Run to Catch Fly Balls," *Science*, 268 (1995), 569-573; Shoji Nagataki and Satoru Hirose, "Phenomenology and the Third Generation of Cognitive Science: Towards a Cognitive Phenomenology of the Body," *Human Studies*, 30 (2007), 291-230; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

[27] See also George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[28] Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

[29] Berleant, *op. cit.*

[30] John Levi-Martin, "What is Field Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, 109 (2003), 1-49.

[31] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell, 1972).

[32] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

[33] *Ibid.*, p.50.

[34] Yonatan Malin, "Metric Displacement Dissonance and Romantic Longing in the German Lied," *Music Analysis* 25, 3 (2006), 251-288.

[35] Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Music* (London: Routledge, 1988); Susan McClary, "[Constructions of Subjectivity in Franz Schubert's Music](#)," *Queering the Pitch*, ed. by Phillip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994); Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987).

[36] Kurt M. Koenigsberger, "Commodity Culture and its Discontents," *Leaving Springfield*, ed. by John Alberti (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

[37] Nick Zangwell, "Against the Sociology of the Aesthetic," *Cultural Values*, 6, 2 (2002), 443-452 and "Against the Sociology of Art," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 32, 2 (2002), 206-218. Also see Bridget Fowler, "A Note on Nick Zangwell's 'Against the Sociology of Art,'" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 33 (2003), 363- 374.
