

Aesthetics Today

Contemporary Approaches to the Aesthetics of Nature and of Art

Contributions of the 39th International
Wittgenstein Symposium
August 7–13, 2016
Kirchberg am Wechsel

Volume XXIX

Editors

Stefan Majetschak
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**WISSENSCHAFT · FORSCHUNG
NIEDERÖSTERREICH**



Printed in cooperation with the
Department for Science and Research
of the Province of Lower Austria

Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2016
Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society

Distributors

Die Österreichische Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft
The Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society

Markt 63, A-2880 Kirchberg am Wechsel
Österreich / Austria



www.alws.at

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ISSN 1022-3398

Refereed Periodical

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Beiträge, Abstracta-Heft und Programm wurden mit Hilfe eines von Joseph Wang, Universität Innsbruck, erarbeiteten Datenbankprogramms erstellt.
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Contributions, Book of Abstracts and Program were produced using a database application developed by Joseph Wang, University of Innsbruck, Austria.
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Visuelle Gestaltung: Sascha Windholz
Druck: Eigner Druck, A-3040 Neulengbach

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Aesthetic Experience and Certainty

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Abstract

Wittgenstein's mature philosophy offers a therapeutic way out of some conundrums stemming from taxonomic expectations regarding philosophical description of experience in general. The paper asks if this is also true of the facts of *aesthetic* experience. This possibility is hinted at by examining an application of the notion of certainty to aesthetic experience. Some traits of possible uses of central concepts of the mature Wittgenstein to a philosophical aesthetics inspired by the "new method" are also canvassed.

Is there a place for certainty in aesthetic experience? This question begs qualification. It would seem more natural, or philosophically interesting, to ask for the place of certainty not in *aesthetic experience* so much as in *aesthetic judgment*.

Philosophical discussion of aesthetic experience typically revolves around what kinds of objects elicit what kinds of responses – or what forms, isolated by the observer (or listener, etc.) in her apprehension, invite the focus of spirit to dwell on the peculiar mode of reaction we call aesthetic experience. Clive Bell's *Art* (1914) is a classic example of this approach. I'd like to suggest that, to the extent that Wittgenstein's mature philosophy offers a therapeutic way out of some conundrums stemming from taxonomic expectations regarding philosophical description of experience in general, this is also true of the facts of *aesthetic* experience. This might be hinted at by examining the possible application of 'certainty' to aesthetic experience.

In §353 of *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein describes a forester that asks his men to cut down a certain number of trees. He indicates by ostensive gestures which ones should be cut down. And he adds: "And I know that this is a tree". In a way, the figure of the *vernünftige Mensch*, of the rational man, thus asserts a basic proposition of the forester's belief system, one that is supposed to be true for all his men – but that, strangely enough, *should not* be asserted in that context. To pass that proposition over in silence, as an ellipsis, is part and parcel of the language game in place. Otherwise, it would suggest the need for verification in ignorance of what would count as verification. We could say: the tree itself! But the game does not provide for this possibility, except in a couple of special circumstances (hallucinations, thought experiments à la Gettier, fictional scenarios, etc.). Forbidden in normal situations, the occurrence of the assertion suggests a legitimate question as to the verification that would resolve the ignorance hinted at by the certainty expressed in the assertion. One of the forester's men reasonably asks himself: "But the forester simply *knows* that this is a tree, without examining it, or asking us to do so?"

His good faith made him thus fall into a trap. For, at this moment, crucially, practice is interrupted. The forester could be said to want to do justice to facts ("the most difficult" philosophical task, as Wittgenstein says in his comments on Frazer) but in a dogmatic, not a descriptive manner, one that violates the criteria of the use in question. And in so doing, somehow those very facts are drained of meaning. The experience of meaning (*Bedeutungserlebnis*) is thus emptied. By uttering a proposition stemming from the most basic layers of the systems of belief or verification in which the experience is anchored, and by doing

so with an attitude of certainty, the forester undermined the possibility of cooperation between vast regions of systems of propositions and concepts. For how to keep believing the forester who suggests, if obliquely, such doubt? Except in special situations, or jokes, beliefs in most of the things we know without making this knowledge explicit operate in silence. They form webs of connections of meaning, through intermediary links (*Zwischenglieder*), with different degrees of proximity – that is, they form systems (as the systems of propositions of the early 30s), even if open systems (unlike the systems of propositions of the early 30s).

We could say that it is precisely because I do not deduce certain fundamental certainties (a deduction whose process could be analyzed) that they are fundamental and form webs of systems (OC §417). And by being made explicit in the *vernünftige Mensch's* fashion, they cast a fog of doubt, not over calculation mistakes, measurement imprecisions, memory flaws, etc., but over the kind of participation of the speaker in the very form of life in question. But I'm suggesting a further step: there are *non-dits* which should remain *non-dits* and must only be shown – if we want to do justice to facts. If this interdiction of assertion is violated, this must be done exclusively – in normal contexts – for therapeutic purposes.

Let us return to the aesthetic experience. When we say of an object that it is beautiful (or some other such quality), do we thus assign a quality to it? Or do we want in essence to say that it pleases us, or causes some such aesthetic effect in us? In this last case, we don't describe the object proper, the "lines and colors" of its volumes (bi- or tridimensional, etc.), but we give it a characterization that depends on our relation with it, one that is no longer reducible to, or even expressible by means of a sensory description – in contrast to the core of modern aesthetics. As Wittgenstein notes in 30.03.1947 on the effect of certain opera: "You gesture with your hand, would like to say: 'of course!'" (MS 134 78) – and here we seem to find the same kind of emphatic acquiescence presiding, for example, the massive acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution: "The certainty ('of course') was created by the enormous charm of [the theory's] unity" (LA III. 32). Wittgenstein calls this an *attitude* – and places this attitudinal dimension on a level that is more fundamental than any considerations of verification might express.

A skeptic could doubt the possibility of the establishment of a standard of taste, occurring through a mode of presentation bearing the mark of certainty. But suppose the intervention of the skeptic is in terms of doubling the certainty that I am having an aesthetic experience as such, irrespective of the specific aesthetic quality of the object of such experience from the viewpoint of a regional aesthet-

ics – assuming the Grammar provides for these aesthetic games. All that this intervention could then accomplish is to undermine the experience of meaning as such. The situation is analogous to the case of the forester who asserts his belief that he is pointing to trees when pointing to trees. By wanting to do justice to the facts with inadequate instruments of description, the philosopher analyst tears the fabric of the very facts under philosophical description, undoing their characteristic lived experience. This is a typical case of throwing the baby out along with the bath water.

Who is this unfortunate child thrown out with the water of the analytic bath? Its name is said in many ways – and it would be interesting to survey these, from 29 to 51. One of the first would certainly be the notion of 'familiar experience', occurring in the manuscripts of the *Philosophical Grammar*. One of the last ones, in the latter manuscripts, would be the notion of *Geist*, Spirit – together with the notions of 'subtle shades of behavior', 'the soul of words', and activating philosophical operators adjunct to the concept of Aspect (aspect-blindness, dawning of an aspect, picture-object [*Bildgegenstand*], etc.). The survey of the names of our dropped-out child, and correlate concepts, would make up a conceptual constellation of an Aesthetics inspired by Wittgenstein. But before we say some final words on what such Aesthetics could look like, let us give voice once more to the skeptic. Around §200 of the PI Wittgenstein stages dialogues on the activity of following a rule, and on teaching and learning. In §213 two voices intervene:

"But this initial segment of a series could obviously be variously interpreted (for example, by means of algebraic expressions), so you must first have chosen one such interpretation." – Not at all! A doubt was possible in certain circumstances. But that is not to say that I did doubt, or even could doubt. (What is to be said about the psychological 'atmosphere' of a process is connected with that.)

Only intuition could have removed this doubt? – If intuition is an inner voice – how do I know how I am to follow it? And how do I know that it doesn't mislead me? For if it can guide me right, it can also guide me wrong. ((Intuition an unnecessary evasion.)) (PI 213)

Note that the second character, clearly a therapeutic one, seems to be in a paradoxical position. On the one hand, she recognizes the logical, modal possibility of doubt – but adds: this does not mean that I could doubt. The second 'can' is also an instance of the mighty logical 'kann'. However, the difference between both uses of the modal 'can' is that, in the second use, the philosopher takes into account the spirit of the game, its characteristic atmosphere, the wider institutional context of the lived experience of that meaning. The conclusion, certainly exasperating to lovers of crystals, is the paradox of saying that I could doubt but I could not doubt. The interdiction of the second character amplifies the logical space to include the anthropological or cultural dimension of the experience of meaning – without however twisting the philosophical nature of the commentary of experience into sociology or cultural studies. Why? Amongst other reasons, because its examples also have the nature of thought experiments, and not of empirical conjectures. They are thought experiments regulated by the Grammar of the spirit of the rituals, in the realm of phenomenological problems. We think here even of the rituals of mathematics, of logic, of science – to which underlie, as well as in the case of the rituals of ordinary life, an attitudinal aesthetic dimension. It is no wonder that the paragraph ends in a characteristic manoeuvre of the dogmatic voice towards introspection, with the therapeutic

voice then replying by calling attention to the logical dimension of criteria.

Let us finally turn to the notions of aesthetics and aesthetic experience in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* (LA).

Wittgenstein begins his course on aesthetics by noting that the subject matter cannot be mixed up with traditional aesthetics, an investigation of aesthetic qualities and judgments. Running against the grain of the traditional syllabus, he remarks that, in most situations where we find an aesthetic experience, this kind of expression (of quality attribution, of judgment) does not occur. On the contrary: we usually find a language much closely associated with the language of right and wrong, typical of games of precise gradations. Now, this seems once again paradoxical, since aesthetic distinctions are seldom precise in the sense of measurement games.

If I say of a piece of Schubert's that it is melancholy, that is like giving it a face (I don't express approval or disapproval). I could instead use gestures or [Rhees] dancing. In fact, if we want to be exact, we do use a gesture or a facial expression. (LA I. 10)

What the language of aesthetic experience shows us is that what is at stake are not operations of the kind that would be regulated by standards of taste. Recall that in modern times this was the grain of the discipline, spread by institutions like the 17th Century Italian *Academy of the Good Taste*. Much more than standards of aesthetic judgment expressed by aesthetic adjectives, what is at stake is a characteristic lived experience, an attitude regarding objects and situations, or, as the philosopher says in his comments on Frazer, an attitude regarding – or expressed by – a ritual of a form of life. This mode of description accommodates much better a phenomenon that philosophers of aesthetics in the 20th-Century were keen to account for: the fact that certain families of art works seem to operate within identity criteria less and less linked to their facticity (lines and colors of their volumes), and more linked to the context in which they were presented (the "artworld") and to certain non-observable properties, especially the "theories" that intrinsically accompany the objects (the "institutional theory" of art).

The word we ought to talk about is 'appreciated'. What does appreciation consist in?

If a man goes through an endless number of patterns in a tailor's, [and] says: "No. This is slightly too dark. This is slightly too loud", etc., he is what we call an appreciator of material. That he is an appreciator is not shown by the interjections he uses, but by the way he chooses, selects, etc. Similarly in music: "Does this harmonize? No. The bass is not quite loud enough. Here I just want something different...." This is what we call an appreciation.

It is not only difficult to describe what appreciation consists in, but impossible. To describe what it consists in we would have to describe the whole environment. (LA I. 18-20)

Between aesthetics and anthropology, it seems that aesthetic experience can be seen, by the philosophical commentary on meaningful experience, as an interesting key to read the philosopher's latter philosophical step: that of expanding the field of criteria of concepts, propositions and beliefs to the lived experience of the form of life. In the final analysis, the soul of words could be seen as an aesthetic experience. And perhaps beyond that we could not venture ourselves. We can only immerse ourselves in its framework: the bedrock of our life.

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