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Us Against Them: The Emotionally Open Audience and the Aesthetic Experience

Ingrid Goree

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Honors Program

HONORS SENIOR PROJECT APPROVAL FORM

(To be submitted by the student to the Honors Program with a copy of the Honors Project suitable for binding. All signatures must be obtained.)

Name of Candidate: INGERID GOREE

Department: PHILOSOPHY

Degree: B. A.

Full Title of Project: US AGAINST THEM: The
Emotionally Open Audience and the
Aesthetic Experience.

Approved by:



Project Advisor

22-April '96

Date



Department Chair

22-April '96

Date

Honors Program Director for Honors Council Date

US AGAINST THEM:

The Emotionally Open Audience

and the

Aesthetic Experience

Ingrid Goree
Honors Senior Project
22 April 1996

My purpose in writing this paper is to remedy an unfortunate and disappointing problem I have encountered in the community. I have noticed that the people who attend live musical performances with me are not having the same sorts of experiences that I am having. It seems that these people have not been told of the richness of experience which is possible when one is a good audience. This paper is meant as a general discussion of and a possible remedy for the problem.

Susanne K. Langer says that

A work of art is an expressive form created for our perception through sense or imagination, and what it expresses is human feeling. The word "feeling" must be taken here in its broadest sense, meaning *everything that can be felt*, from physical sensation, pain and comfort, excitement and repose, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or the steady feeling-tones of a conscious human life (Langer 249).

For Langer, the element of "human feeling" is expressed by the art object. However, if the audience does not perceive this feeling, then can we say that there has been an experience of art? If the audience has no experience of an emotive quality, then there has been a failing on the part of one of the three integrated elements of the aesthetic experience -- the artist, the art object, or the audience. In this, I will discuss these elements in general terms, and then focus on the audience and its responsibilities.

First, there must be an artist who is concerned with creating something new and expressing some idea or feeling through his or her creation. This artist must not necessarily be experiencing sadness, for example, to paint a painting which will be considered sad. The artist must not even be attempting to convey sadness in the painting, necessarily. He or she must, however, be actively engaged with the medium and must be acting out of a sense of necessity. The artist should be painting because she cannot **not**

paint. The artist often discovers herself what she is trying to convey only after she has begun or even finished the work in question. According to Langer, “there is a great deal of experience that is knowable, not only as immediate, formless, meaningless impact, but as one aspect of the intricate web of life, yet defies discursive formulation, and therefore verbal expression: that is what we sometimes call the *subjective aspect* of experience” (253). The artist, then, “formulates that elusive aspect of reality that is commonly taken to be amorphous and chaotic; that is, he objectifies the subjective realm. What he expresses is, therefore, not his own feelings, but what he knows about human feeling” (Langer 255). In addition to the expression of the artist’s knowledge of the human condition, there is a sense in which the artist is creating for the sake of creating, and not because there is a huge pay check waiting for her at the end of the day.

The second element is the art object. The object is necessary because if there is no fruit of the artist’s labor, then there can be nothing for the audience to perceive. In addition, the artist’s message requires a vehicle through which it can be conveyed to the audience. The art object is necessary even if the artist is her own audience, since it is possible that she discover her message or purpose through the creation of the thing. Someone once told me of an art graduate student who seemed not to be making any art objects. When she was asked about her progress, she replied that she needed to clean her studio, and could not possibly make anything until her studio was clean. When her department chair demanded to see some of her work -- upon the completion of her coursework -- she showed everyone her studio, which was immaculate. There was not a bit of dust or dirt or paint in the room; she had spent her years of graduate study working

on removing everything from her studio space. In this case, the art object seems to be the uncovering of the room and the removal of everything extraneous, and the creation of something new through this process.

The audience is the third part of the aesthetic experience, although the artist may be her own audience. The audience has the special job of being in the correct frame of mind to perceive the message or intent of the artist. This is why one must often distance oneself from a newly-created artwork for a period of time in order to effectively judge whether it is good. For the artist, the work is “good” if it seems finished to her; that is, if it “is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation” (Dewey 35). If the audience is another person or group of people, then the notion of being in the proper frame of mind takes on a new dimension. Langer mentions that the audience perceives art “through sense or imagination” (249). The audience must be both active and passive in her perception of the art object, and must be willing to imaginatively put herself in the place of the artist in order to experience what is happening around her. What I am most concerned with here is that the aesthetic lives of many people seem to be lacking the richness of expression and understanding that is possible. This general trend is reflected in the overly commercialized view of art -- especially music -- as entertainment, which I think is an unfortunate mistake and may be an important point of contention if the trend continues.

The following passage from Tolstoy’s *What is Art?* incorporates the notion of the audience’s emotional involvement in the art experience:

The most varied sensations, the strongest and the weakest, the most important and the most insignificant, the worst and the best, so long as they infect the reader, spectator, hearer, form the subject

of art. The feeling of self-renunciation and submission to fate or to God, as conveyed in the drama; or of the ecstasy of lovers, as described in the novel; or the feeling of lust, as represented in the picture; or of vivacity, as communicated in a solemn march in music; or of merriment, as evoked by a dance; or of humour, as evoked by a funny anecdote; or of the sensation of quiet, as conveyed by yesterday's landscape or cradle-song, -- all this is art.

The moment the spectators, the hearers, are infected by the same feeling which the composer experienced, we have art.

To evoke in oneself a sensation which one has experienced before, and, having evoked it in oneself by means of motions, lines, colours, sounds, images, expressed in words, to communicate this sensation in such a way that others may experience the same sensation, -- in this does the activity of art consist. Art is a human activity which consists in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, communicates to others the sensations experienced by him, so that other men are infected by these sensations and pass through them (182-183).

Tolstoy may be a bit strong in insisting that the artist must "consciously" communicate his feelings. I think the artist must be consciously aware that he is painting or composing music, and he must have some idea of the general mood which he is attempting to communicate, but I do not think that every artist knows exactly what he or she is feeling or experiencing at the time of the creation of the work. John Dewey, in his book *Art as Experience*, claims that "the artist does his thinking in the very qualitative media he works in, and the terms lie so close to the object that he is producing that they merge directly into it" (16). Given this view of the artist and his proximity to his work, it is possible that he not know what his work is about until he distance himself somewhat from the piece; he might need time to gain an audience perspective, rather than his creator perspective.

Tolstoy is also a bit too strong in saying that the audience must necessarily become "infected" with the very same feeling the artist has. Consider the person who

loves a song because of the instrumentalization, but cannot understand the lyrics at all. Since much popular music is dependent on lyrics, and those lyrics are not always understandable, an audience often finds that a song she thought was about striking back at corrupt authority is actually about torturing minorities. In this case, the audience is mistaken about the object of the hatred and anger in the song, so her feelings cannot be the same as those of its composer. The audience may also be unable to have the same feelings because of physical or experiential limitations. The album *Dirt* by a band called Alice in Chains springs instantly to mind here. The entire album is about heroin, is quite depressing, and seems to inspire feelings of hatred, remorse, self-loathing, and pity, to name a few. *Dirt* makes me feel this way, despite the fact that neither do I do, nor have I ever done, heroin.

At least part of the reason that I am overwhelmed by feeling when I listen to Alice in Chains or Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" is my own desire to understand more than what is going on mathematically or musically in the composition. I am drawn to experience the music, rather than just listen to it or hear it. Knowing something about the composer's personal life is valuable to this aim, but is not necessary. It has long been a general "truth" that all artists are tortured, misunderstood creatures, and that everything of artistic value comes only through pain and suffering. It is this view of the artist that lends a sense of romance and mystery to art and to artists themselves.

In the introduction to *Life with Picasso*, Carlton Lake claims that Francoise Gilot "had an infinitely deeper and truer appreciation of Picasso's thought and work than anyone I had encountered" (9). This, of course, is not in the least surprising. Francoise

was Picasso's lover for over ten years and they had two children together. Françoise knew Picasso himself better than most people, and was therefore in a better position to know what was on his mind when he painted a given painting. Françoise was likely to know Picasso's mood at any given time and was probably privy to many of his thoughts about his own work; and since she was also a painter, Françoise would have had a painter's perspective anyway. One would, therefore, expect Françoise Gilot to have a better understanding of Picasso's work than most people since she had a better understanding of Picasso than most people.

Along with the generalization that all artists are plagued by inner turmoil or anguish comes the society-wide placing of the artist on a perceptual or emotive pedestal. We think of the artist as a superhuman entity, blessed with the gift of a higher level of perception than the rest of us. We not only expect artists to understand the world better than we do, but we also expect them to tell us what is wrong and right with it. Add to this the fact that art is a means of expression of one's feelings and is a personal and sometimes a painful experience for the artist. Even if the act of creating a particular piece is not painful, the experiences which led the artist to create in the first place may very well have been. I am referring, of course, not to physical pain, but to the emotional pain and suffering which is a necessary part of human experience. The personal nature of the creation process is the thing which deserves the most attention and respect from the audience. A true artist puts a bit of himself into everything he creates, and this "bit" is that feeling which is transmitted to the audience. Now, the artist may not be consciously aware of the feeling he is putting into his piece (as I have said before), but the feeling is

nevertheless there if the artist is truly engaged with his medium, and the feeling will be taken up by the attentive and appreciative audience.

A “bad” audience is one which does not attend to the emotional happenings of the experience. This audience is composed of people who seem not to understand what is going on and who do not seem to care; they look and act as though they were forced to be there, or as though they attended for appearances’ sake. Wassily Kandinsky says the following in his essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*:

Imagine a building divided into many rooms. The building may be large or small. Every wall of every room is covered with many pictures of various sizes; perhaps they number in the thousands. They represent in colour bits of nature -- animals in sunlight or shadow, drinking, standing in water, lying on the grass; near to, a Crucifixion by a painter who does not believe in Christ; flowers; human figures sitting, standing, walking; often they are naked; many naked women, seen foreshortened from behind; apples and silver dishes; portrait of Councillor So and So; sunset, lady in red, flying duck; portrait of Lady X; flying geese; lady in white; calves in shadow flecked with brilliant yellow sunlight; portrait of Prince Y; lady in green. All this is carefully printed in a book -- name of artist -- name of picture. People with these books in their hands go from wall to wall, turning over pages, reading the names. Then they go away, neither richer nor poorer than when they came, and are absorbed at once in their business, which has nothing to do with art. Why did they come? In each picture is a whole lifetime of fears, doubts, hopes, and joys (3).

This is the classic example of the “bad” audience. Bad audiences can be divided into two main groups; first there is “Jimmy Joe down at the trailer park” who loves his velvet wall hanging of dogs playing poker. People of this sort are really trying to have aesthetic experiences, but they are missing the mark a bit. I do not wish to imply that only “high art” is worthy of a good audience, but those objects which are produced simply for the purpose of making money, or things whose only purpose is utility I do not consider to be

art because of the lack of emotional content on the part of the artist. So in the case of Jimmy Joe, the reason he is not having a “real” aesthetic experience has nothing to do with him and everything to do with his chosen object.

The second type of bad audience I will call “Ms. Middle Class” who thinks that great art matches the couch, and who buys season tickets to the Huntsville Symphony and whispers to her neighbor throughout the performance. These people have the financial means to surround themselves with great art, but they do not pay attention to what is happening around them. Ms. Middle Class goes to the Symphony because it makes her look good socially, or because it is expected of her, but never because she thinks that a live performance of Mozart would be utterly thrilling. Jimmy Joe may lack the experience or exposure necessary to fill his life with great works of art, but he is doing his part in attempting to gain something from what he has. Ms. Middle Class is not experiencing anything, although she has every opportunity to do so.

I often find myself extremely angry about the bad audiences I have encountered, and I know that I am not the only person who feels this way. One thing that I find terribly annoying is the fact that it is virtually impossible to enjoy a live band in Huntsville, for example. It seems as though the entire town is full of Ms. Middle Classes, because the far-too-many people who show up at live band performances just sit around and drink beer and talk all night . Not only are they not experiencing the music (which is a tragedy for them), but they are showing utter disrespect for the feelings of the musician while completely destroying the possibility of the rest of the audience experiencing and enjoying the music. It is the case that this audience is of the second type because of the

fact that, although the music may be very good and very “real” (i.e., not contrived and obviously not merely for making money), the people who are talking are not even listening to the music, much less experiencing it. The anger we -- the good audiences -- feel has to do with a variety of factors. First, our experience is diminished or even prevented by the disrespect of the Ms. Middle Class types. A certain amount of snobbery and a sense of territoriality are also sometimes at work. [The feeling is something like this: They are not experiencing my music the way it ought to be experienced, and they are keeping me from experiencing it, so they do not deserve to be here.] The anger actually begins as an annoyance and then becomes an irritation. Frustration ensues after a few fruitless menacing stares, followed by the angry feeling which accompanies being cheated.

Dewey refers to a tension between an active and a passive component of the aesthetic experience. I find this to be particularly evident in the experience of musical art. If one were to take a completely passive role, then she would only **hear** the music. In this case, the hearer expects the music to do all the work while she acts as a sponge, absorbing the feeling the music has to offer. She is not doing her job in meeting the piece or the composer halfway, however, and she cannot expect the music to “grab her if she is not attending to the subtleties which transmit the feeling. On the other hand, **listening** to all music may lead to a false sense of meaning and feeling if the listener is the only active participant -- i.e., if the creator did not actively engage with the music. Here I wish to name my favorite example of “not-art.” The utterly active listener may be moved somehow by a Michael Bolton song, although I am baffled as to why this would be the

case. Michael Bolton's recordings are laden with flat, trite, and overall unimaginative lyrics (except, of course, his cover songs) which are coupled with predictable key changes, standard guitar and bass riffs, and outright boring drum lines. I cannot imagine what would possess anyone to listen to any of his work more than once, much less purchase an album or a concert ticket. I am continually amazed that he makes any money. However, Michael Bolton has learned how to capitalize off of the Ms. Middle Class and Jimmy Joe people of the world, and has managed to make his a household name -- even in my house! At any rate, in order to truly appreciate those pieces which we call art one must **experience** them, combining doing and undergoing in such a way as to create an experience in itself.

The task of striking a balance between active and passive is crucial in order for the audience to have an aesthetic experience. When one is actively allowing the music to "speak" to her, then she is unaware of anything other than herself and the music and its message. And once the music has begun to move the audience there are no rules concerning how far it will go or what kind of response the audience will give. The good audience neither helps nor hinders the emotional content of the experience. The feelings that one has lost herself and that one is willingly no longer in complete control seem to be similar to the feeling the artist has when he creates, if it is not the very same. And now we have come full circle. The artist is lost in the creative process and is overwhelmed during the creation of the very same piece which causes the good audience to feel the same way upon hearing it.

It seems to me that too many people go through life completely unaware of the importance of art. Art and aesthetic expression are the things which make up what is popularly known as the “human” part of us. Art unites us, whether it be poetry, music, drama, literature, dance, sculpture, or painting. Art transcends all social and political boundaries and lets us experience the human condition through different eyes, whereby we might see that there are more similarities between people than differences. It is through feeling and expression that we are united, and it is art which makes this possible. It seems to me that that part of us which makes us revel in a breathtaking sunset is similar to, if not the same as, the part which makes it possible for us to have aesthetic experiences. The problem is that most people are too busy or too concerned with themselves to recognize what there is to learn from the world and other people. A possible solution to this problem is to make everyone aware of the fact that artists are deeply connected to their works, and that the audience has the responsibility to treat this connection with respect, at the very least. The lack of respect is a problem, not just for the artists, but for good audiences as well, in that good audiences are hindered in their experience by the bad ones. The tension between good and bad audiences seems to be leading in a very dangerous direction, in that as audiences become increasingly more emotionally involved in their experiences, they are less likely to tolerate a bad audience. The angry young man sitting next to the yuppie couple at the bar may become volatile if he fails to make them be quiet through the use of politeness. This can be avoided if all audiences are aware that the creative process can be happening around them at any time, and that the experience is one which is worth having and sharing with others.

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