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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | CRITICAL ESSAY

Aesthetic experience and the question of "difficulty": A note

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Abstract: This note of commentary explores some of the ways in which "difficulty" figures in aesthetic experience and how these relate to broader factors of social and cultural organisation. Having examined some ideas about the variety and character of difficulty, drawing on previous writing, it suggests that forms of empirical inquiry combined with a refreshed analytic agenda offer the possibility of understanding better its nature as both a negative and a positive factor of encounters with the arts. Such investigation would be complementary to those approaches to specific forms of artistic practice (rather than to user experiences) taken by academic work in the arts specialisms.

Subjects: Art & Visual Culture; Cultural Studies; Humanities; Literature; Media Communication; Theatre & Performance Studies; Visual Arts

Keywords: aesthetics; comprehension; cultural capital; cultural policy; Bourdieu

1. Introduction

In this note, I want to examine an aspect of aesthetic experience, of aesthetic encounters, which has relevance for a range of practice, including work within both traditional and more recent, electronic and digital, forms. It also has broader implications for patterns of culture, and the differences of critical evaluation and of taste active within those patterns (see Gillespie, 2012; Corner, 2013 for recent commentary on shifts here). I want my observations finally to connect up with what I see as an expanded investigative agenda for cultural sociology or the sociology of art. However, this short paper does not offer new data collected within the terms of such an agenda. Instead, it offers a provisional examination of what I consider to be a neglected aspect of the *experience* of the arts, a neglect often occurring even within those studies which have made valuable headway in our understanding of cultural "choice" and of the interconnections between taste and socio-economic variables. If I stop

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This short commentary looks at the question of difficulty as experienced in relation to works of art. What causes difficulty and how is it variously dealt with? Although we may see difficulty as an obstacle to engagement with the arts, in some artistic practice it is an intrinsic factor in the satisfactions they offer. This complicates how we view it. Appreciation of the arts is aligned with matters of social and cultural status, so the question of difficulty is a factor in this broader context too. Greater clarity about its occurrence, including that gained through case studies, would be a valuable addition to our understanding of the importance and complexity of aesthetic experience.

well short of offering a firm sociological account grounded in new evidence, I also hope to stop short of entering too far into the speculative abstractions of aesthetics as a branch of philosophy (as found, for instance, in collections like Cahn & Meskin, 2007). I want to acknowledge both the pull downwards and upwards so to speak, offering an account which reflects on experiential complexities but retains clarity and relevance for a variety of readers coming at the issues from different positions and with different kinds of cultural practice principally in mind. I shall certainly omit some areas and aspects from my discussion, both intentionally for reasons of space and also as a result of the inevitable foreclosures that any treatment of a complex question introduces. There will be disagreement with my account of the way things are as well as with my attempts to account for this, but then that is an essential part of critical exchange.

By "aesthetic encounter" I mean primarily to indicate those situations in which processes of perception and engagement are brought to bear upon certain kinds of creative *work,* although I am aware that the experiencing of aesthetic responses does not restrict itself to works fashioned with that response in mind or indeed to that which can be usefully be classified as a "work" at all (on this issue, including taking aesthetic pleasure in natural surroundings, see Berleant, 2012; Cooper, 2015). Across their many variations of medium and approach, the creative practices I have in mind have the commonality of function that their products relate to those who encounter them in ways that give emphasis to the pleasure and satisfactions in form and expression generated, the imaginative space opened up, at least as much as to any propositional or directly informational aims. Aesthetic encounters can occur accidentally, casually or purposively and they variously enter the routines of social and personal life, connecting with other, non-aesthetic, aspects. It is widely recognised that "Art" is a loose and problematic category, carrying evaluative as well as descriptive implications for that which is judged to warrant another term—for instance, "entertainment" or "design". However, it is self-evidently an indispensable category in most contexts of aesthetic investigation, including here (among the extensive commentaries, Becker, 2008 is an illuminating sociological approach).

"Difficulty" within this setting (inverted commas dropped henceforth) can be regarded as the experiencing of kinds of impediment to the viewer/hearer/reader understanding "what is going on" (or, to put it more actively, impediments to their being able to answer satisfactorily the question "what am I to *make* of this?") as part of the process of response.[1] Difficulty of this kind hinders or prevents pleasure and satisfaction and needs to be removed before these can occur. Recognition of difficulty might occur immediately (posed, as it were, at the level of a first sentence or an opening bar or two of music), but can often take a little time to be confirmed since many aesthetic encounters are exercises in "slow understanding" rather than immediate comprehension and all that is being looked for initially is perhaps "a way in" to the understanding process. The problem(s) of connection might be quite easily remediable (for instance, by acquiring specific items of contextual knowledge and reference points) or the nature of the misalignment might be more serious and extensive (in a literary work, for example, issues of literacy level may prove an immediate and substantial barrier before any strictly "aesthetic" issues arise). In either case, the response to an experience of difficulty can involve further efforts at achieving successful relationships with the work using a fresh approach or new resources, or it can involve a dismissal as "not for me", at least "not for the time being". In the latter case, it can be part of a routine act of selection, with no attitudinal accompaniment, or it can be a response carrying a sense of resentment at exclusion. This is all allowing for the fact that aesthetic encounters involve both sensory and sense-making activity, operating in combination or separately, and that in some instances (music and abstract painting would be examples, but by no means the only ones) having a positive sensory relationship may be at least as important as "making" sense, of constructing meanings.

In what follows, I want to look at some aspects of "difficulty" in more detail. I then want to consider the ideas of three writers, George Steiner, Oswald Hanfling and Pierre Bourdieu, who engage with the issue (In Steiner and Hanfling quite directly, in Bourdieu, as one aspect of his broader sociology of taste) in ways which I think deserve further development. Finally, I look briefly at what might be done by way of undertaking this development.

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2. The varying nature of difficulty

Clearly, taste-decisions are derived from many other factors than assessments of difficulty. I can establish good connections with an aesthetic work, identify what it is doing, and decide that I am not going to like it or even that I am going to *dis*like it, without at any point reflecting on its level of difficulty. Moreover, although unfamiliarity and strangeness are often a component of difficulty, I can find something unfamiliar and strange without finding it difficult. The very unfamiliarity, the innovation, can contribute quickly to a sympathetically productive engagement.[2] I can also find that something prompts sustained, serious reflection and perhaps discussion with friends about its significance without seeing it as deserving the description of difficult.

This said, difficulty, a sense of comprehension breakdown within an aesthetic encounter, is a common experience for many people of very different social and educational backgrounds, whether related to a specific work or a whole class of works. The more a work is located within the spheres of the established arts rather than the popular arts, the more chances there are of difficulties being encountered given the formal and thematic ambition of much artistic practice in these areas, although the range and complexity of the popular arts and their intersection at points with notionally "higher" forms means that this is not a firm distinction. Certain kinds of artistic work require a greater degree of prior orientation and contextualisation in order to be appreciated than others, a fact sometimes neglected by those who believe that, for instance, the qualities of a particular piece of music, writing or painting will "connect" immediately with anyone regardless of their aesthetic biography to date. This is very rarely true. Of course, encounters with difficulty clearly change in the pattern and profile of their appearance over the course of a lifetime as new aesthetic interests are developed, new routes of aesthetic satisfaction opened up, within the framing terms of family, education, friendship and general experience.

The possibility of encountering difficulties is often indicated from prior experience well before any sustained aesthetic engagement begins. So, for instance, the cultural practices of selecting a book, deciding to see a particular film, buying a CD, going to a concert or visiting a gallery exhibition often involve a measure of filtering, a process in which potential difficulties are anticipated and factored into or out of the choice, perhaps by reference to publicity, reviews and the comments of friends. The exceptions include episodes of planned cultural risk-taking and accidents or mistakes. We can imagine a touristic visit to a city's art gallery which is only partly successful. Some of the permanent collection offers satisfaction, but the special exhibition entitled "Marriage", of video installations, torn photographs and metal objects, defies attempts to make sustained meaningful connections and finally becomes annoying. Or we hear that a particular bar is featuring jazz that night but when we get there we find that it is a trio playing harsh phrases over electronic loops without regular rhythm or a discernible pattern of development. Again, we try for a while to "get into it", but have to admit failure. In both cases, we may be inclined to see our difficulty as in large part a product of deficits in the aesthetic practice itself although a lingering suspicion that shortcomings in our own imaginative capacities, our cultural resources, are a factor might also be present, especially if a number of others visitors or listeners seemed to be having a positive experience.

One distinctive and mostly non-optional context for the occurrence of aesthetic difficulty in everyday life for many is, no doubt, its positioning within the different levels of the education system, where the overcoming of the challenges which it poses (perceived as welcome or irksome) are often intrinsic to the idea of intellectual development as well as to the extension of cultural opportunity and the reproduction of approved cultural values. Here, engaging successfully with what initially seemed difficult is not so much a matter of having an improved experience so much as attaining certificated kinds of competence.

However, the situation as described above is complicated by the fact that difficulty occurs in aesthetic encounters not only as an obstacle to be overcome in order that a "proper" experience can be enjoyed. In some kinds of work and encounter, it figures instead as an intrinsic part of aesthetic satisfaction, not a barrier to a positive relationship with a work, but an ingredient of that relationship.

Diepeveen (2003) develops a useful survey of the tendency, focussing on varieties of modernism and its precedents and in the next section, I explore aspects of this kind of difficulty further.[3]

Thus difficulty is sometimes placed as an obstacle to aesthetic communication, but sometimes as an essential ingredient of it, or at least kinds of it. This tension or contradiction carries implications, not always noticed, for much discussion of quality in the arts, for arts education and for schemes wishing to encourage greater inclusiveness around arts activity.

3. Critical commentary on difficulty

One of the few writers to tackle directly the question of difficulty in this context is the cultural and literary critic George Steiner who pursues it in relation to poetry (Steiner, 1978). Taking poetry as the focus introduces special factors since poetry's "playful" deployment of language for its own imaginative purposes presents to the reader an intended challenge of often complex sense-making in ways which are distinctive even within the literary field. Nevertheless, Steiner's discussion has a much wider suggestiveness. He notes of the question of difficulty towards the end of his essay that "it has moved to the very centre of the aesthetic experience since the late 19th century" (1978, p. 276). Giving most emphasis to the analysis of difficulty as an obstacle, Steiner examines the various types of elucidatory effort (which he calls "homework") that might have to be made in order to reduce it. In this regard, he discusses how historical distance introduces problems at levels ranging from local expression to "orders of apprehension", some of which may only be partly responsive to "homework". He correctly notes that the kinds of difficulty involved are mostly of a different order from "conceptual difficulty", as this might arise in engaging with a complex proposition for instance.

However, Steiner, in a way that connects with my observations above about modes of "difficulty" positioned as a core part of the aesthetic experience rather than as a block to it, also notes the ways in which difficulty might be introduced by artists themselves, difficulty of a kind he calls "tactical"(1978, p. 270). Such a move, going beyond, sometimes well beyond, what I earlier called the relative "slowness" of aesthetic understanding, seems designed to introduce greater resistance to meaning-flow, greater uncertainty and thereby perhaps increased thoughtfulness and depth in the response (a product of the commitment of "figuring out"). Such a self-conscious challenge to the reader/perceiver/hearer might be employed to project a sense of serious problems in the "readability" of the world itself, a sense which is expressed in a dislocation or subversion of conventional modes, especially those emphasising continuity and realism. These practices, self-consciously avant-garde or not, develop their changing strategies of provocation, their models of "productive difficulty", against the changing background of the conventional, the commercial and the commodified.[4] Clearly, "tactical" difficulty can feature in aesthetic production on a spectrum from localised challenges to sense-making and coherence through to the embracing of obscurity and forms of nonsense as an aesthetic goal.[5] As noted earlier, it produces a situation of a rather different kind from that difficulty which may be seen as primarily a matter of a largely circumstantial misalignment, arising from apparent gaps and deficits in reader/listener/viewer knowledge. This is so even if having the cultural competence to engage with art that is "*intended* to be difficult" has increasingly become, with the legacy of modernism and postmodernism, just as much a requirement within many aesthetic subfields as the competence to engage with the "classic" art of the past or of other cultures. The point relates to another issue which Steiner touches on—the difference between difficulty regarded as an objective feature of an artwork ("it is difficult/it is not difficult") and difficulty posed as a subjective/experiential issue ("I am finding this difficult"). It is widely acknowledged how this duality runs through a great deal of writing on the arts, among other things producing a degree of instability in the very idea of "criticism" as a grounded practice and requiring that subjective/experiential matters be given more attention than they have often received (for a recent discussion, see Grant, 2013).

What Steiner does not discuss as much as he might have done, although his "tactical" category raises it, is the precise nature of those satisfactions and pleasures that engaging ("grappling") with

work *intended to be difficult* brings to aesthetic experience. In a later essay about aesthetics and "distance", the philosopher Oswald Hanfling gives closer attention to this point (Hanfling, 2003). Once again using poetry as an example with more general implications, although oddly not referring back to Steiner's discussion, Hanfling notes that:

> Indirectness in poetry may be regarded, then, as an intrinsic merit … a considerable difficulty may be encountered in working out what the poet is saying...this difficulty too may be intrinsic to the pleasure that poetry can provide (2003, p. 180).

He goes on to comment that in this situation:

> we would be taking pleasure, paradoxically, in being frustrated, in having our natural tendency to find meaning in the relevant lines constantly frustrated (2003, p. 182).

I think it would be useful to know more about *what is going on* in the kinds of aesthetic relationships indicated here, about how they *work* as meaning-making activity in which the difficulty itself is enjoyed (even when it is not overcome), just as we need to know more about those situations described earlier in which difficulty is encountered as a barrier that has to be overcome in order that enjoyment (or exam success) may be achieved.

4. Difficulty, quality and accessibility

Issues of difficulty are clearly one important dimension of the continuing debate about the accessibility of the arts, a debate in which aesthetic evaluations and social judgements are often in a relationship of tension (one between perceptions of "quality" and perceptions of "inequality" so to speak). The work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (particularly Bourdieu, 1984, 1993) remains an essential reference point for academic exploration of the economic and social production of taste, despite the many studies which have investigated the radically changed cultural conditions since Bourdieu's own data were collected and offered revised perspectives and terms of analysis (as, for instance, in Frow, 1995 and Bennett et al., 2009). Questions of difficulty are implicit in Bourdieu's account of "refined" or "pure" taste in the arts. First of all and most clearly, difficulty is that which some groups either largely *preclude or overcome* (quite often the former) by the acquisition, through family experiences and education, of the cultural capital to engage with the serious arts ("the aesthetic disposition") giving them access to the art of the past as well as of the present (for instance in 1984, pp. 18–34). Secondly, linking with my discussion above, it can be seen as that which is *acclaimed* as a part of the core experience of certain kinds of art, particularly if not exclusively in modern work.

By contrast, "popular taste" in Bourdieu's scheme is characterised by its general reluctance to engage with any art form that is not readily and fully comprehensible, delivering its satisfactions without effort (e.g. in 1984, Part 1, pp. 32–34). Bourdieu sees a preference for realisms and for "action" across the artistic range as one indicator of such a disposition (1984, pp. 32–33), a preference leading to bafflement about, and often hostility towards, work outside this range. Again, shifts in broader cultural patterns and particularly in popular culture have made this generalisation more questionable. Nevertheless, I think it remains a productive one to work with, albeit critically.

As commentary on Bourdieu frequently observes, this scheme of division might appear to place popular taste as inferior to that of middle-class refinement, a matter of structured deficits in "cultural capital" which involves deficits in specific forms of competence. However, such a judgement, carried in the very categorisations, is considerably offset by the emphasis which Bourdieu wants to place on the way in which "refined" tastes are as much pursued with regard to the social-positional advantage which their display confers and confirms as for any intrinsic aesthetic satisfactions afforded. This emphasis gives his account of "the aesthetic disposition" a questioning, critical dimension, while "vulgar" taste, notwithstanding its cognitive limitations, is seen to have an honesty which deserves approbation (whatever the nuanced and ironic terms in which Bourdieu accords this).

Bourdieu's analysis here connects implicitly with the idea that certain modes of aesthetic experience and evaluation, particularly those around works that display the difficulty Steiner called "tactical" and which Hanfling explores a little further, may to some extent be a matter of self-deceit. That is to view them as encounters in which people may be encouraged, in order to confirm or to gain esteem, into feigning for themselves a positive relationship with works whose sense, significance and value-for-them they are really much less sure about.

However, there is a risk in allowing into the picture too much scepticism about the integrity of the aesthetic experiences of others. As many commentators have noted (Born, 2010 among the more recent writing), Bourdieu's overall approach involves some displacement of the *specificity* of the aesthetic as a kind of experience in the interests of pursuing his broader sociological account. Indeed, at points if only implicitly, the sociological is defined *in opposition* to aesthetics, despite the brilliantly suggestive detail on preferences and judgements that he offers. This makes it a rather reductive perspective, a little too inclined towards an undercutting of the conventional aesthetic order and the social order surrounding it rather than offering a full exploration of its *experiential* constituents. The terms of aesthetic pleasure and satisfaction need recognition in the ways in which they go beyond their positional grounding and reproduction as "cultural capital".[6]

Although he has a much broader agenda to pursue concerning the reproduction of taste divisions, Bourdieu nevertheless brings out sharply, if sometimes unintentionally, the ways in which various dimensions of "the difficult" appear in aesthetic experience and in the construction, maintenance and shifting of cultural hierarchies.

5. Difficulty and the agenda of cultural research

One of the implications of my discussion is not only that issues of difficulty are involved, sometimes openly and sometimes hidden, in any consideration of how aesthetic encounters work or fail to work but that further empirical study of types of aesthetic encounter, of the constitutive factors of aesthetic experience, would be highly productive. Taking its reference points from the continuingly suggestive work of Bourdieu and subsequent studies in the sociology of culture but connecting with a wider range of writing about the arts, it would further the project of developing a better "empirical" grounding for aesthetical inquiry (a key theme in Berleant, 2012). One component of it would follow from extensive interview discussion with individuals and groups about their personal experience of difficulty in relation to the arts, discussion which connected more deeply than survey levels with the variety of their cultural biographies and their shifts of "taste", what they sought out, and what they avoided. Not only would this inquiry complement those undertaken within the separate arts disciplines, where the emphasis is often tightly on critical engagement with formal achievement rather than on the broader location of aesthetic work within the experience of readers, viewers and listeners, it would expand and refine our general theoretical address to the aesthetic as a deeply embedded but, in many ways, still quite mysterious component of culture. The possibilities of a non-reductive sociology of art, one which recognises the complexities of value and satisfaction which aesthetic encounters involve beyond the terms of their framing social conditions, are clearly indicated in a number of recent studies (for instance in Born, 2010; Stewart, 2013).

Within this approach, as well as difficulty as obstacle, as impediment to enjoyment, difficulty as attraction and pleasure, as *intended* and *expected* part of the rewards of giving attention, would also be open to further mapping. Just what are the broader contexts and tendencies at work in these "planned-in" kinds of difficulty across different aesthetic practices and publics?

Some commentators have seen difficulty in this latter, positive sense as a dimension of aesthetic encounter under increasing threat even for those demographic groupings amongst whom it was once established. In his review of the prospects for cultural evaluation in new contexts of consumption and exchange, Gillespie (2012) regards the potential loss of an avant-garde as a pressing problem, noting that "throughout the 20th century, there were examples of critics helping to *connect* audiences with experimental, exciting and generally avant-garde works" (2012, p. 56). This sense of

a "tutoring" role for the professional critic in sustaining, and perhaps expanding, a satisfying relationship with the intentionally "difficult", a role now seen as marginalised by broader cultural trends in popular culture and new media, is echoed by other commentators, even though evidence for the "decline of the difficult" is not at all apparent.[7] For instance, the British novelist Will Self recently noted how

> "the hallmark of our contemporary culture is an active resistance to difficulty in all its aesthetic manifestations, accompanied by a sense of grievance that conflates it with political elitism", going on to note how such an attitude prevents many people from confronting "the very real economic inequality and political disenfranchisement they're subject to" (Self, 2014).

Although it explicitly wishes to avoid the charge of elitism, not surprisingly such a position finds it hard to outline any clear policy by which a confrontation with perceived "real inequality" might be brought about and the identified "active resistance" turned into a more positive alignment.

Questions of difficulty will continue to show themselves in the experiencing of the arts, where they will be open to different forms of cognitive and affective negotiation, and they will produce tensions, and sometimes contradiction, within discourses of arts appreciation and policy. Naturally, the various forms of artistic practice will show variations in the ways in which these questions are raised (for instance, across writing, fine art, theatre, film, music, forms of video and web practice). Exploring the topic poses challenges of definition and coherence of analysis, as well as of appropriate language, as my own highly provisional account here no doubt unwittingly displays. However, I think the possibility of using qualitative research to find out more about how matters of difficulty figure variously within aesthetic choices, encounters and experiences is an intellectually engaging one, not without significance for our deeper understanding of the crosscurrents of culture.

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Notes
1. I am primarily concerned here with substantial instances of difficulty, not what might be described as localised or "passing" instances. Losing track of quite what is happening in a film's narrative (a more frequent occurrence than it once was!) or having a problem with a passage in a book does not "block" general engagement in the way I wish to consider.
2. Aesthetic innovation often works a gamble across the familiar and the new. Too much of the former can seem merely "repetition with variation", too much of the latter can present a substantial challenge to accessibility and acceptance and require the formation of new "follower" publics. The history of jazz across its many stages of development is one illustration of this.
3. "Modernism" in its many forms and in its broader influence is an important factor in "difficulty" across all of the arts, including in sectors of what could be called the "high popular". Its function, touched on elsewhere in this paper, is often both sharply to mark out a break from (and often rejection of) conventional modes for selective audiences and to intensify and legitimate the cognitive and aesthetic satisfactions of engaging with intentionally difficult material. For an account of modernist work as following a deliberate policy of social exclusion with broader implications for the arts and for society, see Carey (1992).
4. A widely recognised problem occurs with the avant-garde uses of difficulty as a part of a practice of *political* mobilization—the problem of the restrictions it imposes on the social range of those able to understand let alone engage with work.
5. Here, the occurrence of apparent nonsense lines in the lyrics of some popular songs is interesting. The primary attraction in these instances, however, is to enjoy them precisely *as* nonsense not to find them a provocation to make coherent meaning out of apparent obscurity (as might be the case with examples of modern poetry, although I am aware of border crossovers).
6. Here, the value I am placing on getting "inside" the varieties of aesthetic experience rather than simply plotting the sociological profile of diverse cultural choices is relevant. The personal satisfactions of encounters with difficult works should not be displaced by being seen as the product either of pretence or strategic social positioning even if these may both be active factors.
7. Indeed, the reverse might more obviously seem to be the case in some areas. One form in which the "difficult" has been appearing for some time is the explicitly "open" art work, where the viewer, reader or listener is invited not so much to arrive at their own interpretation of what something means as to use the work as a departure point for their own creativity. Here, the "difficulty" takes on a different character, productive rather than responsive, from the cases discussed earlier, although it can be found no less intimidating. It also decisively breaks with any idea of art as "communication".

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