

# Commentary on: Aesthetic Experience Explained by the Affect-Space Framework by Schubert, North and Hargreaves

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**ABSTRACT:** This commentary critically evaluates the target paper by Schubert, North and Hargreaves on the semantic structure of aesthetic experience. It places it in the context of existing research with a special emphasis on related debates in philosophy and theoretical aesthetics. Several suggestions, in particular on their use of the terminology, are made.

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THE paper “Aesthetic Experience Explained by the Affect-Space Framework” by Schubert, North and Hargreaves is a valuable and thoughtful contribution to theoretical discussions of and empirical studies on the aesthetic experience (of music).

Several empirically informed models, frameworks or theories of aesthetic experiences (or aspects of it) have been proposed over the last years – in addition to but often unrelated to the vast philosophical literature on this issue. Yet, many questions are still open to debate, e.g.: How exactly can or should aesthetic experience be conceptualized? Which experiential components are involved in it? Is it any different from other experiences? How it can best be measured?

The framework proposed by the authors filters and re-organizes many of the aspects that have been discussed as relevant to an aesthetic experience along three main dichotomous components. By way of that, several original and potentially fruitful aspects arise:

- The proposed affect-space in general provides a differentiation of the emotional and affective responses that can come along with the apperception of a sensory object but until now have mostly be treated as equally relevant for it.
- The differentiation between what the authors call emotion valence and affect valence, together with the clear statement that emotions (induced e.g. via the mechanisms that Patrik Juslin put together in his BRECVEMA-model; Juslin, 2013) might and often do occur during an aesthetic experience but are simply irrelevant for the genuinely *aesthetic* character of it, resonates nicely with standard philosophical conceptualisations of the aesthetic experience.
- The focus on aesthetic judgment and its experiential and affective counterpart (“internal locus”, “affect valence”) is an attractively concise construct of aesthetic experience and seems promising in addressing its specificity.
- The integration and hierarchical organisation of several candidates of liking and positive aesthetic experiences (under the heading of “hedonic tone”) casts fresh light on the experiential qualities of an aesthetic experience and its different levels of intensity.
- Thus, the still unclear but promising concept of “aesthetic emotions” can further be shaped and specified.



Differentiating between an internal and an external locus acknowledges the important but often disregarded difference of object-directed and self-directed processes during an aesthetic episode (which, however, was already proposed in Klaus-Ernst Behne's model of musical value judgements ("Modell des musikalischen Werturteils"; Behne, 1986)). Corresponding differentiations—comprising e.g. world-focused vs. self-focused attention as well as hedonic tone—have also been proposed relating to emotion experience (Lambie and Marcel 2002; Lambie 2009). In addition, more recently, philosophers have argued that phenomenality and intentionality are inseparable and essentially united within emotional experience and that feelings—as 'feelings towards' (Goldie 2009) or 'felt evaluations' (Helm 2009)—are world-directed as well as self-directed (Slaby 2007; Slaby and Stephan 2008). This account has also been applied to music aesthetics (Seibert 2016). These considerations concerning an affective intentionality are not covered by the affect-space framework, since locus is not equivalent to intentionality. Following this perspective, for example internal affect valence is world-directed (to the aesthetic object in question or to the emotion [internal emotion valence] elicited by this aesthetic object?). And this world-directedness does not coincide with the aesthetic judgement as external affect valence. Further clarification with respect to intentionality is needed here to prevent confusion in the course of asking participants for self-reports.

### EMPIRICAL AESTHETICS AND PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS

Yet, the paper tends to have an air of aesthetic normativity – when stating right in the beginning, for instance, that certain components form the “necessary and sufficient conditions for an aesthetic experience” (Abstract) – that might be inspiring in philosophical programmes but should be far from empirical agendas. To a certain extent, this seems to be a consequence of the generally very positive intent to integrate important steps of the philosophical debate into empirical aesthetics.

When one deals with philosophical concepts one should take into account that there are at least two sorts of them: one is meant to take a normative (prescriptive) stance, the other to take a phenomenal (descriptive) stance. Authors like Hanslick, Kant, or Dickie who are cited by Schubert, North and Hargreaves with their views on the nature of an aesthetic experience, clearly present cases of normative definitions. This is to say that an aspect like the Kantian “disinterested pleasure” or Dickie's notion of the “ineffable” in every musical experience should not be taken as empirical facts or objective or even true definitions (which seems the case here and there in the text) but only as something one could think about and – more importantly – something that was valid for some people at a certain point in time and thus shaped the production and perception of aesthetic objects at that time.

This comes with the fact that – like the artworks and artifacts that trigger an aesthetic experience – the aesthetic experience is no purely “natural” phenomenon but only emerges when a person is part of a cultural group that has developed a respective idea. As we can easily see from the history of thinking about aesthetics in Europe and North-America, the concrete notion of what an aesthetic experience is supposed to be and consist of – for example, if it may involve emotions and if yes, which status these may have – is and always has been highly contested and changed dramatically over time. This is to say that every psychological construct of aesthetic experience that is meant to be open to empirical exploration must take into account that it can and will only measure the sort of aesthetic experience the participant has learned to be an aesthetic experience. For the sake of the present paper, the authors should explicitly name the (historical and cultural) boundaries within which their framework is supposed to be valid. Roughly speaking, these would comprise milieus in “the West” that have a somewhat conservative (idealistic), work-oriented understanding of art, value to a certain extent expertise as basis for judgments and adopt a contemplative attitude during the apperception.

This is a, if not *the*, core problem of empirical aesthetics, admittedly, that comes about with the historical, social, and cultural character of its research object. Since it has not yet attracted sufficient attention, the current paper cannot be blamed for not solving it either. However, it might be a worthwhile endeavor for the near future to address this problem in all sincerity and reflect upon consequences to be drawn for empirical aesthetic research.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR CONCEPTUAL AND LINGUISTIC CLARITY

Since the authors express their striving for conceptual and linguistic clarity, I would like to kindly ask them to reconsider some of their word usages:

- Semantic structure: Given the established concept of “semantic structure analysis” in linguistics (to which there is no reference in the text and which is different from what is attempted in the text), another term for their approach might be more appropriate.

- Preference: The authors use preference interchangeably with liking (as is quite common). However, etymologically the term denotes a behaviour and a comparison which does not apply to the meaning intended here. I therefore would like to suggest to use the simpler term “liking”. In addition, the critique they raise as to the integration of “preference” in the model proposed by Brattico, Bogert, and Jacobsen (2013) seems to stem from an identification of their liking-notion of preference with the different notion explained and discussed of Brattico et al. (2013).

- Emotion valence and affect valence: These terms together with their concepts are adopted from Colombetti (2005) and Charland (2005). Although I am very sympathetic with the concepts, I find the terms unnecessarily confusing. “Emotion” and “affect” have long been separated and conceptualized differently in the history of (thinking about) emotions. But the way they were thought of has not very much to do with the twist Colombetti and Charland want to give those old terms. There is yet another understanding of “affectivity” in current philosophical discussion about cognition.

- Pleasure: Next to the concept of beauty, pleasure has always figured as the central concept in aesthetics, referring to the experiential component, id est the subjective response to an aesthetic object (and possibly the driving force behind every aesthetic practice). Therefore I find it somewhat awkward that this core concept figures only as one of several instances of “shallow hedonic tone” in the framework. After all, pleasure does refer to quite the same thing that the authors want to address when using the terms affect valence and hedonic tone (see also Lambie & Marcel 2002, 243). Perhaps they see a possibility to rethink (and even restructure) their framework in that sense.

## NOTES

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