

Beyond the Myth of Experience, Part 1

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As I see it, this dispute about what 'human experience' is and our relationship to it lies at the heart of contemporary philosophy. I side with those [...] who insist that we can attain an objective perspective on our own subjectivity. Philosophers [sometimes] dispute this on the grounds that to explain experience objectively would be a contradiction in terms which would only 'explain consciousness away' and ultimately alienate us from the subjective core of our own humanity. Some philosophers [...] try to defuse such worries by insisting that it's perfectly possible for us to reconcile our humanity with science's objectification of experience. My own view is that despite its fundamentally reactionary tenor, the objection above registers a genuine difficulty, and that it is unrealistic and a little panglossian to insist that we will remain 'human' much as we are now even after the explanatory 'reduction' of experience. My conviction is that the sources and structures of human experience can and will be understood scientifically, but this integration of experience into the scientific worldview will entail a profound transformation in our understanding of what it means to be human – one as difficult for us to comprehend from within the purview of our current experience as the latter would have been for our hominid ancestors.¹

(Ray Brassier)

This insightful passage by the philosopher Ray Brassier not only pinpoints a crucial debate in the realm of philosophy, but one whose wide-sweeping implications also will resonate far beyond learned academic and theoretical circles insofar as it promises to redraw our immediate understanding of ourselves as humans. Indeed, if human culture as we know it has grown out of an intellectual framework concomitant with a spontaneous image of human experience, one of the most crucial questions that confronts us at the present is how culture will change once elements indexed by the nascent scientific understanding of experience start bleeding into the communal life-world established by the spontaneous image. In an interview conducted in 2007, the neurophilosopher Paul Churchland speculates that once the biological substrate of human experience is better understood it will entail a profound cultural shift in which we will

be forced to reinterpret ourselves through an entirely novel conceptual framework.² For just as our understanding of concepts such as 'life' and 'health' have been fundamentally transformed by the many advancements made in biology and medicine, a scientific explanation of the neurobiological basis of experience will alter the parameters established by immediate understanding in the form of a thoroughly *alien* account of what it means to be human. More specifically, the critical link between the scientific understanding of experience and its wider sociocultural implications is to be found in the shared assumption by many cognitive scientists that experience can be systematically explained from an *objective third-person perspective*, which in turn will provide us with the key to our inner mental life. Hence, what the brain sciences ultimately promise is an objective account of the neurobiological architecture underlying human experience, which will be obtained through the gathering of empirical data in the form of various techno-scientific experiments. In other words, the underlying assumption is that technology will allow science to produce a complete *exteriorisation* of our experiential life and its concomitant cognitive machinery by identifying *sub-personal objective properties* that correlate with our *individual subjective experiences*. It will make what has previously been thought of as something essentially private open for public investigation.

This is, however, not really a new debate – although it has certainly gained renewed relevance in light of recent advancements in cognitive science – since at its core are two understandings of the concept of experience that both have long histories in Western thought: 'lived experience' (*Erlebnis*) and 'reflective experience' (*Erfahrung*). As the intellectual historian Martin Jay argues in his comprehensive study of the history of experience in Europe and the US: the fact that experience has two distinct connotations in German has often been recognized even among non-German thinkers, since the distinction between the two terms is more than a mere semantic issue insofar as it points to two very different understandings of what experience actually is – directly lived or cognitively enclosed.³ According to proponents of the former, experience is usually identified as a vital unity prior to objectification, in the form of an inherently personal phenomenon of raw and unmediated sensations that is explicitly pitted against cognitive reasoning, epistemological encapsulation and scientific models. These approaches, it is said, will always be insufficient in capturing and communicating the *immediacy of pre-reflective excess* that is the most basic characteristic of experience as such. For advocates of the latter, on the other hand, experience is more of a public phenomenon that can be explained objectively and indeed needs to be supplemented with properly cognitive and scientific regis-

ters – since otherwise it will remain caught in the irrationalism of raw immediacy and lived excess, and in mere practice and custom as opposed to theory and explanation. The latter view has been prominent in epistemology and science in particular – such as during the scientific revolution, whose proponents advanced the idea that the individual history of the psychological subject needs to be supplemented with a properly cognitive meta-subject operating from a disembodied ‘view from nowhere’. And crucial to this metacognitive perspective was a genuinely objective model of experience, which was to be explicated by transposing the parameters of the experiential from that of the individual to impersonal technological instruments by treating experience itself as an object such as any other. Unsurprisingly, this perspective did not sit well within the discourses of aesthetics and theology, whose proponents strongly criticised this understanding of experience on the basis of various accounts of the experiential as pre-reflective life, organic and spiritual wholeness, pure feeling, and so on. In other words, even though the mediums through which these kinds of experiences were formulated differed some – in general terms, ‘spirit’ in theology and ‘flesh’ in aesthetics – what they shared was a commitment to a form of experience that rejected the idea that the latter can be fully analysed in abstract, theoretical terms. As Jay puts it, according to proponents of aesthetic and theological *Erlebnis*, underlying the cognitive register was ‘the experiential, affective dimension, which had an irreducibly non-rational element’.⁴ The emergence of a proper characterisation of aesthetic experience in the 18th century may consequently be understood as a process of re-enchantment in light of the scientific disenchantment of the world, whose proponents’ main concern was to transpose the project of enchantment from the objective qualities of nature to the subjective qualities of the human body. Central to this model of experience was a particular form of emotion and irrationalism – both in the encounter with artworks but also as a whole way of life – which operated according to the belief that aesthetic experience is vital for restoring the order of intelligible meaning in the wake of the scientific labour of disenchantment.

In this essay, I want to briefly reconsider the implications of the scientific objectification of human experience from the perspective of aesthetics and culture; more specifically, through the concept of so-called ‘aesthetic experience’. As we just have seen, historically, aesthetic experience has usually been positioned against the disenchanting vectors of techno-scientific objectification, and while one reaction to the scenario outlined above indeed may be that it posits a fundamental threat to aesthetics – construed as a realm of human enchantment and imagination – my basic contention is that the techno-scientific objectification of experience opens up

untapped cultural and aesthetic resources, and that the cognitive discrepancy that emerges between the culturally acquired image of ourselves as humans and the naturalistic image of man constructed by modern science should not be viewed as a mere threat to our immediate self-understanding or to the integrity of aesthetics and culture. On the contrary, it should be understood as a privileged site for future cultural interventions insofar as it points to cognitive and cultural landscapes hitherto alien to us. Hence, what is necessary here is the overcoming of the problematic dichotomy between aesthetic experience and techno-scientific objectification by the repositioning of aesthetic experience within a critical framework in tune with the transformative potentials of the natural sciences.⁵

What I am interested in is thus an understanding of aesthetics that positions it *against* what Brassier has referred to as ‘the myth of experience’⁶ – the idea that our phenomenological first-person perspective constitutes an ineffable given that science has nothing to say about. For it is precisely this naïve assumption that science is in the process of debunking through an understanding of human experience and its underlying biological substrate as nothing but an object like any other. Needless to say, this has implications on any form of aesthetic that seeks to operate from the perspective of cognitive subversion – yet it also points to the *importance* of aesthetics as a program of cognitive subversion insofar as it seems to me that the cognitive import of aesthetics, from this perspective, is that it provides us with an *actual way* of getting out of the myth of experience that philosophy only can allude to. For whereas philosophy by itself is incapable of actually interrupting the myth of experience – indeed, no matter how much we do so at the level of theory, we are still as much experiential subjects as we were before – aesthetics, precisely insofar as it addresses experience directly, can be utilised as a practical program for implementing the techno-scientific disconnections from human experience that this perspective calls for. For without actual ways of doing so, the philosophical rejection of the myth of experience remains an empty promise.⁷

In a recent article, I have nominated the formal experiments of modernism as the aesthetics that most cogently have sought to move beyond the inherent restrictions of human experience. Of particular relevance in this case is the shared interest of several modernist artists in augmented models of experience – for example through various experiments with vision, hearing, psychedelia and synaesthesia – which may be understood as aesthetic experiments that do not simply operate at the level of the *content* of experience, but instead seek to explore its overarching *form*. For instance, in her book *Writing on Drugs*, the philosopher Sadie Plant sug-

gests that the vivid colours and symmetrical patterns that occur with remarkable frequency in various forms of art and craftsmanship across cultures all over the world in fact may be understood as different attempts at visualising the abstract, cognitive patterns that constitute the fabric of a psychedelic experience. According to Plant, these patterns might turn out to be what she refers to as ‘universally geometric constants’ that would constitute ‘a level of basic hallucinatory experience that proceeds independent of all the user’s own personal and cultural preconceptions’.⁸ In other words, what a psychedelic experience brings to the fore according to Plant are culturally invariant, abstract cognitive patterns which she hypothesises may be phenomenal manifestations of the workings of the brain during extreme states of excitation (such as of the kind induced by psychoactive drugs) – when local modifications brought about by changes in synaptic connections bring about global alterations in brain-wave amplitude, speed and frequency.⁹ Hence, the key points here are that in phenomenal states such as psychedelic experiences the cognitive subject seems to be able to experience objective neurobiological processes that explicate experience as an object – and that the cognitive import of psychedelic and similar forms of art thus may turn out to be the aesthetic unpacking of these neurobiological processes.

Accordingly, rather than utilising aesthetics for the purpose of communicating various kinds of experiences, it is here approached as a medium for explicating its underlying *artificiality* – that is, the fact that experience is a *plastic medium* that can be approached objectively and also be augmented beyond the confines of the default first-person perspective. Indeed, rather than remaining deadlocked to the naïve immediacy of the myth of experience, these formal experiments force us to ‘step outside of ourselves’ by experiencing the mechanisms through which experience as such is produced. They are thus examples of what I elsewhere have referred to as *formal alienation* – where the ‘formal’ here designates cognitive disconnections from the myth of experience through aesthetic experimentations that intend to turn us into ‘phenomenological mutants’ (Brassier) by navigating the vast possibility space that underlies subjective experience, and ‘alienation’ the strange feeling when stepping outside of ourselves and experiencing experiential processes from the outside that the objectification of deviant phenomenal processes tend to trigger. It is in this sense that formal alienations of this kind incur ‘a defamiliarization allowing semblance to be confronted as semblance from a vantage registering the discrepancy between how appearances are experienced and how they are produced.’¹⁰

The shift from aesthetic content to form thus marks a concomitant cognitive shift from the subjective to the objective, which may be elaborated on by thinking of the techno-scientific disconnection from the myth of experience as a form of *spatial dispossession*. The rudiments to the conceptual underpinnings for this account of spatial dispossession may be extracted from the sociologist Roger Caillois' conception of psychasthenia. More specifically, Caillois identifies psychasthenia as a fundamental 'disturbance in the [...] relation between personality and space',¹¹ through which the psychological subject is overturned by an impersonal spatial immanence that ends up dispossessing it of its vitalist self-conceptions: 'the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself'.¹² For Caillois, the natural sciences is one of the primary examples of this spatial dispossession insofar as scientific objectification indeed may be understood as operating according to a logic in which psychological individuality gradually slides towards the immanence of impersonal exteriority. As he puts it:

One can already recognize the characteristic scientific attitudes and, indeed, it is remarkable that represented spaces are just what is multiplied by contemporary science: Finsler's spaces, Fermat's spaces, Riemann-Christoffel's hyper-space, abstract, generalized, open, and closed spaces, spaces dense in themselves, thinned out, and so on. The feeling of personality, considered as the organism's feeling of distinction from its surroundings, of the connection between consciousness and a particular point in space, cannot fail under these conditions to be seriously undermined.¹³

In his own work, Brassier links Caillois' model of spatial dispossession to an account of objectification which sees the latter as a cognitive overturning of the transcendental subject that is rendered immanent to space in the form of the impersonal void of the object.¹⁴ The objectivity underlying the formal overturning of the myth of experience consequently has to be linked to a specific form of spatial dispossession: experience is overturned by cognitive objectification insofar as it is robbed of its transcendental self-differentiation and re-inscribed into the impersonal exteriority congruent with de-individuated space. Hence the central role of technology here; for while the aesthetic stepping outside of the myth of experience does not necessitate technology in order to realise its subversive potentials, it is at the same time undeniable that

the introduction of increasingly sophisticated technologies vastly expands its cognitive impact. As the artist Brian Eno notes in his essay on the studio as a compositional tool: one of the most significant consequences of music technology is that it spatialises sound by making it available for entirely novel forms of technological manipulation.¹⁵ But while Eno singles out the tape recorder as his main example of this approach, it is really applicable to all forms of media and cognitive technologies. Hence, from this perspective, the central aesthetic import of media technology is its capacity to exteriorise experiential processes along the sub-personal axes of spatialised objectivity, through artworks operating as psychasthenic disturbances. And the techno-aesthetic subversion of experiential structures may therefore be characterised as ‘synthetic intelligence’s short-circuiting’ (Brassier) of the phenomenological lifeworld, which ‘not only dismembers the vital unity of being; more fundamentally, it objectifies the subject in such a way as to sunder the putative reciprocity between mind and world’.¹⁶ It is in this sense that the aesthetic subversion of the myth of experience indexes a significant transformation in the register of cognitive understanding – which no longer is rooted in an immutable core of human experience, but in the plasticity of spatialised objectivity.

Notes

1. Brassier, R. and Ieven, B. (2009) ‘Against an Aesthetics of Noise’, in nY #2. <http://ny-web.be/transitzone/against-aesthetics-noise.html>
2. See Churchland, P. (2007) ‘Demons Get Out! Interview with Paul Churchland’, in Mackay, R., ed., *Collapse, Vol. II: Speculative Realism*, p. 207-233.
3. See Jay, M. (2006) *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (California: University of California Press).
4. Ibid. p. 112.
5. As Brassier puts it: ‘I am very wary of ‘aesthetics’: the term is contaminated by notions of ‘experience’ that I find deeply problematic. I have no philosophy of art worth speaking of. This is not to dismiss art’s relevance for philosophy – far from it – but merely to express reservations about the kind of philosophical aestheticism which seems to want to hold up ‘aesthetic experience’ as a new sort of cognitive paradigm.’ See Brassier and Ieven, ‘Against an Aesthetics of Noise’.
6. ‘The myth of ‘experience’, whether subjectively or inter-subjectively construed, whether individual or collective, was consecrated by the culture of early bourgeois modernity and continues to loom large in cultural theory. Yet its elevation by idealist philosophers who uphold the primacy of human subjectivity, understood in terms of the interdependency between individual and social consciousness, impedes our understanding of the ways in which the very nature of consciousness is currently being transformed by a culture in which technological operators function as intrinsically determining factors of social being’. See

Brassier, R. (2015) 'Genre is Obsolete', <http://auricle.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Ray-Brassier-Genre-is-Obsolete.pdf>

7. In that regard, aesthetics of the kind advocated here may be understood as sociocultural forerunners to current and future forms of more invasive cognitive technologies.
8. Plant, S. (1997) *Writing on Drugs* (London: Faber and Faber), p. 195.
9. Ibid. p. 192-196.
10. Brassier, R. (2012) 'Interview', in *Metal Machine Theory 6*, http://www.mattin.org/essays/METAL_MACHINE_THEORY_6.html
11. Caillois, R. (1935) 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpcaillois.htm>
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. See Brassier, R. (2007) *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 44.
15. See Eno, B. (2004) 'The Studio as a Compositional Tool', in Cox, C. and Warner, D., eds. *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (London: Continuum), p. 127-130.
16. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. 45.