

A Rhythmic Process of Harmonization: Whitehead's Concept of Aesthetic Experience

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Dadejlik, O., Kaplický, M., Ševčík, M., and Zuska, V. (2021) *Process and Aesthetics: An Outline of Whiteheadian Aesthetics and Beyond*. Prague: Karolinum Press. ISBN 978-80-246-4726-5.



My own belief is that at present the most fruitful, because the most neglected, starting point is that section of value-theory which we term aesthetics. Our enjoyment of the values of human art, or of natural beauty, our horror at the obvious vulgarities and defacements which force themselves upon us – all these modes of experience are sufficiently abstracted to be relatively obvious. And yet evidently they disclose the very meaning of things. (Whitehead, 1937, p. 185)

Alfred North Whitehead is an unusual guest in the field of aesthetics, to say the least. There is absolutely no reference to 'Whiteheadian aesthetics' neither in Timothy M. Costelloe's *The British Aesthetic Tradition* (2013), nor Paul Guyer's gargantuan *A History of Modern Aesthetics* (2014) – just to mention two recent

comprehensive works in the historiography of aesthetics. This, of course, is hardly surprising, given the fact that apart from some scattered remarks about beauty, art, and aesthetic experience, Whitehead wrote no papers or books specifically addressing these issues. If there is a ‘Whiteheadian aesthetics’, it must be unearthed: reconstructed from his fascinatingly rich philosophical oeuvre. Whiteheadians, however, tend to dig for different kinds of treasures – after all, they have more urgent things to focus on if one considers the main goal of Whitehead’s mature philosophy, starting with his *Science and the Modern World* (1925) and culminating in the bewildering *Process and Reality* (1929): to systematically develop a new metaphysical system, “the last great metaphysical system”, as Deleuze suggested, which Whitehead called “process philosophy” or “the philosophy of organism”, based on a conception of reality as constituted by interdependent processes. Even amidst our excessive academic industry, there is only a handful of monographs explicitly dedicated to the systematic unfolding of what might be called a Whiteheadian aesthetics by Sherburne (1961), Shaviro (2009), Odin (2016). Karolinum Press’s *Process and Aesthetics* aims not only to expound the implicit aesthetics of Whitehead’s metaphysics, psychology or philosophy of education, but to argue that “the area of aesthetics is the ideal gateway” (p. 136) to Whitehead’s process psychology and even ontology, since his system and basic concepts are “imbued with aesthetic ideas” (p. 8).

Even though the book is an amalgam of earlier studies written by the four authors, Ondřej Dadejík, Martin Kaplický, Miloš Ševčík, and Vlastimil Zuska, it does have a robust profile and a well-thought-out structure. At the heart of the book lies the notion of aesthetic experience, both of art and nature: the chapters reconstruct a Whiteheadian notion of aesthetic experience through reading the relevant textual segments of Whitehead’s multi-faceted works against the background of John Dewey’s (chapter 2) and Henri Bergson’s (chapter 3) aesthetic writings, showcasing both their similarities and differences. Aesthetic experience proves to be an excellent gateway for inquiry, since it takes us to a rich conceptual terrain, allowing the authors to revisit aesthetic concepts such as rhythm or creativity as well as antinomies such as abstraction and concreteness, or mediation and immediacy. And while the last chapter, utilizing the insights gained from the preceding chapters, seeks to elucidate the concept of aesthetic experience in terms of oscillating abstractive processes, the authors also pay close attention to the role and significance of aesthetics in Whitehead’s philosophical methodology and overall metaphysical system throughout the book.

Chapter 1 begins by reconstructing Whitehead’s philosophy as an essentially aesthetic philosophy, in which aesthetic experience and art serve not only as an “explanatory tool” for the Whiteheadian method of “descriptive generalization”, but as the “original area” (p. 21) of its entire system. But what exactly does that mean? The authors argue that aesthetic experience could become the starting point for Whitehead, as it allows us to escape the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”, i.e. our tendency to lean on a set of abstractions when transacting with the world, mistaking these abstractions for the concrete

and individual, which conceals reality from us: “a model of reality is presented as reality itself” (p. 80). Aesthetic experience – both in artistic and non-artistic contexts – can “overcome the antithesis between the concrete and the abstract” by keeping us “as close to the concrete as the necessities of finite understanding permit” (p. 23). Thus, anchoring aesthetic experience in Whitehead’s method of descriptive generalization and his quest for overcoming the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, *Process and Aesthetics* shows how “Whitehead’s aesthetics is organically integrated within his own philosophy” (p. 24) and that for Whitehead “an analysis of aesthetic experience could lead to a complete knowledge of reality” (p. 32).

While chapter 1 focused on positioning the aesthetic within Whitehead’s own philosophy, the subsequent chapters offer a comparative interpretation of his aesthetics with that of Dewey and Bergson. Neither of them come as a surprise, both Dewey and Bergson have well-established places in Whitehead scholarship, though while we know about the connection and mutual respect between Whitehead and Dewey, scholars often disagree about the connection between Whitehead and Bergson. Nevertheless, Dewey and Bergson prove to be excellent choices for such a comparative reading, for there are many similarities but also significant differences between their ideas concerning the primacy of processes over objects, the rhythmic character of life, immediate experience, art and culture, or modern society with its highly compartmentalized institutions producing “celibate” “minds in grooves” (p. 85).

In the book, the authors are generally concerned with the close reading of the primary sources by Whitehead, Dewey and Bergson; Whitehead’s aesthetics is put into a larger context – from structuralism to cognitive science – only in the last chapter. Thus, the authors consult or critically engage with the scholarship on Whitehead’s aesthetics only occasionally. I believe such a critical engagement would have helped highlight the originality of their contribution.

In the following, I will not go through every nook and cranny of the argument of *Process and Aesthetics*, but rather concentrate on the central idea: Whitehead’s notion of aesthetic experience. Whitehead’s concept of aesthetic experience – which is intimately connected to his conception of beauty – is reconstructed by the authors, similarly to Shaviro (2009), as a “process of harmonization” (p. 27). This means that the aesthetic experience of “beauty is not a state, but a process whose aim is a harmonious interconnection of experiences without the loss of intensely perceived novelty” (p. 30). In aesthetic experience, writes Whitehead in his *Modes of Thought*, “there is a totality disclosing its component parts” (p. 31).

On the one hand, there is the moment of grasping the “affective tone” of the whole, an emotionally charged, subjective experience. On the other hand, inseparable from the latter, there is the creative process of interconnecting the details of the aesthetic object. This is a process of fusing together the familiar and the unknown, sameness and novelty, order and change, selecting certain aspects of reality, while excluding others (p. 140), resulting in it becoming a “pulsating oscillation” between the abstract and the concrete as well as different levels of abstraction (p. 152).

The above characteristics make the process of aesthetic experience rhythmic – a rhythmic movement of harmonization. The authors quote Whitehead’s words from his *Religion in the Making*: “All aesthetic experience is feeling arising out of the realization of contrast under identity” (p. 63). However, the descriptions of aesthetic experience as the “harmony of contrasts” (p. 104) or the fusion of contrast and unity (Whitehead’s definition of rhythm) connect it to the Whiteheadian conception of the becoming of an “actual occasion” (pp. 63–64) and, therefore, points to “the aesthetic nature of the occurrent world as such” (p. 66). It is argued in chapter 3 that the rhythmic patterns of aesthetic experience, disclosing immediacy through harmonization, “generally disclose reality as rhythm” (p. 92). Again, this interpretation channels Whitehead’s aesthetics deep into his metaphysics.

Process and Aesthetics is, without question, a bold volume: it endeavours to reconstruct a Whiteheadian conception of aesthetic experience as a rhythmic process of harmonization of contrasts, and, going even further, to argue that it is the concept of aesthetic experience that will lead to a better understanding of key concepts in Whitehead’s philosophy such as experience, rhythm, abstraction or the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Exposing Whitehead’s aesthetics alongside the ideas of Dewey and Bergson resulted in many valuable insights concerning aesthetic experience as a rhythmic, creative process of harmonization penetrating beyond “the realm of conceptualized causality” (p. 101). Finally, the comparative interpretation offered in *Process and Aesthetics* might not only help Whiteheadians, uninitiated into the history of aesthetics, connect their ideas with aesthetic problems, but it might also help experts in aesthetics, uninitiated into the depths of process philosophy, recognize Whitehead as a rich source of aesthetic ideas.

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