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Contemporary AESTHETICS

The Aesthetics of Conversation: Dewey and Davidson

Kalle Puolakka

Abstract
Conversation is one of the most mundane events of human life, yet the conversations we have can vary a lot. Some proceed only with great effort, while others engage us thoroughly. Drawing on Dewey's aesthetics, this paper argues that the movement and rhythm of conversations can make them into genuine candidates for an aesthetic status. The key term of the paper is interaction. For Dewey, all experience, aesthetic experience included, is constituted by an interaction between humans and their environment. In his later philosophy of language, which is critical of conventionalist explanations of language, Davidson, in turn, offers a very rich account of the interactions conversations can involve. He cites the novels of James Joyce as an extreme example of just how intricate the forms of linguistic interaction can become. Though the notion of aesthetic experience does not figure in Davidson's account, his analysis of the conditions for successful communication can nevertheless be seen to shed light on those features of conversations that explain Dewey's interest in their aesthetic dimension.

Key Words
aesthetic experience, communication, conversation, Davidson, Dewey, everyday aesthetics, interaction

1. Introduction

Despite the recent upsurge of interest in the aesthetic aspects of everyday phenomena, such as food, clothing, design, people's homes, and the environments in which those homes are situated, there has been no extensive aesthetic analysis of one of life's most common occurrences: conversations. This paper develops an aesthetic account of conversation on the basis of the views of two important figures of American philosophy, John Dewey and Donald Davidson. Dewey occasionally uses actual conversations to illuminate some of the key elements of his aesthetic theory.[1] This is no surprise, given that he sees interaction between humans and their environment as the source of all experience and the basis of aesthetic experience, the key notion of his aesthetics. Conversation is arguably among the most fundamental forms of human interaction and, for Dewey, it is a good example of an experiential situation that can form an integral whole with a clearly distinguishable beginning and end. Such qualities, he argues, are essential preconditions of aesthetic experience.

However, Dewey does not fully explicate the structure of a conversation that he finds worthy to be called aesthetic. Davidson's later philosophy of language proves helpful here because the emphasis it places on the unexpected, passing, and creative elements of language use points to ways in which conversation can be understood in aesthetic terms. Aesthetic-related considerations already have a role in Davidson's much

discussed view. In a few articles he extends the key ideas of his later philosophy of language to an analysis of literary language and interpretation, formulating a view that comes very close to the position currently known as moderate or modest actual intentionalism in the analytic philosophy of art , and considers the work of James Joyce as epitomizing the kind of creative language use he wants philosophy of language to take more seriously. It is also noteworthy that in the beginning of one his most well-known articles, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," Davidson cites the language use of the comedian and radio sitcom writer Goodman Ace to support his anti-conventionalist view of language. The notion of the aesthetic, as such, does not appear in Davidson's account but I believe the detailed analysis of the conditions for successful communication that he formulates, centering on what he calls a prior and a passing theory of language, supplements Dewey's reflections on the aesthetic potentiality of conversations. Together they show that conversation is an everyday phenomenon that can be meaningfully included among the topics of philosophical aesthetics.

The perspective on conversations that I offer in this paper is not wholly novel because Scott Stroud, inspired by Dewey, has also provided an analysis of the aesthetic sides of communication. However, while Stroud finds a distinctive kind of attitudinal orientation toward the situation by the interlocutors fundamental to making conversation aesthetic, I think this is just half of the story. My perspective on Dewey and Davidson's views shows that what makes conversation aesthetic has to do with the character of the interaction that emerges between the conversationalists. A proper orientation from the conversationalists can help but that cannot alone guarantee that the interaction will give rise to an experience Dewey would call aesthetic.

An aesthetic conversation has to possess a particular kind of structure. My account can be seen as continuing the many lines of theorizing in which interaction is situated at the very heart of aesthetics. This idea not only figures prominently in Arnold Berleant's aesthetics of engagement, which has been strongly influenced by Dewey's aesthetics, but it frequently appears in theories of the aesthetics of the performance arts, photography, computer art, as well as interpretation in general, which has been likened to a conversation with the author. [2],[3],[4],[5],[6] Music is also frequently analyzed in conversationalist terms. Not only are musical phrases analyzed as being responses to one another but also the relationship between conductor and soloist is sometimes likened to a conversation in that they respond to each other's actions in very much the same sense as conversationalists do. These considerations give initial support for the idea that conversations can be examined from an aesthetic perspective.

The account I develop below also lays a stress on the social aspects of language use. There is nothing new in saying that language is a social art; it's the first sentence of Quine's seminal book *Word and Object* (1960). But many have stressed that aesthetic experience is an important element of various social phenomena. Public art is one powerful example of how the social and the aesthetic can come together. Dewey also

stresses their connection, for he attributes an important aesthetic dimension to the different rituals that bring people together, and also to the communal experiences they create. Dewey also hints at the possibility that conversations, too, could be the source of these kinds of communal experiences in his often-cited example of "that meal in a Paris restaurant" by which he illuminates his notion of "an experience," a kind of elementary phase of aesthetic experience. It is very unlikely that Dewey was thinking of a meal eaten alone and in silence.[7] This paper takes a more thorough look at the social character of aesthetic conversations. This aesthetic and communal level also has important social ramifications that I will briefly touch on in the final part of the paper, following on from my defense of the aesthetic status of conversations.

2. Dewey on aesthetic experience and conversations

Given the slightly rambling way in which Dewey develops his understanding of aesthetic experience, in addition to the dense prose he uses to describe this form of experience, it is good for any aesthetic theorizing that relies more substantially on his account to explain on what sort of interpretation of that notion it is based. Also, different aspects of Dewey's analysis are relevant in different contexts. In the context of conversations, the emphasis Dewey places on the process-like and temporal character of aesthetic experience proves fruitful. For Dewey, "an instantaneous experience is impossible," for experience is "the product… of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world."[8] This shows the evolutionary background of Dewey's philosophy of experience; experience is a matter of how an organism adapts to and copes with the environment. Aesthetic experience has a timely dimension because it has to undergo a distinctive kind of development for it to count as an aesthetic experience. The qualities it has to exhibit include accumulation, rhythm, intensity, resistance building tension, and consummation, and all these qualities are, moreover, gathered together in a sense of wholeness. "Instead of signifying a surrender to caprice and disorder," Dewey writes, aesthetic experience "affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing. Because experience is fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience."[9] I believe that conversations too can be marked by the type of organizational structure Dewey places at the center of aesthetic experience.

Dewey's own references to communication and conversation, in particular, are meant to draw attention to how the beginning and end of aesthetic experience are intimately tied to one another and how aesthetic experience, thus, constitutes an integral whole, that the beginning of the experience, in a way, contains the seeds of its ending.[10] In other words, the beginning underdetermines how the experience has to proceed for it to become infused by aesthetic qualities and what counts as a closure of the experience. As with many other situations, it is possible for a conversation to have an internal momentum that can run its course to "fulfillment."[11] For Dewey, that sort of ending constitutes an aesthetic moment.

Language use, of course, can be rendered aesthetic, for example, through beautiful wording, catchy imagery, witticism, metaphor, and imaginative wordplay. Even such things as tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures can contribute to the aesthetic character of a conversation. Dewey, however, is interested in conversation as an aesthetic phenomenon in a more wide-ranging sense. It has to do precisely with how the conversation unfolds, that is, its structure and form. Conversation can be aesthetic even if its material, that is, "signs and symbols," does not, in most cases, have intrinsically aesthetic quality. In Dewey's view, conversations, like many other intellectual endeavors, can have "an artistic structure," in which case "the experience itself has a satisfying emotional quality because it possesses internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement."[12] Not all conversations exhibit this type of developmental structure but have qualities that Dewey associates with what he calls "non-esthetic experience." In contrast to conversations that achieve fulfillment through a process of accumulation, such conversations have "beginnings and cessations, but no genuine initiations and concludings."[13] There is only a "loose succession" of different parts of the conversation, and the conversationalists' relationship to the communication situation is "external and partial."[14] In a way, the conversation just drifts and ends at a random point. Such conversations terminate without the sense of closure that Dewey insists is essential to aesthetic experience. In the worst case, the conversationalists just part ways feeling empty.

A scene from the TV-show *Frasier* serves to illuminate conversations having a non-aesthetic quality. Depressed by his poor love life, in one episode Frasier, urged by his friend Roz, goes to a singles bar to meet some women. As an elitist who is more accustomed to dinner parties, private clubs, and opera banquets, Frasier finds the situation highly awkward and has to ask Roz for help in getting started in the mating game. At the bar, Frasier meets Kim and though communication between them does not proceed smoothly, with Frasier, for example, continuously failing to perceive her subtle hints about how the evening might continue, they eventually leave together for Frasier's place. Upon arrival Kim gasps at Frasier's stunning apartment and, in response, he asks whether she would like a tour. The following conversation ensues: "Kim: I don't know. What do you want to show me? Frasier: I don't know. Uh, what do you want to see? Kim: What would you like me to see? Frasier: Whatever you came here to see. Kim: And what did I come here to see? Frasier: Is there an end to this? Because I'm starting to feel redundant on my part."[15] Such feelings of redundancy are among the factors that reduce the aesthetic feel of conversations.

This example shows that, on the Deweyan account, the aesthetics of conversations primarily depends on the form of the conversation, not on its content. The problem with the conversation between Frasier and Kim, from an aesthetic point of view, is its excessive repetitiveness that makes its accumulation impossible. The topic of the conversation does not reduce its potentiality to have an aesthetic character as such. Were Kim to be as linguistically clever and witty as Frasier, their mating game could possess the aesthetic

characteristics specified above. In fact, imaginative erotic exchanges have been thought to involve precisely such qualities.[16] The conversation between Frasier and Kim also serves to show that an outsider's perspective on a conversation can be very different from the conversationalists'. An onlooker, for example, might find the situation in Frasier's apartment extremely funny, perhaps taking it as a kind of satire played out of how awkward romantic situations can be. But for the conversationalists themselves it offers very little aesthetic gratification.

The way in which aesthetic conversations differ from those that fail to achieve an aesthetic level is also captured well by the common distinction between making and having a conversation. In *making* a conversation, we are not fully engaged in the situation and the conversation lacks a sense of direction, sometimes proceeding only with great effort, as in Frasier's case. In contrast, *having* a conversation involves an inner movement and accumulation of the conversation that Dewey finds typical in aesthetic experience. The interaction suggests a genuine participation by the interlocutors, giving the conversation a life of its own that drives the participants forward. There is accumulation, and the different phases of the conversation build on one another. In all intellectual endeavors that deserve to be called aesthetic, Dewey claims "there runs a sense of growing meaning conserved and accumulating toward an end that is felt as accomplishment of a process."[17] From Dewey's viewpoint, a conversation, too, can demonstrate this type of process. It does not simply end at a random point but is "so rounded out that its close is a consummation not a cessation."[18] The ending of the conversation is felt as "a consummation of a movement."[19] Unlike *making* conversation, in this case, the conversationalists part ways with a sense of fulfillment or even with a sense of being one experience richer. Alas, it's not a conversation that poor Frasier gets to have in the above excerpt.

3. Davidson on the complexities of communication

As surprising as it may sound, the key ideas in Davidson's later philosophy of language provide deeper insight into the constituents of a Deweyan aesthetic conversation. Davidson takes a more ground-level look at how interaction between conversationalists has to proceed for it to reach an aesthetic level. Davidson argues that views that emphasize the indispensable role of conventions and rule-governed practices in linguistic meaning cannot provide a complete picture of how successful communication is possible. Such views, he says, do not take into account linguistic phenomena, such as malapropisms and novel sayings, in which understanding takes place even though linguistic conventions are broken, either deliberately or unintentionally.[20] Following Grice, Davidson puts forward a view that connects the meaning of what is said with the speaker's intentions. The speaker has to take into account the interlocutors' readiness to interpret him correctly, what Davidson calls "the requirement of interpretability," by providing sufficient clues or leading the conversation in a direction that will allow them to grasp the intended meanings.[21] Linguistic conventions, in other words, cannot impose any determinable limits on what can be meant but they

do underdetermine the ways in which the speaker has to make himself interpretable. Referring to Joyce's linguistic experiments in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, Davidson claims that with enough creativity and stage-setting there really is no saying how much language usage can deviate from standard norms and still remain meaningful.[22]

Davidson further illuminates his account of the conditions for communication with a distinction between a *prior* and a *passing* theory of language. These theories have a different role, depending on whose perspective we look at the conversation, the speaker's or the listener's. The listener's "prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker," while for the speaker, "the prior theory is what he believes the interpreter's theory to be."[23] The passing theory, in turn, is the true locus of communication, as the passing theory of the speaker expresses how they intend to be interpreted and for the listener, in turn, how they actually interpret the speaker's words. When the passing theories of the speaker and listener converge, communication succeeds.

The prior theory, in other words, gives a setting for the communication situation and is constituted by the assumptions the interlocutors have of each other's linguistic habits and capacities, deriving, for example, from each other's "character, dress, role, [and] sex," as well as from their linguistic and other previous behavior.[24] However, communication can develop in a direction in which the listener's prior theory no longer accounts for the intended meanings of the speaker's words. A speaker may provide "information relevant to interpreting an utterance in the course of making the utterance."[25] There is no reason why speakers have to remain within the confines of what they assume the listener's prior theory to be but, with sufficient stage-setting and clues, the speaker can make them "gear" their passing theory "to the occasion," as Davidson puts it, so that they will be able to catch the intended meanings.[26]

This, in a nutshell, is the requirement of interpretability: "you cannot change what words mean… merely by intending to…, but you can change the meaning provided you believe (and perhaps are justified in believing) that the interpreter has adequate clues for the new interpretation."[27] This emphasis brings creativity to the very heart of language use and, for Davidson, Joyce's writing epitomizes this type of linguistic usage. He writes: "Joyce draws on every resource his readers command (or that he hopes they command, or thinks they should command), every linguistic resource, knowledge of history, geography, past writers, and styles. He forces us both to look at and listen to his words to find the puns and fathom the references."[28] Joyce is admittedly a rather extreme case but, as Davidson sees no principled distinction between literary and ordinary language, there is no reason why similar types of interactions could not take place in non-literary, everyday contexts too.

Davidson's argument against overly stressing the conventionalist and rule-governed character of language is that it is impossible to specify how far the prior theories of the

speaker and listener will suffice in a given linguistic interaction. It is equally impossible to lay down any systematic account of how listeners are able to gear their passing theory to give the correct interpretation of what the speaker has said. This explains Davidson's use of his epithet *passing*. The element that grounds an understanding in one context may have no role in another; the success of communication can even involve an *entre-nous* between the interlocutors. In other words, there is no "chance of regularizing" how the speaker's and the listener's passing theories coincide; in many cases it is guaranteed by "wit, luck, and wisdom" but also capacities, such as "empathy and imagination," Davidson believes.[29],[30]

Of course, conversation can proceed along familiar paths. But Davidson's view shows that it can also include very intricate interplay between the conversationalists. What Davidson's analysis also points out is that conversationalists themselves have an impact on the structure of the conversation they are taking part in. Some aesthetic theories describe the experience of art as involving an interaction between artwork and recipient.[31] In conversation, however, the interaction is much more concrete, for the interlocutors can literally respond to each other's actions and are thus able to directly mold the conversational situation. Noël Carroll suggests this is one of the key differences between the interactions that take place within conversations and those occurring in the interpretation of art.[32] It is only through the conversationalists' own efforts that conversation can be made into the kind of cumulative process that renders it aesthetic. It becomes almost a joint and collaborative project between the interlocutors, even resembling some forms of participatory art. Arnold Berleant, in his social aesthetics, beautifully captures the character of this collaboration. In such social situations, "creative processes are at work in its participants, who emphasize and shape the perceptual features, and supply meaning and interpretation. There is no art object here, of course, but the situation itself becomes the focus of perceptual attention." Berleant continues: "And at the same time as its participants contribute to creating the aesthetic character of the situation, they may recognize with appreciative delight its special qualities, and perhaps work, as a performer would, at increasing and enhancing them."[33] Though Berleant does not discuss conversation, it is arguably a very good example of what he means by aesthetically rewarding social situations.

My investigation of the main points of Davidson's later philosophy of language shows that communication can rest on very intricate factors that are relevant from the perspective of this paper. He portrays conversation as involving interaction between interlocutors that is similar to how Dewey views aesthetic experience. Both Dewey and Davidson emphasize the role of the imagination, not in the sense of building mental imagery or make-believe that have been dominant in the analytic philosophy of literature but in the Deweyan sense that likens imagination to the mental capacity "to see and feel things as they compose an integral whole."[34] In conversations, imagination can be seen as the capacity to build a picture of what will make a good next move in the conversation, given how it has proceeded, that will either further it or serve as a meaningful conclusion. For Davidson,

expectations and anticipations are important parts of a conversation. How they are taken into account by the conversationalists has a great impact on the movement and rhythm of the conversation. Some utterances might be unexpected and take the conversation in new directions; some in turn are foreseeable but are experienced as appropriate, giving a satisfying feeling of wholeness. It may even be that a conversationalist uses particular words in the expectation that they will elicit a particular response. This will give the conversation an air of suspense. Some moves in the conversation can, in turn, seem banal and inappropriate, running the risk of reducing the flow of the conversation.

This picture of the interaction involved in conversation resonates well with the Deweyan aesthetic framework, which views aesthetic experience as having "the rhythm of expecting and satisfaction to be internally complete."[35] Expectations and anticipations serve to create tension in a conversation, too. Some linguistic moves within the conversation can, in turn, release the tension that has built up, serving as a climax to the conversation. Goodman Ace was considered a master of this type of language use. Describing Ace's linguistic accomplishments, Davidson cites his particularly good selection of "the ideal phrase for the situation," hitting the nail right on the head.[36] In Deweyan terminology, Ace had an ability to bring conversations to a consummation. That, for Dewey, is also an aesthetic moment, and it is something that sadly is missing from the conversation between Frasier and Kim.

This type of climax is not often reached in a conversation. We may leave feeling that much more could have been made of it, that some more appropriate phrase might have brought the conversation to a meaningful conclusion. Sometimes we are even convinced that the conversation, given how it has proceeded, needs a particular kind of next move. We almost literally feel there is a hole or an empty spot in the conversation that has to be filled with suitable words. The awkwardness that some people feel in the face of silence is one example of the force of this pull. Sometimes the required words can spring to one's mind only after the conversation. George Costanza, one of the main characters in the American TV sitcom *Seinfeld*, demonstrates an extreme example of this situation. In one episode, George becomes the butt of a joke in a conversation and, after the incident, he comes up with a riposte that he thinks is so good that he goes to great efforts to recreate the situation. When George gets the opportunity to present his punch line, his opponent subsequently trumps it with a further riposte, and George again sinks into a state of emptiness, following his short-lived triumph. Even the negative experiences we can encounter in conversations show that conversation can exhibit movement and rhythm that, in the best instances, make them into genuine aesthetic happenings. Actually, for George's linguistic opponent, the situation has a culminating moment. Also, unlike George, the onlookers of the situation in the episode seem to appreciate the wittiness of the opponent's new riposte. This case again shows that the aesthetic character of conversations can vary, depending on whether one is part of the conversation or just an onlooker, which was already touched upon in connection with the case of Frasier and Kim.

4. Orientation or interaction?

To flesh out the details of the account on the aesthetics of conversation I shall present an alternative view that equally draws on Dewey, that of Scott Stroud. In his attempt to outline a basis for an artful life, Stroud asks, "How can one move everyday communicative activity from the realm of statements to the realm connected with aesthetic experience or expression?"[37] His goal is, thus, the same as mine.

For Stroud, an appropriate orientation to the communicative situation is fundamental to revealing its aesthetic aspects. He notes that communication has two sides, either as a means or as an end in itself. It can be used as a means to achieve some ulterior end, such as making one's thoughts public, buying a ticket or ordering a meal. Sometimes the means and ends are completely disconnected. The act of communication itself can even be experienced as a necessary ordeal to reach a desired end, when ordering something to eat from an impolite waiter, for example. Stroud thinks that a very different kind of orientation towards communication can also be taken; the communicative situation can be valued for its own sake. It's not necessary to locate the value of communication solely to the products of communicative acts; the process itself can have value. Stroud writes: "Communication is *both* a means to future states of affairs and an immediately valuable, felt instantiation of harmony and coordination with others."[38] The means and ends of communication, in other words, need not be as disconnected as they often seem to be in everyday communication. The communication situation can also be felt as an integrated whole. It's just a matter of orientation: "One's orientation toward communicative activity can focus one's attention in such a way as to foreground its value as a mere means; it is at this point that communicative interaction loses any felt, immediate value and instead gains the promised value only of the end yet to be achieved."[39]

To make his case that proper orientation is key to making communication an aesthetic event, Stroud refers to Dewey's example of the different attitudes of passengers on a ferryboat crossing New York's Hudson River. Some passengers might just see the trip as a necessity involved in getting to the other side of the river; the process has to be endured for the sake of the end desire. A person interested in real estate could, in turn, speculate during the trip about the prices of the apartments and offices that the ferry passes along the way. But another type of orientation to the trip is also possible. It could include an appreciation of the New York skyline, how the colors and shapes of the different buildings relate to one another and form an integrated unity. With proper orientation to the situation, the view can begin to have "form in the artistic sense," transforming the ferry ride from a mere necessity to an aesthetic event that is valued for its own sake.[40] From Dewey's reflections, Stroud concludes that orientation is fundamental to making experience aesthetic: "A certain way of experiencing an object with a certain sort of *attention* and *absorption* characterizes what Dewey labels 'aesthetic experience'."[41] Stroud even suggests that there is a hint of mindfulness in Dewey's account, in that "one ought to focus one's attention on the materials of the immediate situation,

and not on some remote goal or outcome that desire inclines one toward." This sort of mindful attention makes it possible to see the communication situation as "a qualitative whole," like aesthetic experience.[42]

In my view, Stroud's analysis does not go deep enough, for it does not pay enough attention to the fundamental pillar of Dewey's whole philosophy of experience, the environment, including not only the natural and urban spaces that humans inhabit and encounter but all "those conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being."[43] Aesthetic experience, in other words, has "objective conditions," and not all conditions make possible the "cumulation, conservation, reinforcement, transition" of the experience "into something more complete."[44] From this perspective, experience is a matter of how a situation unfolds and develops. My reading of Dewey and Davidson provides a picture of how a conversation or some other type of communication situation has to proceed in order for it to have an aesthetic character. This account gives insight into the objective conditions of aesthetic experience in the case of conversations and it shows that a proper orientation alone does not guarantee that a conversation attains an aesthetic character. It's the quality of the interaction that matters. A change of orientation does not even seem to be required; one can be pulled into a conversation so fully that no special effort occurs. Aesthetic experience can be something that, in a way, just grabs you. Sometimes conversationalists' incapacity to take on the kind of orientation central to Stroud's explanation can surely prohibit a conversation from reaching an aesthetic level. Yet, the orientation cannot fully explain how a conversation is transformed into an aesthetic phenomenon.

An interlocutor's lack of attention can indeed undermine the aesthetic aspects of a conversation, as Stroud claims, but in a very specific sense that he does not discuss. Improper orientation does not weaken the conversationalist's own experience, in that they would be unable to experience the situation as an integrated whole. But by failing to respond to the others' communicative moves in the kind of way specified in the first parts of the paper because of improper orientation, they can ruin the conversation for all parties, not just their own subjective experience. They are a spoilsport; no one can now experience the conversation aesthetically, no matter what their orientation. At times, Stroud does come close to the view I have laid out above. For example, he writes: "the process of communication *is* the end of communicating – individuals attentively responding to each other and the situation in such a way as to truly instantiate a community of interacting being."[45] Here he sees interaction as central to a conversation marked by aesthetic qualities. However, he does not give a fuller account of the qualities this interaction has to possess for it to be called aesthetic. This is what I see as fundamental for an explanation of the aesthetic character of conversations. Orientation can provide a good basis for an aesthetic interaction. However, in my view, its role is limited to this. Orientation cannot even be a necessary condition, for a conversation can reach an aesthetic level even without the type of conscious change in mindset Stroud claims is necessary. For these reasons I believe Stroud's account of the aesthetics of

communication built around the notion of orientation is just half the story in discovering what makes a conversation an aesthetic phenomenon.

One of the unfortunate consequences of my account is that it makes aesthetic everyday conversations rarer phenomena than they would be in Stroud's model. Stroud believes that, just with proper orientation, even a sales transaction at a supermarket checkout can have an aesthetic quality to it.[46] I am much more skeptical about such a possibility. At the checkout there is simply not enough time for the accumulation of the situation I see as necessary for an aesthetic conversation to take place, or at least it would necessitate much longer queues in stores. However, there is a positive side to my account. Some have argued that one of the features threatening the whole enterprise of everyday aesthetics is an overly loose concept of the aesthetic. By making the aesthetic appear almost everywhere, the whole notion is in danger of becoming contentless and trivial, hence undermining the credibility of this new field.[47] This pitfall arguably looms behind Stroud's perspective on the aesthetics of conversations. However, with its much more specific conception of aesthetic experience, my position, drawing on the views of Dewey and Davidson, is not guilty of looking at everyday phenomena with a trivialized notion of aesthetic experience but may very well contribute to a fuller understanding of the constituents of the aesthetics of everyday life.

5. Conversations and the creation of communities

Now to the social import of the discussion promised at the beginning. My account of conversations shows that language use is an inherently social phenomenon; most artworks can be experienced alone but it takes at least two to make a great conversation. Earlier I noted that such conversations involve similar qualities to those at the heart of Arnold Berleant's "social aesthetics." But the political implications of these views significantly overlap as well. Berleant thinks his social aesthetics promotes "reciprocity," "collaboration," "intimacy in personal relations," and other political ideals "at the heart of the democratic process."[48] My take on conversations continues Berleant's attempt to bring aesthetics more in line with social concerns and it also provides new perspectives on the social character of language. For language is more than a social phenomenon in the sense of conventionalist theories of meaning, going beyond the fact that the coordination of our linguistic habits enables us to understand our fellow language users. Ted Cohen's analysis of metaphors draws attention to these aspects of language use. He sees the use of metaphors as a way of cultivating intimacy with other people. Using a metaphorical expression implies the cooperation of the speaker and the listener. Metaphor can, in other words, be seen as "a kind of concealed invitation" to take part in an interpretive game as a result of which those involved "are drawn closer to one another."[49]

Even though metaphors are usually grasped quickly and without much conscious effort, according to Cohen, complex mental activities nevertheless function in the background. For a metaphor to work, the speaker and the listener must have

knowledge of one another's "beliefs, intentions, and attitudes." This is Cohen's example: calling your departmental chair a Bolshevik. Especially now that communism is even more of a minor force in the world than it was in the days of Cohen's article, the chairman will understand that you are not attempting to report a fact. They know this because they know that you know they are not a Bolshevik. Something like this reasoning enables them to realize that what was said should not be taken literally, but figuratively. You also know that they know that you know that they are not a Bolshevik. This process gives you reassurance that they will interpret the expression in the appropriate way, that is, not as a factual statement. This link between the interlocutors makes the working of the metaphor possible. Further deciphering the point of the metaphor will presuppose and reveal even more detailed knowledge of the speaker's mental life. This shows how metaphor's functioning is based on knowledge the speaker and recipient share of one another. This is how metaphors can draw language users closer together, promoting intimacy and a sense of community between them. The size of the community a metaphor creates varies. Potentially it consists of all those who share the required information to appreciate the metaphor. But Cohen also notes that the knowledge required in grasping a metaphor can be so intimate and detailed that it will work only when spoken to a specific person.[50]

Cohen believes that this type of sharing and interplay characterizes language use at large but has just become buried under the routine character of everyday communicative activity. An examination of metaphor illustrates how some uses of language can "initiate… the cooperative act of comprehension which is, in any view, something more than a routine act of understanding."[51] Such an interaction is seen as central to communication in the account Davidson lays out in his later philosophy of language, and it shows that communication's power to cultivate intimacy is not limited to metaphors. Making an imaginative next move in a conversation can require detailed knowledge of the interlocutors' mental lives, and of their linguistic capacities, in very much the same way Cohen thinks is required in the case of metaphor. A specific type of bond has to exist between the interlocutors if the kind of conversation Davidson raises to the very heart of his later philosophy of language is to succeed. I can make this linguistic maneuver, for I know my listeners have sufficient knowledge and capacity to understand my expression in the way I intend. It also seems that immediate successfulness is an important factor of the sense of intimacy these sorts of conversations create. Additional explanations of how utterances are to be understood would weaken the intimate feel of the conversation.

Imaginative conversations of the kind Davidson thinks pose a problem for conventionalist views of language can thereby give rise to the sense of communality similar to that which Cohen thinks is created by the use of metaphors. Again, Joyce can be taken as an extreme case of this communality engendering interaction. Davidson writes: "[B]y fragmentating familiar languages and recycling the raw material Joyce provokes the reader into involuntary collaboration…. The center of creative energy is thus moved from the artist to a point between the

writer and his audience."[52] Goodman Ace's linguistic virtuosity also created interaction that involved an invitation for others to take part in the linguistic play. The sense of togetherness initiated by his imaginative use of language must be one important reason why people seem to talk so warmly of him.

What makes these points interesting is that the sort of sense of communality conversations are seen to be capable of engendering here also have an important place in Dewey's view of democracy.[53] In fact, Dewey believes the health of this type of political system rests upon the same kind of sensibility being held by its citizens, and he attributes to communication and to how people, in general, interact with one another a vital role in sustaining and in reinforcing the experience of communality between them. Given that the conversations of the kind I have developed above, based on Dewey's aesthetics and Davidson's later philosophy of language, can bring about experiences of communality, they turn out to be highly valuable from the perspective of Dewey's democratic ideals, perhaps even serving as a benchmark for all other types of communication in society.[54]

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Endnotes

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[1] For references, see below.

[2] Of Berleant's vast publication output, see, for example, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

[3] Aili Bresnahan, "Toward A Deweyan Theory of Ethical and Aesthetic Performing Arts Practice," *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 1, 2 (2014), 133-148.

[4] Richard Shusterman, "Photography as Performative Process," in his *Thinking Through the Body. Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 239-261.

[5] Dominic Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[6] Noël Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 97-131.

[7] John Dewey, *Art Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), p. 36. Originally published in 1934.

[8] *Ibid*., p. 220.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[11] *Ibid*., p. 35.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 335.

[15] The scene is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWuS9_mHEdQ. Accessed March 4, 2017.

[16] See Richard Shusterman "Aesthetic Experience: From Analysis to Eros," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, 2 (2006), 217-229, ref. on 226.

[17] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 39.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[20] Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in his *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 89-107; ref on. pp. 89-91.

[21] Donald Davidson, *Subjective, Objective, Intersubjective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 28, pp. 116-117.

[22] Donald Davidson, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," in his *Truth, Language, and History*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005/1989), pp. 143-157.

[23] Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 101.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 98.

[28] Davidson, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," p. 147.

[29] Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 107.

[30] Donald Davidson, "Aristotle's Action," in his *Truth, Language, and History. Philosophical Essays Volume 5* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005/2001), pp. 277-294; ref. at p. 281.

[31] Consider, for example, Gadamer's notion of *Spiel*.

[32] Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," p. 117.

[33] Arnold Berleant, "Ideas for a Social Aesthetics," in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. Jonathan M. Smith & Andrew Light (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 23-38, ref. on p. 31.

[34] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 267.

[35] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 254.

[36] Davidson, "A Nice Derangements of Epitaphs," p. 89.

[37] Scott Stroud, *Dewey and the Artful Life. Pragmatism, Aesthetics, and Morality* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. 179.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 182, italics in the original.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 136.

[41] Stroud, *Dewey and the Artful Life*, p. 59.

[42] Ibid., p. 181.

[43] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), p. 13. Originally published in 1916.

[44] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 146.

[45] Stroud, *Dewey and the Artful Life*, p. 183, italics in the original.

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 180.

[47] See, for example, Jane Forsey, *The Aesthetics of Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 203.

[48] Berleant, "Ideas for a Social Aesthetics," p. 35.

[49] Ted Cohen, "Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978), 3-12; ref. on 8.

[50] *Ibid.*, 8-9.

[51] *Ibid.*, 9.

[52] Davidson, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," p. 156-157.

[53] On Dewey's theory of democracy see, for example, Gregory Pappas, *Democracy as Experience. John Dewey's Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

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