

Looking Past Pleasure : Anger, Confusion, Disgust, Pride, Surprise, and Other Unusual Aesthetic Emotions

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What do we mean by *experience* when we discuss *aesthetic experience*? What are people experiencing, and what brings it about? In modern psychological aesthetics, aesthetic experience is essentially a simple feeling of liking, preference, and pleasure. This might sound unfair, but our methods illuminate our concepts. An informal analysis—that is, idly flipping through recent issues of *Empirical Studies of the Arts* and *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*—shows that aesthetic feelings are usually measured with self-report items like *pleasing–displeasing*, *like–dislike*, *positive–negative*, and *pleasant–unpleasant*. The psychology of aesthetic experience is eerily close to the psychology of how much novices say they like something.

The focus on positive feelings isn't a modern turn—even the earliest work in psychological aesthetics viewed experience along a simple positive–negative continuum. The title of Henry Rutgers Marshall's (1894) classic—*Pain, Pleasure, and Aesthetics*—accurately captures his unidimensional model of aesthetics. By the time of Kate Gordon's (1909)*Esthetics*—perhaps the first textbook in psychological aesthetics—the positive–negative dimension of affective experience was well established. Much later, Berlyne (1960, 1971) developed a sophisticated behavioral theory based on reward and aversion systems. The success of Berlyne's approach ensured a long life for research on positive and negative aesthetic feelings.

Over the last century, the psychology of aesthetics has developed a large body of work devoted to simple and mild feelings of liking and disliking. These are important feelings: people do like and dislike art, and much of human experience is simple and mild. Nevertheless, the scope of human feeling is vast, and I suspect that our field's behavioral legacy is obscuring some interesting feelings that we ought to know more about. In this article, I discuss some unusual aesthetic emotions: knowledge emotions such as interest, confusion, and surprise; hostile emotions such as anger and disgust; and self-conscious emotions such as pride, shame, and embarrassment. Most of these feelings have received little attention in psychological aesthetics, so they represent open doors for future research.

Human Emotions and Aesthetic Emotions

As Berlyne (1971) and his group were conducting their landmark experiments, the psychology of emotion was emerging as an interdisciplinary field (Izard, 1971). Most theories of emotion distinguish among specific emotions, diffuse moods, and mild positive and negative affect (Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 2001). Emotions consist of components, such as facial, vocal, and postural expressions (an expressive component); a subjective feeling state (a subjective component); a set of cognitive appraisals that bring about the emotion (a cognitive component); a tendency to act (a behavioral component); and changes in the brain and body (a physiological component).

I have argued that appraisal theories of emotion have a lot to offer psychological aesthetics (Silvia, 2005a). Among other benefits, appraisal theories greatly expand the kinds of feelings that researchers can study. Berlyne's strand of behaviorism offered positive reward and negative aversion; appraisal theories offer around 20 different emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 2001; Scherer, 2001). Researchers can (and certainly do) disagree over whether feelings like anger, pride, and surprise should be considered aesthetic feelings, but I think we should sidestep this disagreement. Regardless of whether researchers view these feelings as properly aesthetic, people around the world experience these feelings in response to the arts. A modern psychology of aesthetics ought to have something to say about how these feelings work.

A Tour of Unusual Aesthetic Emotions

Knowledge Emotions

One family of feelings—the knowledge emotions—is made up of emotions associated with thinking and comprehending. Figure 1 depicts the appraisal space for interest, confusion, and surprise, the most widely studied emotions in this family. These emotions involve knowledge in several senses. First, their appraisals are metacognitive: the emotions stem from people's appraisals of what they know, what they expect to happen, and what they think they can learn and understand. Second, the emotions, for the most part, motivate learning, thinking, and exploring, actions that foster the growth of knowledge.

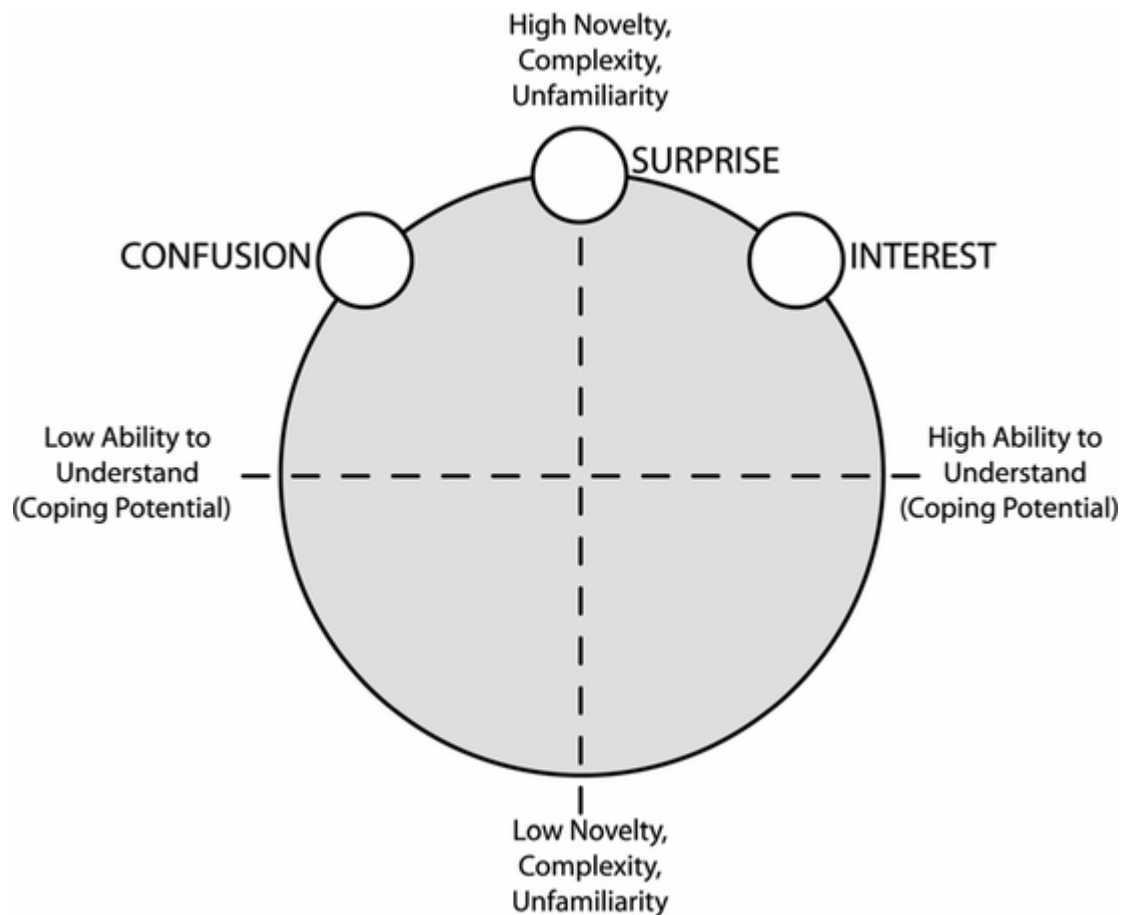


Figure 1. A two-dimensional appraisal space for interest, confusion, and surprise.

Interest

Interest involves two appraisals (Silvia, 2005b): appraising an event as new, complex, and unfamiliar (a high novelty–complexity appraisal) and as comprehensible (a high coping-potential appraisal). I have covered interest in detail elsewhere (Silvia, 2006, 2008b), and aesthetics research has been interested in interest since Berlyne (1960). For our purposes, the notable feature of interest is how it differs from pleasure. Berlyne (1971) and others have shown that interestingness and pleasingness have different causes, correlates, and consequences (Turner & Silvia, 2006). For example, interest is more strongly related to physiological activation, behavioral exploration, and appraisals of novelty. The finding that interest predicts viewing time and listening time more strongly than pleasingness does (Silvia, 2006, chap. 1) should give pause to researchers who identify aesthetic experience with simple pleasure.

Confusion

Confusion is a scandalous newcomer to emotion psychology. Many researchers probably would not view it as a proper emotion, but some do (see Rozin & Cohen, 2003). From my point of view, confusion is an interesting mental state, regardless of whether we ultimately view it as an emotion. Confusion is a metacognitive signal: it informs people that they do not comprehend what is happening and that some shift in action is thus needed, such as a new learning strategy, more effort, or withdrawal and avoidance. For people interested in art education, confusion is a

major emotion: it is the typical emotion of novices who are faced with works that they cannot understand. Fostering expertise in the arts probably involves both reducing and harnessing the experience of confusion.

I suspect that confusion fits within interest's appraisal space. Like interest, it involves appraising something as new and complex; unlike interest, it involves appraising the event as hard to understand (see Figure 1). Some unpublished studies offer support for this appraisal model: the two appraisals predict feelings of confusion in response to visual art, and enhancing people's ability to understand something makes it less confusing and more interesting (Silvia, 2008a).

Surprise

Surprise has been widely studied in emotion psychology, particularly as part of the startle response (Simons, 1996). Its main function is to interrupt ongoing action and orient people to a possibly significant event. Surprise is a relatively simple emotion. It has one core appraisal—appraising something as novel and unexpected—although other appraisals can shift the subjective feeling of surprise or shift the emotion from surprise to another emotion (Scherer, 2001). Figure 1 shows that appraising an event as new predicts surprise; the appraisal of coping potential that follows can lead to interest or confusion.

A clever line of research by Ludden, Schifferstein, and Hekkert (2008) has explored people's experience of surprise during interactions with consumer products. Ludden and her colleagues propose that designers can evoke surprise via *sensory incongruity*, such as a conflict between how an object looks and how it feels, sounds, or smells (Ludden & Schifferstein, 2007; Ludden, Schifferstein, & Hekkert, in press). The incongruity creates surprise, which motivates people to explore the object. As people interact with the object, the state of surprise can shift to other feelings, such as interest, amusement, and disappointment. This research, in my view, deserves special attention: it studies an overlooked emotion (surprise) in an overlooked context (the decorative arts).

Hostile Emotions

Australia's museum curators had a bad month in October 1997. At the National Gallery of Victoria, Andres Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ* was attacked twice in two days. The first attacker removed it from the wall and futilely stomped it; the second attacker smashed it with a hammer while an accomplice created a diversion by removing a different photograph. A few days later, someone stole *Virgin in a Condom*, a sculpture by Tania Kovats, from the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art. Australia's curators, I hope, have since learned the value of fastening art to a wall or pedestal.

What does the psychology of aesthetics have to say about such attacks? Hostile feelings in response to the arts are common, and they aren't limited to blasphemous works. (For a demonstration, just ask your friendly neighborhood art historian what he or she thinks about *Nascar Thunder*, a recent masterpiece by Thomas Kinkade.) The long history of artistic censorship and repression makes hostile emotions particularly interesting to the psychology of art and aesthetics.

Emotion psychologists have called anger, disgust, and contempt the *hostility triad* (Izard, 1977; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). As a group, these emotions motivate aggression, self-assertion, and violence. From an appraisal perspective, we can predict when people will experience hostile emotions. Anger's appraisal structure involves appraising an event as contrary to one's goals and values (a goal-incongruence appraisal) and as deliberately caused (an intentionality appraisal). This appraisal structure can be expressed thematically as *deliberate trespass*. Disgust's appraisal structure, like anger, involves an appraisal of goal incongruence; unlike anger, disgust involves appraising something as unpleasant, dirty, or harmful. This can be expressed thematically as *contamination*.

In one study, we found that these appraisals predicted anger and disgust in response to paintings and photographs (Silvia & Brown, 2007). People viewed a wide range of images, including disturbing and controversial works, and then rated each image for appraisals and for feelings of anger and disgust. Within-person models found, as expected, that appraising a work as against one's values and as deliberately offensive predicted anger; appraising a work as against one's values and as unpleasant predicted disgust. In other research (Cooper & Silvia, 2009), we found that hostile feelings in response to contemporary photography predicted antagonistic and rejecting action tendencies. Feelings of anger and disgust predicted whether people expressed repressive attitudes toward the photographs (Study 1) and whether they accepted or declined a free postcard of a controversial work (Study 2).

Self-Conscious Emotions

To experience feelings like pride, shame, guilt, regret, and embarrassment, a creature must have a sense of self and the ability to reflect upon what the self has done. Self-conscious emotions are thus unusually complex; few animals seem to have them, and they are among the last emotions to develop in humans (see Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Tracy & Robins, 2007a). From an appraisal perspective (Tracy & Robins, 2007b), self-consciousness emotions involve appraising events as congruent or incongruent with one's goals, values, and self-image; as caused by oneself instead of other people; and as consistent or inconsistent with personal and cultural standards (Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 2001; Scherer, 2001).

It isn't hard to find instances of creators' self-conscious emotions. In his private letters, for example, Sherwood Anderson frequently described his feelings about his writing (Jones & Rideout, 1953; Modlin, 1984). Literary historians credit Sherwood Anderson with transforming American short fiction (Rideout, 2006). Anderson had much to be proud of, and pride is a major theme in his letters. There are proud defenses of *Beyond Desire*, a novel panned by critics, and many expressions of pride in what he saw as his best work, such as the collections *Death in the Woods*, *The Triumph of the Egg*, and *Winesburg, Ohio*. The letters reveal shame and embarrassment, too, such as bashful excuses for *Marching Men*, his second (and worst) novel.

Self-conscious emotions can be collective: we can experience pride and shame when people in our ingroup behave well and badly. Because people can identify with other people, they can experience self-conscious emotions in response to the actions of others. A creator can be proud of a great piece of work, and the creator's family, friends, and fans can be proud, too. The residents of tiny Marion, Virginia—home of the annual Sherwood Anderson Festival—take justifiable pride in their town's most famous literary figure. More broadly, American writers can

take pride in Anderson's body of short fiction, which sparked the country's most distinctive contribution to world literature. Many ethnic, national, and cultural groups feel proud of their exceptional artists. In American literature, examples include William Saroyan among Armenian Americans, Zora Neale Hurston among African Americans, and Richard Brautigan among 1960s hippies.

Understanding personal and collective feelings of pride, shame, guilt, regret, and embarrassment is central to a mature science of aesthetics, but our field knows so little about these emotions. Of the emotion families, self-consciousness emotions afford the most to researchers looking for untrod terrain.

We Like Liking

By advocating for unusual emotions, I don't mean to slight research on pleasure and liking. Many effects in aesthetics involve changes in positive affect, not in complex, discrete emotions. In the visual arts, for example, variables like pictorial balance, prototypicality, processing fluency, prior exposure, and angularity influence people's positive feelings (see Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004; Locher, 2006; Silvia & Barona, 2009). For these processes, mild feelings of liking are the proper dependent variable; it would be bizarre to supplant *like–dislike* with *proud–ashamed* in these areas of research. And there's nothing simple about simple liking. A large branch of emotion psychology is devoted to studying positive and negative affect (e.g., Cacioppo & Berntson, 1999; Watson, 2000): low-level, bottom-up affect dynamics are subtle and intricate. I suspect (and hope) that pleasingness will keep aesthetics researchers busy for another century.

Conclusion

In this article, I took a brief tour of some intriguing and overlooked emotions. These emotions, except interest, have received little attention from researchers in psychological aesthetics. A few of the emotions, such as pride and confusion, have probably never been mentioned in the past 30 years of aesthetics research. I think our field ought to catch up with the diversity and complexity of everyday aesthetic experience: we ought to have more to say about why people feel proud, confused, angry, surprised, and embarrassed during encounters with the arts. These emotions are fertile territory for enterprising researchers.

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