



# Art and Transformation<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** *Encounters with art can change us in ways both big and small. This paper focuses on one of the more dramatic cases. I argue that works of art can inspire what L. A. Paul calls transformations, classic examples of which include getting married, having a child, and undergoing a religious conversion. Two features distinguish transformations from other changes we undergo. First, they involve the discovery of something new. Second, they result in a change in our core preferences. These two features make transformations hard to motivate. I argue, however, that art can help on both fronts. First, works of art can guide our attempt to imagine unfamiliar ways of living. Second, they can attract us to values we currently reject. I conclude by observing that what makes art powerful also makes it dangerous. Transformations are not always for the good, and art's ability to inspire them can be put to immoral ends.*

**KEYWORDS:** aesthetics, decision theory, habituation, imagination, transformative experiences

## Introduction

We may ascribe several ends to art. It can serve to please and instruct, as Horace (1929: ll. 333–46) once said. But works of art can also serve to change us. They can inspire us to become better, worse, or just different than we were before. I will be focusing on a particular instance of this third end. To wit, I aim to explain how art can inspire the radical kind of changes known as ‘transformations’.

L. A. Paul (2014: 10–18) identifies two kinds of transformations. *Epistemic transformations* involve the revelation of something previously inaccessible to us or the discovery of something we could not have known beforehand. Stock examples include tasting a new kind of fruit and seeing a new color. *Personal transformations* involve a change in our core preferences, the ones that define who we are. Thus, personal transformations result in our becoming different people. Paul points to taking a college course and reading a powerful work of fiction as examples.

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Epistemic and personal transformations can cut across each other. Some epistemic transformations are mundane, and some personal transformations are predictable. Yet, it is possible to undergo a combination of the two. Paul (2014: 17) calls such experiences simply *transformations*. Paradigm examples are becoming a parent, fighting in a war, undergoing a religious conversion, going off to college, embarking on a career, and picking up a new hobby (Paul, n.d.).

My thesis is that art can inspire transformations of this third sort. Here I follow the path laid out by Nick Riggle (2020). But whereas Riggle focuses on how performing and participating in art can transform us, I will argue that appreciating art can do so as well. I use the word ‘art’ here in an expansive sense, taking it to include both high and low forms. Yet, I do not claim that all art inspires transformations or that only art can do so. Moreover, I allow that art may try but fail at this project. It may invite transformations but receive no uptake (Riggle 2020: 172). One final clarification is in order. By ‘inspire’, I mean ‘influence’ or ‘impel’. On my view, art does not give us good or normative reasons to undergo transformations. It motivates us in ways that bypass our rationality. Hence we speak of a dangerous power.

## 1. Two Motivational Obstacles

Transformations are hard to inspire (Callard 2016: 143–53; Paul 2014: 5–51; Ullmann-Margalit 2006: 167–69). Two obstacles stand in the way. First, we do not know what we are getting ourselves into when approaching a transformation. Because we have not had the relevant experience before, we do not know what it would be like to have it. As such, we cannot tell whether the experience would appeal to us. Moreover, because we cannot tell whether it would appeal to us, we have no way of weighing it against our other options. We cannot judge whether pursuit would be wiser than evasion. Call this *the cognitive obstacle* to motivating transformations.

Second, suppose *per impossibile* we discovered what life would be like on the other side of a transformation. We cannot just assign a subjective value to this outcome and proceed accordingly. For we will not always think about the matter as we do now. The transformation will change our core preferences. Thus, our future selves may reject the value judgments our present selves endorse.

Our opinion of the transformation could change in several ways. First, we might view the transformation positively now but negatively later. We might come to oppose what the transformative experience has to offer even though it appeals to us at present. If we knew such an infelicitous change would occur, our motivation to pursue the transformation would likely diminish. For we rarely want to do something we know we will ultimately dislike.

Second, we might regard the transformation negatively now but positively later. The transformation might alter our preferences in such a way that they come to align with what the experience has to offer. Yet, this is not enough to motivate us to pursue the transformation. For we must want to have these new preferences—and we might not. Paul (2014: 91) uses the following example to make the point. Suppose there was a drug that would make you less intelligent. As a side effect, though, it would

make you enjoy being less intelligent. It would induce a blissfully ignorant state. Is this rosy outcome reason enough to take the drug? No. For you might not want to become the kind of person who enjoys being less intelligent.

I am interested in scenarios like this drug case—ones where we do not currently like what the new experience promises us. Such scenarios capture the second obstacle to motivating transformations. How can something, such as a work of art, get us to like what we do not like? Moreover, how can it get us to want to like what we do not want to like? Call this *the conative obstacle* to motivating transformations.

Here is an example adapted from Paul (2014: 71–94) that illustrates how the two motivational obstacles work together. Olivia is trying to decide whether to have children. Currently, she is against it. She does not see what is so great about being a parent. All the mothers she knows appear stressed, frustrated, and exhausted. None of that sounds appealing. Moreover, if she has children, her career may take a back seat, and she may have less time for her hobbies. Olivia's friends reassure her that things will change once she has a child. She will gain a newfound appreciation for familial bonds and come to love her parental responsibilities. Spending time with her child will be worth what she gives up in exchange. Yet, Olivia does not know whether to trust her friends' prediction. Although it might reflect their experiences, hers could be different. Not all mothers enjoy motherhood after all. Besides, Olivia is ill-disposed toward the activities her friends describe. Spending time with children is not at the top of her priority list. Nor does she want to become the kind of person for whom it is. Thus, even when she envisions a rosy future with smiling children by her side, the scene does not move her. It does not make her want to become a parent.

How, then, can art inspire transformations? How can it overcome the cognitive and conative obstacles standing in the way? The answer lies in the details of how each obstacle arises. Thus, in sections 2 and 3, I will focus on the details of the cognitive obstacle. Then, in sections 4, 5, and 6, I will turn to the details of the conative obstacle. In sections 7 and 8, I will present a concrete example of a transformation inspired by a work of art. Finally, I will end the paper in section 9 with some concluding remarks about the dangers of art's transformative power.

## 2. Art and the Limits of Imagination

Before making a decision, we often want to know what it would be like to embrace a particular option (Paul 2014: 26–27, 145; Paul 2017: 22–26; see also Kind 2020: 136; Nanay 2016; Williamson 2016: 117). Would we enjoy it or not? Would it bring us happiness or the opposite? To answer these questions, we often attempt to explore the scenario in our minds. We try to imaginatively project or forecast what we would think, feel, or want were we to inhabit it.

Our imaginative abilities have limits, though. According to a well-known dogma, we cannot imagine what it would be like to go through something if we have not gone through something like it before ourselves. Antonia Peacocke (2021) calls this *the experiential constraint*, and it is the *fons et origo* of the cognitive obstacle

(see Kind 2020). To decide whether to pursue a transformative experience, we need to imagine what it would be like to go through it. But since a transformative experience is by definition one we have not had before, we are unable to do so.

Peacocke (2021) and others (Feagin 1996: 83–112; Ismael 2019: 336; Kind 2021: 247–52; Nussbaum 1990; Rowe 2009; Smith 2011: 109–10; cf. Currie 2020: 86–87, 99–105) claim that art can help us overcome the experiential constraint. Just as notebooks and planners can aid our memories, so works of art can aid our imaginations. They are ‘cognitive prostheses’ capable of augmenting our native abilities in this domain. In particular, art can help us imagine what it is like to have experiences we ourselves have not had before. One way it can do so is by providing us with simulated versions of other people’s experiences (Kaufman and Libby 2012; Oatley 2016). Art can ‘transport’ us into their worlds, so to speak (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000; Van Laer et al. 2014). It can get us to take on their thoughts, feelings, and desires, and learn what it is like for them to face their circumstances and make their decisions.

Support for this position comes from statements made by art creators and art appreciators (Peacocke 2021: 2–3; Smith 2011: 105). Artists often say they seek to convey knowledge of what a particular experience is like, and consumers of their work often say they receive such knowledge. Indeed, people who have had a particular experience sometimes claim that a given work of art captures it. In other words, those who know first-hand what it feels like to undergo a particular experience, and thus are in a position to judge whether a given artwork conveys this knowledge, sometimes affirm that it does. Some veterans maintain that the opening of *Saving Private Ryan* captures the feeling of being at war (Wallace 1998). Michael K. Williams, the actor who played Omar Little in *The Wire*, says the television series gave expression to his own experiences growing up in the violent, drug-ridden slums of Baltimore (Simmons 2019). Discounting this testimony would require a compelling error theory.

Paul (2014: 7n4) has some sympathy for this line of thought. But she denies that art can give us what we need when it comes to transformative experiences (Paul 2014: 7n4, 9, 13, 53, 77; Paul 2019). She offers a couple of reasons for this denial. First, transformative experiences are defined as being epistemically inaccessible (Paul 2014: 8). It is part of what it is for an experience to be transformative that we do not know what it would be like to go through it. So, if a work of art gives us knowledge of what a particular experience would be like, then that experience ceases to qualify as transformative. The upshot is that, by definition, art cannot help us imagine transformative experiences. It can only shrink their domain (see Kind 2020).

Paul’s (2014: 88–90; 2015b: 807, 811–13) second argument is that works of art give us the wrong kind of knowledge. At best, they reveal what it is like *for some other (fictional) person* to have the relevant experience. But that is not what we need when deciding whether to undergo the experience. We need to know what it would be like *for us*. And there is no guarantee things will go for us as they do for the other (fictional) person. Our mental apparatus may process things differently.

### 3. The Seductive Power of Art

There is more to say about this matter, but let us suppose Paul's arguments succeed. It remains the case that art often feels like a helpful guide. We are often inclined to believe things will go for us as they do for the characters we encounter in movies, songs, and novels. If this conviction is unjustified, why do we embrace it so readily? On my account, motivated reasoning is partly to blame. We believe because we want to believe. And we want to believe because we get seduced by the power of art.

How does art seduce us? The answer has to do with an unfortunate fact about forecasting. Although we may have the potential to be good at it (Kind 2020; 2021), we tend to be bad at it (Dunn, Forrin, and Ashton-James 2009; Epley and Caruso 2009; Maibom 2016; Ta and Ickes 2017; Wilson and Gilbert 2005; cf. Williamson 2016). But we are not bad at it because we guess randomly. We are bad at it because we forecast idealistic responses. We imagine how we want things to go rather than how they actually will go (Dunn, Forrin, and Ashton-James 2009: 332; Epley and Caruso 2009; Maibom 2016: 196). Works of art feed into this tendency. For they make us want things to go how they depict things as going.

#### 3.1 Matthen on Aesthetic Pleasure

There are many ways to tell this part of the story. But one fruitful strategy is to draw on Mohan Matthen's account of aesthetic pleasure. I will develop this strategy in some detail, as it will play a crucial role later in the paper as well.

Matthen (2017: 14) describes aesthetic pleasure as a 'facilitating pleasure'. This means it is active and self-reinforcing. Aesthetic pleasure motivates us to continue the activity that gave rise to it. To use an example from the natural world, when we see a pretty bird, we want to follow it and see it again (Scarry 1999: 5).

Aesthetic pleasures are active in another way too. They engage a nexus of mental and bodily preparations that ease and optimize the activities that gave rise to them (Matthen 2017: 8–11). In other words, they 'facilitate' the pleasure-generating activities so as to maximize the pleasure they afford. So it is that after spotting our pretty bird, we may try to look at it more closely or from a better angle.

The facilitating nexus is specific (Matthen 2017: 11). It motivates pursuit of the pleasure-generating activity and no other. But we must not interpret this point too narrowly. The pleasure of looking at a pretty bird does not just lead us to continue looking at that specific bird. It also leads us to engage in ancillary activities that support and extend our bird watching. For example, we may remember the bird after it has disappeared from sight or imagine it flying away to its nest. We may talk about the bird with our friends when we get home or research how to locate it in the future. To this list, we can add making copies of the bird, as in photographing or drawing it (Scarry 1999: 3). All these are ways of optimizing and extending the pleasure of the original act of bird watching.

Aesthetic pleasure functions the same way in the case of viewing works of art. It moves us to perpetuate the activity that gave rise to it and to do things that optimize this activity. When we notice a beautiful painting in a museum, for example, we may

approach it and study it more carefully. We may also discuss it with a tour guide or read the informational placard on the wall. The pleasure afforded by contemplating a work of art may also inspire copying. Witness the masses taking pictures of museum masterpieces and posting them to Instagram. We copy in other ways too, such as by imitating. After encountering a striking Twombly, for instance, I may try my own hand at abstracts.

### 3.2 The Case of Representational Art

Representational art is a special case. There is a twofoldness to viewing it (Wollheim 1980: 137–51). We see the physical aspects of the work—the paint strokes, etc.—and we also see what those physical aspects represent. Either one can generate pleasure and activate an associated facilitating nexus. When focusing on the physical aspects of Degas’s dancer paintings, for example, the delicacy of his pastel work may spark an urge to imitate his style in our own painting practice. By contrast, when attending to the dancers depicted in the paintings, we may imagine what it would be like to be those dancers or find ourselves wishing we could move as gracefully as they did.

Think also of our reactions to advertisements. Seeing a glossy ad of a smoker may make us want to produce our own such ads. But it may also move us to become smokers (Charlesworth and Glantz 2005; Dal Cin et al. 2007). Television shows have a similar effect. Upon watching a rousing drama, we may want to become the directors of dramas. But we may also want to imitate the characters depicted in the drama—to style our hair or dress as they do.

It is not only the physical appearance of a character that may appeal to us. We may take pleasure in their way of life and want to repeat it as well. Consider our engagement with literature. We pick up ‘The Red-Headed League’ and delight in Doyle’s Holmes. We may prolong this pleasure by daydreaming about him or writing fan fiction. We may also find ourselves imagining what it would be like to be Sherlock—to live and think how he does. We may even try to become versions of the great detective ourselves. We may go around for a day solving mysteries and reasoning ‘deductively’ (see Kaufman and Libby 2012).

### 3.3 Implications for Forecasting

Let us return to the issue with which this section began. I said we often imagine things will go for us as they do for the characters we encounter in works of art. An explanation is now at hand. We often take pleasure in contemplating a character’s way of life, and we often want to extend this pleasure by copying that way of life. We want to be who we see. This desire shapes our forecasts about our future selves. For, again, we tend to forecast what we want to happen rather than what will actually happen.

Here is an example that ties these points together. Think about Bradley Cooper’s rendition of *A Star is Born*. The dramatic narrative arc of Ally’s character (played by Lady Gaga) brings us pleasure and draws us in. We may find ourselves wanting what happens to Ally to happen to us. We may wish for our creative musical talents to be

discovered and to have a run of fame. We may desire to find celebrity romance, win legions of fans, receive critical accolades, and the rest. These yens may influence how we imagine things going if we decide to become a singer-songwriter or start our own band. We may fall prey to the romantic notion that our lives will unfold as magically as Ally's does.

To summarize, on my view, art is not some great guide to the truth. It does not reveal what life would be like for us on the other side of a transformation. It just gets us to think that it does. Of course, this is less an overcoming than a sidestepping of the cognitive obstacle. But it is enough for my purposes. I hold that art can motivate transformations. This implies that art can provide us with reasons to undergo them—but not necessarily with good or normative reasons. In fact, art rarely if ever gives us such reasons. On a standard internalist account, we have a good or normative reason to do something only if we have that reason from an unimpaired cognitive state (Arkonovich 2013: 212–13). This means the reason cannot be a function of false or unjustified beliefs. But that is what happens when a work of art inspires a transformation. It seduces us into thinking that we know what it would be like for us on the other side of the transformation when in fact we do not know. And this unjustified forecast is integral to why we pursue the transformation.

#### 4. The Conative Obstacle

I have spent the last two sections discussing the cognitive obstacle to motivating transformations. In the next three sections, I will turn to the conative obstacle. It might seem as though this turn is unnecessary. For it might seem as though doing away with the cognitive obstacle is enough. I admit there are times when this is true. In some cases, the only thing holding us back from pursuing a new experience is a failure to grasp what it has to offer. We are so disposed that we would pursue it if we knew more about it (or thought we did). Here is an example.

FRENCH COOKING I. Suppose you have never tried your hand at French cooking. On the few occasions you had the chance, you declined. It did not seem like the sort of thing you would enjoy. But one day you see a documentary about French cooking that opens your eyes. You realize you had many misconceptions about the practice. Now that you know more, you think you would like it after all. It is exactly the sort of thing that excites you. So, you make an attempt at French cooking the next opportunity you get.

I wish to focus on cases that are *different* from French Cooking I. The ones that interest me have the added feature of being 'personally transformative' in Paul's sense. Undergoing the experience at stake alters our preferences. It results in our liking different things than we did before.

These changes can go in several directions. One possibility is that what the experience has to offer aligns with our current preferences but will not align with our future ones. In other words, the experience is attractive to us prior to

undergoing it. But upon undergoing it, we will come to hate it. A second possibility is that what the experience has to offer will align with our future preferences but does not align with our current ones. That is, when we actually undergo the experience, we will enjoy it. At least eventually. At present, though, we do not find it appealing. Moreover, we do not aspire to become the kind of person who does find it appealing.

I will restrict my attention to the second of these two scenarios. To illustrate the problems it creates, consider another example.

**FRENCH COOKING II.** Suppose you attempted French cooking once before, and you did not like it. Yet, you know you tend to get into hobbies, and you suspect if you dedicated yourself to French cooking, you would come to enjoy it. Such is your track record with other artistic endeavors. However, you do not want to become the kind of person who likes French cooking. It reminds you too much of your college nemesis who had a passion for that particular culinary art. So, you keep on avoiding French cooking.

Unlike in French Cooking I, knowledge is not the issue in French Cooking II. In this latter example, learning more about French cooking will not motivate you to try it. For your dislike of French cooking is not grounded in ignorance. It is part of your personality. Thus, the only way forward is to change this part of your personality. But you do not want to change this part of your personality. You want to remain who you are.

#### 4.1 Extrinsic Motivations

Only extrinsic considerations, such as rewards or punishments, can help in such scenarios (Callard 2016: 129–30). Since we are not drawn to the experience itself, only something external to it can get us to pursue it. The extrinsic consideration cannot be just any old thing, however. It has to speak to our current preferences. It has to entice us as we are prior to being changed by the transformative experience (Paul 2015a: 492). In addition, the reward or punishment must be of sufficient magnitude to outweigh our dislike for the experience. If our aversion to the experience is intense, something minor will fail to move us. There may even be cases where no extrinsic factor is weighty enough.

Extrinsic considerations merely initiate the transformation process. They do not actually transform us (Callard 2016: 131–32). That is, they do not actually get us to alter our preferences regarding the experience in question—to shift from disliking to liking what it has to offer. Rather, extrinsic considerations just motivate us to undergo the experience, and it is undergoing the experience that transforms us. To use an old metaphor, an extrinsic consideration is a ladder we climb up and then kick away. It brings us to the point where we no longer need it as a motivation because we have come to enjoy the experience for its own sake (Callard 2016: 137). (Of course, we may never kick the ladder away. We may end



up being motivated by both extrinsic and intrinsic considerations.) Here is a third example to illustrate the idea.

**FRENCH COOKING III.** As before, suppose you do not currently like French cooking, but you know you would come to like it if you threw yourself into it. That is how you are wired. However, you do not want to become the kind of person who likes French cooking. It reminds you too much of your college nemesis. So, you have never taken it up as a hobby. Then, one day you meet a boy who is into French cooking. You find yourself attracted to him and looking for ways to forge a connection. Setting your hang-ups aside, you decide to sign up for a French cooking class with him. Things do not work out with the boy, but you end up sticking with the class. In fact, you go to enough sessions that your preferences change. You come to enjoy making ratatouille and boeuf bourguignon, just as you suspected you would.

## 4.2 Habituation

How does this transformation occur? How does engaging in French cooking (or anything else) lead us to develop an affinity for it when previously we had an aversion to it? This is something of a mystery. But one possible explanation lies in Aristotle's theory of habituation. On Aristotle's view, if we use rewards and punishments to get children to develop the habit of engaging in some noble activity, they will come to care about that noble activity for its own sake (Fossheim 2006: 109–14; Zagzebski 2017: 134). Aristotle's point does not just hold for children and noble activities, though. It generalizes. If extrinsic considerations get any of us to pursue any undertaking for long enough, we will wind up valuing it for its own sake.

Habituation does not always work, of course. Sometimes the more we do something, the more we care about it. But sometimes not. Sometimes the more we do something, the more we hate it. In such cases, extrinsic considerations will not bring about a transformation. They will push us away from the activity or experience in question. Indeed, extrinsic motivations can be the source of the problem. They can undermine or crowd out the development of intrinsic motivations rather than enable it (Schwartz and Wrzesniewski 2016).

Habituation also does not explain every case. It is particularly ill-suited to account for sudden transformations, such as religious conversions. For habituation takes time whereas conversions happen quickly—even instantaneously. I lack a satisfying account of the mechanism at play in such cases. But this lacuna is not troubling. For I do not seek to explain every mechanism by which transformations occur.

## 5. Art as Motivator

What does art have to do with this story? Beautiful artistic representations can serve the same function as rewards and punishments. They can draw us toward an experience and motivate us to pursue it even if we are not attracted to the

experience itself. We can return to Matthen for an explanation. A beautiful representation of an experience generates pleasurable sensations in us. Delight in these pleasures prompts us to return to their source and to deepen our engagement with it. We want to see more representations of the experience and perhaps even to undergo it. As Elaine Scarry (1999: 3–5) puts it, beauty begets repetition both in the world and in ourselves.

I speak here about beauty, but only by way of example. Other aesthetic values can do the same thing. Think of viewing the music video for Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. We may take pleasure in Jackson's zombie-like dance moves even though they are more campy and humorous than beautiful. This pleasure may motivate us to view the video again and to share it with our friends. It may also inspire us to stand up and mimic Jackson's dance. Crucially, this may occur even if we are not good at dancing, do not like dancing, or do not regard ourselves as dancers. Our desire to extend our enjoyment of Jackson's uncanny contortions can be strong enough that we are willing to take on the costs of imitating them not just in terms of time and energy but also of social standing and personal identity.

Of course, like rewards and punishments, aesthetically appealing representations do not actually transform us. They merely motivate us to pursue the experience in a serious and sustained way. It is actually having the experience that changes us in the sense of getting us to care about the experience for its own sake. Thus, we may liken the artistic representation to a ladder we climb up and then kick away. Or *can* kick away. At the end of the transformation, we may continue to take pleasure in artistic representations of the experience. We just no longer need this pleasure as a motivation. We will have reached a point where we find the experience appealing in and of itself.

Must an artistic representation be beautiful or otherwise aesthetically appealing in order to move us? Maybe not. Some psychologists claim the impulse to imitate is hard-wired into us. We have a natural disposition to repeat what we see (Meltzoff and Moore 1977; Meltzoff 2002; Warnick 2009: 57–60). So too for what we hear or read about (Aziz-Zadeh et al. 2006; Clay and Iacoboni 2011; Goldman 2006; Warnick 2009: 59–60). Indeed, this instinct is sometimes alleged to be foundational to human learning (Tomasello 2009). Thus, perhaps an artist only has to offer us a representation of an experience to inspire us to pursue it. There is no need for the artist to beautify the representation.

Of course, we might doubt the innateness of imitation. Cecilia Heyes (2005) and Kim Sterelny (2013) argue that imitation is just a particular instance of our more general human capacities for associative or social learning. This approach fits well with the Matthen-style view I have been defending. Yet, suppose the impulse to imitate is indeed a bedrock part of our cognitive makeup. A problem still arises. Modern society bombards us with images. From television and radio to billboards and social media, we are awash in representations of experiences we could pursue. Thus, there has to be something about the image in question that sets it apart—that leads us to focus on it in particular (Warnick 2009: 61). Beauty and other aesthetic values serve this function. They draw us in and absorb our attention. They cause us to linger on the image and return to it later.

In addition, our proclivity for mimesis can be defeated, and one common defeater is a conflict with our sense of self (Warnick 2009: 61–73). If what an image represents contradicts our core values and preferences, then our impulse to imitate it abates. This matters when it comes to the sort of transformations that concern me in this paper. I am interested in cases where our existing preferences oppose what a prospective experience has to offer. Thus, for a representation of that experience to inspire mimesis, it needs something that can overcome such opposition. Aesthetic value can be that thing. An aesthetically valuable representation of the experience provides us with pleasure. This pleasure can cancel out the resistance created by our aversion to the experience.

## 6. Beyond Beauty and Pleasure

It is worth emphasizing the range of aesthetic values that can bring us pleasure and inspire transformations. Beauty may readily come to mind, but representing an experience in a way that is humorous, cool, sublime, profound, titillating, or erotic can have the same effect. The sublime is worth singling out. It involves taking pleasure in what is overwhelming or threatening, which tracks how we often regard transformative experiences (Zuckert 2019; see also Shapshay 2021). Moreover, the sublime can leave us feeling dissatisfied with our mundane everyday lives. This feeling of dissatisfaction may prod us to try something new. In a similar vein, Riggle (2020: 171–79) mentions playfulness. It, too, has the benefit of loosening our hold on our current commitments. Thus, by making a transformative experience appear sublime or presenting it in a playful manner, an artist can increase our willingness to pursue it.

We might wonder whether negative aesthetic values, such as being ugly, horrific, tragic, or disgusting, could do the trick. The first thing to say is that contemplating such values can bring us pleasure, and this pleasure can have the facilitating effect Matthen describes. It can motivate us to continue attending to the work that has the negative value and to optimize the pleasure we get from doing so (Korsmeyer 2011: 113–36). Horror movies can make us want to watch more horror movies. So, too, *mutatis mutandis*, can sad songs, tragic dramas, and difficult beauties.

Can the pleasure of contemplating negative aesthetic values facilitate copying? Can it motivate us to imitate the action or experience that is represented as having these values? Yes. Upon reading a tragic story, we sometimes want our own lives to go tragically. A case in point is the copycat suicides by readers of *Sorrows of Young Werther* (Niederkrotenthaler, Herberth, and Sonneck 2007). Of course, Goethe also assigns Werther's life positive values, such as profundity, and it may be these positive values that ground pleasure and inspire imitation. But I doubt every case is like this. Sometimes we get seduced by the tragic itself.

Of course, negative aesthetic properties often simply repel. Contemplating them causes us pain, which has the inverse effect of pleasure. It makes us want to stop doing whatever gave rise to the sensation. Hence artists will depict a way of life as ugly, boring, or dull when they want to push us away from it. This is the flip side of the story I have been telling. Works of art can discourage transformations as well as encourage them.

## 7. Free Solo: An Example

Having discussed the cognitive obstacle in sections 2 and 3 and the conative obstacle in sections 4, 5, and 6, I will now develop an example that illustrates how the parts of my theory work together. The example will also bring out some latent problems that I have been ignoring. I will discuss these latent problems in section 8.

Consider the following story. Molly is hanging out with her friends one evening, and they decide to watch the National Geographic film *Free Solo* (Vasarhelyi and Chin 2018). It is a documentary about the rock climber Alex Honnold, and it covers his attempts to scale the 3,000-foot cliff face of El Capitan by himself without any support ropes. Molly pays little attention at first. She knows next to nothing about rock climbing, but the premise strikes her as dumb. ‘What is so cool about climbing a big rock?’ she thinks. ‘Of all the things to do with your life!’

The documentary is well made, however. The views of Yosemite National Park are breathtaking, and Alex turns out to be an intriguing figure. Molly is drawn to his quiet charisma and driving passion. His struggles with self-esteem and his complicated love for his new girlfriend further endear him to her. She continues to think he is a fool for risking his life doing something so silly, but she does not deny the drama of his story.

In the climax of the film, Alex attempts the free solo climb of El Capitan, and Molly surprises herself by getting nervous. Her palms sweat, and her leg muscles clench as he tries a karate kick leap across the treacherous gap at the ‘boulder problem’ halfway up the cliff. Molly swears aloud when Alex lands the jump and exclaims that she could never do that. But she also starts to wonder what she could do. She remembers her childhood days climbing trees in the park, which she had forgotten. And she imagines herself for a moment on the rock face of El Capitan performing this or that maneuver. When the movie ends, Molly shakes her head. Rock climbing is not for her. Yet, she has started to grasp why it might be for some people. She has caught a glimmer of what Alex sees—the joy of pushing his body and mind in the peculiar ways rock climbing requires.

The next day, Molly runs across a Facebook advertisement for a *New York Times* story about Alex. She clicks on the link, curious to learn what has become of him since the documentary. The *Times* story kicks off a deep dive into the world of free solo climbing. Before she knows it, an hour has passed, and she has read half a dozen other articles on the subject.

A few weeks later, Molly is spending time with a different group of friends. When they ask her what she wants to do, she proposes watching *Free Solo*. ‘It is a good film’, she promises, ‘even if you don’t like rock climbing. The scenery is magnificent and the story is hard to beat’. The second time viewing the documentary is a different experience for Molly. She once again enjoys the beauty of the cinematography and the drama of the story. But they are no longer necessary expedients for getting her to attend to an ostensibly ridiculous activity. She has warmed enough to rock climbing that she pays attention to the subject of the film for its own sake. She hangs on Alex’s words as he describes the different strategies for handling the boulder problem. She marvels as he navigates thin

handholds, tiny edges, and slippery crevices. And she once again wonders whether she could be a rock climber too. Not exactly like Alex, of course, but in her own way.

The next morning Molly invites her sister to go with her to a local climbing gym. Unfortunately, she finds her time there frustrating. She could not do as much as she had imagined, and she does not reach the top of the wall even once. She is no Alex Honnold. But Molly likes the community, which supports her efforts, and that is enough to bring her back. Bit by bit, she improves. She starts to discover first-hand the joy she experienced vicariously when watching *Free Solo*. After a couple of months, she settles in. She has a new hobby, one she never would have considered or wanted before encountering the documentary.

## 8. Background Conditions for Transformations

Stories like Molly's are common. Yet, works of art do not always change us in the way *Free Solo* changes her. Two puzzles lurk here. First, why do some works of art transform us but others do not? We may suppose Molly saw many films about many activities in the months leading up to her transformation, but only *Free Solo* leads her to adopt a new hobby. Such a scenario would not strain credulity. If her story unfolded this way, though, we would want to know what was special about her engagement with this film. Why did she respond to it and not to the rest?

This brings us to the second puzzle. Why does a given work of art resonate with some people but not others? Suppose Molly is the only one among her friends affected by *Free Solo*. They enjoyed the film, but their lives remain unchanged. This situation also seems realistic, but it raises the question of what is special about the connection between Molly and *Free Solo*. Why does it resonate with her and no one else in her viewing group?

We can begin to answer these questions by noting that, to motivate a transformation, a work of art must reach people where they are. It must offer them an extrinsic motivation that speaks to their preexisting desires. Yet, different people have different preexisting desires. Therefore, a given artwork may speak to one person but not another.

Someone might object that everyone cares about pleasure. Thus, since contemplating aesthetic value gives us pleasure, an aesthetically valuable work should speak to everyone's concerns. But this objection presupposes a blunt view of both pleasure and aesthetic value. Although everyone may care about pleasure, there are many kinds of pleasure, and not everyone cares about every kind. So, too, there are many sorts of aesthetic values, and preferences regarding them vary widely. Some people enjoy one sort while other people enjoy another sort. There are fans of comedies, fans of tragedies, fans of horror films, and fans of action movies. But there are few people who like absolutely everything. This is why the aesthetic pleasure offered by contemplating a particular work's aesthetic value will resonate only with a subset of its audience.

In addition, a work of art never affects us in a vacuum. It is always just one of many forces pushing and pulling us in different directions. Included here are the influences of family members, friends, social media, the press, and, of course, other artworks. Whether a person undergoes a transformation will in part be a

function of the net impact of these forces. In some cases, the impetus provided by a given artwork will be swamped by that of other factors. In other cases, it will be complemented by them. The story about Molly fits into the latter category. *Free Solo* is not Molly's only influence. She also reads the *New York Times* article about Honnold and finds a supportive community at a local rock-climbing gym. Transformative changes seldom occur without such fortuitous coincidences.

Here is another way to make the point. I mentioned earlier that, according to some theorists, we have a natural tendency toward mimesis. We are inclined to imitate or mimic what we see. But this tendency can be diminished or defeated. If the activity represented in a work of art runs counter to our existing sense of self, we are prone to resist it rather than to copy it. There are other defeaters as well. For instance, we are unlikely to copy a behavior depicted in a song or movie if doing so will meet with heavy criticism from our loved ones. Thus, it matters that Molly's sister goes with her to the climbing gym. Without her support, Molly might have abandoned the project without giving it a chance.

Of course, beauty and other aesthetic values have the power to overcome defeaters. The pleasure they provide can generate such a strong motivation that it does not matter what anyone else thinks or says. The opposite can be true as well. Sometimes there are too many defeaters, or they are too powerful to overcome. Questions arise here about the interaction between irresistible forces and immovable objects, but we can set them aside for now.

Another consideration merits mention. What an artwork leads us to imagine may fail to align with what we actually experience. This is so for two reasons. First, even on the most optimistic accounts, art does not give us perfect and complete knowledge of what a given experience is like. It only lets us see as through a glass darkly. Second, art reveals the experiences of others. And although we may imagine things will go similarly for us, they often do not. If our own experience falls far short of what a work of art led us to expect, we may become frustrated. Our disappointment that things are not going in reality as they went in our minds may lead us to abandon the experience before the force of habituation kicks in.

Aesthetic pleasure can help with this problem too. The appeal of an artistic representation of an activity or experience is sometimes enough to keep us going when we become frustrated that things are not turning out as we anticipated. It can inspire us to chase a dream that is not yet real. Sometimes further extrinsic motivations are necessary. This is why it is fortuitous that Molly finds a supportive community at the climbing gym. The pleasure of their comradery helps compensate for her irritation over not being as good at rock climbing as she imagined she would be.

Finally, as mentioned before, the habituation process does not always succeed. Although we often come to enjoy an activity the more we do it, this is not always the case. Sometimes we come to hate it (cf. Meskin et al. 2013). There are several theories why, but one is especially apropos. Habituation may result from an increase in our familiarity with and mastery of the new activity (Montoya et al. 2017). According to this theory, any new activity is processed slowly and with difficulty. As our exposure to the activity increases, we process it more quickly and with greater ease. We experience this increase in fluency as pleasurable. Yet, sometimes we lack an aptitude for the activity in question. We remain at a low

level of fluency despite our extended efforts. As a result, we never experience the pleasure that comes with mastery. We are stuck with the pain of ineptitude. Luck is on Molly's side here as well. She turns out to be good at rock climbing. Her initial frustrations dissipate as she takes to the activity.

In sum, a work of art will transform us only if certain background conditions obtain. We must have an affinity for the specific aesthetic value that the artwork possesses. In addition, the other influences in our life must complement the force of the artwork. Support from friends or family members will help in this regard. Reinforcement from other media, including other art will help as well. Finally, we must have an aptitude for what the work of art is inspiring us to do.

## 9. The Hidden and Dangerous Power of Art

To review, art does not overcome the cognitive obstacle to motivating transformations. It merely sidesteps this obstacle. It does not give us knowledge of what it would be like for us to undergo the transformation. It just seduces us into thinking we are gaining such knowledge. Works of art often achieve this effect by representing transformative experiences in a beautiful or otherwise aesthetically appealing way.

The story about the conative obstacle also revolves around aesthetic appeal. Nothing intrinsic to the transformative experience attracts us to it. Not at first. Instead, it is the aesthetic properties with which the artist clothes the experience that do the initial work. The artist adds aesthetic features that are not essential to the experience, and these inessential features draw us in. Then, if we engage with the experience long enough and other favorable conditions obtain, we end up enjoying the experience in its own right.

### 9.1 Hiddenness

Art's power is seldom obvious. For the most part, it remains hidden and obscure. Take what happens with the conative obstacle. I likened the role of aesthetic value to rewards and punishments, such as those used to motivate children to develop good habits. But there is a difference. In the case of children, there is usually a clear separation between the reward and the noble act—between the extrinsic benefit and the thing itself. Not so with art. The skilled artist weaves together features that are essential to the ideal and ones that provide aesthetic interest. The result is an amalgam of essential and accidental properties that is difficult to parse. We find ourselves pulled toward the whole without being able to tell which aspects of the whole are drawing us in.

Advertisers take advantage of this fact. We open a copy of *Vogue* and see a spread for Gucci sunglasses. We find ourselves wanting to own a pair, but it is unclear why. It is possible we are responding to the model rather than the glasses. Maybe their smile speaks to us or their sex appeal. Or it could be the setting in which the model has been photographed. The fact that the model is at a party or on a beach might have caught our eye. We can rarely tell which of these factors is driving our pleasure response, as Matthen (2017: 22–23) notes. We tend to lack the sensitivity necessary for such fine-grained analysis.

Something similar holds for the cognitive obstacle. The infusion of aesthetic value makes it hard to judge the accuracy of an artistic representation. The aesthetic value of the artwork gives rise to pleasure, which inclines us toward what the artwork represents. But it is seldom obvious to us that this inclination is aesthetic in nature. The experience of beauty and the experience of truth have a similar qualitative feel. As a result, we often confuse the two.

This problem is exacerbated in the case of transformative experiences. Because we lack first-hand acquaintance with what the artwork represents, we cannot check whether the representation is accurate. We cannot compare it with how things went for us in the past. Thus, we are easily duped. We readily feel as though a work of art has conveyed what it would be like for us to undergo a transformative experience when it has not.

## 9.2 Danger

To compound matters, artists can render all sorts of things aesthetically appealing. They can even use the power of aesthetics to draw us to the experiences of evil people. We see this in work depicting ‘rough heroes’, such as Tony Soprano and Humbert Humbert (Eaton 2012). These characters are ‘rough’ in that they embody immoral ideals. But they are ‘heroes’ in that they are portrayed in ways that make us root for them. The artists who create these characters make them so aesthetically appealing that we admire them even though they do horrible deeds. The intermixing of aesthetic values with the characters’ evil traits can even lead us to regard the evil traits themselves as attractive.

Of course, on my view, beauty and other aesthetic values do not themselves change our preferences. They do not make us like what we previously did not like. Instead, they get us to engage with the activity or experience in question, and this engagement is what alters our attitudes. We might hope this process would not work in the case of evil. We might hope that upon engaging with the activity, we will realize its evil nature and back away. Sometimes things work out this way, as Aaron Meskin *et alia* (2013) suggest, but not always. Habituation can get the better of us. Repeat engagement with a stimulus can diminish our resistance to it and lead us to acquire a taste for it (Bornstein 1989; Zajonc 1968). And we can acquire a taste for all kinds of things. We can even become habituated to liking dastardly acts and ignoble ways of life (Fossheim 2006: 114; Kaufman and Libby 2012: 16–17; Krahé 2018; Zagzebski 2017: 135).

In conclusion, what makes art powerful also makes it dangerous. Transformations are not always for the good, and art’s ability to inspire them can be put to negative ends. This is not a new point. We find it already in Plato (1992: l. 401b-d) and Aristotle (1987: ll. 1336a30-b8). Thus, the lesson they draw applies here as well: we must be careful about art’s place in society.

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