Verbal Art across Cultures
The Aesthetics and Proto-Aesthetics of Communication

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In the context of a sociolinguistic discussion of the *Aesthetics and Proto-Aesthetics of Communication*, it seems to me, as a philosopher, worthwhile trying to shed some light on how we might understand the concept of 'the aesthetic'. In recent times a number of social theorists and cultural critics have used the term to formulate claims about changes in the value-orientation of members of our societies. An example of this is the slogan "the aestheticisation of the life-world".¹ The claim seems to be that certain kinds of properties are being given a new evaluative prominence in the everyday life of at least certain members of our societies. As a philosopher it isn’t my job to ask whether these claims are correct. I merely want to ask here whether it is possible to isolate conceptually the kinds of properties about which such claims are being made. My answer will be that a sociological trend to 'aestheticisation' in contemporary western cultural formations would entail the increased production of conditions conducive to a focus on essentially first-hand, qualitative experience. Similarly, what is aesthetic about certain pervasive forms of communication plausibly present in all human societies is their triggering of this kind of experience, whether this be directly causal or by means of framing devices which institute norms of attention.

What I have to say is structured along the following lines: I begin with a historical look at the introduction of 'aesthetics' as a technical term. I contend that its significance grounds in the irreducibility of first-person experience (1). I compare the analysis on these lines with a proposal which sees 'aesthetic' as primarily a term used to distinguish 'showing' from 'stating' symbolic functions (2). I then argue that when we are talking about the aesthetic, we are talking first and foremost about a form of value (3), and that the peculiar form of value in question has components which are close to both theoretical (4) and practical (5) value. This anthropological suggestion is set into relation with the semiotic analysis of the concept of the 'aesthetic' sphere advanced by Nelson Goodman (6). I then attempt to explain the relationship between aesthetic experience, the aesthetic attitude, aesthetic objects and aesthetic qualities (7). And finally (8), I turn to the question of how the aesthetic, thus conceived, relates to the poetic function, as conceived by Jakobson.

Our starting point is the idea of the 'sensual'. For Kant, aesthetics is quite simply the "theory of the senses" ("Sinnenlehre"). Understood this way, 'aesthetics' clearly cannot be identified with the philosophy of the arts. The theory of the senses belongs first and foremost to the theory of knowledge, which in Kant's view has the bipartite structure of a theory of the senses (aesthetics) plus a theory of the understanding (logic). As we are permanently involved in processes of assigning sense-impressions to concepts in order to orientate ourselves in the world, the difficulty would actually be to find some area of human activity in which we are not 'aesthetically' involved. This consequence, which has a somewhat bizarre ring, is a result of the philosophical context in which 'aesthetics' was first introduced as a technical term.

As is well known, the philosopher responsible for this step in the eighteenth century was Alexander Baumgarten. It is important that Baumgarten's move was directed against the reigning Rationalist conception of knowledge, as formulated in the writings of Descartes and Leibniz. Baumgarten intended, in one fell swoop, to give philosophical dignity to a number of different areas which had been held to be equally unworthy of genuine philosophical attention. In European eighteenth-century Rationalism, the criteria of clarity and distinctness permitted only those entities whose components can be explicitly designated - exemplarily: geometrical figures - recognition as objects of knowledge. Acquaintance with empirical objects, on the other hand, involves having sense impressions, which are themselves unanalyzable. Like geometrical figures, sense experiences might be recognizable if we have them a second time. However, we are, so it seems, unable to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for their instantiation. The corresponding concepts are thus 'clear' (recognizable, identifiable), but not 'distinct' (definable). This means that the introduction of the concepts in question is dependent on ostension: "look at the x over there!"; "sniff that!"; "listen to this!".

One aspect of Baumgarten's intention, then, was simply to extend the boundaries of what can be seen as genuine knowledge to include empirical concepts. That intention is one which is not coherently possible for anyone to share today. Whatever certain philosophical sceptics may say, the natural sciences have become our paradigm of knowledge. Baumgarten designated by his terminological transformation of the Greek ἀποδημία (meaning: having to do with feeling or perception) would today not only cover the empirical sciences, including just about the entirety of empirical psychology, but also epistemology, the philosophy of science and the philosophy of mind.

Once this is clear, one wonders whether anything at all is to be gained by making use of a predicate originally used to situate the arts in a field of enquiry which has long since become so differentiated that we have difficulty conceiving it as a single field at all. This doubt can be reinforced by a number of further considerations, of which I just want to name one here: Since Aristotle,

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2 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement, transl. J. C. Meredith, Oxford 1978, first version of the Introduction, XI.
'confused' perception or ideas as best understood in terms of modes of symbolisation or reference. A predicate or concept would be 'clear' if we can provide some precise condition of its correct instantiation; correspondingly, it would be 'confused' if it can only be 'defined' ostensively. This non-mentalistic transposition of the distinction to the level of semantics opens up a way of characterising the arts which seems to retain the spirit of Baumgarten's suggestion. This is in terms of the distinction between 'signifying' and 'stating'. The arts are all forms of symbolisation of which it is the case that — even if language is their medium — their point is not propositional. Even when a work of literature consists entirely of sentences which have the form of assertions, the truth or falsity of those assertions cannot be the point of the exercise. Of course, non-propositionality is insufficient as a characterisation of the aesthetic sphere. The 'performativistic' dimension of language-use, to which we can attend by abstracting from a speech act's propositional content, need have nothing to do with the aesthetic. But if we are indeed dealing with a linguistic work of art — and I think the same goes for forms of everyday verbal artistry, such as joking-telling — then its sentences have to be put together in such a way that they show the reader something that exceeds their propositional content.

Taking the distinction between showing and stating as fundamental has the advantage of focussing on a dimension which is fundamental not only to the arts, but also to a whole set of everyday practices which one might want to see as proto-aesthetic. I can show you the way something tasted by giving you a sample of it to try yourself; a child might draw a picture to show you what her friend looks like; or she might do a frantic dance to show you how excited she is, or perhaps how excited her friend was yesterday. Maybe she might even show you such things by dancing without being aware that she is showing you them. An obvious disadvantage of the approach, however, is that it cannot account for an aesthetics of non-artefacts. If there is no intentionally acting being behind an object, then there is no way it can show me anything. Taken literally, it would imply the necessity of some sort of super-mind behind natural phenomena, if one wants to make sense of an aesthetics of nature. I think one should attempt to do so, and so doing is clearly in line with Baumgarten's project. This is one simple reason why the concept of the aesthetic should be grounded in a notion of the experiencing subject, rather than in a distinction of two sorts of symbolisation. There is a second, more substantial reason, to which I shall turn below. Before doing so, it is worth pausing for a brief meth-
The aesthetic would thus be a concept which helped to clarify what is valuable in the arts without being definitionally tied to them.°

The suggestion, then, is that the term ‘aesthetic’ is used to mark out a specific value-sphere, which in some way is to be distinguished from pragmatic, moral and cognitive forms of value, even though there are, as we will see, connections between the spheres thus analytically separated. The aesthetic is a particular respect in which questions of relative goodness or badness may arise within human experience. To come back to the two related suggestions I have sketched so far: this form of value could, on the one hand, appear to be the value of a certain kind of showing, as opposed to stating. On the other hand, and this is what I will continue to argue for, it could result from the strong evaluative stance human persons tend to take towards what is involved in being an irreplaceable subject of experience.

4. If the first suggestion were correct, aesthetic value would be of cognitive, or at least quasi-cognitive character. Aesthetic experience would involve qualities which – either in principle or for contingent or pragmatic reasons – would not be exhaustively translatable into propositional terms. There are two central types of case which need to be distinguished here, although aesthetic artefacts will typically mix the two. In the first, the limits of propositionality would result either from the contingent limits of our cognitive capacities or else from the semantic openness of a symbolising object. Faced with a self-referential or undecidable semantic system, conflicting, fragmentary, inconclusive propositional attitudes are likely to be appropriate. In the second case, non-translatability is grounded in the phenomenal qualities of what is shown. What is shown is thus what something feels, looks, sounds or smells like. In other words, the irreducibility of this kind of showing cannot itself avoid appealing to subjective experience. How it feels to have certain things shown to you may be describable in words, but, if it is a genuine example of the kind of case being called ‘aesthetic’ here, it won’t be completely communicable to you, if you’re not on the receiving end yourself. Giving an explication of ‘showing’ thus leads us fairly directly to the second suggestion: that is, that ‘aesthetic’ is a predicate characterising forms of experience in which the subject of experience is irreplaceable.

A second remark about this form of showing is in order here, a remark which also carries over to the characterisation of the aesthetic in terms of subjective experience. It is controversial whether what is shown, or what is experienced, in such cases is to be characterised in cognitive terms at all. One suggestion is that we don’t actually come to know anything at all in this way, but come to acquire a certain type of ability – to remember, to imagine and to recognize a certain type of experience.°° Now, although an ability is not a form of knowing that, it is often characterised as a form of knowing how. At stake here is, however, not so much the question of when the term ‘cognitive’ is appropriate, but rather what mechanisms are at work in such perceptual cases. It is highly plausible that such recognitional abilities need to be explained either in terms of a form of representation that is independent of linguistic capacities or else in terms of specifically phenomenal concepts, demonstratives that derive their reference from a kind of internal ostension (‘that feature of experience only accessible to me’).°° If either of these kinds of analysis are correct, then it does make sense to talk in terms of the cognitive components of irreducibly first-person experience. Note a difference in the status of the untranslatability resulting from the complexity and ambiguity of symbolic systems and that resulting from the experience of phenomenal qualities. In pure examples of the first case, the resulting cognitive surplus is going to be in principle translatable (although this will normally be a distinctively unattractive exercise). Cognitive components of the second kind, on the other hand, are going to be either logically resistant to exhaustive linguistic reformulation, or else only representable in terms of first-person propositions, which retain an essentially private character.

5. Grounding the concept of the aesthetic in the irreplaceability of subjects of experience enables us to grasp a second central dimension of the aesthetic, which the alternative proposal cannot account for. A form of knowing in which the non-substitutability of the experiencing subject is a logical barrier to full translation into publicly accessible meaning is only one way in which the irreplaceability of the experiencing subject might be important. There are other forms of experience than merely epistemic (or quasi-epistemic). And if the first attempt to explicate aesthetic value sees it as a special form (or perhaps quasi-form) of theoretical value, these further forms of experience demonstrate its closeness to the practical sphere. Particularly prominent among such forms are kinds of emotional affectiveness. Being moved, for instance being moved to laughter or tears, means finding a certain response provoked in oneself, one which in the kind of case mentioned, involves a kind of behavioural expression. Although such behavioural manifestations are no necessary component of being emotionally affected – one can of course be moved without showing

° That one can simply side-step the problem of the conceptual gap between the aesthetic and the arts, by dismissing the traditional line of thinking which links the aesthetic to the etymology of the word, is shown by the historical example of Hegel and the more recent, analytically orientated suggestion of Kutscher. Both simply use ‘aesthetics’ to designate the philosophy of the arts (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, I, Werke 13; Frankfurt am Main 1970, I, 13; Franz von Kutscher, Ästhetik, Berlin/New York 1989, 3). Hegel’s reason for doing so is, of course, grounded in his philosophy of history. Alan Goldman’s – undiscussed – decision to impose the same restriction is all the more surprising in the light of his extensive use of the implications of the etymology. Cf. Alan H. Goldman, Aesthetic Value, Boulder, Colorado/Oxford 1995, 4f.


it is, they are nevertheless closely bound up with the emotions. Moreover, being moved may well provide us with a motive to act, that is, it may be causally connected not only to behavioural displays, but also to deliberate action. On the other hand, this doesn’t have to be the case: if we are moved to tears, this may leave us either purified of the emotion or animated to act in some relevant way. Which of these turns out to be the case will depend on further factors, but not on the nature of aesthetic experience itself. George Santayana claimed that a life-form of pure consciousness, which only registered the qualities of things, would be a life-form without aesthetic experience. That, he argued, is only accessible to “emotional consciousness”. Because of the epistemic dimension of the aesthetic, largely captured by the idea of showing, Santayana was wrong. Nevertheless, his pithy remark does pick out nicely what is a highly significant component of the aesthetic sphere. It is because this aspect of aesthetic experience is important that emotivist theories of art had a certain plausibility. Clearly, however, an emotivist theory of aesthetic experience is inadequate as an inclusive theory. Such an inclusive theory, which needs to take account of both cognitive and emotive components, has to take as its starting point the concept of an irreplaceable subject of experience. This also enables us to stick to the etymology, according to which sensual qualities are at the centre of concern, whilst still distinguishing specifically aesthetic concerns from those of epistemology.

Aesthetic value, then, rests in the peculiar value of being a subject of one’s own experience. There is aesthetic experience because there are individual centres of perception and feeling. This entails that all sentient beings fulfills a central condition for being susceptible to aesthetic experience. However, the assignment of positive value to ones irredicably first-hand experiences presupposes fulfilling a set of further conditions. Central among these are, firstly, the capacity to step back reflectively from one’s own immediate experience and, secondly, the capacity for evaluation. Aesthetic experience is a dimension of the life of human persons because of the specific conjunction of capacities that characterize the life-form of such individuals. On the one hand, each one of us is both able to, and unable not to, experience the world from a specific point of view that is irredicibly her or his own. On the other hand, we can, every now and then, step back and recognize precisely that a recognition which goes hand in hand with recognizing its givenness for other such persons. Finally, we have enormous difficulty not investing the type of experience thus focused on with considerable value.15

6. Such an analysis, which grounds the aesthetic in immediate, non-substitutable subjective experience, has appeared unsatisfactory to certain modern philosophers, who, understandably enough, would like to transform the somewhat messy talk of subjective experience into something more scientifically exact. One such suggestion comes from Nelson Goodman, who analyses the aesthetic in semiotic terms. He explains the distinction of showing from saying by the conjunction of the two semiotic characteristics of exemplification and (syntactic and semantic) density. In exemplification, a symbol both possesses a property and is singled out to stand for that property. A tailor’s swatch exemplifies the texture and colour of a piece of fabric; a painting might similarly exemplify colour, texture, shape contrasts, etc.; language-use can exemplify features such as rhythm, prosody or the way language is generally used in specific contexts. Syntactic density characterizes a signifying scheme whose characters are so ordered that between each two there is always a third. This feature is possessed by ‘analogue’ thermostats and drawings, but not by the alphabet, a musical score or a digital watch. Semantic density, finally, is given when the ordering of the set of items denoted similarly always yields a third between each two. Because reality is in general not divided up into discrete units, the only symbol systems which are free from semantic density are highly artificial systems, where the class of items that can be referred to contains no overlaps, being instead completely atomised.

Goodman argues that the application of these semiotic tools allows a demystification and rational reconstruction of the characteristics traditionally associated with aesthetic experience. Syntactic density, typified by painting, and high semantic density, also to be found in literature and music (a certain level of semantic density characterizes all language-use), explain what is traditionally seen as the ‘ineffability’ of the aesthetic, its irreducibility to propositional content. And the claim that I have formulated as the necessity of first-hand experience, the ‘immediacy’ of the aesthetic, is to be reconstructed in terms of exemplification. This reconstruction is to be seen as corrective, according to Goodman, because it reveals the essentially hermeneutic nature of aesthetic processes. Immediacy is an illusion, because exemplification, like denotation, is a case of a symbol standing for something else – in this case, of a sample standing for a property. If the recipient doesn’t read the exemplifying symbol in this way, as pointing beyond itself, then there will be no experience worth mentioning and certainly none with any special value.16

There is a lot to be said for Goodman’s analysis, although this is not the place to do so in any detail. One of its great advantages is that it provides a detailed explanation of why in most cases the irreplaceability of the subject of experience correlates with an object which is also in some sense irreplaceable.17

In the context of the present discussion, it is important to note three qualifications with respect to its status. Firstly, Goodman’s declared object of interest is ‘the aesthetic’ dimension of symbol systems, primarily those of the various fine arts. Thus he deliberately excludes all those paradigmatic forms of aes-

15 Otherwise, those world-views which claim that we can, and should, overcome the “principium individuationis”, for instance as it manifests itself in our susceptibility to pain, would not need to recommend such rigorous techniques in order to overcome it.
16 There is a lot to be said for Goodman’s analysis, although this is not the place to do so in any detail. One of its great advantages is that it provides a detailed explanation of why in most cases the irreplaceability of the subject of experience correlates with an object which is also in some sense irreplaceable.17
17 On this point, see Languages of Art, chapter III, ibid., 99ff.
e testimony with non-artefacts. Of course, he could argue that we only get a kick out of the experience of a beautiful sunset because we associate something else with it. As an exclusive claim this would, I think, involve an underestimation of the strength of certain causal processes.

Secondly, Goodman’s reconstruction of the idea of immediacy via the notion of exemplification, although a valuable contribution to our understanding of the reception of artworks, does not reconstruct the core notion of non-substitutable first-hand experience. Irrespective of whether the presentation of certain formal qualities does its work by means of symbolisation, thus breaking the intentional focus on what is present, we still attach a high premium to being there — precisely in order to experience the unique quality of being subject to those processes oneself. We have here a central point at which one can see the importance of the notion of the aesthetic for an understanding of the workings both of the arts and of other social practices: if you don’t see the eclipse or the performance, read the book, attend the funeral, match or political rally yourself, then you are going to be missing something. The future regret which can be caused by missing out on any one of these events grounds, at least partly, in the specific and irreducible value that humans attach to forms of first-hand experience. The social and cultural pressures obviously at work in these cases are not the whole story.

Finally, when we are dealing with syntactically and semantically structured artefacts — whether in the arts or in everyday communicative contexts — and when we can agree that exemplification and density are significantly at work, then we are still faced with the highly pertinent question: What is the point of such processes? Goodman’s answer is that their significance is exclusively cognitive. Exemplification is a specific mode of enabling access to the way things are; density involves the transportation of an inexhaustible complex of information, which excites curiosity and spurs on to the joy of discovery. As my remarks in the previous section make clear, this is a one-sided view of the matter. Aesthetic experience has components which are not only (quasi-)cognitive, but also proto-practical. Although, as Aristotle knew, there is a great deal of pleasure to be had from cognitive processes, there is something ridiculously exciting. And certain sounds or sound-patterns and forms themselves cause excitement. And certain sounds or sound-patterns and forms themselves cause excitement. And certain sounds or sound-patterns and forms themselves cause excitement. And certain sounds or sound-patterns and forms themselves cause excitement. And certain sounds or sound-patterns and forms themselves cause excitement. And certain sounds or sound-patterns and forms themselves cause excitement. And certain sounds or sound-patterns and forms themselves cause excitement. And certain sounds or sound-patterns and forms themselves cause excitement. And certain sounds or sound-patterns and forms themselves cause excitement.

First, the aesthetic attitude. Like aesthetic experience, this is clearly located on the subjective side of things. There is, however, an important difference: However much preparation goes into the production of an experience, in the end it has to be undergone, to use Dewey’s term. In this it differs from an attitude. Although an attitude can be causally brought about in someone without them wanting to take it on and they can even have a certain attitude without being aware of it, nevertheless in general an attitude is a way of attending which we see as subject to the control of the person who has it. If it is demanded of people, they are usually able to take on a more serious attitude towards a task or a more respectful attitude towards a person. Now, there is a tradition in the philosophy of art which places the aesthetic attitude at the centre of the analysis. In this tradition, the aesthetic attitude is conceptualised as a way of attending characterised by disengagement from practical interest and, as is sometimes added, from cognitive orientation. This characterisation of what is aesthetic about the attitude in question is inadequate for two reasons. Firstly, it is purely negative and so fails to provide us with any information about what sort of value we are after when we take on the attitude in question. Secondly, it makes the disjunction with the practical and the cognitive a matter of definition, whereas our reflections have made it plausible that aesthetic experience can have both a (quasi-)cognitive and a (proto-)practical dimension. The aesthetic attitude, in the analysis I am offering, is

7. The approach I am suggesting has meant that a notion of experience has been placed at the centre of the analysis: ‘aesthetic’ is primarily a predicate applying to experience. But of course, we often find it applied to other sorts of individuals. In particular, philosophers like to talk of ‘the aesthetic attitude’, as well as of ‘aesthetic qualities’ and ‘aesthetic objects’. According to my analysis, these uses are to be seen as derivative.

8. It is true that we can sometimes think of aesthetic experience as being a matter of definition, whereas our reflections have made it plausible that aesthetic experience can have both a (quasi-)cognitive and a (proto-)practical dimension.


22. Clearly, this everyday language use of ‘attitude’ is to be distinguished from the terminological use now current in the philosophy of mind, according to which all intentional states, above all believing and desiring, are propositional attitudes.

23. Kant provides the paradigm for this characterisation of the aesthetic, particularly in the first and second moments of the judgement of taste, where it is conceptualised as discontented and non-conceptual (Critique of Judgement, ibid., B3-B32). Modern variants are put forward by Edward Bullough, in “Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and Aesthetic Principle”, British Journal of Psychology V (1912-13), 87-118, and Jerome Stolnitz, Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism. A Critical Introduction, London 1960.

How we precisely should draw the conceptual distinctions between the cognitive, the practical and the aesthetic depends on how the former two concepts are precisely understood. If the cognitive is definitionally tied to the propositional, then the aesthetic can only be quasi-cognitive. If the practical is, as in Kant, definitionally tied to freedom, then the aesthetic will be at most proto-practical. I leave these issues undecided. What is, however, clear without any further definitional ado is that the aesthetic sphere, in the broad, anthropo
merely a way of attending to elements of a situation which enables the subject in question to experience them aesthetically.

The conceptual dependence on the notion of aesthetic experience is also to be found in talk of aesthetic objects or qualities. Certain characteristics of things are particularly conducive to bringing about the kind of experience in which the irreducibility of the first-person perspective is foregrounded. The aesthetic attitude can actually be taken at any moment and towards virtually anything, which includes the possibility of its appearance on occasions where it is inappropriate for other - moral or practical - reasons.26 Objects with aesthetic qualities are objects in the presence of which it is worthwhile focussing on what is only accessible to an irreplaceable subject of experience. That might mean someone has the choice of focussing on the object in that way. It might also mean that the mere presence of the object causes the person to see it in that perspective. The experience of being overawed by certain natural phenomena - those that have traditionally been described as 'sublime' - would be an example of such an effect. It is important to realise that we are not talking about any absolute division here. What may transpose someone in one situation into a state in which she is sensitive to particular phenomena may, under other conditions, have no effect whatsoever. It seems to me highly implausible that there is anything one might call an absolute aesthetic phenomenon, which would cause aesthetic experience under any circumstances whatsoever.

Most objects which possess aesthetic qualities do so in a less spectacular way. Architecture is an example of a phenomenon with which people are confronted on a day-to-day basis, but which only becomes the explicit object of their aesthetic attention under particular circumstances. Of course, it depends on the people and the buildings in question. In this respect, architecture is in modern western culture a somewhat unusual kind of art, in that it is there all around us, often without being accompanied by any signs telling us to take on some special attitude towards it. Contrast this with a phenomenon such as street theatre, which announces its difference from everyday life by means of masks or other props, so that passers-by realise that the nature is in modern western culture a somewhat unusual kind of art, in that it depends on the people and the buildings in question. In this respect, architecture is in modern western culture a somewhat unusual kind of art, in that it is there all around us, often without being accompanied by any signs telling us to take on some special attitude towards it. Contrast this with a phenomenon such as street theatre, which announces its difference from everyday life by means of masks or other props, so that passers-by realise that the nature of adopting the aesthetic attitude.

In sum, aesthetic experience can come to us in one of three ways. It can be directly caused; it can result from a voluntary, even whimsical choice to take on the aesthetic attitude; or it can be the effect of the triggering of attitudinal norms by features of certain cultural contexts. That triggering itself can be more or less automatic, depending on whether the subjects in question see the attitudinal changes as 'natural', whether they are 'carried away' by the fray around them or whether they opt to enter into the goings on in the way prescribed by the cultural cues or framing devices.27

8. The enormous importance of such framing devices was largely ignored by the tradition of the aesthetic attitude. Instead, the focus was primarily on characteristics which appear to inhere in the objects in question, independently of their social contextualization. The kind of attributes given such prominence were formal qualities. As a result of the focus on beauty, these were restricted in traditional aesthetics to such qualities as symmetry, completeness and harmony of the elements.28 However, the analysis I have outlined leaves conceptual space for virtually any formal characteristics to take on such a role. On the other hand, my suggestion is resistant to any attempts to restrict the aesthetic to the purely formal. Aestheticity remains tied to the criterion of the extent to which being there oneself matters. It may well be the formal elements of an experience which are lost if one attempts to 'tell it like it was' to someone else. It is, however, often precisely the way in which the form and the content of an art-work, or performance of everyday verbal artistry, are interconnected that one cannot translate into propositional form. Of course, there are people who possess great skill in 'telling it like it was', such skill that their listeners might very well feel compensated for not having been present at the scene which is being communicated. Their listeners might even prefer listening to them or watching them perform. That will be because the performance itself has qualities which it is worthwhile experiencing first-hand.

The same can undoubtedly also be true of performances which are in some way standardized in their structure or other formal qualities. The issue of the aesthetic aspect of such modes of communication is then, as I see it, not in itself the issue of the poeticity of the language used, as defined by Jakobson.29 Language, however, often precisely the way in which the form and the content of an art-work, or performance of everyday verbal artistry, are interconnected that one cannot translate into propositional form. Of course, there are people who possess great skill in 'telling it like it was', such skill that their listeners might very well feel compensated for not having been present at the scene which is being communicated. Their listeners might even prefer listening to them or watching them perform. That will be because the performance itself has qualities which it is worthwhile experiencing first-hand.

26 My fairly restrictive and non-terminological use of the word 'frame' overlaps at least here with the technical use of Goffman. At one point Goffman emphasizes the fact that what he calls frames involve prescriptions of differing degrees of "involvement" for participants. (Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience, Cambridge, MA 1974, 354f) As his examples (an "understanding" of sexual intercourse versus that of traffic systems) suggest, part of what being heavily 'involved' can involve is construing ones first-person experience as non-substitutable.


28 Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", in: Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), Style in Language, Cambridge, MA 1962, esp. 356f. The question of whether the dominance of this function is what makes a verbal message a work of art, which Jakobson sees as the key question for poetics (ibid., 350), is a different question still.
language which is used to focus the recipient’s attention on the linguistic form of what is being said can certainly be one source of the aesthetic quality of a communication situation. It is, however, only one possible source among others. In social situations, the aesthetic aspect of such poetic language-use will often be the way in which the effects achieved by such means are part of an overall experience which matters to the individual concerned. In a ritual context, the effect of certain formal characteristics of the language used may be structurally indispensable for the constitution of the ritual. The ritual’s aesthetic quality will, however, be more than merely this, as the experience in which being there matters to the individual is, if the ritual is successful, an experience of more than simply effects of language. I suspect that experience of the poetic and aesthetic experience only appear to coincide under very specific conditions, such as the reception of modernist literature.30

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