



WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Department of Psychology

A Behavioral Interpretation of Aesthetics



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Perhaps there are phylogenetic reasons why we find some things beautiful, but what explains acquired tastes? I will explore the hypothesis that “aesthetic responses” entail Skinner’s concepts of multiple control and saltations in response strength. We appreciate most those stimuli that evoke behavior that was already at partial strength, typically as the consequence of the combined effect of a panorama of other stimuli. We find texts incomprehensible when relevant responses have little strength and boring when relevant responses are at high strength. Poetry is commonly judged more beautiful than prose because it exploits multiple sources of control—cadence, rhyme, thematic relations—to strengthen an otherwise weak response. When the relevant textual stimulus is encountered, the jump in response strength is therefore considerable and stands out against the background of other textual responses. An analogous account can be offered for art, music, dance, and sport. Experience in a domain greatly enriches the web of multiple controlling variables, and the connoisseur finds beauty in subtleties to which the rest of us are insensitive. Thus the novice enjoys the thumping rhythms of the poetry of Poe, while the literary critic finds beauty in the esoteric, multi-layered literary allusions of James Joyce.



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