Experience Leadership: Lessons From John Dewey

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the possibility that John Dewey’s metaphorical redefinition of art as experience can help reclaim the concept of “experience” for cultural leadership. Far from being a promoter of the consumable experiences in the “experience economy”, Dewey’s leader is an energetic educator and a critic of the institutionalization of art and the aesthetical. Seeing art as an active process of doing and undergoing, Dewey is concerned with the problem of isolated high culture and his aim is to change the elitist and market-transactional conception of art and open up the conventional discourse, something he dubbed “the museum conception of art”. The museum conception of art entails creating a view of fine art as objects to be served, consumed, stored away and appreciated in a safe environment, preferably secured in a glass box, at a location which people must obtain permission to enter. This model, which still prevails, also applies in the theatre and the concert hall, where important works of art are segregated from ordinary people and everyday life. Dewey’s idea of art as experience should not, however, be interpreted in an overly managerial, limiting or regulating manner, and to develop the discourse it is helpful to look beyond its supposed essentialism. For that purpose, the metaphor of “art as experience” is best understood as an instrument of imagination, a tool, for rethinking institutions. Rather than being a formula or a set of instructions, Dewey’s critical culture-political approach provokes questions about the role of institutions, knowledge processes and power structures, and emphasises the centrality of labor in the process of reflection.

Keywords
cultural leadership | pragmatist aesthetics | john dewey | experience economy
INTRODUCTION

More than ever businesses are focusing on delivering a truly great customer experience. The key question that arises is: can the quality of the experience be measured?

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In his 1934 publication *Art as Experience*, John Dewey criticised the modern organisation of art institutions for segregating art from other aspects of life (1980: 3). Influenced by his friend Albert C. Barnes’ leadership at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, where Dewey also served on the board, he set out to rethink the whole situation of culture and art in Western society. His key argument was that the high-art product was isolated and that art had been institutionalised and placed out of reach for most people by fault of the arts management discourses of the time. Dewey dubs this administrative condition “the museum conception of art” (1980: 6), a rhetorical concept he contrasts with his own formulation of “art as experience”. His undertaking then becomes to inspire cultural leaders to make art, which to him is an instance of human experience and life’s energy in possibly its most intensified form, more relevant to everyday modes of being.

But how is Dewey still relevant for cultural leadership today, when the term “experience” is already used to describe any sort of service or spectacle? Should cultural leaders rather look towards the schemes and ideas of the “experience economy” for guidance? With particular view to the existing emphasis in Nordic culture-political discourses on “the experience economy” (Power 2009; Bille 2012), this article presents John Dewey’s view of art as experience as an alternative to the more reductive conception of the term.

While the dominant view of experiences in the experience economy discourse (Pine & Gilmore 1999) is focused on the transaction of standardized consumable experiences, viewed from the point of view of the producing company or experience provider (Boswijk, Thijssen & Peelen 2007), Dewey’s idea of a cultural leader is someone who cares deeply for the transformative power of art and culture. The leader’s role is to open up eyes and ears and develop ways of reconnecting art and life. This applies not only to the leaders themselves but to everyone involved with the process of experience and the “work of art”: the public, the artists and the organizers. It should therefore not be a surprise that it has been suggested that *Art as Experience* could be an inspiration for cultural leaders and those who wish to make their mark on cultural institutions (Jensen 2003; Marsh 2004; Guillet de Monthoux 2004).

In the context of cultural organization theory, leadership has made inroads as a sub-discipline of management studies (Chong 2010). Topics of particular concern to cultural leadership scholars have commonly been issues such as “dual leadership” (Castañer 1997; Cray, Inglis, and Freeman 2007; Järvinen, Ansio, and Houni 2015; Reid and Karambayya 2009), the leadership of “creative people” (Torr 2008) and leadership for “artistic quality” (Krause 2015).
However, in an attempt to open up the discourse and escape the entrapments of conventional or mainstream business leadership studies, a number of cultural leadership researchers have put particular focus on aesthetics and “aesthetic leadership” (Ropo and Eriksson 1997; Ropo and Sauer 2003, Soila-Wadman and Köping 2009). Dewey’s cultural leadership philosophy is part of the “aesthetic” tradition in cultural leadership and aesthetic leadership theory (Dobson 1999; Guillet de Monthoux, Gustafsson, and Sjöstrand 2007). However, what makes Dewey’s cultural leadership ideas particularly interesting to researchers today is his emphasis on audiences as contributors, as members of the organization. In his pragmatist-aesthetic leadership model the viewer/listener/reader is active in creating meaning of cultural objects and doing “the work of art”. Via pragmatist management theory (Fontrodona 2002) and look towards philosophical pragmatism in cultural leadership (Bilton 2006; Guillet de Monthoux 2004; Jensen 2003; Marsh 2004) we see that cultural leadership could be different from what it usually is described as in the mainstream cultural management literature, and see that it could focus more on audiences growth, education, critical thinking and the effort of meaning making.

In line with Dewey’s pragmatist approach, “cultural leadership” is broadly defined in this paper as the act of leading the cultural sector, including, though without being limited to, arts institutions and cultural projects. Here “leading” is understood as guiding, pulling or influencing so that an idea, a project or an organization may move from one place, or attitudinal position, to another. Cultural leadership in this sense involves influencing people (Yukl, 1989: 252) in the arts/cultural sector through evaluation of concepts and pointing to an alternative understanding and possible worlds (Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Alvesson and Spicer 2012). This means that leadership is, among other things, a battle of ideas, a battle for the more fruitful or useful idea. In a similar fashion, “art” is defined as a broad category of human heritage and cultural achievement. Dewey’s first example of an “art object” in *Art as Experience* is the Parthenon in Athens (1934: 4), but he also includes things like comic strips in the newspaper, and even a decent meal. In fact, the whole project of re-describing “art as experience” is to expand the concept of art and take it to mean cultural and aesthetic experience in a broad sense.

This paper focuses on three things or cultural leadership lessons from *Art as Experience*: First, that leadership should be critical of any attempt to institutionalize experience. Do not take for granted the reductive managerial jargon of the day: the institutional reality of culture and art is all too often taken as a given. The second thing is that the task of cultural leadership is to educate the public so that the experience becomes meaningful and life-fulfilling, i.e. it is not to inform but to transform. The third lesson for the experience leader is to imagine other worlds and acknowledge that the aesthetic experience may be problematic and disturbing. It need not be cleaned up or softened by administrators and is not to be defined or measured. Experience should not be designed for customer satisfaction or “managed” on the basis of checklists or performance indicators.
A note on limitations and purpose: This is a theoretical paper, in the sense that there are no actual or real-world cases or examples of good practice or pitfalls. The reason is that any case or anecdote, in a scholarly context, needs examination and explanation which would take up more attention and space than is justifiable within the constraints of this publication. Another limitation is that the approach is normative (Alvesson and Spicer 2012: 376): the argument upholds certain ideals which are neither questioned here nor explained, such as a favorable attitude towards democratization of institutions and an egalitarian stance. It is therefore unashamedly suggested here that Dewey’s idea of “art as experience” is a useful idea, but more critical in its implications than has been made explicit by some of the authors who have referred to his theory of cultural leadership. The purpose of the article is both to offer an alternative perspective to the experience economy’s more managerial-institutional version of experience and to keep intact the critical elements of the theory. A key to that understanding is the concept of “re-description” in the sense of Rorty (1989) and Hatch (1999). “Re-description” is a re-reading in the light of a new context, or from a different perspective and is what Dewey encourages the cultural leader to do: to constantly re-think and re-conceptualize the institutions of culture, and be critical of the dominant administrative discourses.

EXPERIENCE AS ECONOMY

Experiences are a fourth economic offering as distinct from services as services are from goods, but one that has until now gone largely unrecognised. Experiences have always been around, but consumers, businesses, and economists lumped them together with such uneventful activities as dry cleaning, auto repair, wholesale distribution, and telephone access. When a person buys a service, he purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages – as in a theatrical play – to engage him in a personal way.

(Pine & Gilmore 1999: 5)

In the book The Experience Economy by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, a “new economy” is described as the next economic paradigm following the agrarian economy, the industrial economy and the most recent service economy (1999: 6). According to the authors, the successful business leader, in the new environment of the experience economy, differentiates herself from the competition by focusing “first on increasing customer satisfaction, then on eliminating customer sacrifice, and finally on creating customer surprise” (Pine & Gilmore 1999: 99). Subsequently, the reader is given various lists and schemas that explain the different aspects of “experience” in the theatre/supermarket context, but the principles of customer satisfaction and the “elimination of sacrifice” prevail. In the follow-up publication Authenticity, Pine and Gilmore (2007) develop the arguments put forward in The Experience Economy.
by emphasizing the issue of “authenticity” and argue that in the experience economy, the savvy “consumers of experiences” are highly sensitive to issues concerning what is “real” and what is “fake” (Pine & Gilmore 2007: 1). Accordingly, companies, if they want to “trounce rivals”, must grasp, manage, and excel at rendering “authenticity” to capture the attention of customers through the “appeal of real” (Pine & Gilmore 2007: 3).

What is important for our purposes here, is that for Pine and Gilmore, “experience” means an arranged environment in which customers are first and foremost entertained. Even if educational and aesthetic aspects play a role in designing the transactional “sweet spot” of “rich, compelling, and engaging experience” (Pine & Gilmore 1999: 39), the “experience” is provided by the experience provider as a service operation. Furthermore, even if the message of Pine’s 1992 publication Mass Customization is on the co-production of individually customized goods, in the experience economy, the audience are generally seen as passive spectators, and are not invited on to the theatre stage (to use Pine and Gilmore’s preferred metaphor).

The authors of The Experience Economy make a point of distinguishing between “the service economy” and “the experience economy” (Pine & Gilmore 1999: 5), but the experience is provided and designed in much the same way as are services. As Albert Boswijk, Thomas Thijsen and Ed Peelen (2007) have pointed out, the idea of “experience” with Pine and Gilmore is one of market exchanges and consumption. The company remains at the forefront and the “customer” is secondary, as the consumer of experiences produced by the producer of that experience (Boswijk, Thijsen & Peelen 2007: 150). In the experience economy, the role of the cultural leader is primarily to provide a customer experience, as spectacularly as possible, so that the consumer will feel entertained and satisfied.

The experience provision discourse has taken a specific route within the cultural sector and in the last two decades there have been increased demands for the measurement of “visitor experience” in cultural institutions (Falk 2016). With reduction in budgets, for instance at museums and heritage sites, there is added pressure to attract wider audiences and this is accompanied by demands for evaluation of experience with the help of “performance measures based on customer satisfaction management” (Goulding 2000). Studies of this sort typically investigate visitors’ experience with reference to how they like the service, visitors willingness to pay, preferences, motivation, satisfaction and the probability that they will return and recommend the site to others (Brida, Pulina & Meleddu 2016; Hume, Mort, and Winzar 2007). Today, the evaluation of “visitor experience” and measuring the satisfaction of visitors, “pre, during and post visit” (Kempiaik et al. 2017), is a mini industry.

While the visitor experience studies, and associated normative schemas, are not heavy on theory and do not describe at any length the ideal relationship between visitor experience and cultural offering (at the theatre, art gallery or heritage
museum), they typically make references to “service experience” in passing or even as a premise. For instance in the paper “The museum environment and the visitor experience”, Goulding (2000), states in the first sentence: “The nature and characteristics of services pose different challenges for managers, given that a service is an act, a process, and a performance” (2000: 261). Brida et al., in their paper “Understanding museum visitors’ experience”, explain that the “role of positive externalities exerted by the cultural activity has become the aim of the field of services research” (Brida, Pulina & Meleddu 2016: 48), and that “in understanding the customer, it is important to analyse visitors’ experience, behaviour and their commitment to the cultural site also in the future, bearing in mind that each segment of demand carries different expectations from the services offered at site” (Brida, Pulina & Meleddu 2016: 48).

In the visitor experience literature, service becomes a stand-in for experience, not only in the sense that good service leads to good experience, in a direct causal relationship, but as a short-hand, metaphor, or even a synonym. Similar to the “experience economy” discourse, the cultural offerings, be they performances, paintings or other cultural artifacts, are provided activities and the “experience” is not only of the service: the service is the experience. This reduction turns the visit into a service-transactional process, while leaving aside the core of the visit and making it a short-hand for any activity, perception or sensation, however brief or shallow.

If the concept of the experience economy was coined by Pine and Gilmore in 1998, it was not long until the cult of experience found its way into cultural policy discourse, and perhaps with most impact in the Nordic countries (Power 2009; Bille 2012). In 2003, the Swedish Knowledge Foundation (KKS) established a definition of the experience industry covering 13 industry sectors, and in 2008 the Danish Enterprise and Construction Authority (EBST) published a report that included similar sectors and economic activity (Lindqvist & Protsiv 2011: 3). It is important in this context that the experience industries are a much wider set of industries than what is customarily called the arts, culture, or even entertainment. For instance the “experience industries” are defined by the European Cluster Observatory as spanning six sub-sectors: accommodation and tours, food and drink, gambling, museums and parks, sports and leisure, and arts (Lindqvist & Protsiv 2011).

It is also noteworthy, as Trine Bille has pointed out, that within the Nordic cultural policy discourse the term “experience economy” has been used hand in hand with the concepts of “creative industries” and “creative classes” (Bille 2009: 94). However, more than the “creative” prefix, the concept of “experience” is often seen as a way out of the instrumental tendencies of contemporary policy debates in the Nordic countries (Skot-Hansen 2005; Vestheim 2012). Thus, on the one hand, the term “experience” has been used to link cultural activities closer to other economically vital areas such as tourism, retail and gambling, and on the other “experience” is used to underline the non-instrumental elements of arts and culture. “Experience” is therefore both
“instrumental” and “non-instrumental” and used both to underline culture’s economic or educational “utility value” and its intrinsic value, as in valuable for itself. And sometimes these seemingly competing meanings are mixed together.

An example of this approach is Silvanto, Linko and Cantell’s 2008 article “From enlightenment to experience: cultural centres in Helsinki Neighbourhoods.” The authors speak of “providers of experiences” when discussing cultural centres in Helsinki and how the centres “reflect the latest developments of society” (165). Following the “EUROCULT21” model of the “Four Es” model (Skot-Hansen 2005), Silvanto, Linko and Cantell emphasise the need for a particular focus on experience as “the fifth E”, distinct from the other E’s of Enlightenment, Empowerment, Economic-impact and Entertainment. In their account, “experience” works as what art “is” rather than what it is “good for” and importantly it is not “impact that can be measured” but rather a “way of expression” (Silvanto, Linko & Cantell 2008: 167). However, the authors do not give details of what this important piece of the schema means or how the concept should be used. Still, distinctions are noted between visitors supposedly different motives:

[T]he visitors probably do not visit the centre in order to be enlightened or empowered. Yet pure entertainment might be too narrow a concept to describe the reason for their visits to the centres. According to the arguments used, these people might rather be in search of experience. (Silvanto, Linko & Cantell 2008: 175)

This interesting categorisation invites questions: what makes “experience” a discernible idea from, for instance, “enlightenment”, “entertainment” or “empowerment”? And if the role of cultural centres is to provide experience, what is the nature of that experience? What does “expressive value” mean in this context? These questions are not addressed in the paper and the authors treat the concept of “experience” as rather inconsequent to the overall theory and make little reference to any literature on experience as a “way of expression” that exists (see, for instance, Throsby 2001 for an interesting cultural policy context).

Dorte Skot-Hansen’s treatment of the subject of experience in the article “Why Urban Cultural Policy?” (2005) gives more food for thought. With reference to Joli Jensen’s 2003 article “Expressive Logic: A New Premise in Arts Advocacy” (2003), which in turn makes direct reference to John Dewey’s use of the concept, Skot-Hansen describes the experience value of the arts in terms of “art as experience”: The arts are “forms of social inquiry that are deeply human and deeply meaningful” (Skot-Hansen 2005: 38) and these forms exist in all of us and “encompass everyday activity” (Skot-Hansen 2005: 38):

The aesthetic experience we can get when singing in the bath, gardening or walking a tightrope. The defined high arts are simply more intense, mean-
This inclusive and cultural democratic approach to art is characteristic of what we can call Deweyan or “pragmatic”. Far from the “service experience” or the trivialising transactions of the dry-cleaning experience which Pine and Gilmore (1999: 5) mention in the quote above, Skot-Hansen emphasises the role of art as important “in itself” but at the same time “in itself” is a much broader idea than just the art “thing” or object. In a more holistic manner, Skot-Hansen sees as one of the bases of cultural policy a more open process approach, one that connects with the everyday existence of everyday people. Instead of separating “art” as a distinct object at an institution, from “experience” as a perception of the growing human being, she points towards pragmatist aesthetics rather than the theory of the “experience economy” and suggests a focus on the “intense, meaningful, distilled and portable versions of the widely dispersed aesthetic impulse” (Skot-Hansen 2005: 38).

As Scot-Hansen indicates, a Deweyan cultural leader would be suspicious of the “experience economy” reduction of experience as a transaction of consumable thrills. Even if there might be, as Guillet de Monthoux (2004: 43) points out, links between Dewey and the experience economy camp (“Even though his messages were not the experience economy that was being preached from Harvard Business School three generations later, certain of his points were forerunners of this later thought pattern” (Guillet de Monthoux 2004: 43)), there are fundamental differences between Dewey’s version of “an experience” and that of the “experience economies”. One of these differences is that for Dewey, “experience” is not something that can be given or provided by anyone or any institution. Experience is a holistic process and he urges caution in interpreting the idea of experience too narrowly, and calls on us to be aware of the complexities of “selling” “managing” or “planning” experience. Therefore, to a degree, both the commercial emphasis of Pine and Gilmore and the schematising terminology of Silvanto, Linko and Cantell trivialise the concept of experience and treat it as insignificant even if it is supposed to be at the centre of the argument. And however much the rhetoric of the experience economy has been adopted for cultural policy (Power 2009; Bille 2012), it is perhaps not a fruitful theory of cultural leadership or the running of arts institutions, particularly if experience is understood as narrowly as it is in the “experience as service” literature.

In this context Dewey’s contribution to the discourse on experience in late modernity becomes valuable, not as a representation of what has been named the “Deweyan tradition” in arts marketing (Boorsma 2006), but as an important insight into, and critique of, the dominant reductive view of experience. This is not simple however, since the language seems to fail us at every turn. Even more thorough accounts of the experience concept, with direct references to Dewey’s possible contribution to cultural leadership discourse, such as Joli...
Jensen’s 2003 article “Expressive Logic: A New Premise in Arts Advocacy”, seem to complicate some of Dewey’s most important arguments. Jensen, for instance, goes to great lengths to describe Dewey’s view of art as “non-instrumental” when Dewey would himself describe his whole philosophical approach as “instrumentalism”. But if the experience economy discourse is too reductive, what are the lessons we can take from Dewey? How can we reclaim experience and what would he teach cultural leaders of today?

EXPERIENCE IS HOLISTIC

In The Art Firm: Aesthetic Management and Metaphysical Marketing, Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (2004) playfully envisions an art company called Dionysus Inc., which faces a hard competitive environment in the experience market. This imaginary avant-garde firm is directed by a group of cultural leaders who are also famous historical thinkers and artists. In this scenario the philosopher Immanuel Kant is the company’s Financial Director, the Romantic poet Friedrich Schiller is Management Consultant/Aesthetic Coach, the artist Joseph Beuys is the Head of Human Resources, and another philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, is Managing Director. The Head of Marketing is an American philosopher, John Dewey, whose work, according to Guillet de Monthoux, has roots in the “Central European fine-art tradition” on which Dionysus’ company ethos is founded. What makes John Dewey a competent cultural leader is that he has the ability to talk to any kind of customer and his approach is democratic in the sense that he can’t bear, as Guillet de Monthoux puts it, to have customers “take aesthetics the wrong way, thinking it is some sort of frightening or intimidating totalitarianism” (Guillet de Monthoux 2004: xi). Dewey’s role is to bridge the apparent gap between the “mysterious metaphysical world of the artistic genius” and “the market” (the everyday world of the common person), by making the company’s aesthetic principles less intimidating. However, even though Dewey’s focus on experience makes him a possible forerunner of the experience economy thinking (Monthoux 2004: 43), the message is very different from the idea of experience as a standardized and consumable offering. Dewey would be critical of the focus on the structure of the service and the “role of positive externalities” that we are told are “exerted by the cultural activity” (Brida, Pulina & Meleddu 2016: 48) and that have reduced the aesthetic experience to “the field of services research” (Brida, Pulina & Meleddu 2016: 48). According to Guillet de Monthoux, Dewey is also alert enough to avoid connecting the company’s “operations” (the business of metaphysical performance, interestingly unspecified) to some “banal entertainment.” Banality, as maintained by Guillet de Monthoux, is one of “the two capital sins of an art-based economy” (the other being totality, or art in the service of dictators and fascists), and, with his “non-banal yet democratic” approach to aesthetic management, Dewey is crucial to the success of the ideal organisation Dionysus Inc. What Guillet de Monthoux means by banality is that if the aesthetic experience is reduced to a crude marketing technique, the
The value of the artistic performance is lost and with it the performance’s quality (Guillet de Monthoux 2004: 110). Art managers should be wary of simple business management solutions to their problems and unimaginative application of marketing textbooks.

Indeed, Dewey becomes idealistic when he describes the model aesthetic experience. It is almost like a spiritual spell that is so complete in a wholeness that does not end in a disruption but rather the conclusion of the event (similar to playing a game of chess, reading a book or singing a song). The aesthetic experience has a beginning and an end in time and space, and even if we do not know the end, or only later realise when it began, it is distinguished from other regular occurrences by its emotional intensity. Dewey stresses that the aesthetic experience cannot be broken down for analysis or be reduced to its description, for even if we explain or rationalise the experience, we will always leave something out because the occurrence is a more complicated whole than any recollection or intellectual account of it. To create or appreciate a cultural artifact or an artwork in an optimal situation leads to our having an experience marked by an exemplary degree of vividness and coherence. Such an experience possesses an unusually full development of certain generic features, such as “completeness”, “uniqueness”, and “unifying emotion”. The specific traits and meanings an experience contains are in turn a function of what Dewey calls its “situation”, which comprises a larger complex of natural and cultural factors, including the purposes of whoever is having the experience (Dewey 1980: 35-57).

The cultural leader, artist or performer “embodies in himself the attitude of the receiver” and becomes the audience when he or she works on the art product (Dewey, 1980: 48). In this sense it is impossible to understand experience as a consumable offering in the managerial meaning of the term. While the “service as experience” discourse of the “experience economy” says the cultural experience is just like any other vivid and memorable transactional experience, Dewey maintains that having an experience, in the way it should be, is not a series of professional solutions to customer needs leading ultimately to the “sweet-spot” of customer satisfaction. It is a holistic and unifying undergoing that ultimately has the potential of transformation.

If Guillet de Monthoux’s book is a signal of growing interest in John Dewey’s relevance in cultural leadership in recent years, it goes hand in hand with a discernible tendency to connect the experience formulation with policy discourses of inclusion and more accessible art organisations. His version of Dewey as a cultural leader is original but making him the Marketing Manager concerned with communication and bridge-building could miss some of the power of the potential point. Dewey is first and foremost a critic of the prevailing paradigm, not its marketer, and as Guillet de Monthoux stresses, he is much more of a critic of culture than a salesman. The label of “marketing manager” is more of a rhetorical device, for Guillet de Monthoux goes on to introduce Dewey as a cultural leader who builds bridges and educates the public.
EXPERIENCE IS TRANSFORMATIVE

Angela Marsh (2004), in her article, “Pragmatist Aesthetics and New Visions of the Contemporary Art Museum”, considers “the current impetus toward “democratizing” contemporary art exhibition practice with regards to Deweyan/Shusterman pragmatist aesthetics” (Marsh 2004: 91). According to Marsh, John Dewey could play an ample role in guiding the process of democratising audiences’ relationship with art. This challenge, Marsh argues, is no small assignment:

Dewey illustrates the segue between art and the perceiver, and his belief that within the profound art experience, lived dichotomies are healed: In art as an experience, actuality and possibility or ideality, the new and the old, objective material and personal response, the individual and the universal, surface and depth, sense and meaning, are integrated in an experience in which they are all transfigured from the significance that belongs to them when isolated in reflection. (Marsh 2004: 91)

In this paragraph Marsh is referring to the philosopher Richard Shusterman’s account of Dewey, in which he claims that pragmatist aesthetic theory aims at rethinking art “in democratic terms” and reflecting on the social implications of prevailing art ideologies (Shusterman 2000: 62). Shusterman, for instance in the books Pragmatist Aesthetics and Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture, professes to be following Dewey’s programme of restoring continuity between the “intensified forms of experience that are works of art” and people’s everyday life experiences, and he proposes to “re-conceive art so as to enhance its role and appreciation” (Shusterman 2000: xv; Shusterman 2002: 130).

Education, for Dewey, is based on our personal experiences, and everything we acquire through education must be considered as relating to a particular time and place. In contrast to the “service as experience” discourse, education is not a service, to be given or to be provided with, but rather it has to be endured or undergone. The basic idea is that all genuine education comes through striving involvement in an interaction between external and internal conditions (Dewey 1997: 36). Furthermore it is not a one-directional, or directive, relationship, where either the objective reality of things and facts is put into the mind of the receiver (or perhaps where the receiver shapes the world as her personal isolated mental construct); instead Dewey sees the relationship as interactive, where each side influences the other. Experience is a two-way process of observing and serving, perceiving and performing. We change the environment and the environment in turn changes us.1

In this complex and integrated interaction between the individual and the environment, Dewey asks the educator to consider the circumstances of the novice

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1. “Experience does not go on simply inside a person. It does go on there, for it influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose. But this is not the whole of the story. Every genuine experience has an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had.” (Dewey 1997: 39)
or the beginner and not to presume that objective qualities are automatically known. This means, for example in arts education, that art or the musical work that becomes relevant to us through painting, playing or listening, singing or dancing, and is both culturally and personally conditioned as the product of our prior familiarity, not to mention the difference between the experiences of music that one plays and the experience of music that one listens to. Even though people identify with the same cultural background, we still experience the same art differently. There is no ultimate right way to experience or understand culture, since we approach it from our own familiarity with it and the world we relate to. The ideal cultural experience is a complicated and negotiated process that from the very start involves the viewer as an active participant. Dewey’s point is that we learn on the basis of our former experiences, where we come from socially and personally. He also suggests that through the process of experience, what we are to learn involves our prior understanding of it. The process of learning is continuous, since our new educational experiences are related to our environment and what we already knew.

Here it is possible to ask whether Dewey is simply replacing the harmonious form of the work of art and its essential qualities with a harmonious experience with universal qualities. Indeed, Dewey’s description of the aesthetic experience as complete and holistic has led some to see it as a consistent and harmonious affair. In this way, Gordon L. Ziniewicz, when explaining the relationship between experience and the “problematic” (difficulty or confrontation), describes the aesthetic experience as perhaps necessarily harmonious, in contrast with “problematic” experiences that can stir thinking. However, as Philip W. Jackson points out, Dewey’s idea of the aesthetic experience is stirring and more transformative, with the potential to broaden our minds (Jackson 1998: xiv). It has the potential to “modify irrevocably our habitual ways of thinking, feeling and perceiving”. For Dewey, aesthetic experience gives the possibility

2. “It ought not to be necessary to say that experience does not occur in a vacuum. There are sources outside an individual which give rise to experience. It is constantly fed from these springs. No one would question that a child in a slum tenement has a different experience from that of a child in a cultured home; that the country lad has different kind of experience from the city boy, or a boy on the seashore one different from the lad who is brought up on inland prairies.” (Dewey 1997: 39-40)

3. “An aesthetic experience is an experience of immediate and enjoyable order; a problematic experience, one requiring some investigation, thought, and action, is an experience of incompleteness, of jarring disorder (something is just not right). Intelligence grows with the continual experiment of attempting to resolve problematic experiences. In this sense, for Dewey, conflict is necessary for life; it stirs thinking about what we are about, what we are doing, and why. Inquiry arises in a situation that exhibits confusion and disharmony. Human beings attempt to bring order, through their efforts, to disorderly and unsatisfying situations. Intelligence is but one instrument in this “correction” of experience. Overt action, altering actual conditions, is essential for making situations better.” (Ziniewicz 1999: para.12)

4. “What is intimated to my mind, is, that in both production and enjoyed perception of works of art, knowledge is transformed; it becomes something more than knowledge because it is merged with non-intellectual elements to form an experience worthwhile as an experience.” (Dewey 1980: 290)
of transforming, and that transformation is not limited to what is usually called knowledge. The aesthetic experience transcends the categories of thinking and feeling. It is in this transformative sense that Dewey’s identification of art as an experience does not mean that everyone has the same aesthetic experience from the same work of art, or even the same experience from one moment to the next.

EXPERIENCE IS EVER-CHANGING

A key to understanding John Dewey’s pragmatism or “cultural instrumentalism” (Eldridge 1998: 8), is to understand that he sees words as tools to think with. A concept’s meaning is not given and needs to be constantly rethought critically and creatively to be as useful as possible. “Useful” in this context means helpful for human growth and development. Correspondingly, elitist hierarchies and organizational structures that create distance between vital cultural products and people are in this perspective “useless”. The premise of Art as Experience, is that “art” as we conceptualize it is not helpful and needs to be rethought. However, it is not Dewey’s ambition to replace the Kantian-Enlightenment paradigm with a new fixed definition, but rather to set the terms of debate, and the exclusivist institutional structures, into motion by bringing art “back” to everyday people and egalitarian involvement. It is a project of democratization and for this he uses the concept of “experience” that he had already developed in his philosophy of education and progressive politics.

Defining “art” has dominated much of the traditional discourse on aesthetics, and the demand for an ultimate definition became even more important with the Enlightenment and modern attitudes towards what are now considered the fine arts (Kivy 1997: 1). The objective of defining art was to find a denominator or a criterion from which the art theorist could derive statements and judgements about art and subsequently to use these as starting points for further reasoning about the value of the arts. By defining “art”, according to this Enlightenment project of categorisation, connoisseurs would be able to distinguish between things that were “art” and other kinds of organised things, noises and images that somehow would not live up to their universal aesthetic standards.

But these standards have proven hard to define and the classifications, criterions and axioms generated in the process have been misleading and generally not very useful. In fact the whole project of defining art has been problematic, since the art works under discussion, especially new works and works from cultures other than the classical Western or European have defied categorisation. As the history of modern art has taught us, once you decide what art is, artists will find ways of doing something different and more interesting, not least to challenge the prevailing paradigm.

Relatedly, the term “experience” has proven hard to pin down. As Gadamer (2004) affirms in Truth and Method, the concept of “experience” is “one of the
most obscure we have”, pointing out as an example the difference between the epistemological schematisation of the British empiricist, and the “inner historicity” of the hermeneutic meaning (Gadamer, 2004: 341). Similarly, Jay (2005) argues that the concept of “experience” has been used by a range of authors at different times and in dissimilar contexts and “it will quickly become apparent to anyone seeking a meta-narrative of this idea’s history that no such single story can be told” (Jay 2005: 2). Even leaving aside the differences between scientific v. aesthetic experience (and the English language difficulties of translating the German concepts of Erlebnis and Erfahrung), there is perhaps just something old-fashioned about describing things in terms of “an experience” in late modernity. The critical post-structural questioning of “presence” and the unified conscious “I” have put the whole concept of experience into disrepute and lessons from history indicate that any naturalistic or essentialist account of experience should always be put into critical perspective.

It might therefore be argued that to replace the term “art” with Dewey’s “experience” (as in “art as experience”) may seem more confusing than clarifying and only add to the confusion surrounding the modern-enlightenment project of art definitions. Here it is important to keep in mind that Dewey does not mean that art products are experiences literally, but that “we have to forget them for a time” (Dewey 1980: 4) to understand their meaning. In line with Rorty’s (1982: 72-89) argument, and to some extent Shusterman’s (2000: 83), we should be open to how Dewey’s characterisation of “art as experience” can open up the discourse of the qualitative dimensions of the institutional processes of art. In that way the experience formulation can assist in asking questions about the creative elements involved through the interpretive method of “re-description”.

Rather than being a formula or a set of instructions, Dewey’s approach provokes questions about the role of institutions, and about hierarchies of power, and emphasises the centrality of involvement in the process of art. These are all “pragmatist aesthetic” themes (Shusterman 2000) that become important when reflecting on the modern institution of art. As Morgan (1997) explores, each metaphor can help us see a particular aspect of an organisation while at the same time obscuring others. For Dewey, the educationalist and theorist of democracy, “experience” is a real thing that can help us explain better human life and growth. The aesthetic experience has characteristics that can help

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5. Jean-François Lyotard (1998) dismissively describes experience as “a modern figure”: “It needs a subject first of all, the instance of an “I”, someone who speaks in the first person. It needs a temporal arrangement of the type: Augustine Confessions, book XI (a modern work if ever there was one), where the view of the past, the present and the future is always taken from the point of an ungraspable present consciousness. With these two axioms, one can already engender the essential form of experience: I am no longer what I am, and I am not yet what I am. Life signifies the death of what one is, and this death certifies that life has a meaning, that one is not a stone. A third axiom gives experience its full scope: the world is not an entity external to the subject, it is the common name for the objects in which the subject alienates himself (loses himself, dies to himself) in order to arrive at himself, to live.” Quoted in Jay (2005: 361).
understand how art can serve us better in our everyday lives and should not be seen as untouchable or categorically out of reach. However, the aesthetic experience cannot be calculated, measured or reduce to a simple description. It is somehow unreachable, like the “moving horizon” Alfred Tennyson describes in Ulysses and which Dewey approvingly quotes in *Art as Experience*:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.

*(Tennyson as quoted in Dewey 1980: 193)*

Dewey’s version of the aesthetic experience is a “normative goal, a desideratum rather than a given” (Jay 2005:166). It is an attempt at viewing and describing part of reality in new or different terms and a political pursuit which set against the dominant view and aimed at challenging the status quo. It is therefore important to keep in mind that rather than viewing Dewey’s theory as a reductive account or a finite recipe of what constitutes experience, his idea of art as experience is an attempt to change or unsettle the terms of debate. It is a plea “with explicit political implications” (Jay 2005: 167), which challenges the dominant conceptualisation by shifting attention to the aesthetic experience in life and in commonplace experiences.

Any “re-description” is a re-reading in light of a different context, or from a different perspective. It is more helpful here to view Dewey’s pragmatist redefinition or re-description of the process of art, “art as experience”, in the creative sense of a new definition being produced. For that purpose, the notion of “art as experience” is best understood as a “cognitive and heuristic device” for “schematizing theoretical perspective” (Cornelissen 2006: 1580). As Cornelissen points out, to use a metaphor, or to say that something “is like” something else, is not to say that they are the same thing (Cornelissen 2004: 705-726).

**CONCLUSION**

This paper introduces John Dewey’s formulation of “art as experience” as a critical idea that he used to identify and criticise what he perceives as the dominant thinking about art at the beginning of the twentieth century. Dewey’s main target is the institution of high culture, its categories and divisions, which in turn form the basis of the marginalisation of aesthetics in modern society, creating “the beauty parlour of modern civilisation” (Dewey 1980: 339). And it is against the “external” organisation of the aesthetic experience that he offers the notion of “art as experience”, a subversion of the prevailing “product-consumption” paradigm. The idea of “art as experience” should not however be interpreted too literally and Dewey’s vision is much more of the creation of possibility, a development in the sense of a musical variation that offers a different perspective.
Dewey asks the cultural leader to think of the audience (the public, guests, viewers or listeners) as participants or active creators in the process of creative viewing and listening. Dewey’s leader is a critic, educator and moderator and not merely a marketing manager or a provider of consumable experiences. The role of the leader is to open up eyes and ears, re-educate, and develop more ways of perceiving (Dewey 1980: 324). The idea is that the conventional comprehension of art as a “work” or a product that is ready for consumption has made people unaware of the dynamic nature of art as an imaginative process.

The main lesson to draw from *Art as Experience* is that leadership should be critical of any attempt to institutionalize experience. Do not take for granted the managerial jargon of the day, since too often the institutional reality of culture and art is taken as a given, and the task of cultural leadership is to rethink the system for the benefit of all. The work of directors, artists, performers and managers in the cultural sector can become mundane and uninspiring, as in any other trade. The difficulty is that for those who are responsible for cultural production, a lack of motivation can kill the creative drive and leave the guests, performers and staff unmoved and indifferent to the offering. Cultural heritage becomes untouched, trivial and inconsequential, and art loses its value and purpose. This can happen when the museum experience is over-sterilized and standardized; there is the danger that this will happen if too much attention is given to the managerial jargon of the experience economy camp.

**REFERENCES**


