

AARON SMUTS

ANESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

AFTER DECADES OF NEGLECT, the full strength of pragmatism is finally being uncovered partially due to the drumming of Richard Rorty. Although John Dewey is given his proper place within the pantheon of pragmatist philosophers, a lack of attention to Dewey's experiential philosophy has contributed to a view of him as a lesser social philosopher. Most historians of pragmatism view Dewey's experiential philosophy narrowly in relation to the metaphysical and epistemological consequences of radical empiricism and underplay the scope of its social implications. In response, I will argue that in Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience lies an easily overlooked social/political approach that predates, by almost half a century, recent social theoretical concerns in phenomenology and everyday-aesthetics that take notice of experience and prompts inquiry into sometimes obviously important, but dismissed as irrelevant and mundane, paths.

While working to build his aesthetic theory from the qualities of normal, healthy experience, Dewey diagnoses a rarely recognized experiential ailment—what might be called the *anesthetic malady*. This illness generally results when experience is deprived of meaning due to the poverty of the predominant forms of activity available in one's environment. Dewey thinks that healthy, vital experience is an interested, coherent process leading to meaningful fulfillment; as such, it can be said to be *an experience*. The diagnosis and alteration of those activities, situations, and structures that prevent experience from being *an experience* is a crucial task for philosophers concerned with identifying the optimum conditions for human flourishing. At the most basic level, Dewey argues that critical attention should principally be directed to the relations people have with their environment For

assessing the quality of experience he emphasizes the importance of the body, type of activity, and, most importantly, our relationship with space.¹

I

In "Having an Experience" Dewey examines the neglected aesthetic dimension of ordinary experience. For Dewey the aesthetic is no "intruder in experience from without": it is not some rare museum or nature bound phenomena linking one with the platonic heavens or a form of disinterested spectatorship; rather, it is "the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience" of a live creature.² The aesthetic is a quality of *an* experience where there is the fulfillment of a movement unified by a pervasive quality. Thomas Alexander explains that *an* "experience is one which has been successfully transformed through intelligent action so as to be an inherently complete and dynamically moving whole which realizes the sense of meaning and value as deeply as possible."³ We note an-experiences in ordinary parlance, since due to their significant completeness they are set in relief against the majority of our lives. Dewey explains that experience in the "vital sense is defined by those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being 'real experiences'; those of which we say in recalling them, 'that was an experience.'" We recognize them with phrases like "remember the time" because their integration beckons their demarcation in the stream of life. In contrast to "inchoate experience" that characterizes the rest of the general stream, *an* "experience has a unity that gives it its name, *that* meal, *that* storm, *that* rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single quality that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts" (*HE*, pp. 555–56). Coherence gives healthy experience, good or bad, its glowing significance.

Perhaps Dewey has not adequately described what has traditionally been thought to be aesthetic experience. Partially the problem is that he is obsessed with wholes, but the aesthetic does not always come in neatly packaged chunks: it seems to be more of a glimmer on the flowing stream of experience than any nuggets panned. The aesthetic might be better described as an attitude taken toward experience, than the effect of an experience being unified by some other quality.⁴ Nevertheless, it is not crucial that Dewey has perfectly identified the

aesthetic or described it wide enough to take into account all aesthetic qualities and experiences; he has pointed out another quality or sub-type of the aesthetic found in coherent experiences, or events, marked by his special “a”-less spelling—“esthetic.” The recognizable importance of such accomplished experiences and the sickness resulting from being deprived of them is a ubiquitous concern of Dewey’s thought.

Dewey’s criticisms reach far into the structure of our economy and daily lives, by calling for a radical restructuring of lived-environments. As we shall see, his analysis of anesthetic environments contains insights similar to and is as extensive as Marx’s criticism of alienated labor, Weber’s analysis of disenchantment and the iron cage of modernity, and Foucault’s examination of bio-power. The radical suggestiveness of Dewey’s thought should be noted, given Cornel West’s portrayal of him as too staid in his political criticism and goals: “The point is not simply that Dewey adopts a gradualist view of social change and remains a reformer rather than a revolutionary. Rather it is the *kind* of gradualism he promotes and the *form* of reformism he propagates; that is his gradualism is principally *pedagogical* in content, and his reformism is primarily dialogical in character.”⁵ As we shall see Dewey’s remarks on the economy in *The Quest for Certainty* and his discussion of alienated labor in “The Live Creature and ‘Ethereal Things’” suggest his criticism is not quite as focused on education as West lets on. Dewey’s experiential philosophy highlights the often neglected everyday-experiential dimension of human suffering and demands restructuring going far beyond education and conversation.

Dewey acknowledges the importance of the quality of the environment to experiential health, since it limits and controls the ways in which we act. Influenced by the sociologist Lester Ward, Dewey holds a social-psychological concept that we might call *environmentalism*.⁶ In “The Live Creature” Dewey emphasizes that “life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it. . . . The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way.”⁷ Jane Upin explains that environmentalism,

involves the conviction that it is possible to bring about changes in the human condition by making changes in the environment. This theory does not entail that a person is a blank tablet, totally determined by the surroundings. But it does entail a belief in the adaptability of human beings, faith in the possibility of education and improvement, and

thereby, expectations not only of change but also of progress. (*CPG*, p. 10)

Anesthetic experience results when the situation with which the live creature interacts either encourages the humdrum or forces one into the mechanical mode of action. The social, economic, cultural, and spatial environment in which one lives must be assessed for the feasibility of having vital, aesthetic experiences within it. Dewey argues that there are two sorts of worlds in which aesthetic experience could not occur: the world of perpetual flux and the finished word of Nirvana. It is only because “the actual world, that in which we live, is a combination of movement and cumulation, of breaks and re-unions, the experience of a living creature is capable of esthetic quality” (*LC*, p. 538). Without the awareness brought by meaningful perching or the rustling branches that necessitate flight, there could be no aesthetic quality to experience. John McDermott presents a rough goal of for Deweyan reformation of an environment to enable the esthetic: “A genuinely liberated social and political environment is one which encourages the individual, who is, after all, not ready-made, to experience the world in all of its potential intensity” (*CUL*, pp. 141–42). To create such an environment that sustains an-experiencing Dewey thinks that we must first recognize the chief obstacles.

II

Improving on James’s remarks about the importance of the body in experience, Dewey argues that fundamental to doing and suffering is embodiment.⁸ For Dewey, the actor is privileged over the spectator and touch over vision for the realization of meaningful experience. Part of Dewey’s Copernican revolution in philosophy—the shift from a spectator to an actor-centered view—is the realization that the “mind is within the world.”⁹ There are no disembodied minds on the model Dewey invites us to try out. He argues that “oppositions of mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh, all have their origin, fundamentally, in fear of what life might bring forth.”¹⁰ He attempts to counter this perceived withdrawal from life with a new emphasis on interaction, which entails a focus on one’s sensuous relations with the world. For Dewey the “senses are the organs through which the live creature participates directly in the on-goings of the world about him” (*ET*, p. 543). When

deprived of stimulation one is cut off from the world, when flooded with sensation one tends to either be swallowed in meaninglessness or flee from life in retreat. As we would expect, the type and quality of bodily sensation is central to the value of experience and hence life.¹¹

Significantly, Dewey finds the emotive and bodily associated aesthetic quality of experience crucial to intellectual activity. He questions the cognitive/non-cognitive distinction by noting the aesthetic quality of successful intellectual experience. The inquiry through which results are generated occurs in a much more processual and recursive form than the manner in which they are presented. Dewey argues that “in an experience of thinking, premises emerge only as a conclusion becomes manifest,” as it is consummated. The ties between Dewey’s educational theory and his work on experience are evident in his discussion of the structure of successful inquiry. He criticizes the practice of learning by rote and substitutes a progressive education for optimal growth, where children learn from a process of rich bodily experience involving inquiry, doing, and discovery. What is necessary for learning to be successful is the consummation of the movement of anticipation and cumulation that constitutes the process. Since intellectual activity “must bear an esthetic stamp to be itself complete,” we might say that without “Eureka!” it is just a bath (*HE*, pp. 557–58).

III

Dewey’s analysis of the sickness of most practical activity is simultaneously an account of anesthetic environments, conditions, and behaviors. The ability to have a valuable and meaningful experience through practical activity requires that it must not be mechanical or humdrum. Mechanical activity fills time and may provide an income, but the monotonous is meaningless since it stifles awareness of what is occurring. Dewey makes a distinction between labor and work, the former to be avoided since it is mechanical in nature and inherently unrewarding. This criticism of labor marks Dewey’s radicalism and perhaps either the naiveté of his hopes or the sense of the tragic limitation he must have born, since it would require a massive and probably impossible restructuring of most meaningless labor to make it work. The opposite of mechanical activity is the humdrum, that which is meaninglessly incoherent since it lacks a unifying thread. Dewey explains that between “the poles of aimlessness and mechanical efficiency, there lies

those courses of action in which through successive deeds there runs a sense of growing meaning conserved and accumulating toward an end that is felt as accomplishing of a process" (*HE*, p. 558). Whereas, repetitive and senseless action obviously leads one to lose sight of purpose and meaning.

Dewey laments the conditions of production that truncate experience by depriving it of the possibility for the interested interaction necessary for the aesthetic. He argues that, "wherever the conditions are such as to prevent the act of production from being an experience in which the whole creature is alive and in which he possesses his living through enjoyment, the products will lack something of being esthetic," as will the experience of the workers. Dewey suggests that little can be achieved by trying to cure assembly line malaise by requiring those working to shift their tasks periodically so that at some point they get a complete view of their role in a larger whole, since it is doubtful how satisfying this could be once one gets in a particular groove. The problem might be more fundamental: Dewey suggests that it is due to the distinction between the useful and the fine that has devalued the meaningful production of ordinary items. It is through this distinction that "so much of production has become a form of postponed living and so much of consumption a superimposed enjoyment of the fruits of the labors of others." As such the alienated workers' experience of mechanized labor might be more like a yo-yo, starting at the top and finally reaching the bottom all to begin again. As should go without saying, to flourish people need to live with an environment conducive to active, rich experience that encourages an aware stance to valued activities (*ET*, p. 547).

Every vital experience, Dewey thinks, is characterized by doings and sufferings: "every experience is the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives." Experience is not a spectator event. If it is vital it requires an active engagement and responsiveness to the outcomes of and obstacles to one's activity. For Dewey, "an experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alteration, but consists of them in relationship." The measure of an experience's quality and meaningfulness is in the "scope and content of the relations" (*HE*, pp. 562-63). The ways in which the realization of the relations of one's activity and its consequences can be thwarted offers a critical perspective for analyzing one's relations with the lived environment. Excessive doing and excessive reception hinder one's ability to see the meaningful connections

between doing and suffering. Hurried busy work and the sheer rush of physical sensations make one's experiences flat and shallow.

The opposite of excessive doing is excessive receptivity, which does not allow experience to take root in the mind and is also a hindrance to exploring relations. Taking LSD, day-dreaming, and indiscriminately watching TV might create such problems by allowing us to be swallowed by the environment. Building on Dewey, McDermott suggests that such an environment not suited to bodies, that deprives them of aesthetic differentiation and affective responses, can produce a "deep-seated listlessness, and experiential anomie . . . masked by . . . the vicarious identification with the worlds portrayed by contemporary film and television, especially sports" (*CUL*, p. 169). Kristeva adopts a similar experientially aware environmentalism in "New Maladies of the Soul" where she warns about the experience-flattening powers of television that can produce a situation where "psychic life is blocked, inhibited, and destroyed."¹² Dewey's aesthetic environmentalism asks us, clearly and without need of psychoanalysis, to recognize and remedy the basic bodily-inhospitable environmental causes of this anesthetic malady.¹³

IV

For describing and analyzing everyday experience, which is necessary to access its value, Dewey says we should look to art. To explore an experience of a job interview, Dewey asks, "where should we look for an account of such an experience? Not to ledger-entries nor yet to a treatise on economics or sociology or personal-psychology, but to drama or fiction" (*HE*, p. 561). Though the novels of, say, Virginia Woolf or Nicholson Baker may help us understand and explore everyday lived experience by offering a fictional example, we might want to explore the experience of the live creature and the centrality of embodiment through what the extremely aesthetically deprived would be like. The adequacy of Dewey's account of the anesthetic malady is suggested by its applicability to Wim Wenders's highlight of recent German cinema, "Wings of Desire."¹⁴

Wenders's "Wings of Desire" (1988) explores the paucity of the experience of angels deprived the ability to fully interact with the sensuous environment. Though "Wings" centers around the un-lived experiences of angels, it is not a film about religion; it is a film about experience via a quiet, meditative exploration of the horrors of being confined to spectatorship and denied the richness of human sensation.

The angels of *Wings* cannot do or receive. They suffer from an excess of receptivity and humdrum activity since the general stable and precarious characteristics of life experience are absent.¹⁵ Dewey explains:

Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it—either through effort or by some happy chance. And, in a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed. If the gap between organism and environment is too wide, the creature dies. If its activity is not enhanced by the temporary alienation, it merely subsists. Life grows when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives. (*LC*, p. 535)

The competence of Dewey's analysis is suggested in the portrayal of the living death of the angels of *Wings* who are more than eternally out of step with their environment. They have always found themselves completely alienated by a total powerlessness.

The film explores the activities of two angels wandering through Berlin. They appear as two ordinary people, dressed in everyday clothes, but no one except a few children and other angels can see, hear, or for the most part feel them. Though they move around effortlessly and hear people's thoughts, they cannot touch, taste, or see color. They are eternal spectators cut off from the world, suffering from anomie. They are un-living creatures unable to fulfill what desires they have. Working within a naturalistic framework, Dewey stresses the seemingly obvious but previously much ignored centrality of embodied experience with the life-sustaining environment: "At every moment, the living creature is exposed to dangers from its surroundings, and at every moment, it must draw upon something in its surroundings to satisfy its needs" (*LC*, p. 535). But the angels exist in an environment completely unreceptive to bodies, since they have none, and as such can feel no personal danger and have never been satisfied by the environment. They exist to the world of human experience as we often do to television. This is suggested in an early sequence where we pass in and out of the lives of several Berliners. We see the front of a man sitting in a chair thinking about his son. The film cuts to a reverse-shot revealing from where the initial shot was taken showing a television, hence, suggesting that the angels stand to this man as he does to the television. They often feel strongly for the situation of other humans

but they have no life which can be enriched or existence their desires can affect. The concern they feel for others in danger may put them on the edge of their seats, but after centuries of powerlessness many of the angels, especially those we see in the library, have become abject wanderers.

One of the angels, Daniel (Bruno Ganz), discovers a trapeze artist for whom he develops a deep attachment and through whom he can witness the extremes of human sensuousness. At a crucial episode late in the film Daniel grows tired of being “outside of the world” and decides to renounce his immortality to become a fully experiencing, embodied human. He finds himself in a world of rich color, as the film changes from black and white, on the west side of a heavily graffitied Berlin Wall. His first moments are spent in intense wonder as he learns to identify the colors on the wall and the blood on his hand. This differentiation of colors from a confused beginning, leading to a desire to know them, to testing and asking which are which, and finally to the consummating moments of realization, mark this as *an* experience. Dewey mentions a story called “The Unlearner” where an afterlife is portrayed as continuously re-experiencing all that came before by discovering relations in previous experience. *Wings* is the inverse: Daniel, a witness to the relations made by others, is finally allowed to make relations in experience from which he had been eternally severed.

The film’s most memorable portrayal of having a vital aesthetic experience is the short scene when Daniel drinks his first cup of coffee. He learns the intensity and overwhelming sensation of his embodiment on his first cold morning when he stumbles upon a coffee stand. Remembering Peter Falk’s earlier discussion of the joys of coffee drinking, Daniel, shivering, buys a cup. He picks it up and, feeling its warmth, brings it to his mouth to find out that too quick a drink burns. He continues to sip it slowly as he is gradually warmed. That’s coffee-on-a-cold-morning. The experience is unified and tied together as an event from the desire for warmth to the fulfillment of this desire. He encounters the resistance of its extreme heat and must readjust his drinking to avoid suffering a burn. The relations between the doings and suffering of coffee drinking are discovered, noted, and celebrated. The quality of this experience of the multi-faceted richness of embodiment is set off from the stream of Daniel’s experience, which had been for eternity bland and lifeless.

The contrast *an* experience has with the rest of Daniel’s experience

is similar to that an experience has within the general stream of the majority of our needlessly anesthetic lives. "Wings of Desire" is not so much about the poverty of angelic experience, than about most of ours: we become trapped in the mechanical and are unaware of what we are doing or we mope in a humdrum state not caring about what we are doing and what is occurring. For Dewey the aesthetic is present in all complete experiences that have meaning, purpose, unity, and are rich with recognized relations. "Wings" celebrates this element of ordinary experience when early on one of the angels says that he would just like to "come home like Philip Marlow and feed the cat."

Though the complacency of mechanical habits is an enemy of the aesthetic, Dewey's emphasis on the embodied actor and the example of "Wings of Desire" suggest that insufficient activity and over-receptivity are the chief causes of the anesthetic malady. Cornel West argues that Dewey "thought the crisis of American civilization was first and foremost a cultural crisis of distraught individuals, abject subjects, and ruptured communities alienated from their own powers, capacities, and potentialities" (*AEP*, p. 103). Dislocation and the resulting sense of powerlessness make impossible meaningful, purposive action, so also does an environment hostile to bodily experience or emotional involvement. A negligent inattention to the environment of experience, Seigfried suggests, is the principle error of modern pharmaceutical psychology:

Qualities do not essentially reside in organisms or in things but emerge in interaction with each other. But for purposes of control they may be treated as if located in one or the other. Psychologists, for instance, have traditionally treated women hysterics for their symptoms, thus substantiating the subjective pole and privatizing it, rather than taking the hysteric behavior as a quality of their interaction with the material surroundings. The latter would make it possible to objectively identify hysteria as a process whose roots, and therefore cure, are deeply entangled in objectively identifiable situations.¹⁶

This is where Dewey asks us to look, the interactions of the agents with the experienced environment. At a most basic level we are to remedy an extreme imbalance on the side of either doing or suffering or a lack of either.

V

Upin faults Dewey for not paying enough attention to the non-social environment. She sees Charlotte Perkins Gilman's and Michel Foucault's analyses of the experience of environmental (especially architectural) space as lacking from Dewey; yet, Dewey does consider the sustaining environment that one encounters in experience through the importance he gives to embodiment and activity.¹⁷ In "The Live Creature and Etherial Things" he makes an important comment calling for more attention to one's relation with space, the third, and most important, area of aesthetic environmental analysis. Dewey argues that, "space thus becomes [in experience] something more than a void in which to roam about, dotted here and there with dangerous things and things that satisfy the appetite. It becomes a comprehensive and enclosed scene within which are ordered the multiplicity of doings and undergoing which man engages" (*ET*, p. 544). He might be able to agree with Foucault that "space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power," but in some ways Dewey has a more interesting and complete account of space.¹⁸ It is not only interesting as a form of power and control; it is also a source of meaning. Space becomes a source of meaning as the environment becomes deeply ingrained with memories and desires, as a unifying element of experience.¹⁹

In "The Common Substance of the Arts" in *Art as Experience*, Dewey briefly discusses the importance of space in structuring and controlling experience. He argues that movement in space is qualitative, so that "near and far, close and distant, are qualities of pregnant often tragic import—that is they are stated not just measured by science."²⁰ It is not the "homogeneous space"²¹ described by Newton or a scientific account of a spatial grid that he is concerned with; rather it is lived, qualitative space that Dewey notes.²² Dewey's account of space is not that of Renaissance perspective, but that of the Mannerists. Experienced space is "infinitely diversified in qualities." He explains that "space is room, *Raum*, and room is roominess, a chance to be, live and move. . . . Lack of room is denial of life, and openness of space is affirmation of potentiality." Qualitatively space can be roomy or cramped, stifling or emancipating. Though it offers room to live, it is not experienced as container; rather "space and time are also occupancy, filling" (*ART*, pp. 209–10). A different spatial environment has a substantially different

feel as our relations with it vary, and our positions change our kinetic potential.

Most importantly, Dewey explores the relationships we have with the spaces of experience and how they fund our future interactions, helping them to be meaningful. For the purposes of anesthetic analysis, perhaps the fundamental element of his account of space is *place*, or particular charged spaces. Dewey explains how “places, despite physical limitation and narrow localization, are charged with accumulations of long-gathering energy” (*ET*, p. 544). Lived space is not encountered as a homogeneous “container” in which to move about as if it were nothing but a life-size map, but as a living cite with locales of personality.²³ Places are experienced as qualitative—as fearful, depressing, nostalgic, alienating, and lonely—since they are invested with accumulated meanings. Dewey argues that places are experienced through what we might call, from a distance, emotional transference or projection. Places are often encountered as having a temperament of their own, sometimes one so terrible that all one can do is flee.²⁴

It is not just the investment of familiar lived-space that Dewey is concerned with, but with how present experience is funded in our relations with new space. The ideal an-experience of new space is when the “past is carried into the present so as to expand and deepen the content of the latter.” Dewey never fully explains exactly what this amounts to, but he does say what it is not. The enrichment of present experience is thwarted and becomes anesthetic when one is merely engaged in either *identification* or *recognition*. Identification is a mode of experience deprived of relations, taken as separate cars on a train, related through succession but distinct. Dewey explains: “Identification nods and passes on. Or it defines a passing moment in isolation, it marks a dead spot in experience that is merely filled in. The extent to which the process of living in any day or hour is reduced to labeling situations marks the cessation of a life that is a conscious experience. Continuities realized in an individual, discrete form are the essence of the latter.” Mere identification precludes the past from enriching present experience by isolating and cataloguing it. Activity done as if from a check list threatens to anesthetize experience (*ET*, p. 545).

The other enemy of enriched experience, “recognition,” involves something similar to what James calls vicious intellectualism, the understanding of the new solely by forcing it into old categories. Dewey explains: “Mere recognitions occur only when we are occupied with something else than the object or person recognized. It marks either an

interruption or else an intent to use what is recognized as a means for something else. To see, to perceive, is more than to recognize" (*ET*, p. 545). Mere recognition makes experience shallow by reducing it to the same or using it for something else. The paradigm case of the "mere-recognizer" might be the tourist who experiences solely behind a camera or video recorder solely for future viewing. Walker Percy's discussion in "The Loss of the Creature" suggests that the problem of mere recognition may be more difficult to escape than Dewey had thought. Percy thinks that tourists can no longer see or have a genuine experience of the Grand Canyon as did Garcia Lopez de Cardenas when he stumbled upon it. Now our experience is heavily invested with prior knowledge and is strictly regulated by approved spaces for observation. Percy explains:

Seeing the canyon is made even more difficult by what the sightseer does when the moment arrives, when sovereign knower confronts the thing to be known. Instead of looking at it, he photographs it. There is no confrontation at all. At the end of forty years of preformulation and with the Grand Canyon yawning at his feet, what does he do? He waives his right of seeing and knowing and records symbols for the next forty years. For him there is no present; there is only the past of what has been formulated and seen and the future of what has been formulated and seen. The present is surrendered to the past and the future.²⁵

Percy diagnoses two general problems that plague present experience: obsession with the future and over-funding. The first problem is much easier to remedy than the second: put down the camera for a while and stop worrying about souvenirs. Dewey would emphatically agree with this analysis of the inability to have an experience of the Grand Canyon or other places we approach like it, but he does not give enough explanation of how to avoid the second problem, over-funding, which may be a much more serious difficulty than Dewey acknowledges.

Perhaps any place-experience, not just that of well known tourist attractions, can become over-funded through previous place-experience or routine. Everyday experience of familiar places may become anesthetic through patterns of action and habits of attitude, so that experience becomes blocked as the common closes one off to new relations. In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino raises the problem of over-funding. Marco Polo describes the city of Phyllis to Kublia Khan, where knowing you are only visiting "every point in the city offers surprises to your view":

But it so happens that, instead, you must stay in Phyllis and spend the rest of your days there. Soon the city fades before your eyes, the rose windows are expunged, the statues on the corbels, the domes. Like all of Phyllis's inhabitants, you follow zigzag lines from one street to another, you distinguish patches of sunlight from patches of shade, a door here, a stairway there, a bench where you can put down your basket, a whole where your foot stumbles if you are not careful. All the rest of the city is invisible. . . . Your footsteps follow not what is outside the eyes, but what is within, buried, erased. If, of two arcades, one continues to seem joyous, it is because thirty years ago a girl went by there, with broad, embroidered sleeves, or else it is only because that arcade catches the light at a certain hour like that other arcade, you cannot recall where. Millions of eyes look up at windows, bridges, capers, and they might as well be scanning a blank page. Many are the cities like Phyllis, which elude the gaze of all, except the man who catches them by surprise.²⁶

Evidently, Calvino does not find the charged quality of places helpful in having a meaningful experience that allows one to grow. Instead, he thinks this charged quality can trap one in the past, unable to have new, different experience. Dewey does not miss this point. Like the situationists, he acknowledges the necessity of the precarious, of the "shock [that] becomes an invitation" to transformation. But Dewey does not explain how we should go about inviting invitations; he just hopes they will come, or trusts us to figure out a solution once we recognize the problem.

Nevertheless, Dewey recognizes the significance of meaningful places in experience and the enriching role our relations with places can have when we encounter the new. Also, in live cities it is not at all clear that the necessary precarious and new is not just around the corner. Perhaps Calvino, having a pessimistic fit, has down played the enrichment past experience can have in the present and the significance of qualitatively invested space. Making up for Dewey's silence on the issue, Iris Marion Young, a little overly optimistic, puts forward the ideal of the "un-oppressive city" that would constantly invite new experience:

The temporal and spatial differentiation that mark the physical environment of the city produce an experience of aesthetic *inexhaustibility*. Buildings, squares, the twists and turns of streets and alleys offer an inexhaustible store of individual spaces and things, each with unique aesthetic characteristics. . . . Dwelling in the city means always having a sense of beyond, that there is much human life beyond my experience

going on in or near these spaces, and I can never grasp the city as a whole.²⁷

For Calvino, the problem is in the stance one takes toward experience, and the habits one gets into; for Young the solution is found in the quality of the environment. Obviously both must be addressed, and Dewey does discuss both, however slightly. Perhaps most importantly, Dewey's environmentalism, like Young's urbanism, asks us to look at the flip side of Emerson's epistemology of moods, at how the environment effects the stance we take.

VI

Dewey's diagnosis of the anesthetic malady is significant in that it clarifies our understanding of a prominent source of malaise. With a better grasp of just what is lacking in certain forms of experience, we can come to see the conditions that sap the vitality from our daily lives. Dewey points to two major factors contributing to the anesthetic malady—the type of activities we engage in and our relationships with space. Rather than focusing on art experiences, I followed Dewey's suggestion to look at art on experience. In "Wings of Desire" we found an account of the lackluster, humdrum activities of disembodied angels that was fundamentally in accord with Dewey's suggestion that repetitious behavior, lack of sensuous engagement, and some patterns of consuming diversionary entertainment were anesthetic factors. Beyond mere personal significance, Dewey's analysis of the problems with mechanistic behavior provides a novel, but fundamental basis for evaluating labor arrangements. Turning from activity to our relationship with space, we find in Dewey a compelling analysis of another source of meaning and misery. Not only do we attach a great deal of significance in the central places of our lives from which we in turn derive meaning, paradoxically, our relationships with space can become a hindrance to healthy experience when our attitude towards them become one of mere recognition or identification. Through his analysis of the character and causes of the anesthetic malady of experience, Dewey provides an important contribution to our understanding of some of the major obstacles to human happiness.

1. My approach to Dewey has been influenced by John McDermott, especially his *The Culture of Experience*, where he develops similar themes in his discussions of Dewey. John J. McDermott, *The Culture of Experience: Philosophical Essays in the American Grain* (New York: New York University Press, 1976); hereafter *CUL*.
2. John Dewey, "Having and Experience," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 564; hereafter *HE*.
3. Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), p. 186.
4. For an excellent, critical account of theories of aesthetic experience, see Noel Carroll, "Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experience," in *Beyond Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
5. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 102; hereafter *AEP*.
6. Jane S. Upin, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Instrumentalism Beyond Dewey," *Hypatia* 8 (1993): 38, 10; hereafter *CPG*.
7. John Dewey, "The Live Creature," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 535; hereafter *LC*.
8. In "The Experience of Activity," James argues that "the world experienced (otherwise called the 'field of consciousness') comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest. . . . the body is the storm centre of, the origin of co-ordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view." William James, *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 284 n. 180.
9. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 232.
10. John Dewey, "The Live Creature and 'Ethereal Things,'" in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 543; hereafter *ET*.
11. For a more ambitious proposal about the role of the body in aesthetics, see the chapter on "somaesthetics" in Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).
12. Julia Kristeva, "New Maladies of the Soul," in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 207.
13. Dewey's experiential criticism does not suffer from a lack of awareness of structural constraints on human action that require massive economic change. In *The Quest for Certainty* he argues that "the life which men, woman and children actually lead, the opportunities open to them, the values they are capable of enjoying, their education, their share in all the things of art and science, are mainly determined by economic conditions. Hence we can hardly expect a moral system which ignores economic conditions to be other than remote and empty" (p. 225).

14. On the subject of pragmatism and film, Ray Carney has interpreted the films of John Cassavetes through a Jamesian view of self-hood as relational, mutable, and developing through one's interactions with others. Ray Carney, *The Films of John Cassavetes: Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
15. For a critical account of the role of the precarious in Dewey's thought, see John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
16. Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 163.
17. See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 149.
18. Michel Foucault, "Space Knowledge, Power," in *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 253.
19. Jackson Lears, in *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), looks at our relationships with things of experience in a similar manner as Dewey looks at space and the practical objects of our daily lives.
20. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn, 1958), p. 207; hereafter *ART*.
21. In *The Quest for Certainty* Dewey describes the scientific view of space as "homogeneous space" (pp. 75, 78).
22. In *Art as Experience* Dewey contrasts the different treatments of space by science and art: "As science takes qualitative space and time and reduces them to relations that enter into equations, so art makes them abound in their own sense as significant values of the very substance of all things" (p. 207).
23. Dewey describes Newtonian space as "container space" in *The Quest For Certainty* (p. 113).
24. In "Haunting the House from Within: Disbelief Mitigation and Spatial Experience" (*Dark Thoughts: Philosophical Reflections on Cinematic Horror*, ed. Steven Schneider and Daniel Shaw [Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003]), I argue that Dewey's theory of spatial experience helps account for the curious effectiveness of haunted houses in horror.
25. Walker Percy, "The Loss of the Creature." *Message in the Bottle* (New York: Knopf, 1965), p. 48.
26. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weave (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), pp. 90–91.
27. Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal Community and the Politics of Difference," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 318.