
RESEARCH ESSAY

A Literary Montage

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The word 'aesthetic' is derived from the Greek word 'αἰσθητικός' (aisthetikos, meaning esthetic, sensitive, sentient). Aísthēsis covers the meaning of perception with the senses, feeling, hearing, and seeing. Aesthetic deals with perception, but only within very narrow boundaries can man observe the phenomena, which surround him; most of them naturally escape his senses, and mere observation is not enough. To extend his knowledge, he has had to increase the power of his organs by means of special appliances; at the same time he has equipped himself with various instruments enabling him to penetrate inside of bodies, to dissociate them and to study their hidden parts. Aesthetics is not bound to natural perception, nor to the products of natural perception such as painting. Man can extend the range of his perception by developing new tools, means, machines, and media. With all these instruments he discovers hidden parts of reality that are inaccessible to his natural senses. Therefore it is a mistake to think that only science starts, where perception ends. Also art in its using technology can teach us about the nature of things outside of us.

'Man does not limit himself to seeing; he thinks and insists on learning the meaning of the phenomena whose existence has been revealed to him by observation. So he reasons, compares facts, puts questions to them, and by the answers, which he extracts, tests one compared to another. This sort of control, by means of reasoning and facts, is what constitutes experiment, properly speaking.' (Claude Bernard)¹

In the philosophic sense, observation shows and indicates, and experiment teaches. Bacon appears to combine them, when he says: 'Observation and experiment for gathering material, induction and deduction for elaborating it: these are our only good intellectual tools.' What we lack is an understanding of the art of research and of the inevitable conditions of artistic discovery. But what we realize is that firstly there is no understanding without observation and experiment and that secondly, if we want to understand things beyond our natural range, we have to use instruments, tools, apparatuses, machines, and media. The idea of art governed by science is doubtless a surprise, only until explained with precision and understood. I have often spoken of the application of the experimental method to art, to the novel, and to science.

I really only need to adapt, for the experimental method has been established with strength and marvelous clearness by Claude Bernard in his *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*. This work, by a savant, whose authority is unquestioned, will serve me as a solid foundation. I shall here find the whole question treated, and I shall restrict myself to irrefutable arguments and to giving the quotations, which may seem necessary to me.

It will often be only necessary for me to replace the word 'doctor' by the word 'novelist' or 'artist' to make my meaning clear and to give it the rigidity of a scientific truth. The experimental method is the first feeble attempt to gain a foothold in the realm of truth.

I am going to try and prove for my part that if the experimental method leads to the knowledge of physical life, it should also lead to the knowledge of the passionate and intellectual life. The experimental art is the goal. In the arts experiment is but provoked observation. All experimental reasoning is based on doubt, for the experimentalist should have no preconceived idea, in the face of nature, society or man, and should always retain his liberty of thought. Experimental art and science explains not only the how and why of things. The observer listens to nature; the experimenter questions and forces her to unveil herself. The experimental artist unveils the truth.

At first sight, and considering things in a general way, this distinction between the experimenter's activity and the observer's passivity seems plain and easy to establish. But as soon as we come down to experimental practice we find that, in many instances, the separation is very hard to make, and that it sometimes

¹ Claude Bernard in *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (1927, 1957), 5.



Figure 1: Ein bioenergetisches paradoxon | a bioenergetic paradoxon Installation with living algae, Peter Weibel. The phototrophic growth of blue-green algae, *Anacystis nidulans*, demonstrates the production and dissipation of energy. Galerie nächst St. Stephan, Vienna, 1975. Credit: Peter Weibel.

even involves obscurity. This comes, it seems to me, from confusing the art of investigation, which seeks and establishes facts, with the art of reasoning, which works them up logically in the search for truth. Now in investigation there may be activity, at once of the mind and of the senses, whether in making observations or in making experiments. Experiments can verify observations. Observations can instigate experimental ideas. Ideas and theories have to be verified by observations and experiments. The observer relates purely and simply the phenomena which he has under his eyes. He should be the photographer of phenomena. He listens to nature and he writes under its dictation. But once the fact is ascertained and the phenomenon observed, an idea or hypothesis comes into his mind, reason intervenes, and the experimentalist comes forward to interpret the phenomenon. The experimentalist is a man who, in pursuance of a more or less probable, but anticipated, explanation of observed phenomena, institutes an experiment in such a way that; according to all probability, it will furnish a result, which will serve to confirm the hypothesis.

The artist or novelist is equally an observer and an experimentalist. In a practical sense we can say: in life men do nothing but carry out experiments on one another. The experimentalist is the examining magistrate of nature. The novelists are the examining magistrates of men and their passions. Artists are the examining magistrates of the elements and forms of space and time. The experimental artist works his experimental ideas not only to discover the truth of nature, but also the nature of truth. His experimental ideas go beyond observation, they are sometimes of a speculative nature but never arbitrary. His imagination is supported by some observed reality. The appearance of the experimental idea is entirely spontaneous and its nature absolutely individual, depending upon the mind in which it originates; it is a particular sentiment, a *quid proprium*, which constitutes the originality, the invention, and the genius of each one. Only the artist, who is a doubter, expressing his doubts by experiments, questioning observations, is the true savant.

In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s we registered the rise of experimental cinema, experimental poetry, experimental music, and experimental art in a way unsurpassed until now. In these decades the experimentalists created works, which belong to the most magnificent works of and for the human mind. In the 1980s money flooded in the art system returned to observable phenomena by natural perception such as painting. Artists wanted to become part of the mainstream, loved by mass media, and accepted by the dominant system, by



Figure 2: Blutglocke | Bloodbell, Lecture performance, Peter Weibel. The blood of the artist gradually draws off into a thin-walled vessel of glass. A video camera, placed next to the glass, serves to transmit this blood draining process onto a TV screen. Just as the blood increases inside the jar so does the level of red on the screen until the latter seems to be fully covered with blood. During the rising level of blood the artist gives a lecture on the topic of the end of time and cancels it the very moment the screen turns completely red. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, 2 – 18 February 1979. Credit: Peter Weibel.

galleries, museums, and collectors. They felt discarded, if they would carry on with the experimental quest and suppressed the term 'experimental.' They did not know, how deeply they were becoming slaves of mass culture. They did not know that one of the most important works for the progress of medicine was a book with the title *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* by Claude Bernard (1865), a classic of the philosophy of science, comparable to Descartes. And they did not know that one of the greatest novelists of all times, Émile Zola, defined his work *The Experimental Novel* (1880), which he based on Claude Bernard's work, in such a way that he could write: 'It will often be but necessary for me to replace the word 'doctor' by the word 'novelist'.' I feel myself in the tradition of this great scientist and novelist and therefore my sketch on experimental aesthetics is an experimental montage or rewriting of these two texts of these two 19th-century scholars in such a way that I only replaced the word 'doctor' and 'novelist' by 'artist.' My work is fundamentally experimental, based on observation, hypothesis, and experiment or on imagination, experiment, and verification. My contribution to these experimentalists is an equation for the digital age: truth is provability and provability is computability.

I sum up by repeating that the scientists, novelists, and artists observe and experiment, and that all their work is the offspring of the doubt which seizes them in the presence of truths and phenomena unexplained, until an experimental idea rudely awakens their genius some day, and urges them to make an experiment, to analyze facts, and to master them.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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