

# Existential aesthetics

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of what I propose to call “existential aesthetics” is to investigate the various ways in which art and certain kinds of aesthetic practice or aesthetic experience can be of existential importance to people. Section I provides a definition of existential aesthetics, while Section II delineates this emerging field from cognate areas of research. Sections III and IV explore various subcategories and examples of existential aesthetics. Section V seeks to identify important avenues for future research and Section VI presents some concluding thoughts about the potential of existential aesthetics and why philosophers should be encouraged to fulfill this potential.

Art and certain kinds of aesthetic practice or aesthetic experience can be of existential importance to people. Reading a particular novel may change a person’s life; a painting or a film can trigger an epiphany and turn one’s values upside down; engaging in some aesthetic practice may give meaning to one’s existence and have a profoundly therapeutic effect; one may grow to love—in the fullest sense of the word—a certain song or a beautiful natural landscape; a hike in the woods or a concert can count as one of the best and most cherished moments of one’s life; being a foodie, a punk, or a jazz lover may be so important to a person as to be constitutive of their identity, and so forth. The aim of what I propose to call “existential aesthetics” is to investigate and elucidate such experiences, practices, and effects from a philosophical perspective.

Existential aesthetics is not yet a fully acknowledged subarea of aesthetics in the way that environmental aesthetics or everyday aesthetics are. This is partly a matter of critical mass. Until rather recently, relatively few authors within the field of contemporary aesthetics would directly address the existential importance of art and aesthetics in their writings. But this is changing. There is now a growing body of scholarship that seeks to explore issues like the ones listed above. By bringing such work under the one heading of existential aesthetics, the aim of this article is to improve our understanding of what is already happening in this area, draw attention to its significance, and facilitate further and more focused philosophical activity in this direction.<sup>1</sup>

Section I provides a definition of existential aesthetics, while Section II seeks to delineate this emerging field from cognate areas of research. Sections III and IV explore various subcategories and examples of existential aesthetics. Section V seeks to identify important avenues for future research and Section VI presents some concluding thoughts about the potential of existential aesthetics and why philosophers should be encouraged to fulfill this potential.

## I

Existential aesthetics is philosophical work that investigates the various ways in which art and certain kinds of aesthetic practice or aesthetic experience can be of existential importance to people. Let me unpack this definition.

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There are two ways in which works of art, aesthetic experiences, or certain aesthetic pursuits can acquire existential importance: (1) they can deeply and profoundly affect (the course or quality of) a person's life; (2) they can be existentially illuminating in addressing certain existential questions.

(1) A work of art, an aesthetic experience, or an aesthetic practice may achieve such significance for a person that one can say, in a nontrivial and fundamental way, that one's life would not be (or have been) the same without it. For instance, falling in love with a film or a novel may be the start of a relation that lasts for decades and that changes the very fabric of your mental and emotional life. Engaging in some aesthetic practice, like painting or bird watching, may profoundly and unalterably shape who you are as a person. It may be part of what makes life worth living for you. Even a one-off aesthetic experience may shake you to your core and make you reevaluate some of the values and principles you hold dear.

(2) Existential questions deal with the most fundamental concerns we have as human beings: How to face our own mortality? How to cope with the human condition? What makes life worth living? (Benatar 2016, 3). An existential crisis, one could say, occurs when such queries become particularly pressing; when people question whether their lives have meaning, value, or purpose; when people are desperate to make sense of their existence. In such situations, it can happen that a work of art creates clarity and provides guidance. Or some form of aesthetic engagement may offer solace and comfort. As actor and filmmaker Ethan Hawke puts it in a recent interview:

Most people don't spend a lot of time thinking about poetry. Right? They have a life to live, and they're not really that concerned with Allen Ginsberg's poems or anybody's poems, until their father dies, they go to a funeral, you lose a child, somebody breaks your heart, they don't love you anymore, and all of a sudden, you're desperate for making sense out of this life, and, "Has anybody ever felt this bad before? How did they come out of this cloud?" Or the inverse -- something great. You meet somebody and your heart explodes. You love them so much, you can't even see straight. You know, you're dizzy. "Did anybody feel like this before? What is happening to me?" And that's when art's not a luxury, it's actually sustenance. We need it.

(Hawke 2020)

It should be clear that (1) and (2) will often co-occur. Works of art can be so helpful in dealing with existential questions that they change the course of a person's life in a very fundamental way. But (1) and (2) can also be instantiated separately.

A work of art may be existentially illuminating without therefore having a life-altering effect (e.g., by lending further credence to a view one already holds). Thus, a movie might illustrate and humanize certain existential quandaries in a way that one finds enlightening, but not to the extent that one can say that one's life would not be the same without it. For me, for instance, that has been the case with films like *Le Bonheur* (dir. Agnes Varda, 1965) or *Another Year* (Mike Leigh, 2010), which powerfully show how perfidious a naïve and insouciant pursuit of happiness can be. Conversely, (1) can be instantiated without (2). One can develop a deep and life-long attachment to a particular song even if that song does not in any way address existential questions. *Una Paloma Blanca* by the George Baker Selection plays such a key role in the life of the main character in Sander Kollaard's *Uit het Leven van een Hond* (2020). Of course, it is likely that much of the art that is discussed in existential aesthetics will deal with existential themes like death, the meaning of life, suffering, loneliness, and alienation. Such works tend to speak to and acquire significance for people who are burdened with existential concerns. But it is important to note that existential aesthetics is not limited to the discussion of such works. Poems, novels, films, or paintings that have vital significance to people do not have to address such topics directly or even indirectly.

Existential aesthetics is *philosophical* work that investigates the various ways in which art and certain kinds of aesthetic practice or aesthetic experience can be of existential importance to people. In other words, existential aesthetics is a type of philosophical aesthetics. This comes with the expectation that contributions to existential aesthetics will adhere to the standards and norms of professional philosophy. Art critics, literary critics, and film scholars may also expound on existential themes contained in their objects of study, but only if their work is sufficiently philosophical in nature will it qualify as existential aesthetics. Similarly, essays in existential aesthetics may draw on

personal experience and may take as their starting point an event or a work that has been of personal significance to the author. But essays of this type will only count as existential aesthetics if they live up to the standards of professional philosophy. Existential aesthetics is not to be confused with confessional literature.

## II

There is bound to be some overlap between existential aesthetics and other subareas of debates in aesthetics. For instance, an essay on the existential significance of music can be both a contribution to existential aesthetics and the philosophy of music (cf. [Levinson 2012, 2022](#)); reflections on the rituals of mourning may sit at the intersection of everyday aesthetics and existential aesthetics (cf. [Higgins 2020](#)). But overlaps of this sort are only to be expected. One finds them in all subdisciplines of philosophy. And they do not prevent existential aesthetics from having its own distinct identity, not to be subsumed under any other existing subarea of aesthetics. The latter is important.

Even though there are clear affinities between, say, existential aesthetics and everyday aesthetics, it would not be helpful to equate the two or to consider one a variant of the other. To begin with, existential aesthetics need not focus on everyday phenomena and will in fact often focus directly on works of so-called high art (see below for discussions of [Alcaez Leon 2019](#); [Maes 2020](#); [Saarinen 2020](#)). Equally, essays in existential aesthetics can focus on existentially significant experiences of nature. By contrast, as one of the pioneers in everyday aesthetics states, in everyday aesthetics “we are thinking of aesthetic issues that are not connected closely with the fine arts or with the natural environment” ([Leddy 2005](#), 3). Issues in everyday aesthetics may relate to interior decoration, personal appearance, workplace aesthetics, cooking, gardening, hobbies, and much of this will not have any existential import (see also [Irvin 2008](#)). For similar reasons, existential aesthetics cannot be subsumed under environmental aesthetics or the aesthetics of art.

Moreover, it is important to distinguish existential aesthetics from public philosophy. Essays in existential aesthetics will, by definition, address topics that are not exclusively of academic interest, but they are not necessarily aimed at the general public or at a very broad audience. They may be written in an accessible, jargon-free style, but this is not a prerequisite. Existential aesthetics is part and parcel of the academic discipline of philosophical aesthetics and so contributions to existential aesthetics can be straightforwardly academic in nature. Work in public philosophy may of course focus on topics and themes that have existential significance for people. But this need not be the case. Any subject, debate, or subarea in philosophy can in principle be picked up in public philosophy. In contemporary aesthetics, for instance, the ontology of art, the definition of art, and the nature of depiction are three of the most widely discussed topics. They could become the subject of a podcast, blog post, video essay, or some other form of public philosophy—even though discussions of this sort will rarely have a connection to existential concerns.

Finally, existential aesthetics is not to be confused with *existentialist* aesthetics. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the latter consists of contributions to aesthetic thinking made (or inspired) by existentialist philosophers such as Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Gabriel Marcel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre ([Fallico 1962](#); [Deranty 2019](#); see also [Fallico 1962](#)<sup>2</sup>). But as is clear from my definition of existential aesthetics (as well as from examples listed in Sections III and IV), one can engage in existential aesthetics without subscribing to the basic tenets of existentialism. Conversely, not everything that fits under the banner of “existentialist aesthetics” will thereby also qualify as existential aesthetics. Existentialist philosophers have made contributions to, for instance, the ontology of art, the philosophy of fiction, and the study of the imagination that have no direct bearing on the existential importance of art and aesthetics.

This is not to deny that some contributions will qualify as contributions to both existentialist and existential aesthetics. And just like everyday aesthetics is a relatively new branch of aesthetics, even though it finds inspiration and precursors in the long Buddhist tradition of writing about the aesthetics of the everyday, so, too, will the budding field of existential aesthetics undoubtedly find inspiration and precursors in the existentialist tradition of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> (In fact, as I suggest in the concluding section, existential aesthetics is one of the key areas where continental and analytic aesthetics may fruitfully meet.) But, for reasons mentioned above, it is important to distinguish the two and to emphasize that one can engage in existential aesthetics without subscribing to existentialism (or any other “isms”).

## III

There are different ways of carving up this emerging field. One way is to distinguish contributions to existential aesthetics based on their object of study. Some essays will focus on individual works of art, such as Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* in [Sheila Lintott \(2020\)](#) or *The Big Lebowski* in [Eberl \(2012\)](#) and [Julian Baggini \(2021\)](#). Other contributions may focus on a particular genre, art form, or time period. For instance, [Maes \(2020\)](#) analyzes the profoundly moving effect of sixteenth-century Renaissance portraits and describes how some of these portraits confront us with death and oblivion in a very powerful way—a theme that is also picked up by Jean-Luc Nancy in the chapter “Recall” of his book *Portrait* (2018). [Nick Riggle \(2020\)](#) starts from the observation that art can radically change our lives and selves and that many avant-garde artists in the twentieth century created participatory situations with the explicit aim to directly engage people in the course of their lives and move them to express themselves in transformative ways. But how can we authentically express ourselves in a way that transforms the self we express? Riggle develops the concept of “transformative expression” to address this paradox and enhance our understanding of the social and aesthetic character of our capacity to distance ourselves from our commitments and act in the expressive ways that participatory art invites. In “Agency and Identity in Music, or You Are What You Audit” (2022), [Jerrold Levinson](#) describes how different musical activities enable agency of different sorts, which in turn help form musical identities, which then enter into the overall identities of persons. To highlight music's existential significance Levinson writes:

The music I have responded to most deeply as a listener over the years is perhaps the dominant element in the fabric of my life, apart from relationships with other human beings. That music ... has permeated my existence and shaped my outlook, I would say, to an even greater degree than all the science, philosophy, literature, film, and visual art I have also absorbed in all that time. (2022)

This subject is also investigated in [Landon S. L. Peck and Patrick Grealy's “Autobiographical Significance of Meaningful Musical Experiences” \(2020\)](#) and [Joerg Fingerhut and colleagues' “The Aesthetic Self” \(2021\)](#).

Sometimes work in existential aesthetics presents findings that are meant to apply across the arts. In “Aesthetic Intimacy” [María José Alcaraz León \(2019\)](#) studies the sense of intimacy and the feeling of a profound connection that some artworks or artists can engender. This happens rarely, she notes, but when it occurs works or artists can come to acquire a very important place in the appreciator's life. She examines existing accounts of such intimacy (e.g., [Haapala 2006](#); [Nguyen and Strohl 2019](#)) before elaborating on her own conception. [John Holliday \(2018\)](#) focuses on the same phenomenon but then specifically in relation to fictional literature, while ideas of aesthetic attachments and obligations are explored further in the work of [Nick Riggle \(2015\)](#), [Robbie Kubala \(2018\)](#), [Julianne Chung \(2019\)](#). What it means to truly love a work of art—as opposed to merely judging it aesthetically pleasing or successful—and how such a love may have a lasting impact on one's life, is the subject of a number of recent publications ([Levinson 2016](#); [Cross 2017](#); [Maes 2017](#); [Shpall 2017, 2018](#); [Schaubroeck and Maes 2021](#); see also [Nehamas 2007](#)).

Existential aesthetics has things to say not just about the appreciation of art, but also about the making of art. [Jussi Antti Saarinen's](#) book, *Affect in Artistic Creativity: Painting to Feel* (2020), draws attention to a critically important but often overlooked reason for why painters paint: “It makes them feel alive and creative and liberated from the constraints of life. Painters may also paint in order to deal with loss – to grieve. It makes them feel sheltered. At home. Safe. And sound.” (2020, 1) He adds: “[p]ainters pursue the mentioned kinds of affects via painting because they galvanize, enrich, and (re) structure their overall sense of being. This means that painting and painterly affectivity carry considerable *existential import*” (5). Saarinen here builds on his earlier work on oceanic feeling in painterly creativity (2014). Painting, he argues, may induce oceanic feelings, which involve a sensation of self-boundary dissolution, and which can best be understood as shifts in ‘existential feeling’—a term he borrows from [Matthew Ratcliffe \(2012\)](#). Existential feelings are the preintentional background feelings that structure experience as a whole. They are ways of finding ourselves in the world. A sudden shift in existential feeling—something that the activity of painting can bring about—tends to have a

momentous impact on one's overall take on reality. Saarinen illustrates this with various anecdotes of painters who reported such life-changing experiences.

It should be emphasized that the purview of existential aesthetics is not restricted to the domain of art. In "Aesthetics, Ethics and the Meaning of Place" (2016), Arto Haapala is interested in cases where we are able to create a particularly deep relation to an aesthetic object. Inspired by Heidegger and Gadamer, he argues that this type of bond is often based in the particular characteristics of our "place." Place is understood here not in the straightforward physical sense. Rather, "in the existential sense that I want to define it, place is . . . the for-me-significant-and-meaningful-collection-of-entities" (258). Haapala goes on to argue that while originality and innovation are the driving motivation of all avant-garde art, familiarity is at the heart of "aesthetics of place." My place,

is dear to me because it is part of my existence. . . . when we are in constant contact with our surroundings and have created our very own personal ties to it, it becomes something to which we cannot have an indifferent attitude. Our place is too close to us for us to have any distance.  
(261; cf. Saito 2017)

In "How Memorials Mean, or How to Do Things With Stones" (2020), James O. Young asks why it is that war memorials can profoundly move people unacquainted with the dead, and with no commitment to their cause. Part of the answer, he suggests, lies in their ability to convey that war involves the tragic loss of human life. "People can be told this, but actual exemplification in stone of the magnitude of this loss seems to make the human toll of war inescapable and deeply affecting" (43).

How can the experience of beauty have a life- or self-transforming import, and why is it often explicitly denied any such importance in contemporary philosophy? This is the question addressed in Nick Riggle's "On the Interest in Beauty and Disinterest" (2016). As part of this endeavor, Riggle discusses several literary depictions of encounters with beauty that are deeply meaningful, including passages from Proust, Rilke, and John Williams's *Stoner*. As Riggle points out, "in contrast to the tradition of emphasizing disinterested pleasure, the self seems to be rather *involved* in these experiences, not diminished, obscured, or excluded — indeed, the self seems essentially to be clarified, illuminated, transformed" (7). More recently, Dominic McIver Lopes's *Being for Beauty* (2018) raises the question of how engaging with beauty contributes to a life that goes well (see Stecker 2019; Kubala 2020; Driver 2021 for critical discussion).

#### IV

As is clear from the brief and by no means exhaustive overview in Section III, contributions to existential aesthetics can have various objects of study: the focus can be on a particular aesthetic experience, an aesthetic practice, a (nonartistic) aesthetic object, or it can be on works of art, artistic genres or specific art forms. But contributions to existential aesthetics can also be distinguished based on whether they study the (1) existentially impactful or (2) existentially illuminating character of certain works of art, aesthetic experiences, or aesthetic pursuits. As was suggested in Section I, there are different ways in which these can acquire existential importance: (1) they can deeply affect (the course or quality of) a person's life; or (2) they can help a person address certain existential questions. Regarding the latter, one could make further subgroupings based on the specific existential questions that are being addressed, for example, how to face our own mortality or how to deal with the loss of meaning and the feeling of absurdity (e.g., Setiya 2017; Nikopoulos 2019).

Before I explain why (2) is particularly deserving of further development, let me first add some more examples to lend further substance to this subcategory. In "Love, Death and Life's Summum Bonum" (2021), Anna Christina Ribeiro argues that the *Before* trilogy directed by Richard Linklater is best seen as an example of *memento mori* art (2021, 4). *Memento mori*, the admonition to remember death, can take many forms, but the core idea is that an awareness of our inevitable end should bear on how we live. Ribeiro shows how Linklater's warning works in each of the movies and argues that with the *Before* trilogy, he makes the case for romantic love as life's "summum bonum."

Levinson (2012) presents "Life Lessons from Jazz Standards" and explains how songs like "Day In, Day Out" or "You Don't Know What Love Is" can help to address the sort of existential crisis

that love can bring about (and that Ethan Hawke evokes in the quote above). In “Irony, Disruption, and Moral Imperfection” (2020) Dieter Declercq discusses how engaging with ironic storytelling can yield existentially significant insight. Concretely, Declercq outlines how we can harness ironic media as resources to cultivate a sense of self-irony that helps us deal with moral imperfection. The problem is that if we set moral perfection as the standard for our actions, we will become neurotic, and feel constantly ashamed and guilty about failing to meet an unattainable standard. Stories can give us insight into what living such a life might mean and provide us with aesthetic resources to avoid it. (One of his key examples is the ironic representation of the moral perfectionist Chidi Anagonye in the comedy series *The Good Place*.)

Epiphanies can be understood—to use a phrase of L.A. Paul’s (2014)—as transformative experiences. Sophie Grace Chappell (2019) examines such moments of revelation drawing on numerous examples taken from literature. According to Chappell, an epiphany can best be understood as an overwhelming, existentially significant manifestation of value, often sudden and surprising, which feels like it “comes from outside” and which teaches us something new in a way that demands a response (e.g., of love, of pity, of creativity) (2019, 95). A different take on epiphany and aesthetic experience as a motor of self-transformation is presented by Matthew Pelowski and Fuminori Akiba (2011). Starting from examples taken from Proust, Kandinsky, and Nam Jun Paik, they introduce a five-stage model of art perception to account for art’s potential to generate perceptual and conceptual change and for the connection of art viewing to viewer personality.

What is particularly interesting about works of art that are existentially illuminating is the intrinsic link there appears to be between existential value and artistic value. This is not so for works that are “merely” existentially impactful. The main character in *Uit het Leven van een Hond*, Henk, is deeply attached to the song *Una Paloma Blanca* because it reminds him of his beloved dog Schurk who had a curious affection for this one song. But the fact that the song has this existential importance for Henk does not yet make it a masterpiece of songwriting. Henk himself calls the song garbage (“kutmuziek”) despite the meaning it has acquired for him over the years. So, in this case, existential value is in not in any way linked to artistic value. However, with works that are genuinely existentially illuminating there does seem to be this connection. For instance, *Nanette* is “a brilliant and masterful work of comedy,” Lintott (2020) argues, in part because Hannah Gadsby succeeds in telling the complex story of the existential trauma she endured as a lesbian who presents as gender-queer in a way that is funny but also deeply illuminating and confronting. Here, the existential value is part of the work’s artistic value.

Stecker (2012, 357) has proposed the following test to determine whether something counts as an artistic value: does one need to understand the art work to appreciate it is being valuable in that way? If so, it is an artistic value. If not, it is not. (In that case, it may be a nonartistic value that the artwork happens to possess, comparable to, say, its financial value.)<sup>4</sup> It seems clear, if we accept this criterion, that a work’s being existentially illuminating will count as an artistic value. It does not suffice to know, for instance, that a work deals with existential themes to know that it is genuinely existentially illuminating. One has to learn how the work explores these themes, what attitudes it manifests toward its subject matter, what it requires its audience to imagine and to feel, before one can assess this value. And so, it can be considered an artistic value, whereas simply having an existential impact on someone’s life does not (necessarily) qualify as such.

No doubt there is more to be said and explored about the distinction between (1) and (2)—not least because Stecker’s criterion has been contested (e.g., Dodd 2013; Harold 2020) and other questions impose themselves (e.g., Can the two categories be further refined? Is being existentially illuminating a form of cognitive value?). This is certainly one of the topics, along with other issues that I discuss in the next section, that merit further investigation.

## V

As a nascent area of research, it is difficult to predict how it will develop and evolve. Nevertheless, I think we can identify some important avenues for future research.

First, there are many questions that go to the very heart of what existential aesthetics is, which remain to be explored. How the existential importance of an artwork relates to its artistic value, is just

one of these questions. Let me list some others: Are there significant differences between art forms when it comes to the potential to gain existential importance? How exactly do we determine what it means for someone's life to change in a fundamental and nontrivial way, and what are the ways in which an aesthetic experience can engender such an effect? To what extent is this a matter of the appreciator's own agential activity? Should we distinguish between negative and positive aesthetic experiences in this regard? If one can come to truly love a work of art, can one also profoundly hate a work of art (in such a manner that it has a deep impact on one's life)? How does the existential importance of art and aesthetics compare to other endeavors and experiences that acquire such importance?<sup>5</sup> In addressing existential questions, how does art differ from philosophy? How can existing philosophical work on the meaning of life (e.g., [Taylor 1970](#); [Nagel 1979](#); [Nozick 1983](#); [Wiggins 1988](#); [Eagleton 2007](#); [Wolf 2010](#)) be brought to bear on the study of art and aesthetics? Are there existential truths or insights that can only be expressed by art? If an aesthetic pursuit can acquire existential importance, it can also lose that importance, but what is involved in such a loss and how does it come about? Can art help us cope with global existential threats like Covid 19 or climate change and, if so, how? And the list goes on.

Secondly, there is great untapped potential in exploring the boundaries and areas of overlap between existential aesthetics and other areas in philosophy and aesthetics. I want to highlight three in particular (though these are by no means the only possible growth areas).

### Black Aesthetics

All human beings face existential questions in virtue of being human. But there is no denying that racial conditions inflect the general existential considerations of despair, joy, meaningfulness, and absurdity. As Paul Taylor notes, such considerations often take shape in light of questions like this:

How is it possible to live under conditions of racial terror, exclusion and oppression? If the prospect of life's meaninglessness is terrifying, how much more terrifying is it to be enslaved, and stripped (as much as possible) even of the feeble existential armaments – religion, language, ties to one's ancestors and descendants – with which humans try to ward off despair? If, as Sartre says, hell is other people, what is it to face the threat of lynching, of other people treating the breaking and burning of your body as an occasion for celebration?

(2010, 11)

These existential challenges, Taylor writes, have not only been the subject of black aesthetic production—think of the entire blues canon—but “it has also been the subject of aesthetic criticism and theory, from studies of black music by Angela Davis and Leroi Jones to Saidaya Hartman's remarkable study of slaves being forced to dance for their masters, to ‘demonstrate’ their contentment with their condition.” (2010, 11; cf [Taylor 2016](#))

### Feminist Aesthetics and Body Aesthetics

Gender, like race, will have an impact on how existential quandaries are experienced and dealt with. For instance, while some have thought of midlife crises as only affecting men ([Jacques 1965](#)), others have drawn attention to how they may affect men and women differently ([de Beauvoir 1993](#)) and what we can learn from art and literature in this respect ([Hutchinson 2020](#), see also [Setiya 2017](#)). The aesthetics of sexiness, as a crucial but gendered element of selfhood, is examined in [Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin \(2016\)](#), whereas scholars like [Eliza Steinbock \(2019\)](#) have theorized the role of photography and cinema in practices of survival within trans communities. Notwithstanding such thoughtful contributions, so much research remains to be done in this area.

### Health Humanities

This burgeoning field of study draws on the arts and humanities to study health and well-being. Established practices like bibliotherapy, that is, the use of literature to help people cope with impactful changes in their lives or promote personality growth ([Marrs 1995](#), [Jack and Ronan](#)

2008), and expressive writing, that is, writing to help make sense of one's thoughts and emotions in periods of crisis and illness (Radley 1999, Lepore and Smyth 2002), already point to the potential for philosophy of art to contribute. Recently there have been some overtures in this direction—a case in point being Declercq's *Satire, Comedy and Mental Health* (2020), in which he draws on analytic aesthetics to examine how satire may help us to negotiate a healthy balance between care for others and care of self. But there is undoubtedly more potential to unlock here.

## VI

Existential aesthetics, I have proposed, is the branch of aesthetics that investigates the various ways in which art and certain kinds of aesthetic practice or aesthetic experience can be of existential importance to people. While there is existing work in this area, there is also great potential for expansion and, for a number of reasons, philosophers may be encouraged to fulfill that potential.

First, for many philosophers, existential concerns are what first drew them to the profession. Many aestheticians and philosophers of art, in particular, will have chosen their field of study because art or certain aesthetic pursuits are of deep significance to them. Undertaking work in existential aesthetics may be a way to reconnect with that original spark of interest. (It has been for me.) Moreover, in studying why and how art can be existentially illuminating, there is a real opportunity to make one's own philosophical work existentially illuminating.

Secondly, existential aesthetics addresses themes and topics that are never just of academic interest and it should thus be able to appeal to people outside of academia who have a genuine investment in the arts. This is less obviously the case for, say, technical discussions on the nature of depiction, value eliminativism, or the ontology of art works. When one introduces such debates to participants in the art world or to nonphilosophy students it is often necessary to explain in what way these debates may bear on other interests the audience may have. Most work in existential aesthetics will require much less of an effort in this regard. If the making or appreciating of art occupies an important place in one's life, or if one is contemplating certain existential questions and is anxious to make sense of it all, it should not be difficult at all to relate to the issues at play in existential aesthetics.

A further advantage—as is evident from the list of examples in Sections III and IV—is that existential aesthetics may help to bridge the divide between analytic and continental aesthetics. There was a time, as David Benatar points out, that analytic philosophers did not pay much attention to existential questions (2016, 2). Philosophers of art proved no exception. For instance, the standard and comprehensive anthology *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition* (Lamarque and Olsen 2004) contains not a single paper that would fall under the banner of existential aesthetics. “This situation stands in quite stark contrast to influential French and German philosophers who have lived up to, and to some extent, inspired the public reputation that philosophers have for grappling with these sorts of questions” (Benatar 2016, 1). This divide between analytic and continental philosophy, while never absolute, is now gradually dissolving. Analytic philosophers in general, and philosophers of art and aestheticians in particular, are engaging more and more with existential matters. When they do so they may both inspire and be inspired by work in continental philosophy. Thus, existential aesthetics could very well be one of the fields where the rapprochement between the two is made possible and even encouraged.

When I express the hope that there will be more existential aesthetics in the future, I am, of course, not claiming that this is the only or the best way of doing aesthetics. Rather, I believe it is a promising and exciting branch of aesthetics that perhaps has been unduly neglected. By highlighting this work here and discussing it under the heading of existential aesthetics, my aim has been to improve our understanding of what is already being done in this area, draw attention to its significance, and facilitate further and more focused philosophical activity in this direction.<sup>6</sup>



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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Of course, the idea itself that beauty or art can be of vital importance to people and society is not entirely new. Philosophers like Plato and Nietzsche have made that case each in their own way. But that is not to say that there has been no neglect of this topic in contemporary aesthetics. For comparison, think of R.W. Hepburn's influential essay "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty." While Kant, Burke, and other (1966) philosophers in previous centuries had written about beauty in and of nature, Hepburn noticed a distinct lack of engagement with this subject in the field of aesthetics as he found it. This was one of the pivotal moments that led to the emergence of environmental aesthetics. Likewise, I think we have seen as relative neglect of existential concerns when it comes to art and aesthetics—a neglect that is now gradually beginning to be addressed. (With thanks to two anonymous reviewers who pressed me to clarify this.)
- 2 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer who pointed me in the direction of Fallico's book and asked me to clarify the relation between existential and existentialist aesthetics.
- 3 The label of "existential aesthetics" is rarely used in earlier scholarship. When it does pop up it is typically employed to refer to work by, or inspired by, proto-existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard (e.g., [Stoker 2010](#)), Nietzsche (e.g., [Min'an 2007](#)), or Heidegger (e.g., [Haapala 2003](#), [Xue-wen, and Cheng 2009](#)). In other cases, it has a completely different meaning than the one I have proposed. For instance, in a relatively obscure essay from 1948 Maximilian Beck distinguishes between two types of aesthetic theories. Subjectivistic theories declare that beauty is merely a matter of consciousness, whereas objectivistic theories hold that beauty has an existence of its own apart from consciousness. Existential aesthetics, Beck argues, is a type of objectivistic aesthetics. He then elaborates on this, distinguishing between different fields of reality and defining beauty as "the act of entering into existence of forms" ([Beck 1948](#), 260). But as will be clear from even this short summary, Beck is operating with a very different understanding of "existential aesthetics" than the one I have presented.
- 4 See also [Stecker \(2010, 240\)](#). One finds a slightly revised and updated version of the test in: "A value V found in an artwork w is an artistic value if knowing or recognizing that w has V requires us to either experience w with understanding or to have the kind of understanding of w that is derived from interpreting it" [Stecker \(2019, 56\)](#).
- 5 Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.
- 6 I am very grateful to Jason Leddington, María José Alcaraz León, and Jerrold Levinson for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article. I have also benefited greatly from suggestions made by two anonymous referees and by the editors of the journal. Finally, I am indebted to Dieter Declercq with whom I have had multiple conversations on this subject and who has helped me to gain clarity on several of the issues discussed here.