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Sadness and beauty in art—Do they really coincide in the brain?

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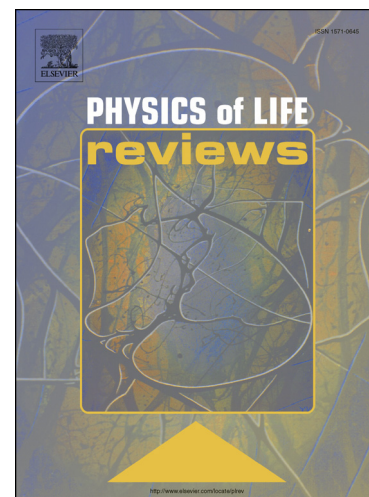
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**Sadness and Beauty in Art—Do they really coincide in the brain?
Comment on “An Integrative Review of the Enjoyment of Sadness
Associated with Music” by Eerola et al.**

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Eerola, Vuoskoski, Peltola, Putkinen, and Schäfer propose a comprehensive review and framework for approaching an age-old question—“why we listen to sad music?”—and relatedly, why can we even seem to “enjoy it”? They do this by introducing three levels of components, from the physiological/biological, to the cultural, to a collective. At each stage, they in turn propose “hedonic shifts”—perceptual, cognitive, or most probably neurobiological “*transformation[s] that seemingly turn a nominally negative emotion into intense pleasure*” (p. 2), or at the very least appear to remove or decouple the painful or negative component of sadness as experienced in aesthetic musical contexts. □

We applaud this approach, especially the comprehensive effort to collect the literature in regards to aesthetic sadness, as this is indeed both an age-old and a currently emerging issue in empirical aesthetics and the psychology of all art (Pelowski, 2015; Pelowski, Markey, Forster, Gerger, & Leder, 2017; Ishizu & Zeki, 2017). Their paper will provide a valuable resource for future studies, and, we also do think, the theoretical approach is successful in framing the question of sad music enjoyment in each level. However, there are still obviously outstanding questions regarding what is actually happening, within an individual, when a person enjoys sad music or, closer to our own domain, sad art. Especially, we target the possibility of this phenomenon not necessarily being a ‘mixed emotion’ as well as the corresponding hypothesized hedonic shift primarily on the proposed biological (i.e., brain) level. This commentary aims to supplement their framework from a psychological and neuroimaging point of view, proposing an alternative hypothesis and some questions for future consideration.

Hedonic shift at the biological level—a search for evidence?

Once again, in their paper, the authors portray the seemingly contradictory mixture of emotions underlying response to sad art—presumably of a negative (‘I must feel or be responding to some discrepancy or unfortunate emotional tone because I can report that it is indeed sad-inducing’) and a positive (‘I appear to have sought out this very stimulus and continue to experience it’) valence—as a hedonic shifting from the negative affect toward the positive. This suggests that two contradicting affects do not emerge simultaneously, but instead, change (shift) one from the other over some time period. They support this argument by providing a good deal of evidence for such transformations at especially the social and cultural levels. However, as the authors mention, when considering “*the mechanisms and*

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