

## PROUST WASN'T A NEUROSCIENTIST

---

MURRAY SMITH

My response falls into two parts. In the first part, I begin by addressing the concerns raised by Sherri Irvin regarding the role of neuroscience within the model of triangulation advanced by *Film, Art, and the Third Culture* (hereafter: *FACT*). This leads me through a variety of considerations, including the distinction between *explanandum* and *explanans*, the nature of the supervenience relation holding between neural states on the one hand and psychological and phenomenological states on the other, and the methodological or epistemological character of triangulation. In unpacking the latter claim, I draw a comparison between biological motion and the biological – or, better, biocultural – cognition that a naturalistic approach to the mind points us towards. In the second part of my response, I pick up on Elisabeth Schellekens's focus on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience, and my particular conception of it. I seek to allay Schellekens's worry that my account of aesthetic experience encompasses 'too much' by emphasizing again the importance of the *explanandum–explanans* distinction, and relatedly, by stressing the distinction between the *content* of aesthetic experience and the *explanation* of such experience. I stress the differences between the explanatory goals of the theorist with the creative and aesthetic goals of the artist (while acknowledging that theorists need to observe a principle of explanatory relevance, lest their theories become 'bloated' in the way Schellekens fears). I conclude by arguing that a naturalized aesthetics is able to accommodate the particularity of specific artworks and of individual appreciators, and that such accommodation is not in tension with the tradition of scientific psychology.

I

In her commentary, Sherri Irvin recognizes the centrality of the triangulation model to the project advanced in *FACT* – the effort to coordinate evidence from introspection and phenomenal reflection, psychology, and neuroscience in the study of the mind in general, and in relation to aesthetics and aesthetic experience in particular. In commenting on the model and the book, Irvin points to a number of ways in which we share common ground. In agreement with both Irvin and Elisabeth Schellekens – and indeed, I believe, with Nanay – I take the clarification and explanation of aesthetic experience to be central to the enterprise of philosophical aesthetics. Irvin also notes the 'anti-reductivist flavour'

of *FACT*, notwithstanding the seriousness with which I take (neuro)science.<sup>1</sup> One way in which this is manifest, as Irvin points out,<sup>2</sup> is in my concern with the overreaching and 'overinterpretation' widespread in cognitive neuroscience, where bold claims and speculative edifices are built on the basis of preliminary and often very limited neural evidence. The most sustained critique of this tendency is to be found in Chapter 2 of *FACT*, where I coin the expression 'neural behaviourism' to describe and refer to that strain of neuroscience which treats neurophysiological evidence as if it spoke for itself – as if it were meaningful *without* being intermapped onto evidence from experience and psychological theory.

But Irvin has doubts about the level of confidence that I place in neuroscience (or at least the neuroscience currently available to us): the findings of contemporary neuroscience, she states, 'tend to be pretty primitive' and 'coarse-grained'.<sup>3</sup> More specifically and more fundamentally, Irvin challenges my view that there is an 'interdependence' among the three types or levels of evidence which makes it impossible to hierarchize their significance. She argues that, at least with respect to aesthetic experience, there is an asymmetry among the levels which makes phenomenological evidence – the evidence of experience itself – the most significant kind of evidence available to us. She holds this because 'when it comes to art and aesthetic experience, the phenomenological is irreducibly not just one of the legitimate targets of our interest, but the primary one'.<sup>4</sup> Irvin also contends that, so long as we hold that mental properties supervene on neural properties, psychological evidence takes priority over neural evidence. I'll return to the topic of supervenience shortly. But the immediate point to take stock of is that, on Irvin's view, in contrast to mine, there is a clear hierarchy among the three types of evidence constitutive of triangulation, in which phenomenology is at the top and neurophysiology at the bottom (neural evidence is 'subservient' to the other kinds of evidence).<sup>5</sup>

Note, however, that there appears to be a strong and a weak version of Irvin's objection to the role of neuroscience in aesthetics. Certain passages in her commentary imply that the problem is (or might be) that neuroscience is too young as a science either to make much of a contribution, or for us to know whether it might make such a contribution, to our understanding of aesthetic experience:

---

<sup>1</sup> Sherri Irvin, 'The Nature of Aesthetic Experience and the Role of the Sciences in Aesthetic Theorizing: Remarks on the Work of Nanay and Smith', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 105.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 105, 107.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

the suggestion that the three levels exist in 'a tail-chasing form of interdependence' strikes me as premature: the present coarse-grained state of much neuroscientific knowledge doesn't permit it to have a very robust explanatory role. It remains to be seen whether the apparent primacy of the experiential level will recede as the underlying neuroscience becomes more sophisticated.<sup>6</sup>

Other passages imply a stronger, more conceptual objection, based on the fact that both our experiences and our psychological capacities supervene on neural states and processes. Given this, Irvin argues, 'the prospect of neurophysiological data making an independent contribution to aesthetic theorizing, even once the science is far more advanced', is in doubt.<sup>7</sup>

Here it is important to introduce two rejoinders to the strong version of Irvin's objection. The first concerns the peculiar status and role of experiential evidence in the model of triangulation advanced by *FACT*. Such experience, I argue, plays a dual role in theories of aesthetic experience: it functions as both *explanandum* and *explanans*.<sup>8</sup> How can that be? As Irvin stresses, our aesthetic experience – whether of artworks, natural phenomena, or the facets of everyday experience – is the very thing which theories of aesthetic experience seek to *explain*. But I contend that, additionally, what we have to say about aesthetic experience – the way it feels to us; the way we characterize it – plays a role in our *explanations* of such experience. This is one of the peculiarities of the science of mind which marks it off from all other domains of science, where the pursuit of the 'view from nowhere' is an appropriate governing ideal. That ideal of course has an important place in the cognitive sciences as well. But unless we take the stance that the 'view from somewhere' – the data of first-person experience – is entirely epiphenomenal, experiential evidence is bound to figure in our explanations, even if such evidence is defeasible.

To take one example from *FACT*: according to the orthodox theory of suspense, suspense arises when, in engaging with an unfolding sequence of events, we hope for certain outcomes, fear for others, and, crucially, lack knowledge of the outcome. But this gives rise to the problem of 'anomalous suspense'<sup>9</sup> – the apparent experience of suspense in contexts where we do know the outcome of the narrative in question (either because it is a well-known real-world narrative or because of repeated engagements with specific fictional narratives). Various solutions to this problem are possible, some of which hold that the emotion we

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>8</sup> Murray Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

experience in such contexts really is suspense. But if we wish to defend the idea that suspense *is* or *can be* experienced where we already know the outcome of a narrative, experiential evidence will be relevant. Thus when my body tightens up at the prospect of the hijacking of the flight depicted in *United 93*, and it feels to me like I am experiencing suspense in relation to that possible event, that counts as one form of evidence in favour of the hypothesis that I am experiencing suspense.

We need to be careful here with regard to what the evidence of experience is evidence of – what exactly is the *explanandum*? There are two candidates: our experience itself and the psychological capacity associated with the experience. Can our experience be evidence of our experience? There is something worryingly circular about that thought. Our experience (qua experience) just is constitutive of what we want to explain, and in that sense we can't be wrong about our experience. But we can be mistaken about the psychological skill or capacity the exercise of which creates the experience. As I note in *FACT*, our ordinary experience gives us the impression that our visual system affords us a uniformly coloured and detailed visual field. But as research on peripheral vision and on inattention and change blindness shows, it doesn't! Christopher Chabris and Dan Simons refer to this phenomenon as the 'illusion of attention'. They note that 'we vividly experience some aspects of our world, particularly those that are the focus of our attention. But this rich experience inevitably leads to the erroneous belief that we process *all* of the detailed information around us.' So our visual experience is characterized by this illusion, and such experience gives rise to mistaken beliefs about our visual capacities.<sup>10</sup> (The same may be true of suspense; our experience of what feels like suspense in anomalous cases, like those noted above, may be misleading; the jury is out.) Thus it is cogent to think of our visual experience as evidence for our capacities or skills – misleading evidence, as it turns out in this case – in a way that it isn't cogent to think of experience as evidence of experience.

My second response to the strong version of Irvin's objection focuses on the role of supervenience. Irvin and I are in agreement 'that the phenomenological and the functional/cognitive supervene on the physiological'.<sup>11</sup> But we differ on the significance of this relationship. While I grant that there is an ontological hierarchy among the levels in the triangulation model,<sup>12</sup> I insist on two further points. First, that the more basic level of neurophysiology in the ontological

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 61, 235nn11–13; Christopher Chabris and Dan Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuition Deceives Us* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Irvin, 'Nature of Aesthetic Experience', 107.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 234n6.

hierarchy should not lead us to make any fallacious inferences about the (ir)reality of psychological states or conscious experiences: the ontological hierarchy gives us no reason to think that the mind in general or consciousness in particular are any less real than the brain states on which they supervene. Although Irvin does not address this point, I am confident that here, too, we are in agreement.

Where there is a difference, if not a disagreement, between us concerns the nature of triangulation. At least by implication, Irvin treats triangulation as an ontological claim; that is what the supervenience relation describes. But I frame triangulation in *methodological* terms: 'no item within these bodies of evidence is insulated from revision or rejection – so elimination of even long-established, cherished beliefs and theories is certainly possible. In addition, no straightforward methodological hierarchy among the three levels of analysis is established: no one of the three types of evidence necessarily overrules the others.'<sup>13</sup> The idea here is that, in our search for an understanding of the mind and of aesthetic experience, we can begin with evidence of any type – experiential, functional, neural – as all of them will (or at least can) lead us into the space of explanation, where any given piece of evidence may intersect with any other. I grant that, given supervenience, differences at the base level of the brain may not manifest in differences at the supervening level of the mind; but of course they can and often do, and that is all that is necessary to 'license' attention to neural evidence from a methodological point of view. The example of mirror neurons is telling in this respect: mirror neurons were initially discovered by accident when the neuroscientists involved were running experiments designed to test for a quite different set of hypotheses about brain function in macaque monkeys.<sup>14</sup> But once this unexpected and anomalous neural data was on the table, hypotheses about the functional and experiential states it might be underpinning could be (and were) framed. Note that this is precisely why I don't claim that 'neurophysiological data [makes] an *independent* contribution to aesthetic theorizing',<sup>15</sup> but rather that it exists in a relation of *interdependence* with functional and experiential states. This interdependence claim cuts both ways as far as neuroscience is concerned – neural evidence is given a significant role, but it degenerates into meaningless 'neurobabble' if cut loose from experiential and functional evidence and interpretation.

One might also make this methodological point in epistemological terms: triangulation bears on how we gain knowledge of the mind – how we discover its mechanisms, processes, and other characteristics. It leaves the ontological

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 64–65.

<sup>15</sup> Irvin, 'Nature of Aesthetic Experience', 100 (my emphasis).

hierarchy, described by the supervenience relation, intact. Ontologically, a tiger is a tiger because of its genetic make-up; but we get to *know* if a tiger is a tiger by looking at its observable features and behaviour. What cuts ice epistemically may be ontologically blunt.

What more can be said in support of the methodological and epistemological value of triangulation in general and the neural level of evidence embedded within it in particular? In a striking passage which resonates strongly with those trends in contemporary philosophy of mind which accord substantial weight to the body and the brain – such as embodied and 4EA accounts of the mind – Darwin recorded the following thought in one of his notebooks:

To study Metaphysic, as they have always been studied, appears to me to be like puzzling at Astronomy without Mechanics. – Experience shows the problem of the mind cannot be solved by attacking the citadel itself. – The mind is a function of the body. – We must bring some stable foundation to argue from.<sup>16</sup>

We might consider Darwin's idea here in connection with the literature on *biological motion*. It is now well established within perceptual psychology that our minds are adapted to detecting the distinctive contours and rhythms of biological motion, as it is manifest in the movement of humans and other animal species. Among the possible forms of motion, biological motion is quite distinctive, and quite different from the artificial, technologically enhanced forms of motion we humans have invented. (Of course, it is a racing certainty that some future technologies will emulate biological motion, for various purposes.) And the distinctiveness of biological motion is ineluctably tied up with – one might even say constituted by – the bodily forms of animals. Darwin is inviting us to make the leap and accept that the mind, just as surely if rather more subtly, is tied up with the form of the body and the brain (the brain being nothing other than a particularly intricate part of the body): 'The mind is a function of the body.' John Searle, Patricia and Paul Churchland, and a great many other contemporary philosophers of mind would agree. Searle, for example, has argued that 'the brain is a biological organ, like any other, and consciousness is as much a biological process as digestion or photosynthesis.'<sup>17</sup> The mind cannot be understood without an understanding of its architecture, and the architecture of the mind depends

---

<sup>16</sup> Charles Darwin, *Charles Darwin's Notebooks, 1836–1844: Geology, Transmutation of Species, Metaphysical Enquiries*, ed. Paul H. Barrett et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Notebook N, 564; quoted in Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 57, 64.

<sup>17</sup> John R. Searle, 'Consciousness and the Philosophers', review of *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, by David J. Chalmers, *New York Review of Books*, 6 March 1997, 50.

at least in part on the architecture of the brain (or the brain-and-body). We can speak not only of biological motion, but of *biological cognition*.

On this view, the brain is the vehicle of biology, the organ that evolved in the human species in such a way as to create a behavioural and cognitive gulf between *Homo sapiens* and all other species. But we should not take talk of biological cognition to exclude culture as another shaping force in human cognition. As I argue in Chapter 6, phylogenetically speaking, culture emerged from our biology and then developed as an additional domain in which human cognition is forged, in tandem with underlying biological processes; according to one version of this view, human evolution has occurred through 'gene-meme co-evolution'.<sup>18</sup> From an ontogenetic and development point of view, the psychology we are left with must be understood in *biocultural* terms; talk of 'biological cognition' is not intended to deny or obscure the importance of culture in cognition.<sup>19</sup> Culturally shaped cognition is to biological cognition as artefactual motion is to biological motion: both artefactual motion and cultural cognition build on affordances in their respective domains, for movement in the physical world and thought in the space of reasons and cognition.

## II

Schellekens, like Irvin, puts the nature of aesthetic experience at the centre of her response, recognizing the significance of the issue to both *FACT* and *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*. She notes that both books are concerned with what is 'phenomenologically distinct about aesthetic experience',<sup>20</sup> arguing that this is a litmus test for any naturalistic account, since (Schellekens contends) naturalism tends to be reductive, erasing the very distinctiveness that it must capture and explain in order to succeed. Irvin, as we have seen, remarks on the efforts I make to resist such reduction, giving rise to the 'anti-reductivist' aroma of *FACT*. Schellekens captures my characterization of aesthetic experience very effectively, drawing on the term *retrospection* to evoke both the idea of 'savouring' rather than merely having an experience, and to point to the *complex temporality* and *reflexive intentionality* implied by this conception of aesthetic experience. 'This "savouring" or "retrospection"', Schellekens writes,

<sup>18</sup> Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Consider, for example, the case of sociomoral disgust alluded to in my 'Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Précis', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 98.

<sup>20</sup> Elisabeth Schellekens, 'Psychologizing Aesthetic Attention', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 111, also 114.

combines a whole host of states and abilities both in what we might call its production, its phenomenology, and its aftermath. It is not only reflective and emotionally laden, it is also self-reflective and affectively enjoyed *as* reflection or retrospection. We have an experience and at the same time an experience of that experience: aesthetic experiences are enjoyed, felt, and retrospected upon in a special way qua objects of a special form of self-consciousness which is distinctive of aesthetic attention.<sup>21</sup>

In her commentary, Irvin sounds a note of dissent – or least notes an important qualification – on this topic, to the effect that ‘savouring does not necessarily imply enjoyment, but it does imply really tasting as opposed to just absently swallowing.’<sup>22</sup> While the pleasurable character of aesthetic experiences of which Schellekens writes – such experiences are ‘enjoyed’ – appears to have a kind of normative weight, neutral or negative aesthetic experiences are surely not only possible, but part of the landscape of actual aesthetic experience. True, we ought to seek positive aesthetic experiences, but often enough they fail or disappoint. Likewise, we ought to seek the right and the good – but things don’t always work out that way. ‘Disvalue’ is an aspect of both ethics and aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> So what is basic to aesthetic experience in this respect is keen and self-conscious attention to the quality of the experience, however pleasurable or otherwise the experience turns out to be.

Schellekens’s description, taken alongside Irvin’s qualification, pinpoints the *kind* of aesthetic experience I strive to theorize in *FACT*.<sup>24</sup> But Schellekens worries, if I can pursue the metaphor introduced by Irvin, that all may not be well underneath the aroma and the flavour of the account. The description of the phenomenon to be explained – aesthetic experience – may be attractive; the naturalistic theory advanced to explain it is greeted more cautiously. Schellekens worries in particular that I am ‘trying to fit too much into the account of what is supposed to be our distinctly aesthetic phenomenology’.<sup>25</sup> I take it that

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 115. Chapter 7 emphasizes the retrospective dimension of aesthetic experience, especially as it bears on empathy (Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 196–97). There may also be a connection between the retrospective aspect of aesthetic experience and the ‘lingering effect’ of such experience, as discussed by Nanay and Schellekens. See Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16–17; Schellekens, ‘Psychologizing Aesthetic Attention’, 112–14; Bence Nanay, ‘Responses to Irvin and Schellekens’, *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 120–22.

<sup>22</sup> Irvin, ‘Nature of Aesthetic Experience’, 102.

<sup>23</sup> On this point, see my review of *Aesthetic Pursuits: Essays in the Philosophy of Art*, by Jerrold Levinson, *Philosophy* 93 (2018): 467–69.

<sup>24</sup> Paisley Livingston has queried whether the conception of aesthetic experience explored in *FACT* is, in fact, too narrow and too demanding. See Paisley Livingston, ‘Questions about Aesthetic Experience’, *Projections* 12 (2018): 71–75; and my response, ‘*Film, Art, and the Third Culture* – A Response’, *Projections* 12 (2018), 116–19.

<sup>25</sup> Schellekens, ‘Psychologizing Aesthetic Attention’, 115.



Schellekens's worry here arises from the very 'thickness' of the thick explanation that, as we have seen, she rightly adduces goes hand in hand with the methodology of triangulation. If everything from neural networks and mental modules to selection pressures and evolutionary niches to affect programs and extended minds goes into the theoretical mix, what hope is there that the intricate structure of retrospection is going to survive, let alone be discerned and explained?

Here again it is important to hang on to the *explanandum–explanans* distinction. Those items which seem most alien to descriptions and explanations of aesthetic experience, including neuroscientific evidence, reference to subpersonal mechanisms and processes, as well as the adaptive unconscious and implicit bias, play their role in the engine room of explanation. They bear upon what Schellekens refers to in the quotation above as the 'production' of aesthetic experience. Generally speaking, none of these factors shows up in our conscious experience, even if their consequences do; and so none is part of the content of aesthetic experience. 'Exactly what do we find behind the "door [to] the first-person perspective within a scientific approach to the mind"?' asks Schellekens.<sup>26</sup> We find, exactly, the contents of experience – what is available, with all its fallibility and fragility, to introspection and phenomenological reflection. The point is 'simply' that, to reiterate one of my responses to Irvin, such aesthetic experience is not only the *target of explanation*, but – conceived in functional terms, as a distinctive kind of capacity – one type of evidence that we can marshal within the *explanation of* that very target phenomenon (see p. 128). It is easy to understand how, given this dual role, it might seem like I am cluttering up the space of aesthetic experience itself with a lot of apparatus that doesn't belong there. That is why the *explanandum–explanans* distinction is so vital.

Relating my exploration of Edgar Reisz's *Heimat* (1984–2013) to Nanay's treatment of certain works by Paul Klee, Schellekens suggests that these analyses may 'affect' our experience of the artworks concerned.<sup>27</sup> With regard to *FACT*, however, *affecting* the appreciator's experience is not my primary goal. That's the job, in the first instance, of the artist by means of the artwork, and, in the second, of the critic through their criticism of the work. As a theorist, I would substitute the word 'explain' for 'affect'; explanation, once again, is the name of the game in theory construction. I insist upon drawing firm lines between three roles we can play in relation to artworks, and the distinct activities that playing these roles entail: *making* artworks is distinct from *appreciating* them, and both are distinct from *explaining* them. That is not to deny that there are points of connection and similarity, nor that the same individual can occupy these different roles with

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 116, citing Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 117.

<sup>27</sup> Schellekens, 'Psychologizing Aesthetic Attention', 116.

respect to the same artwork at different times, nor that at a very abstract level, all three activities might be absorbed into some super-category (of all phenomena related to the aesthetic).

The distinct activities of making, appreciating, and explaining also relate to Irvin's sceptical attitude to the relevance of neuroscience, when she argues:

we do not need to descend to the physiological level to make sense of [various examples examined in *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*]: as Smith notes, artists know how to manipulate audience attention and exploit unique features of the perceptual system in order to produce distinctive aesthetic effects, and their knowledge is derived not from neurophysiology but from careful observation of how certain kinds of effects captured on film are productive of particular kinds of experience.<sup>28</sup>

As far as the activity of the artist is concerned, I agree. That is why, *pace* Jonah Lehrer, Proust was *not* a neuroscientist.<sup>29</sup> Lehrer makes the case that many of the discoveries of cognitive neuroscience – for example, with respect to memory, language, and visual perception – were prefigured in the work of artists such as Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, and Paul Cézanne. I have no objection to the rhetorical conceit of Lehrer's title: that artists can convey in artistic form an understanding of aspects of the human mind, and that psychology often confirms the wisdom of the arts. But we need to be wary of conflating the very different kinds of enquiry and knowledge afforded by the arts and sciences. Proust illuminated the mind, but his path to that illumination wasn't via the scientific study of the brain (as Lehrer well knows, of course). The theorist is engaged in a different activity, and that is why drawing on the findings of neuroscience – if not actually doing some neuroscience – take on a relevance and justification for the theorist which they lack for the artist.

So Proust wasn't a neuroscientist in the sense that he didn't need to draw upon neuroscience (or any scientific psychology) in order to create his works; nor do we need to appeal to neuroscience or scientific psychology in order to appreciate them. But if we want to *theorize* and *explain* why Proust's techniques and novels work as they do – and especially if we want to generate thick explanations – then neuroscience (and scientific psychology in general) will be a useful resource. Nonetheless, multilevel theories such as the one advanced in *FACT* do face a problem of *explanatory bloat* – if we can move sideways into context, as the advocates of thick description urge, and downwards into the physical structures subvening mental states and processes, as I contend by defending a parallel notion of thick explanation, then where do we draw the line for what is to count as explanatorily relevant?

<sup>28</sup> Irvin, 'Nature of Aesthetic Experience', 108.

<sup>29</sup> Jonah Lehrer, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011).

The problem of explanatory bloat calls for a principle of explanatory *relevance*. I can't offer one here; but I can suggest the outline of such a principle through an example from *FACT*. There I make the case that in shaping our responses to the antagonist in *Saboteur* (1942), through the mechanism of affective mimicry, 'an aspect of the biology of emotions is enlisted [by Hitchcock] in a cultural and political cause.'<sup>30</sup> And I offer this up as a prime case of thick explanation. But not, I hope, an indigestibly thick explanation. The explanation cuts a path across the biological and cultural levels, identifying a particular set of causal factors: Hitchcock intuitively understood – he was no more a neuroscientist than Proust – through his experience as a film-maker, how the expressions and movements of performers affected audiences, as is evident from both his film-making practice and his reflections on his craft in interviews. And he was alert to the various constraints and pressures his films were subject to (including those of the Production Code Administration, the Second World War, and more broadly, the Hollywood system).

Schellekens also suggests that questions 'arise for anyone who seeks both to naturalize (and in that sense at least normalize) *and* to customize the aesthetic at the same time.'<sup>31</sup> Earlier in the same passage she suggests that the alignment of naturalized aesthetics with scientific psychology might be taken as an advantage, insofar as its 'explanations are grounded in information, facts, evidence, or data which in some sense at least apply across aesthetic agents, regardless of all the purely personal, idiosyncratic qualities which can make us such unreliable aesthetic judges.'<sup>32</sup> Schellekens's remarks on this topic resonate with the focus of Chapter 8, which seeks to reconcile the traditional emphasis on the particularity of art with the impetus towards generalization characteristic of scientific and philosophical theorizing. There I argue that the incompatibility between art and these explanatory enterprises is more perceived than real: a naturalistic theory of art can reveal those recurrent patterns, widespread practices and shared experiences which are manifest in the aesthetic universe, while setting into relief the unique and particular aspects of individual artworks and other aesthetic objects. (Note that Nanay explores the presumed 'uniqueness' of artworks, the 'completely new and often very rewarding experiences' that they afford,<sup>33</sup> and the implications of such uniqueness for aesthetic evaluation, in Chapter 6 of *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*. He concludes, similarly, that the explanatory resources available in

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 146.

<sup>31</sup> Schellekens, 'Psychologizing Aesthetic Attention', 116.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Nanay, 'Précis', 92.

the philosophy of perception and vision science can shed light on uniqueness in the aesthetic domain.)

The same principle applies to the idiosyncrasy of individuals. Scientific psychology doesn't deny that individuals vary in a myriad of ways; indeed some branches of psychology – like personality psychology – focus on this very fact. Human variability – individual and cultural – is a feature of human existence which, one way or another, any scientific approach to human behaviour has to take into account. And so this recognition must have a place within a naturalized aesthetics. It is true that, when we assess the design features of an artwork, we are seeking to understand how the work draws on certain human capacities and existing knowledge in order to create a certain kind of experience. But it is no strike against the theory to admit that, where particular perceivers lack the appropriate background knowledge, or the perceptual or cognitive or emotional capacities, or the right disposition to engage with the work, then the qualia the work is designed to elicit will not emerge and the experience will not be had. In fact any other conclusion would be inconsistent with the scientific temper of naturalistic philosophy, since the background knowledge, the mental capacities, and the appropriate disposition are all causal preconditions for the work to work as it has been designed to work.<sup>34</sup> Both Nanay, in *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Perception*, and Todd Berliner, in his recent *Hollywood Aesthetic*, make the point by appealing to *expertise*.<sup>35</sup> Nanay draws on evidence to show that while the visual attention of experts ranges across the entire composition of a depiction, untrained viewers tend to restrict their attention to a focal object.<sup>36</sup> Berliner, meanwhile, notes that the ability of a viewer to appreciate properly and to find aesthetic pleasure in a film hinges on their level of expertise with the kind of film in question.<sup>37</sup> In a tradition like Hollywood film-making, where seeking a wide audience is central to the practice, making works which accommodate viewers possessing different degrees of expertise is an important skill. But the crucial point here, emerging from these arguments on expertise made by Nanay and Berliner, is that there is no tension between naturalism and the recognition of variability of response across individuals and groups.

<sup>34</sup> Nanay is similarly emphatic that engaging with the discoveries of the empirical sciences of mind – which is to say, adopting a naturalistic stance – compels us to take cultural variation in aesthetics seriously (ibid., x). In this sense, naturalism is not only compatible with the recognition of variation; where the evidence is there, it pushes us in that direction.

<sup>35</sup> Todd Berliner, *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>36</sup> Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 26–27.

<sup>37</sup> Berliner, *Hollywood Aesthetic*, 192.

Throughout this response, I've sought to defend the naturalistic but non-reductive tenor of *FACT*, by showing how a serious and principled engagement with neuroscience (and other sciences) need not compromise the distinctiveness of the aesthetic phenomena – above all, aesthetic experience – that all four participants in this symposium prize and seek to understand. I am not sure that I can completely disentangle the elements of clarification, concession, and creativity that Nanay distinguishes in his response. But I am confident of the value of all three elements, and thank Irvin and Schellekens for so effectively generating them with their thoughtful, challenging, and illuminating commentaries.

Murray Smith

Department of Film, University of Kent,  
Canterbury, Kent CT2 7UG, United Kingdom  
M.S.Smith@kent.ac.uk

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- Berliner, Todd. *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Boyd, Robert, and Peter J. Richerson. *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Chabris, Christopher, and Dan Simons. *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuition Deceives Us*. London: HarperCollins, 2010.
- Darwin, Charles. *Charles Darwin's Notebooks, 1836–1844: Geology, Transmutation of Species, Metaphysical Enquiries*, ed. Paul H. Barrett, Peter J. Gautrey, Sandra Herbert, David Kohn, and Sydney Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Gerrig, Richard. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Irvin, Sherri. 'The Nature of Aesthetic Experience and the Role of the Sciences in Aesthetic Theorizing: Remarks on the Work of Nanay and Smith.' *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 100–109.
- Lehrer, Jonah. *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011.
- Livingston, Paisley. 'Questions about Aesthetic Experience.' *Projections* 12 (2018): 71–75.
- Nanay, Bence. *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- '. 'Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception: A Précis.' *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 91–94.
- '. 'Responses to Irvin and Schellekens.' *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 118–24.
- Searle, John R. 'Consciousness and the Philosophers.' Review of *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, by David J. Chalmers. *New York Review of Books*, 6 March 1997.
- Schellekens, Elisabeth. 'Psychologizing Aesthetic Attention.' *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 110–17.
- Smith, Murray. *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- '. 'Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Précis.' *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 95–99.

- .'*Film, Art, and the Third Culture – A Response.*' *Projections* 12 (2018): 111–36.
- '. Review of *Aesthetic Pursuits: Essays in the Philosophy of Art*, by Jerrold Levinson. *Philosophy* 93 (2018): 464–70.