

PSYCHOLOGIZING AESTHETIC ATTENTION

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The main question driving the carefully crafted investigations developed in Bence Nanay's *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* and Murray Smith's *Film, Art, and the Third Culture* is one which, in its modern guise, has arisen at increasingly regular intervals in our discipline: Is empirical psychology – broadly conceived – relevant to philosophical aesthetics?¹ That is to say, can alternative approaches to art and aesthetic experience, including the methods yielding experimental, cognitive, and perceptual data about such experience, contribute to the ways in which philosophers examine aesthetic phenomena in a meaningful way.

If so, how? There are at least two reasons why it has been important to return to this question with such frequency. First, what we mean by 'psychology' continues to evolve at an impressive pace. At least in its most current understanding, when we first start hearing about 'naturalizing aesthetics' between fifteen and twenty years ago, the project found its most vocal proponents in the guise of so-called 'neuroaesthetics' and the work of scientists such as William Hirstein, V. S. Ramachandran, Robert Solso, Dahlia Zaidel, and Semir Zeki.² To many, empirical approaches of this kind gave a bad name to psychology as applied to aesthetics for some years to come, feeding into what was once described as a 'culture of mutual distrust' between the disciplines.³ Luckily, our conception of such lines of investigation into aesthetic phenomena has been considerably enriched since then, to include not only our basic neurology and Darwinian sexual selection theory, but our perception more broadly, including aspects central to the contemporary philosophy of mind and philosophy of emotions. The second reason why it is important to push this question to the forefront of our inquiries regularly is that every now and again

¹ Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Murray Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

² See Vilayanur S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein, 'The Science of Art: A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6 (1999): 15–41; Robert Solso, *The Psychology of Art and the Evolution of the Conscious Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Dahlia Zaidel, *Neuropsychology of Art: Neurological, Cognitive and Evolutionary Perspectives* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005); Semir Zeki, 'Art and the Brain', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6 (1999): 76–96; *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ William Seeley, 'What Is the Cognitive Neuroscience of Art... And Why Should We Care?' *ASA Newsletter* 31, no. 2 (2011): 1.

our community produces excellent research which brings some of the most recent experimental information directly to bear on the questions that we care most about: how we experience art, what sets aesthetic experience apart from other kinds of experience, why art matters to us. Smith's and Nanay's books are highly valuable contributions not just to these concerns, but also to the metaphilosophy of aesthetics, that is to say, to how we as philosophers should think about the relations between these different approaches, and exactly which elements of our psychology can be fruitful to specific debates in philosophical aesthetics.

If the neuroaesthetics of the late 1990s supported a visualization of the philosophical and empirical projects as operating in parallel with one another – engaged on neighbouring trajectories but never actually intersecting – the conceptual picture which has emerged more recently, in great part thanks to research such as Nanay's and Smith's, clearly relies on more generous frameworks of communication and reference. Here, it might still make *some* sense to talk of the philosophical and empirical perspectives respectively as originating from different starting points and converging in a constructive manner, perhaps in a triangular structure such as the one Smith favours. Nonetheless, it seems more apparent than ever that if we continue on the current trajectory, even such a fairly minor differentiation should eventually cease to make sense, and talk of different approaches working together in any geometrical formation would itself become superfluous. What we will have, then, is just one inclusive thick explanation, resting on all the diverse elements that contribute to its explanatory power. It seems perhaps that a more accurate theme for this discussion is not so much whether psychology is *relevant* to aesthetics but, rather, in which respects psychology is *central* to it.

Anyone who reads either of these books stands to benefit from a broadening of their horizons, no matter how progressive we think ourselves to be with regards to this kind of research programme. Both offer the opportunity for us to rethink and revise the methodologies relevant to aesthetics and to resolve particular problems pertaining to our field. In practice at least, aesthetics knows no boundaries.

What I would like to do in these brief comments is to raise some questions with regard to what Nanay and Smith describe as that which is phenomenologically distinct about aesthetic experience. In this particular context such a concern is hardly peripheral to the overarching project since our ability to establish whether the aesthetic can resist the reductivism which accompanies most versions of naturalism and naturalization rests at least partly upon this question. In this process, I will point to some of the areas that call for further clarification or detail

should Nanay and Smith, as we have good reasons to believe, turn out to be right about their shared philosophical commitments.

I

Let us begin by reflecting on that which is said to be distinctive of aesthetic experience or aesthetic perception. According to the theory developed by Nanay, when we have an aesthetic experience of the paradigmatic kind, we have an experience ‘very similar to the experience of treating an object to be unique.’⁴ That is, looking at something aesthetically is similar to how we look when we encounter something for the first time. Nanay writes:

If we encounter an object that is unique, we don’t really know how to attend to it; which properties of it we should attend to and which ones we should ignore. We have no precedent of how to do this [...] So we have no blueprint to follow: we try out attending to all kinds of properties of the object – our attention is distributed.⁵

Nanay’s main aim here is not to capture a definition of aesthetic experience as such, but rather to point to how we must understand the role of attention in typical cases of aesthetic experience. His claim, then, is that aesthetic attention is *focused* on objects but *distributed* onto the various properties of that object.

Although I won’t address the topic of distributed attention directly here, one important aspect which Nanay takes to support his account of aesthetic perception is the so-called ‘lingering effect’ of aesthetically attending to something (through such distributed attention). An effect of this kind may occur, for example, when we have had an aesthetic experience in an art gallery. We engage with the pieces not simply by focusing on the exhibited objects but primarily by distributing our attention onto its various properties. As a result, according to Nanay, we tend not to be able to leave our aesthetic attention at the door of the gallery when we exit that space. Instead, the mode of perception may stay with us somehow, following and colouring our engagement with the world and its contents for some time. In other words, we can activate our aesthetic attention in the museum, but we may not be able to deactivate it quite as easily. Instead, it is gradually *tuned out*. As Nanay puts it, ‘after having spent a day in the museum, our experience of the banal scenes on leaving the museum tends to retain some kind of aesthetic character’⁶

Importantly, we can explain this aesthetic form of lingering not only by appealing to distributed attention, but also by emphasizing the role of so-called

⁴ Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 119.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

aesthetically *relevant* properties.⁷ The idea here is that aesthetic properties as such raise a whole host of conceptual, perceptual, metaphysical, and even programmatic problems, which can be avoided, Nanay suggests, by thinking in terms of relevance instead. So, while aesthetic properties cannot explain this lingering effect single-handedly, introducing the notion of aesthetically relevant properties gives us the tools to do so. Or so Nanay argues.

In some respects, I am sympathetic to the suggestion that a neatly delimited category of aesthetic properties is something of a red herring (if only for the extremely high expectations that positing such a notion involves for any theory aiming to explain not only what unites such an extremely diverse collection of qualities, but also their varying valence). That said, I worry about Nanay's conception of this lingering effect, what the real benefits of jeopardizing the broader notion of aesthetic properties consist of, and whether it really is the case that uniqueness in art is primarily a matter of the uniqueness of attention.

For one thing, I don't entirely recognize my own aesthetic phenomenology in the general description given. It seems to me that the lingering effect of art is both richer and more specific – in the sense that it is more targeted on an experience of the actual artwork – than Nanay's account may be able to allow for. When I leave the gallery or the museum, I may well not be able to 'deactivate' my aesthetic attention immediately, and may well carry an aesthetically tainted way of seeing the world along with me for an extra few minutes. But this does not seem to be exclusively – or even primarily – a matter of a strictly perceptual mode of attention. The lingering effect bears witness to the fact that it is the experience of perceiving a very specific work (or several very specific works) of art that 'stays with me', as it were, the phenomenological details of which colour my ensuing experience and enable me to pick up certain features I might otherwise not have noticed in the world beyond the artwork (or indeed put them in certain connections with one another). In other words, the lingering effect of engaging aesthetically with art stems largely from how such engagements affect other continuing mental states, such as the beliefs pertaining to states of affairs external to the work and our perception of it, including our moral beliefs and deliberations. If we discard too casually all reference to what it was we were looking at, and why we found it interesting or even captivating to begin with, we risk losing our focus on the more transformative kind of aesthetic experience which we tend to seek when we engage with art and in terms of which, I would argue, at least many cases of the lingering effect of art is best understood.

⁷ Ibid., 65.

So, rather than an activated mode of visual attention which is gradually phased out, it seems to me that it is first and foremost the elements of engaging with the work which I find the most enriching, such as the set of insights or emotions evoked, which stay with me qua perceiver. And this leads us straight to the question of aesthetic properties. For it is greatly in part due to the aesthetic value – most probably best conceived as a combination of reliably *aesthetic* properties, such as beauty or harmony, and properties that happen to be *aesthetically relevant* on a given occasion – and the role such value plays in aesthetically informed perceptual experience which directly influences the lingering perceptual effect of art, its duration and significance.

Surprisingly perhaps, the language with which Nanay describes the uniqueness of the aesthetic seems at times Kantian in spirit, such as when aesthetic experience is characterized as being ‘very much akin to encountering something for the very first time’.⁸ We find a strong element of the unexpected, the impossibility of predicting when aesthetic experience might occur, the delightful freedom of newness and lack of rules or principles, and more. But can all this richness and complexity be maintained purely at the level of perception? For Nanay’s project is not just one of bringing a psychologically informed philosophy of perception to bear on questions in aesthetics. It is also one of making the more general point that aesthetics is, in effect, a branch of the philosophy of perception. What is the price to pay for that view? Well, quite a high price, possibly, bearing in mind that a fair number of the concepts aesthetics tends to rely on, such as aesthetic properties, aesthetic objects and perhaps even subjects, may suddenly find themselves dispensable, replaced by simpler and thinner perceptual concepts: we would perhaps no longer be subjects of experience but *perceivers*, albeit it richly equipped, distributing our attention on all properties that might be aesthetically relevant.

II

In his *Film, Art, and The Third Culture*, Murray Smith – for whom the process of naturalizing aesthetics in a new way is central – specifically asks his readers:

[is there] a distinctive mental state which constitutes ‘aesthetic attention’ or the ‘aesthetic attitude’ – a form of consciousness systematically distinct from ordinary, ‘interested’ consciousness, characteristically prompted by artworks and other natural or artefactual aesthetic prompts?⁹

⁸ Ibid., 129.

⁹ Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 191.

The 'triangulating' method favoured combines (i) the phenomenological, (ii) the psychological, and (iii) the neurological levels of analysis into one thick explanation, and so, we are told: 'The door is thereby opened to admit [...] the first-person perspective within a scientific approach to the mind.'¹⁰

Smith's answer is that 'aesthetic experience arises when our perceptual, affective, and cognitive capacities are engaged in a way that goes beyond their normal functioning, and that such engagement prompts us to savour and reflect upon the resultant experiences.'¹¹ Further on, he writes: 'When [aesthetic] experiences go well, they are not merely had, but savoured. They become the object of a particular kind of self-consciousness.'¹² This special kind of self-consciousness known as aesthetic experience, this 'savouring' or 'retrospection', thus combines a whole host of states and abilities both in what we might call its production, its phenomenology, and in 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.

It seems both right and important to point out, as Smith does here, that there are important cognitive aspects of our aesthetic experiences which tend to be overlooked, and that conceiving of such experiences primarily as affective and fairly passive responses is fundamentally unhelpful not only to philosophical analysis but also to daily life. That said, the generous and inclusive spirit of Smith's triangulation and thick explanation raises questions of its own. Are we now not trying to fit too much into the account of what is supposed to be our distinctly aesthetic phenomenology? For if all aspects of the psychological, neurological, and phenomenological are potential contributors to our aesthetic explanations, by what means exactly do we assess the explanatory weight each of them might carry separately? The question relates directly to how we should balance the input or emphasis of either of the three corners in this triangular structure.

Smith surveys the basic concepts at the heart of the triangulation of the phenomenological including attention, consciousness, the degrees of consciousness of peripheral factors, self-consciousness, the unconscious, the 'cognitive' or 'adaptive' unconscious, and more. In spirit, such inclusivity is surely on the right track of providing a solid theory of aesthetic experience. And yet, at the same time, it opens up a new set of concerns. For, now that we are

¹⁰ Ibid., 197.

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹² Ibid., 91.

operating with a notion of the cognitive which embraces subconscious elements, where should we draw the line between those aspects which are directly relevant to aesthetic experience and those which are not? How could we know? Or, to put the point in Smith's own terms, how thick can a thick explanation become and still remain an explanation (of anything)?

Some of these questions are tied up with a methodological point one might want to press Nanay on too. For one might think that an important advantage of a method which seeks to incorporate the results of psychological investigations is precisely that our 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. But if aspects of our aesthetic experience are subconscious or subpersonal features of our micro-perceptual or phenomenological experience, have we really strengthened the foundations of our explanations or, to exaggerate a little perhaps, simply replaced them by some other explanatory features that are not obviously all that far-reaching either? Exactly what do we find behind the 'door [to] the first-person perspective within a scientific approach to the mind'? And this, of course, is directly connected with a broader concern about the reach of thick explanations in general: Is aesthetics now less about explaining aesthetic experience or aesthetic value and more about explaining phenomena with some aesthetic component? One possible answer here of course is that a distinction of this kind is merely nominal: what is an aesthetic experience if not an experience with some (more or less significant) aesthetic components? Be that as it may, the special savouring and introspection so aptly described by Smith reminds one of the probing questions which arise for anyone who seeks both to naturalize (and in that sense at least normalize) *and* to customize the aesthetic at the same time.

The theory outlined by Smith is reinforced by the many interesting examples of films incorporated into his arguments. Indeed, one of the strengths of Smith's naturalizing project is the intricate way in which he weaves his account into a detailed understanding of works such as Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* film series, demonstrating step by step how a theory informed 'by psychological, evolutionary, and neuroscientific research on the emotions' can affect our artistic experience.¹³ In a similar vein, Nanay's discussion of Paul Klee serves as a helpful point of reference connecting theory with practice. It is fair to say, then, that both *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* and *Film, Art, and the Third Culture* demonstrate significant advances on many previous attempts to marry research

¹³ Ibid., 165–66.

in philosophical aesthetics with approaches, models, and methodologies drawn from the empirical sciences, and both make for extremely refreshing reading in respect of the concept of aesthetic experience which is thus allowed for. One of the many things we stand to learn from Nanay's and Smith's work is that asking whether empirically informed psychology is relevant to philosophical aesthetics is now no longer so much a question to which we should return at regular intervals in philosophy, as one which should retain a permanent place on the drawing board.

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