

AESTHETICS AS PHILOSOPHY OF PERCEPTION: A PRÉCIS

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My book *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*¹ had more than one goal. The most important of these was to draw attention to just how much progress could be made in various debates in aesthetics if we make more use of the arguments and conceptual apparatus of philosophy of perception. Aesthetics is about experiences – special kinds of experiences we care a lot about. So turning to philosophy of perception, the philosophical subdiscipline that is about experiences, is a natural move.

What do I mean by aesthetics here? The book is about aesthetics, not philosophy of art. Philosophy of art is a motley ensemble of debates and puzzles that have to do – one way or another – with art, some metaphysical, some ethical, linguistic, or epistemological. It would be fairly crazy to claim that philosophy of perception would have any kind of priority in solving problems in philosophy of art. But aesthetics is different from philosophy of art – as many philosophers of art are quick to emphasize. Aesthetics is not exclusively and not even primarily about artworks, it is also about our aesthetic engagement with nature and everyday scenes, for example.

And what do I mean by philosophy of perception? Philosophy of perception is about the perceptual domain and its relation to other parts of the mind. It is not exclusively about perception. So when I say that philosophy of perception can be a useful way of tackling problems in aesthetics, I am not assuming that aesthetic phenomena are exclusively or essentially perceptual. Crucially, no matter how narrowly we construe it, philosophy of perception is partly about phenomena like mental imagery and attention and both of these concepts play an important role in understanding various problems in aesthetics.

That is the second, narrower aim of the book: to use the concept of attention as an illustration of how and to what extent aesthetics can learn from philosophy of perception. What sets aesthetic engagement apart from other moments in our life is a difference in what we attend to and how we do so. Attention can have a huge impact on our experiences in general and on our aesthetic engagement more particularly. Attending to some irrelevant or distracting feature can completely derail our experience. And much of the point of talking about art,

¹ Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

music, literature, and other aesthetic phenomena is that it could get you to attend to features you have not attended to before and by doing so completely new and often very rewarding experiences open up. It is certainly the job of any critic to get the reader to attend to some features of the artwork that would lead to different, more interesting or more pleasurable experiences.

I use these considerations to argue that the kinds of features, or, as philosophers like to call them, properties, that play the most important role in aesthetics are what I call 'aesthetically relevant properties': if you attend to these properties, it makes an aesthetic difference. Putting 'aesthetically relevant properties' at the centre stage of aesthetics is a not so concealed way of trying to dethrone the old and venerable concept of 'aesthetic properties', which much of Western aesthetics has been focusing on for centuries, but even more so in the last half-century. Being beautiful is an aesthetic property as is being graceful or being ugly. Many have tried to give a clear-cut definition of aesthetic properties and many have failed. There is wide disagreement about some of the most basic questions concerning aesthetic properties (Are they evaluative? Are they perceived?). That is an embarrassment for the entire discipline of aesthetics. We really need a fresh start. And we can have a fresh start if we talk about 'aesthetically relevant properties' instead of 'aesthetic properties'. My pitch is that by shifting the emphasis from aesthetic properties to aesthetically relevant properties we can make progress in many old questions in aesthetics. The critic's job is not to tell us what aesthetic properties the work has. It is rather to draw your attention to new, unsuspected aesthetically relevant properties that can transform your experience. And contemporary art is blatantly not about aesthetic properties, but it is very often about making seemingly aesthetically irrelevant properties aesthetically relevant.

Finally, the third, even more narrow, aim of the book was to explore a very special way of exercising our attention. Vision science makes a distinction between focused and distributed attention: we can attend to just one object or to many objects at the same time. But the distributed versus focused distinction can be applied not only to attending to objects, but also to attending to properties. So there are four possibilities when it comes to attention: focused with regard to both objects and properties, distributed with regard to both objects and properties, distributed across objects, but focused on one property thereof and focused on one object, and distributed across many of the properties of this object. This latter way of exercising attention is what I take to be typical (but neither necessary nor sufficient) of some paradigmatic forms of aesthetic experience that have often been discussed not only by philosophers, but also by artists and writers in the last two hundred years in the West.

It is important to emphasize that the aesthetic experience I was trying to characterize in terms of attention focused on one object but distributed across the properties of this object is both geographically and historically very limited in scope. It is a typically Western phenomenon and one that arguably only began to become important a couple of centuries ago and that, to make an even more tentative claim, might be on its way out (as the smartphone generation is not too strong on distributed attention). So the aesthetic experiences, which I deliberately labelled ‘Proustian aesthetic experiences’, form a spatially and temporally highly specific phenomenon – not some kind of cultural universal. In fact, part of the motivation for writing the book was to point out how the way we exercise our attention changes over time, giving rise to very different perceptual and aesthetic experiences.

It is important to emphasize that the aim of this book is not to annex aesthetics to the empire of philosophy of perception. My aim, in spite of the deliberately provocative title of the book, was much more modest: I wanted and still want aesthetics to learn from philosophy of perception. And I also think that a fair chunk of the subject matter of aesthetics, but by no means all of it, is very closely related to that of philosophy of perception. This does not mean that aesthetics is about perception. It is also about all kinds of other exciting mental phenomena, like mental imagery, attention, emotions, beliefs, hopes, aspirations, and expectations. However, we have a lot of evidence from psychology and neuroscience that all these mental states influence perception – even the earliest stages of perceptual processing. So we can’t give a full account of perception without talking about all these mental states.

I use a fair amount of empirical findings throughout the book – from cross-cultural psychophysics findings about attention to neuroscientific evidence for top-down influences on the primary visual cortex. And neuroscience has been widely used in aesthetics, at least since the neuroaesthetics movement of the 1990s. I should emphasize that what I am doing is very different from these neuroaesthetics approaches (this is an important similarity between my book and Murray Smith’s *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*).² My aim is not finding out about some universal features of our engagement with art on the basis of neuroscience. I do not apply neuroscience to aesthetics directly – as it has often been pointed out, this can go wrong very easily. Instead, I use philosophy of perception, which is informed by recent findings in psychology and neuroscience, to shed light on old problems in aesthetics. So the link between neuroscience and aesthetics is mediated by philosophy of perception.

² Murray Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

A perk of this approach is that what empirically grounded philosophy of perception should teach us is that looking for aesthetic universals – the hidden or more often not so hidden aim of neuroaesthetics – is futile given the top-down influences on our perception that make perception very different in different periods and different parts of the world. So using empirically informed philosophy of perception to enrich aesthetics forces us to take the cultural variations of our aesthetic engagement seriously, paving the way to a truly global aesthetics.

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