

# IS PSYCHOLOGY RELEVANT TO AESTHETICS? A SYMPOSIUM

## INTRODUCTION

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BENCE NANAY AND MURRAY SMITH

The symposium published here began life as a somewhat unusual ‘author meets critics’ session at the British Society of Aesthetics annual conference, at St Anne’s College, Oxford, on 16 September 2016 – unusual inasmuch as the focus was not on a single book, but on two books exploring different but related themes. In addition, rather than encompassing all the issues these two books address, the session focused on one general question that both books explore in some depth: is psychology relevant to aesthetics?

When George Dickie posed the very same question in 1962, he answered with a resounding ‘no’, and many others have taken and still hold a similar view. But a naturalistic approach to aesthetics, drawing on the knowledge and methods of the sciences and especially the cognitive sciences, has a long history and is experiencing a resurgence in contemporary aesthetics. Dickie, who was responding to an earlier wave of naturalism over the first half the twentieth century, concludes his essay with a kind of invitation and challenge: no one, he argues, has ‘made clear how any specific psychological information is relevant to [aesthetic] problems. Not only has this matter not been made clear in any specific instance, but no one appears to have any idea what sort of procedure should be followed to establish the relevance relation under discussion.’<sup>1</sup> The BSA ‘double-header’ panel took up Dickie’s invitation, exploring two distinctive, positive answers to the question he had posed.

Bence Nanay’s *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* explores various ways in which the philosophy of perception is a useful tool in relation to a number of questions in aesthetics, with special emphasis on the concept of attention.<sup>2</sup> Nanay argues that attention plays a crucial but underexplored role in a number

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We can count ourselves lucky, at least three times over, in relation to the symposium published here. We were fortunate first of all, and above all, to find two expert and generous commentators in Sherri Irvin and Elisabeth Schellekens. Our next wave of luck came with the acceptance of the panel by the British Society of Aesthetics conference committee, chaired by David Davies and Dawn Wilson. Fortune favoured us a third time with the invitation to publish the papers from the symposium in *Estetika*; our thanks to Jakub Stejskal for shepherding the papers through the submission and editorial process, and to Hanne Appelqvist for giving her blessing to the plan as the incoming editor of the journal.

<sup>1</sup> George Dickie, ‘Is Psychology Relevant to Aesthetics?’, *Philosophical Review* 71 (1962): 302.

<sup>2</sup> Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

of aesthetic phenomena, including our engagement with art. In order to apply the conceptual apparatus of the philosophy of perception, including those parts of it concerned with attention, however, we need to be conversant with the psychological findings about attention and about perception and the mind in general. In other words, Nanay proposes an indirect use of psychology in aesthetics: aesthetics would benefit (and has historically benefited) from closer attention to the philosophy of perception. And the philosophy of perception we draw upon should be consistent with and informed by the empirical sciences of the mind, especially psychology. In short, the relevance of psychology for aesthetics is mediated by the philosophy of perception. Many case studies of such a methodology are given in his book, from the distinction between focused and distributed attention to debates about the cognitive penetrability of perception and cross-cultural variations in a range of perceptual phenomena.

Murray Smith's *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* aims to articulate a 'third cultural', naturalized aesthetics integrating humanistic methods with scientific ones, with a particular focus on aspects of emotional response to films and other aesthetic objects.<sup>3</sup> Smith argues that we are best placed to understand and explain our experience of artworks – including our emotional responses to them – by exploring the interconnections among the three different types of evidence at our disposal in relation to mental phenomena in general: phenomenological, psychological, and neuroscientific evidence. This model of 'triangulation' is explicated by Smith by means of case studies on such 'art-affects' as suspense, empathy, the startle response, and the expression and perception of emotion in the face. In seeking to relate these distinct types of evidence to one another, Smith makes the case that we need to pay attention to both the personal and subpersonal levels of psychological description – to our acts and intentions and reactions *and* the psychophysiological systems that subservise them (the distinct visual pathways for action and object recognition, the body clock, the neural mirror system, the 'affect programmes' underpinning our basic emotions, and so on). And in parallel with Nanay, Smith argues that philosophical theorizing in relation to artistic creation and appreciation cannot proceed in isolation from psychological research. Insofar as the arts not only exploit but extend and stretch our ordinary perceptual, cognitive, and emotional capacities, affording us experiences that generally do not arise in ordinary settings, aesthetic theory must at once be attentive to the psychology of ordinary human behaviour, and work towards a psychology of specifically aesthetic behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Triangulation, then, articulates the 'relevance relation' that Dickie

<sup>3</sup> Murray Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

seeks: psychology is relevant to aesthetics because aesthetic experience is a species of conscious mental activity, and such activity is best illuminated by seeking consilience among the three types of evidence available to us.

While the two books have somewhat different foci, both discuss aspects of Dickie's sceptical arguments concerning psychology and the aesthetic attitude,<sup>5</sup> and both pay notable attention to film. Smith's book sets out its arguments about film in parallel with exploration of other media and artforms; Nanay's study ranges widely across the arts and other domains of aesthetic experience, while paying considerable attention to film. Both books orient themselves towards metaphysics and epistemology, broadly construed, rather than towards questions of value.<sup>6</sup> Sherri Irvin and Elisabeth Schellekens each provide a commentary which reflects on aspects of both books, commentaries which – among other things – make salient the shared concerns and points of convergence between the two books, including a focus on aesthetic attention and experience, and (as Schellekens puts it) the 'metaphilosophy of aesthetics'.<sup>7</sup> As Schellekens also notes, both books seek to establish 'generous frameworks of communication and reference' with the sciences and other branches of philosophy with which they engage, in contrast to the parallel but rather separate conversations of the past.<sup>8</sup> To that extent, the ambition of both books is to create a space for an authentic third culture. Nanay and Smith each provide a response to the two commentaries, once again reflecting on the points of similarity and difference between their respective books, as well as responding to the comments of Irvin and Schellekens.

Bence Nanay

Centre for Philosophical Psychology, University of Antwerp,  
D 413, Grote Kauwenberg 18, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium  
Peterhouse, University of Cambridge,  
Cambridge, CB2 1RD, UK  
bn206@cam.ac.uk

Murray Smith

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

<sup>4</sup> In his interview with Hans Maes, Arthur Danto credits Richard Wollheim with recognizing the importance of this point. 'The Commonplace Raised to a Higher Power: A Conversation with Arthur C. Danto', in *Conversations on Art and Aesthetics*, by Hans Maes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed Smith refers to Nanay's arguments in this regard: Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 31–32.

<sup>6</sup> For more on this point, see Bence Nanay, 'Responses to Irvin and Schellekens', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 123.

<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Schellekens, 'Psychologizing Aesthetic Attention', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 111.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

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