

Aesthetic Investigations

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Using Philosophy of Perception in Aesthetics

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Abstract: Aesthetics is about ways of experiencing the world. But then if we apply the remarkably elaborate and sophisticated conceptual apparatus of philosophy of perception to questions in aesthetics, we can make real progress.

Aesthetics is about ways of experiencing the world. But then if we apply the remarkably elaborate and sophisticated conceptual apparatus of philosophy of perception to questions in aesthetics, we can make real progress.

I do not for a moment want to suggest that aesthetics *is* philosophy of perception. Nor am I trying to conquer, in true imperial manner, aesthetics or suggest that it ought to be annexed to philosophy of perception. But what I am trying to do in my work on aesthetics is aesthetics as philosophy of perception. I am trying to tackle various questions in aesthetics by using the conceptual repertoire of philosophy of perception. I do not claim that this is the only way, or even, all things considered, the best way, to do aesthetics; there are clearly others.¹ My aim is to convince the reader that it is a promising way.

Is it a radical or even novel idea to tie aesthetics to the study of perception? Of course not.² The Greek word ‘aesthemi’ means ‘perception’ and when Alexander Baumgarten introduced the concept of ‘aesthetics’ in 1750, what he meant by it was precisely what we would now call philosophy of perception, or the study of sense perception (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*). My claim is that, regardless of etymology, this connection can still be made today (although our ‘study of sense perception’ is very different from what it was in 1750 and, no doubt, the most important questions in aesthetics are also different).

I. AESTHETICS VERSUS PHILOSOPHY OF ART

My claim is about aesthetics and not about philosophy of art. And I by no means want to suggest that it is a promising avenue of research to consider problems in the *philosophy of art* to be really about philosophy of perception—it would be difficult to defend this claim. Philosophy of art, like any philosophy of X, asks a wide variety of questions about X—about art in this case. Some of these questions are metaphysical, some others epistemological, political or ethical. I will try to say as little as possible about philosophy of art here (although using a philosophy of perception approach).

As it has repeatedly been pointed out, aesthetics and philosophy of art are very different disciplines. The most important attempts to draw a line between aesthetics and philosophy of art were fuelled by a certain mistrust of all things aesthetic. The general line of argument, by George Dickie and Noël Carroll, among others is that too much attention has been given to ‘the aesthetic’ in the discussion of art.³ Aesthetic response (or aesthetic experience or aesthetic appreciation, whatever any of these concepts may mean) is only one possible response to art. There are others. And we have no reason to privilege the aesthetic response (again, whatever that means). Thus, they conclude, when we discuss philosophy of art, we are better off doing so without any necessary reference to aesthetics.

As I want to talk about aesthetics, following the logic of the Dickie- and Carroll- style arguments would entail that I may be better off doing so with no necessary reference to art built in to the very concept of aesthetics. We should detach aesthetics from art, but do so carefully.⁴ Questions in aesthetics are often about art, but they don’t have to be.

A consequence of this is that we should not build in a necessary reference to art when we talk about aesthetics. But then how should we talk about aesthetics? What does the word ‘aesthetics’ mean in the title of this paper? One tempting way to proceed would be to say that aesthetics is about beauty. Or, to be more generous, one could say that aesthetics is about aesthetic properties: beauty, gracefulness, balance and the like. And then we can build all the central concepts of aesthetics on this foundation: aesthetic experience is the experience of aesthetic properties; aesthetic judgement is the judgement of aesthetic properties and so on. I am very skeptical of this way to go.

My main reason for not taking aesthetics to be the study of beauty or of aesthetic properties in general is that many, even most questions in aesthetics have nothing to do with aesthetic properties. The question about what makes pictures pictures or how we perceive pictures is as central in contemporary aesthetics as any, but it is blatantly not about aesthetic properties. There are various candidates for what makes pictures pictures, but it is extremely unlikely that the properties pictures have and non-pictures lack are any kind of aesthetic properties. Further, some instances of picture perception may attribute aesthetic properties, but not all do (and the vast majority of cases when we see pictures have nothing to do with aesthetic properties). Aesthetic

properties seem irrelevant to these questions. But the same goes for dozens of other central questions in aesthetics: about the nature of narrative, about the nature of identification with a protagonist in a story, of our emotional engagement with fiction, and so on. And while there are some genuinely interesting questions about aesthetic properties, arguably these can also be raised without relying on this concept. But this still leaves us without a firm grip on just what aesthetics is.

A simple and pedestrian route for delineating the domain of aesthetics is to consider it to be the sum total of topics where we use the term ‘aesthetic’. This would involve (but of course not be limited to) debates about aesthetic experiences, aesthetic attitude, aesthetic attention, aesthetic judgement, aesthetic value, and aesthetic stance. But we should also include those debates that are discussed in aesthetics journals and books, which are not strictly speaking (or not necessarily) about art. This would include (but, again, not be limited to) questions about picture perception and questions about depiction in general (as not all pictures are art), questions about our engagement with narratives and about narratives in general (not all narratives are art), about fiction and our engagements with them (not all fictions are art), about metaphor, creativity, and so on.

So I want to resist the urge to find some kind of essential feature of aesthetics: it comprises a diverse set of topics. As Robert Motherwell says, ‘there is no such thing as *the* ‘aesthetic’, no more than there is any such thing as “art”’.⁵ The general idea behind my approach is that many (not all) of these topics do happen to have a common denominator and it is that they are about experiences of various kinds. But they are about very different kinds of experiences—and what is often singled out as the ‘aesthetic experience’ is just one of these. Picture perception is an experience, our engagement with narratives is an experience, identification with a fictional character is an experience, and aesthetic experience (whatever it may be) is also an experience. But they are very different.

One advantage of using philosophy of perception to tackle questions in aesthetics is that we can be more specific about understanding these experiences and also the differences between them. Again, I am not claiming that all questions in aesthetics are about experiences. But many are. So a natural place for aestheticians to turn is to the philosophical discipline that is about experiences: philosophy of perception.

I said that questions in aesthetics are not strictly speaking (or not necessarily) about art; that we should detach aesthetics from art, but do so carefully. The emphasis on experiences makes this easier to do. Understanding how our experience of a picture of an apple differs from our experience of an apple is one of the most important questions in aesthetics. But it is not necessarily about art as most pictures are not artworks. So one can experience pictures without experiencing artworks and one can, since not all works of art are pictures, experience artworks without experiencing pictures.

Similarly, some, but not all, works of fiction are art and some but not all artworks are fictions. We should be able to raise questions about the nature of fiction and our engagement with fictional works independently of any talk of art. The same goes for narratives, pictures, depiction, metaphor, creativity, and so on.⁶ But, again, this decoupling should be done carefully: any account of, say, fiction or narrative should be applicable to fictional artworks and narrative artworks as well.

Philosophy of art is a thriving discipline with a lot of exciting and open questions. But my aim is to demonstrate how some of the major questions in aesthetics (not in philosophy of art) can benefit from a philosophy of perception-based approach. In order to assess the strength of this approach, however, I need to say a bit about what I take to be philosophy of perception.

II. PHILOSOPHY OF PERCEPTION

What does it mean to say that I aim to use the conceptual apparatus of philosophy of perception to tackle questions in aesthetics? What is the conceptual apparatus of philosophy of perception? Does it have one at all? And why focus on perception? Isn't this an impossibly restrictive move? Well, this depends on what one means by perception and by philosophy of perception.

The first thing to note is that perception is not to be identified with the sensory stimulation of our sense organs. Perceptual processing starts with sensory stimulation, but it doesn't end there. Visual perception, for example, starts with the firing of rods and cones on the retina, but it most definitely doesn't end there. Much more goes into perception: various cross-modal influences, categorization, conceptualization, and all kinds of top-down influences from non-perceptual processes. Importantly, our perceptual state is difficult to characterize without talking about attention: attention is part of perception (not something post-perceptual).⁷ It would be unwise to ignore these non-sensory aspects of perception. But then, focusing on perception may not be as restrictive as it first seemed. Further, as philosophy of perception goes well beyond the characterization of perception, my approach will come out as even less restrictive.

It is not clear where the boundaries of philosophy of perception lie.⁸ If we conceive of philosophy of perception as the ensemble of philosophical questions about perception, then a lot of philosophical questions about perception reflect questions about non-perceptual mental processes.

To make this point more vivid, here are some classic questions in philosophy of perception: What is the difference between perception and belief? What is the difference between sensation and perception? What is the connection between perception and action? What are the similarities and differences between perception and imagination? What are the similarities and differences between perception and emotion? How does perception justify belief? All of these questions are genuine questions in philosophy of perception. But

together they also seem to cover much of philosophy of mind, which already addresses concepts like sensory imagination (often labeled ‘quasi-perceptual’) and emotions (often compared to perceptual experiences because of their belief-insensitivity, for example).

When I talk about philosophy of perception, I have this inclusive concept in mind—an ensemble of philosophical questions connected to perception. Some will undoubtedly find this use of the concept of philosophy of perception too liberal. They can replace the phrase ‘philosophy of perception’ in the title of this paper with ‘philosophy of mind’.

The approach I am advocating here is not all that revolutionary. Many questions in aesthetics have been treated for decades as philosophy of perception questions. One obvious example is picture perception: the question about how seeing a depicted apple differs from seeing an apple face to face. It would be difficult to deny that philosophy of perception comes in handy when trying to answer this question. Another similarly obvious example is the question about whether aesthetic properties—like beauty and grace—are strictly speaking perceived or only inferred on the basis of some other properties. There are other examples—all major accounts of aesthetic experience on the market appeal to some key assumptions in philosophy of perception, for example. My aim is to generalize from such isolated appeals to philosophy of perception and argue that it is a useful tool for many, even most questions in aesthetics. And it is not a particularly novel claim to consider aesthetics to be about experiences. John Dewey’s basic assumption about the domain of aesthetics is exactly this (although, his account of aesthetic experience is diametrically opposed to mine). And Frank Sibley famously said that ‘broadly speaking, aesthetics deals with a kind of perception’.⁹

Philosophy of perception is about experiences. Aesthetics is about some special kinds of experiences: aesthetic experiences, the experience we have when looking at pictures, the experience we have when we identify with Hamlet, the experience we have when we engage with fiction, etc. Thus, it shouldn’t sound surprising that it is a promising avenue of research to consider debates and problems about aesthetics to be really about the branch of philosophy that is about experiences, namely, philosophy of perception. Again, some of these may not be perceptual experiences. But, as we have seen, the scope of philosophy of perception is much wider than questions about the nature of perceptual experiences. Just how radical my approach is, that is, how radical doing aesthetics as philosophy of perception is, depends on how we think of aesthetics and on how we think of philosophy of perception. And given that I think of philosophy of perception in a fairly liberal way, I don’t think that my approach is all that radical.¹⁰

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NOTES

1. I myself used very different approaches, for example, to talk about the relation between literature and philosophy in Nanay 2010b, 2013c, and 2013b.
2. Nanay 2014b, 101-120.
3. Dickie 1964, 1974 and Carroll 2000, 2001.
4. See Davis 2011, 4-5 for a similar methodology.
5. Motherwell 1951.
6. Nanay 2014a, 17-35.
7. Prinz 2010, Nanay 2010a, see also the rich inattentive blindness literature.
8. Nanay 2010c, 3-12 and 2013a.
9. Sibley 1965, 137.
10. This text is a shortened and edited version of the first chapter of Nanay 2015. The copyright is held by Oxford University Press.

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