

Aesthetic Investigations

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Aesthetics is ‘The Philosophy of Our Wordless World’

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Abstract: The past decade has witnessed a sudden interest in aesthetics among neuroscientists and philosophers of perception, whose respective approaches are focused on measuring brain activity given artworks and grasping how human beings perceive artworks. In this paper, I argue that despite its non-empirical approach, aesthetics matters more than empiricists readily admit. For several centuries, aesthetics has addressed how human beings navigate wordless artworks. It is thus particularly well-suited for making sense of our wordless world, whose rich contents may be felt, though not perceived. It is unlikely that such empirical studies could help us understand: the imagination’s role in making sense of unfamiliar experiences, how human beings spontaneously devise concepts needed for perception to occur, or the roles played by perplexing, idiosyncratic, or ineffable artworks in sustaining our interest over centuries. That we value artworks for generating meaning, provoking imaginations or inspiring thoughts strikes me as rather *extra-perceptual*.

I. OUR WORDLESS WORLD

For too long, philosophers have suggested that perception conforms to the ‘linguistic turn’, made famous by Richard Rorty’s 1967 anthology of the same name. We routinely presume that experiences, knowledge, desires, beliefs, and even actions are readily expressible as propositions. Of course, philosophers as varied as Gilbert Ryle, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Christopher Peacocke have doubted that experience is so easily conceptualized. I sometimes

worry that the tendency to reclassify philosophical doubt as healthy skepticism or thought experiments, neutralizes otherwise outré positions. For all practical purposes, aesthetics remains the singular philosophical field where language doesn't occupy centre court. For this reason, aesthetics matters more than today's "realists", whether philosophers of perception or object-oriented ontologists, who seek evidence for their claims, readily admit.

Whether wordsmiths by nature or loquacious logicians by training, philosophers have seemed loath to acknowledge and slow to develop strategies for confronting our less obvious, but no less significant *wordless* world. Of course, aestheticians do have words and we happily employ them, but our terrain concerns strategies for grasping our wordless world, what Martin Heidegger once distinguished as *earth*, given its seclusion as compared to world. He considered earth out of reach, since it is not yet conceptualized and therefore beyond perception, yet our wordless world is always present right where we are, not *there*, but in the here and now. Our wordless world is present in those artworks we consider perplexing, idiosyncratic, or ineffable. Strangely, those are often the ones that draw our attention, precisely because we lack the tools to understand them. Aestheticians may be best-suited to develop tools such as nonpropositional epistemology that could enable all philosophers to better appreciate and navigate more of our wordless world.

At this point, one might respond that it is phenomenology and not aesthetics that grants us access to our wordless world. And I would not disagree, save for the fact that so much of our wordless world goes ignored by all but a handful of university scientists, amateur naturalists, and indigenous farmers, whose worlds are not dominated by manmade features. Even scientists who recognize world's wordless component typically converse in terms of theories, hypotheses, and describable outcomes. Luckily for aesthetics, the arts prove more popular than science, granting aesthetics its role to philosophize about how it is possible to make sense of wordless episodes like symphonies, paintings, installation art, sculpture, architecture, decoration, tools, and more recently, the natural environment. And of course, aestheticians also tackle wordy episodes like opera, poetry, literature, theatre, and film, which routinely engender wordless imagery. Aestheticians may bandy about concrete terms like taste, beauty/ugly, aesthetic experience, aesthetic properties, aesthetic attitudes, aesthetical judgements, intentionality, and aesthetic/nonaesthetic concepts, but they do so, mostly to capture the extra-perceptual content that art experiences prompt, such as thoughts, emotions, and memories. Our wordless world no doubt harbours nonconceptual content, which somehow gains entry into people's memory banks, even as it eschews perception.

By now, it may have crossed your mind that any talk of a wordless world is an oxymoron, like military intelligence, business ethics, or freedom fighters. For philosophers who tie world to the totality of facts (following Wittgenstein), world itself is philosophical code for worded. Already cognized, world

is not just describable, but it is knowable in light of constitutive conceptual schemes. Recall Ludwig Wittgenstein's 1922 dictum, 'The world is everything that is the case', that is, propositional knowledge. This is no place to rehearse the philosophical history of world, let alone *world* itself. Suffice it to say that Heidegger gave philosophers (whether of mind, perception, or language) an easy way out when he differentiated world and earth, since this distinction makes it possible to focus on world at the expense of earth.

Those philosophers who focus on our worded world tend to reject affordances in favour of representations (fully cognized upon perception), thus shaping our world as recognizable, which is a rather untenable position given recognition's dependence on prior categories. For them, world is already wordy, and whatever dodges identification unproblematically remains earth. By contrast, aestheticians acknowledge the difficulties surrounding apprehension and strive to understand how/why we appreciate artworks whose aspects elude detection, precisely because we cannot categorize them. Recently, aestheticians have been exploring roles played by literary genres, art movements and musical forms, which not only facilitate artworks' appropriate appreciation, but their eventual development enables audiences to notice more aspects. Absent particular interpretative frames, we miss a lot of details. Following the development of useful frames, content that would otherwise remain inaccessible now seems self-evident.

What happens when what we dismiss as merely felt, and therefore unknowable, is readily perceived and valued by others, or remembered by many more? What if we presume that what we consider merely felt *must* already be comprehensible to others, because it is perceptible, yet remains unintelligible? Crazier still, what if world is not entirely conceptualized, even though we have been taught that it is? Should we still go about our philosophical work presuming that we perceive only that which is cognized, never once doubting our foundational beliefs?

II. PERFORMANCE, IMAGINATION, AND EXTRA-PERCEPTUAL CONTENT

In the course of their philosophical work, aestheticians tend to upend the triumvirate of perception, cognition, and world. Artworks are part of our world, yet they routinely defy cognition and sometimes upend our perceptual faculties by overloading our senses. Even when we think we easily perceived some artwork, it may take decades before it is partly, let alone fully, understood. In fact, artworks are valued more for their extra-perceptual content; their powers to generate meaning, provoke imaginations, or inspire thoughts. Great artworks not only unfold over time, but they invoke the help of thousands of spectators who continue working on them every time they discuss some aesthetic experience or try to unpack its meaning. Artworks repeatedly engage people across the ages, precisely because they confound cognition. Were one

to perceive artworks the way one perceives the identifiable contents of one’s own closet or filing cabinet, they would not hold our interest. Moreover, each new performance of an artwork offers different cognitive engagements as each artistic director reinterprets the artwork, presenting it in a different light for changing audiences.

Because artworks are the work of intelligent, well-educated creatives, intentionalists suspect that every detail has been worked out in advance. The view that artists (or artistic directors) anticipate audience responses, and thus build reception into their schemes, has recently gained traction from neuro-aestheticians and cognitive scientists whose research can pinpoint why/how artworks manipulate viewers. Despite such fascinating research, which always makes it seem as though artists are in full control of all of their ideas, decisions, actions, and talent, interviews with artists (even poets and singer-song writers) reveal nearly the opposite. Artists regularly explain that they originally did this (wrote those words, made that film or produced that installation) for some particular reason, only to later realize that their work has since revealed totally different interests, motivations, or goals; leaving original intentions to provide reasons, though not meaning. Yes, cognitive scientists and philosophers of perception may be able to prove how particular details lure human attention, predict which artworks human beings will find attractive, or explain why unfamiliar artworks seem so distasteful, but their realm remains the recognizable, which is concept-dependent. They cannot test or explain why human beings are drawn to the mysterious and incomprehensible.

Since neuro-aesthetic research tends to track attention, which depends on object recognition, and identify brain activity in particular zones, I doubt laboratory research can detect, let alone measure and test for the impact of nonconceptual content, which lacks the requisite referent for recognition. Similarly, it cannot evaluate the overwhelming extra-perceptual content generated by one’s imaginative thoughts and peer discussions following one’s experiencing some performance. And it may very well be that nonconceptual content as opposed to perception, does most of the work, despite its apparent worldly absence. I write ‘does most of the work’, because perhaps our enduring relationships with artworks depend less on what we initially perceive, and more on what we don’t understand, requiring artworks to require extra-perceptual thoughts to fill in the gap. Moreover, viewers may be lured to those special spots on images that cognitive scientists are eager to identify, specifically because they are primarily searching for clues to the work’s meaning. If one accepts Arthur Danto’s case of nine indiscernible red squares, for which perceptually-identical paintings have different contents, one understands that meaning and perception need not be strictly correlated. A more useful triumvirate enjoins performance, imagination, and extra-perceptual content. Perception matters for sure, but it is primarily an entry vehicle, leaving the difficult, interpretative work to occur much later, often in the artwork’s absence.

In what follows, I review a recent turn of events that is rapidly reshaping philosophers' attitudes towards aesthetic experiences, though in a manner that further divides us from our wordless world. Not only have cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind entered the fray, but realism's resurgence, coupled with a secondary goal to extrapolate mind-independent experiences, risk to displace our wordless world all the more.

III. TWO SURPRISE INCURSIONS

Since the millennium, contemporary aesthetics has witnessed two unexpected incursions. One intriguing development concerns philosophers of mind's sudden fascination with aesthetics, while the other involves cognitive scientists' increasingly measuring aesthetic responses. Both fields' sudden interests in aesthetics have caught aestheticians off guard, precisely because they are heirs to logical positivism's empirical imprimatur. Nearly a century ago, logical positivists (also known as the Vienna Circle) disparaged aesthetics, along with ethics and religion, since they deemed such fields 'meaningless nonsense', given their unverifiability. Even Wittgenstein, whose later *Philosophical Investigations* explores the kind of ambiguity the arts offer, initially described ethics, which is "inexpressible", and aesthetics as "one" in his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (1922). Despite logical positivists' attempts to discredit aesthetics, it survived, and especially thrives in countries where philosophers who do aesthetics manage to reach vast audiences, given the broad interest in the arts. It may thus seem odd that philosophers and scientists who once dismissed aesthetics as unverifiable are suddenly eager to participate in its debates. This unforeseen appreciation of aesthetics can be explained by the recent availability of measurable tools like fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), PET (Positron emission tomography), and EEG (Electroencephalography). And what better way to understand human brains than to measure their reactions to pictures of art, film-clips, sound clips, smells, or some combination thereof. As a result, those philosophers, and even scientists, who once dismissed aesthetics as too unscientific, are now keen to make their mark in this field by demonstrating a correlation between aesthetic appreciation (in terms of recognition) and brain activity. To some, their claims to evidence frame aesthetics as merely speculative.

During the nineties, vision scientist Semir Zeki (University College London) coined the term neuroaesthetics to refer to a 'broad range of recent research in the cognitive neuroscience of visual aesthetics'.¹ In 2007, aesthetician William Seeley summarized neuroaesthetics as seeking to explain how artworks function as either perceptual or aesthetic stimuli, while attempting to ground experiences in biological explanations.² After analyzing neuroaesthetics' claims, he concluded that '[e]xplanations of how artworks function generate artistically salient perceptual effects [that] can help clarify conceptual issues and resolve debates among competing theories in philosophical

aesthetics. But, there is no reason to expect that these sorts of explanations will form a coherent unified theory that generalizes to even a subset of artworks or aesthetic practices.’³

Neuroaesthetics seems primed to describe a causal relationship between artworks and spectators, but what happens if spectator responses only seem to have been caused by the artwork. For example, people often respond, “This does nothing for me”, which isn’t all that surprising since this response is predicated on a view that objects work on spectators, who need not exert any extra effort of their own. What was once described as spiritual art may rather have been empty vessels fulfilling spectators’ fleeting interests

In light of Zeki’s two books (*Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain* [1999] and *Splendors and Misery of the Brain: Love, Creativity and the Quest for Happiness* [2009]) detailing his discoveries regarding the *human brain on art*, scores of university biology departments have built similar labs across the globe to test vision science, vision & cognition, vision & perception, neurobiology, etc. Neuroscience labs testing for perceptual and aesthetic effects have indeed compiled reams of data concerning the relationship between film shots and directed attention or the relationship between imagery and human emotion, and they routinely capture various brain zones heating up in light of controlled aesthetic situations. Few aestheticians tire of hearing neuro-scientists detail their exciting discoveries. Only problem is, we now have body-in-tube data for people not actually having aesthetic experiences, no different than philosophy of mind’s earlier brain-in-the-vat theories. Respondents are rather lying in machines looking at pictures or watching film clips with fMRI sensors attached to their scalps. Even if we foretell a future where such brain scans occur while people experience films in cinemas or installation art in art museums, we still have the same problem whereby perception depends on prior concepts, yet avant-garde art tends to produce objects that defy easy categorization.

Such abridged versions of aesthetic experience reduce engaging multiple objects with others in select environments (church, museum, theatre, or sculpture park) to image scanning. And they reduce experiences that entail scenes with vast amounts of detail to brain activity whose signal strength (so-called hot zones) primarily indicate familiarity and recognition. The same goes for experiencing films on giant screens in packed sensoround theatres. Since labs are well-equipped to measure human brains’ pleasure centres and emotional responses, data gathering remains an incessant pursuit.

Trouble is, some neuroscientists are beginning to doubt the ease with which neuroscience research can detect beauty’s presence, let alone its universality. Contra their peers, Bevil Conway and Alexander Rehding are especially suspicious about statements like: ‘All works that appear beautiful to a subject have a single brain-based characteristic, which is that they have as a correlate of experiencing them a change in strength of [fMRI] activity within the mOFC [medial orbitofrontal cortex].’⁴ To counter such bold positions,

they add: '[A] discovery that every person's experience of beauty (however vaguely defined) correlates with activity within a specific brain region would be surprising, since it would seem more likely that a complex reaction (beautiful!) would hinge not on the absolute level of activity within a single brain centre but rather on the pattern of activity across many distributed brain regions, specifically those responsible for perception, reward, decision making, and emotion. Indeed, a broader reading of the literature reveals that the mOFC is not uniquely associated with experiences of beauty and may be neither necessary nor sufficient for these experiences. The mOFC appears to be part of a large network of brain regions that subserves all value judgments.'⁵ Given this research frenzy, I would encourage aestheticians to jjoin in, either by collaborating directly with those neuroscientists regularly funneling data to philosophers of mind or by collecting data in situ from audience members attending art events. Moreover, by emphasizing the extra-perceptual, aestheticians may even inspire neuroscientists to discover ways to detect people's absorption of nonconceptual content, if this happens somehow.

While scientists are rapidly trying to figure out how particular artworks manipulate, seduce, or direct viewer attention, none has attempted to go from spectator to artwork, which would require understanding: the imagination's role in making sense of unfamiliar experiences, how human beings spontaneously devise concepts needed for perception to occur, or the relationship between venue (including the milieu, environment, and building) and audience experience. These points, which I consider 'extra-perceptual', account for the fact that much of what happens when we experience artworks occurs later, and for reasons that may not be directly triggered by perception. Since art experiences often expose people to unfamiliar imagery, measuring people's responses to either pictures or artworks is limited to what they perceive, and fails to measure the long-term impact of engaging mysterious contents. That said, aesthetic experiences are not limited to concrete events. Aesthetic experiences such as book reading, story telling, or pondering missing or destroyed artworks, occur in the imagination. Consider that Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* was imperceptible from 1917 to 1950, yet people could discuss its significance despite its being lost. In the seminal text *Art as Experience* (1934), John Dewey bemoans the one-sided idea of the nature of perception', whereby the 'elements of seeking and of thinking are subordinated to the perfecting of the process of perception itself ...resulting in a thoroughly anaemic [sic] conception of art.'⁶ No longer constrained by the limits of perception, we can develop what James Shelley calls non-perceptual aesthetic properties (or features) to demonstrate the necessity of extra-perceptual components.⁷

Despite Dewey's concerns regarding exclusively perceptual approaches, philosophers of mind, historically constrained to theoretical debates, have recently launched the sub-area known as philosophy of perception. And what easier way to prove their theories than to tie their philosophical debates to the reams of data recently gleaned from measuring brain responses to artworks.

Given aesthetics’ focus on aesthetic experiences, it’s not surprising that many philosophers of perception are convinced that their work can make a vital contribution to aesthetics. Dozens of notable philosophers of mind have either published or have books forthcoming on this topic.⁸

IV. MARKING SPACE FOR THE EXTRA-PERCEPTUAL

Although not all philosophers of perception rely on neuroaesthetic data, all are focused on perception, which as I’ve repeatedly noted is hardly the *central* feature of aesthetic experience. I imagine that most art lovers rank meaning and thought-provocation higher than perception. Audiences may earnestly perceive all that there is to see, hear and smell, but remain entirely unmoved. Finally, what makes an experience aesthetic is its capacity to provoke reflection, which again is extra-perceptual.

No doubt, perception is the vehicle that enables human beings to gather information about their world, but what people readily perceive is usually linked to what they already know. To recognize chair or forest imagery requires access to chair and forest concepts. By contrast, avant-garde art is well-known for presenting information whose relevant concepts seem out of reach, yet human beings eventually find such works meaningful. What is this process? How do human beings respond when artworks, whether visual artworks, scores, or scripts, are presented in unfamiliar manners (unusual exhibitions, new arrangements, or bizarre interpretations)? Aestheticians routinely work on these kinds of philosophical problems, which remain extra-perceptual. One’s perception of the actual artwork (the object, score or script) doesn’t change, yet its changed context can produce entirely different responses. Imagine an arranged score whose notes appear identical, yet its performance sounds entirely unfamiliar (Beaudoin and Moore⁹). Consider Baz Luhrman’s *Romeo & Juliet* (1996), which employs Shakespeare’s script to unrecognizable ends.

There is one last hitch, which is a huge problem for both scientists and philosophers of mind. Neither field admits to or knows how to account for nonconceptual content, which bodies absorb even if they don’t perceive it, theoretically speaking. For philosophers of mind, perceptions are cognized. They are not just sense-data blobs, but are perceived in light of some referent, or prior concept. Aesthetic experiences like Richard Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* purposely overwhelm the senses, forcing audience members to decide whether to attend to set design, story line, music, acting, lyrics, singing, character development, costume design, or some combination thereof. I would argue that with such rich experiences, the vast majority of what one absorbs is nonconceptual content, which somehow gets recorded as memory. Even if nonconceptual content goes unnoticed because it isn’t immediately recognizable, the body somehow stores access to it, which later aesthetic encounters trigger. Conceptualizing this information take years and lots of outside

work. Nature walks or unfamiliar experiences similarly overwhelm our senses. Phone apps like Shazam, whose computers identify birds by recognizing bird sounds recorded on phones, effectively conceptualize nonconceptual content, when they tie inscrutable whistles to suspected species. Like Shazam, the human brain must ratiocinate through all the possible referents that could conceptualize the experience. Unlike Shazam, human beings sometimes have to devise novel concepts, such as genres, frames, categories, or movements to conceptualize aesthetic experience. Even if all nonconceptual content is simply sense-data split from its referent, philosophy of perception, like its scientific partner neuroaesthetics, remains crippled by its singular obsession with measurable perceptual effects on viewers. By contrast, aestheticians since Immanuel Kant's Third Critique, have marveled at the way human beings respond to artworks, absent *guiding concepts*. Not only do philosophers of perception ignore nonconceptual content, but their emphasizing perception makes the same mistake as neuroscientists, who tie causality to concept-dependent recognition, rather than trying to grasp how subjects *eventually* experience artworks for which they lack concepts.

The recent incursion by scientists and philosophers of mind signals a boon for aesthetics, largely because aesthetics is finally poised to demonstrate its strengths, which philosophers have tended to underestimate. As already noted, research focused exclusively on perception turns up few surprises, yet such evidentiary approaches often overshadow aesthetics' far more original claims. It should also be noted that none of these more evidentiary practices has produced information that runs counter-intuitive or disproves claims made by aestheticians for centuries. These newer fields usually produce results that seem so basic that they can play only ancillary roles, as footnotes to ongoing debates. Still, the non-evidentiary way that aesthetics is practiced has led some to presume that its claims are speculative, as compared to scientifically-tested research. To some, this diminishes aesthetics' authority. To others, it vindicates our wordless world.

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NOTES

1. William Seeley 2007, 1, <http://abacus.bates.edu/~wseeley/Seeley%20APA-C07.pdf>.
2. Seeley 2007, 1.
3. Seeley 2007, 13.
4. Ishizu and Zeki 2011.
5. Conway and Rehding 2013.
6. Dewey 2005, 264
7. Shelley 2003.
8. Philosophers of mind with texts forthcoming on art include Tim Crane (ed. *The Contents of Experience: Essays on Perception*, 1992/2011), Bence Nanay (*Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, forthcoming 2015), Alva Noë (*Varieties of Presence*, 2012; *Art as Philosophical Practice*, forthcoming), Christopher Peacocke ("The Perception of Music", 2009), Mark Rollins (*The Strategic Eye: Perception and Pictorial Art*, forthcoming), Jesse Prinz (*Works*

of Wonder: The Experience, Evaluation, and Origin of Art, forthcoming), Susanna Siegel (*Contents of Visual Experience*, 2011) and Evan Thompson (*Colour Vision: A Study in Cognitive Science and the Philosophy of Perception*, 1995).

9. Beaudoin and Moore 2010.

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