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*Dedicato alla cara, lieta, familiare memoria di Richard Wollheim*

# Contents

# Acknowledgments

This book is about how thinking about perception can help us tackle various problems that have to do with aesthetics. It does not presuppose any familiarity with philosophy of perception (so that aestheticians can read it) and it doesn't presuppose any familiarity with aesthetics either (so that philosophers of perception can also read it). But this means that it does not presuppose much. So then the hope is that it is accessible to pretty much anyone.

I have been working on this material for more than two decades, so it would be impossible to acknowledge everyone who helped me throughout the process by talking about these issues or even by giving written comments on some earlier version of some of the chapters. So I won't try to list them, because I would no doubt forget some people. But I hope I can remember those who gave me feedback on the entire book: Casey O'Callaghan, Craig French, Dan Cavedon-Taylor, Maarten Steenhagen, Jacob Berger, Will Davies, Sam Rose, Robbie Kubala, Kris Goffin, Margot Strohminger, and an anonymous referee for Oxford University Press. I am extremely grateful for their comments.

I presented material from the book at various venues: University of Oxford, University of Tubingen, University of Kent, University of East Anglia, University of Aarhus, the Swiss Center for the Affective Sciences, University of Paris, University of Vienna, Tilburg University, University of Leuven, University of London, Columbia University, University of Cincinnati, University of British Columbia, University of Manchester, University of York, University of Hertfordshire, University of California, Berkeley, and at various meetings of the American Society of Aesthetics, the British Society of Aesthetics, and the American Philosophical Association. I also gave graduate seminars on the topic of the book at Syracuse University, at the University of British Columbia, and at the University of Antwerp. I am very grateful for all the questions and comments at these venues.

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was published as 'Aesthetic attention' in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. And some material from Chapter 7 was published as 'The history of vision' in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Thanks to Bob Marriott for preparing the index.

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Bence Nanay

*Cambridge*
*May 15, 2015*

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# 1

# Aesthetics

Last week, in a barber shop in San Diego, I unsuspectingly answered the standard question about what I'm doing in town by saying I'm here for an aesthetics conference. It must have been the jetlag: I normally try not to reveal that I'm a philosopher if I don't absolutely need to. Either way, there I was confessing that I'm here for an aesthetics conference.

A quick sparkle of enthusiasm in my barber's eyes: he thought that I'm either in the nail business or in plastic surgery. While it was tempting to go along with one of these two options, I somehow saw fit to explain what aesthetics is. My first attempt—tying it to the concept of beauty—failed miserably for obvious reasons. It would have been a tempting route to just say it's philosophy of art: various philosophical questions about art. I have done that in the past, but for some reason, maybe irked by the missed opportunity of posing as a plastic surgeon for half an hour, I didn't want to take this route—I do think that aesthetics is different from the philosophy of art and now that I'd got myself in this muddle, I shouldn't take that cheap way out. So here is what I said: aesthetics is about ways of perceiving the world that are really rewarding and special. You can perceive artworks that way but also other things: the ocean, the mountains, the desolate streetscape surrounding that barber shop.

My barber knew exactly what I was talking about, and he gave me an example: he had no customers one morning when it was, uncharacteristically, raining outside. And in the empty parking lot in front of his shop he saw this really old man walking very slowly, holding a yellow umbrella and wearing a stripy three-piece suit and a baseball hat. He said it was like seeing the world in slow motion—as if it were a film. He told me other examples as well, but this one stuck in my mind. This ended up being one of the deepest conversations I had about aesthetics over the course of that aesthetics conference.

Aesthetics is about ways of perceiving the world, I told the barber. This is almost true, but not quite. The aim of this book is to get clear about the intricate connection between aesthetics and perception. I am not exactly unbiased in this question. I have been doing research on both philosophy of perception and on aesthetics. This apparently sounds bewildering to most of my philosopher friends and colleagues. The bewilderment normally takes the following form: Philosophy of perception is a very respectable subfield of philosophy, even hip these days. It is part of philosophy of mind, which, in turn, is part of the 'core' philosophical disciplines. Aesthetics, in contrast, is as fringy as it gets, at least within contemporary analytic philosophy. My well-rehearsed answer is that the questions I am interested in within aesthetics are really philosophy of perception questions. I had this conversation many times. Once someone asked a surprising follow-up: are there questions in aesthetics that are not really philosophy of perception questions? And I had to say: well, not many. So a tempting conclusion to reach would be that questions in aesthetics are really philosophy of perception questions.

I don't quite want to say this. But I do think that if we apply the remarkably elaborate and sophisticated conceptual apparatus of philosophy of perception to questions in aesthetics, we can make real progress. And this is exactly what I intend to do in this book.

The seemingly provocative title of the book, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, should be interpreted in the light of this: I do not for a moment want to suggest that aesthetics *is* philosophy of perception. Who am I to pronounce on what aesthetics is or should be? Nor am I trying to conquer, in true imperial manner, aesthetics or suggest it ought to be annexed to philosophy of perception. But what I am doing in this book 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 am not claiming 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.

An additional perk of this approach is that it may move aesthetics out of its unfortunate isolation within philosophy. If we can do aesthetics in a

[1] I myself used very different approaches, for example, to talk about the relation between literature and philosophy in Nanay 2010g, Nanay 2013c, and 2013d.

philosophy of perception manner, then maybe aesthetics can be considered to be more of a core discipline. As a result, this book does not presuppose any familiarity with the technical vocabulary of aesthetics—anyone without a background in aesthetics will be in a position to follow the arguments. And it does not presuppose any familiarity with the technical vocabulary of philosophy of perception either. It is suitable for aestheticians as well as for philosophers of perception (or for anyone else, for that matter).

Another additional perk is that this way of thinking about aesthetics may give us a concept of aesthetics that non-philosophers can also relate to. Aesthetics is not exactly fashionable in art history, critical theory, and cultural studies circles. At least since the 1980s 'anti-aesthetics' movement (Foster 1983), there has been a deluge of articles and books arguing that aesthetics is pointless, harmful, and is generally a waste of time (see Schaeffer 2000 and Connor 2011 for some representative versions of this claim).[2] The main charge is that if we think of aesthetics as the study of Kantian beauty, it is not particularly interesting. But it is difficult to see how one can have a less narrow conception of aesthetics without making this field of study completely vague (see Elkins 2013 for an example of this claim). The hope is that by refocusing the debates in aesthetics as philosophy of perception debates, we can give a non-trivial but also not narrowly Kantian way of thinking about aesthetics.

Finally, is it a radical or even novel idea to tie aesthetics to the study of perception? Of course not (see Nanay 2014a for more on this). 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: 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).

[2] This line of thought has an illustrious history. As Bouvard says in the Flaubert book, "In the final account, all the practitioners of rhetoric, poetics and aesthetics are just a bunch of imbeciles" (Gustave Flaubert: *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005, p. 130).

## 1.1 Aesthetics versus Philosophy of Art

This book 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 about philosophy of art here as possible.

As it has been repeatedly 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 (Dickie 1964, 1974; Carroll 2000, 2001a), is that too much attention has been given to 'the aesthetic' in the discussion of art. Aesthetic response (or aesthetic experience or aesthetic appreciation, whatever any of these concepts may mean, see Chapter 2) 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 into the very concept of aesthetics. We should detach aesthetics from art, but do so carefully (see Davis 2011, pp. 4–5 for a similar methodology). 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 book? One tempting way to proceed would be to say that aesthetics is about beauty. Remember, that was my first attempt at explaining aesthetics to the barber. 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 judgment is the judgment of aesthetic

properties, and so on. I am very skeptical of this way to go and I will say more about aesthetic properties in Chapter 4.

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. I will talk a lot about various candidates for what makes pictures pictures in Chapter 3, 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, in Chapter 4 I will argue that 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 to 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 judgment, aesthetic value, aesthetic stance. But we should also include those debates that are discussed in aesthetics journals and books but that 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, humor, 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'.[3] The general idea behind this book 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.

The aim of the book is to 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—questions about the nature of fiction and our engagement with fictional works should be able to be raised independently from any talk of art. The same goes for narratives, pictures, depiction, metaphor, creativity, and so on.[4] 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 this book is about aesthetics and 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.

[3] In: What abstract art means to me. *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 18 (1951): 2–15.
[4] See Nanay 2014d for a treatment of creativity along these lines.

## 1.2 Perception

What does it mean to say that I aim to use the conceptual apparatus of philosophy of perception to tackle aesthetics questions? 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—see Prinz 2010, Nanay 2010a, Wolfe et al. 2000, Prinzmetal and Landau 2008, see also the rich inattentional blindness literature, which will pop up repeatedly throughout the book). 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 (see Nanay 2010e for some discussion on this). If we conceive of philosophy of perception as the ensemble of philosophical questions about perception, then a lot of philosophical questions about perception also cover 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 seem to also cover much of philosophy of mind.

One concept that definitely belongs to the conceptual arsenal of philosophy of perception is that of sensory imagination—a concept that has played an important role in aesthetics. Sensory imagination (imagining seeing something, imagining hearing something, etc) is to be contrasted with propositional imagination (imagining that x is F). Propositional imagination is a propositional attitude, like belief, whereas sensory imagination is by definition 'sensory': perception-like. Some philosophers of perception even refer to sensory imagination as a *quasi-perceptual* process (Prinz 2007, Tye 1996, Carruthers 2005, see also Kind 2001), and rightly so—perception and sensory imagination have very similar phenomenology: seeing an apple and visualizing one have a similar feel (Perky 1910, but see Hopkins 2012a's worries and Nanay 2012e's response) and they also share very similar neural circuits (Kosslyn et al. 2006, see also Nanay 2015h) and very similar patterns of cortical activation (Page et al. 2011). For these reasons, mental imagery and sensory imagination have been considered to be part of the domain of philosophy of perception. Philosophy of perception is not only about perceptual, but also about quasi-perceptual processes.

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 read the title of the book as *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Mind*. I'd be happy to concede the label. And maybe some aesthetic phenomena that are about experiences are more appropriate to take to be part of philosophy of mind and not of philosophy of perception. Humor and creativity are two potential examples. But, and that's what really matters for my purposes, the narrower subject of the book, a certain kind of distributed perceptual attention, would count as a central subject of philosophy of perception under even the most restrictive way of construing philosophy of perception.

## 1.3 Product Differentiation

The approach I am advocating here is not all that revolutionary. Many questions in aesthetics have for decades been treated as philosophy of perception questions. One obvious example is picture perception (see Chapter 3): 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—for instance, all three major accounts of aesthetic experience appeal to some key assumptions in philosophy of perception (see Nanay 2014a). My aim is to generalize from these 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, as we shall see in Chapter 2, 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' (Sibley 1965, p. 137). If you agree with this claim, you may not need much convincing to continue reading this book. But even if you don't, you could accept the much weaker claim of this book, namely, that broadly speaking, aesthetics deals with various kinds of experience that philosophy of perception can help us to understand better.

As there are claims in the vicinity of my approach that would be easy to confuse with my own (and the seemingly provocative title of the book does nothing to dispel these), I need to be explicit about what I am *not* saying.

First, as we have seen in Section 1.2, I am not saying that it is a good idea to expect of philosophy of perception to answer the central questions in the philosophy of art. I restrict my claim to aesthetics (which I differentiate from philosophy of art). Second, I am not even saying that all questions in aesthetics can be fruitfully tackled with the help of philosophy of perception. But many, even most, of them can.

Third, it is not my view that the domain of aesthetics (whatever that is) is necessarily perceptual. For example, I am not claiming that aesthetic experiences are necessarily perceptual or that only perceivable entities can be experienced aesthetically. Large-scale narrative structure or mathematical proofs can be experienced aesthetically, but they are not perceivable (although the jury is out about whether they are quasi-perceptual, see e.g. Mancosu 2005). But even if some of our aesthetic experiences turn out to be non-perceptual experiences, a general account

of them would still benefit from taking philosophy of perception seriously. As we have seen, the scope of philosophy of perception is much wider than just the question of what is perceived.

Finally, one may worry that conceptual art has demonstrated that the perceptual is not everything in art. If so, putting so much emphasis on perception (or even quasi-perceptual processes) may ignore these recent developments in art history. My answer is that conceptual art may or may not have demonstrated this, but that is strictly speaking irrelevant for establishing claims about aesthetics. Remember that questions about aesthetics and questions about philosophy of art are to be kept separate. There are lots of exciting questions about conceptual art within the domain of philosophy of art. But it does not follow that it poses new challenges to any issue in aesthetics.

Philosophy of perception is about experiences. Aesthetics is about some special kinds of experiences: not just, and not primarily, about aesthetic experiences, but also about 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 the question about the nature of perceptual experiences. Just how radical the approach of this book is, that is, doing aesthetics as philosophy of perception, 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.

The plan of the book is straightforward. After this one, there are seven chapters. They can be read independently of the others and they cover a number of the most influential concepts and debates in aesthetics. But the book is more than just a collection of case studies. There is a main theme: attention. I argue that attention plays a crucial role in characterizing those experiences that aesthetics is about. In some paradigmatic cases of what we may call 'aesthetic experiences', our attention is exercised in a special way: it is distributed across properties (Chapter 2). And various versions of this distributed attention explains some

important aesthetic phenomena, such as picture perception and appreciation (Chapter 3), and it also helps us to navigate some of the most vicious debates in aesthetics and art history: especially debates about aesthetic properties (Chapter 4), formalism (Chapter 5), uniqueness (Chapter 6), and about whether vision has a history (Chapter 7). In the last chapter, I consider some important examples of experiences in an aesthetic context, where our attention is not exercised in a distributed but rather in a focused manner.

# 2

# Distributed Attention

## 2.1 Varieties of Aesthetic Experience

This chapter is about aesthetic experience. Which is a little awkward, because I don't think that there is such a thing as aesthetic experience. Or, rather, I don't think that there is one and only one kind of aesthetic experience; that it is a monolithic category. My suspicion is that we tend to call any strong (or intense, or emotionally significant) experience that we have in an aesthetic context 'aesthetic experience'. But this can mean very different things: experiences of overwhelming beauty, experiences of strong emotions, experiences of strong identification with a fictional character, musical *frissons*, and so on.

Do we have any principled reasons to call some of these strong experiences encountered in an aesthetic context 'aesthetic experiences' and deny this label to others? I really don't think so. So I won't even try to give a lofty general theory of aesthetic experience (because I don't think there is such a thing, so it is very unlikely that we can give a general theory thereof). Again, recall the Robert Motherwell quote I used in Chapter 1: 'there is no such thing as *the* 'aesthetic', no more than there is any such thing as 'art".

The aim of this chapter is different and in many ways much more limited: I want to single out an important aspect of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience: the way we exercise our attention. This is not a particularly new angle—an old and influential, broadly Kantian, way of thinking about aesthetic experiences aims to understand what is special about aesthetic experiences in terms of disinterested attention. But the notion of disinterested attention (as the notion of aesthetic experience itself) has acquired a terrible reputation in the last decades. The aim of this chapter is to give a new account of how this 'special' kind of disinterested or aesthetic attention could be

cashed out with the help of the conceptual apparatus of philosophy of perception.

The gist of this account is that in the case of some paradigmatic instances of aesthetic experience, we attend in a distributed and at the same time focused manner: our attention is focused on one perceptual object, but it is distributed among a large number of this object's properties. This way of attending contrasts sharply with the most standard way of exercising our attention (which would be focusing on a limited set of properties of one or more perceptual objects). In other words, this way of attending is special and I argue that it is a central feature of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience.

Again, what I will say about the exercise of attention is not true of all aesthetic experiences. It is not true, for example, of those aesthetic experiences I will talk about in Chapter 8, where our attention is very much focused. But in this chapter, I concentrate on one very specific kind of aesthetic experience, which is only one of very many different kinds of aesthetic experiences, but it has been very influential, in art, literature, and philosophy. Here is someone who can describe experiences of this kind better than I can:

> But even the ugliness of faces, which of course were mostly familiar to him, seemed something new and uncanny, now that their features,—instead of being to him symbols of practical utility in the identification of this or that man, who until then had represented merely so many pleasures to be sought after, boredoms to be avoided, or courtesies to be acknowledged—were at rest, measurable by aesthetic coordinates alone, in the autonomy of their curves and angles.[1]

A lot is going on in this quote. We have the (broadly Kantian) insight that this experience is devoid of practical utility. We also have a formalist spin with the emphasis on curves and angles (more on this in Chapter 5). And also the seeing of something familiar in a new light, with fresh eyes. All of these themes are important and influential features of one particular kind of aesthetic experience—again, not all experiences in an aesthetic context. And the aim of this chapter is to understand better how our mind works when we have an aesthetic experience of this kind.

[1] Marcel Proust: *Swann's Way* (trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff). New York: Modern Library, 1928, pp. 469–70.

I singled out the quote from Proust because he somehow managed to condense three important themes of what it is to have an aesthetic experience into one sentence. But one may still worry how 'paradigmatic' these instances of aesthetic experiences are. All right, Proust had them, but this surely doesn't make them paradigmatic. Indeed it wouldn't, but there are many many artists, writers, and philosophers who talk about the same kind of experience: this is exactly what Robert Musil meant by the 'Other Condition' (see Nanay 2014b), what Julio Cortázar meant by paravision (in his book *Hopscotch*), what John Szarkowski called the 'abandonment to the uncomplicated pleasure of seeing',[2] and what Jonas Mekas tried to capture in his films and, to throw in a really obscure reference, what Géza Ottlik described as 'the freedom of perception' in his 1957 novel, *Iskola a határon*—the list could go on indefinitely (and I will give some further quotes at the end of the chapter), but let me add two more evocative examples. Here is Albert Camus:

> In the cloisters of San Francisco in Fiesole, a little courtyard with arcades. Red flowers, sunshine and yellow and black bees. In a corner, a green watering can. Flies humming everywhere. In the warmth, the little garden breathes gently. [ . . . ] I want nothing else but this detachment and this closed space—this lucid and patient intensity.[3]

And the last example is from Aldous Huxley's book *The Doors of Perception*, where he makes a systematic attempt at describing his drug-induced experiences, which he takes to be an intensified version of the aesthetic experiences I want to focus on here.

> A small typing table stood in the center of the room; beyond it, from my point of view, was a wicker chair and beyond that a desk. The three pieces formed an intricate pattern of horizontals, uprights and diagonals—a pattern all the more interesting for not being interpreted in terms of spatial relationships. Table, chair and desk came together in a composition [ . . . ] I was looking at my furniture, not as the utilitarian who has to sit on chairs, to write at desks and tables, and not as the cameraman or scientific recorder, but as the pure aesthete whose concern is only with forms and their relationships within the field of vision or the picture space. (Huxley 1954, pp. 21–2)

[2] John Szarkowski: Introduction to *Andre Kertesz*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964, p. 9.

[3] Albert Camus: *Carnets*, 1937, September 15.

I am assuming that experiences of this kind are something the reader is familiar with. Maybe you call it something else, but it is very likely that you have had experiences of this kind. I suspect that the experience my barber in San Diego described was such a Proustian experience, for example, although he has not read Proust, and, while I haven't asked, I'm pretty sure he has not seen any Jonas Mekas films either. But it is possible that you have no idea what I am (or Proust is) talking about, nor are you interested in some complicated description of a fleeting impression you have no reason to care about. This is not a reason to stop reading this book. This book is not about experiences of this kind. This chapter, on the other hand, is. But I use aesthetic experience of this kind in order to introduce a concept I take to be crucial for reasons that go far beyond aesthetic experiences: the concept of distributed attention. This concept will play a key role in understanding the aesthetic appreciation of pictures, formalism, uniqueness, the history of vision, etc. Even if you couldn't care less about aesthetic experiences in the narrow Proustian sense, you should care an awful lot about distributed attention in aesthetics—or so I will argue.

One tempting way of approximating what all these authors were talking about is something like an experience of overwhelming beauty. But this is not a particularly helpful characterization as aesthetic experiences are not always and not necessarily overwhelming—they can be fleeting moments of beauty. More importantly, this characterization seems to tie the concept of aesthetic experience to the concept of beauty, but this does not exactly take us into crystal clear territory—it's not as if we have firm necessary and sufficient conditions for being beautiful.

Robert Hopkins makes an important distinction between judging beauty and savouring beauty (Hopkins 1997, pp. 181–2, see also Scheffler 2010 for a similar distinction). He points out that judging something to be beautiful is not a very demanding notion at all—it merely means forming a belief that it is beautiful. Savouring beauty, on the other hand, 'implies responding to it in a more full-blooded way' (Hopkins 1997, p. 181). In the case of savouring beauty, our 'sensibilities are engaged by that beauty' (Hopkins 1997, p. 181). It is possible to judge things to be beautiful without savouring their beauty. This was, allegedly, the way in which Ernst Gombrich experienced artworks in the last couple of decades of his life: he saw that a painting was beautiful or graceful, but it left him completely cold. But this would not constitute an

aesthetic experience, at least not in the sense I am interested in here. What is also needed is that our 'sensibilities are engaged' and that the experience is more 'full-blooded'.

Further, besides the general worry about the lack of clarity when it comes to the concept of beauty, an additional problem is that I am not even sure that all aesthetic experiences or even the kind of aesthetic experiences I zoomed in on, are experiences of beauty. The experiences Proust, Camus, and Huxley talk about, for example, don't seem to be about beauty at all. But this way of thinking about aesthetic experiences may still help the reader to recall some of her own aesthetic experiences.

There is great variation between different people's aesthetic experiences of this kind. Richard Wollheim famously spent an average of two hours looking at a painting in order to arrive at an 'aesthetic judgment' of it and argued that the first glance impression is often misleading when it comes to assessing the aesthetic value of a painting (Wollheim 1987, p. 8). I had the chance to be with him during this process on a number of occasions and he insisted each time that it takes him at least an hour in front of a picture to have anything reminiscent of an aesthetic experience (he used the term between air quotes). Contrast this with Clement Greenberg (see Danto 1996, p. 109; Hoving 1993, p. 256), who took aesthetic experience to be instantaneous: he was known for making his assessment about the aesthetic value of a painting on the basis of whether he had an aesthetic experience in the very first split second of seeing it.

I talked about some important features of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience—following Proust's insights. But there are two further features that I take to be very important: (a) we do not have complete control over them and (b) they have a lingering effect.

It has happened to many of us that although we have entered a museum with the specific intention of having an aesthetic experience of a specific artwork, it just didn't happen. We stand in front of it and we fail to experience it in an aesthetic manner, in spite of the fact that we really want to. Maybe we are too fixated on the lecture we need to give in half an hour. Or maybe we are still thinking of the conversation we had over lunch with a friend. Or maybe we are just too sleepy. In any case, the aesthetic experience is just not forthcoming. In this respect, aesthetic experiences are very different from the ordinary perceptual experiences of, say, color or shape. If I am looking at an object and want to see its color, this will guarantee, barring some odd circumstances, that

I experience its color. This is apparently not so when it comes to aesthetic experiences. I do not take this crucial aspect of aesthetic experiences to be controversial—many artists and art critics have expressed their frustration about it—my favourite quote on this comes from Roger Fry:

> There are days of lowered vitality when one may wander disconsolately in a gallery like the Louvre, in despair at one's incapacity to respond to the appeal of the great masters, whom one had thought to be one's friends, but who suddenly seem to speak an alien tongue. (Fry 1927, p. 40)

Here is another observation that I take to be an uncontroversial feature of aesthetic experiences and that is also surprisingly missing from the philosophical discussion of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experiences tend to have a lingering effect. They often do not stop when the contemplation of the object of the aesthetic experience stops. After leaving the concert hall or the cinema, one may still see the world differently. Whether this 'lingering effect' is better described as the continuation of our aesthetic experience or as the aesthetic experience coloring and altering the ensuing experience depends on how one individuates experiences in general. But the main point is that 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 (this doesn't happen all the time—something often distracts us—but tends to happen nonetheless). Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet's film *Une visite au Louvre* (2004) emphasizes this odd feature of aesthetic experiences, when they follow up forty-five minutes of footage of brilliantly filmed artworks with a scene of the poplar tree outside of the Louvre. Our aesthetic experience of the tree outside is as strong as that of the paintings inside.[4]

Is the characterization of aesthetic experience the holy grail of aesthetics? It should be clear from the discussion so far that I really don't think so. Critics of the concept of aesthetic experience have pointed out that aesthetics as a discipline has paid too much attention to capturing

[4] It is important that this feature of aesthetic experiences is not merely a contrast effect. Béla Tarr's 1993 film *Sátántangó* is seven and a half hours long and black and white. Most of its shots are over five minutes long and mainly nothing happens in them. One memorable shot shows three characters walking away from the camera on an abandoned dirt road for a full ten minutes. Each time I saw this film in the cinema, my experience when I left the cinema was 'Wow, colors' and also 'Wow, things move very fast'. The lingering effect I want to focus on here is not to be confused with such contrast effects.

this fleeting experience. In many ways, I agree—our responses to art as well as our responses to other things around us (texts, pictures, movies, nature, ordinary objects) are varied and aesthetic experience is only one way in which we experience these things. Many other kinds of experience are equally important within the context of aesthetics (I will talk about some of these in Chapter 8). Take, for example, *frissons* or chills, the strong reaction to music, which can be explained by a simple physiological reaction to sudden and unexpected changes in primary musical parameters, such as changes in dynamics, tessitura, harmony, or meter (Gabrielsson 2001, Panksepp 1995). Frissons are not less aesthetic than the experiences I am interested in here. But they do not have the attentional pattern I take to be so central for the kind of (Proustian) aesthetic experiences I will talk about.

What I aim to do in this chapter is to use some conceptual apparatus from philosophy of perception in order to give an account of how our attention is exercised in some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience. And I emphasized way too many times that I am not trying to give a general theory of aesthetic experience. But I know that the mere use of this term 'aesthetic experience' will raise red flags for many readers. And rightly so. Let's face it, the concept of aesthetic experience has acquired a terrible reputation in the last couple of decades. And I should make it clear that we can nonetheless use this concept in a relatively harmless manner and that we do not need to side with any highly controversial claims that made this concept acquire this reputation.

First, the concept of aesthetic experience has been used to define art. The idea is that those objects are works of art that are supposed to trigger aesthetic experiences or, alternatively, that trigger aesthetic experiences in a suitably informed spectator (see Bell 1914 for a classic exposition). With some alternative definitions of art (see Dickie 1964 and Levinson 1979) as well as the general skepticism about the feasibility and desirability of a general definition of art (see, e.g., Weitz 1956; Lopes 2008, 2014), this use of the concept of aesthetic experience is not something anyone who still talks about aesthetic experiences should feel obliged to take seriously.

Second, the concept of aesthetic experience has also often been taken to be the holy grail of how we should enjoy (great) art: if we enjoy (great) art the *right* way, we experience the work of art in an aesthetic manner. What seems to follow from this is that if we do not have an aesthetic

experience when looking at (great) works of art, we are not doing what we are supposed to be doing: maybe we lack aesthetic sensibility or concentration or training. I will not assume that there is a *right* way of engaging with art, let alone that the right way is to have an aesthetic experience.

Third, in the light of my remarks in Chapter 1 about the differences between aesthetics and philosophy of art, it should not come as a surprise that I take aesthetic experience to be neither necessary nor sufficient for the experience of works of art. We can experience works of art in a non-aesthetic manner and we can experience objects other than works of art in an aesthetic manner. We experience works of art in all kinds of way: sometimes we are only paying attention to their price or to their color (as in the proverbial case of buying an artwork to match one's sofa). These experiences are unlikely to be aesthetic experiences. Yet, what we experience in these examples are works of art. Also, presumably art thieves don't have aesthetic experience when they are robbing a museum. Conversely, we can have aesthetic experience of nature and of ordinary objects (see Carroll 1993 and Irvin 2008 respectively). In short, the concept of aesthetic experience should be detached from art: some, but not all, of our aesthetic experiences are of artworks and some, but not all, our experiences of artworks are aesthetic experiences.

Fourth, I don't want to restrict aesthetic experiences to perceptual experiences (although I will mainly talk about perceptual aesthetic experiences in this chapter). It has been argued that we can have aesthetic experiences of entities that are not perceived: maybe ideas (in the case of engaging with conceptual art), maybe large-scale narrative structure (Collingwood 1938, Goldie and Schellekens 2007, Shelley 2003, Costello 2013). I see no reason why we should exclude these from the circle of aesthetic experiences.

My aim is to explain some important features of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience in terms of aesthetic attention. And if this explanatory scheme works, it should also work in the case of these non-perceptual examples of aesthetic experience.

## 2.2 Disinterested Attention

Probably the oldest and most widely discussed account of aesthetic experience focuses on the phenomenal character of these experiences.

The general idea is that, to put it simply, aesthetic experiences 'feel' different: what it is like to have aesthetic experiences is different from what it is like to have non-aesthetic experiences. The question then is: what is this phenomenal character that is proprietary to aesthetic experiences? Some of the most famous candidates are detachment, disinterestedness, and disengagement (Stolnitz 1960 emphasizes disinterestedness, whereas Bullough 1912 emphasizes emotional detachment)—and these are very much in the spirit of the Proust quote I started out with. The general Kantian insight here is that our aesthetic experiences are different from our other experiences inasmuch as they are free from our everyday worries and practical outlook.[5]

The concept of attention has been very important both in the expositions of and in the objections to the 'disinterestedness' accounts of aesthetic experience. Eliseo Vivas, for example, defines aesthetic experience as 'an experience of rapt attention which involves the intransitive apprehension of an object's immanent meanings and values in their full presentational immediacy' (Vivas 1959, p. 227). Jerome Stolnitz also appeals to the concept of attention in his definition of the aesthetic attitude as 'disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone' (Stolnitz 1960, pp. 33–4, see also Fenner 1996, Kemp 1999).

I will follow the same route: I also think that a crucial feature of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience is the way our attention is exercised, and that this way has a lot to do with disinterestedness (at least under some conception of disinterestedness). But it has to be acknowledged that talking about aesthetic attention and especially disinterested aesthetic attention has become a strict taboo in aesthetics since George Dickie's influential rejection of the very idea of aesthetic attitude and aesthetic experience, which is based on a lengthy analysis of the concept of 'disinterested attention' (Dickie 1964, 1974, see also Zemach 1997). If we want to revive the concept of aesthetic attention, it needs to be pointed out that Dickie's argument is incomplete or maybe even misguided. And, as it turns out, it is.

[5] I called this insight Kantian because this is a view routinely attributed to Kant, but see Zangwill 1992 for a more nuanced account of what Kant meant and for an analysis of how contemporary concepts of disinterestedness relate to the Kantian one.

Dickie (reasonably) assumes that those accounts that define aesthetic experience (or aesthetic attitude) in terms of disinterested attention would need to have a clear distinction between interested and disinterested attention: aesthetic experience is characterized by disinterested attention and other kinds of experiences are characterized by interested attention. But, so the argument continues, attention is just not the kind of thing that can be interested or disinterested.

As Dickie's supposed demolition of the myth of the aesthetic attitude seems to rely on this piece of conceptual analysis of attention, we need to examine the assumptions he makes about this concept. The most important assumption seems to be that there is one kind of attention: attention can have different motives and it can be stronger or weaker, but we cannot talk about different types of attention.[6] For Dickie, there is only one type of attention.[7]

But this is just a false claim. There are a number of ways of attending (overt/covert, endogenous/exogenous, focused/distributed, etc. (see Chun et al. 2011 for a taxonomy and see also Posner 1980, 1984; Posner et al. 1984; Hoffman & Subramaniam 1995; Kowler et al. 1995 for the specific distinctions)). But if this is so, then we can bypass Dickie's argument and try to characterize aesthetic experiences in terms of the way our attention is being exercised. This is exactly what I aim to do—by turning to philosophy of perception for some help.

## 2.3 Distributed versus Focused Attention

My starting point is the old and, within perceptual psychology, mainstream distinction between focused and distributed attention. Here is a brief exposition of this distinction:

> When the attention of an observer is strictly or intensely focussed on a particular part of a visual scene [ . . . ], then only its object(s) are present in consciousness, but in most ordinary viewing situations attention is not so exclusively focussed. Rather, it tends to be far more broadly distributed, encompassing much of what is present in the scene. (Mack 2002, p. 105)

[6] 'There is only one way to listen to (to attend to) music, although listening may be more or less attentive and there may be a variety of motives, intentions and reasons for doing so and a variety of ways of being distracted from the music' (Dickie 1964, p. 58).

[7] Dickie does admit that we can attend to different properties of the same entity, but maintains that there is only one way of attending to a property.

The distinction between focused and distributed attention is not new: it was introduced in the early 1970s (Eriksen and Hoffman 1972) and was routinely used in describing visual search experiments soon afterwards (see, e.g., Treisman and Elade 1980). It has been a standard distinction in the visual search and visual attention literature ever since (the same distinction is often referred to as focal versus diffuse attention, see, e.g., Cavanagh & Alvarez 2005, Chong & Treisman 2005).[8]

It is important to emphasize that this difference between focused and distributed attention, as it is used in the empirical literature, concerns the size of the visual field or the number of objects one is attending to. To this empirically established distinction between focused and distributed attention, I would like to add a conceptual one about what it is that we are attending to: to entities or to properties (see also Scholl 2001).[9] We sometimes talk about attending to entities: to the pedestrian who is crossing the road in front of me or to the car that is trying to overtake me (James 1892/1961, p. 39). But sometimes we talk about attending to properties: to the color of the car that is trying to overtake me or to its speed, etc. (Nanay 2010a, Dretske 2010). Every entity has lots of properties. Hence, we can shift our attention from one property to another while still attending to the same object, say, when I attend to the color of my laptop and then start attending to its shape.[10]

[8] This distinction is not the same as the widely discussed foreground/background distinction, that is, the distinction between awareness of the attended stimulus and awareness without (or with little) attention (see, e.g., Neisser 1967's concept of pre-attentive processing, Rock and Gutman 1981's concept of inattention, see also Mangan 1993, Schwitzgebel 2007 for philosophical summaries). When our attention is focused, we may still be aware of some stimuli that are not attended to (in fact, in the Neisser and Rock experiments attention seems to be focused). And the same is true of distributed attention. The contrast between focused and distributed attention is about how much of the visual stimuli we are attending to and not how much of it we are conscious of.

[9] A similar distinction that is very much present in the (empirical and philosophical) literature is between object-based attention and spatial attention (see, for example, Prinz 2010, who calls the latter 'orienting'). One way of thinking about the relation between this distinction and the one I make in the main text would be to take spatial attention to be a special case of attention to properties (as spatial location is one of the many properties of objects we can attend to).

[10] I need to emphasize that what I mean by attention here and throughout the book is conscious attention. This is very different from the way I have been using the concept of attention in my work in philosophy of perception, where I allow for unconscious attention (Nanay 2010a, 2011d, 2013a). I do hold that attention can be conscious or unconscious, but I take conscious distributed attention to be an important feature of the aesthetic domain. I will say a bit more about conscious and unconscious attention in Chapter 8.

The traditional distinction between focused vs. distributed attention we know from vision science is a distinction between two ways of attending to entities. But we can make a similar distinction between attending to *properties* in a focused or distributed manner. Suppose that I am attending to one object only (say, because there is only one object in my visual field). I may attend to only a few properties (or even only one property) of this object. But my attention may also be, to paraphrase Mack, 'broadly distributed, encompassing' various properties I perceive the object as having. The same distinction can be made if I am attending to a number of objects. I can attribute the same property, say, the property of being red, to all of these objects (this is in fact what happens during visual search experiments).[11] In this case, although my attention is distributed in the sense that I am attending to a number of *objects*, my attention is focused in as much as I attribute only a few *properties* to them. But I can also attribute different properties to different objects, in which case both my attention to objects and my attention to properties are distributed.

Thus, we get two cross-cutting distinctions: focused versus distributed attention with regards to objects and focused versus distributed attention with regards to properties. I am interested in experiences where our attention is distributed with regards to properties but focused with regards to objects. I call attention of this kind 'aesthetic attention' and argue that it is a crucial feature of some paradigmatic examples of aesthetic experience.

Most of the time, we are attending to only a few properties of any object in our visual field. As Mack emphasizes above, our attention is normally distributed (with regards to objects): we are attending to a number of objects. But then given the limited capacity of our attention, we are unlikely to attribute a large number of different properties to them (see Wolfe et al. 2000). Thus, attending to one object only but to a large number of different properties thereof is special—it is a very different

[11] I have been using the phrase that experiences attribute properties, by which I mean they represent objects as having properties. But it has been argued that perceptual experiences do not represent anything, nor do they attribute properties to anything; rather, they put us in direct contact with the world (Campbell 2002; Travis 2004; Brewer 2011; Martin 2004; see also Nanay 2014c and 2015b for discussion on the compatibility of these two views). Those who have such relationalist leanings could read 'tracks', 'presents', or maybe 'is sensitive to' instead of 'attributes' properties in what follows.

way of allocating our limited processing resources from the standard case: these attentional resources are allocated to one object only, but to a variety of its properties (and not to lots of objects and a limited number of their properties). And it is this 'special' way of attending that I call 'aesthetic attention'.[12]

More slowly: the two cross-cutting distinctions (between focused versus distributed attention with regards to objects and between focused versus distributed attention with regards to properties) give us four different ways in which we can exercise our attention. Our attention can be:

i. Distributed with regards to objects and focused with regards to properties
ii. Distributed with regards to objects and distributed with regards to properties
iii. Focused with regards to objects and focused with regards to properties
iv. Focused with regards to objects and distributed with regards to properties

An example of (i) is the way we exercise our attention in visual search experiments or in tasks where we need to sort through a pile of red and blue socks. In these cases, we are attending to lots of objects, but only to one property of these objects (in this example: their color—whether they are red or blue). In the case of (ii) our attention is all over the place: it is not fixated either on an object or on any given property: it wanders aimlessly. I take this to be a fairly common way of attending: this is what you are likely to do when you have to wait at the doctor's office and you forgot to bring anything to read. Another fairly common way of attending is (iii), where we are focusing on a specific property of a specific object: the performance of most perceptually guided actions presupposes attention of this kind (see, e.g., Hayhoe and Ballard 2005). Finally, (iv), which seems much less common to me, is an experience where our

[12] It is important to emphasize that the limitation of attentional resources applies in the case of distributed attention the same way as it does to focused attention. But while focused attention concentrates these resources to a limited number of properties, distributed attention doesn't. Attending to many properties of one object and attending to one property of many objects are equally demanding in terms of attentional resources, but it utilizes these resources very differently.

attention is focused and distributed at the same time: it is focused inasmuch as we are attending to one object only. But it is distributed across the properties of this object.[13] Our attention to properties is similar to the case of (ii): it is not focused on one property only, but it is also very different from (ii) as this way of attending is always centered on one object only. And (iv) is clearly very different from (iii). If, as I argue, (iv) is a good bet for those who want to understand what disinterested attention is, (iii) would be the prime example of 'interested attention'. And (ii) would be attending characterized by no interest at all. Dickie offered us a choice between (ii) and (iii) and (rightly) pointed out that neither should be taken to be aesthetic attention. But he failed to consider other ways of attending. He failed to consider (iv), attending focused on an object but distributed across its properties.[14]

A quick note on what I take to be the 'object of attention' when I talk about attention focused on an object: by 'object of attention', I mean perceptual object (or, as it is sometimes labelled, 'sensory individual', see Cohen 2004, Nanay 2013a). If one has an aesthetic experience of a landscape, then the 'object of attention' is likely to be the entire landscape and not one tree or another (one, of course, can have an aesthetic experience of a single tree as well). And in this case, the attention exercised in this experience is still focused with regards to its object, while distributed with regards to its properties (and among these properties will be relational properties connecting various parts of the landscape).

[13] One may worry about just how special or unusual this way of attending is. One celebrated empirical finding about attention (Scholl 2001) is that attention to a property of an object spreads to other properties of the same objects (but not to similar properties of other objects). It would be tempting to conclude from this that attending to a large number of properties of one object is not the exception; it is the norm. But at this point it is important to highlight the difference between conscious and unconscious attention (from three footnotes ago). What the Scholl experiments show is that attending to a property of an object triggers *unconscious* attention to other properties of the same object. But what is at stake in the fourfold distinction I made in the main text is *conscious* attention. While unconscious attention does, as a matter of course, spread to a large number of the properties of the perceived object, we have no reason to believe that conscious attention does.

[14] Many examples of distributed attention I consider in this chapter (and in the following chapters) are examples of distributed simultaneous attention: we attend to a number of properties of the same perceptual object simultaneously. But this simultaneity is not a necessary feature of distributed attention: if our attention oscillates back and forth between a wide variety of properties of the perceived object, this would still count as distributed attention.

This account of aesthetic attention is not vulnerable to Dickie-style objections: there is a very clearly defined difference between aesthetic attention and non-aesthetic attention—one of them is distributed across properties but focused on one object, whereas the other one is not. But does this account capture the appeal to disinterestedness that drives the earlier accounts of aesthetic attention? Well, the answer depends on what one means by disinterestedness. Distributed attention is not strictly speaking disinterested if by 'disinterest' we mean the lack of interest, but I take this to be a good thing. It would be odd to suppose that what characterizes our aesthetic experience is the lack of interest.

But thinking of aesthetic attention as distributed attention does capture the original Kantian importance of disinterest in our aesthetic experiences. Practical interest in an object, which is supposed to exclude aesthetic experience, could be described as attention focused on a limited number of its features—the ones we are interested in from a practical point of view. It is only when we are free from practical interests that we have a chance to experience the object in an aesthetic manner. This does not mean that we experience it with no interest—Dickie is right about this. Aesthetic attention does not equal the lack of attention. It equals distributed attention among a variety of properties, which is nonetheless focused on the same object. Thus, we can say that aesthetic interest is not really disinterest but rather distributed interest.[15]

Here is an empirical reason to think that this account of aesthetic attention is on the right track. Attention, as we have seen, can be covert or overt. Overt shifts of attention are accompanied by eye movements. Covert shifts are not. So not all changes in attention are tracked by eye movements. But many are. And it can be and has been analyzed how the eye-movement patterns of experts and naïve observers differ when looking at artworks. The findings show that at least the overt attention

[15] This account, like most of the disinterested attention accounts, is formulated in a way that seems to fit best with our experience of the visual arts: a tranquil contemplation of a picture or a sculpture. But given that there is nothing about distributed attention that is tied to the visual sense modality and to a stationary scene we are observing, my account can also give a good description of our aesthetic experience of the non-visual and temporal arts—music and film, for example (see, for example, Peacocke 2009 for an account emphasizing the importance of attending to relational properties, which I take to be a form of attending in a distributed manner, for the appreciation of music and see also Carroll and Seeley 2013 for the ways our attention structures our experience of movies). I will say more about these at the beginning of Chapter 8.

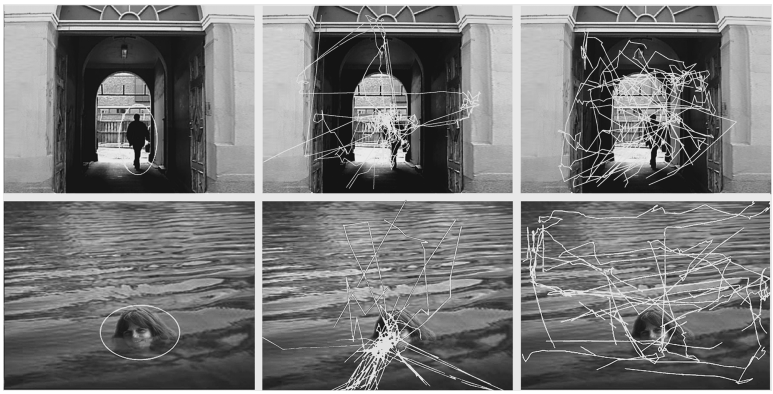

**Figure 2.1** Illustration of the eye-movement patterns of naïve observers (second column) and art experts (third column). The first column shows the picture itself (with the dominant theme highlighted)—reproduced from Vogt and Magnussen 2007, thanks to Stine Vogt for the permission to use the image.

of art experts (that is, artists and/or people with between five and eleven years of art school training) is much more distributed (spatially) than that of naïve observers (Vogt and Magnussen 2007). When looking at a picture of a scene with a human figure, the eye movements of naïve observers tend to be focused on the human figure (and especially the face), whereas the eye movements of experts tends to be distributed almost evenly across the image surface (see Figure 2.1). I do not take these findings to be definite proof about the importance of aesthetic attention because I don't think that art school training strongly correlates with one's ability to have aesthetic experiences and I also need to acknowledge that the distribution of attention these experiments are about is spatial distribution, whereas not all distribution with regards to properties is spatial distribution. But I do think that these experiments at least indicate that the account of aesthetic attention is on the right track.

## 2.4 The Importance of Aesthetic Attention

My claim was that attending to a variety of properties of the object we are looking at, that is, aesthetic attention, is a central feature of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience. Again, the claim is not that

it is a necessary let alone sufficient condition for all different kinds of aesthetic experiences. No doubt, there are many experiences where our attention is distributed among a number of properties of the perceived scene that are in no way aesthetic experiences. Suppose that you promise to give me a lot of money if I manage to have an experience where my attention is distributed and I succeed. This will still be unlikely to count automatically as an aesthetic experience. And there are also experiences that people tend to describe as aesthetic but where our attention is not at all distributed.

Here is a potential candidate for a type of experience, where our attention is not distributed—in fact it is very much focused. Suppose that I am looking at Van Eyck's *Man in a blue turban (or blue chaperon)* and I am mesmerized by the hue of the turban: that is the only aspect of the painting to which I am devoting all my attention. Do I have an aesthetic experience? Maybe I do, although one may wonder what this is an aesthetic experience of—clearly not of the painting or even of the turban—maybe of the hue. But even if it is an aesthetic experience, it is clearly not an aesthetic experience of the Proustian kind I have been focusing on. It may be more similar to musical 'frissons' at least with respect to the way our attention is exercised. Remember that some experiences that may be called aesthetic may not require aesthetic attention. All I claimed was that those paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience I zeroed in on at the beginning of the chapter do. But maybe I am too concessive. It could be argued that when we are captivated by the color of the turban, we may very well be distributing our attention among a number of properties. The turban has various shades, and part of what the observer may describe as being mesmerized by the color may in fact consist of attending to how the shade changes across the surface: how it is lighter on the left and slightly darker on the right, how it is the lightest just above the forehead, etc. What the observer may describe as being mesmerized by the color may also involve attending to the contrast between the blue of the turban and the dark brown of the man's clothes or the contrast between the blue of the turban and the much darker, almost black shade of the background. If so, however, then her attention is in fact distributed among a variety of different properties of the object her attention is focused on.

More generally, one could argue that aesthetic experiences often have a lot to do with formal unity: the taking in of the artwork (or whatever is

experienced in an aesthetic manner) as a single, integrated whole (see Beardsley 1981 for a classic exposition of this). Wouldn't this involve focused and not distributed attention? I think it wouldn't. This way of thinking about aesthetic experiences is very much consistent with my approach. Remember that aesthetic attention is focused with regard to the object and distributed with regards to the properties. And this, I would argue, describes the features of aesthetic experiences Beardsley talks about: we do attend to the unified single integrated whole of the perceptual object: our attention is focused with regards to the perceptual object. But at the same time, our attention is distributed with regards to the properties of this perceptual object: the different aspects of this integrated whole and the different ways they contribute to its being an integrated whole. In order to appreciate the unity and integration of what we experience aesthetically, we need to exercise our attention in this focused (with regards to objects) and at the same time distributed (with regards to properties) manner: we need aesthetic attention.

Emphasizing the importance of aesthetic attention in thinking about aesthetic experiences captures some of the oldest platitudes about the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experiences. When I look at a Giacometti sculpture while being attacked by a burglar and looking for a defence weapon, I am unlikely to have an aesthetic experience. But when looking at it in a museum, undisturbed, with a lot of time on my hands, admiring its composition, then I am in a better position to have an aesthetic experience. When the burglar is attacking me, my attention is focused on one property of my environment only: on how I can use the objects around me for defending myself. So I am likely to see the objects in my visual field as belonging to two categories: things that I can use to defend myself and things that I can't. When I spot the Giacometti, I am very likely to take notice of one and only one of its numerous properties: its propensity to serve as a means of my self-defence (see Gibson 1979; Jeannerod 1988, 1994, esp. Section 5, Jeannerod 1997; Jacob and Jeannerod 2003; Nanay 2011a, 2012a, 2013a, 2013b). If, in contrast, I am looking at the sculpture in a museum, with a lot of time on my hands, admiring its composition, then nothing should stop me from attending to a number of its properties: nothing should stop my attention from being distributed with regards to the properties of the sculpture. It needs to be added that nothing *guarantees* that my attention will in fact be distributed with regards to the properties of the object. I may, after all,

be obsessed with the size of the feet of Giacometti's figures and pay attention to only that one aspect of the sculpture. Or I may be looking for a sculpture that fits on my bookshelf and I am only interested in the size of the sculpture. In these cases, my attention is, again, focused on one property only: it is not an instance of aesthetic attention.

The very fact that, in my account, nothing guarantees that our attention would be distributed should, in itself, be taken to be an indication that the account is on the right track. As we have seen in Section 2.1 above, we do not have full control over whether we have an aesthetic experience. We go to a museum to have an aesthetic experience of an artwork we had an aesthetic experience of a day ago, but it is just not happening. We stand in front of it and, although we really want to, we fail to experience it in an aesthetic manner. Most of the existing explanations of aesthetic experience (notably, the deflationary account (Carroll 2000, 2002, 2006) and those approaches that talk about 'valuing for its own sake' (Levinson 2013, Iseminger 2006)) fail to account for this interesting and unfortunate aspect of aesthetic experiences.

According to the deflationary approach, aesthetic experience is defined in terms of the properties it is directed at. Aesthetic experiences, like experiences in general, attribute properties to objects. Depending on what kinds of properties are being attributed, we get different types of experience. If the attributed properties are of a certain special kind, we get aesthetic experience. The most important contemporary proponent of the view that aesthetic experience should be defined in terms of the properties it attributes is Noël Carroll. As he says, 'If an experience of an artwork is a matter of [ . . . ] the detection of its aesthetic and/or expressive qualities, then it is an aesthetic experience' (Carroll 2001b, p. 60. See also Carroll 2000, p. 207 and Carroll 2006; see also Levinson 2013, 1996 and Stecker 2006 for worries about the deflationary account).

But if aesthetic experience is just the detection of the object's 'aesthetic and/or expressive qualities', then why couldn't we control whether we have an aesthetic experience? If I was capable of detecting the object's 'aesthetic and/or expressive qualities' yesterday, there must be a reason why I am incapable of it today. And the deflationary account doesn't give us a reason why this would be so. The 'aesthetic and/or expressive qualities' are right there in front of me, just like they were yesterday. But, contrary to what seems to follow from the deflationary account, it

very often happens that while we may have had an aesthetic experience of the same object yesterday, today it is just not happening.

There are other, more prosaic, kinds of experiences that are not fully under our control. Take, for example, the perception of stereograms (or, Magic Eye pictures)—something I will say more about in Chapter 3. Even if you look at a stereogram the way you are supposed to: from about 20 cm and even if you defocus your eyes, it happens quite often (especially if you haven't seen one before) that you do not see a three-dimensional scene in the picture, but only the abstract patterns. And there is a physiological explanation for why this is so, which has to do with the ratio between the distance of the parallel patterns on the paper and the distance between the paper surface and the focal point of our vision. Just as it would be difficult to explain our experience of stereograms in terms of the properties of the attributed properties of our experience alone, the same goes for aesthetic experiences. There is a lot that a proponent of the deflationary approach could say in response. My aim here was not to give a knock-down objection to the deflationary approach, but to point out that there seem to be some unresolved issues if we conceive of aesthetic experience this way.

According to the main alternative of the deflationary account, a defining feature of aesthetic experiences is that we value them for their own sake (Iseminger 2006, p. 99, see also Iseminger 1981). The contrast here is with states of affairs or experiences we value not for their own sake but for the sake of something else: chopping onions, for example, is not something most of us value for its own sake, but for the sake of being a necessary feature of cooking something delicious—which we may value for its own sake (see also Levinson 2013, where he combines features of the 'valuing for its own sake' approach and the deflationary approach).

Valuing an experience for its own sake is, again, not something one can fail to do in spite of one's best efforts. If my experience yesterday in the museum was of the very same properties of the artwork as today, what explains that I don't seem to be able to value this experience for its own sake (while I could do so yesterday)? We have the same experience (the very same properties are attributed to the very same object), but while I valued this experience for its own sake yesterday, I can no longer do so. At the very least, proponents of the 'valuing for its own sake' approach would need to say more about what concept of 'valuing' is at play here and why it is not fully under our control. In short, the 'valuing

for its own sake' account seems to have trouble explaining the odd phenomenon that we can, and very often do, try and fail to have an aesthetic experience.

If, however, aesthetic attention is indeed a central feature of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience, then whether we manage to have an aesthetic experience is at least to a large part a matter of whether we manage to attend in this specific manner. And attending in a certain way is not something we can always force ourselves to do (see Prinzmetal and Landau 2008 for a good summary on this; arguably, this point was already made by Leibniz [1704/1981, §54]).[16]

And the emphasis on aesthetic attention can also explain another crucial feature of aesthetic experiences better than its rivals: their lingering effect.

Aesthetic experiences, as we have seen, have a lingering effect—they last even after the concert or the theatre performance is over. The deflationary account does not have the means to explain this: we are no longer detecting the aesthetic/expressive properties of anything after the film or concert is over or when we leave the museum. But then what explains that we still experience the world in an aesthetic manner? The deflationary account could, of course, be supplemented by an independent explanation for why this is so, but no such explanation is provided by the account itself.

This is also an unresolved problem for the 'valuing for its own sake' account. While it may sound convincing to say that we value our experience of the concert or the theatre performance for its own sake, it is difficult to see why anyone would value the experience of looking at random street scenes after leaving the building for its own sake. Proponents of the 'valuing for its own sake' account can, no doubt, supplement the account with an independent explanation for this phenomenon, but, as in the case of the deflationary account, no such explanation is provided by the account itself.

If, however, aesthetic attention is indeed a central feature of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience, then what we should expect is that our way of attending in an aesthetic manner will be slow to

[16] I do not claim that my account is the only possible account that is capable of explaining the fact that aesthetic experiences are not fully under our control. But my account can explain this and the other accounts that are on offer have difficulties doing so.

change—because we do not have full control over the way we exercise our attention. But then just because the movie or the concert is over or just because we left the museum, the way we exercise our attention does not have to, and often does not, change—it is the aesthetic way in which we are attending to the world that lingers.

## 2.5 Aesthetic Attention and Aesthetic Experience

I identified one very special kind of experience with the help of the attention we exercise. And my rhetoric throughout was that these are paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience because they align nicely with the experiences some influential novelists, artists, and critics have tried to capture. But then I would also need to show that the emphasis on aesthetic attention is something that gets highlighted when people talk about these special kinds of experiences. And I believe that it does get highlighted. Here is Robert Musil's characterization of aesthetic experience (what he calls the Other Condition), which appears to make the same connection between aesthetic experience and distributed attention:

> Everything was shifted out of the focus of attention and has lost its sharp outlines. Seen in this way, it was all a little scattered and blurred, and yet manifestly there were still other centres filling it again with delicate certainty and clarity. For all life's problems and events took on an incomparable mildness, softness and serenity, and at the same time an utterly transformed meaning.[17]

Some other old and influential descriptions of aesthetic experience also seem to support my emphasis on aesthetic attention. Take Roger Fry's famous description of his aesthetic experience of watching a film (which is also one of the earliest pieces of theoretical writing on cinema):

> If, in a cinematograph, we see a runaway horse and cart, we do not have to think either of getting out of the way or heroically interposing ourselves. The result is that in the first place we *see* the event much more clearly; see a number of quite interesting but irrelevant things, which in real life could not struggle into our consciousness, bent, as it would be, entirely upon the problem of our appropriate reaction. I remember seeing in a cinematograph the arrival of a train at a foreign

[17] Robert Musil: *The Man without Qualities* (trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser). London: Picador, 1979 (1930/1932), Chapter 32, pp. 144–5.

station and the people descending from the carriages; there was no platform, and to my intense surprise I saw several people turn right round after reaching the ground, as though to orientate themselves; an almost ridiculous performance, which I had never noticed in all the many hundred occasions on which such a scene had passed before my eyes in real life. The fact being that at a station one is never really a spectator of events, but an actor engaged in the drama of luggage or prospective seats, and one actually sees only so much as may help to the appropriate action. (Fry 1909/1920, pp. 18–19)

Fry talks about irrelevant aspects of the perceived scene that, if the scene were observed in a non-aesthetic manner, would have gone unnoticed. In other words, we are attending to aspects of the perceived scene we would not be attending to otherwise. Our attention opens up to include irrelevant aspects of the scene—it becomes distributed. D. H. Lawrence gives a surprisingly similar characterization of the way attention is exercised when we engage with art: 'The essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention, and "discovers" a new world within the known world' (Lawrence: 1928/2005, p 107).

A much more detailed and more influential description of aesthetic experience comes from the Russian formalists. One of the key concepts of Russian formalism is defamiliarization (see Thompson 1988, pp. 10–11). Here is what this concept means:

If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. [ . . . ] Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed. [ . . . ] The object, perceived in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten. [ . . . ] Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. [ . . . ] And Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (Shklovsky 1917/1965, pp. 11–12.)

This metaphor could also be interpreted easily in the framework I outlined above. If an object is unfamiliar, we do not know how to approach it, and we therefore tend to attend to a number of its properties to figure out what to do with it or what can be done with it. If an object is familiar, we just attend to those of its properties that we need to attend

to. When the Russian formalists describe aesthetic experience as being similar to the experience of the unfamiliar, they really describe a way of attending to this object that is less focused than it normally would be. They describe what I call aesthetic attention (see Chapter 6 for more on the relation between the concept of defamiliarization and distributed attention).

This may also help us to give an answer to one of the most important questions about aesthetic experience, namely, why should we care? Why do we pay large sums of money to put ourselves in a position to have an aesthetic experience (which, as we have seen, doesn't always then materialize)? If we accept my claim about the centrality of aesthetic attention in understanding aesthetic experience, the answer will be straightforward: because aesthetic experiences allow us to see and attend to the world differently: in a way that we don't, and couldn't, see it otherwise.

One way of describing what I attempted to do in this chapter is that I identified a very specific kind of aesthetic experience with the help of the concept of distributed attention. This kind of aesthetic experience has been very influential, especially in the last century. How important is it in the grand scheme of all things aesthetic? I am not sure. As we shall see in Chapter 8, there are many other kinds of experiences that have as much right to be considered aesthetic as the one I zoomed in on here, and our attention in the case of those experiences is very much non-distributed. And, as I will tentatively argue in Chapter 7, this kind of aesthetic experience is not a universally human way of experiencing the world and of artworks, but it may be tied to a certain historical period.

I used the concept of distributed attention to characterize aesthetic experiences of this kind. But the concept of distributed attention that plays a central role in this new account of aesthetic experience also elucidates a number of important questions in aesthetics: the perception and aesthetic appreciation of pictures, the question about what properties we should attend to or ignore, and the ways in which uniqueness is an important feature of the aesthetic domain. These are the questions the next couple of chapters are about.

# 3

# Pictures

## 3.1 Picture Perception

Pictures have the odd power to show something that is not present. If you look at the photograph of your grandmother, you see, or seem to see, her even if she is far away (and even if she has passed away). In this respect, pictures are somewhat similar to sentences. Sentences can also be about something that is not present. The sentence 'The Golden Gate Bridge is red' is about the Golden Gate Bridge. And even if this sentence is written far away from San Francisco, it manages to be about something that is thousands of miles away. The same goes for a picture (be it a photo or a painting) of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Both the snapshot of the Golden Gate Bridge and the sentence 'The Golden Gate Bridge is red' represents this large structure as being red. But they do so very differently. The question then is: What exactly is the difference between these two ways of representing? One difference that comes to mind easily is that of specificity. If I read the sentence that 'The Golden Gate Bridge is red' and I have never seen it nor have I seen any photograph of it, I will have no idea about its exact shade of color. In contrast, if I see a snapshot of the bridge, I will have very specific information about its exact shade. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words.

While this may seem to be an intuitive way of framing the difference between pictures and sentences, it is probably not a very good way of doing so. I could give you a much more complex sentence about the color of the Golden Gate Bridge, comparing it to the color of tomatoes, cherries, fire engines and so on. If you read this sentence it would give you a pretty good approximation of the bridge's exact shade of color, as long as you have encountered tomatoes, cherries and fire engines. And I can give you a snapshot of the bridge in morning light when its color

looks very unusual. Or I may just give you a black and white photo. In this case, the sentence will give you more specific information about the color than the picture. So nothing about the nature of these two different kinds of representation guarantees that the way sentences represent is impoverished, whereas the way pictures represent is rich in details. But then what is the difference? What makes pictures special?

There are many ways of addressing this question, but they belong to three broad categories. We could try to locate this difference in the way sentences and pictures are structured. A very rough way of doing so would be to say that sentences have subjects and predicates, whereas pictures don't have subjects and predicates. A more complex (far more complex) way of working out this syntactic difference between sentences and pictures is Nelson Goodman's Byzantine book *Languages of Art* (Goodman 1968, see also Kulvicki 2006 for a similar approach).

Another way of locating the difference between sentences and pictures focuses on their relations to what they represent. A very simple example of this would be to say that while pictures resemble (maybe not perfectly, but to a certain extent) what they depict, sentences themselves do not resemble what they are about. The photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge will, in some way, resemble the bridge itself—maybe not in color, but in shape, or 'outline shape', and so on. But the sentence 'The Golden Gate Bridge is red' does not resemble the bridge in any meaningful sense of the word. Both the sentence (if it is written down) and the photograph are marks on a paper, but only the latter, not the former, bear any resemblance to the Golden Gate Bridge (see Peacocke 1987, Hopkins 1998, Abell 2009 for very, that is, *very*, different versions of this claim, see also Greenberg 2013 for criticism).

Without dismissing versions of these two broad approaches to locating the difference between pictures and sentences, I want to focus on a third one: one that, maybe unsurprisingly in the context of this book, puts the emphasis on perception. The general idea is that pictures and sentences are perceived differently. A simple way of putting this difference is that when we look at the snapshot of the Golden Gate Bridge, we see the bridge in a certain way: we see the Golden Gate Bridge in the photograph. But when we look at a piece of paper with the sentence 'The Golden Gate Bridge is red' on it, we do not thereby see the bridge. We may imagine the bridge or strong visual imagery may be triggered by the reading of this sentence, but we don't see the bridge in this piece of paper.

I have been focusing on the similarities and especially on the differences between pictures and sentences. But there is an even more fundamental question in the background: about what pictures are and what makes them different from *all* other objects in the world (including sentences). If we take the first approach, then pictures are objects with a specific kind of syntactic structure. If we take the second approach, pictures are objects that have a certain relation (presumably a relation that has to do with resemblance) to the things they represent. And if we take the third approach, pictures are objects that are (or that are supposed to be) perceived in a certain way.

I am drawn to the third of these approaches, but I will not defend it directly here. This third approach replaces the question about what pictures are with the question about how we perceive pictures. If we understand what makes picture perception special, we get an automatic (well, almost automatic) answer to what makes pictures special: that they are perceived in a distinctive way.

But the question about picture perception is an independently important and interesting one, regardless of whether one goes on to use this concept to define what pictures are. Even if one is convinced that some story about the pictures' syntax or their relation to the depicted object is what makes them special, it is still important to understand what happens when we perceive these pictures (which, in any case, is the only way in which we can be aware of their syntax or of what they resemble).

We can make this point more salient by considering the following two unusual kinds of pictures: stereograms (or, Magic Eye pictures) and anamorphic pictures. Stereograms, at first glance, don't look like pictures at all: they look like dense and varied patterns on a paper that don't seem to depict anything at all. But if you look at them from about 20 cm and if you defocus your eyes, you see a three-dimensional scene in them. These pictures depict a three-dimensional scene, but you can only see it if you look at the picture in a specific way. Anamorphic pictures don't look like pictures at first glance either: they also look like non-figurative marks. The most famous example is the anamorphic skull in the foreground of Hans Holbein's *Ambassadors*. You cannot see the skull if you look at the picture head on. You need to look at the canvas from an oblique angle in order to see what this anamorphic picture depicts (see Topper 2000 for a summary).

Both the syntactic and the resemblance approaches, no doubt, would have a lot to say about why these pictures count as pictures (although they may find the anamorphic pictures easier to explain than stereograms). But regardless of how they do it, they cannot ignore the crucial piece of the puzzle of how the picture needs to be looked at in order to be seen as a picture. In this sense, the question about picture perception is logically prior to the question about what pictures are.

Having a convincing account of picture perception may or may not yield a convincing account of what pictures are. Even if we go the third route, there are some further wrinkles to iron out: are pictures those objects that are perceived in a certain way? Or those objects that are perceived this way by a 'suitably informed spectator'? In certain circumstances? And so on. And if we go the first (syntactic) or second (resemblance) route, even if we have a full account of how we perceive pictures, a lot more needs to be done to arrive at an account of what pictures are. But it seems to be a good idea to start out with trying to understand picture perception.

The question about picture perception is interesting and important independently of whether we can plug such an account of picture perception into an explanation of what pictures are. Seeing an apple face to face and seeing a photograph of an apple are two different perceptual episodes. They clearly have something in common: I seem to have a perceptual experience of this apple in both cases. But they are also very different.

One difference between seeing an apple face to face and seeing a picture of the apple is that in the former case the apple needs to be there if I am to really see it face to face (as opposed to hallucinate it). But in the case of seeing the apple in the picture, the apple does not need to be there (and, in the vast majority of cases, it is not in fact there). Some philosophers of perception would be reluctant to use the term to describe this perceptual state as a case of *bona fide* 'seeing'—they assume that in order to see something, this thing needs to exist and be present. They may not be too happy to go along with the accepted depiction literature terminology of saying that we see the apple in the picture. In fact, there is some debate in the literature about whether seeing an apple in the picture is really a subcase of seeing the apple (in a certain way, that is, in the picture) or merely a case of seeming to see it (see Hopkins 2012b for a summary). In this paper, I will follow the accepted terminology of

glossing picture perception as seeing something in a picture. Those more precious about their use of the term 'seeing' may want to read it as 'seeming to see'.

But the observation that what is depicted in the picture does not have to be present nor even exist is important in order to set aside another issue lurking in the background: fictionality. I can draw a mermaid and this picture will depict something that does not exist. When you look at this drawing, you will see a mermaid in the picture: you will see something that does not exist. While this power of pictures (or other representations) to represent fictional, nonexistent things is an important question in aesthetics, I will ignore it in this chapter (but see Nanay ms).

## 3.2 Canvas or Nature?

The question then is this: how does my mind work if I see an apple in a picture? And how is this mental state different from my mental state when I see an apple face to face?

It seems that when we are looking at a picture we see not one but two things: the depicted apple and the picture of the apple. The two-dimensional picture surface (which is the actual object in front of you) and the three-dimensional object depicted in the picture. So one crucial question any account of picture perception needs to clarify is whether we really do see both of these things and if so, how it is possible to see two things at the same time (at the same region of my visual field).

There seem to be only three options here:

i. We only see the picture surface, not the depicted object
ii. We only see the depicted object, not the picture surface
iii. We see both the picture surface and the depicted object

Option (iii) itself comes in two very different forms:

iii (a) We see both the picture surface and the depicted object but we alternate between seeing the surface and seeing the depicted object
iii (b) We see both the picture surface and the depicted object and we see them simultaneously

According to option (i), we do not really see the depicted object. As it is not present, maybe we only imagine that it is there. Or maybe we

imagine our experience of the picture surface to be an experience of the depicted object (this is Walton 1990's account). But we do not, strictly speaking, see the depicted object. There are many challenges to making it precise what this 'imagining one's experience of the surface to be of the depicted object' means. Moreover, it is not at all clear whether this extremely complex imaginative episode is something we humans are capable of at all, let alone all those nonhuman animals that are apparently capable of picture perception. Further, if we go down this route, we can no longer say that seeing an apple in a picture is one way of seeing an apple (or, having a perceptual experience of the apple as seen in the picture is one way of having a perceptual experience of the apple). Instead, it is a way of imagining seeing the apple.

Option (ii) denies that we really see the picture surface. This is an odd and somewhat desperate view, as the picture surface is right in front of us and we are staring at it. There is an important example of seeing pictures where the surface does not seem to figure in our perceptual experience, and that is the way we are meant to perceive *trompe l'oeil* pictures—at least for a split second. *Trompe l'oeil* paintings deceive the eye (hence the name): they fool us into thinking that we see the depicted object face to face—before realizing that we see a picture. But not all pictures are *trompe l'oeil* pictures. So even if it is true that we only see the depicted object but not the surface when looking at (and being fooled by) *trompe l'oeil* pictures, this is clearly not true in general.

Option (iii (a)) is normally attributed (rightly or wrongly) to Ernst Gombrich. His account of picture perception is that we see both the surface and the depicted object, but we never see the two at the same time. We oscillate between seeing the canvas and seeing the depicted scene. While I described this view as a case where we see both the picture surface and the depicted scene, it may be more appropriate to describe it as a way of combining (i) and (ii). Specifically, the proposal is that our perceptual state oscillates between (i) and (ii). But then this view will inherit at least some of the problems of option (i) and (ii).

Finally, the most widely discussed way of thinking about picture perception is (iii (b)): we simultaneously see both the two-dimensional picture surface and the three-dimensional depicted scene. Option (iii (b)) is often labelled as the Twofoldness Claim. When we see something in a picture we have a twofold perceptual state: we see the surface and the depicted object simultaneously (see Wollheim 1980, 1987, 1998; Walton

1990, pp. 300–1; Walton 2002, p. 33; Nanay 2004, 2005; Feagin 1998; Levinson 1998; see also Hopkins 1998, esp. pp. 15–17; Maynard 1994, esp. pp. 158–9; see also Lopes 1996, 2005, chapter 1; and Kulvicki 2006, pp. 172–3 for somewhat critical overviews).

## 3.3 The Twofoldness Claim

Again, the Twofoldness Claim, that is, option (iii (b)) is that when we see something in a picture we are in a twofold perceptual state: we see the surface and the depicted object simultaneously. There is something odd about the Twofoldness Claim as it stands: if we see these two very different things simultaneously, how is it possible that our visual experience is not disjointed (or confused) (Hopkins 2012b)? There may be other ways of getting around this worry, but I want to suggest that we should turn to philosophy of perception for a little help.

In outlining the four options above, I was implicitly equating 'seeing' with 'having a conscious perceptual experience of' or 'visually attending to'. And the disjointedness worry about the Twofoldness Claim is only a worry if 'seeing' is interpreted this way. But we know from philosophy of perception (and from hundreds of subliminal priming experiments) that there are many ways of seeing something. First, seeing can be conscious or unconscious (Marcel 1983, Weiskrantz 1997). Second, we attend to some but not all the objects and properties we see (Mack and Rock 1998, Simons and Chabris 1999). The relation between these two distinctions is complicated because the relation between attention and consciousness is complicated: it is not clear whether attention is necessarily conscious, for example (probably not, see Cohen et al. 2012; Jiang et al. 2006; Kentridge et al. 1999, 2008).

In order to bypass these worries, I will focus on the distinction between attending to something we see and not attending (partly because of the emphasis given to the concept of attention throughout this book).[1]

[1] In my previous writings on picture perception, I was using the conscious/unconscious distinction (Nanay 2008, 2010b, 2011c, 2015e), but this will make no real difference, as long as we take the unattended stimulus to be unconscious (as we should in the light of empirical evidence, see Cohen et al. 2012 and also Prinz 2010 and Schwitzgebel 2007 for philosophical summaries but see also Lamme 2003 for a dissenting view).

We do not attend to most of the things that are in our visual field. In fact, we attend to very few properties of very few things most of the time. And, as inattentional blindness experiments show, what we are attending to and what we are not attending to has an important impact on our perceptual experience (Mack and Rock 1998). Here is probably the most famous of the inattentional blindness experiments (Simons and Chabris 1999). You see a clip where people pass a basketball around. You are supposed to count how many times the team whose members are dressed in white pass the ball among themselves. Most participants who do this fail to notice that a man in a gorilla costume walks across the screen comfortably and takes up a significant part of the screen for a long period of time. Given that their attention is directed elsewhere (to the passing of the basketball), many subjects are completely unaware of this. If there is no counting task to perform, everyone immediately notices the gorilla.

One way of interpreting this experiment is that we are not conscious of those objects or properties that we are not attending to: we are not conscious of the gorilla because we didn't attend to it. Consciousness requires attention: if we do not attend to something, we will not become conscious of it. While I myself think that this interpretation is basically correct, I will not rely on this here—as there is an alternative interpretation according to which you were conscious of the gorilla, but you immediately forgot it. On this view, we could talk about inattentional amnesia, not inattentional blindness (see Wolfe 1999). For present purposes, all I need to assume is that the allocation of attention influences our experience of the perceived objects significantly. Crucially, priming studies show that even unattended objects (like the gorilla) can prime us (that is, it disposes us to be quicker to recognize stimuli that have something to do with gorillas [Mack and Rock 1998]). This shows that whether or not the unattended object is not experienced or experienced very briefly and then forgotten immediately, it is nonetheless perceived (presumably unconsciously) and that is why it can have a priming effect. In short, we can see objects with or without attending to them.

How do these considerations apply if we turn to picture perception? If we allow for different ways of seeing something, then we will have more than the four options I outlined above. We can see the picture surface with or without attending to it, and the same goes for seeing the depicted scene. A plausible interpretation of the Twofoldness Claim would be that

we do not normally attend to the picture surface when seeing things in pictures. We attend to the depicted scene. Now, we *can* attend to the picture surface and this way of attending will play an important role when we try to understand the aesthetic appreciation of pictures (see Clark 1960, p. 17, pp. 26–7). But normally, we only attend to the depicted scene, not the picture surface.[2]

Remember the worry about the Twofoldness Claim that it would imply some kind of disjointed or confused experience, where properties of the depicted scene are thrown in together with the properties of the picture surface. This worry disappears if we take the picture surface to be unattended. Just as the unattended gorilla fails to show up in our experience of the basketball game, the properties of the picture surface (in normal cases) will also fail to show up in our experience of the picture. As a result, these properties are not in the position to make this experience disjointed.[3]

One may worry that while this way of thinking about picture perception manages to avoid the disjointedness objection, it only does so by endorsing another problematic assumption, again, about the phenomenology of picture perception. And this new problematic assumption is that seeing something in a picture is very similar to, maybe even indistinguishable from, seeing the same thing face to face. If the surface is not attended, whereas the depicted object is, then presumably it is the depicted object and not the surface that will show up in our phenomenology. But while this may be so with *trompe l'oeil* pictures (or maybe even with naturalistic pictures), it is clearly not the case when we are looking at impressionist, expressionist, cubist or pretty much any depictions that

[2] I myself defended at various places a specific version of this view, where the picture surface is represented dorsally (by means of the dorsal visual subsystem) and the depicted object is represented ventrally (by means of the ventral visual subsystem) (Nanay 2008, 2011c, 2015e). In short, the two (more or less) separate visual subsystems (see Milner and Goodale 1995, Jeannerod 1997, but see also Schenk and McIntosh 2010 for some controversies about just how separate these two subsystems are) normally represent the same properties. But in the case of picture perception they represent different properties: the dorsal visual subsystem represents the properties of the picture surface, whereas the ventral visual subsystem represents the properties of the depicted scene. What I say about picture perception in this book is consistent with the dorsal/ventral account, but it does not depend on it.

[3] For a somewhat related strategy for downplaying the salience of the picture surface in our experience (in a very different conceptual framework), see Polanyi 1970.

are not hyper-naturalistic. I think this is an important problem that all accounts of picture perception need to address, and I will do this at the end of this chapter (when all the conceptual resources for doing so are at our disposal). I will argue there that we can preserve the force of some of the considerations in favor of twofoldness without facing some of the problems of the Twofoldness view if we add an additional third fold. But before turning twofoldness into threefoldness, I need to clarify a potential confusion about the concept of twofoldness that comes from conflating questions about picture perception and questions about the aesthetic appreciation of pictures.

## 3.4 Picture Perception versus the Aesthetic Appreciation of Pictures

It is very easy to confuse the philosophical debate about picture perception with the philosophical debate about aesthetic appreciation of pictures. In fact, arguably, two of the founding fathers of the depiction literature, Ernst Gombrich and Richard Wollheim, both slide back and forth between these two very different questions.

The aesthetic appreciation of pictures is often characterized as the appreciation of pictures as pictures. The aesthetic appreciation of pictures is clearly a subcase of picture perception. Not all instances of picture perception count as the aesthetic appreciation of the perceived picture. More often, indeed in the vast majority of cases, we see something in a picture but we do not appreciate the picture aesthetically—we do not appreciate the picture as a picture. When you are watching a sitcom or commercials on TV, when you flip through the in-flight magazine, or when you look at the drawings on the emergency procedure leaflet, you see things in pictures. But you are unlikely to appreciate these pictures aesthetically (although, of course, it is not impossible to do so). One may appreciate what is depicted in a picture without appreciating the picture as a picture.

So there are really two different questions about picture perception: what happens in our mind when we see things in pictures and what happens in our mind when we see pictures in a way that we also appreciate them aesthetically. The answer to these different questions is bound to be very different.

How is it possible then that both Gombrich and Wollheim seem to have given the same answer to these questions? Were they so confused that they failed to make this simple distinction? Or were they so highbrow that they just couldn't look at pictures and not appreciate them aesthetically? A more natural way of reading these philosophers (and I will focus on Wollheim here) is that they had two independent proposals, one about picture perception in general and one about the aesthetic appreciation of pictures. And they—fittingly for Gombrich—oscillated between the two without noticing.

Richard Wollheim took seeing both the picture surface and the depicted object simultaneously to be a crucial feature of both picture perception in general and of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures. Again, in order for this not to yield a paradox, he must have meant different things by 'seeing' in seeing the surface and the depicted object simultaneously when addressing the two questions. And we can and should indeed keep these two very different claims apart—as long as we use the appropriate concept of seeing. We have seen that one way of making the proposal about simultaneous seeing work when it comes to understanding picture perception (not appreciation) is to bring in the concept of attention and to argue that while we do simultaneously see both the surface and the depicted scene, we do not simultaneously attend to both—we are only attending to the latter. But those special cases in which we are aesthetically appreciating pictures are different. Then, in addition to simultaneously seeing both the surface and the depicted scene, we also attend to the surface and the depicted scene simultaneously.

And this will be a way of exercising our distributed attention, a concept I introduced in Chapter 2: attention distributed with regards to properties, but focused with regards to objects. When we appreciate pictures aesthetically, our attention is distributed across the properties of the surface and the properties of the depicted scene simultaneously. Each time we see something in a picture, we see both the surface and the depicted scene. We can attend to either—although we normally attend to the latter only. But we can direct our attention to the picture surface as well as to the relation between the two. And this is what happens when we appreciate pictures aesthetically. The aesthetic appreciation of pictures is a form of picture perception where our attention is exercised in a special manner.

To make things more confusing, the account of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures I outlined in the last two paragraphs is also often labelled as the 'Twofoldness Claim': in order to appreciate a picture aesthetically, one needs to exercise twofold attention: attending to both the picture surface and the depicted object. Richard Wollheim, who introduced the term 'twofoldness', as we have seen, did not make a distinction between these two claims and he did not make a distinction between the two different concepts of twofoldness that are in play when addressing these two very different questions (see Nanay 2011c on where Wollheim used which of these two concepts of twofoldness).

But then each time we talk about twofoldness, we need to make it clear which of the two concepts we have in mind. The concept of twofoldness we should take seriously in the context of picture perception is the simultaneous perceptual representation of surface and depicted object. It is twofoldness in this sense that has been argued to be necessary for picture perception. And the concept of twofoldness we should take seriously in the context of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures is the simultaneous perceptual attention devoted to both the picture surface and the depicted scene. It is twofoldness in this sense that has been argued to be very important for understanding the aesthetic appreciation of pictures.

It could be thought that it is unfortunate that both of these very different phenomena are called 'twofoldness', and we could blame Wollheim for confusing the reader and making two very appealing ideas much less appealing by blurring the difference between them. But I want to suggest that we may have had good reasons to run these two arguments together (acknowledging that they are different). Our perception of pictures is a twofold perceptual state: we perceive both the picture surface and the depicted object. This is true of all instances of picture perception, whether or not aesthetic in nature. And this claim is silent about what we are attending to. When we see a picture, we can attend to various features of this picture. We can attend to the depicted object only: this is what happens normally. But we can also attend in a twofold manner: to both the surface and the depicted scene. If this happens, we are in the realm of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures. And for this we need twofold attention (Nanay 2012f, 2012g, 2012h).

Allowing for an explanation of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures is an important desideratum for any account of picture perception. And

the Twofoldness Claim has some impressive explanatory simplicity in this respect: the Twofoldness Claim, understood as an account of picture perception, already provides all the conceptual resources for understanding the aesthetic appreciation of pictures.

## 3.5 From Twofoldness to Threefoldness

The Twofoldness Claim is a good starting point for understanding picture perception. I started this chapter with the general question about the relation between the two things we seem to perceive when we look at a picture: the two-dimensional picture surface and the three-dimensional depicted object. If this is the question, then the Twofoldness Claim is an appealing answer. But I want to argue that we need to ask a different question.

When talking about picture perception, we need to consider not two, but three entities. They are the following:

A: the two-dimensional picture surface
B: the three-dimensional object the picture surface visually encodes
C: the three-dimensional depicted object

The novelty is the distinction between B and C, which have been treated interchangeably in the literature.[4] And while they often do seem similar, this is not always so. B and C come apart as long as the picture is not fully naturalistic. Caricatures provide a clear example. When we look at a caricature of, say, Mick Jagger, C is Mick Jagger himself. But B, the three-dimensional object the picture surface visually encodes, has very different features from Mick Jagger himself. B typically has thicker lips, for example. To use a slightly more highbrow example, in one of Henri Matisse's portraits of his wife, Madame Matisse's face appears to be

[4] An exception is Hopkins 1998, p. 128, where Hopkins makes a somewhat similar distinction between 'seeing-in content' and 'pictorial content'. But note that Hopkins' distinction has a much narrower scope—as it was introduced in order to salvage his account of depiction from potential objections (especially from the objection that the picture's outline shape may resemble more than one depicted objects). See also Abell 2009, pp. 91–2 for a critical analysis of Hopkins' distinction and Abell 2010, esp. p. 83ff, where she makes a distinction between internal and external objects that is very similar to the distinction I made here (and where she also talks about the example of black-and-white photographs). Lambert Wiesing, relying on Husserl, also makes a similar distinction in Wiesing 2009.

entirely green. So B's face is green, but C's face (that is, Madame Matisse's face) is not green at all. A final, quite trivial example: in the case of black and white photographs, B has no color. But C does. Again, B and C come apart unless the picture is fully naturalistic.

Neither B nor C needs to be fully determinate. For example, in the case of the black-and-white photograph, B's color is only minimally specified, if at all. And in the case of pictures that depict entities completely made up by the artist, C may be determined only by B's features.

We therefore need to account for the representation of not two but three folds. The question is how they fit together. I take picture perception first and then turn to the aesthetic appreciation of pictures afterwards.

In the case of picture perception, if we want to use the insights of the twofoldness view without running into the difficulties it faces, we need to resolve the ambiguity between whether the label 'the depicted scene' refers to B or C: to the three-dimensional object visually encoded in the surface or the actual depicted scene.

And I want to resolve this ambiguity in favor of B. It is B, the three-dimensional object visually encoded in the surface, that we perceive. And we also perceive A, the picture surface. This is, so far, not a threefold, but a twofold view of picture perception. C does not have to be perceived, and sometimes it may not even be represented either. If I don't know how Mick Jagger looks, I will still perceive a person in the picture when I'm looking at the caricature. There is picture perception, but in this case, C is not even represented. But when C is represented, it is represented quasi-perceptually—by means of mental imagery.

## 3.6 The Three Folds

More slowly, we need to go through the three folds that the threefoldness account posits and examine how they are represented in perception (and whether they all need to be so represented). I take the three folds in turn.

### *3.6.1 The picture surface (A)*

The first fold is that of the picture surface and the threefoldness account (like the twofoldness account) claims it is perceptually represented, but not necessarily perceptually attended to. We have some empirical reasons to think that the picture surface is perceptually represented even

if it is not (always) attended to. The first empirical reason is simple and straightforward (see Hagen et al. 1978), but only takes us to the claim that the picture surface is *sometimes* perceptually represented. Take two displays: an object depicted in a picture and the very same object (of the same size) behind a screen or colored glass. There is a significant difference between our judgment of the size of the object in these two displays (even if the picture depicts it in a *trompe l'oeil* manner). As the depicted/perceived object is of the same size in the two displays and, presumably (at least in the case of the *trompe l'oeil* depiction) our perception of them is also the same. But then the difference in our assessment of the object's size must be influenced by the perception of the picture surface in the first display. This perception may be inattentive and, as a result (especially in the case of the *trompe l'oeil* picture) it may be unconscious. But unconscious perceptual states can still prime us in various ways and influence our actions, decisions, and judgments.

A more complicated reason for thinking that the picture surface is perceived (but not necessarily attended to) has to do with a widely discussed topic in the psychology of picture perception: the perception of pictures from an oblique angle. An odd fact about the psychology of picture perception is that if our position changes in front of the picture, our view of the depicted object does not change (Vishwanath et al. 2005; Cutting 1987; Goldstein 1987, Halloran 1989; Pirenne 1970; Polanyi 1970; Wollheim 1980, pp. 215–16; Matthen 2005, pp. 315–17). Even if we look at a picture from an oblique angle, we don't see the depicted scene as distorted. This is surprising and needs to be explained, as the projection of the depicted object on our retina is very different from the way it is when we look at the picture head on.

The standard way of explaining this phenomenon is to say that we are perceptually aware of the orientation of the picture surface and this awareness compensates for the oblique view: that is why we do not see the depicted object as distorted. This proposal goes back at least as far as Pirenne 1970's analysis, allegedly inspired by a letter by Albert Einstein (see Pirenne 1970, pp. 99f).

I simplified this problem significantly (see Kulvicki 2006, Busey et al. 1990, Maynard 1996, and Nanay 2011c for less simplified versions; see also Koenderink et al. 2004, p. 526 for a dissenting view and Nanay 2015e for a response). There are cases where there is no such compensation: when we are looking at ceiling frescos from an oblique angle, for

example, we do see the depicted scene as distorted. And this difference may give us a clue about *how* the picture surface is represented in perception (I myself argued that we have reason to conclude that it is represented by the dorsal visual subsystem, see Nanay 2008, 2011c, 2015e). But even bracketing these complications, we can conclude that the picture surface is perceptually represented and that is the reason why perceiving pictures from an oblique angle does not lead to distortions. This was one of Wollheim's original reasons for talking about the simultaneous perception of surface and the depicted object (Wollheim 1980, pp. 215–16).

### *3.6.2 The three-dimensional object visually encoded in the surface (B)*

It may seem uncontroversial that the three-dimensional object visually encoded in the surface (B) is also perceived. When I see an apple in a picture, an apple shows up in my experience somehow. But it is not clear whether it is B (three-dimensional object visually encoded in the surface) or C (the actual depicted apple) that shows up in my experience. I will come back to this question at the end of the subsection—until then, I want to remain noncommittal about this and will just say 'apple' as a placeholder for 'B or C'.

The real question is whether the apple shows up in my *perceptual* experience—and this is far from being clear. In fact, those who insist that imagination plays a role in perceiving pictures will deny this. They will say that we do not perceptually experience the apple: we only experience the surface and we imagine our experience of the surface to be the experience of the apple. But the experience of the apple is an imagined experience—not a perceptual one (Walton 1990).

Further, it may also be questioned whether we in fact need to experience the apple—perceptually or non-perceptually. Perception, as we have seen, can be conscious or unconscious. And picture perception can also be conscious or unconscious. Many (even most) of the experiments that demonstrate unconscious perceptual processes (for example, in unilateral neglect patients and blindsight patients as well as in the subliminal priming or inattentional blindness paradigm) are in fact conducted on subjects facing pictures (Strahan et al. 2002, Eimer and Schlaghecken 2003, Greenwald et al. 1996). Thus, any general account of picture perception, psychological or philosophical, should be applicable to

both the conscious and the unconscious instances of picture perception. In the case of unconscious picture perception, we do not experience anything—we do not experience the apple either. But we do perceive the apple unconsciously: it is the perception of the apple (and not of the marks on the surface) that primes us to behave in certain ways without knowing that we have encountered the apple.

And this emphasis on unconscious picture perception may give us a reason to mistrust the imagination-based accounts of picture perception. If picture perception is taken to be conscious, then, in spite of all the criticisms of imagination-based accounts, we can at least make sense of the idea of imagining one experience to be another: of imagining the experience of the picture surface to be the experience of the apple. But it is difficult to even formulate this account in the case of unconscious picture perception. Even if we allow for the possibility that mental imagery can be unconscious (Nanay 2010d, Phillips 2014), imagining one experience to be another is an imaginative episode that seems by definition conscious (as what we imagine to be something else is something conscious: an experience). The imagination-based accounts of picture perception may or may not work for conscious picture perception; but they are extremely unlikely to work for unconscious picture perception.

But dismissing the imagination-based accounts of picture perception will not give us any positive reason to think that the apple is *perceptually* experienced (in the case of conscious picture perception). We will see in Chapter 4 how difficult it is to tell apart perceptual experiences from non-perceptual ones. But regardless of how strict one is about the perceptual versus non-perceptual phenomenology distinction, we have good reason to hold that the apple is part of our perceptual phenomenology—it is perceptually experienced.

Consider so-called 'aspect dawning' pictures (Lopes 2005), like the famous picture of the Dalmatian (see Figure 3.2). When you look at this picture, first all you see is a bunch of black patches in front of a white background. But eventually you see a Dalmatian in this picture. Where a moment ago all you saw were patches now suddenly you see a dog in the picture. Further, all the contours of the dog that you now see are illusory contours—like the sides of the Kanizsa triangle: there are no marks on the paper that would correspond to the contours of the Dalmatian (but see Cavedon-Taylor 2011 for some important differences between these

**Figure 3.1** The aspect-dawning picture of the Dalmatian—thanks to Dom Lopes for the picture.

two different kinds of illusory contours). In other words, what makes pictures of this kind special is that before you get to see the dog, you do not see these illusory contours—you see them only once you see the dog in the picture. Your phenomenology clearly changes when you suddenly get to see the dog.

But the question is whether your *perceptual* phenomenology changes. Suppose it doesn't. In this case, your perceptual phenomenology would have to be what it was when you thought you were looking at the nonfigurative marks on the paper. All the changes in your phenomenology after you recognized that this is a picture of a dog and not an abstract composition are changes in your non-perceptual phenomenology. Even if we assume that the dog itself is not perceptually experienced, the surface properties are clearly very differently experienced after the transition—the illusory contours, for example, are only experienced afterwards. And once one experiences the dog, it is not possible not to be aware of these illusory contours. Thus, even if we restrict the perceptual

phenomenology to the picture surface and exclude the dog, the perceptual phenomenology still changes as a result of seeing something in the picture.[5] But then the initial assumption, namely, that the dog is part of our non-perceptual phenomenology, becomes completely ad hoc: we would need to postulate all the following processes in order to hold onto this assumption: we perceptually experience the picture surface, we non-perceptually experience the dog and this non-perceptual experience then modifies our perceptual experience of the picture surface (providing the illusory contours, for example). It may not be impossible to argue for this way of describing the case, but it entails the ad-hoc postulation of a non-perceptual experience, and a top-down influence from this experience to the perceptual experience. A non–ad hoc way of describing how aspect dawning pictures work would be to say that the dog is part of our perceptual phenomenology and it is the perceptual experience of the Dalmatian that makes it possible for us to perceptually experience the illusory contours (that we did not experience before we became aware of the dog). No need to postulate either an ad-hoc non-perceptual experience or an ad-hoc top-down influence.

Does this argument show that B is perceived or that C is perceived? It should be clear that if this argument goes through, it only shows that B is perceived. It is possible that while B is perceived, C is not—it is non-perceptually represented—see Section 3.6.3 below. The argument I gave in this subsection is consistent with this view. If this argument shows that the 'dog' or the 'apple' is perceived, this is to be understood as claims about B: about the three-dimensional object visually encoded in the surface: the argument shows that we perceive the three-dimensional object visually encoded in the surface.

### *3.6.3 The depicted object (C)*

So far I argued that A (the picture surface) and B (the three-dimensional object visually encoded in the surface) are perceptually represented when we see things in pictures. However, the treatment of the third fold, C, is more complicated.

[5] Further, it is not just perceptual phenomenology that changes, but even the activation of direction-specific neurons in the primary visual cortex (see Teufel et al. in press), which makes it even more problematic to consider these changes to be driven by non-perceptual mental states.

First of all, C does not have to be perceived and sometimes it may not even be represented either. If I don't know how Mick Jagger looks, I will still perceive a person in the picture when I'm looking at the caricature. There is picture perception, but in this case, C is not even represented.

When I do recognize the picture as the caricature of Mick Jagger, then C is represented, but it is presumably not perceptually represented: I am not perceiving Mick Jagger himself. But then how can we explain that when I recognize the picture as the caricature of Mick Jagger, my phenomenology changes?

I didn't represent Mick Jagger before. I represent him now. And this changes my phenomenology. The question is how Mick Jagger is represented. I will argue that Mick Jagger (and C in general) is quasi-perceptually represented: represented by mental imagery.

The first thing I need to argue for is that C is not represented non-perceptually. A straightforward alternative to my view would be to say that C merely shows up in our judgment—neither perceptually nor quasi-perceptually. This, I am told, may be Edmund Husserl's view and this also seems to be what is implied by some other, more contemporary way of describing the Gestalt switch in the case of seeing the duck–rabbit figure. As Bill Brewer says, for example: '[T]he difference is no change in the core subjective character of the *experience*; it rather concerns our classificatory engagement . . . This is [a] further phenomenology . . . Basic [perceptual] experiential presentation is common throughout' (Brewer 2007, p. 93). I will set aside the worry that this move would commit one to the existence of 'cognitive phenomenology', that is, proprietary phenomenal character of non-perceptual mental states, a highly controversial issue in contemporary philosophy of mind (see Bayne and Montague 2011 for a summary).

An initial problem with this line of the argument is that it would also make it difficult to explain why, after having recognized Mick Jagger in the caricature, our perceptual experience of the lines and shapes of the surface (i.e., of A) changes. The proponent of this view could posit a non-perceptual experience with cognitive phenomenology, which then has some kind of top-down effect on our perceptual phenomenology, but this would lead this view into more and more complicated and more and more ad-hoc ways of describing what is going on in situations of this kind (further complicated in the case of Brewer's claim by findings about

how patterns of eye movements and Gestalt switches are correlated [see Einhäuser et al. 2004]).

Further, and more importantly, this way of thinking about C contradicts some empirical findings. As we have seen, when we see black and white photographs, B is the black and white (and grey) three-dimensional object visually encoded in the picture and C is the colorful depicted object. So recognizing that what is depicted in a black and white photograph is not grey but, say, red or yellow is an instance of recognizing C. And this can be and has been empirically studied—for more than fifty years. Here is a famous experiment (Delk and Fillenbaum 1965, see also Hansen et al. 2006 and Witzel et al. 2011 for more recent and methodologically more rigorous studies): if we have to match the color of a picture of an orange heart to color samples, we match it differently (closer to the red end of the spectrum) from the way we match the color of a picture of some other, orange shapes. This shows that our recognition of the object in question (the heart) influences the color we experience it as having. So when we recognize C, we perceive the color of the surface to be different from before (when we haven't recognized C). But given that color is one of the few properties that is widely agreed to be perceptually represented, this means that representing C can and does change our perceptual experience.

This doesn't in itself show that C is represented quasi-perceptually, as it would be possible that the non-perceptual representation of C influences, in a top-down manner, our perceptual state. The problem here, again, is twofold: the blatant ad hoc nature of this proposal and its conflict with empirical findings. In an experimental setup that is similar to the one in the Delk and Fillenbaum study, subjects were put in the fMRI scanner and the activation in the visual cortex, including the primary visual cortex, was different in those cases where the subject recognized C and in the cases where she didn't (Bannert and Bartels 2013). This means that those who insist that C is represented non-perceptually (by a judgment), would need to posit a top-down influence from some non-perceptual states to the primary visual cortex. And while the primary visual cortex is subject to various attentional and crossmodal influences, it is highly implausible that it would get direct input from our judgments.

How can we explain the change in the perceived color (and in cortical activity) in this example then? How does the representation of C

influence the perceived color (and the cortical activity)? A straightforward proposal would be to say that it is the mental imagery of C that influences the perceived color. You have a (not necessarily very salient) mental imagery of the heart and this mental imagery (and the color red that shows up in it) influences your perceptual experience of the orange heart-shape. Similarly, when you recognize Mick Jagger, you have a (not necessarily very salient) mental imagery of Mick Jagger and this imagery influences the way you see the caricature.[6]

This view was explicitly defended in Macpherson 2012 as an indirect mechanism for cognitive penetration: mental imagery mediates cognitive penetration (in these Delk and Fillenbaum cases). But one doesn't need to take sides in the Byzantine cognitive penetrability debate (something that I will come back to in almost all the remaining chapters, but especially in Chapter 6) to hold that mental imagery influences our perceptual experience. And if C is represented by mental imagery, this can explain why it changes cortical processing of, say, color, as mental imagery is widely held to influence cortical processing, including processing in the primary visual cortex (see Kosslyn et al. 2006 for a summary).

So this gives us the following picture: we have two perceptual states and (at least in some instances of picture perception) also a quasi-perceptual state: the perceptual representation of A and the perceptual representation of B, and we also have the quasi-perceptual representation (that is the mental imagery) of C.[7] And in order to explain the phenomenology of seeing this picture as a caricature of Mick Jagger, we need to take all three of these perceptual/quasi-perceptual states into consideration.

What makes this view of picture perception a threefoldness account (and not a twofoldness account)? This view claims that there are two perceptual states only that are involved in picture perception, not three: the perceptual representations of A and of B. And some of the time

[6] On non-salient mental imagery, see Phillips 2014 and Nanay 2010b.

[7] I take the concept of 'quasi-perceptual' to be fairly harmless: given the well-documented similarity (in terms of processing (Kosslyn et al. 2006) and phenomenology (Perky 1910, Segal 1972)) between perception and mental imagery, even if something is represented by means of mental imagery, we can say it is represented quasi-perceptually (see Lycan 1995; Matthen 2005 on the concept of quasi-perceptual states).

(when C is not represented at all), this is the end of the story: two folds only. But some other times, when C is represented, we need to talk about not two but three perceptual/quasi-perceptual states: the perceptual representations of A and B and the mental imagery of C. The move of bringing in three and not two folds is important for three reasons. First, it allows us to identify the perceptually represented folds as A and B (and not as A and C) and second, it explains the phenomenological difference between not recognizing C in the picture and recognizing it—in order to do so, we need to postulate a quasi-perceptual representation of C. But, again, this quasi-perceptual representation of C is not a necessary feature of picture perception.

The third reason why this is a threefoldness account becomes clear if we now turn from the question of picture perception to the question of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures. The first thing to note is that which one of these perceptual/quasi-perceptual states (that are all part of our overall mental state when perceiving pictures) is the most salient (and which ones remain unconscious) depends on our pictorial interests. Correspondingly, we can attend to any of A, B, and C and any of the relations between them: we can attend to C, for example, if we want to find out how Mick Jagger or Madame Matisse looks. We can attend to the relation between B and C, when, for example, we want to assess how good the caricature is (or how naturalistic a picture is). And we can attend to the relation between A and B if we are interested in the way the marks on the surface give rise to three-dimensional features. Attending to the relation between A and B has received a lot of attention lately as a crucial aspect of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures (Budd 1995, p. 58; Podro 1991, 1998; Lopes 2005; Hopkins 2010; Nanay 2010b). And I will say more about it in the next section. But attending to the relation between B and C is important for another reason: for establishing the accuracy of the picture. Further, attending to the relation between B and C can be part of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures; when appreciating pictures aesthetically, appreciating their naturalism or the lack thereof can be very important (see also Hopkins 1997 for a related argument). If it is true that one desideratum on any account of picture perception is that it should provide the conceptual resources for understanding the aesthetic appreciation of pictures, then the third fold needs to be part of any account of picture perception (because it needs to be part of any account of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures).

Further, the introduction of the third fold may also help us to understand the difference between perceiving a picture and perceiving a sculpture. In the case of perceiving figurative sculptures, we also need to consider three entities: A, B, and C: the three-dimensional clay/marble/bronze object (A), the three-dimensional structure encoded by this (B), and the three-dimensional object/person seen in the sculpture (C). While A and B can come apart (for example, in the case of bas-reliefs), they often have the same contours. So the aesthetic appreciation of sculptures often involves attending to the relation between B and C.

## 3.7 Distributed Attention and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Pictures

I want to return to the specific kind of property that has played an important role in understanding the aesthetic appreciation of pictures (while acknowledging that there may be other properties that we routinely attribute to pictures when we appreciate them aesthetically). It is the property that Budd describes as 'the crucial characteristic of pictorial art, namely, the *interrelationship* between the marks on the surface and what is depicted in them' (Budd 1995, p. 58, see also p. 54).

Properties of this kind (under different labels) have triggered lively discussion recently, mainly in connection with the concept of 'inflection' (see Podro 1991, 1998; Lopes 2005; Hopkins 2010; Nanay 2010b). Hopkins calls these properties 'inflected properties' and argues that 'a full characterization of [them] needs to make reference to the surface's design (conceived as such)' (Hopkins 2010). I myself called them 'design-scene properties', where a 'design-scene property' is a 'relational property that cannot be fully characterized without reference to both the picture's design and to the depicted object' (Nanay 2010b, p. 194). In the light of the threefoldness account above, which resolves the ambiguity of the concept of 'depicted object' in this definition, I should say that a design-scene property is a relational property that cannot be fully characterized without reference to both the picture's surface and to the three-dimensional object visually encoded in the surface.

Design-scene properties are relational properties: they depend both on a property of the picture surface and a property of the depicted scene. The property of being darker than y is also a relational property: x's being

darker than y depends on the color of x and the color of y. What makes design-scene properties interesting is that x and y are located at the very same part of our visual field: x is something three-dimensional that is depicted in the picture, whereas y is something two-dimensional: part of the picture's surface.

A key element in any appreciation of a pictorial work of art is the awareness of design-scene properties (this is what Budd suggests when he says that 'the *interrelationship* between the marks on the surface and what is depicted in them' is '*the* crucial characteristic of pictorial art' (Budd 1995, p. 58, the second emphasis is mine)). When we are admiring a Miró drawing and the way two simple curved lines somehow manage to depict an expressive human face, what we are attending to is exactly a design-scene property: the relational property partly determined by the shape property of the two-dimensional curved line on the canvas and partly determined by the three-dimensional depicted face. And when we are appreciating Cézanne's landscapes, one thing that enhances our aesthetic appreciation is to see the interrelationship between the three-dimensional depicted fascicles of pine needles and the two-dimensional single brushstrokes on the canvas. What Frank Sibley would call our 'critical and evaluative discourse' (Sibley 1959, p. 422) is full of references to design-scene properties (from which Sibley would conclude that it is an aesthetic property—see Chapter 4): to the way the depicted object emerges from the marks on the surface or to the way the depicted object is represented by the marks on the surface.

Again, I am not claiming that design-scene properties are the only properties that need to be attributed to pictures in order to appreciate them aesthetically (see Chapter 5 for a more systematic discussion). But it seems that a central case of appreciating pictures aesthetically involves the attribution of design-scene properties.

And this is where the main theme of Chapter 2, namely, distributed attention, can be applied in the more specific context of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures. It is easy to see that the attribution of design-scene properties itself entails the exercise of distributed attention. But just how our attention is distributed is somewhat restricted in this case: it is distributed across properties of the picture surface and properties of the depicted object.

If one sees two objects and attributes a relational property to them, one needs to attend to both *relata*. If I see x and see y and see x as darker than

y, I need to attend to both x and y. And if I see x as being closer to me than y, then, again, I need to attend to both x and y. These are, however, cases of distributing our attention across objects: we attend both to object x and to object y. And these cases, at least the way I described them, also seem to presuppose focusing one's attention on certain properties (or maybe set of properties) of these two objects: x's color and y's color in the first case and x's and y's distance from me in the second. So the way one's attention is exercised is focused with regards to properties and distributed with regards to objects. We have seen in Chapter 2 that this way of attending is quite widespread, for example, visual search seems to also presuppose a form of attention that is focused with regards to properties and distributed with regards to objects.

Design-scene properties are also relational properties, but attributing design-scene properties implies a way of exercising one's attention very differently. When we attribute design-scene properties, our attention is focused on the very same (visual) object and it is distributed with regards to the properties of this object. In other words, the way our attention is exercised in these cases is exactly what I labeled as 'aesthetic attention' in Chapter 2: attention that is focused with regards to objects but distributed with regards to properties.[8]

One may wonder why I take the surface and the depicted scene to be different properties of the same object (and not two different objects). True, they clearly *are* different objects: one is two-dimensional, whereas the other is three-dimensional. But remember that what is meant by 'object' in the distinction between distributed and focused attention was perceptual object or 'sensory individual': objects we attribute properties to. And in terms of perception, the part of the canvas depicting the apple

[8] In Chapter 2, I emphasized that distributed attention doesn't need to be simultaneous distributed attention—it can oscillate between the properties attended to. And the same is true of the distributed attention exercised in the aesthetic appreciation of pictures. It can, and it often does, oscillate between the two-dimensional surface (A) and the three-dimensional object visually encoded by it (B), rather than attending to both simultaneously. In fact this oscillation is an important aspect of our aesthetic appreciation of some pictures, like Anselm Kiefer's large canvases or Andreas Gursky's large-scale photographs, where this oscillation involves walking back and forth towards and away from the canvas (see Nanay 2012g for a detailed case study of how this works). So I am departing from Wollheim's original claim about the aesthetic appreciation of pictures: it does not need to be the attention to the relation between the two-dimensional surface (A) and the three-dimensional object visually encoded in it (B) and even if it is, it doesn't need to be *simultaneous* attention to (A) and (B).

and the apple visually encoded by the canvas are not different sensory individuals (at least on some ways of cashing out what sensory individuals are [see Nanay 2013a, Chapter 3]): they occupy the very same region of our visual field.

To sum up, we get a straightforward application of the general 'distributed aesthetic attention' idea when it comes to the aesthetic appreciation of pictures. In the aesthetic appreciation of pictures, our attention is distributed. But this distributed attention is restricted to properties of the picture surface and properties of the depicted scene.

Further, even though we exercise our attention in a distributed manner when we appreciate pictures aesthetically, this does not imply that the aesthetic appreciation of pictures automatically counts as an aesthetic experience: it is possible that some other necessary conditions are not met.[9] Expert art critics are clearly capable of attributing design-scene properties at will. But this, again, will not guarantee an aesthetic experience (as demonstrated by both Gombrich's case and by the unfortunate case of many of us who have ever tried but failed to have an aesthetic experience of our favorite artwork). The aesthetic appreciation of pictures can be but doesn't have to be an aesthetic experience.

We have seen that the relation between A and B is not the only property that is relevant when appreciating a picture aesthetically. Attending to the relation between B and C, for example, can also be part of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures: in the case of appreciating pictures aesthetically, appreciating their naturalism or the lack thereof can be very important. But attending to the relation between B and C is also a way of exercising distributed attention—this time distributed not between A and B, but between B and C (I want to leave it open just how similar this way of attending to both B and C is to the kind of distributed attention that I talked about in Chapter 2).[10]

[9] See also Irvin 2014 on the relation between aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic experience (although her concept of aesthetic experience is importantly different from mine).

[10] Here is another such property, also a relational one, and also one that, arguably, presupposes some degree of distributed attention, in line with my account in Chapter 2: according to Matthew Kieran, 'when we truly appreciate a work, we appreciate [ . . . ] the ways in which the artistry shapes and guides our responses' (Kieran 2005, p. 213). I take 'the ways in which the artistry shapes and guides our responses' to be a relational property that is partly determined by the artistry and partly by our responses, and in order to attend to this property, we would need to attend, in a distributed manner, to both the artistry and our responses.

## 3.8 Twofoldness versus Threefoldness

I gave a new account of picture perception that talks about not two but three folds. One may wonder why we should multiply folds if we don't need to. I want to conclude with two considerations about why a threefoldness account is preferable to a twofoldness account.

First, I argue that the threefoldness account is not susceptible to the objection we considered in Section 3.3 that seems to jeopardize the Twofoldness Claim. We are finally in the position to go back to the objection that any account of picture perception must be able to account for the phenomenal difference between seeing something in a picture and seeing the same thing face to face. If the surface is not attended, only the depicted object is, then presumably it is the depicted object and not the surface that will show up in our phenomenology—and this sounds dangerously similar to seeing the depicted object face to face. So the worry was that while the account of picture perception I outlined above may be plausible for *trompe l'oeil* pictures or maybe even with naturalistic pictures, it is clearly a crazy view when it comes to any depiction that is not hyper-naturalistic.

We can now see that this objection is based on the conflation of B and C: of the three-dimensional object visually encoded by the surface and the depicted object itself. It is B, that is, the three-dimensional object visually encoded by the surface, that we attend to, not C. As we have seen, the representation of C may color our perceptual experience, but C itself is not something we normally attend to. B is what we attend to and the experience of B (say, the green-faced Madame Matisse) is very different from the experience of C (that is, the pink-faced Madame Matisse), that is, the experience of the depicted person face to face.

In other words, we can maintain that when we see something in a picture, we simultaneously see both the surface and what is in the picture: we normally do so by attending to the latter and not the former. And this does not entail an experience indistinguishable from (or even similar to) the experience of seeing the depicted object face to face because what we are attending to is not the depicted object per se, but the depicted object as it is depicted: the three-dimensional object visually encoded by the surface—B, not C.

We can, of course, also attend to the surface, as we have seen (when, for example, aesthetically appreciating pictures). And we can also attend

to the depicted object itself—to C (when, for example, assessing the accuracy of the depiction). But in all cases of seeing something in the picture, we need to attend to the three-dimensional object visually encoded by the surface—to B.

Finally, the second consideration in favor of the Threefoldness Claim is the following: it allows for a more nuanced picture of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures. As we have seen, one desideratum on any account of picture perception is that it should provide the conceptual resources for understanding the aesthetic appreciation of pictures. The Twofoldness Claim does this, but the resulting account of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures is not as rich as the account of the aesthetic appreciation that we would get if we talked about not two but three folds. Some properties that are very relevant for the aesthetic appreciation of pictures are, for example, relational properties between B and C. And if we accept the threefoldness view, the conceptual resources for this aspect of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures are already present in the threefoldness account of picture perception. And the concept of distributed attention I introduced in Chapter 2 plays a key role in understanding this aspect of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures.

# 4

# Aesthetically Relevant Properties

## 4.1 Attend or Ignore?

What properties are relevant for aesthetic evaluations? This question is important not only for academic philosophers and art historians, but for everyone. Suppose that you are sitting in a museum, trying to make sense of the artwork in front of you. What is it that you're supposed to pay attention to? The artwork in front of you has lots of properties: it was made by an artist who, no doubt, had a lot of things to say about it. Are you supposed to pay attention to those properties of the artwork that the artists found important? Or are you just supposed to pay attention to what the audio-guide tells you to pay attention to?

Just what you are paying attention to can influence immensely how you see the artwork. We have already seen in the context of the inattentional blindness experiment the radical changes attention can bring about in our perceptual experience (for example whether a gorilla shows up in our experience). But the role of attention is equally significant when we are looking at artworks. Consider one of Paul Klee's early abstract paintings from 1915: a composition with rectangular color patches, mainly in the shade of orange, blue, gray, and purple (see Figure 4.3). The title of the painting is *Green X above left*. And there is indeed a small green X-shape on the left-hand side of the painting. After reading the title, it is close to impossible not to see the other features of the composition as somehow being connected to that green X on the left. The green X on the left is where attention is anchored and the rest of the painting is seen as centered around that green X. This is a radical change in our experience—before reading the title, our experience of that green X was likely to be quite marginal. This demonstrates

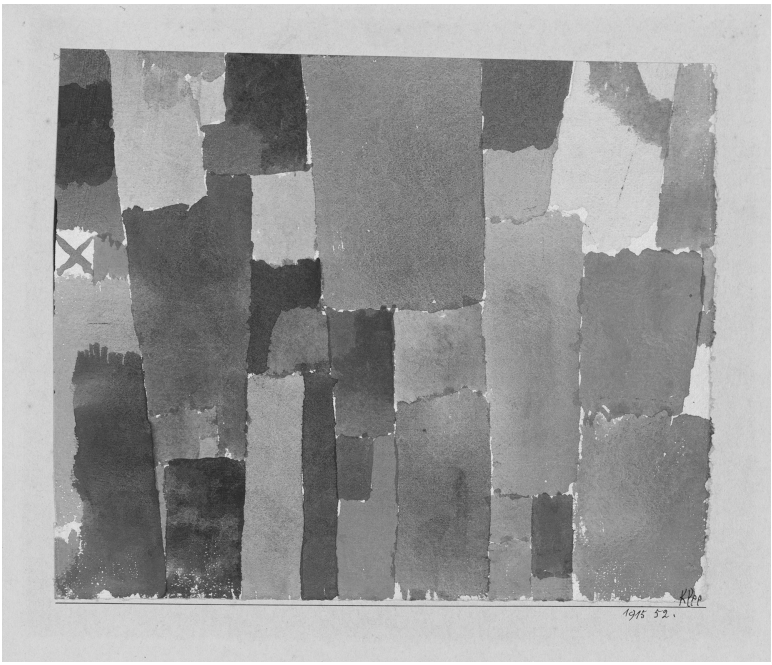


**Figure 4.1** Paul Klee: Green x above left, 1915, 52. Watercolor on paper on cardboard, 16/15.4 × 18.7/18.8 cm, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, private loan. Thanks to Zentrum Paul Klee Fotoarchiv for the permission to use this image.

nicely the importance of what property of the artworks we pay attention to.[1] Paying attention to an irrelevant property can and will derail our experience.

When we engage with an artwork, we invariably ignore some of its features and focus our attention on others. When admiring Petrus Christus's *Portrait of a young girl*, we ignore the cracks in the paint and focus our attention on other features of the painting's surface. We abstract away from the cracks. When looking at a romanesque church that was rebuilt in the baroque era, we may try to ignore the baroque elements in order to admire the medieval structure. Again, we are attempting to abstract away from some features of the artwork.

[1] See also Michael Baxandall's analysis of the importance of attending to the nail in Braque's 1910 *Violin and Pitcher* (Baxandall 1994).

How do we know what properties of an artwork we should be paying attention to and what properties we should ignore or actively abstract away from? One way of settling this question would be to say that we should ignore all those properties that the artist did not intend us to attend to. Petrus Christus clearly did not want anyone looking at his portrait to focus on the cracks in the paint—they were not there when he painted this small picture. Another way of keeping apart those properties that need to be attended to from those that need to be ignored would be to ask what would give us the highest degree of aesthetic experience, pleasure, or some other measure of appreciation—maybe independently of what the artist intended.

I argued in a paper about the multimodal experience of art that there is no easy way of settling this question (Nanay 2012c). As our experience of works of art (like our perceptual experiences in general, see Spence and Driver 2004, O'Callaghan 2008) is multimodal, we should, for example, not automatically ignore properties that are experienced in a sense modality that is different from the primary sense modality the artwork is experienced in. A tempting shortcut in assessing what properties to ignore is to shut out all the sense modalities that are not the ones the artwork is 'supposed to' be enjoyed with. Those members of the concert audience who close their eyes during the concert and often even during an opera production would provide a paradigmatic example of this strategy. But if it is true that our experience of artworks is genuinely multimodal, then this is a mistake. The aesthetically relevant properties of an artwork may be spread across sense modalities.

I have been talking about aesthetically relevant properties: properties are aesthetically relevant if attending to them makes an aesthetic difference (see also O'Callaghan ms). This 'making an aesthetic difference' can mean many things: attending to aesthetically relevant properties may alter our general aesthetic evaluations of the artwork, strengthen (or weaken) our identification with a fictional character, trigger an aesthetic experience of a Prussian nature, make us appreciate a narrative twist, and so on. My aim is to say more about what aesthetically relevant properties are and how important they can be in understanding various debates in aesthetics.

But what I call 'aesthetically relevant properties' are not to be confused with 'aesthetic properties'—a concept that has been considered to be one of the central concepts of aesthetics in the last half century. Lots of

properties are aesthetically relevant that are not among the more restrictive set of aesthetic properties. The aim of this chapter is to encourage a turn from the concept of 'aesthetic properties' towards that of 'aesthetically relevant properties'. But first let's see what aesthetic properties are supposed to be.

## 4.2 Aesthetic Properties

Objects have properties. The coffee cup on my desk has lots of properties: shape, size, color, spatial location, and so on. It also has somewhat less obvious properties, such as the property of being made in England or being on a planet that has a lot of water on it. And it may have some even more unusual properties, like being graceful or being ugly. Being graceful or being ugly are aesthetic properties. So is being beautiful, probably the most paradigmatic of all aesthetic properties.

I gave three examples of aesthetic properties, but I gave no definition for what makes a property aesthetic. Frank Sibley drew up a list of aesthetic properties that he assembled together because they are the properties expressed by adjectives typical of "critical and evaluative discourse about works of art" (Sibley 1959, p. 422). Many others have added to the list (Goldman 1995, Zangwill 2001, Levinson 2005, see also De Clercq 2008 for a summary). Some further central examples include being balanced, being serene, being delicate, moving, and so on.

This is a diverse set of properties and it has been a challenge to find some common denominator between them or some kind of exact criterion for drawing the line between aesthetic properties and non-aesthetic ones. I mentioned a couple of paradigmatic aesthetic properties and Sibley argues that identifying these central examples suffices for having a discourse about aesthetic properties. But others are more skeptical. As aesthetic properties have played such an important role in a number of key debates in aesthetics, it may raise eyebrows in other, more formalized parts of philosophy that this central concept is left undefined.

This may urge us to think that if we can do aesthetics without relying on the concept of aesthetic properties, we should try to do so. The aim of this chapter is to argue that we should try to do exactly this. There are lots of questions one could ask about aesthetic properties and I want to mention a couple of these. In Section 4.4, I will argue that we can reframe

these questions in terms of 'aesthetically relevant properties'—and this reframing may help us to move these debates further.

First, are aesthetic properties 'objective' or 'subjective'? Is there a (mind-independent) fact of the matter about whether an object has an aesthetic property? There is a (mind-independent) fact of the matter about whether a piece of paper is triangular. But there is no (mind-independent) fact of the matter about whether a piece of paper has special sentimental importance to my grandmother. How about aesthetic properties? Are they more similar to properties like being triangular or to properties like having special sentimental value for someone (see Levinson 2005 and Matravers 2005 for a good overview of these issues)? While it could be argued that this question is a *bona fide* metaphysics question (and one that is difficult to tackle without bringing in the heavy artillery of metaphysics), many (especially outside of aesthetics) consider this to be the most important question in aesthetics. If the only way we can talk about the aesthetic realism versus aesthetic antirealism debate is in terms of aesthetic properties, then we have a pretty good reason to hold onto this concept. I will argue in Section 4.4 that we can give a parallel formulation of the aesthetic realism versus antirealism debate in terms of 'aesthetically relevant properties'.

Second, are aesthetic properties necessarily evaluative (Levinson 2001)? On the basis of the examples I gave so far, it may seem so: being beautiful and being graceful seems to carry positive value; attributing the property of being ugly to something (or someone) seems like a negative evaluation (de Clercq 2002). But maybe not all aesthetic properties are evaluative (Zangwill 2001). One of the standard examples I mentioned above, the property of being balanced, may be a possible example. And there are further issues: one could argue that even if we consider the aesthetic property of being balanced to carry positive value in some contexts (say, renaissance paintings), it may still carry negative value in others (say, baroque or expressionist paintings). And the same is true of all aesthetic properties, including beauty.[2] I will argue in the next section that focusing on aesthetically relevant properties, and

[2] As Oscar Wilde says, 'no object is so ugly that, under certain conditions of light and shade, or proximity to other things, it will not look beautiful; no object is so beautiful that, under certain conditions, it will not look ugly' (Wilde 1879, p. 111).

not on aesthetic properties is a way out of this conundrum—as aesthetically relevant properties are clearly not necessarily evaluative.

Finally, here is a question a philosopher of perception would find natural to ask about aesthetic properties: *how* are they attributed to objects? This constitutes a very straightforward, almost obvious, way of connecting up questions in aesthetics and questions in the philosophy of perception.[3] Some properties of objects are perceived.[4] Others are not. And it is not easy to draw the line between these two sets of properties. Color, shape, and spatial location are good candidates for properties that are perceived: when we are looking at an object, we literally perceive its color and not merely infer that it has a certain color. And the property of being made in England or being on a planet that has a lot of water on it are good candidates for properties that are non-perceptually represented. But how about sortal properties like being a chair? And how about properties like edible? How about dispositional properties like fragile? The answer is not clear (Siegel 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009; Scholl and Tremoullet 2000; Kelly 2010; Matthen 2010; Kriegel 2007; Nanay 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b).

Now, are aesthetic properties perceived? This is an obvious question to ask for someone with interests in both aesthetics and in philosophy of perception. Do we literally see things as beautiful or as graceful or do we just infer (maybe on the basis of seeing them as having some other properties [shape, color, etc.]) that they are? I will argue in Section 4.5 that we have no principled way of answering this question. But the corresponding question about whether aesthetically relevant properties are perceived can be answered easily.

I am skeptical of the importance of aesthetic properties in aesthetics and I will argue in the rest of the chapter that many of the classic questions about aesthetic properties can be raised in a much more

[3] Another straightforward way of connecting up questions in aesthetics and questions in the philosophy of perception is about how the perception of photographs is different from the perception of handmade pictures, a topic I will not say anything about in this book (but see Walton 1984, Currie 1995, Carroll 1995, Lopes 2003, Cohen and Meskin 2004, Abell 2010, Nanay 2010f, Kulvicki 2014).

[4] I will sometimes say that these properties are perceptually represented. As we have seen, not everyone thinks that perceiving a property is the same as perceptually representing it as not everyone thinks that perceptual states are representations. But I do. Those who don't can read 'perceiving properties' when I (occasionally) write 'perceptually representing properties' in what follows.

straightforward and productive manner about aesthetically relevant properties. But it should be clear that this does not mean that the concept of aesthetic properties is useless or that I am out on a crusade against it. The concept of beauty is clearly crucial for philosophers and non-philosophers alike. I just don't think that millennia of hard thinking about the nature of beauty and other aesthetic properties got us particularly far. Maybe it's time to try another angle, with the help of the concept of aesthetically relevant properties.

## 4.3 Aesthetically Relevant Properties

I need to say more about what I take to be aesthetically relevant properties and why I think it's a less problematic concept than that of aesthetic properties. As we have seen, a property is aesthetically relevant if attending to it makes an aesthetic difference: *any* aesthetic difference: an aesthetic difference of any kind.

This could mean that attending to this property makes my identification with one of the protagonists stronger (or weaker). It could also mean that I appreciate some narrative twist in a story better. Or it could mean that attending to this property makes me appreciate the picture's composition better. I take all of these (and many more) to be all different kinds of aesthetic differences. If attending to a property leads to any such aesthetic difference, it is an aesthetically relevant property.

We have seen that shifting one's attention from one property of an object to another one changes the phenomenology of one's experience. If I have been attending to my laptop's color and suddenly I shift my attention to its shape, the phenomenology of my experience will change. But then one may wonder whether the concept of aesthetically relevant properties would become too cheap: whether all properties would count as aesthetically relevant under this definition.

And this is why I was emphasizing that attending to an aesthetic property should bring about an *aesthetic* difference in our experience. Not just any difference, but an aesthetic one. Attending to each and every property would bring about a difference in our experience—but typically not an aesthetic difference. When I shift my attention from the color of my laptop to its shape, this will, presumably, not result in an aesthetic difference. And if I attend to the distance between the painting and the ceiling (a *bona fide* relational property of the painting), it is unlikely that

this will bring about an aesthetic difference.[5] It will bring about some difference in the phenomenology of my experience, but not an aesthetic one.

On the other hand, I do not want to be too restrictive about what counts as an aesthetic difference—I do not want to restrict it, for example, to difference in our aesthetic experience (in the Proustian sense we considered in Chapter 2). And I don't want to tie the concept of aesthetic differences to the concept of beauty either. A change in the way I identify with a protagonist can be an aesthetic difference, but it has nothing to do either with beauty or with the Proustian sense of aesthetic experience. But I still consider it to be an aesthetic difference. Quick example: In Alain Resnais' *L'Année dernière in Marienbad* (1962), the male protagonist speaks with an Italian accent. This is something I did not notice the first time I saw this film. When I saw it for the second time, I did, and it made an aesthetic difference: it changed the way I identified with this character. But this change was not a change in how beautiful I considered the film to be and not even a change in my Proustian aesthetic experience of the film.

But so far, I merely gestured towards what would constitute an aesthetic difference, I have not given any definition. Nor is it, strictly speaking, the aim of this chapter to give a watertight definition for aesthetic difference (and thereby for aesthetically relevant properties)—the aim is to outline a theoretical framework where we can have a debate about how exactly to define aesthetically relevant properties. But any such definition would need to avoid circularity (if aesthetic difference is cashed out in terms of aesthetically relevant properties) and collapsing back to the concept of aesthetic properties (if aesthetic difference is cashed out in terms of aesthetic properties). Here is my (fairly liberal) definition, which, again, should be taken to be a working definition: if attending to a property of a particular changes the *valence* of one's experience of that particular, it is an aesthetically relevant property.[6] In other words, if attending to P makes me appreciate my experience

[5] I say 'unlikely' because it is easy to dream up some piece of conceptual art where this property (or any other property) becomes an aesthetically relevant one.

[6] Attending to an aesthetically irrelevant property may change the *intensity* of one's experience (by taking away resources) but it wouldn't, presumably, change the *valence* of one's experience.

more (or less), P is an aesthetically relevant property. It is important that if attending to P of a particular itself makes me appreciate this particular more (or less), this does not give us reason to think that P is an aesthetically relevant property—what is required for P's being an aesthetically relevant property is that attending to it would make me appreciate *my experience* more (or less).[7] It needs highlighting that this definition is not circular: I did not define something aesthetic with the help of something else aesthetic—it is not aesthetic appreciation that was used for defining aesthetically relevant properties, but the appreciation of one's own experience. And I also resisted the temptation to side with one or another account of aesthetic experience when defining aesthetically relevant properties.[8]

It should be clear that the same property can be aesthetically relevant in one context and completely aesthetically irrelevant in another. To go back to the Klee example, the green X is aesthetically relevant here but there are lots of artworks one can imagine where attending to a green X on the canvas makes no aesthetic difference whatsoever.

This is an important difference from the way aesthetic properties are characterized: beauty is an aesthetic property, regardless of whose property it is, whereas a shape property can be aesthetically relevant in one context but not in another. And there is no principled reason why *any* property, or at least any property one can attend to, could not be made aesthetically relevant—given the relevant context and the relevant artwork. In fact, at least some attempts in conceptual art could be thought of

[7] This distinction, alas, is not always as clear as it seems: sometimes attending to a property of x makes us appreciate our experience more because it makes us appreciate x more. But we have no reason to take this property to be aesthetically relevant—I may just be noticing some property of x that I was unaware of. So, strictly speaking, we would need to expand the definition in the following way (the new addition italicized): if attending to a property of a particular makes me appreciate my experience of that particular more (or less), *and not as a result of making me appreciate the particular itself more (or less)*, it is an aesthetically relevant property.

[8] There are, no doubt, other ways of cashing out what should be meant by making an aesthetic difference that may be preferable to the one just outlined—again, it is not the aim of this chapter to defend this specific way of thinking about aesthetic differences. Those who talk about aesthetic properties in aesthetics give very different definitions of aesthetic properties (if they do). In a similar vein, I do not want to tie the argument in this chapter about the importance of aesthetically relevant properties to one and only one specific way of defining aesthetic difference (as long as it is noncircular and avoids collapsing back to the concept of aesthetic properties).

as ways of making some unlikely properties aesthetically relevant (as we shall see at the end of Chapter 5).

I will say more about the relation between aesthetically relevant properties and aesthetic properties in the next section. But it is important to emphasize that neither concept entails the other. Aesthetic properties are likely to be aesthetically relevant in some contexts, but not in others. In our engagement with some pieces of conceptual art, for example, beauty (the paradigmatic aesthetic property) may not be an aesthetically relevant property (see Costello 2013 for a discussion of this): attending to the object's beauty would make no interesting aesthetic difference (at least according to the conceptual artist). And there are lots of properties that can be aesthetically relevant without being aesthetic properties—as the Klee example nicely demonstrates.

One may also be tempted to take aesthetically relevant properties to be those non-aesthetic properties that aesthetic properties supervene on.[9] The general idea then would be that aesthetic properties are the supervenient properties and aesthetically relevant properties provide the base of this supervenience. There would be no change in the supervenient aesthetic properties without a change in the base properties, that is, in the aesthetically relevant properties. I think this is the wrong way of thinking about the relation between aesthetic properties and aesthetically relevant properties. Lots of aesthetically relevant properties do not provide the base of any supervenient aesthetic property: the example from the Resnais film, for example, presumably doesn't.

In short, focusing on aesthetic properties gives us one way of thinking about the aesthetic domain and focusing on aesthetically relevant properties gives us another. In the former picture, there is a special set of properties (being beautiful, being graceful, etc.) that can and should be kept apart from the rest of the properties. In the latter picture, pretty much any property-instance can count as an aesthetically relevant property, but whether it does or not depends on the context. My aim is to argue that the latter picture may be more promising than the former one in addressing many of the traditional problems in aesthetics.

[9] It may be worth noting that not everyone takes aesthetic properties to be supervenient properties, see Eaton 1994.

## 4.4 Aesthetically Relevant Properties versus Aesthetic Properties

I hope to show that it may be a good idea to replace the concept of aesthetic properties with that of aesthetically relevant properties in at least some classic debates. Philosophers of science often talk about progressive and degenerative scientific research programmes (Lakatos 1970, Lakatos 1974). A scientific research programme is a temporal sequence of a set of scientific theories. A progressive research programme does not contradict any new data and makes new predictions and new explanations. A degenerative one sometimes does contradict new data and makes no (or hardly any) new predictions and new explanations. If a degenerative research programme contradicts new data, this does not falsify the research programme: there are many ways of modifying the research programme in such a way that the contradiction disappears. These modifications, however, involve adding extra, ad-hoc, assumptions to the 'core' of the research programme, that serves only one purpose: to explain away the contradiction. These extra assumptions constitute the 'protective belt' of a degenerative research programme. The thicker the protective belt is, the more likely it is that a research programme is degenerative. The more new predictions and explanations a research programme provides, the more likely it is that it is progressive. Imre Lakatos argues that it is often worth being loyal to a degenerative research programme for some time (as it may manage to recover), but if there is an alternative, progressive research programme on the horizon, the rational thing to do is to jump ship and join the progressive one.

A similar distinction can be made between progressive and degenerative philosophical research programmes, including philosophical research programmes in aesthetics. A philosophical research programme is, like a scientific research programme, not a theory, but a temporal sequence of theories that share some important core assumptions. Physicalism or utilitarianism are possible examples for philosophical research programmes. A progressive philosophical research programme would be able to explain and predict new data—in this case, not necessarily empirical data. If a philosophical research programme can, for example, be applied successfully to a new, so far unconsidered subfield or if it can explain a new, so far unconsidered phenomenon, it is likely that it is

progressive. If it faces numerous objections that it can avert only by postulating ad-hoc assumptions, the sole purpose of which is to explain away these objections, then it is likely to be a degenerating philosophical research programme.

I consider the use of aesthetic properties in addressing problems in aesthetics to be a research programme and the use of aesthetically relevant properties to be another research programme. Remember that a research programme is not a theory: it is a temporal sequence of various theories all held together by a common core. Similarly, theories with very different accounts of what aesthetic properties are, and, say, whether they are necessarily evaluative, would still be part of the same research programme, the 'aesthetic property'-based research programme.

I will try to show that while the 'aesthetic property'-based approach shows some typical signs of being a degenerating research programme, the aesthetically relevant properties-based approach is a progressive research programme.

First example: what can these two research programmes say about conceptual art? One widespread way of describing the conceptual art movement is that it makes any considerations about aesthetic properties irrelevant. Conceptual art doesn't try to be beautiful, but it doesn't try to be ugly either. The question of beauty or ugliness is just irrelevant (at least in some conceptual art, see Costello 2013 for a distinction between strongly and weakly non-perceptual art, where he argues that this is true only of strongly non-perceptual art). How then can the 'aesthetic property'-based research programme talk about conceptual art?

One possible approach this research programme can take is to talk about the aesthetic properties not of the physical object in front of us, but of the ideas that are expressed in the physical object (Goldie and Schellekens 2009). While this is clearly a permissible (and ingenuous) move, it is difficult not to see it as a way of adding extra, ad-hoc, assumptions to the 'core' of the research programme, that serves only one purpose: to explain away the contradiction. These extra assumptions about the aesthetic properties of ideas come very close to being a textbook illustration of what constitutes the 'protective belt' of a degenerative research programme.

Contrast this with the 'aesthetically relevant property'-based research programme. One way in which this research programme can describe conceptual art is as an endeavor that makes seemingly aesthetically

irrelevant properties aesthetically relevant. In fact, we can even describe the pull of conceptual art by saying that conceptual artists draw our attention to aesthetically relevant properties that are not aesthetic properties. Here, the 'aesthetically relevant property'-based research programme can make new predictions and provide new explanations, which is the hallmark of progressive research programmes.

Two quick examples: Marcel Duchamp's *Mona Lisa Rasée* is a picture that is perceptually indistinguishable from a faithful reproduction of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. But Duchamp earlier made another picture (*L.H.O.O.Q.*) where he drew a moustache and beard on the picture of *Mona Lisa*. Duchamp's *Mona Lisa Rasée* is a reference to this earlier picture and we, presumably, see it differently from the way we see Leonardo's original: the missing moustache and beard is part of our experience, whereas it is not when we look at Leonardo's original. The second example is Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning drawing*, which is just what it says it is: all we see is an empty piece of paper (with hardly visible traces of the erased drawing on it).

In the case of the Rauschenberg piece, the property of having been produced by erasing a de Kooning drawing is an aesthetically relevant property. And a surprising aesthetically relevant property as it is not an observable property. But it is not an aesthetic property by any definition of aesthetic property. Yet, it is extremely significant in understanding this work. And in the case of *Mona Lisa Rasée*, the property of being related to the previous work, *L.H.O.O.Q.,* is an aesthetically relevant property, but not an aesthetic property. When it comes to conceptual art, aesthetically relevant properties (and especially unlikely aesthetically relevant properties) seem extremely important.[10]

Second example: Lakatos's original framework was about scientific research programmes and in this context it is easy enough to see what would constitute the 'data': empirical observations. When we adapt Lakatos's framework to talk about philosophical research programmes, it is much less clear what would be the equivalent of the 'data': we have

[10] One may wonder whether we are entitled to call these properties aesthetically relevant properties and it is important to emphasize that we can: attending to them makes an enormous aesthetic difference (although it may not make a difference in terms of how beautiful or ugly or graceful we find the work of art—it may not entail any difference in the attributed aesthetic properties). I will say more about whether this aesthetic difference can entail perceptual difference at the end of this chapter.

seen that this wouldn't need to be something empirical (and in some cases, say, when we talk about metaphysical research programmes, it is difficult to see what 'empirical data' would even mean). But then how should we understand one of the most important distinctions between progressive and degenerating research programmes, namely, that while the former is consistent with and can explain new data, the latter is often not consistent and can't explain data. What is the 'data' of aesthetics in this sense?

Without attempting to give a full characterization of what such data may be, one set of phenomena that would play the role of 'data' in this context is our critical and evaluative practice. There are clearly other data points besides this one, but our critical and evaluative practice is one such data point. Hence, if a research programme in aesthetics is consistent with and can explain our critical and evaluative practice, we have some (not necessarily conclusive) reason to consider it to be progressive. If it can't do that, it is likely to be degenerative. And on this point, the 'aesthetic property'-based research programme may seem to have a real advantage: the whole idea of aesthetic properties is tied to our critical and evaluative practices—at least that is the criterion Sibley gave for distinguishing aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties. Remember how Sibley introduced the concept of aesthetic properties: he collected properties expressed by adjectives in "critical and evaluative discourse about works of art" (Sibley 1959, p. 422). But then in order to adjudicate between the 'aesthetic property'-based and the 'aesthetically relevant property'-based research programmes, we should then ask what 'critical and evaluative discourse about works of art' is supposed to do. What are critics supposed to do?

And here it should become clear that the critical and evaluative discourse about works of art is not on the side of the 'aesthetic property'-based approach, in spite of Sibley's claims. Again, what are critics supposed to do? My answer is that one really important thing critics are supposed to do is to point out properties of the artwork that change the way you are experiencing it (and do so in a way that makes an aesthetic difference). But this means pointing out aesthetically relevant properties. Not aesthetic properties; aesthetically relevant properties. If a critic points out the Italian accent of the male protagonist in the Resnais film, this could change my entire experience of the film—I may see him as more of an outsider and his actions may make more (or less)

sense. But it is not an aesthetic property. Thus, aesthetically relevant properties play a central role in critical discourse, more so than aesthetic properties. If we follow Sibley's own methodology, we should be zeroing in on aesthetically relevant properties, not on aesthetic properties. The critic would not do her job if she merely pointed out how beautiful and balanced a Corot painting is. But she would very much do her job if she pointed out how the small patches of red contribute to the picture's composition.

But then critical and evaluative discourse about works of art is on the side of the 'aesthetically relevant property'-based research programme. This is the second reason why we may want to abandon the 'aesthetic property'-based research programme and jump ship to the 'aesthetically relevant property'-based one.[11]

I need to emphasize again that I am not trying to exorcise aesthetic properties. In fact, I think that one of the things critics should do is to say something about how aesthetically relevant properties link up with aesthetic properties: how the tiny red patches contribute to the picture's being balanced. But I think too much attention has been devoted to the aesthetic property end of this relation and too little to the aesthetically relevant property end. The 'aesthetically relevant property'-based research programme would have a lot to say about aesthetic properties and the relation between the two kinds of properties. But their central concept would be that of aesthetically relevant properties.

At this point one could object that the way I set up the 'aesthetic property'-based research programme and the 'aesthetically relevant property'-based research programme is unfair because these two research programmes are not addressing the same problems, therefore, they should not be considered to be direct competitors. So in order to conclude the argument about the advantages of the 'aesthetically relevant property'-based research programme over the 'aesthetic property'-based research programme, I need to show that the most important debates and controversies

[11] This is not as radical a move as it may seem—many influential questions in aesthetics are already using concepts that are closely related to that of 'aesthetically relevant properties' (or at least more closely than to that of 'aesthetic properties'). One example is the concept of 'categories of art' (Walton 1970). What 'category of art' we take a work to belong to—this was Walton's point—very much influences our aesthetic evaluation of it. In my terminology, this would entail that belonging to a category of art is an aesthetically relevant property. It is not an aesthetic property.

in aesthetics that are addressed with the help of the concept of aesthetic properties could also be addressed with the help of the concept of aesthetically relevant properties. In fact, one could even argue that some advances could be made if we reinterpret these debates to be about aesthetically relevant properties, and not about aesthetic properties.

Take the aesthetic realism versus aesthetic antirealism debate first. On the face of it, this debate is strictly about aesthetic properties: about whether beauty is in the eye of the beholder or whether it is 'out there', waiting for us to discover it. Less floridly, it is about whether there is a (mind-independent) fact of the matter about whether a particular has an aesthetic property. Aesthetic realists say there is; aesthetic antirealists say there isn't.[12]

It is not the aim of this book to solve the aesthetic realism versus antirealism debate, or, for that matter, to say much about it. As we have seen, the point could be made that this debate really belongs to applied metaphysics. More importantly, in the context of the book, it is unclear how philosophy of perception considerations could make a difference here—this debate may be a prime example of the limitations of the approach I'm advocating in this book.[13]

[12] This is a somewhat crude simplification of the rather complex realism versus antirealism debate. Importantly, more would need to be said about the concept of mind-independence. Some proponents of aesthetic realism, for example, argue that aesthetic properties are response-dependent (a claim about the nature of aesthetic properties—x has an aesthetic property if and only if x would elicit a certain response in subjects of a certain kind in certain circumstances), but they are nonetheless mind-independent in the sense that the object's having this property does not presuppose anyone responding to it (see Levinson 2005, Matravers 2005, Zangwill 2001 for overviews of this move).

[13] I can't resist a (longish) footnote on how philosophy of perception may still, in spite of it all, be relevant even for this debate. One of the most influential arguments for aesthetic realism is that it is the only view that can explain why we tend to find at least a certain degree of aesthetic agreement (see Hume 1757/1985, Goldman 1993, 1995). If one is an aesthetic realist, it is easy to explain this: artworks have aesthetic properties independently from us so it should not surprise anyone that we agree about them. The property of being circular is also a property that exists independently of us and, predictably, there are no vicious debates about which objects are circular and which are not. And the pro-realist argument is that aesthetic antirealists can't give an explanation for this phenomenon (see Bender 1996, Schellekens 2006, Young 1997 for summaries). And here is the point where some appeal to philosophy of perception, more precisely, to the 'mere exposure effect', could provide such an antirealist explanation. We know that previous exposure to a stimulus makes the positive assessment of this stimulus more likely (Fechner 1876; Zajonc 1968, 2001; Bornstein and D'Agostino 1992)—this is true even if the previous exposure is never noticed (Kunst-Wilson and Zajonc 1980, Elliott & Dolan, 1998, Monahan et al. 2000). And the same effect has been observed in the aesthetic context as

What is important from the point of view of this chapter is the following. One may worry that even formulating this crucial question in aesthetics presupposes the concept of aesthetic properties. But then we will be in a bad position to expand the explanatory scope of aesthetically relevant properties at least when it comes to the aesthetic realism versus antirealism debate.

But we can also formulate a version of the aesthetic realism versus antirealism debate with the help of the concept of aesthetically relevant properties (and without any appeal to aesthetic properties). The question then becomes: is there a (mind-independent) fact of the matter about which properties of an object are aesthetically relevant? Aesthetic realists would say there is; aesthetic antirealists would say there isn't. And there is no need to talk about aesthetic properties. The definition of aesthetically relevant properties does not commit us one way or another: all it says is that a property is aesthetically relevant if attending to it yields an aesthetic difference in our experience.

The crucial question then from the point of view of the aesthetic realism versus antirealism debate will be why attending to these aesthetically relevant properties makes an aesthetic difference (and why

well (Cutting 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2007): During a class on visual perception, James Cutting showed images of paintings for a couple of seconds, without any explanation or comment throughout the semester and at the end of the semester, he made the students judge the paintings. These judgments showed clear correlation with the frequency of exposure. Cutting himself takes these findings to imply some version of aesthetic antirealism (the reason why we like certain works of art is that we are exposed to them, not because they possess any mind-independent aesthetic property). I think this is far too hasty a conclusion to draw, and there are attempts to show that the same effect is not present if students are shown really awful pictures (Meskin et al. 2013). There are other problems, like the one that Cutting's experiments (and also the Meskin at al. 2013 experiments) works with a version of the mere exposure effect that could be labeled the 'token mere exposure effect': exposure to a token object makes the positive assessment of this very token object more likely. But what would be needed for even getting close to an antirealist explanation for aesthetic agreement is the demonstration of 'type mere exposure effect': the effect that exposure to an object of a type makes the assessment of other tokens of this type more likely. I explore the possibilities of establishing this conclusion in Nanay 2016, but it is important to note that neither the Cutting experiments nor the Meskin et al. experiments say anything about this option, which would be the relevant one from the point of view of the aesthetic realism versus antirealism debate. And even if it could be clearly demonstrated that such 'type mere exposure effect' exists in the aesthetic context, this would still not constitute a positive reason for endorsing aesthetic antirealism—but it would counter one of the most influential pro-realist arguments. In short, philosophy of perception considerations may, after all, play a surprisingly important role in addressing the aesthetic realism versus anti-realism debate.

attending to properties that are not aesthetically relevant doesn't). Is there some further, mind-independent fact about these properties that make our attending to it special (this would be the realist option)? Or is this all we can say about aesthetically relevant properties, namely, that attending to them has this odd effect (this would be the aesthetic anti-realist option)? I am not going to pretend that these questions are easier to answer than the traditional questions of the 'aesthetic property'-based way of framing the aesthetic realism versus antirealism debate.[14] But at least they are different questions.

Another major and widely discussed question about aesthetic properties is whether they are necessarily evaluative and if so, what their value depends on. And here, again, the emphasis on aesthetically relevant properties seems to have an easier time: aesthetically relevant properties can clearly be non-evaluative. The green X on the Klee painting is not evaluative, for example.

Further, we have seen that the same aesthetic property may carry a positive value in one context and a negative one in another: gracefulness may be a good thing in some works of art but not in others, for example. If we focus on aesthetically relevant properties, then this context-dependence is built into the very concept: the very same property can be aesthetically relevant in one context but completely irrelevant in another.

The list could go on. But hopefully these examples were sufficient to demonstrate that shifting from an 'aesthetic property'-based research programme to an 'aesthetically relevant property'-based one would not amount to changing the question: the big debates that have been framed in terms of aesthetic properties can also be framed in terms of aesthetically relevant properties. And, crucially, the emphasis on aesthetically relevant properties could open up new, thus far unexplored, questions and research directions. We have seen that one of the marks of a progressive research programme is that it can give new predictions and provide new explanations. I want to devote the rest of this chapter to

[14] It could be argued that realism about aesthetically relevant properties is easier to swallow than realism about aesthetic properties—for similar reasons to why dispositionalism in the philosophy of color is easier to swallow than reductive objectivism. I will not pursue this line of argument here.

showing how the emphasis on aesthetically relevant properties could open up a very important new topic that seems blocked as long as we stay with an 'aesthetic property'-based research programme: the exploration of the relation between the aesthetic and the perceptual.

## 4.5 Perceiving Aesthetically Relevant Properties

I argued in the last section that the research programme that focuses on aesthetically relevant properties has a genuine advantage over the research programme that focuses on aesthetic properties. I gave two reasons for thinking so. I now want to add a third, somewhat more complicated reason. A research programme is likely to be progressive and not degenerative if it can explain new phenomena and open up new research directions. And I will argue that the research programme that focuses on aesthetically relevant properties does exactly this: it can give a much more nuanced picture of the complicated relation between the aesthetic and the perceptual than the research programme that focuses on aesthetic properties can.

A good point to start this discussion is the debate about whether aesthetic properties are perceived. I argue that we have no principled way of answering this question. But if we ask a parallel question about aesthetically relevant properties, then the answer will be simple, straightforward, and opens up the possibility of asking even more fundamental questions about the importance of perception in the aesthetic domain. This would provide a case study for pointing out the potential advantages of using aesthetically relevant properties (rather than aesthetic properties) as the crucial concept in aesthetics.

A major question in philosophy of perception is about which properties are perceived and which ones are inferred or non-perceptually represented. Beliefs can represent their objects as having any property. In the case of perceptual states, in contrast, the set of properties they represent their objects as having is limited. The question is how limited this set of properties is. Color is a good candidate for a perceived property, whereas being made in England is a good candidate for a non-perceptually represented one. But there are many kinds of properties in between that are more difficult to categorize.

A couple of potential candidates: it has been argued that we perceive objects as trees and tables (Siegel 2006), as being causally efficacious (Siegel 2005, 2009), as edible, climbable, or Q-able in general (Nanay 2011a, 2012a), as agents (Scholl and Tremoullet 2000), as having some kind of normative character or value (Kelly 2010, Matthen 2010), as having dispositional properties (Nanay 2011b), and as having moral value (Kriegel 2007).

It is somewhat surprising that not much discussion has been devoted to a seemingly much more plausible set of candidates for perceived properties: aesthetic properties. Do we literally see things as beautiful or as graceful or do we just infer (maybe on the basis of seeing them as having some other properties, e.g., shape and color) that they are?

Before turning to ways of addressing the question about the perception of aesthetic properties, we need to point out an ambiguity in the way the question of what properties are perceived has been raised. Perception can be conscious or unconscious. Correspondingly, properties can be perceived consciously or unconsciously. As many experiments about subliminal priming have shown, one can perceive a property without being aware of it. Thus, the set of properties that is perceived consciously will, presumably, be narrower than the set of properties that is perceived (consciously or unconsciously). Both projects are important ones, but I will assume that what matters in the present context is not unconscious representation, but whether we perceptually experience aesthetic properties: whether aesthetic properties show up in our perceptual phenomenology or in our non-perceptual phenomenology.

But how can we address the question about whether aesthetic properties are perceptually experienced? How can we draw the line between perceptual and non-perceptual phenomenology? These are as fundamental questions within philosophy of perception as it gets, but the methodology is not at all clear.

Most arguments in the philosophy of perception for and against the claims that such and such a property is part of our perceptual phenomenology are based on what has been called the methodology of contrast cases (see Masrour 2011, Siewert 2002, Siegel 2007, Kriegel 2007, and Bayne 2009). The upshot is this: if we find two token experiences that only differ in that property P shows up in one but not the other and if the two experiences differ in their perceptual phenomenology, then property P is part of our perceptual phenomenology. Here is an example: At a

dinner party, I'm eating a piece of meat that I take to be chicken, when my host tells me that it is in fact a piece of rat meat (or pigeon, etc; use your favorite disgusting animal). My experience before she told me this is E1; my experience after that is E2. The only difference between E1 and E2 is that there is one property, the property of being a rat, that shows up in E2 but not in E1—in all other respects, E1 and E2 are the same. If I am really disgusted by rats, then the point can be made that the perceptual phenomenology of E1 and E2 are different: the meat will *taste* different. But then we can conclude that the property of being rat meat is part of our perceptual phenomenology (as this is the only difference between E1 and E2).

The problem with the contrast case methodology is that it is difficult to settle disagreements about phenomenology. If I say that E1 and E2 differ in their perceptual phenomenology and you deny this, it is not clear how the issue can be decided. Intuitions wildly differ with regards to what phenomenal character counts as perceptual. Does the rat meat example really show that the property of being rat meat is part of our *perceptual* phenomenology? If someone were to claim that this property is part of our non-perceptual phenomenology, it is difficult to see how we could settle this disagreement.

And this problem also arises if we are trying to apply the methodology of contrast cases to the question about the perception of aesthetic properties. An example that would follow the general structure of the contrast case methodology would be this: suppose that I am looking at an artwork, but somehow fail to see its beauty. This is E1. Now, suddenly (or maybe not so suddenly, but after talking to a friend about it), I am looking at the same artwork, but now I do see its beauty. This is E2. Assuming that the only difference between the two experiences is that the aesthetic property of being beautiful is represented in one, but not the other (an assumption that itself would be easy to question), we would still need the further premise that the two experiences differ in their *perceptual* phenomenology. It seems obvious that the phenomenology (perceptual or non-perceptual) of the two experiences is different. But what is needed to complete the argument would be to show that their perceptual phenomenology is also different. And here, we again bump into the problem of unresolvable disagreement: if you say that the phenomenological difference between E1 and E2 is perceptual, but I say that it is not perceptual, then how can we decide who is right

and who is wrong? The methodology of contrast cases will not help us to decide whether aesthetic properties are part of our perceptual phenomenology.

Despairing of the methodology of contrast cases, I proposed a different methodology that seems to work at least in the case of some properties (Nanay 2012b). I suggested that instead of trying to decide from the armchair what properties are perceived, we need to look for some empirical evidence. If we find patients with brain lesions who (a) consciously see object x, (b) experience property P of x, but (c) do not experience any lower level properties of x, such as shape, size, or color, then we have good reason to conclude that property P is part of our perceptual phenomenology. I used a case study of unilateral neglect patients who (a) consciously see object x, (b) experience the action-property of x (the property of what it can be used for), but (c) do not experience any lower level properties of x, such as shape, size, or color. And I argued that we have good reason to conclude that action-properties are part of our perceptual phenomenology not only of these patients but also of people without any brain lesions. The skeleton of the argument is the following: Suppose, for *reductio*, that action-properties are part of the patients' non-perceptual phenomenology. What about their perceptual phenomenology? We are forced to conclude that these patients lack any perceptual phenomenology while they are performing this visual search task. The only properties they are aware of are action-properties, but these properties are, by the supposition for *reductio*, not part of their perceptual phenomenology. This is an extremely problematic conclusion, as these people are staring at objects, performing visual tasks with what they see, talking about what they see, manipulating what they see, and, importantly, claim to consciously experience what they see. If we want to avoid the conclusion that they lack *perceptual* phenomenology altogether (that there is nothing it is like for them to see these objects), we need to deny the supposition for *reductio*—we need to say that action-properties are perceptually experienced.

Regardless of whether this is a feasible methodology for drawing the line between perceptually experienced and not perpetually experienced properties in general, it is extremely unlikely that it would work in the case of aesthetic properties. In order to be able to apply this methodology, we would need to be able to find patients with brain lesion who display all of the following: (a) they consciously see object x, (b) they

experience some of the aesthetic properties of x, but (c) they do not experience any lower level properties of x, such as shape, size, or color. Now, it would be nice if there were patients of this kind (well, maybe not so nice for them), but I don't know of any. So even if this methodology of keeping apart perceptual and non-perceptual phenomenology is a viable one when it comes to action-properties, it will not help us with aesthetic properties.

In short, we have no principled way of answering the question about whether aesthetic properties are perceived. How about aesthetically relevant properties? Here, the answer is simple: we have seen that some aesthetically relevant properties are very simple shape or color properties. The small red patches in Corot's paintings are aesthetically relevant: attending to them can completely alter your aesthetic experience and your aesthetic evaluation of the picture. And even the most conservative contributors to the 'what properties are perceived' debates would admit shape, color, and size properties among the perceptually represented properties. But then some aesthetically relevant properties (like the x in the Klee painting or the red marks in Corot's paintings) are perceived.

So it seems uncontroversial that some aesthetically relevant properties are perceptually represented. But it is equally uncontroversial that some others are not—being made by a certain artist, for example, can be an aesthetically relevant property, but it is very unlikely to be a perceptually represented property. One of the main advantages of focusing on aesthetically relevant properties, rather than aesthetic properties, is that we can ask more nuanced questions about the ways in which aesthetically relevant properties relate to our perceptual experiences. This is the topic I now turn to.

## 4.6 The Perceptual Impact of Aesthetically Relevant Properties

We have seen that some aesthetically relevant properties are perceptually represented. This suggests a fairly strong bond between some aesthetically relevant properties and perceptual experiences. But some aesthetically relevant properties are not perceptually represented.

Some aesthetically relevant properties are presumably represented in imagination (or by mental imagery). Degas was known for placing some

crucial parts of the depicted scene outside the picture frame—in this case, at least some aesthetically relevant properties are imagined. In Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Behind Saint-Lazare Station* (Paris, 1932), we see a man jumping across a puddle, with moderate success. What we see in the picture is a man in the air. But, arguably, the imaginary representation of his landing in the puddle is also aesthetically relevant (see Nanay 2009b). A final, somewhat different example: take the following installation by the conceptual artist Jan Fabre (*Sanguis/Mantis*, 2001, Collection Angelos bvba): ten rusty hammers, five glass tubes filled with blood, and three paintbrushes arranged neatly on a glass tabletop. Again, what is also aesthetically relevant here besides what we see is what we imagine (or have imagery of). In all these three examples, one could argue that while the aesthetically relevant properties are not perceived, they are represented quasi-perceptually—after all, imagination is supposed to be a quasi-perceptual process. But at least some aesthetically relevant properties are not even quasi-perceptually represented.

Take the property of being painted by Cézanne. It is, presumably, an aesthetically relevant property: if we attend to this property, this may bring about a difference in our experience (maybe we are then paying more attention to certain features of the painting that we take to be atypical for Cézanne). But being painted by Cézanne is in no way a perceptually represented property (nor is it a quasi-perceptually represented property). So I take it to be uncontroversial that some aesthetically relevant properties are not perceptually represented: we are looking at the painting, but the aesthetically relevant property we are attending to is a non-perceptually represented property of this (perceived) object.

The question then is whether attending to even a non-perceptually represented aesthetically relevant property changes our perceptual experience. Some aesthetically relevant properties may not be perceptually represented. So attending to at least some aesthetically relevant properties may not be an instance of perceptual attention. But even in these cases the question arises: does the non-perceptual attention to a non-perceptually represented aesthetically relevant property alter our perceptual experience?

A straightforward answer to this question would be to say that the attribution of aesthetically relevant properties, while it does not have to be a perceptual attribution, can and does change one's perceptual experience: if there is a difference in the attribution of aesthetically relevant

properties, there can be and normally there is a difference in one's perceptual experience.[15] This would restore the tight connection between aesthetically relevant properties and perception: while not all aesthetically relevant properties are perceived, they can and normally do have very serious perceptual consequences.

Do non-perceptually represented aesthetically relevant properties have any perceptual impact? I defined aesthetically relevant properties as properties that are such that attending to them makes an aesthetic difference. But this leaves open whether attending to them makes a perceptual difference: whether it alters our perceptual experience.

And here we can use some more general considerations from the philosophy of perception literature about cognitive penetration to settle this question. If perception is an informationally encapsulated process, as Danto and Fodor thought (see esp. Danto 2001a, 2001b, see also Fodor 1993), then it is plausible to conclude that non-perceptually represented aesthetically relevant properties do not have any perceptual impact. To use Danto's distinction (from Danto 2001a), the non-perceptually represented aesthetically relevant properties may change our interpretation of what we see. But it could not change what we see.

Suppose, on the other hand, we accept those (empirical and conceptual) arguments that aim to show that perception is very much cognitively penetrable: that it is subject to various top-down influences (see Wollheim 1993; Margolis 1998, 2000; Lamarque 2010; Stokes 2014 on cognitive penetration in the context of aesthetics, see also Gandhi et al. 1999; Delk and Fillenbaum 1965; Levin and Banaji 2006 for empirical reasons and Siegel 2011 and Macpherson 2012 for philosophical summaries of these debates). Then we can maintain that non-perceptually represented aesthetically relevant properties can and very often do have significant perceptual impact (I will come back to this question after discussing cognitive penetration in more detail at the end of Chapter 6).

But from the point of view of this chapter the crucial thing is that this question about the relation between perception and the domain of aesthetics can only be raised in terms of aesthetically relevant properties, not in terms of aesthetic properties. The focus on aesthetically relevant

[15] A similar point was raised by Hopkins 2005—although he talks about 'aesthetically significant features', which may just be a notional variant of 'aesthetically relevant properties'.

properties opens up this new and important field of enquiry that was blocked for any 'aesthetic property'-based approach. Shifting the emphasis from aesthetic properties to aesthetically relevant properties has the advantage to make us capable of asking and beginning to address these questions about the relation between perception and aesthetics in a more nuanced manner—which is exactly what one would expect from a progressive research programme.

# 5

# Semi-Formalism

## 5.1 Attend or Ignore (Again)?

In the last chapter, I gave an account of aesthetically relevant properties. Attending to aesthetically relevant properties makes an aesthetic difference. In other words, aesthetically relevant properties are incredibly important: they are the properties we *should* attend to, that we should not miss out on.

But I didn't say anything in the last chapter about how to identify these properties. Again, suppose that you are sitting in an art gallery, looking at a painting. It will not help you too much if you are telling yourself that you should be paying attention to the aesthetically relevant properties. To go back to the Klee example, what are the properties that I should attend to here? The green X? Presumably, yes: the artist clearly thought so, otherwise he wouldn't have given this title to the picture. But what is it about that green X that you should attend to? And what else? Am I supposed to look for some kind of balance in the composition (again, some of Klee's writings, especially his *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch* (Klee 1925), seem to suggest that this is a good bet). But is this all? Is there some principled way of singling out aesthetically relevant properties?

The aim of this chapter is to examine a view, aesthetic formalism, that aims to restrict the aesthetically relevant properties of artworks quite radically. And the reason why I am examining aesthetic formalism is not in order to dismiss it or make fun of it, but because I think we can salvage something from its general insights that provides at least some guidance about which properties of an artwork are its aesthetically relevant properties.

I said in the last chapter that pretty much any property can be aesthetically relevant. This chapter is about how to interpret this 'pretty much'. Formalism restricts the set of aesthetically relevant properties

radically. I will argue that we should be less radical, in fact, much less radical. But some restriction is needed.

In Chapter 3, I addressed the question about the aesthetic appreciation of pictures—I singled out a kind of property, design-scene property, which, I argued, plays an important role in our aesthetic appreciation of pictures. But I did not give a full account of the aesthetic appreciation of pictures. Design-scene properties seem very important, but they are not the only properties that are relevant to our aesthetic evaluation of pictures. The aim of this chapter is to give a more complete account of which properties of pictures are aesthetically relevant.

Chapter 3 was entirely about pictures (and there will be more picture-talk in Chapter 7). This chapter is about aesthetic evaluations more generally (although the main example used will still be the aesthetic evaluation of pictures). As the question about which properties of an artwork are relevant for our aesthetic evaluation has mainly been raised in the context of the various debates about aesthetic formalism, I will also tie the discussion to this—a move further justified by the fact that my own account could be thought of as a version (maybe an attenuated version) of aesthetic formalism, which I call 'semi-formalism'.

## 5.2 Formalism

There are many versions of formalism (see esp. Wollheim 2001 and Curtin 1982 for two different detailed typologies). But here is a good candidate for the core claim these different versions of formalism all have in common:[1]

(F) The only aesthetically relevant properties of an artwork are its formal properties.[2]

[1] Some formalists (and some critics of formalism) focus on a metaphysical claim about the relation between aesthetic properties and formal properties instead of the relevance of various properties to aesthetic evaluations (see, e.g., Zangwill 1999, p. 612; Zangwill 2000a, p. 478; Zangwill 2000b, p. 376, Zangwill 2013, see also Parsons 2004 for a critical analysis). The formalist position in this context would be to say that aesthetic properties supervene on formal properties.

[2] Note that, in keeping with the general spirit of Chapter 4, I used aesthetically relevant properties and not aesthetic properties in the formulation of formalism.

In other words, according to the formalist, it is the formal properties and only the formal properties of artworks that we need to pay attention to when we are aesthetically evaluating an artwork. We can ignore all other properties. If we fail to take these into consideration, we don't miss out on anything aesthetically important.

Some formalists (notably, Bell 1914) make some other (much stronger and much more problematic) claims about formal properties, for example, that attending to formal properties is *the right way* of enjoying (great) art or that formal properties can be used to define what art is. The formalist claim I take to be theoretically interesting is the much weaker (F)—so I will ignore extra formalist assumptions of the kind Bell makes.

Formalism has been criticized severely for several decades (see esp. Wollheim 2001, p. 127; Budd 1995, p. 49; Lopes 2005, p. 120); but the very fact that it is still with us (and still provokes further attacks) seems to suggest that it should not be dismissed without thorough discussion.

To assess the plausibility of (F), we need an exact definition of what is meant by 'formal properties'. And a significant part of the literature on formalism attempts to do exactly this: to come up with a definition of 'formal properties' that does not render the claims of formalism hopelessly strong. I will first consider two important candidates that lead to two very different versions of formalism. As the discussion of formalism both in philosophy and in art history has been revolving mainly around the formal properties of pictures, I will also focus the discussion on these here (I will consider nonpictorial formalism in Section 5.6). So the formalist claim restricted to pictures would be this:

(FP) The only aesthetically relevant properties of a picture are its formal properties.

And the more specific question then is: what are the formal properties of pictures?

### *5.2.1 Formal properties as intrinsic properties of the picture surface*

The traditional way of defining formal properties is to restrict them to the intrinsic and visually salient properties of the picture's two-dimensional surface. As Clive Bell says, these properties would be 'lines and colors combined in a particular way' (Bell 1914, p. 17). Or, as Denman Ross says, they are restricted to 'harmony, balance and

rhythm in lines and spots of paint, in tones, measures and shapes' (Ross 1907, p. 5).

Thus, for the classic formalists, formal properties are restricted to lines, shapes, colors and the relations between these elements—in short, to the visually salient intrinsic properties of the picture surface.[3] I will call these intrinsic, visually salient properties of the picture surface 'surface properties'. Note that the surface's temperature or its chemical composition does not count as a 'surface property'. A 'surface property' is always visually salient.

This way of interpreting formal properties would give rise to the following version of formalism about pictures (where CF stands for classic formalism):

(CFP) The only aesthetically relevant properties of a picture are its surface properties.

To put it simply, according to this version of classic formalism, the only properties we need to pay attention to when aesthetically evaluating a picture are its surface properties. Every other property we should feel free to ignore. A fairly simple guideline for museum-goers.

One direct consequence of this version of formalism is that the 'representational properties' of pictures are excluded from the elite set of formal properties. As Bell says: 'the representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant' (Bell 1914, p. 27).

But this feature of classic formalism has been severely attacked. Richard Wollheim points out that when we are looking at a representational picture, it is not possible to be aware of its formal properties without *also* being aware of its representational properties (Wollheim 2001, pp. 130–1. I will analyze Wollheim's argument at some length in Section 5.5.2 below). Thus, we have no way of singling out a picture's formal properties from its non-formal properties.

Further, we may have reason to doubt whether (CFP) in fact captures the spirit of formalism about pictures *as pictures*. As Malcolm Budd notes, 'formalism [should] not demand that pictures should be seen as if

[3] Bell assumed that color is an intrinsic property (see Bell 1914, pp. 19–20)—but not everyone these days would agree with that. Those who take color to be a relational property should adjust the characterization above accordingly.

they were not pictures, as if they were non-representational structures' (Budd 1995, p. 51). Although there are programmatic passages in Clive Bell's oeuvre where he seems to claim that only the surface properties matter in aesthetic evaluations, his critical writings always take the depicted very much into consideration. If even the most radical of formalists couldn't stop himself from talking about the representational properties of pictures, we may wonder whether it is a reasonable demand to exclude these from the elite circle of formal properties.

### *5.2.2 Formal properties as plastic volumes*

A weaker version of formalism allows for some representational properties of pictures to be relevant to our aesthetic evaluations. Budd summarizes this proposal: 'a picture's value as art is entirely dependent on its being a depiction of a scene that, *considered with respect to the disposition of coloured masses in space*, constitutes a harmonious or impressive whole—possesses "significant form"' (Budd 1995, p. 52, my emphasis).

It is important that the depicted scene should be 'considered with respect to the disposition of coloured masses in space' and not with respect to the concepts these 'plastic volumes' fall under: concepts like trees, dogs, or women. As Budd says, 'according to the Formalist's claim, it is necessary to abstract away from these concepts in aesthetic judgment and to consider the depicted scene only in its spatio-coloured aspect' (Budd 1995, p. 52).[4]

There are two versions of this proposal. The first one would equate formal properties to these 'plastic volumes' only. Wollheim criticizes this version by pointing out that any arrangement of spatial volumes could be depicted by an indefinite number of paintings, some good, some bad (Wollheim 2001, p. 132). Thus, there must be properties other than these 'plastic volumes' that are aesthetically relevant.

The second version of the 'plastic volumes' proposal is that the set of formal properties is a union of two subsets: the subset of the intrinsic properties of the depicted 'plastic volumes' and the intrinsic properties of the surface (Budd 1995, p. 53). In fact, Roger Fry's version of formalism

[4] Note that this is somewhat similar to what Christopher Peacocke calls 'scenario content' in the context of visual perception (Peacocke 1992).

seems to suggest something along these lines (Fry 1920, 1926). The problem with this proposal is that it does not allow for properties that connect the surface properties and the properties of the depicted object: of *how* the depicted object is being depicted (Wollheim 2001, p. 132; Budd 1995, p. 54). It doesn't allow for design-scene properties.

This typology of various versions of formalism is not supposed to be exhaustive. Wollheim considers very briefly an even weaker version of formalism according to which 'the form of a painting resides, not in the form of what it represents, but in how it represents this form. Form is a matter, not of the *What*, but of the *How*' (Wollheim 2001, p. 132). Although Wollheim himself does not attribute this view to anyone particular, the similarity to Emerson's famous dictum of 'the What is of no importance compared with the How' (Emerson 1837/1926, p. 108) is easy to spot. This proposal would extend the set of formal properties to properties that connect the surface properties and the properties of the depicted object. Mary Devereaux's concept of 'Sophisticated formalism', the view that 'focuses on the (formal) relation between form and content' (Devereaux 2001, p. 245) is best seen as a version of this version of formalism (Devereaux herself does not endorse this version of formalism).[5] I take this version of formalism to be a special case of semi-formalism, the view I will defend in the rest of the chapter.

We will see in Section 5.5.2 that besides these more specific objections, there are a number of arguments that can be raised against all versions of formalism. Instead of trying to salvage formalism per se, I will defend a semi-formalist account, which is significantly weaker than classic formalism. But before I do that, I want to spend some time on the question about why we should even consider formalism to be a serious view about the aesthetic evaluation of pictures.

## 5.3 Why Formalism?

Why should we be tempted to take formalism seriously? Why would formal properties be so important for our aesthetic evaluations? There are so many inconclusive or just plain bad arguments in favor of

[5] See also Eldridge 1985, p. 308, who attributes similar views to Wordsworth and Hegel (p. 309).

formalism (see Lopes 2005, pp. 120–5; Budd 1995, p. 49–61; Carroll 1985, 1989, 2005 for a debunking of some of these) that one may wonder why this view has been so influential. I will argue that it has been so influential because it does manage to capture some important aspects of our engagement with works of art. But it goes too far. The aim of this chapter is to carve out an intermediary position between formalism and anti-formalism. Thus the label for my own view: semi-formalism.

Formalism could be taken to attack two views at the same time. First, it denies that what is depicted in a picture (its content) is relevant to our aesthetic evaluations—see the Bell quote above: 'the representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant' (Bell 1914, p. 27). Or, as Oscar Wilde says, 'What is a picture? Primarily, a picture is a beautifully coloured surface, merely, with no more spiritual message or meaning for you than an exquisite fragment of Venetian glass or a blue tile from the wall of Damascus. It is, primarily, a purely decorative thing, a delight to look at' (Wilde 1879, p. 112). Second, it also denies that the picture's non-observable properties (such as the artist's intention or its social context) are relevant to our aesthetic evaluations. Again, Bell asks us: 'to those who have and hold a sense of the significance of form what does it matter whether the forms were created in Paris the day before yesterday or in Babylon fifty centuries ago?' (Bell 1914, p. 34).

As formalism attacks both of these views, formalist intuitions could also be divided into two different kinds: intuitions against the importance of what is depicted in the picture and against the importance of non-observable properties of pictures. I start with the former.[6]

Some pictures are abstract: they do not depict anything.[7] Hence, the properties of what is depicted in these pictures cannot be relevant to the aesthetic evaluation of these pictures (as nothing is depicted in them). But then we should not overestimate the importance of what is depicted

[6] I am not in any way assuming that our intuitions about a phenomenon are always a good guide for finding out about the nature of this phenomenon (see the vast recent literature on the role of intuitions in philosophy). But if formalism is appealing for some reasons, it would be preferable if semi-formalism could retain some of this appeal (without facing some of the problems formalism faces). To quote Paul Klee, "Intuition is a good thing. You can do a good deal without it, but not everything" (Paul Klee: Exact experiments in the realm of art, 1928.)

[7] They may, of course, nonetheless *represent* various things, see Wollheim 1987.

in pictures. Note that this is not an argument for formalism (or, if it is taken to be one, it is not a particularly good one, see Budd 1995, pp. 49–51). It is only an intuition that questions the general importance of what is depicted in a picture to our aesthetic evaluations in general.

Another pro-formalist intuition comes from the following observation. Every token object or event can be depicted by many pictures and these pictures can vary drastically in terms of their aesthetic value. One picture depicting x may be a masterpiece, while another picture depicting x may be awful. Thus, the properties that are crucial in the evaluation of these pictures are not restricted to the properties of the depicted object, x. The properties of the depicted object, x, are not that important in our aesthetic evaluation. As before, this consideration is not supposed to be an argument for formalism, but rather an intuition that militates against overestimating the importance of what is depicted in a picture to our aesthetic evaluations.

So much about the intuitions with regards to the importance of the properties of what is depicted in the picture. But, as we have seen, formalism also denies the importance of the picture's non-observable properties, like its social context or the artist's intention. The main formalist intuition here is that these non-observable properties may enrich our understanding and non-aesthetic evaluation of the picture, but they are irrelevant when it comes to strictly aesthetic evaluation. The strength of this intuition will clearly depend on how one demarcates the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic.

I suspect that at least some of the formalist intuitions of this kind are fueled by a certain degree of anti-elitism: the thought is that all we need in order to evaluate a picture aesthetically is our aesthetic sensibility that anyone can have. It is not only the select few with art history degrees who can property evaluate pictures aesthetically. We are all capable of that.

It is important that the reason why I talked about these pro-formalist considerations is not in order to provide compelling arguments for formalism (or some version thereof). All I wanted was to show that formalism captures some widespread intuitions about the nature of pictures and of art in general (see also Isenberg 1973). It is worth taking it seriously and looking for accounts of the aesthetic evaluation of pictures that inherit at least some of these intuitions.

## 5.4 Semi-Formalism

My claim is that if we replace the concept of 'formal properties' with a more liberal concept, we can keep a structural equivalent of the original formalist claim, which was the following:

> (F) The only aesthetically relevant properties of an artwork are its formal properties.

I propose to replace the concept of 'formal properties' here with that of 'semi-formal properties'. Semi-formal properties are *properties of the picture that depend constitutively on (or are identical to) the picture's formal properties*. To be more precise, P is a semi-formal property of a token artwork, x, if P depends constitutively on (or is identical to) x's formal properties. Without going into the details of the vast literature on constitutive (vs. causal) dependence, I will assume, for simplicity, that if property P of x depends constitutively on x's formal properties, x's having property P puts restrictions on the range of formal properties x may have.

This is a necessary, not a sufficient condition for constitutive dependence. The exact microphysical properties of an artwork also restrict (in fact, presumably also determine) the range of formal properties it has. But this does not mean that the microphysical properties of an artwork are semi-formal properties (or that they depend constitutively on its formal properties). Constitutive dependence is a relation that carries a lot of ontological weight in a way that is not very easy to pin down (see the labyrinthine literature on various forms of grounding in metaphysics). But the general idea is that if p depends constitutively on q, then q makes p what it is. Similarly, the proposal is that it is x's formal properties that make x's semi-formal properties what they are. This explains why the microphysical properties of the artwork are not semi-formal. But, for example, the relation between x's formal properties and something else is a semi-formal property (as relational properties, presumably, depend constitutively on the relata).

In short, we get the following semi-formalist claim (where SF stands for semi-formalism):

> (SF) The only aesthetically relevant properties of an artwork are its semi-formal properties.

For the more specific case of pictures, the semi-formalist claim will be the following:

(SFP) The only aesthetically relevant properties of a picture are its semi-formal properties.

As we have seen, there is no agreement about what a picture's formal properties are supposed to be. One proposal was that they are its surface properties, that is, visually salient intrinsic properties of the picture surface. Another proposal was that they include representational properties of the kind 'being a depiction of a scene [ . . . ] considered with respect to the disposition of coloured masses in space' (Budd 1995, p. 52). Depending on what concept of formal properties we use, we end up with different concepts of semi-formal properties.

To use the threefoldness model of our aesthetic appreciation of pictures from Chapter 3, where A, B, and C (the picture surface, the three-dimensional object it encodes, and the three-dimensional depicted object) all show up in our picture perception, the classic 'surface properties' version of formalism would amount to attending to properties of A only. The more sophisticated 'plastic volumes' version of classic formalism would amount to attending to B. According to semi-formalism, all the following will count as semi-formal properties (and therefore can count as aesthetically relevant properties): properties of A, properties of B, the relation between A and B, the relation between B and C, the relation between A and C. In fact, the only kind of properties that will not count as semi-formal properties in this typology are the intrinsic properties of C. As both the properties of A and of B count as formal properties, as long as a property depends constitutively on A or B, it will count as a semi-formal property.

To keep things simple, I will just take 'formal properties of pictures' to be 'surface properties' in what follows as this will simplify things considerably. But a full semi-formalist account may require some attention to the plastic volumes version of formal properties. I will indicate below where this could make a difference.

The concept of semi-formal properties is a much more inclusive one than that of formal properties. Whatever counts as formal properties will automatically count as semi-formal properties, but, importantly, many other properties will also count as semi-formal. I will mention a couple of examples.

Take the picture's property of depicting a cat. It is not a formal property according to any of the classic definitions. Is it a semi-formal property? The answer is that it depends. The property of 'depicting a cat' will not count as semi-formal as it does not depend constitutively on the picture's formal properties—a picture's formal properties may be radically different, but it may still depict a cat: having the property of depicting a cat does not put any restrictions on the range of formal properties the picture may have. But the property of 'depicting a cat in foreshortening' or of 'depicting a cat with strong brushstrokes' will count as semi-formal, because these properties do depend constitutively on the picture's formal properties—the property of depicting a cat with strong brushstrokes does put serious restrictions on the range of formal properties the picture may have, especially when it comes to the formal property of strong brushstrokes. Thus, at least some representational properties will count as semi-formal properties.

One may wonder about the relation between properties like 'depicting a cat', which counts as not semi-formal, and properties like 'depicting a cat with strong brushstrokes', which counts as semi-formal. The property 'depicting a cat' is the determinable of the more determinate property 'depicting a cat with strong brushstrokes'. So how is it possible that one is semi-formal and the other is not?

A little background on the distinction between determinable and determinate properties (which will also come up in Chapter 6): Being red is a determinate of being colored, but a determinable of being scarlet. There are many ways of being red and being scarlet is one of these: for something to be scarlet is for it to be red, in a specific way. If something is red, it also has to be of a certain specific shade of red: there is no such thing as being red *simpliciter* (Johnston 1921, Funkhouser 2006).

Similarly, there are many ways of depicting a cat, and depicting a cat with strong brushstrokes is one of these. But if a picture depicts a cat, it must do so in a certain determinate way: with either strong brushstrokes or less strong ones, etc. We can attend to either the determinable property (red, depicting a cat) or the determinate one (scarlet, depicting a cat with strong brushstrokes). Each time a determinable property is instantiated, there must be a determinate of it that is also instantiated: there is no instance of red that is not also some specific shade of red. But we can nonetheless represent (e.g., have thoughts about) something as

red without representing it as any specific shade of red. And when we are looking at a red object, we can attend to its being red or its being scarlet and these will be two very different experiences as a result. Similarly, representing or attending to the property of depicting a cat (which is not a semi-formal property) is also very different from representing or attending to the property of depicting a cat with strong brushstrokes (which is a semi-formal property).

The fact that some representational properties count as 'semi-formal' according to my definition will raise red flags for some classic formalists who may take it to be the *sine qua non* of any version of formalism that it excludes representational properties from the elite set of formal properties. Note, however, that the 'plastic volumes' version of classic formalism clearly talks about some representational properties as formal, and no one would deny that Roger Fry was a genuine formalist. Further, while there are programmatic passages in Clive Bell's oeuvre where he seems to exclude all possibility of representational properties making any difference in our aesthetic evaluations (see the famous quote I used in Section 5.2), his critical writings very often take representational properties to be aesthetically relevant. To use a non-visual example, he writes about Proust that 'He knew that to temper with words is to temper with sense; that to change the shape and sound of a sentence is to change its meaning' (Bell 1928, p. 20, see also Bell 1928, pp. 56–7, where he explicitly claims that Proust's book is a masterpiece *in spite of the fact that* it does not possess 'significant form', see also Nanay 2015c on Bell's formalism). So if even the most purist of formalists does talk about some aesthetically relevant representational properties—then the semi-formalist should also be entitled to do so. Also, it should be remembered that my aim is not to defend formalism, but to defend semi-formalism, a view that is importantly similar to but significantly different from formalism. In any case, semi-formalism does not exclude the possibility of the aesthetic relevance of representational properties.

An important set of properties that will also count as semi-formal is exactly the design-scene properties that Chapter 3 focused on. Design-scene properties are relational properties that depend constitutively both on the picture surface and on the depicted scene. So design-scene properties automatically qualify as semi-formal properties: design-scene

properties by definition depend constitutively on the picture surface. But not all semi-formal properties are design-scene properties.[8]

To translate this account into practical terms, the general upshot is that when we want to evaluate a picture aesthetically, we should pay attention to its semi-formal properties: to properties that depend constitutively on the picture's surface properties. Sometimes this means paying attention to its design-scene properties, but not always. We can ignore all those properties that are not semi-formal. I will argue in the rest of the chapter that this view is not completely hopeless and that it is preferable to classic versions of formalism.

One aspect of this account that may need highlighting is that this is another way of bringing in the general idea of distributed attention into an important debate in aesthetics. Attending to a semi-formal property very often implies the exercise of distributed attention: attending to design-scene properties, for example, clearly does. Some semi-formal properties (for example, straight formal properties, which also count as semi-formal, according to my definition) may not involve distributed attention, but as we shall see when discussing various important examples for semi-formal properties, most semi-formal properties do involve distributed attention—distributed between formal properties and some other properties (for example, the artist's intention, the social context, some representational features).

## 5.5 The Advantages of Semi-Formalism

Semi-formalism is a much weaker view than formalism. Thus, if it is a view that should be taken seriously, I need to argue for three claims:

(a) Semi-formalism accommodates at least some of the formalist intuitions.
(b) Semi-formalism is not obviously false.
(c) Semi-formalism is not obviously vacuous.

[8] Another property that counts as semi-formal is the 'appropriateness of form to content', a property at the center of Noel Carroll's 'neoformalism', which should not be confused with my semi-formalism for a number of reasons, the most important of which is that while he is using his neoformalism to give a definition for being a work of art, my semi-formalism has nothing to do with the definition of art (Carroll 1999, p. 126). But, again, the 'appropriateness of form to content' is just one subset of semi-formal properties.

I will take these claims in turn.

### *5.5.1 Semi-formalism inherits at least some of the formalist intuitions*

I considered some formalist intuitions in Section 5.3. The aim of this subsection is to point out that semi-formalism can capture at least some of the intuitions that originally inspired formalism.

We have seen that formalism denies that what is depicted in a picture (its content) is relevant to our aesthetic evaluations and it also denies that the picture's non-observable properties (such as the artist's intention or its social context) are relevant to our aesthetic evaluations.

The first pro-formalist intuition was about the aesthetic value of abstract pictures. As these pictures do not depict anything, no representational properties can be aesthetically relevant here. But then we should not overestimate the importance of what is depicted in pictures. This is not an argument for formalism, but more of a motivation. And this pro-formalist intuitive appeal of abstract pictures is preserved in the semi-formalist account. The aesthetically relevant properties of abstract pictures count as formal according to the classic definitions and they also count as semi-formal according to my (much weaker) definition.

In fact, semi-formalism can avoid a problem that classic formalist accounts face because of their treatment of abstract pictures. As we have seen, one of the recurring critical remarks about formalism is that 'formalism [. . . ] demand[s] that pictures should be seen as if they were not pictures, as if they were non-representational structures' (Budd 1995, p. 51). In other words, classic formalists use the very same evaluative approach in the case of all pictures, abstract or not. This is not true of semi-formalism: non-abstract pictures clearly have semi-formal properties which abstract pictures don't have.

The second pro-formalist consideration was the following. Different pictures, of different aesthetic quality, can depict the very same object. Thus, the aesthetic value is not fully determined by the depicted object—we should not overestimate the representational properties. But what follows from this consideration is that the value difference between these two pictures cannot be due to the depicted object only. It is often due to formal properties. But it can also be due to properties like the interrelation between the formal properties and the depicted object—semi-formal properties. If the one object/many pictures intuition counts in favor of

the aesthetic relevance of formal properties, it should count in favor of the aesthetic relevance of semi-formal properties even more strongly.

Formalism also denies the importance of the picture's non-observable properties, like its social context or the artist's intention: all we need in order to evaluate a picture aesthetically is our aesthetic sensibility, not an art history degree. According to the semi-formalist account, knowledge of non-observable facts about the artwork can indeed enrich attribution of some semi-formal properties to the artwork, thus, it can also enrich our aesthetic evaluation of it. But these non-observable facts are relevant to our aesthetic evaluation of the picture only inasmuch as they are connected to its observable formal properties—something that is accessible to everyone.

Finally, it is worth noting that semi-formalism is fully consistent with some highly influential formalist manifestos. Susan Sontag in her 'Against interpretation' urges that we need to pay 'more attention to form in art': 'if excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence' (Sontag 1964, p. 12). Sontag's forceful stance against the primacy of interpretation should be interpreted as a call for a shift in emphasis from 'content' to 'form'. If we apply Sontag's general argument in the case of pictures, the problem with what she calls 'the arrogance of interpretation' is not that it is not restricted to attention to formal properties, but that it completely ignores formal properties. Thus, Sontag's version of formalism is in fact closer to semi-formalism than to classic versions of formalism.

And here is the way Rosalind Krauss characterizes modernist methodology (by which she means formalist methodology):

> it was precisely its methodology that was important to a lot of us who began to write about art in the early 1960s. That method demanded lucidity. It demanded that one not talk about anything in a work of art that one could not point to. It involved tying back one's perceptions about art in the present to what one knew about the art of the past. (Krauss 1972/1992, p. 955)

Again, it should be clear from the last sentence that this way of writing about art is a form of semi-formalism. And the principle of 'not talking about anything in a work of art that one could not point to' is what I take to be the most powerful summary of the pull of formalism. And it is something that sets semi-formalism apart from other ways of talking about works of art (as we shall see at the end of subsection 5.5.3).

It may also be worth noting that when art historians used formalist methodology (and not just talked about it), this formalist methodology amounted to what I call semi-formalism (see esp. Wölfflin 1915/1932 and Riegl 1901/1985, see also Rose 2014 for a thorough overview). I will give some examples for this in Chapter 7. Further, somewhat oddly, even the most fierce opponents of formalism, like Wollheim or Budd, when they do actual art criticism, almost invariably use semi-formalist methodology (see, for example, Wollheim 2002, esp. p. 10 and see also Summers 2003 and Davis 2011 for versions of 'post-formalism' that would count as semi-formalism according to my definition).

### *5.5.2 Semi-formalism is not obviously false*

I need to point out that semi-formalism has some explanatory advantages over other versions of formalism: that by replacing formal properties with semi-formal ones, we can defuse some anti-formalist arguments. And we can, indeed, diffuse most, if not all classic anti-formalist arguments. I will consider the three most influential anti-formalist arguments here.

The first argument is that if we allow, as we should, some representational properties to count as formal properties, it will be very difficult to draw the line between those representational properties that should be considered to be part of the form and those that are part of the content. One way of seeing this would be to emphasize the importance of background knowledge in evaluating (and even perceiving) pictures. Whether we see one object or another in the two-dimensional surface of the picture depends on our background knowledge, as the duck–rabbit illusion demonstrates. As different formal properties of this picture will be salient depending on whether we see it as a duck or as a rabbit, our background knowledge seems to partly determine what formal properties are relevant to our aesthetic evaluation (see Wollheim 2001, pp. 132–3 for a similar argument).

Further, in many cases, our background knowledge makes it possible for us to attend to some formal properties: some compositional features of Renaissance paintings are determined by the direction of gaze of some of the depicted people. But as the direction of gaze is neither a surface property, nor a 'plastic volume' (or the interaction between the two), it seems that some genuinely formal properties are only accessible to us if

we also attribute some non-formal properties to the picture (Budd 1995, pp. 55–6 makes a similar argument, see also Miller 1979).

How can the semi-formalist allow for the fact that what we see in a picture depends on our background information and that sometimes we have access to some formal properties only if we take some of the background information into consideration? If we accept the semi-formalist account, these arguments from background knowledge fail to apply. Picture perception (and aesthetic evaluation) does depend on our background information: the anti-formalist is right about this. But it also depends on the formal properties of the picture. And a property that partly depends on our background information and partly on formal properties will count as a semi-formal property. But then the fact that properties of this kind are relevant to our aesthetic evaluation of pictures is consistent with the semi-formalist claims.

Take the example of the direction of gaze. As we have seen, the recognition of some compositional properties of some pictures depends on the recognition of the direction of gaze of some of the characters in the picture, which, according to the classic version of formalism, is not a formal property. But the property of the triangular composition marked out by the direction of gaze of three characters is a semi-formal property according to my definition: it is a property that depends constitutively on the formal properties of the picture.[9]

The first anti-formalist argument I just discussed was focusing on the first tenet of formalism: on the claim that what is depicted in a picture (its content) is irrelevant to our aesthetic evaluations. But the discussion of the importance of our background information in aesthetic evaluations brings us to the second tenet of formalism: the claim that the picture's non-observable properties (such as its social context or the artist's intention) are irrelevant to our aesthetic evaluations. Besides the Bell quote above about the irrelevance of where and when an artwork was produced, the most important testimony here is Clement Greenberg's famous 'hit me' method of aesthetic evaluation we already encountered

[9] This is one point where it may make a difference how one understands 'formal properties' in the definition of semi-formal properties (properties that depend constitutively on the picture's formal properties). One could argue that a triangular composition does not depend constitutively on surface properties. But even if this is so, it does depend constitutively either on surface properties or on 'plastic volume' properties.

in Chapter 2: standing in the middle of a dark room without knowing anything about what artwork one is going to see and then having the lights switched on (Greenberg 1961, see also Danto 1996).[10] The general idea behind Greenberg's method is to filter out any kind of (for him irrelevant) information about the artist's intention or the social context—indeed about anything that is not visible.

Probably the most famous argument against the second tenet of formalism comes from Kendall Walton (Walton 1970). Walton argues that we always perceive a picture (or any work of art) as belonging to a certain category. But what category we should perceive a picture as belonging to depends on a number of non-observable features of the picture (such as the artist's intention, the circumstances of its production, or the institutionalized categories of the art form). Hence, non-observable properties, although indirectly, are indeed relevant to our aesthetic evaluation of pictures (see also Levinson 2007 for a good summary and Zangwill 2000a for a [moderate] formalist rebuttal).

Here is the semi-formalist way of dealing with Walton's argument. According to Walton, there is a property, that of 'belonging to a certain category of art' that is relevant to our aesthetic evaluation of pictures. Does this count as a semi-formal property? The answer is that some such properties do, some others don't. It depends on how we individuate these categories of art. More precisely, it depends on whether these categories of art are individuated in a way that depends constitutively on the formal properties of the artworks belonging to this category. If they are, then the property of 'belonging to this category of art' is a semi-formal property. If they are not, then it is not.

It is important that Walton argues that what category a token picture belongs to *depends on* some non-observable properties. He does not argue that what category it belongs to is *fully determined by* non-observable properties. Hence, what category this picture belongs to could depend both on some non-observable properties and some observable ones.

[10] Note the similarity between Greenberg's method and Cézanne's: "Close your eyes, wait for a moment; don't think about anything. Open them . . . Do you see? . . . You see nothing but a great wave of colour, yes? An iridescence, colours, an extravagance of colours. That's what a painting must give us before all else" (Quoted in Gasquet 1926/1991, p. 306).

In other words, at least some of the properties of the kind 'belonging to a certain category of art' will count as semi-formal properties according to my proposal, as long as this property depends not only on some non-observable properties, but also on some of the formal properties of the picture.

But some other properties of the kind 'belonging to a certain category of art' will not count as semi-formal properties. The property of 'belonging to the category of "pictures of sunsets"' will not count as semi-formal: it does not depend constitutively on the picture's formal properties. Being a picture of a sunset does not put any restrictions on the range of formal properties of this picture (pictures of sunsets don't have to be reddish-orange!).

Interestingly, the actual examples Walton gives for properties of the kind 'belonging to a certain category of art' all seem to be semi-formal properties. Here is a quick list: 'paintings, cubist paintings, Gothic architecture, classical sonatas, paintings in the style of Cézanne, and music in the style of late Beethoven' (Walton 1970, p. 339). The properties of 'belonging to the category of paintings in the style of Cézanne' and 'belonging to the category of cubist paintings' do depend constitutively on the picture's formal properties. If Walton is right then they also depend constitutively on some non-formal (and non-observable) properties, but these two claims do not contradict one another: it may be that these properties depend constitutively on both.

The third objection (or rather group of objections) against formalism comes from the apparent difference in our aesthetic evaluation of indiscernible objects. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* is indiscernible from dozens of urinals from the 1910s, yet, our aesthetic evaluation of it is very different (Danto 1964, 1981). Fakes are indiscernible from originals, yet they have very different aesthetically relevant properties (Goodman 1968/1976, Chapter 3; Sagoff 1976; Irwin 2007). As indistinguishable objects share all their observable properties by definition, these considerations strongly suggest that formal properties are not the only ones that are relevant to our aesthetic evaluations.

While this may be a good argument against classic versions of formalism, it does not work against semi-formalism. If two objects are indiscernible, then it is plausible to assume that they share all their formal properties. But it does not follow that they also share all their semi-formal properties. Remember: semi-formal properties are ones that

depend constitutively on the formal properties of the picture. So even though two pictures share all their observable properties, and thereby all their formal properties, their semi-formal properties may differ. Duchamp's *Fountain* and the other urinals from the 1910s have very different semi-formal properties. The objection from indiscernibles, one of the most important objections to classic versions of formalism, does not work against semi-formalism (see Nanay 2015d for more discussion on what considerations about indiscernible artworks do and don't show).

### *5.5.3 Semi-formalism is not vacuous*

I also need to point out that semi-formalism is not true by definition. In other words, I need to point out that semi-formalism can and does have opponents, but they will be fewer than the opponents of formalism.

In order to show this, we need to ask what properties of a picture are ruled by the semi-formalist definition to be aesthetically irrelevant. As semi-formal properties are those that depend constitutively on the picture's formal properties, the only properties that will count as not semi-formal will be the ones that do not depend constitutively on the picture's formal properties. According to semi-formalism, these properties are irrelevant to the aesthetic evaluation of pictures. The question is whether anyone would disagree with these claims.

And the answer is yes. Take two of the widely analyzed non-observable properties that are taken to demonstrate the weakness of classic formalist accounts: the ones that have to do with the artist's intention and the social context in which the work was created. Neither of these kinds of properties counts as formal according to the classic versions of formalism. Yet, both, the argument goes, can be relevant to our aesthetic evaluation. What can the semi-formalist account say about these properties?

The first question we need to ask is what exactly the properties in question are supposed to be. The artist's intention is not a property of a picture, nor is the social context. A picture has a property of having been created by such and such artist with such and such intention. And a picture also has a property of having been created in such and such social context. Are then these properties (that is, the property of having been created in such and such a social context and the property of having been created by such and such artist with such and such intention) semi-formal properties?

The answer is that it depends. Some properties of the kind 'having been created by such and such artist with such and such intention' will count as semi-formal, but some others will not. If the artist's intention is about, or at least partly about, the formal properties of the picture, say, her choice of color, then the property of 'having been created by such and such artist with such and such intention' will in fact count as semi-formal, as it depends constitutively on the picture's formal properties.[11] But if the artist's intention concerns the choice of the subject matter or the general message of the artwork and not its formal properties, then the property of 'having been created by such and such artist with such and such intention' will not count as semi-formal, as it does not depend constitutively on the picture's formal properties. These intentions of the artist will be strictly irrelevant to our aesthetic evaluation according to the semi-formalist account.

Similar considerations apply in the case of the importance of social context. The question here is whether the property of 'having been created in such and such social context' is semi-formal. And, again, the answer is that sometimes it is, sometimes it is not. If the choice of materials used on the canvas or the system of perspective was necessitated, or only made possible, by the social context, then this property will count as semi-formal: it depends constitutively on the formal properties of the picture. Hence, in this case, social context will be very important in our aesthetic evaluation of the picture. But in some other cases, the property of 'having been created in such and such social context' does not depend constitutively on the picture's formal properties. In these cases, this property will not count as a semi-formal one: taken independently from all formal properties, the social context is irrelevant to our aesthetic evaluation.

The same argument applies in the case of the art-historical (as opposed to social) context of a work of art. Jerrold Levinson argues that works of art cannot be understood (or evaluated) in isolation from their art-historical context (Levinson 1979, 2007). And the way a work of art is art-historically situated is not a formal property according to classic versions of formalism. But is it a semi-formal property according to the

[11] Note that it is not the intention that depends constitutively on the picture's formal properties, but the picture's property of having been created by such and such artist with such and such intention.

semi-formalist? Take one of Levinson's examples: the property of 'being influenced by Cézanne'. As before, whether this property counts as semi-formal depends on the details of the example. If the brushstrokes of the painting in question are the way they are because of Cézanne's influence, then this property is a semi-formal one: it depends constitutively on the picture's formal properties. But if the influence is merely that the painter of the picture in question traveled to Provence to paint landscapes, then the property of 'being influenced by Cézanne' is not a semi-formal property. The bottom line is that art-historical context is sometimes (but not always) relevant to our aesthetic evaluation of pictures.

The claims I argued for in this sub section are all controversial. Marxist analysis does attribute great importance to the social context of the artwork independently of its formal properties. And psychoanalytic analyses take the artist's intentions as well as her sex life and mental health to be aesthetically relevant, even if there is no or very little connection between these non-observable facts and the picture's formal properties. The semi-formalist account denies the relevance of both of these factors—unless, of course, they are directly connected to the picture's formal properties. Interestingly, some of the most important Marxist or psychoanalytic critics (for example, T. J. Clark or Wollheim), again, followed this semi-formalist methodology and always (well, almost always) connected claims about the importance of social context and the artist's mental life with careful analysis of formal aspects of the picture.

But remember Rosalind Krauss's characterization of modernist methodology, which, as we have seen, really amounts to semi-formalist methodology: 'not talking about anything in a work of art that one could not point to' (Krauss 1972/1992, p. 955). This is true of semi-formalist methodology, but the reason why Krauss talks about this methodology is because it is clearly not true of other ways of writing about works of art (arguably, including some of Krauss's later writings): Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches do talk about aspects of works of art that they could not point to. These approaches, therefore, are not semi-formalist.

In other words, semi-formalism is not true by definition—it has its opponents. And it can avoid some of the most important anti-formalist arguments. Nonetheless, it inherits at least some of the pro-formalist intuitions. It seems to be the best of both worlds.

## 5.6 Semi-Formalism about Nonpictorial Art

Much of the discussion in this chapter was about pictures and how we can give a plausible semi-formalist account of the aesthetic evaluation of pictures that is more plausible than the classic formalist accounts but that also inherits some of the appeal of these classic formalist accounts. But the general formulation of semi-formalism in Section 5.4 was not about pictures—it was about artworks in general. Semi-formal properties are properties that depend constitutively on the artwork's formal properties. I talked about what these formal properties may be in the case of pictures and considered anti-formalist arguments in this context—mainly because they were raised in this context: in the context of formalism about pictures.

But in this final section of the chapter, I would like to briefly return to the more general question about the aesthetic evaluation of artworks and at least gesture towards how a semi-formalist account would work in the case of the nonpictorial arts. Again, the definition of semi-formalism was that the only aesthetically relevant properties of an artwork are its semi-formal properties: properties that depend constitutively on the formal properties of the artwork. Consequently, any semi-formalist account would need to rely on what properties of an artwork are considered formal (not because these are going to be the only aesthetically relevant properties but because the only aesthetically relevant properties depend constitutively on these).

How would this work in the case of music? Music has always been a natural home for formalism—in fact, many classic versions of formalism tried to urge us to engage with pictorial arts or literature the same way as we engage with music, that is, without any consideration for representational content. But it is not at all clear that classic formalism is justified even in the case of music. There has been a lot of debate about the role of emotions in the case of our engagement with music. The arch-formalist Eduard Hanslick famously claimed that emotions play no role (or at least should play no role) in the aesthetic appreciation of music (Hanslick 1854/1986, see also Zangwill 2004). But this has been a very controversial claim, with many philosophers and psychologists emphasizing the (aesthetic) importance of our emotions when listening to music (Robinson 2005, see Davies 1994 and 2003 for summaries of the debate).

Without trying to resolve this debate here, it is important to note that if we go along with the semi-formalist framework, the debate itself will look different. Assuming that the formal properties of music are properties like tones, pitches, and timbres, the question in the semi-formalist framework is this: what are the properties that are semi-formal: that is, properties that depend constitutively on these (tone-, pitch-, and timbre-) properties. And is it possible that at least some emotionally charged properties would count as semi-formal in this sense? My own view (that I will not defend here) is that at least some emotionally charged properties of music would indeed count as semi-formal in this sense: they depend constitutively on the formal properties (of tone, pitch, and timbre), but this does not exclude the possibility that these properties would be emotionally charged. Is the sadness of the slow movement of Beethoven's *Seventh* a property that is relevant for our aesthetic evaluation of this piece? For the semi-formalist, sadness per se (i.e., the fact that listening to this music tends to make us sad) is not a property that is relevant for our aesthetic evaluation. But the property of how the dissonant first chord (a formal property) immediately exudes sadness (an emotional property) is a semi-formal property, and it would be difficult to deny that it is an aesthetically relevant property. In fact, we can zoom in on a special case of semi-formal properties in the case of music that would be the structural equivalent of design-scene properties in this context: properties that depend constitutively on both the formal properties (i.e., tone, pitch, and timbre) and the emotions. These would count as semi-formal properties and they seem to play a similarly important role in our aesthetic appreciation of music as design-scene properties play in our aesthetic appreciation of pictures.

Without going through all the nonpictorial arts (which would involve identifying the formal properties of these arts and then defining the semi-formal properties in terms of these formal ones), I want to spend some time on conceptual art. Semi-formalism defines the semi-formal properties of artworks in terms of their formal properties. But what are the formal properties of conceptual art? I am not sure there are any. At least in some works of conceptual art, the medium is irrelevant: the only thing that counts and what we should be aesthetically appreciating is the idea and most explicitly not the medium. Even if the piece of conceptual art in question is made in a specific art form,

this art form is supposed to be accidental and aesthetically irrelevant for what really matters here: the idea.

Take the two examples from Chapter 4: Marcel Duchamp's *Mona Lisa Rasée* and Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning drawing*. The formal properties of these two pictures seem completely irrelevant to our aesthetic evaluations. And even the semi-formal properties, that is, properties that depend constitutively on the picture's formal properties, seem irrelevant. Does this show that semi-formalism is mistaken?

There are a number of strategies available to the semi-formalist. One strategy is to say that when we appreciate works of conceptual art, we do not engage in *aesthetic* appreciation of these artworks (but maybe some kind of intellectual appreciation—although I myself would be reluctant to draw too sharp a line between these two different kinds of appreciation). Another strategy is to argue that in these cases we do not engage in an aesthetic appreciation of the *artworks* (but rather, the ideas that the artwork is about). But the least controversial semi-formalist way of treating these examples is to allow for some exceptions. And this may not need to imply too much concession.

Following Costello 2013, it is important to point out that conceptual art is not a monolithic category: we can make a distinction between strong non-perceptual art and weak non-perceptual art. In the case of strong non-perceptual art, no perceptible properties of the artwork are relevant to its appreciation as art. In other words, the aesthetically relevant properties must be devoid of all formal components—they cannot be semi-formal properties. In the case of weak non-perceptual art, in contrast, at least some of the aesthetically relevant properties of the artwork are perceptible, while others are not perceptible. Costello argues that the standard examples of conceptual art, including the ones I mentioned in this section, are weakly non-perceptual. He points out, rightly, the aesthetic relevance of the shiny, Brancusi-esque surfaces of Duchamp's *Fountain*, which makes the aesthetically relevant properties depend both on some perceptible medium-properties and some non-perceptible ideas—in my terminology, it makes the aesthetically relevant properties semi-formal. And the same goes for Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning drawing*, where the traces of the drawing are, he argues, part of what makes the artwork aesthetically relevant—making the aesthetically relevant properties, again, semi-formal properties.

But although most of the famous examples of conceptual art are weakly non-perceptual, some are strongly non-perceptual. Here is the example Costello gives: Robert Barry's *All the things I know*, which is nothing but the following sentence written on the gallery wall with simple block letters: 'All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking—1:36 PM; June 15, 1969'. It would be difficult to argue that any formal or semi-formal properties would be even remotely aesthetically relevant in this example. I think the wise move for the semi-formalist in the face of examples of this kind is to just grant exemption: in the case of artworks where there is no medium (in the sense that the medium is blatantly insignificant), there are no formal properties, so there are no semi-formal properties either. Just how rare are these artworks completely devoid of medium (Costello thinks they are very rare), is a question I want to leave open. Those who are moved by examples like Robert Barry's could read the entire discussion of this chapter to be about artworks where there is a medium. And then the claim would be that the aesthetically relevant properties of artworks where there is a medium are their semi-formal properties.

Is this a significant concession and, importantly, is it an ad-hoc one? I don't think so. Remember the way I motivated the question of aesthetically relevant properties: what are the properties of the artwork that we should pay attention to? My point is that this question does not make much sense in the context of strongly non-perceptual art. What is it that we are attending to when engaging with strongly non-perceptual art? Whatever it is, it's not clear to me that we are (or we are invited to be) paying attention to any properties *of the artwork* (even if we consider the artwork to be an 'idea'. We may focus on the fascinating relationship between knowing and thinking or something like that. But it is far from clear that this is a property of the artwork (and not of my own mind—presumably prompted by the artwork). In short, we can restrict the scope of my main claim in this chapter in the following way: if an artwork has properties one can attend to, the aesthetically relevant ones of these are the semi-formal properties.

# 6

# Uniqueness

## 6.1 What Uniqueness? The Uniqueness of What?

Why do people go to museums? Why do they stand in lines for hours for some exhibitions and pay a lot of money? For the entrance fee, they could buy very good quality reproductions of the artworks on display. Why do they go to concerts? Again, for the price of the ticket, they could buy dozens of different recordings of whatever music is being performed. To explain these puzzling phenomena, we need to examine the concept of uniqueness in the aesthetic domain.

The concept of uniqueness pops up constantly in writings about art and aesthetics, not just and not primarily by theoreticians and philosophers, but especially by artists and critics, from Constable to Rauschenberg and from Greenberg to Rosenbaum. A couple of representative quotes (one does not have to search very carefully for these—they are everywhere): Oscar Wilde: 'A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament' (Wilde 1891/2002, p. 261). Francis Ford Coppola: 'theoretically, every work of art is unique'.[1] John Constable: 'No two days are alike, not even two hours, neither were there ever two leaves of a tree alike since the creation of the world: and the *genuine* productions of art, like those of nature, are all distinct from one another' (quoted in Leslie 1843/2006, p. 240). I could fill an entire chapter with quotes like these.

And, unsurprisingly, the concept of uniqueness has been of crucial importance for much of the history of aesthetics. As Mary Mothersill says, the importance of uniqueness in aesthetics 'was a commonplace by the middle of the eighteenth Century, was reaffirmed by the Romantic critics and appears verbatim in the pages of Dewey, Santayana, Croce,

[1] Interview with Rebecca Winters Keegan, *Time*, August 14, 2006.

Prall, and countless literary critics' (Mothersill 1961, p. 422). At least according to some interpretations, Kant's theory of judgments of free beauty involves a commitment to the uniqueness of the object of judgment (Lorand 1989, p. 39). And the concept of uniqueness became even more important at the birth of analytic aesthetics around the middle of the twentieth century, as we shall see.

So, in what sense is uniqueness an important feature of the aesthetic domain? I want to put aside two important interpretations of uniqueness in aesthetics that have been extremely influential since the birth of analytic aesthetics and then turn to my positive proposal about how to understand uniqueness in the domain of aesthetics. My positive proposal will have a lot to do with distributed attention, a theme I introduced in Chapter 2.

According to the first interpretation, works of art themselves are unique: uniqueness is an ontological phenomenon. The IKEA desk in my living room is not unique, but the sculpture that's on it is unique. The upshot is that there is a real ontological difference between works of art and other artifacts that is due to their uniqueness.

According to the second influential interpretation, the sense in which uniqueness is an important feature of art is that there are no aesthetic principles that would connect non-evaluative and evaluative properties. This interpretation is not primarily about ontology but about how aesthetic evaluation works: it should treat each work of art (and its aesthetic value) as unique. And the claim is that they cannot deduce evaluative claims about a work of art from non-evaluative claims about this work of art and from an aesthetic principle. Aesthetic evaluation is non-deductive. It has to proceed case by case.

These two ways of thinking about uniqueness are often (in fact, almost always) combined (see esp. MacDonald 1949, Hampshire 1954). If someone thinks that works of art have some kind of special ontological status, she also tends to think that their aesthetic evaluation is not possible with the help of aesthetic principles. And if someone thinks that there are no aesthetic principles, she often thinks that there are ontological reasons for this.

I argue that these are misleading ways of trying to cash out the importance of uniqueness in the domain of aesthetics. Instead, I'll suggest that the sense in which uniqueness is an important feature of the aesthetic domain has to do with some characteristics of some kinds of

aesthetic experiences—the kind I focused on in Chapter 2. When we have an aesthetic experience of this kind, this experience is very similar to the experience of treating something to be unique in the sense that both entail the exercise of distributed attention.

While talk of uniqueness is ubiquitous in aesthetics and art criticism, some may still be skeptical about whether uniqueness is really a 'thing'. Maybe it is just some kind of romanticist hangover. Or maybe the word 'unique' is used very loosely here, as a vague synonym of 'special' or just as a meaningless honorific. These skeptics should probably skip this chapter. I will not argue that uniqueness is an important feature of the aesthetic domain. What I do argue for is this: if you think that uniqueness is an important feature of the aesthetic domain, then the emphasis on distributed attention familiar from Chapter 2 can help us to understand why. But if you don't think that uniqueness is important or interesting, you will lose very little by skipping straight to Chapter 7 (although you may want to stop for the de Chirico quote and the discussion of the 'unprompted eye' at the end of this chapter).

## 6.2 Uniqueness as an Ontological Claim

The first traditional way of understanding uniqueness in the aesthetic domain is that works of art are unique entities (Macdonald 1949, p. 192; Hampshire 1954, p. 166; see also Elton 1954). The most famous version of this claim comes from John Dewey:

> Identity of mode of production defines the work of a machine, the esthetic counterpart of which is academic. The quality of a work of *art* is *sui generis*. (Dewey 1934, p. 108)

Unlike some other entities (artifacts, maybe moral actions—more on these later), works of art are unrepeatable. If x and y are mass-produced artifacts fresh from the production line that share all their intrinsic and observable properties, they are substitutable for one another. But works of art are not substitutable for entities with which they share all their intrinsic and observable properties (see Macdonald 1949's explicit defense of this claim).

There are two very different versions of this ontological way of explaining the concept of uniqueness in aesthetics. Suppose that x is a work of art. If y has all the intrinsic and observable properties that x has,

then (a) y is not a work of art (Macdonald, Hampshire)[2] or (b) y is not a good work of art (Dewey).

But neither (a) nor (b) sounds particularly convincing in the light of Danto's Gallery of Indiscernibles thought experiment. Imagine a gallery of indiscernible canvases that are all monochrome red of the same shade and of the same size. While the observable properties of all these artworks are the same, their 'meaning' and aesthetic value can be very different: if one of the paintings, made by a counterrevolutionary Russian émigré is called 'Red Square' and the other one is called 'The Israelites crossing the Red Sea', then these two paintings, in spite of being indistinguishable, will have very different 'meaning' and aesthetic value (Danto 1964, 1981, 1999).

There are disagreements about what exactly Danto's Gallery of Indiscernibles thought experiment is supposed to show (and I myself don't think it shows some of the things it is trying to show (Nanay 2015d, see also Wollheim 1993; Margolis 1998, 2000; Lamarque 2010)), but it does give us strong reason to deny that two different objects that have the same intrinsic and observable properties, but that were created by very different people with different intentions and in different art-historical contexts could not both count as good works of art.

But there is another important problem with the ontological interpretation of uniqueness. It seems that the discussion of uniqueness in the 1950s took it for granted that works of art are token entities. But much of the following decades of analytic aesthetics were spent clarifying the ontological status of works of art and if there is a lesson to be learnt from these discussions it is that we should not take it for granted that all works of art are token entities (see Wollheim 1980 for a classic summary, but see also Currie 1988's dissenting view). But if we have good reason to consider some works of art to be types (or sets, or sums, etc.) and not concrete particulars, then it is not at all clear how we could make sense of the original claims and arguments about the uniqueness of works of art. Tokens or concrete particulars can be repeatable or unrepeatable, but it is not clear what it would even mean to say that a type or a set is

[2] To be fair, Hampshire's claim is much weaker than Macdonald's, who seems to be committed to saying that it is logically impossible for y to be a work of art (Macdonald 1949, p. 192). Hampshire may allow for the possibility that y can sometimes be a work of art (but not 'generally' and not 'necessarily').

unrepeatable. In some sense, a type is always 'repeatable' inasmuch as two identical tokens of the same type are substitutable for one another. Thus, it is difficult not to agree with Mary Mothersill's conclusion of her thorough and thoroughly negative discussion of the claim that works of art are unique:

> On some interpretations [the claim that works of art are unique] is true and [ . . . ] on some other interpretations [ . . . ] it is interesting, but I can find no interpretation for which it is both interesting and true. (Mothersill 1961, p. 436)

Thus, it is unlikely that the sense in which uniqueness is an important aspect of the aesthetic domain can be traced back to ontological claims about the uniqueness of works of art. This leaves us with the other traditional interpretation of uniqueness in art: the lack of aesthetic principles.

## 6.3 Uniqueness and Aesthetic Particularism

The second classic version of the uniqueness claim was defended by the same philosophers in the very same articles as the ontological claim I discussed in the previous section (Macdonald 1949/1954, p. 116; Hampshire 1954, p. 165, see also Yoos 1967). But it is a different claim. It is not about the ontology of works of art, but about what critics should do, or, more generally, about how aesthetic evaluation works. As Stuart Hampshire says, 'the [critics'] purpose is to lead people [ . . . ] not to see the object as one of a kind, but to see it as individual and unrepeatable' (Hampshire 1954, p. 165). And the suggestion is that aesthetic evaluations should not appeal to aesthetic principles, because there are no aesthetic principles. What is unique about the aesthetic domain is that our aesthetic evaluation should treat works of art and their aesthetic value as unique: we should not subsume them under general principles.[3]

But what are aesthetic principles supposed to be? Aesthetic principles are universal generalizations that connect non-evaluative and evaluative concepts. They are of the form 'all Fs are Gs', where F is a non-evaluative

[3] Jerrold Levinson's account of aesthetic uniqueness (a lawlike connection between the structure and the aesthetic content of the artwork: 'works of art which differ structurally differ aesthetically' (Levinson 1980, p. 435)) could also be interpreted as a version of this claim. And maybe also Robert Stecker's view, who talks about the uniqueness of the *value* of works of art—not of works of art themselves (Stecker 2005, p. 309).

concept and G is an evaluative one.[4] One way the aesthetic evaluation could proceed is to identify a work of art as an F and then, using this aesthetic principle, deduce that this work of art is G. If, to use a simplified example, it is an aesthetic principle that every symmetrical object is beautiful, then the critic can conclude upon seeing a symmetrical object that it is beautiful. (I leave aside how realistic this account is with regards to what critics do or should do—but see Chapter 4.)

The second influential suggestion about the importance of uniqueness in the aesthetic domain then is that there are no such aesthetic principles: works of art are unique in the sense that they cannot be subsumed under aesthetic principles (Goldman 1990). We have to evaluate the unique works of art non-deductively (see also Meager 1958–9).[5]

This debate about the existence of aesthetic principles and about their use in aesthetic evaluations is known as the aesthetic particularism vs. generalism debate (where the generalist claims that there are aesthetic principles and the particularist denies this). The debate between the particularist and the generalist is far from being resolved (see Bender 1995; Dickie 2006; Goldman 2006; Shelley 2002; Davies 2005, esp. p. 202). But, and this is what is important from our point of view, it is strictly speaking irrelevant to the question of uniqueness. Proponents of aesthetic uniqueness take particularism to be a version of the uniqueness claim, but in fact no claim of uniqueness follows from particularism. So even if particularism were correct, this still would not help us to understand the importance of uniqueness in the aesthetic domain.

Arnold Isenberg's master argument for the view that we now call particularism (the term itself was introduced decades after Isenberg's article) is the following (Isenberg 1949, see esp. pp. 332–3): if there are aesthetic principles that connect non-evaluative and evaluative terms, they are so narrow and context sensitive that they cannot be applied to different works of art. But note that this argument does not say anything

[4] Strictly speaking, there is no reason why F would need to be a non-evaluative property. Although much of the literature treats aesthetic principles to be generalizations connecting non-evaluative and evaluative properties, it would not be impossible to take aesthetic principles to connect two different kinds of evaluative properties.

[5] It is often added to these claims that this is the sense in which the domain of aesthetics differs from the domain of morality, where there are such principles (see esp. Hampshire 1954, Wilkerson 1983). Whether this claim is true clearly depends on whether one thinks that there are moral principles and many would deny that there are (see esp. Hare 1954/1955, Tanner 1998, Tanner 2003, as well as Dancy 2004).

about uniqueness (although Isenberg does use this term): if two works of art, x and y, were to share all their intrinsic and observable properties, there would still be a (narrow and context-sensitive) aesthetic principle that would be applicable to both. In this sense they would be substitutable for one another.

Frank Sibley's contribution to this debate demonstrates this point nicely. Sibley argues that there are no aesthetic principles that would connect non-evaluative and evaluative *determinable* properties. There are (or at least can be) aesthetic principles that connect non-evaluative and evaluative *determinate* properties (Sibley 1974, see also Budd 1999's thorough analysis of Sibley's argument).

As we have seen in Chapter 5, one way of characterizing the relation between properties is the determinable–determinate relation (Johnston 1921, Funkhouser 2006, Nanay 2010a): being red is the determinate of being colored, but the determinable of being scarlet. Properties with no further determinates, if there are any, are known as super-determinates. Sibley's claim can be rephrased accordingly: aesthetic principles connect super-determinates and not properties with any lower degree of determinacy.

Suppose that Sibley is right: there are no aesthetic principles that would connect non-evaluative and evaluative determinable properties.[6] What does this claim say about uniqueness in the aesthetic domain? The answer is that it says nothing. Super-determinate property-types are still property-types: different tokens can have instantiations of it. Hence, if there are two works of art, x and y, that share all their (super-determinate) intrinsic and observable properties, Sibley's aesthetic principle would still apply to both: they would still not count as unique.

## 6.4 Uniqueness and Aesthetic Experiences

I have been entirely negative in this chapter so far: the ontological interpretation of the uniqueness claim turns out to be untenable and

[6] It may be worth noting that the charitable interpretation of Sibley's main claim is that the *non-evaluative* property in the aesthetic principle is a super-determinate. The evaluative property does not need to be a super-determinate. Aesthetic principles are of the form 'all Fs are Gs', where F is the non-evaluative and G is the evaluative property. But if 'all Fs are Gs' is true and if G is a super-determinate, then there are a number of determinable properties, G*, G**, etc., such that 'all Fs are G*', 'all Fs are G**', etc. also come out as true.

the particularism interpretation of it turns out to be orthogonal to the question of uniqueness. This leaves us with the question Mothersill poses at the end of her paper about 'why the notion that works of art are unique should have been taken seriously by so many competent aestheticians and critics' (Mothersill 1961, p. 437).

My claim is that the importance of the concept of uniqueness in the domain of aesthetics is not to be found in the ontology of works of art or in the nature of critical principles, but it has to do with the way our mind works when we have some kinds of aesthetic experiences. So the uniqueness in aesthetics is not strictly speaking about the uniqueness of art—as we have seen, experiences of art and aesthetic experiences come apart. If we detach questions about art from questions about aesthetics, the concept of uniqueness will be one that is explained by the latter. But there are many ways to substantiate this proposal.

Probably the most straightforward way of connecting the importance of uniqueness in the domain of aesthetics and aesthetic experiences is to say that aesthetic experiences themselves are unique. Not the works of art we experience, but the experiences themselves. This is what I take to be Robert Musil's view on the uniqueness in the aesthetic domain. Here is what he says:

> Every work of art offers not merely an immediate experience but an experience that can never be completely repeated, that cannot be fixed but is individual, even anarchic. [That is where] it takes its uniqueness and momentary quality from. (Musil 1925/1990, p. 205)

But what does it mean to say that our aesthetic experiences are unique? If this is a claim about experience-types, then it is difficult to see how the uniqueness claim can even be formulated—it is not clear in what sense a type (even an experience-type) can be considered to be unique (as we have seen in Section 6.2 above). And if it is a claim about token experiences, then in some sense they are clearly unique as they are token experiences, but then we need to say more about what makes them unrepeatable or non-substitutable.

And one may also wonder why we should think that token aesthetic experiences are unrepeatable—while, as we have seen in Chapter 2, seeing the same artwork on two different occasions does not guarantee that we will have the same aesthetic experiences (or, in fact, that we will have aesthetic experiences on both occasions), this nonetheless can and

often does happen—in this case, we would have two interchangeable and substitutable token aesthetic experiences. Now, there is a sense in which these two token aesthetic experiences are different, because I am different—I am a day older, I have seen and heard and thought things since I had the previous token aesthetic experience. But this would be true of any two experiences, not only aesthetic ones—my token experiences of being irritated by the traffic jam today and yesterday would also count as unrepeatable in this weak sense. If we want to transform Musil's brief remarks into an actual account of uniqueness in aesthetics, we need to look elsewhere.

Another way of substantiating the claim that aesthetic experiences are unique would be to bring in some metaphysical heavy artillery: the distinction between tropes and universals. Universals are properties that can be present in more than one distinct individuals at the same time. Tropes, in contrast, are abstract particulars that are logically incapable of being present in two (or more) distinct individuals at the same time (Williams 1953; Campbell 1981, 1990; Bacon 1995; Schaffer 2001). The color of my two matching socks would be instantiations of the same universal, but they would be two numerically distinct tropes (because the two tropes are two different abstract particulars). Millions of mass-produced rubber ducks that all share all their intrinsic properties nonetheless all have very different color-tropes, shape-tropes, size-tropes, and so on. Tropes are by definition unique.

Attributing a trope and attributing a property-type are very different mental processes that will give rise to very different mental states. And one way of substantiating the claim that our aesthetic experiences are unique is to say that when we have an aesthetic experience of an object, we attribute tropes to it. Thus, the properties we attribute to an object x and the properties we attribute to an object y that shares all intrinsic and observable properties with x are different properties: different tropes. The properties that show up in the content of aesthetic experiences are tropes.[7]

[7] Traces of this view can be found in Peter Strawson's way of making sense of the phenomenon of uniqueness in the domain of aesthetics (although he talks about aesthetic evaluation or appraisal and not about aesthetic experience). He says: 'When you draw attention to some feature on account of which terms of aesthetic evaluation may be bestowed, you draw attention, not to a property which different individual works of art may share, but to a part or aspect of an individual work of art' (Strawson 1974, p. 186). If we

While I do like this proposal about the link between tropes and aesthetic experiences, I don't want to commit to it, for two reasons. First, not everyone is as enthusiastic about tropes as I am (see Armstrong 1989; Daly 1997; Levinson 2006; but see Nanay 2009a, 2010h, 2012d). And I certainly do not want to ground a claim about the importance of uniqueness in aesthetics in a disputed piece of metaphysics—especially not in a book that is supposed to highlight the importance of philosophy of perception in addressing problems in aesthetics. As we shall see, what I take to be the real clue to the importance of aesthetics is provided by some philosophy of perception considerations (unsurprisingly).

My second reason for not endorsing the trope story is the following. It has been argued that perceptual states attribute tropes (Campbell 1981, p. 481, see also Campbell 1990, Lowe 2008, Mulligan et al. 1984, Mulligan 1999, see also Kriegel 2004 for a related but different claim). In fact, I myself argued for this claim (Nanay 2012d). Not just aesthetic experiences, but all perceptual states.

But if this is so, then we have a problem. If it is true that perceptual states attribute tropes, then how is aesthetic experience special? How is it different from all other perceptual states? If not only aesthetic experience, but every single perceptual state attributes tropes, then wouldn't this make our entire perceptual life unique? If the attribution of tropes is such a widespread phenomenon, then wouldn't we lose sight of why uniqueness is so important in aesthetics, as opposed to other domains of life?

One could salvage the original proposal about tropes and uniqueness by emphasizing that when we have an aesthetic experience, we *experience* the object as having tropes. Tropes show up in the content of these mental states *consciously*. The claims that perception always attributes tropes are not claims about how we experience the world consciously, but claims about the nature of perception. So it is possible that whereas all perceptual states attribute tropes to objects, aesthetic experience is different in as much as when we have an aesthetic experience, we are also

assume that what Strawson means by 'properties' is what we now describe as property-types and what he means by 'features or aspects of an individual' is similar to what we now call tropes (see, e.g., Strawson 1959), then Strawson's view is an early forerunner of the account that would explain the uniqueness in aesthetics by taking the properties attributed in aesthetic experience to be tropes.

experiencing objects as having tropes. So we would get the following picture: all of our perceptual states attribute tropes to objects, but we are rarely experiencing these tropes as tropes; as property-instances that cannot be present in another individual. Although perception is always the perception of tropes, we are rarely aware of this. But in those rare moments when we have an aesthetic experience, we are aware of this.

While this response seems viable, it should also alert us to the incompleteness of the explanation the trope story provides: even if we accept the explanation of the importance of uniqueness in the aesthetic domain with reference to the attributed tropes in aesthetic experience, this explanation needs to be supplemented by an account of what it means to consciously attribute a trope to an object. And this explanation will not be a metaphysical, but rather a philosophy of perception explanation.

In short, if you like the trope story, it still needs to be supplemented by an explanation of how we experience tropes. If you do not like the trope story (and many will not like the trope story), then consider this way of cashing out how aesthetic experiences have something to do with uniqueness a dead end street. The real question is how we experience objects when we have an aesthetic experience so that this gives rise to a feeling of uniqueness. This question, the question I now turn to, can be raised independently of any metaphysical story about tropes.

## 6.5 Uniqueness and Distributed Attention

My proposal is that when we have an aesthetic experience (of the kind I talked about in Chapter 2), this experience is very similar to the experience of treating an object to be unique—because they both entail the exercise of distributed attention. Treating something as unique in the case of visual arts means treating it *visually* as unique: looking at it in a way we would look at objects we take to be unique. And this, in turn, implies distributed attention.

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 as the object is unique—thus, we could not have encountered it before. So we have no blueprint to follow: we try out attending to all kinds of properties of the object—our attention is distributed. In other words, if we encounter a

unique object (that we also take to be unique), we tend to approach it with distributed attention.

And this is the sense in which uniqueness is a salient feature of the aesthetic domain. Taking something to be unique tends to involve the exercise of distributed attention and, provided that the argument I gave in Chapter 2 is correct, having an aesthetic experience of a certain kind also tends to involve the exercise of distributed attention. Uniqueness is an important part of the aesthetic domain because taking things to be unique is similar to having certain kinds of aesthetic experiences—at least with respect to the kind of distributed attention involved in these processes.

This way of accounting for the importance of uniqueness in aesthetics is consistent with the metaphysical story about the attribution of tropes: we have seen that even if we accept that the uniqueness in aesthetics is explained by the attribution of tropes in aesthetic experiences, this will only be a partial explanation. We still need to account for how we attribute tropes consciously: of how we experience tropes. And one way in which this could be elaborated is by appealing to distributed attention. But the explanation in terms of distributed attention also works without the metaphysical story about tropes: regardless of the metaphysics of the attributed properties, when we have an aesthetic experience of a certain kind, we attend in a distributed manner. And as this is also the way we attend to objects we consider to be unique, this explains why the phenomenon of uniqueness is often associated with aesthetics (regardless of what metaphysical picture we endorse).

But wait. The general insight about the importance of uniqueness in aesthetics was that aesthetics is in some ways different from all other domains of our life. The uniqueness in aesthetics is, as we have seen, often contrasted with the lack of uniqueness elsewhere—for example in the moral domain. But the point could be made that part of what constitutes moral behavior is to treat the other person as unique or as not interchangeable—in fact, this is the explicit view of Robert Musil's, who served as the starting point of our general approach to the uniqueness of aesthetic experiences (see Nanay 2014b on Musil, see also Velleman 1999 for a related account).

Without endorsing the claim that part of what constitutes moral behavior is to treat the other person as non-interchangeable or as unique (a claim that is by no means novel, see Sartre 1943/2003), it needs to be

pointed out that we have a good way of distinguishing uniqueness in the aesthetic and in the moral domain. While treating something (the other person or the object of our aesthetic experience) as unique may be a common denominator between the two, there is a crucial difference, namely, that we have no reason to suppose that we approach the object of our moral behavior (when treating him/her as unique) with distributed attention. Even if morality has a lot to do with uniqueness (a claim no doubt many will deny), it is unique in a very different way from the way the aesthetic domain is unique.

A final motivation for the claim that having an aesthetic experience has a lot in common with treating (perceptually) something to be unique is that it fits very nicely with some influential accounts of aesthetic experience. Here is a famous quote by Giorgio de Chirico, for example:

> One clear autumnal afternoon I was sitting on a bench in the middle of the Piazza Santa Croce in Florence. It was of course not the first time I had seen this square. [ . . . ] The whole world, down to the marble of the buildings and the fountains, seemed to me to be convalescent. In the middle of the square rises a statue of Dante draped in a long cloak, holding his works clasped against his body, his laurel-crowned head bent thoughtfully earthward. The statue is in white marble, but time has given it a gray cast, very agreeable to the eye. The autumn sun, warm and unloving, lit the statue and the church façade. Then I had the strange impression that I was looking at all these things for the first time.[8]

In other words, what is distinctive about the kind of aesthetic experience I talked about in Chapter 2 is that it is an experience that is very much akin to encountering something for the very first time. As encountering something for the very first time seems to imply some version of distributed attention (as we have no precedent to go by for approaching the object visually), these views seem to be consistent with the general line of argument I am proposing here.

But more caution is needed as this general view is easy to confuse with an appeal to the 'innocent eye', which has a very bad reputation among the art historians of the last half century (and rightly so). The difference between accounts of aesthetic experience that emphasize the 'as if encountered for the very first time' aspect of this experience and appeals to the 'innocent eye' is the topic I now turn to.

[8] Giorgio de Chirico: Meditations of a Painter, 1912. In: Herschel B. Chipp (ed.): *Theories of Modern Art*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968, pp. 397–8.

## 6.6 Innocent Eye versus Unprompted Eye

I already mentioned one influential account of cashing out the general idea that some aesthetic experiences are very similar to experiences of encountering something for the very first time. This is the concept of defamiliarization we encountered at the end of Chapter 2 and that was made popular by the Russian formalists at the beginning of the twentieth century. Again, here is a paradigmatic statement from Victor Shklovsky: 'The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged' (Shklovsky 1917/1965, pp. 11–12, see also Thompson 1988, pp. 10–11 for analysis). The Russian formalists put the emphasis on the 'unfamiliar'—they describe aesthetic experience as being similar to the experience of the unfamiliar. But as encountering something that is unfamiliar seems to exclude the possibility of using well-practiced attentional resources for approaching them, it seems that encountering an unfamiliar object is likely to prompt one to attend to it in a distributed manner.

But accounts of aesthetic experience along the same lines are not difficult to find. Here is a famous statement by Stan Brakhage, avant-garde filmmaker par excellence:

> Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? (Brakhage 1963, p. 25, see also Sitney 1974)

Brakhage talks about the untutored eye, and this sounds dangerously similar to the concept of 'innocent eye'. In general, Brakhage's emphasis on seeing something without employing concepts (like the concept of 'green')—an emphasis he shares with Aldous Huxley and many others[9]— leaves this general approach to aesthetic experience vulnerable

[9] Here is a representative Huxley quote: 'We must preserve and, if necessary, intensify our ability to look at the world directly and not through that half opaque medium of concepts, which distorts every given fact into the all too familiar likeness of some generic label or explanatory abstraction' (Huxley 1954, p. 74).

to being subsumed under the heading of the 'innocent eye' tradition. I argue that the kind of picture de Chirico, Shklovsky, Brakhage, and many others are after is very different from the concept of 'innocent eye' (in spite of some unfortunate statements that muddy the waters). But in order to do so, I need to say something brief about the concept of innocent eye.

A significant proportion of the art history and aesthetics of the second half of the twentieth century can be described as a long fight against the concept of the 'innocent eye' (see Carrier 1991 for a summary). The general idea of the innocent eye originates from John Ruskin, who famously said that:

> The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify, as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight. (Ruskin 1857, p. 22)

A lot is going on in this famous quote. It is easy to spot the classic formalist assumptions I talked about in Chapter 5: what we should pay attention to is the formal properties of paintings (for example, the 'flat stains of colour'), not what they signify. But there is also an allusion to seeing things for the first time—an idea I want to salvage. To make things even more complicated, Ruskin's subsequent discussion of how our non-innocent eye sees green grass as green even though it would look yellow if we were to focus merely on its look brings in various issues about color constancy. Nonetheless, what I take to be the core of Ruskin's view is that what he labels the 'innocent eye' is vision that is untouched by our knowledge of the world: of what we know about the color of grass in general, for example.

This is the view Gombrich and Goodman (among others) reacted against. Here is Ernst Gombrich: 'The innocent eye is a myth. [ . . . ] seeing is never just registering' (Gombrich 1959/1972, p. 298). And 'we must doubt all the more whether such an achievement of innocent passivity is at all possible to the human mind' (Gombrich 1959/1972, p. 297). And again: 'Reading an image, like the reception of any other message, is dependent on prior knowledge of possibilities; we can only recognize what we know' (Gombrich 1982, p. 255). Nelson Goodman is equally dismissive when he says that 'the innocent eye is blind' (Goodman 1968/1976, p. 8). This stance is not exactly new, arguably it

goes back at least to the early eighteenth century, to Jonathan Richardson's *Theory of Painting*, where he says: 'For 'tis a certain maxim: no man sees what things are that knows not what they ought to be' (Richardson 1715/1725, p. 147). As Picasso summarizes, 'our knowledge influences our vision'.[10]

From a philosophy of perception perspective, it should be clear that this 'innocent eye' debate is about the cognitive penetrability of vision. It should also be clear that the contemporary consensus is that things are not looking good for the proponents of 'innocent eye' from that point of view. The view according to which perception is cognitively impenetrable—that is, according to which our eye is innocent, seems to be plainly false (Goldstone 1995; Hansen et al. 2006; Lupyan & Ward 2013; Nanay 2013a, 2013b, but see also Firestone & Scholl, 2014, forthcoming for a critical analysis). There are top-down processes that influence perceptual processing as early as the primary visual cortex (Gandhi et al. 1999) or the thalamus (O'Connor et al. 2002). And these top-down effects just become more numerous and more diverse as the perceptual processing continues.

We have already encountered the old experiment (Delk and Fillenbaum 1965) back in Chapter 3, where if we have to match the color of a picture of an orange heart to color samples, we match it differently (closer to the red end of the spectrum) from the way we match the color of a picture of some other, orange shapes. A more recent experiment (Levin and Banaji 2006): Two pictures of identical (mixed race) faces were shown to subjects—the only difference between them was that under one the subjects read the word 'white' and under the other they read 'black'. When they had to match the color of the face, subjects chose a significantly darker color for the face with the label 'black'.[11] In general, one's experience is not determined in a bottom-up manner by the perceptual stimulus: it depends on language, attention, the contrast classes, and one's expectations (see Hansen et al. 2006, Lupyan and Ward 2013).

[10] In: Brassai: *Conversations with Picasso*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 273.

[11] There has been some controversy about the Levin and Banaji 2006 findings, especially about their first experiment (see, e.g., Firestone and Scholl 2014, Firestone and Scholl forthcoming). But the experiment I want to use here is not their first but their second experiment (where two faces are identical in all respects except for the label under them).

I need to add that the concept of 'cognitive penetrability' has been severely debated in the last decades and depending on how one defines this concept (see Siegel 2011, Macpherson 2012 for summaries), it may not be too far-fetched to retain *some* sense in which perceptual experiences are not cognitively penetrable—and then maybe we can still talk about the 'innocent eye'. But it is important to highlight that in order to deny the innocence of the eye, it is enough to endorse a very weak sense of cognitive penetrability—so much so that it wouldn't even count as cognitive penetrability under many formulations of this notion[12] because all it implies is that our perceptual experience is subject to top-down attentional influences—something even those who deny the cognitive penetrability of perception would accept (see Pylyshyn 1999). Even those (like Pylyshyn) who maintain that perception is not cognitively penetrable allow for top-down influences before and after 'early vision'. But from the point of view of the 'innocent eye' debate, it is irrelevant whether there is one brief part of perceptual processing that is sheltered from top-down influences. Proponents and opponents of 'cognitive penetration' agree that our eye is not innocent.

This has important consequences for the dilemma I ended Chapter 4 with. I argued there that questions about whether attending to non-perceptually represented aesthetically relevant properties make a perceptual difference is something that we can only address by appealing to the cognitive penetrability debate. If it is true that perception is cognitively penetrable, even in the very weak sense I considered here, then we can maintain (with Wollheim and Goodman and contra Danto) that attending to non-perceptually represented aesthetically relevant properties can make a perceptual difference. And this would restore the nice and tight connection between perception and aesthetically relevant properties (while acknowledging that not all aesthetically relevant properties are perceptually represented). I will trace some further consequences of the cognitive penetrability view for yet another debate in aesthetics, the history of vision debate, in Chapter 7.

[12] Not, for example, according to Susanna Siegel's influential definition, according to which 'If visual experience is cognitively penetrable, then it is nomologically possible for two subjects (or for one subject in different counterfactual circumstances, or at different times) to have visual experiences with different contents while seeing and attending to the same distal stimuli under the same external conditions, as a result of differences in other cognitive (including affective) states' (Siegel 2011, p. 204).

Again, there is no such thing as 'innocent eye'. But the 'innocent eye' claim is very different from the one I would like to salvage: the view that aesthetic experiences are akin to seeing things for the very first time. To make things simple, I will call this conception the 'unprompted eye' and contrast it with the concept of 'innocent eye'. Even if we assume, as we should, that the eye is never innocent—that our vision is always deeply influenced by our beliefs, previous experiences, and expectations—it is still possible to make the claim that when we have aesthetic experiences of a certain kind, we see something as if we saw it for the first time.

But this distinction between the innocent eye and the unprompted eye will be mysterious unless we specify what makes the unprompted eye unprompted. And I argued that it is the exercise of distributed attention: if our eyes are 'prompted', we come with fixed preconceived ideas about how we should look at something. Suppose that you are hungry and you open your fridge. You will be likely to see the object there as belonging to two different categories: edible and not edible. The way you're attending to these objects is very much determined: you are zeroing in on very specific properties of the objects (roughly, their edibility or nutritional value) and you will actively ignore all their other properties. In other words, your perception is prompted: you will experience the objects in a way that is determined by pre-existing factors (like your quest for food).

Contrast this with aesthetic experiences of a certain kind, where there is no such prompting of the eye: you have no fixed and preconceived way of visually approaching the object you're looking at. In this case, your visual curiosity is not zeroing in on any fixed and predetermined set of properties: there is no pre-established prompt. You are trying to make sense of the object by trying out attending to a wide variety of its properties—just as you would do with an object you have never encountered before.

To be absolutely clear, we have very strong (empirical and philosophy of perception, and of course also aesthetics) reasons to hold that both of these two kinds of experiences are non-innocent in the Gombrichian sense: both the experience of scavenging the contents of my fridge and the aesthetic experience are influenced by various top-down factors such as my previous encounter with food and art, my beliefs about nutritional values and the exhibition I'm attending, and my expectation of culinary or artistic value. But just because both experiences are cognitively penetrated doesn't mean that both are prompted. The prompted versus

unprompted distinction is made within the category of non-innocent eye (because that is the only kind of eye there is).

But then we can connect up the idea of uniqueness in aesthetics with the unprompted eye idea without falling prey to the problems that made the very idea of the innocent eye obsolete. When we have an aesthetic experience of the kind I examined in Chapter 2, our vision is unprompted; our attention is distributed—just as it is when we encounter something we take to be unique or when we encounter an object for the very first time.

# 7

# The History of Vision

It may seem from the discussion so far that I take distributed attention to be some kind of cultural universal: a way of attending that is hardwired in us for our enjoyment of things aesthetic and that can be found in all cultures and all historical periods. The aim of this chapter is to make it clear that this is not my view. In fact, we may have strong reasons to think that the kind of distributed attention that plays such an important role in a wide variety of aesthetic phenomena, such as aesthetic experiences, uniqueness, or the aesthetic appreciation of pictures, is a relatively novel historical phenomenon and it may also take very different forms in different cultures.

I will address this issue through the 'history of vision' debate: the debate in art history and aesthetics about whether vision has a history. According to an influential view within art history, the way the ancient Greeks saw the world was importantly different from the way we now see the world and part of what art history should study is exactly how human vision has changed in the course of history. If the ancients did see the world differently from the way we do now, then in order to understand and evaluate their art, we need to understand how they perceived it (and how this is related to the way they perceived the world). Thus, so the argument goes, the history of vision is a necessary precursor to art history. This general line of argument goes back at least as far as Tacitus,[1] but it has become one of the most important premises of art history and aesthetics since the early twentieth century.

The general idea that vision has a history, however, has been severely criticized recently, both for empirical and for conceptual reasons. The aim of this chapter is to reposition this debate in the light of the book's

[1] See his *Dialogus de oratoribus* Book I (10).

emphasis on distributed attention. If we can show that distributed attention has a history (and we may have some reasons to think it does), then we have strong reasons to hold that vision also has a history. But the scope of this claim will be much narrower than most proponents of the history of vision claim would want it to be.

## 7.1 In Favor of the History of Vision Claim

The general idea behind the history of vision claim is that visual experience has changed in various ways during the course of history. We should, therefore, not assume that people in ancient or medieval times perceived in the same way as we do now. Further, one important aspect of understanding the art of earlier times is to understand the way people perceived artworks then.

The most explicit statement of this claim comes from Heinrich Wölfflin, in one of the best-known passages in the history of art history:

> Vision itself has its history, and the revelation of these visual strata must be regarded as the primary task of art history. (Wölfflin 1915/1932, p. 11)

While Wölfflin's provocative statement has become an important slogan for generations of art historians, the general idea that vision has a history had another major and in some ways even more influential proponent in the context of the turn of the century German/Austrian art historical tradition, namely, Alois Riegl. Riegl's main guiding principle in *The Late Roman Art Industry* was that the way people perceived the world in ancient times is radically different from the way we perceive now. More precisely, he argues that ancient people saw only 'individual self-contained shapes'—and this explains some crucial features of their representational visual art (Riegl 1901/1985, p. 232). But even within the ancient era, he hypothesizes that the Egyptians perceived the world differently from the way the Greeks did and the Greeks differently from the way the Romans, especially the late Romans, did.

Perhaps the real influence of the history of vision claim was provided by the application of this general and abstract idea to the question of modernity—an idea that is present in the work of a very diverse group of thinkers: Charles Baudelaire, Georg Simmel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Siegfried Kracauer, Lev Malevich, to mention just a few (see Frisby 1986 for a good summary). But it was Walter Benjamin who

made this application of the history of vision claim most explicitly and most influentially. Inspired by Riegl's general claims about the history of vision (see Levin 1988, Lang 2006, esp. pp. 136–78), he says:

> During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. (Benjamin 1936/1969, p. 89)

Alois Riegl's influence is clear in these passages and especially in the ways in which Benjamin applies these general ideas to specific periods in art history:

> The period of migration in which the late Roman art industry and the *Vienna Genesis* came into being, had not only a different art, but also a different perception from classical times. (Benjamin 1936/1969, p. 89)

Benjamin's main interest, however, is not the late Roman art industry, but the change in art and perception that happened at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. And Benjamin's claim is that modernity is a change in 'sensorium' and this idea has become one of the guiding principles of theorizing about modernity. For Benjamin, this change in 'sensorium' was brought about by technological changes. Not just the changes in the streetscape around us: the speeding cars and the skyscrapers that Malevich and Baudelaire like to emphasize, but also the technological changes in art itself. As Regis Debray summarizes, 'Photography has changed our perception of space, and the cinema our perception of time (via montage)' (Debray 1992, p. 178).

Still, the application of the idea of the history of vision does not stop, and does not begin, with modernity. As Jonathan Crary argues at length, the general mode of perception may have undergone some important form of change already in the first half of the nineteenth century (Crary 1992). And theorists of postmodernism rely on the principle of the history of vision as much as theorists of modernity do. Frederic Jameson, for example, argues that postmodernism offers 'a whole new Utopian realm of the senses' (Jameson 1991, p. 7). The premise all these arguments share is that history, and art history, can be understood, at least partially, as the history of perception. This assumption is so deeply ingrained in much of the discourse on nineteenth and twentieth century

art and culture and in (at least some branches of) art history and aesthetics that it has been taken for granted without further discussion.[2] As Whitney Davis summarized, 'according to visual-culture studies, it is true *prima facie* that vision has a cultural history' (Davis 2011, p. 7). Recently, however, this consensus seems to have broken down.

## 7.2 Against the History of Vision

The two most influential recent arguments against the history of vision are based on philosophy of perception considerations—something that seems like a natural candidate for being discussed in this book. The first one is by Arthur Danto who starts out with the assumption that vision is modular: it is not sensitive to whatever else goes on in our mind. He then argues that given that vision is modular, it cannot be influenced by the higher order mental processes that do change with history. Our beliefs and knowledge do change with history, but given that vision is not sensitive to these beliefs and knowledge, our vision does not have a history (Danto 2001a, 2001b, see also Davis 2001, Rollins 2001). Danto adds that it is the *interpretation* of vision that changes and the *interpretation* of vision may very well have a history, but vision itself does not and cannot change.

Danto also explores another line of argument against the history of vision claim, one that was originally introduced by David Bordwell (Bordwell 1997, pp. 141–9). The starting point of this argument is that vision is hardwired. The way our perceptual system functions is determined by evolution, not by cultural influences. Bordwell makes this argument with reference to the evolutionary implausibility of the history of vision claim. His line of thought is that if vision, something hardwired, were to have a history, this could only be explained as Lamarckian evolution—the culturally acquired changes in our vision would be transmitted to the next generation. But the main point of the Darwinian explanatory scheme of evolution is that acquired character traits are not inherited (Bordwell 1997, p. 142).

[2] One important exception is Marx W. Wartofsky, who gave a number of different arguments in the course of his career for the history of vision claim. See, e.g., Wartofsky 1984, 1981, 1979.

These two arguments are not completely independent from one another. The claim about the hardwired nature of vision is often supplemented with the insistence that there are no top-down influences on our perceptual processes (Bordwell 1997, p. 301, footnote 92). And this, in turn, is intertwined with claims about the modularity of vision.

There are two ways of arguing against these recent objections to the history of vision claim. First, it could be pointed out that what Danto and Bordwell mean by vision is not what Benjamin, Jameson, Malevich or Riegl mean by vision. What Danto and Bordwell mean is the physiological apparatus that is fixed by evolution and that may well be insensitive to our higher order mental processes. But what Benjamin, Jameson, Malevich, or Riegl mean is something much broader and less restrictive. So maybe the debate is really a terminological one. I will explore this way of resolving the history of vision debate in the next section.

Second, we can engage with the arguments of Danto and Bordwell on their own terms. Both Danto and Bordwell assume that vision is modular. As we have seen in Chapter 6, this is a false claim—and it was already very controversial among vision scientists (and philosophers) well before Danto's paper was published (see, e.g., Karmiloff-Smith 1992, Churchland et al. 1994). We now have very clear evidence that top-down processes influence perceptual processing as early as the primary visual cortex (Gandhi et al. 1999). We also know that cross-modal influences between visual and auditory perception are rife (see Spence and Driver 2004 and O'Callaghan 2008). These findings all militate against Danto's main premise: if we have no reason to believe that vision is modular (in the very strong sense required by Danto), Danto's argument simply fails to get off the ground.

Further, we also have strong reasons to doubt that vision is hardwired. Recent findings about the neural plasticity of the brain in general and of our perceptual processes in particular show that while much of the way our perceptual processes function is in fact determined by evolution, there is a lot of room for adjustments and changes that are part of our developmental processes (see, e.g., Huttenlocher 2002). Also, recent work in philosophy of biology warns against drawing too sharp a line between innate and learned traits (Griffiths and Gray 1994). Bordwell's argument only works if perception is entirely innate and if we can have some very clear way of keeping innate and learned processes apart. But it seems that neither of these premises is correct.

Can we then dismiss the arguments against the history of vision completely? We may be able to conclude that as knock-down arguments against the history of vision claim they fail. But they do need to be taken seriously inasmuch as they demonstrate the importance of making explicit what exactly changes from one historical era to the other. Danto and Bordwell are right in emphasizing that, for example, the retinal processing of visual stimuli is extremely unlikely to change in the course of history. The retinal processing of visual stimuli is, of course, only one part of the perceptual process—the question then is: what is it that changes if not the retinal image? What exactly is the history of vision the history of ?

## 7.3 Attempts at a Compromise

I have been focusing on the recent debate between the proponents and the opponents of the idea of the history of vision, and on the basis of the most important arguments in this debate it may seem that there are only two options: vision either has or does not have a history. But the debate in fact has more layers.

One could try to carve out an intermediary position between the two extreme views—by arguing that some aspects of vision do have a history, while some others do not. Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* could be thought to be a monumental attempt at exactly this compromise. The overarching theme of the book is that we should not make inferences from the way pictures of a certain era represent to the way people of that era perceived. This seems like the opposite of the history of vision claim. But Gombrich would also be unmoved by Danto- or Bordwell-style arguments, as he is very explicit that what we call 'seeing' is conditioned by habits and expectations—top-down effects (Gombrich 1959/1972, p. 89). As our habits and expectations can change from one historic era to the other, he could, in principle be open to the claim that so can our seeing. But things are even more complicated. He makes a distinction between vision and schemata and insists that it is the schemata that changes in history, not vision.

There are other, structurally similar attempts at a compromise between the history of vision claim and its straight negation. David Bordwell himself aims to carve out such a compromise when he distinguishes vision and visual skills. Vision, for Bordwell, is constant and

ahistorical, but visual skills do change. Visual skills do have a history. In fact, he argues that visual skills can even change within one and the same individual. His example is the visual skill of noticing the difference between jump cuts and smooth montages in films—something people were clearly unable to do in 1895 but were capable of in 1995. Tom Gunning makes a similar claim about the changes in our visual skills of watching films around 1908 (Gunning 1986).

Michael Baxandall's book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, which, on the face of it, could be taken to be one of the clearest illustrations of the history of vision claim, also turns out to be an example of this compromise position on closer inspection (Baxandall 1972, see also Baxandall 1971 for similar claims). Baxandall does not say, as for example Riegl or Benjamin do, that the general 'mode of vision' of people in fifteenth-century Italy was different from our general 'mode of vision'. When they saw a tree, they may have had the very same retinal stimulation as we do. But people in fifteenth-century Italy employed some very specific visual skills when they looked at pictures, that we do not employ now. Again, the general 'mode of vision' does not have a history, but the specific visual skills involved in looking at pictures do.

Baxandall's concept of 'period eye' sums up this compromise nicely. He explicitly engages with the question of which aspects or stages of human vision are universal and which ones are not universal and, as a result, subject to variations throughout history. He takes the formation of the retinal image to be universal, but everything that comes after that can in principle be subject to historical variations (Baxandall 1972, p. 29). Baxandall formulates this contrast in terms of raw data and the interpretation of this raw data (which is, oddly, very similar to Danto's contrast). This choice of terms may be controversial as it is somewhat problematic to take the primary visual cortex to be interpreting the retinal image, but what is important for our purposes is that Baxandall's concept of 'period eye' could also be considered to be a compromise between the history of vision claim and the stance that at least some aspects of vision are universal.

Finally, another critic of the history of vision, Noël Carroll, also makes a distinction structurally similar to Bordwell's between seeing and noticing, and admits that what we notice changes in the course of history (Carroll 2001c, p. 15). But what we see does not. I come back to this distinction in Section 7.5 below.

## 7.4 Clarifying the History of Vision Claim

So far, I took the history of vision claim to be the following simple statement: vision has a history. But this seemingly simple statement is in fact ambiguous in at least two ways, and in order to even attempt to reconcile the ahistorical and the historical arguments, we need to do some disentangling.

The first question we need to ask is what is meant by vision, or more generally, by perception, in this debate. What is it that is supposed to have a history? Sensory stimulation? The perceptual mechanism? If so, the mechanism of early vision or of late vision? Perceptual content? Perceptual phenomenology?

As we have seen, the retinal processing of stimuli is unlikely to change in the course of history—and it is a very far-fetched idea that this is what Riegl, Wölfflin, or Benjamin had in mind when they talked about the history of vision. If Danto's, Bordwell's, and Carroll's claims are about the retinal processing of stimuli, then this debate is a clear case of the two camps talking past each other. The same is true of the interpretation of vision as the perceptual mechanism.

Is the debate about perceptual content—about what we see? Maybe. But the concept of perceptual content is itself very unclear. If it means just the object we see, then, again, the history of vision claim is unlikely to make much sense: when the ancient Egyptian looked at the Moon and when I look at the Moon, in some sense, we do see the same thing: the object we see is the same. Is our perceptual content the same? That depends on how we cash out this semi-technical notion (see, e.g., Crane 1991, Nanay 2014c). If we allow for the way the object is perceived to be part of perceptual content, then we may have a more interesting claim: the ancient Egyptian may have perceived the Moon in a different way from the way I do.[3] But much of this difference may be due to the last candidate for interpreting the history of vision claim: perceptual phenomenology.

[3] I explicitly wanted to stay away from the controversial issue of perceptual content for the purposes of this discussion. But it is worth noting that at least on some views (including my own), perceptual content depends on attention, and perceptual phenomenology depends on perceptual content. But as both of these two claims are controversial (and the claim that perceptual phenomenology depends on attention is not at all controversial), I will not rely on these controversial views in the present discussion.

Ultimately, I take the history of vision claim to be about perceptual phenomenology: about what it is like to see something—about our experiences. This is the interpretation Riegl, Wölfflin, and Benjamin were interested in and this is the only interpretation that cannot be dismissed as either trivially false or ill-formulated. But this interpretation also makes it difficult to settle the debate about the history of vision. Perceptual phenomenology is by definition only accessible to the person who has the experience. We cannot have direct access to someone else's perceptual experience and we cannot have direct access to the perceptual experiences of people who lived centuries ago either. I will propose a way to get past this obstacle in the next section.

The second ambiguity about the history of vision claim that is orthogonal to the first one is the following: when we talk about the history of vision, what is this vision the vision of? What is the scope of perception that is supposed to have history? All and any perception? Or the perception in a specific context? The second claim would clearly be much easier to swallow.

There is a disagreement within the history of vision camp about the scope of perception that is supposed to have a history. We can distinguish the following two claims:

a. Perception in general changes from one historical era to the other
b. Perception in a certain specific context changes from one historical era to the other

The original formulation of the history of vision claim by Riegl is a clear example of (a): according to Riegl, ancient people saw *everything* as 'individual self-contained shapes'. Benjamin inherited this more radical version (a) from Riegl and when he understands modernity as entailing a change in 'sensorium', what he means by 'sensorium' is the very general mode of perceiving the world—streets, cars, buildings, everything. It is this stance that became dominant in more recent accounts of the history of vision, for example, in Crary or Jameson.

Heinrich Wölfflin, in contrast, very explicitly restricts the scope of his history of vision claim to the perception of artworks and mainly to the perception of pictures.[4] The same is true of Baxandall's account of visual

[4] Those occasions where he seems to be carried away to liken Gothic shoes to Gothic cathedrals and Lutheran simplicity to simplicity in pictorial compositions notwithstanding (see Nanay 2015a).

perception in fifteenth-century Italy and of Gunning's claims about the changes in our perception with the advent of the 'cinema of attraction' around 1908. These accounts are versions of (b).[5]

I will argue that the best bet for the proponents of the history of vision claim is to opt for (b). But in order to do so, I need to appeal to an important concept that has been oddly ignored in this debate: visual attention.[6]

## 7.5 Does Attention Have a History?

We have seen that the most plausible formulation of the history of vision claim is about visual phenomenology: what changes in the course of history is what it feels like to perceive something. My argument for the history of vision proceeds in two steps:

1. Visual phenomenology depends systematically on visual attention
2. Visual attention has a history

The concept of visual attention has not played a significant role in the history of vision debate. One exception is André Malraux, who famously wrote that:

> The creation of every great art is inseparable from [the] metamorphosis in the manner of seeing, which does not properly belong in the realm of vision, but of attention. (Malraux 1967, p. 206)

In some ways, my account could be thought of as an elaboration of this sketchy idea Malraux mentions in passing. Our perception changes in the course of history because the allocation of our visual attention changes. If we want an argument for the history of vision, we need to look for evidence in favor of the history of attention.

The first premise of my argument is that visual phenomenology depends systematically on the allocation of one's attention. This we know from Chapter 3: attention, as the 'inattentional blindness' phenomenon shows,

[5] Whitney Davis's account of the history of vision in *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Davis 2011) is also a version of (b)—although importantly different from the versions mentioned above, see esp. pp. 8–10.

[6] An exception is Alois Riegl, who talks a lot about attention and attentiveness in Riegl 1902/1999, but this concept is very different from that of visual attention I will focus on. See Olin 1989 on Riegl's concept of attentiveness.

can dramatically change what we experience (Simmons and Chabris 1999, Mack and Rock 1998). In short, if we can show that visual attention has a history, we can conclude that vision has a history.

Recall Carroll's distinction between seeing and noticing (Carroll 2001c, p. 15). He admits that what we notice changes in the course of history. But what we see does not. In the light of the inattentional blindness findings, this distinction seems odd. Seeing, in any meaningful sense of the term, presupposes noticing: what we notice, that is, what we are attending to, systematically influences our perceptual experience.[7]

And we indeed have strong (although maybe not fool-proof) reasons to take visual attention to have a history. I want to explore the possibility of arguing that our visual attention changed in an important respect in the course of the sixteenth century.

But first, some methodological worries need to be acknowledged. How can one argue that in a certain historic period in the past, people exercised their attention in such and such a manner? We could use the pictures they made as evidence, but this is always going to be partial evidence, as Gombrich repeatedly points out. But we can also use contemporary written evidence. I will use the combination of the two.

## 7.6 The History of Visual Attention

As we have seen in Chapter 2, there are a number of ways of attending (overt/covert, endogenous/exogenous, focused/distributed, etc). What seems the most relevant for our purposes is, somewhat predictably, the distinction between focused and distributed attention. And we have also seen that a special case of distributed attention in the case of perceiving pictures is attending to design-scene properties, which I called 'twofold attention'. I discussed at great length the relevance of this twofold experience for the aesthetic appreciation of pictures (or for picture

[7] I am assuming in this discussion that 'seeing' here is understood as conscious seeing. I myself am committed to the view that even unconscious perception is systematically influenced by the unconscious allocation of attention, but I am not relying on this (somewhat controversial) view here. I take the claim that conscious perceptual experience depends systematically on the conscious allocation of attention to be not controversial at all (at least not since the inattentional blindness experiments).

perception in general) in Chapter 3. My topic here is not the explanatory relevance or importance of this concept but its history.

One tempting way of arguing for the claim that attention has a history (and, as a result, that vision also has a history) would be to explore whether distributed attention in general is a capacity that appeared at some point in history. While this may not be an impossible task, I will explore the possibilities of a less demanding way of arguing for the claim that attention has a history—namely, that what has changed in the course of history is not the general way we are attending in a distributed manner, but rather exercising this capacity for distributed attention in a specific context: the context of looking at pictures. I will argue that we may have good reasons to hold that twofold attention, that is, the simultaneous attention both to the picture surface and to what is depicted in it, has a history.

If I am looking at an apple and I am attending to its color and if I am looking at the same apple and I am attending to its shape, the phenomenal character of my experience will be different. As we have seen repeatedly, what properties one is attending to makes a difference in one's perceptual phenomenology. The problem is that it is difficult to see what evidence we could find that would show that visual attention has changed in the course of history. Some obviously faulty lines of reasoning need to be put aside. There were no traffic lights in the Middle Ages, so people then could not have attended to traffic lights. Now we do have traffic lights and sometimes we are attending to them. This difference will not give us any reason to think that attention has a history in the relevant sense—if the scene in front of us is different, then it is obvious that our attention will work differently. This would not give us any meaningful version of the history of vision claim: if all that is meant by the history of vision claim is that we see traffic lights now, but we haven't seen traffic lights in the Middle Ages, then the history of vision claim would hardly be something worth arguing about.

In order for us to be able to infer a change in perceptual phenomenology from a change in attention, we need to be able to point at two cases where the visual scene in front of us is the same, but our attention is exercised differently. The inattentional blindness experiments used the same contrast: the visual scene when watching the gorilla video is the same—we see the very same footage. But, because we are attending differently, our visual phenomenology is different. Thus, in order to be

able to argue that attention has changed in the course of history, we would need to be able to show that *the very same visual scene* was differently attended to in different historic periods.

This general explanatory scheme is easier to apply in the case of the life history of one single person. Suppose that a year ago I didn't know anything about trees, but then I took an intensive course on botany. Now compare my visual experience of a pine tree a year ago and my visual experience of the very same pine tree (seen from the same angle, in the same lighting conditions) now. Given that I have familiarized myself with various features of pine trees, when I see the pine tree now, I am likely to attend to different features than the ones I attended to a year ago. I now attend to, say, the shape of the pine cones, the color of the foliage, the diversity of the ways the needles are bundled in fascicles, etc. I did not attend to any of these features a year ago, as I didn't know much about any of them: I was just looking at a tree without knowing much about the specifics of pine trees. Thus, I am attending to different things now and, as a result, the argument goes, my perceptual phenomenology is also different (see Siegel 2006; Nanay 2011a, 2012b). At least in my own life history, it seems that my attention (when it comes to pine trees) does have a history, and as a result, so does my vision.

The question is whether we can generalize the structure of the argument in this example to history per se (as opposed to one's own personal history). And the answer is not at all straightforward. While we have strong reasons to suppose that I am now attending to features of the pine tree that I was not in the position to attend to in the past, we do not generally have any reason to suppose that there are features of an object that in some past periods people were not in the position to attend to—it is hard to see what evidence we could have that would show how people were attending to a certain kind of object in the Middle Ages, for example.

Here is a potential example that may at first seem tempting in this context. There was a time when people did not know that the Moon is a spherical object and that the changes in its phases result from the way in which the Sun illuminates it. These people then were looking at the same object as the one we are looking at now, but they were not in the position to see, for example, the 'dark side' of the Moon. So, the argument would go, we are attending to different features of the Moon (for example, the line between the shadow it casts upon itself and the sunlit parts) from the

one these people in the distant past could possibly attend to. And, as a result, our perceptual phenomenology is different from theirs. I am skeptical that such an argument would be successful as I am skeptical that this difference in attention is significant enough to bring about a difference in perceptual phenomenology. One could argue that these people in the distant past could also attend to the same *visual* feature of the Moon (ie, the curved line between the visible and the invisible part of the Moon), but they referred to it, or conceptualized it, differently. So this difference is not really a difference in *visual* attention, but rather a difference in the way we conceptualize what we see (and attend to).

In short, I am skeptical of such a general way of arguing that the features of objects we attend to changed in the course of history (although I do not want to fully exclude this possibility). But I will argue that we may have more reasons to suppose that there was a change in what features of pictures we are attending to.

## 7.7 The History of Twofold Attention

I will argue that we may have good reasons to suppose that attention, at least attention as exercised when looking at pictures, has a history. But then, as attention systematically influences perceptual phenomenology, so does vision. The more specific claim I want to explore is that attention to design-scene properties is something that has a history. We can and do now attend to the relation between features of the picture surface and features of what is depicted in it when looking at pictures. And often in order to appreciate a picture aesthetically, we need to exercise our attention this way. But there may have been periods when people did not attend this way. I call attending to both the features of the picture surface and the features of what is depicted in it 'twofold attention'.

We have clear evidence that people were capable of twofold attention by the middle of the sixteenth century, at least in Western Europe, which is the region I will be focusing on from now on (more on whether I am entitled to do so below). A well-known example of this is the attention to bravura brushwork found in works by the later Titian, for example, and widely appreciated by his contemporaries. The appreciation of bravura brushwork is a form of appreciation that demands both attention to the thing represented, and to the particular way in which a loose set of marks on the surface has been employed to bring about that representation.

But there are other examples from around the middle of the sixteenth century. A widespread and very popular subgenre of paintings in that century could only be fully appreciated by attending to both the picture surface and the depicted object. The best-known representative of this subgenre is Giuseppe Arcimboldo, whose portraits can only be appreciated by exercising twofold attention: in order to see the mastery of the execution, we need to be able to identify the very same surface feature as responsible for both depicting a fruit and depicting a part of a human face—and this requires twofold attention. We can, of course, see the depicted person in the painting (and also the depicted fruits) without twofold attention, but we couldn't appreciate the mastery of the execution of it depicting both (and depicting one by depicting the other). Although Arcimboldo is the best-known representative of this way of composing pictures, the so-called 'anthropomorphic landscapes' were widespread from the second half of the sixteenth century, especially in the Low Countries (see Hulpen 1987 for a good summary). In these paintings, we see the marks on the surface in two ways: both as depicting various elements of the landscape: cows, walls, shrubbery, and as depicting parts of a human face: eyes, nose, beard. In order to do so, we need to attend to the features of the picture surface and to the features of the depicted objects (that is, the depicted cows and the depicted eyes) simultaneously. It is important that the simultaneity in question is not the simultaneity of seeing the marks as a face and seeing the marks as a landscape. We can, and often do, flip back and forth between these two ways of seeing the painting (as we flip back and forth when we are looking at the duck–rabbit drawing). The point is that we would not be able to appreciate the mastery of the execution of these paintings (for example, why the small cow in the background is placed where it is placed) without attending to the relation between the features of the surface and the features of the *two* depicted scenes. Appreciation here presupposes attending to design-scene properties.

But these 'anthropomorphic landscapes' are not the only indication of the capacity of sixteenth-century people to exercise twofold attention. Wölfflin spends quite some time describing the importance of the relation between the surface features and the depicted scene when seeing and appreciating some sixteenth-century paintings. One of his examples is Leonardo's *Last Supper*, where the alternating black and white of the receding side walls serves as a way of grouping the characters in the

foreground (Wölfflin 1899/1952, esp. pp. 23–9). Here, a formal element of the surface (provided by the depicted side walls) is essential for the pictorial organization of the apostles in the foreground. The appreciation of these features presupposes the exercise of twofold attention, which makes it possible to see the surface feature of the alternating black and white of the receding side walls as interacting with the depicted scene's three-dimensional pictorial organization.

A last example: in Rafael's *The Expulsion of Heliodorus*, as Richard Wollheim (following, again, Wölfflin) points out, the fall of Heliodorus on the right is counterbalanced by the boys climbing up a column on the left. And to make things even more complex, it is this interaction between the upward movement in the left and downward movement on the right that draws our attention to the middle of the composition, to the praying High Priest in the background (Wollheim 2002, p. 10, see also Wölfflin 1899/1952, pp. 101–3). Here, we need to have twofold attention to both the surface and the depicted scene in order to be able to appreciate the ways in which the two interact to guide our attention to the middle of the picture.

In short, people in the middle of the sixteenth century were already capable of twofold attention. But were people in earlier times, importantly, in the centuries immediately preceding the sixteenth century, incapable of it?[8] This claim is obviously difficult to establish and it is important to note that it would be a methodological mistake to appeal exclusively to the way pictures depicted their objects in that period. While it may be true that the appreciation of thirteenth- or fourteenth-century pictures does not necessarily require twofold attention (the way some post-sixteenth-century paintings do) and it may even be true that the appreciation of these pictures require that the viewer *ignore* the way the picture surface is organized. But we cannot infer facts about vision from facts about pictorial representations—something Gombrich likes to emphasize (Gombrich 1959/1972).

One preliminary consideration comes from the relatively sudden emergence of artworks that actively rely on twofold attention in the

[8] When I talk about 'pre-sixteenth century' in what follows, what I mean is in centuries immediately preceding the sixteenth century. I do so in order to avoid the debates about our way of looking at pictures in much earlier times, especially in antiquity (but see, e.g., Elsner 2007 on this topic).

middle of the sixteenth century. In, say, 1560, many different pictures of different genre and kind were explicitly made in a way that they could only be aesthetically appreciated with the help of twofold attention. But a couple of decades before that, very few, if any, pictures were explicitly made in a way that they could only be aesthetically appreciated with the help of twofold attention. This relatively sudden onset of pictures that presuppose twofold attention, and the fact that very different kinds of pictures that rely on twofold attention emerged about the same time, point to a relatively sudden change in the way people exercised their attention. But, as I emphasized, this is at best a suggestive piece of data, not a real argument.

Here is a real argument. Alberti's *De Pictura* (1435) contains a lengthy analysis of *compositio*: what we would now call pictorial organization (see Greenstein 1997). The *compositio* of pictures, according to Alberti, consists of organizing planes to members, members to bodies, bodies to pictures (or to *historia*). This organization of elements into higher units have their rules: for example, according to Alberti, at most nine elements should be organized into the higher unit and there should be a certain degree of variety between the elements. Michael Baxandall compared Alberti's concept of pictorial *compositio* to the humanist concept of *compositio* in rhetoric (that Alberti, like any educated quattrocento Italian would have been very much aware of): organizing words into phrases, phrases into clauses, clauses into sentences (Baxandall 1971).

What is interesting for our purposes is that pictorial *compositio* in Alberti's sense is entirely a matter of the depicted scene. The basic unit of pictorial *compositio* is the surface of depicted objects (not the surface of the painting). Not the pigment, that is, the mark on the surface, but rather something that is depicted. Thus, the equivalent of words, which serves as the basic units of rhetorical *compositio* is, in the case of pictorial *compositio*, part of the depicted scene. For Alberti, in other words, pictorial *compositio* is fully in the domain of what is depicted—the picture surface seems to play no essential role in pictorial *compositio*. That is, for Alberti, pictorial organization does not require anything akin to twofold attention—it is exclusively a matter of the depicted scene. Attention to the surface is entirely missing.

A further consideration in favor of the claim that we have no evidence that before the sixteenth century Western observers exercised twofold attention when looking at pictures comes from Michael Baxandall, who

analyzes at length the various visual skills that fifteenth-century Italian (educated) observers exercised when looking at paintings (Baxandall 1972). Not one of these (numerous and diverse) visual skills concerns the surface of the painting. In short, Baxandall's thorough analysis of fifteenth-century Italian written sources about picture perception gives us no reason to suppose that the fifteenth-century Italian (educated) observers attended to the properties of the picture surface. But then they did not exercise twofold attention either as this would presuppose attending to the surface (as well as to what is depicted in it).

One may object that (pace Baxandall) fifteenth-century Italian (educated) observers did attend to at least some features of the surface, namely, what it was made of: they did attend to the quantity and quality of ultramarine and gold used on the picture and this is not a feature of the depicted scene, but of the picture surface. While this is undeniable, attending to these features of the surface does not give rise to twofold attention as I defined this term above. Remember that twofold attention means attending to the relation between scene and surface: attending to a design-scene property. But attending to the quality and quantity of the ultramarine is not attention to the features of the surface that are responsible for depicting the represented scene. The quality and quantity of ultramarine is like the cracks in the paint in this respect. The awareness of the quality and quantity of ultramarine, like the cracks in the paint, does not contribute to our awareness of the depicted scene. Thus, attending to them may be an instance of surface attention, but it will not be an instance of twofold attention—they do not count as counterexamples.

These considerations may demonstrate that we do not have any evidence that fifteenth-century Italians did not exercise twofold attention. But of course the absence of evidence is not an evidence of absence: I did not give any positive evidence for the claim that fifteenth-century Italians did not attend this way. The following argument as well as the considerations presented in the next section are supposed to take us a step closer to this positive claim.

One striking aspect of pre-sixteenth-century paintings is the enormous effort painters made in order to avoid occlusion (see, e.g., Wölfflin 1888, Nanay 2015a). If they depict, say, twelve people in one picture, it happens very rarely that any of them is depicted even partially occluded (one exception is the representation of nondescript crowds, where occlusion is used). And if a table is depicted with lots of food items

and utensils and tools on it, each of the tools and utensils and food items are fully in view: not behind or in front of some other object. This changes quickly in the sixteenth century (especially quickly in the genre of food-related still lives), when occlusion was not avoided at all. This avoidance of occlusion is remarkably systematic and a very salient feature of pre-sixteenth-century pictures (and, curiously, also of pictures made by children under five, see Figure 7.4).

Now the question is the following. Suppose, for *reductio*, that people in the fifteenth century did exercise twofold attention: they attended to the features of the surface and of the depicted scene at the same time: they attended to the relation between surface features and scene features. If they really did so, they would have experienced these pictures as depicting extremely unlikely scenes: ones that are arranged in a special way such that no one occludes anyone else. As this almost never happens in real life and given the amount of technical skill geared towards the avoidance of occlusion, experiencing the depicted scene as very unlikely seems to be a very salient feature of the way these fifteenth-century observers experienced pictures. But as we have no reason to suppose that the unlikely nature of the scene was ever part of the fifteenth-century

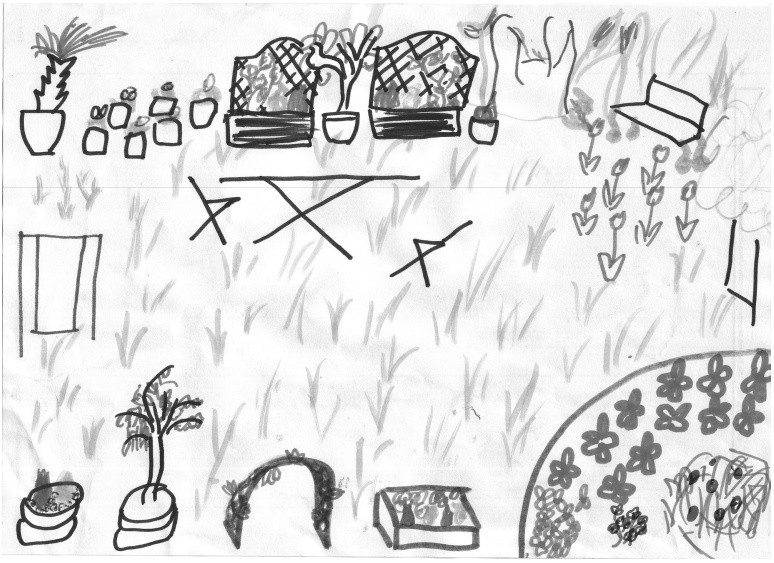

**Figure 7.1** Drawing by a five-year-old child (Hanna Nanay).

experience of pictures, let alone a salient part thereof, we have reason to deny the supposition for *reductio*—that people in the fifteenth century exercised twofold attention.

We can now (tentatively) conclude that while people in Western Europe exercised twofold attention when looking at pictures in the second half of the sixteenth century, they did not do so a century earlier. Attention, at least attention exercised in the case of looking at pictures, seems to have changed significantly sometime in the sixteenth century. Attention does have a history.

It is important to clarify the scope of this claim. Whose attention is it that is at stake here? I was exclusively talking about (educated) Western observers (mainly in Italy). Should we restrict my claim to that group? Is it the case that my argument really only supports a much more qualified claim, namely, that the attention of Italian humanist observers has a history? I don't think so. While the evidence for the exercise of twofold attention in the sixteenth century may be limited to a smallish part of the world—to Western Europe, it is important to note that this is supposed to serve as an illustration. Because we have a relatively rich body of sources about the ways in which people were thinking about pictures in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from Western Europe, we can localize this potential emergence of twofold attention relatively accurately. In the case of other parts of the world, we do not have sufficient sources to make similar claims. But it would be an interesting and important research project to establish when a similar transition took place (if it did) in the case of non-Western observers.

A final clarification, still on the scope of my claim: I argued that educated Italians in the fifteenth century did not exercise twofold attention when looking at pictures. It is important to emphasize that this claim does not imply that they were incapable of doing so. Presumably, they were. And some of them, namely, the artists themselves, did have to pay attention to the features of the picture surface when they were making marks on them that were supposed to give rise to the visual experience of the depicted scene. Artists of all ages, arguably, have to exercise twofold attention in order to be able to make marks on the surface that are seen as depictions of three-dimensional scenes. But my claim excludes the artists (at least artists at the moment of depicting something). My claim is that we have no evidence that those people (in

the fifteenth century) who were looking at pictures were encouraged or required to attend in a twofold manner.[9]

I need to emphasize that this change in the history of visual attention has a very limited scope: it only applies to visual attention exercised in the case of seeing pictures. As a result, the conclusion for the history of vision debate will also have a similarly limited scope. Our general 'mode of vision' (in the sense of Riegl or Benjamin) may or may not have a history. But our perception of pictures does have a history. As our practice of allocating visual attention when looking at pictures changed in the sixteenth century and as visual phenomenology systematically depends on visual attention, we can conclude that our visual experience of looking at pictures changed in the sixteenth century. This is a modest version of the history of vision claim, but hopefully one that can bring the two sides of the history of vision debate closer to one another (see also Nanay 2015f).

## 7.8 Cross-Cultural Variations in Attention

The argument I gave in the previous section for the claim that twofold attention has a history was somewhat tentative: I used evidence from art history to argue that there was a shift, sometime in the sixteenth century, in the way we exercised our attention when looking at pictures. But if we have strong independent reasons to hold that attention is uniform across cultures and historical eras, these considerations may sound somewhat weak.

The aim of this last section is to argue that we in fact have strong independent reasons to hold that the way we exercise our attention is far from uniform across cultures. But then we have equally strong reasons to hold that attention also varies depending on the historical era. And in the light of these background assumptions, the historical considerations of the last section may sound more convincing.

[9] It may seem odd that I said nothing about what may or may not have triggered this change in the way we are looking at pictures. And I do want to remain neutral about this here. One possibility, explored at length by Whitney Davis, is that it is the exposure of different kind of images that changes our way of looking at images (and, in the light of my proposal, changes our way of attending to them), resulting in a cyclical/dynamic process (Davis 2001, 2011, 2015). While this proposal is consistent with my argument here, my argument does not presuppose this way of looking at the history of vision claim.

In the last decade or so, more and more studies have been published about the differences in the way East Asians and Westerners exercise their visual attention. The general line of argument is that while Westerners attend more to focal objects, East Asians are more likely to attend to the background context. For example, when looking at a short footage of an aquarium, Westerners tend to attend to the moving fish, whereas East Asians tend to attend to features such as the bubbles and the seaweed (Masuda and Nisbett 2001).

Other studies show that Westerners and East Asians behave differently in change blindness experiments (Masuda and Nisbett 2006). Change blindness experiments are somewhat similar to inattentional blindness experiments inasmuch as they show that we fail to experience those aspects of the visual scene that we are not attending to. But this is achieved, in the case of change blindness experiments, by means of changing some relatively minor (although sometimes not so minor) features of the scene. This can take various forms, probably the most striking one is when during a film clip, some feature of the scene is changed very slowly. But it also works if the subjects are presented with two images (sometimes with a mask presented briefly between them). The subject fails to notice these changes, although they can be very significant indeed. The importance of the change blindness experiments in the present context is that Americans detect more changes occurring in the features of the focal objects, whereas Japanese subjects detect more changes occurring in the background.

There are many other experiments that point in the same direction. Eye-tracking studies suggest that American subjects focus longer (and sooner) on focal objects, whereas East Asians are more likely to focus away from the focal objects (Chua et al. 2005). And East Asians are much worse at the 'rod and frame' task than Americans, where subjects have to determine the orientation of a line that is framed in a rectangle. If the alignment of the line and the framing rectangle is not the same, all subjects experience an optical illusion with regards to the orientation of the line, but East Asians experience this illusion in a much more significant manner. And this is often explained with reference to their more holistic way of looking at visual scenes (Ji et al. 2000). Finally, East Asians seem to be better at attending to, encoding, and remembering relations between elements of a scene than Westerners who are better at

attending to, encoding, and remembering the features of the elements themselves (Goh et al. 2007).

These studies are often embedded in some larger scale conjectures about attitudinal differences between cultures—maybe Americans or Westerners in general are more individualist, whereas East Asian cultures are less individualistic and more communal (see Markus and Kitayama 1991, Nisbett et al. 2001, Nisbett 2003, and Boduroglu et al. 2009 for good overviews). These wider assumptions about large-scale cultural differences are controversial (and caused some media frenzy), but they are irrelevant from the point of view of this book. What is important is that there seems to be a well-documented difference in the way East Asians and Westerners exercise their attention. But if we don't want to attribute this difference to genetic factors (and we really shouldn't), then the reasons for these differences are cultural: they have to do with the way the subjects have been socialized (just what aspect of socialization makes the difference—the complexity of visual scenes routinely encountered, the differences in reading, etc.—is an open question, see Miyamoto et al. 2006; see also Talhelm et al. 2014 for the suggestion that the difference lies in agricultural practices!). But then, given that the way subjects have been socialized has changed significantly in the course of history, we have a very strong prima facie reason to hold that attention does indeed have a history.

One may be tempted to go further and draw some kind of conclusion about the cross-cultural aspects of distributed attention—the main theme of the book. I think we should resist this temptation. The experiments reported in this section, strictly speaking, say nothing about distributed attention, at least understood in the way I defined the concept in Chapter 2: as focused attention in terms of object and distributed attention in terms of properties. Most of these studies are really about cross-cultural differences with regards to focused attention to objects and distributed attention to objects. The distinction between attention to objects and attention to properties is not really on the radar of the psychologists working on cross-cultural variations in attention. So we are not in the position to draw conclusions about the aesthetic experiences of East Asians and Westerners on the basis of these experiments—more (and different) work would need to be done in order to do so. Differences in what properties of an object one is attending to are also much more difficult to detect than differences in what objects one is

attending to (as eye-tracking, which can help with the latter will clearly not help with the former).

I want to conclude this chapter with some very tentative musings about the historical nature of basically everything I have been talking about in this book. If it is true that our way of attending to pictures changed some time during the sixteenth century and this had something to do with attending in a twofold manner, which is a subspecies of distributed attention, then it is not an absolutely crazy claim to make that all the key concepts of aesthetics I analyzed in this book so far are in some ways rooted in the historical period (in Western art) since the sixteenth century. Aesthetic experience, as we know it, the aesthetic appreciation of pictures, as we know it, the sense of uniqueness, as we now understand this concept, are all concepts that have a historically limited scope. The way people related to artworks (or nature or any other things we are now likely to experience in an aesthetic manner) before that may have been very different. Aesthetics, not just as a subject, but as a distinctive way of relating to the world, may be a relatively new thing.

# 8

# Non-Distributed Attention

This book so far was about distributed attention and the various roles it plays in all kinds of aesthetic phenomena. The aim of this last chapter is to highlight important ways of engaging with artworks and other things aesthetically where our attention is not at all distributed.

I argued in Chapter 2 that distributed attention is a crucial feature of some paradigmatic kinds of aesthetic experiences. But the kind of aesthetic experience I focused on in Chapter 2 is not the only kind of experience aesthetics is about. Aesthetics has a lot to say about phenomena like identification with a character, experiences of narratives, engagement with fiction, catharsis, and so on. None of these experiences typically involve distributed attention. In fact, the point could be made that what is distinctive about these experiences is that our attention is very much focused. The aim of this chapter is to give a quick overview of how philosophy of perception can help us to understand some of those experiences that loom large in aesthetics where our attention is not distributed.

## 8.1 Attentional Synchrony

A good entry point to the distinction between distributed and non-distributed attention is the set of results about how we attend to moving pictures. When you are looking at a painting or a drawing, there is no strict limit on how thoroughly and for how long you are attending to various features of the picture. But in the case of moving pictures, there is such a limit—the images you are looking at change. Thus, this medium is especially important for the purposes of understanding how our attention changes as the images we are looking at change. This can be done relatively easily (at least as far as overt

attention, that is, attention accompanied by eye movements, is concerned) with the help of an eye-tracker.

One important concept in this experimental paradigm is that of attentional synchrony (Smith and Henderson 2008, Smith and Mital 2013). There are some films in which the part of the screen where subjects are fixating at any point of time is remarkably similar across subjects. These films actively guide the spectator's attention to a very specific part of the screen. If we compare the fixation point of all the subjects at any given frame, there is very little variation in this fixation point—and this can be true throughout the entire film. In these cases, the attentional synchrony is very high: different subjects attend to the very same things throughout the film.

Some other films are not like this. In the case of these films, different subjects will attend to different parts of the screen: these films are not very good at actively guiding the viewers' attention (or they have no intention to do so). These films have low attentional synchrony. One's film preferences may show very close correlation with the attentional synchrony value. Films by Tarkovsky or Antonioni or 1960s modernist films in general are likely to show a low attentional synchrony value, whereas action films and apparently Hitchcock's films show a high value. It is an open question what triggers attentional synchrony: movements, scene content, composition, or dynamics (or something else entirely) (Smith and Henderson 2008).

The reason why this contrast between high and low attentional synchrony is important from our point of view is that high attentional synchrony seems to imply at least a certain degree of focused attention. I say that it implies at least a certain degree of focused attention because, as I argued in Chapter 2, the eye-tracker can only tell us about our spatial overt attention. But even if our overt attention is focused to a certain spatial region of the screen, this does not exclude the possibility of attending to different properties (in a distributed manner) of this part of the screen. It is also silent about our covert attention, that is, attentional shifts that happen without any eye movements. Nonetheless, bracketing these considerations, if the subjects' attention were not focused, they would not be all fixating on the same object: high attentional synchrony seems to imply at least a certain degree of focused attention. Note that the converse claim is more problematic: low attentional synchrony does not imply distributed attention—it is possible that

all the subjects have focused attention, but they are focusing this attention on different parts of the screen.

But then it seems that much of our responses to at least some kinds of works of art is dominated by focused attention. Distributed attention and the kind of aesthetic experience it may give rise to is important for understanding some aspect of our aesthetic engagement with artworks (and other narrative constructions), but it is clearly not the full story: the aim of this chapter is to explore one important way in which artworks and other objects are experienced that seem to presuppose focused attention and that nonetheless fall squarely in the domain of aesthetics: identification or engagement with a character.

## 8.2 Vicarious Experiences

In Chapter 6, in order to motivate the concept of unprompted eye (and to illustrate the distinction between distributed attention and non-distributed attention), I alluded to the example of a hungry person who is raiding her fridge. I said that the attention of such a person is likely to be focused with regards to the properties she is attending to (although it may be, and is likely to be, distributed with regards to the object of her attention). She is likely to see the contents of the fridge as belonging to one of two categories: edible or not edible.

The Kantian insight about this kind of experience is that it is clearly not an aesthetic experience—the general moral is that practical interest in an object excludes the possibility of having an aesthetic experience of this object. And this insight was nicely captured by the differences in the way we are attending to this object: practical interest seems to presuppose focused attention to the practically useful properties of the object, whereas at least in some kinds of aesthetic experiences, our attention seems to be distributed.

And this raises a puzzle: when we are engaging with works of art, we are very rarely driven by practical interests (bracketing, for a moment, the engagement of professional art critics). When looking at a landscape painting, we may of course have some practical interests in mind—say, we may want to know on the basis of the species of the depicted trees what part of the world this landscape is to be found in. But most of the time, we have no such practical interests. The same goes for our

engagement with music, film, and literature. But then what explains the fact that our attention is focused so often?

More needs to be said about what is meant by practical interests here. When I said that much of our engagement with works of art is devoid of practical interests, what I meant is that it is devoid of self-centered practical interests: the properties of the artwork I am attending to are unlikely to be relevant to the performance of any of my own actions. Whatever happens on the stage or on screen, I am unlikely to jump up from my seat in the audience and do anything (setting aside cases where I just walk out because the performance or film is too awful). And whatever happens on stage or on the screen is in some important sense cut off from what I can and would do: the space of the theatre performance or of the film and the space I, the spectator, occupy are not the same space. Even if I get up to punch someone in the face, I would not punch Hamlet, but rather the actor playing Hamlet. And the best I can do in the case of a film screening is to damage the silver screen.

So at least in this sense, our engagement with works of art seems to involve a certain degree of detachment: we occupy the perspective of a detached spectator, whose practical interests are cut off from what is going on in the artwork. I may still have practical interests of various kinds: a mosquito bite on my neck may need scratching or the lady sitting in front of me with a large hairdo may block much of my view of the stage, for example. But these practical interests are cut off from the work of art itself. My own actions, potential or actual, tend to be utterly irrelevant when engaging with works of art.[1] But then what is it, if not self-centered practical interests, that focuses our attention?

The general strategy I will explore in this chapter is that much of the time, our engagement with a work of art has a lot to do with actions: not with our own actions, but with one of the protagonists' action. Simply put, the practical interest that focuses our attention is not self-centered, but other-centered practical interest, where this other, whose actions and practical interests color our experience is someone in the space of the

[1] I'm leaving aside participatory works of art that explicitly aim to trigger the spectator's actions. In one of the performances (*Learning to Fly*) of the avant-garde theatre company, De La Guarda, the performers are tied to ropes and are jumping and flying above the audience before descending and starting to interact with the audience members. One of the performers, for example, started undressing me—this performance is difficult to watch in a completely detached manner.

film or picture or theatre performance. While our engagement may indeed be detached from our own self-centered practical interests, it is not detached from practical interests in general—importantly, it is not detached from other-centered practical interests.

I will use the umbrella term of 'vicarious experience' to label experiences where other-centered practical interests color our experience (a more precise definition will follow). I will focus on vicarious experiences in the context of aesthetics here, but it is important to note that vicarious experiences constitute an important and somewhat underexplored phenomenon when it comes to our everyday interactions with others. If I see that you are about to step into a large puddle of mud, I do not see this puddle in a completely detached manner—although I myself may be far away from it and thus there is no danger that I would step in it. Rather, I see the puddle as being relevant to your actions or your practical interests. We engage with others in this vicarious manner remarkably often. One salient example is watching sport events like a football game: when you see the ball bouncing towards the striker, your own self-centered practical interests are obviously irrelevant: you are far far away from both the ball and the striker. But it would be odd to say that you see the ball in a completely detached manner: a more natural way of describing your experience is that you see the ball as relevant to the practical interests of some of the football players: you experience the ball as something that could or should be kicked by one of the players—you experience it vicariously.

Here is a simple way of thinking about vicarious experience: if the content of one's experience cannot be fully characterized without reference to someone else's action, it is a vicarious experience. The content of my experience of the ball bouncing towards the striker cannot be fully characterized without reference to the striker's action (of, presumably, kicking it)—hence, it is a vicarious experience.

I take this to be a harmless piece of conceptual apparatus. We often have experiences the content of which cannot be fully characterized without reference to our own action: we may call experiences of this kind action-oriented experiences. When you are running to catch your bus, the content of your experience (of, say, the obstacles in your way) cannot be characterized without reference to your action of running. Vicarious experiences are described in an analogous manner: when you are looking at your friend running to catch her bus, the content of

your experience cannot be fully characterized without reference to her action.

Actions can, of course, characterize the content of one's experiences in a variety of ways: when I have a vicarious experience, the other person's action can show up in my experience in a number of ways. Some of these will be more interesting from our point of view than others. If I see you raise your arm, this will count as a vicarious experience: the content of my experience cannot be fully characterized without reference to your action. But it is important that these are not the only, and, from the point of view of our discussion, not even the most interesting, cases of vicarious experience. These more interesting cases include experiencing something as an obstacle to your action, as a facilitator of your action, as affording an action, as something you should perform an action with, as something you shouldn't perform an action with, and so on. These are all experiences that would count as vicarious experiences in my terminology. And none of these experiences imply that I see you performing an action. Nor do they necessarily imply that you are in the position to do so—maybe you are not aware of the puddle you are about to step into (an action that is likely to figure in the content of my vicarious experience).

Some, but presumably not all, vicarious experiences are perceptual experiences. At least on some account of how rich perceptual content can be (see Chapter 4 on this), we can literally see something as an obstacle to your action, as a facilitator of your action, as affording an action, as something you should perform an action with, as something you shouldn't perform an action with. These experiences would then be vicarious perceptual experiences. But some other vicarious experiences may not be perceptual experiences. Further, some vicarious experiences may be emotionally charged—and we can give an account of vicarious emotions that parallels that of vicarious experiences, where the content of our experience cannot be fully characterized without reference to someone else's emotions (see, e.g., Manini et al. 2013 for some empirical backing). This concept of vicarious emotional experience may also play an important role in addressing some classic aesthetics questions like the paradox of fiction and catharsis (see Nanay ms), but I will not discuss it here (because I am not sure that this discussion would fall under the heading of aesthetics as philosophy of perception, even in my fairly liberal way of understanding what philosophy of perception is).

Vicarious experiences may constitute an important way of understanding some simple and rudimentary forms of social cognition (which is different from 'theory of mind' and mirror mechanisms) (see Nanay 2013a, Chapter 6). But the aim of this chapter is to argue that it is also an important aspect of some central phenomena in aesthetics, for example, identification.[2] As vicarious experiences form a subspecies of experiences that are very much dependent on our practical interests, our attention is as focused as in the case of the scenario of the hungry person looking for food. If we see a video footage of someone hungry looking for food, our attention tends to be focused in a very similar way. Vicarious experiences prompt the eye in the same way as self-centered interests do. And these episodes of focused attention play a crucial role in understanding some important aesthetic phenomena.

## 8.3 Identification and Character Engagement

Identification or emotional engagement with a protagonist is an important element in reacting to any (narrative) work. If I am sitting in a movie theatre, watching a James Bond movie, it is difficult not to identify with or empathize with or feel for or emotionally engage with one (or more) of the fictional characters—Bond or the Bond-girl or maybe the villain (or someone else). The question then is this: what exactly happens in our mind when we identify or engage with a protagonist? What are the mental processes that make it possible for us to do so?

I have used terms like 'identification', 'empathy', and 'character engagement' more or less interchangeably in the previous paragraph. But they are, of course, very different. Our engagement with protagonists can be an emotionally loaded affair, but it doesn't need to be. And if it is emotional engagement, it can take the form of empathy, sympathy, fellow feeling, and so on. Further, at least some of these terms, especially

[2] The concept of vicarious experience may also be very helpful in explaining other important aesthetic phenomena, such as our engagement with narratives. Not all narrative works are works of art: the story my daughter made up yesterday is, for example, not. And not all works of art are narrative. This raises a genuine philosophy of perception question (at least when pictorial narratives are concerned): how do we experience narrative works differently from non-narrative ones (Branigan 1992; Carroll 2001d; Velleman 2003; Currie 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, Matravers 2014)? And, as I argued in Nanay 2009b, here, again, vicarious experience may be the clue to understand how we engage with narratives. I will not repeat this argument here.

that of identification, have been heavily criticized for their vagueness (Carroll 1990, pp. 88–96, Carroll 2001a, pp. 306–16, see also Carroll 2008, Plantinga 2009): sometimes we say that we identify with a protagonist when we just like her, or when we empathize with her, or when we sympathize with her. It is not clear which of these notions identification encompasses.

Because of these considerations, I will not try to define 'identification' or 'empathy' or 'fellow feeling'. Instead, I will talk about the very general concept of 'character engagement' (which I borrow from Murray Smith, see Smith 1995, 1997) that is supposed to encompass all of these various ways of relating to protagonists. As character engagement is a general term for covering all the different ways of relating to a protagonist, it is unlikely that it would have necessary and sufficient conditions. Character engagement is a heterogeneous phenomenon: it encompasses very different attitudes towards the protagonist.

For these reasons, I do not intend to give an exhaustive characterization of character engagement. What I aim to do is to question the generality of the standard accounts of character engagement (imagining from the inside, sympathy, mirroring, direct perception) and argue that what plays a more important role in our engagement with protagonists is a much simpler attitude towards the protagonist: vicarious experience.

## 8.4 Epistemic Asymmetry Scenarios

Here is a problem all accounts of identification or character engagement need to address. Some kind of similarity between the spectator and the protagonist is built into the very concept of most forms of character engagement (most explicitly into the concept of identification, but also, according to most accounts, into that of empathy).[3] The problem is that sometimes our engagement with the protagonist can be very strong even if there is a significant *dis*similarity between the spectator and the protagonist. The relevant dissimilarity I want to focus on is epistemic dissimilarity: it often happens that even if we know something crucial about the protagonist or her situation that she herself doesn't, our engagement is still very strong: as strong as (or maybe even stronger

[3] Accounts that emphasize the importance of sympathy are exceptions from this—I will say more about them in Section 8.5.2.

than) our engagement in cases where there is no such epistemic asymmetry. Here is a paradigmatic example from Alfred Hitchcock:

> Even in this case [where we know that there is a bomb concealed in a briefcase in the July 20 plot on Hitler's life] I don't think the public would say, 'Oh, good, they're all going to be blown to bits,' but rather, they'll be thinking, 'Watch out. There's a bomb!' What it means is that the apprehension of the bomb is more powerful than the feelings of sympathy or dislike for the characters involved. [. . .] Let's take another example. A curious person goes into somebody else's room and begins to search through the drawers. Now, you show the person who lives in that room coming up the stairs. Then you go back to the person who is searching, and the public feels like warning him, 'Be careful, watch out. Someone's coming up the stairs.' Therefore, even if the snooper is not a likeable character, the audience will still feel anxiety for him. Of course, when the character is attractive, as for instance Grace Kelly in *Rear Window*, the public's emotion is greatly intensified. (Truffaut 1967, p. 73)

Hitchcock could be interpreted as making two claims, one stronger than the other. The stronger claim is that there are cases of character engagement where if the mental states of the spectator and the protagonist are less similar, the engagement is stronger than it would be if they were more similar—there are cases of character engagement where we engage more strongly with a protagonist if we know something important about the protagonist's situation which the protagonist herself does not know than we would engage with the relevant character if the relevant information was also available to the protagonist herself. While this may or may not be true, I want to focus on the weaker claim, according to which there are cases of character engagement where we engage as strongly with a protagonist if we know something important about the protagonist's situation which the protagonist herself does not know as we would engage with her if the relevant information were also available to the protagonist herself. In other words, having information about the protagonist that she doesn't have in no ways impedes our strong engagement with her.

It is important to note right at the beginning that cases that are similar to the one Hitchcock describes are not few and far between, thus, no account of identification or character engagement can ignore them (see Carroll 1990, p. 231; Grodal 1997, p. 84; Gaut 2010, p. 143 for some examples). They are also very important in narrative art forms other than film, as Lessing emphasized almost 250 years ago in the *Hamburg*

*Dramaturgy* (Lessing 1767/1879, Chapter 48).[4] I call scenarios of this kind 'epistemic asymmetry scenarios'.

Here is a classic example of an epistemic asymmetry scenario: in the last act of *Hamlet*, Gertrude picks up a cup and makes a toast with it. We know that the cup contains poisoned wine, which is meant for Hamlet, but Gertrude does not know this. A spectator of this scene has a mental state that is very different from Gertrude's mental state as the spectator is aware of something Gertrude is not: that the wine is poisoned.

The question I will ask in the next section is how this phenomenon, our identification or character engagement in the case of epistemic asymmetry scenarios, could be considered to be consistent with *any* of the theories of identification or character engagement. I will point out that none of the widely accepted accounts of identification or character engagement can explain the reaction we have in the face of epistemic asymmetry scenarios. Then, I argue that the 'vicarious experience' account of character engagement can explain our reaction in the epistemic asymmetry scenarios better than its alternatives.

## 8.5 The Challenge from Epistemic Asymmetry Scenarios

The aim of this section is to show that the most influential accounts of character engagement are in trouble when it comes to explaining our engagement with fictional characters in epistemic asymmetry scenarios. I examine four such accounts: (a) the imagining from the inside account, (b) the sympathy account, (c) the direct perception account, and (d) the mirror neuron account.

### *8.5.1 Character engagement as imagining from the inside*

The first view of character engagement I want to examine is that this process is a version of 'imagining from the inside' (some representative

[4] Here is a quote that is eerily similar to Hitchcock's: "For one instance where it is useful to conceal from the spectator an important event until it has taken place there are ten and more where interest demands the very contrary. By means of secrecy a poet effects a short surprise, but in what enduring disquietude could he have maintained us if he had made no secret about it! Whoever is struck down in a moment, I can only pity for a moment. But how if I expect the blow, how if I see the storm brewing and threatening for some time about my head or his?" (Lessing 1767/1879, p. 377).

examples: Walton 1990, p. 255; Currie 1995, p. 153; Wollheim 1974, p. 187; Wollheim 1987, p. 103, p. 129). Most of those who describe character engagement in terms of empathy also belong to this broad account as they tend to go on to describe empathy as imagining from the inside (Neill 1996, Feagin 1996, Smith 1997, Grodal 2009, Vaage 2010, Tan 2013).[5]

But what does imagining from the inside mean? I take the most plausible way of analyzing imagining X from the inside to be imagining being in X's situation (see Williams 1973; Gaut 1999, 2010; Smith 1997; Darwall 1998; Nanay 2010c; the idea goes back to at least Adam Smith, see Smith 1759/2002, p. 11).[6] One crucial question about imagining from the inside account is what we should mean by X's situation: X's physical situation? X's psychological situation? A combination of the two? Depending on the way we interpret this notion, we end up with very different accounts of imagining from the inside and of character engagement.

If we take X's situation to be X's psychological situation, then imagining being in X's situation will collapse into something much simpler: imagining having X's experiences (which is Walton's view in a nutshell, see Walton 1990, p. 255, p. 344). That's one option. But not taking X's situation to be X's psychological situation would not mean that we should restrict X's situation to X's physical situation. X's situation should also include facts about what X knows. Suppose X is attacked by someone. The experience of imagining myself in X's situation will depend on whether X has a gun in her pocket, as this is an important element of X's physical situation. Similarly, the experience of imagining myself in X's situation will also depend on whether X knows something about the attacker that could be a means of defending herself (say, by blackmailing). And this is not an element in X's physical, but epistemic situation.

A sophisticated formulation of the imagining from the inside view comes from Berys Gaut (Gaut 1999, see also Gaut 1998). He defines

[5] The popularity of the concept of 'imagining from the inside' is very much intertwined with the popularity of the concept of 'simulation' in philosophy of mind and especially in understanding social cognition (see Heal 1995; Gordon 1995a, 1995b; Goldman 1992, 2006a, 2006b; Ravenscroft 1998, Currie and Ravenscroft 2002).

[6] 'As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation' (Smith 1759/2002, p. 11).

identification as imagining oneself in someone else's situation, but argues that identification is not monolithic. It is 'aspectual'. Perceptual identification means that I imagine having the same (physical) point of view as X. Affective identification is imagining feeling what X feels, motivational identification is imagining wanting what X wants and epistemic identification is imagining believing what X believes. I can identify with X perceptually without identifying with her affectively, etc.

It is important to emphasize that recently more and more philosophers consider our engagement with protagonists to be a heterogeneous phenomenon, but take imagining from the inside to be the most important, but not necessarily the only one, component of this engagement (Smith 1995, Gaut 2010). My aim is to emphasize another component of character engagement, that has been ignored so far, namely, vicarious experience. But given that both the more recent versions of the imagining from the inside view and my own view take character engagement to be a heterogeneous phenomenon, proponents of the imagining from the inside view could easily acknowledge that vicarious experience is an important way of engaging with protagonists. And I certainly acknowledge that imagining from the inside is an important way of engaging with protagonists. But it is inconsistent with the reaction we have in the face of epistemic asymmetry scenarios.

Again, the problem of epistemic asymmetry scenarios was the following. There are cases of character engagement where if the mental states of the spectator and the protagonist are not at all similar, nonetheless, the spectator's engagement is very strong—as strong as it would be if the mental states of the spectator and the protagonist were more similar. Take Hitchcock's example where we see that 'a curious person goes into somebody else's room and begins to search through the drawers [and we see] the person who lives in that room coming up the stairs'. We know something the protagonist does not (namely, that someone's coming up the stairs). But our engagement is as strong as it would be if the protagonist knew everything we know. In short, epistemic similarity seems to be irrelevant when it comes to character engagement.

As we have seen, when we imagine ourselves in someone's situation, her situation should also include facts about what she knows: the situation we imagine ourselves in is her situation *as presented to her*. Thus, when I imagine myself in the snooper's situation, I must imagine myself in her situation as presented to her: as a situation where there is no

looming danger of someone coming up the stairs. But this is not what we experience: we do not experience what we would experience if we were in an undisturbed snooper's situation: if we did so, we would not react so strongly.[7] But any account of character engagement needs to explain why our reaction is so strong in epistemic asymmetry scenarios. And the imagining from the inside account does not seem to be able to do so.[8]

It could be objected that what is responsible for our strong identification or character engagement in these scenarios is not the epistemic asymmetry between the protagonist and the viewer—that we know something very important about her situation that she herself doesn't—but Hitchcock's trademark method of suspense. My answer is the following. In the interview the above quote is from, Hitchcock explicitly contrasts suspense and surprise: the big difference is that in the case of surprise the epistemic asymmetry is missing and, as a result, the audience's engagement is much shorter and weaker (see also the Lessing quote above). He contrasts a scene where a bomb suddenly goes off (where there is no epistemic asymmetry: neither the audience nor the protagonists know about the bomb) with one where the audience knows that there is a bomb ticking long before it goes off (but the protagonists don't). In other words, many (although maybe not all) suspense effects are achieved with the help of what I called 'epistemic asymmetry scenarios'

[7] Proponents of the imagining from the inside account could play around with what situation one imagines oneself in: maybe the situation the snooper will be after she is being discovered? This will not work as the protagonist will have a very different experience after being discovered (maybe feeling embarrassed) from the one we, the audience, feel. The same considerations would apply if we take the situation one imagines oneself in to be the counterfactual situation of what it would be like if the snooper knew that there is someone coming up the stairs.

[8] If we use Gaut's non-monolithic notion of identification/character engagement, we still get a version of this problem, as what makes our identification/engagement with the snooper in Hitchcock's example so strong is something epistemic: the fact that we know something she doesn't. I could imagine myself in her perceptual situation, but this would not help us to account for my strong engagement with her. The same goes for the other, motivational and affective, aspects. It seems that what is responsible for my strong engagement with the snooper is my awareness of something epistemic: the epistemic differences between her and me. But the epistemic differences between the character and me cannot be part of her situation. Thus, in spite of the fact that Gaut's version of the imagining from the inside account would not rule out non-epistemic identification, it still does not seem to be consistent with our (epistemic) character engagement in epistemic asymmetry scenarios (something Gaut explicitly admits in Gaut 2010, pp. 145–6).

(see also Smith 2000). Suspense is not an additional miraculous method for making the audience nervous on top of epistemic asymmetry scenarios. The use of epistemic asymmetry scenarios is one of the main ingredients of suspense (as Hitchcock explicitly pointed out).[9]

### *8.5.2 Character engagement as sympathy*

Imagining from the inside is an important account of character engagement, but it is not the only one. My claim was that no existing account of character engagement can explain our engagement in epistemic asymmetry scenarios. The second such account I want to now turn to aims to explain character engagement as 'sympathy' or 'assimilation' (Carroll 1990, pp. 88–96; Carroll 2001a, pp. 306–16; Carroll 2008, pp. 177–84; Plantinga 2009, pp. 87–111; see also Gaut 2010 for analysis).

According to this view, imagining from the inside is not a necessary and not even a very widespread way of engaging with protagonists (although it can happen). Rather, the central case of our engagement with protagonists is sympathy, by which Carroll, the main proponent of the view, means 'a non-passing pro-attitude toward another person' (Carroll 2008, p. 177). And the claim is that 'sympathy for the protagonist is the most pervasive emotion from the beginning to the end of the movie' (Carroll 2008, p. 178).

As advocates of the sympathy view often talk about epistemic asymmetry scenarios (see, for example, Carroll 1990, p. 231), one would expect this view to be consistent with the strong engagement we experience in these scenarios. But it turns out that it isn't, as Hitchcock's Hitler example demonstrates: one would hope that very few of us have 'a non-passing pro-attitude towards' Hitler, but, as Hitchcock shows, it is very easy to trigger strong engagement with him. Sympathy is undoubtedly an important element of the complex process of character engagement, but it can't be the full story. And it also can't be what explains our strong reaction in epistemic asymmetry scenarios—in spite of the fact that these accounts often use examples of this kind.

[9] There are cases of suspense without epistemic asymmetry if we accept, for example, Noël Carroll's account of suspense, according to which "suspense only takes hold where the probabilities seem to be running against some outcome that I prefer" (Carroll 2003, p. 82, see also Carroll 1984, 1996, 2008 and Smith 2000).

### *8.5.3 Character engagement as direct perception*

The third account of character engagement we need to consider claims that our cognitive and emotional engagement with others (protagonists as well as real people) sometimes consists of the direct perception of emotions or other mental states on the other person's (in our case, the protagonist's) face (Gallagher 2001, 2005, 2008; Zahavi 2008; Ratcliffe 2007; Hutto 2007, 2011; de Bruin et al. 2011).

I am not sure how this account can be made more precise: what kind of perceptual process would count as the direct perception of someone's emotions or mental states (McNeill 2012, Smith 2010, Goldie 2007, Dretske 1973, Cassam 2007). But whatever this perceptual process may be, it seems to presuppose that I see the other person's face (or at least her expressive bodily comportment). And it is easy to see that there is no such requirement in epistemic asymmetry scenarios. If we couldn't see the snooper's face in Hitchcock's example, we would still engage with her very strongly. The direct perception approach may account for some cases of character engagement (maybe ones where the character's face expresses strong emotions), but clearly not all of them—and not the ones under scrutiny here.

### *8.5.4 Character engagement as mirror neuron activation*

The fourth account of character engagement (which may or may not be a genuine alternative to the imagining from the inside account) is about the importance of mirror neurons in our cognitive and emotional engagement with others (Gallese 2007, Gallese-Goldman 1998, Gallese et al. 2004, Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008, Sinigaglia 2009). The general idea is that rudimentary forms of social cognition can be explained with reference to the mirror neuron system. The mirror neuron system (or, rather, systems, as there are many mirror neuron systems in the brain, but I will focus on the one in the parieto-frontal network) consists of bi-modal neurons that get activated both when the agent performs an action and when she perceives another agent performing this action (both in rhesus monkeys and in humans: Gallese et al. 1996, Umilta et al. 2008, see Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008 for a summary).

Importantly, mirror neurons do not get activated when the perceived agent does not perform a goal-directed action but exhibits a mere (not goal-directed) bodily movement (Kakei et al. 2001, Umilta et al. 2008). If

the other agent is grasping a ball, the mirror neurons fire, if she is making a grasping movement without there being anything to be grasped, they do not. And as mirror neurons fire when we see protagonists performing actions as much as they do when we see real people, this appeal to mirror neurons may be a new way of explaining our engagement with protagonists (Gallese 2005, 2007, but see also the worries raised by Davies 2014).

Again, this may be so and it may constitute a genuine form of engaging with protagonists (although the mirror neuron story is consistent with at least some versions of the imagining from the inside explanatory scheme, see esp. Goldman 2006b, Gallese and Goldman 1998). But this form of engaging with others is not what happens in epistemic asymmetry scenarios, as in these cases the protagonist often does not do anything, so in that case, our mirror neurons remain silent.

## 8.6 Vicarious Experiences and Epistemic Asymmetry Scenarios

My aim here is to outline a new account of character engagement that is consistent with our reaction to epistemic asymmetry scenarios. I do not intend to give necessary and sufficient conditions. Character engagement is a very diverse phenomenon. Sometimes we engage with a protagonist just because she reminds us of a close friend. It seems unlikely that any given theory could capture all aspects of this multifaceted phenomenon. My claim is that vicarious experience is a crucial, central aspect of our engagement with protagonists.

The prima facie intuition would be that engagement with a protagonist does not involve anything action-related, since what is so unique about the reception of films, theatre performances, and the like is that no matter what happens on the screen or on the stage, we are very unlikely to intervene or even be tempted to do so.

Thus, the spectator is rarely inclined to perform any actions in a theatre or in front of a painting that would be directed at the depicted scene. We are unlikely to have self-centered action-oriented experiences directed at the film or the theatre performance: the content of our experience is very easy to characterize without reference to our own actions. But we do very often have other-centered action-oriented

experiences—we experience objects around the protagonists in a vicarious manner: in a way that cannot be fully characterized without the protagonist's action.

Take the following example: a sequence from a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Tom is chasing Jerry, Jerry ends up in a corner, and Tom is approaching threateningly. There happens to be a hammer lying about not far away from Jerry. Let us suppose that the spectator of this sketch engages with Jerry. My claim is that she experiences the hammer in a way that has a lot to do with Jerry's potential action of defending himself against Tom—she perceives it as a potential weapon, as something Jerry could use, as something Jerry should use, etc. The content of our experience cannot be fully characterized without reference to Jerry's action. We have a vicarious experience.

It is worth considering how this account differs from the four mainstream views of character engagement. We can engage with Jerry in this vicarious manner even if we don't see his face—this is a difference from the direct perception view. And we can engage with him if he is motionless—a contrast with the mirroring view. Further, we do not need to have 'a non-passing pro-attitude' (Carroll 2008, p. 177) toward Jerry in order to engage with him vicariously—I may hate mice and could still engage this way. Finally, I can see the hammer as a potential weapon for Jerry without imagining myself in his situation—for example, if Jerry is unaware of the hammer. Vicarious experience is a way of engaging with fictional characters that is genuinely different from imagining from the inside, sympathy, mirroring, and direct perception.

The Tom and Jerry example is a little obvious. But beyond this example, what the spectator experiences vicariously, that is, in a way that cannot be characterized without reference to one of the protagonists' action, is very often not a gun, a hammer or a frying pan, but a person.[10] Also, most frequently, the action in question is not a simple motor action, but a more sophisticated, sometimes verbal action. Take, for example, the following scene from Bertold Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*. Mack is in prison and he does not see any way of getting out, when Lucy, the daughter of the police captain, enters. The audience recognizes that Mack must persuade her to set him free, in spite of their less than idyllic

[10] For example, this would be the way to analyze character engagement in the case of those modern dance performances where there are only dancers on stage.

past relationship. Again, if I am sitting in the audience watching this performance and if I engage with Mack, I am unlikely to experience Lucy in a detached way, ignoring how her advent might influence Mack's future. Rather, I experience Lucy in a way that is impossible to characterize without reference to Mack's actions and action-plans, maybe I experience her as a potential facilitator of Mack's very complex action of getting out of prison (see Nanay 2006).

How could Hitchcock's example be treated within the vicarious experience framework of character engagement? If I engage with the snooper, I see the man coming up the stairs as someone who will disrupt her action, someone from whom she should escape. I experience him in a vicarious manner: in a way that cannot be fully characterized without reference to her actions. No reason to think that our engagement with the protagonist would not be very strong.

The example from *Hamlet* can be handled in a similar manner. Again, in the last act the queen picks up a cup and toasts with it. We know that the cup contains poisoned wine, but Gertrude does not know this. If we engage with Gertrude, we perceive the cup as a threat: something to be avoided. We have a vicarious experience the content of which cannot be fully characterized without reference to Gertrude's action (of drinking from the cup). But as Gertrude has no idea that the wine is poisoned; our mental states are very different from hers. But this does not preclude strong engagement with her on the vicarious experience account.

To sum up, in cases of character engagement where the spectator is aware of crucial aspects of the situation the protagonist is not aware of, the spectator experiences an object in a vicarious manner: in a way that cannot be fully characterized without reference to this protagonist. But we also know that the protagonist does not perceive the object in the same action-relevant manner, either because she does not see the object at all (as in Hitchcock's snooper example) or because although she does see the object, she is not aware of its relevance to her actions (as in the Gertrude example). The mental states of the protagonist and the mental states of the spectator are very different; still, the spectator can engage with the protagonist and this engagement can be as strong as (or maybe even stronger than) it would be if their mental states were more similar.

The vicarious experience account can explain how our engagement with protagonists can be strong even in epistemic asymmetry scenarios. The other four accounts of character engagement cannot explain this.

This gives us strong incentive to take the vicarious experience account of character engagement seriously—not as an exclusive theory of what character engagement is, but as one of the many processes involved in character engagement.

## 8.7 Character Engagement beyond the Visual Arts

A final worry: maybe the vicarious experience account of character engagement works for the visual arts, but how about literature? Character engagement in the visual arts and in literature appears to be very similar. When I engage with Hamlet in the theatre and when I engage with him while reading the play, it seems as though there must be something in common between the mental processes that make this possible on the two occasions. The imagining from the inside and the sympathy accounts (but not the mirroring and the direct perception accounts) can give a continuous treatment of character engagement that encompasses both the visual and the non-visual cases. If my account does not, this can be seen as a weakness of my proposal. Thus, it needs to be examined how my account could be extended to non-visual cases of character engagement.

My proposal is that if the reader engages with the protagonist in a novel, the content of her experience cannot be fully characterized without reference to the action of one of the protagonists. In this case, the experience in question is not a perceptual experience, but rather a non-perceptual, presumably imaginative one. One way this can happen is that the reader *imagines* the objects around the protagonist in a way that is very much action-relevant. And this imaginative episode can influence one's overall experience significantly.

Take the following text from a Robbe-Grillet novel, *Jealousy*:[11]

> Now A . . . has come into the bedroom by the inside door opening onto the central hallway. She does not look at the wide open window through which—from the door—she would see this corner of the terrace. Now she has turned back towards the door [ . . . ]. (p. 39)

[11] In Allain Robbe Grillet: *Two Novels*. New York: Grove, 1965.

Reading these sentences, it is very difficult (although not impossible) to engage with the protagonist, because we have no idea what action, if any, the character, A . . . , should or would perform. The content of our experience when reading these sentences can very well be fully characterized without reference to A . . . 's action in any way. This, however, changes as soon as she is trying to perform an action:

> She leans toward Franck to hand him his glass. [ . . . ] The glasses are filled almost to the brim with a mixture of cognac and soda in which a little cube of ice is floating. In order to avoid the danger of upsetting the glasses in the darkness, A . . . has moved as near as possible to the armchair Franck is sitting in, her right hand carefully extending the glass with his drink in it. (p. 43)

It is much easier to engage with the character now, because she tries to perform a certain action: to give Franck the glass without spilling the cognac. The content of our experience of reading this is very difficult to fully characterize without reference to A . . . 's action of giving the glass to Franck without spilling the cognac. It is possible to engage with characters of whom we don't know what action they would or should perform, but this engagement is much less likely to occur. An additional advantage of my account is that it can explain this difference between our engagement with A . . . in the first and second quotes—since one involves vicarious experience, whereas the other does not.

The vicarious experience account of character engagement I outlined here does not aim to provide a general account of every aspect of character engagement. As we have seen, character engagement is a diverse phenomenon and imagining from the inside, sympathy, mirror neuron activation (as well as maybe direct perception) are likely to be important components of the way we engage with protagonists. But the four existing accounts of character engagement cannot cover the full story about all aspects of this phenomenon—importantly, they are inconsistent with our engagement in epistemic asymmetry scenarios. My aim was not to dismiss these accounts of character engagement altogether, but to add an important and thus far neglected aspect of character engagement: vicarious experience.

Further, I did not address the crucial question of *which* of the characters we are most likely to engage with. If we engage with a protagonist, then we experience objects around the character in a vicarious manner—in a way that cannot be fully characterized without reference to one of

the protagonist's actions. But what determines which character this will be? In the Brecht scene with Mack and Lucy, do I experience Lucy or Mack in a vicarious manner? Is it possible that I engage with one character at the beginning of the scene and with another at the end? My aim in this chapter was not to answer these questions, but to outline a framework for answering them.

## 8.8 Distributed and Non-Distributed Attention

The first seven chapters of this book were about those ways of engaging with objects aesthetically where our attention is distributed. In this last chapter, I analyzed some important aesthetic phenomena where our attention is not at all distributed. But it is important to emphasize that these two ways of engaging with objects aesthetically are not exclusive. I want to close with a case study of how these two different ways of attending could interact.

Abbas Kiarostami's films (or at least his films before 2002) all end in a curious manner. These films encourage very strong identification and character engagement throughout the film. Their protagonists really really want something. The young boy in *The Traveller* (*Mossafer*, 1974) really really wants to travel to Tehran to see a football game. Badii, the middle aged anti-hero of *Taste of Cherry (Ta'm e Guilass*, 1993) is desperately looking for someone who would bury him after he dies. In *Where is the Friend's Home?* (*Khane-ye doust kodjast?*, 1987) the schoolboy is trying to find his friend in an unknown village to give him back his exercise book. And so on. Because of the dominance of these strong desires to do something, it is very difficult not to identify with the protagonists of these films. It is very difficult not to identify with the schoolboy of *Where is the Friend's Home?*, climbing up a steep slope to the unknown village asking every stranger on his way about the whereabouts of his friend's house.

But in the last five minutes or so of these films, it all changes. The boy falls asleep, exhausted from his long journey, while waiting for the football game to begin. In *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Bad ma ra khahad bord*, 1999), the director who is hell-bent on making a film in a godforsaken village loses all his interest. In *Taste of Cherry*, Badii, after he found someone who may (or may not) bury him after his death, sits down on a bench and just sits there for long long minutes. The audience's

identification at this point completely falls apart. We are looking at the landscape Badii is looking at but it is very difficult to see it in a vicarious or in any kind of focused manner—the relevance of Badii's actions fades, making way to a much more detached, more 'Proustian' aesthetic experience. The last five minutes of these films work more like an avant-garde film, avoiding any identification. But precisely because this is only the last five minutes of the film, which follows ninety or so minutes of intense identification and non-distributed attention, the aesthetic experience that follows is all the more intense. These films provide a nice example of how distributed attention and non-distributed attention can combine in an aesthetically significant manner.

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