

Objects of Authority

A Postformalist Aesthetics

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Chapter 1

Postformalism

An Introduction

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An Introduction

1.1 Alien Aesthetics?

In one of Isaac Asimov's short stories, 'Nothing for Nothing', an alien starship visits Earth during the Upper Palaeolithic. The extraterrestrial explorers find nothing remarkable about the forms of intelligent life they come across until they discover cave paintings and bone carvings with figurative content. They are immediately startled by their depictive character – a form of representation previously unknown to them – and their 'pleasing' mode of delivery. It is obvious to them that these effects are not fortuitous and they do not hesitate to label them 'art' because they appreciate their 'pleasing shapes and combinations' and the way they depict their subject-matter (Figure 1.1).¹

In a somewhat inverted scenario introduced in the novel *The Dark Forest* by Liu Cixin, 23rd-century humans marvel at the beauty of a probe of 'a perfect teardrop shape' sent to Earth by the extraterrestrial Trisolaran civilization. Although no one is sure of its purpose, its 'non-functional design and beautiful form' suggest that it is 'a harmless work of art', perhaps a gift or a sign of good intentions. However, the droplet turns out to be a highly effective Trisolaran weapon, destroying in an instant the entire human cosmic fleet numbering hundreds of spaceships (Figure 1.2).²

In both stories, one form of life encounters the products of an as yet unknown activity of another form of life and from the fact that they are aesthetically satisfying draws the conclusion that the objects possess an aesthetic status – the public mandate to command aesthetic attention. Yet the governing spirit of the respective narratives is markedly different. In Asimov's fictional world, a minded creature capable of conscious reflection can reliably identify among alien objects those that have been made with the intention to command aesthetic attention. By contrast, Liu's story implies that the fact that one aesthetically appreciates an alien artefact cannot be in itself a reliable indicator of its having been produced with an aesthetic mandate: since every form of life organizes and reproduces its material environment and artefacts in accordance with its



Figure 1.1 Scene from 'Nothing for Nothing', artist's impression, © Václav Magid.

sensorimotor apparatus, the folly of Liu's humans was to assume that the norms underlying the reproduction of their material culture apply to an alien form of life as well. In Liu's fictional world, it would be highly irresponsible of Asimov's aliens to infer from their aesthetic reactions to the cave dwellers' products a match in their respective cognitive profiles – a lesson the cave dwellers' 23rd-century descendants will have learned the hard way.

The similarity between Asimov's aliens and humans is indeed suspicious. Apparently, not only do the former have eyesight or something akin to it, but they have at least an intuitive understanding of what representation and art are (even though they have never thought of making representational art themselves). They are intelligent creatures in much the same way modern humans are – crucially, they have subjective,

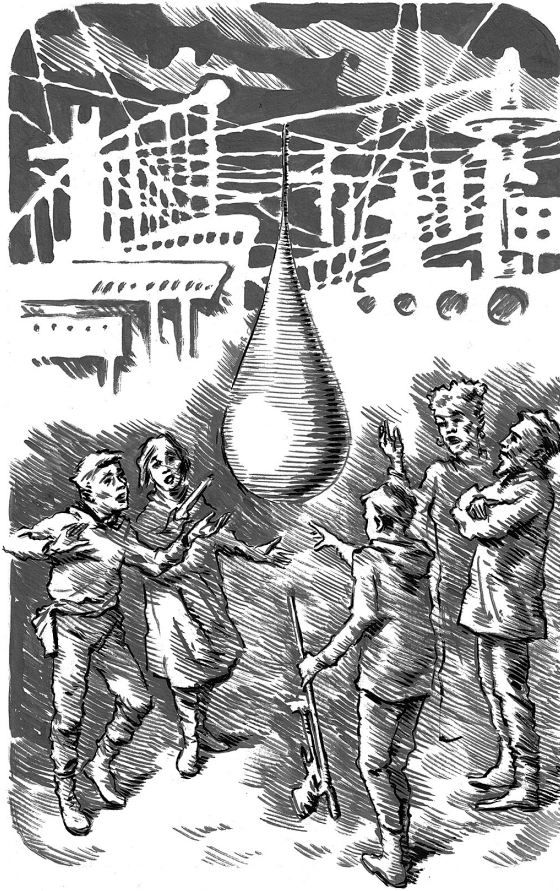


Figure 1.2 Scene from *The Dark Forest*, artist's impression, © Václav Magid.

conscious experiences of the world – even though they have evolved along an altogether independent path. What makes the extraterrestrials effectively alien is that they remain in the dark about the specific meanings attached to the picture-making activities whose fruits they have witnessed. In this aspect at least, they are not so different from human palaeoarchaeologists – like the famed Alexander Marshack who pitched the story's theme to Asimov. And perhaps that is how the parable from 'Nothing for Nothing' should be read: the fact that Palaeolithic cave paintings trigger the aesthetic instincts of creatures like us, endowed as we are with the mental capacity to reflect on shapes of things, provides testimony to the cave painters' ability to use the very same capacity to make artefacts intended for appreciation.

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If justified, this inference should be regarded as good news by anyone with a serious interest not so much in interplanetary ethnography, but in locating early manifestations of human or even hominin artistic behaviour or in interpreting artefacts of Earth-bound societies whose aesthetic context is for whatever reason inaccessible (for example, they have left no record of it or they lack any recognizable aesthetic discourse). It would be good news because it would raise aesthetic judgement to the level of a reliable heuristic tool of determining a remote public aesthetic status: Even if one lacked access to the cultural context of objects one appreciates for their mode of presentation or delivery – that is, if one had access to neither first- nor second-hand aesthetic expertise – it would be precisely because one responded to their mode aesthetically that one would have good grounds for classifying these artefacts as mandating appreciation.

But is the inference justified? Let us suppose that the episode from *The Dark Forest* were also to be read as a metaphoric account of an aesthetic engagement with a prehistoric object stripped of its cultural context. In keeping with the episode's morale, the explanation of one's aesthetic infatuation with prehistoric artefacts would turn on the conditions of the modern beholder's experience rather than on speculations about the original intended effects of viewing the artefact. The vertiginous wonder that takes hold of the 23rd-century humans upon encountering the alien object could, for example, be read as casting light on the 'archaeological sublime' experienced so often when one is confronted with a genuine artefact bearing the marks of a distinctly humanoid activity, yet from a very distant past.³ The strange mix of distance and familiarity would explain why certain rather simple prehistoric artefacts may strike some as glowing with an aura of singular aesthetic achievement, as if the main purpose of their producers were to provoke such marvel.⁴

More generally, the encounter with the Trisolaran probe would be supposed to demonstrate that it is impossible not to project the norms of one's own culture when aesthetically engaging with a product of a different form of life: one's appreciation is always embedded in and informed by one's local circumstances. Even if the alien object demonstrates features that invite aesthetic responses – the shape and sheen of the droplet probe or the depictive attributes of certain Palaeolithic cave paintings – one cannot infer from one's aesthetic response that the norms of its success or failure as a public artefact turn on commanding such or any other kind of aesthetic attention.

Asimov's alien aesthetics finds little common ground with Liu's cosmic anti-aesthetics. The former treats aesthetic appreciation (aesthetic judgement, aesthetic criticism) as a reliable means of recovering alien aesthetic mandates, whereas the latter denies it any such potential. At the level of interplanetary ethnography, or even interspecies ethology,⁵ alien aesthetics is just too optimistic; if the choice is between the two positions, then

the extreme scepticism of cosmic anti-aesthetics easily carries the day. But if the accounts are read as metaphoric parables about the stakes of identifying aesthetic mandates at a human scale, the position occupied by alien aesthetics appears less implausible because the facts of shared human psychology and sensorimotor apparatus are factored in. It now amounts to claiming that subjective ignorance or objective inaccessibility of artistic context are leveraged by the fact that, typically, an artefact 'can be seen to be art by those ignorant of the context in which it is produced';⁶ it is because certain objects are 'suggestive of aesthetic sensibilities in their humanoid makers' that one is supposed to ascribe to them the 'seeking [of] aesthetic effects' even if one has no further access to the artefact's cultural settings.⁷ For the optimist, to lack such access does not imply that its appreciation is completely isolated from any context whatsoever. It implies, rather, that one has access only to such context that is commonly accessible to any human being regardless of their cultural background.⁸ In short, the inclusion of apparently aesthetic means and the skill such implementation requires betrays an effort on the side of the producer to elicit in an audience an aesthetic response.

Can the scaling down to the level of anthropology and the factoring in of a 'natural, innate source: a universal human psychology'⁹ neutralize the animus of Liu's cosmic anti-aesthetics? Not necessarily. The anti-aesthetician may well concede that ignorance of technological and social conditions of production and consumption do not prevent one from recognizing an object as a product of intentional human action; they may even admit that at least in cases of well-preserved artefacts one can rely on one's sensory apparatus to respond to sensory attractors like lustre and symmetrical shape that suggest that some kind of proto-aesthetic sensitivity has been involved in an artefact's making. Yet they may still remain doubtful that with such minimal access to context one can pick out with any reliability and even in broad outline the intention to offer for appreciation. They may point out that in order to recognize symmetry, repetition, striking colours, lustre, or even figurative content as means of inviting appreciation rather than merely as serving to grab attention requires insight into artistic context, which mere exposure to the looks of an artefact cannot provide. Thus, for the sceptic, even at the level of the human species there are just no reliable intrinsic marks an artefact could display that, absent further information, would indicate that it was produced with the intention to offer it for appreciation.¹⁰

Importantly, the dispute is not about whether one can rely on one's aesthetic judgement as a justified means of appreciating adequately the aesthetic merits and demerits of an alien object. Both parties to the dispute agree that employing one's aesthetic sensitivities is not enough to appreciate specific artefacts from remote cultures adequately.¹¹ The dispute is rather about the role of aesthetic judgement in determining the public mandate of an alien object as a candidate for appreciation. The

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optimists argue that what we share with the producers of the distant artefacts – that is, our common human (perhaps even hominid) nature – ensures that we are attracted to similar aesthetic means. The sceptics counter that these means, no matter how visually attractive, cannot be treated as selected for aesthetic ends without access to the context-bound norms of their selection – in this sense, they should be treated as proto-aesthetic at best. Resolving the dispute would thus contribute less to the philosophical enquiry into aesthetic criticism (or what still often passes in the Anglophone academia for philosophical aesthetics), and more to the epistemology of the historic and social sciences dealing with material culture. An attempt at both the resolution and the contribution is the main subject of this book.

The resolution bears the name ‘postformalist aesthetics’. The label ‘postformalism’ serves the double function of denoting what the aesthetics is supposed to leave behind and of aligning the theory with postformalist art-historical writing.¹² Formalism has been criticized or championed under various descriptions in aesthetic scholarship,¹³ but for my purposes, I identify it with the principle that determining an aesthetic mandate of an artefact can rely solely and globally on one’s aesthetic assessment of an artefact’s mode of delivery or presentation (‘form’).¹⁴ On this understanding, the alien aesthetics implicit in Asimov’s story as well as its human-scale version are formalist. Anti-formalism flatly denies that one’s aesthetic sensitivities can contribute to this classificatory task because these are unavoidably contaminated by one’s own aesthetic culture and thus betray more about this culture’s norms of aesthetic engagement than about those of the producing culture.¹⁵ Aesthetic postformalism moves beyond the antinomy between formalism and anti-formalism by both (1) denying that the aesthetic appreciation of object’s formal configuration provides universal access to its aesthetic mandate and (2) claiming universal access to at least some conditions of aesthetic mandates. In this move, it traces the trajectory of postformalist art history.

1.2 Postformalist Art History

There has been little sustained discussion in art history about postformalism and its implications;¹⁶ it has been applied more as a rallying cry than a distinct programme. Some postformalists use the term to describe their endeavours to draw consequences for art history from the principle that norms of engaging visual attention have a history.¹⁷ Others perceive the essence of postformalism in interpreting artefacts along the lines of their potential existential import as it inscribes itself in their spatial settings.¹⁸ I argue that what unites their approaches is the shared commitment to the refocusing of art-historical theory towards the formatting, setting, and replication of visible marks as symptoms of norms of engagement. A caveat: While based on postformalist writings, my characterization is

admittedly motivated in part by my own agenda – it is more of a proposal of what postformalism in art history ought to be identified with rather than what those who band under its banner would readily recognize.

Postformalist art history purports to explain ‘why works of art look the way they look in terms of what art has been meant to do’.¹⁹ It ‘looks at what people in the past *did* with [artworks], what they used them to do, in order to infer the network of aspects that the things had for them’.²⁰ In other words, postformalism explains the appearance of material artefacts without taking their form as a given, accessible equally to their initial consumers as well as contemporary audiences. The postformalist takes seriously Heinrich Wölfflin’s claim that vision (or, in Bence Nanay’s upgrade, visual attention) has a history.²¹ The pragmatic stress on deriving art objects’ appearance from their use context means that the focus shifts from analysing style, iconography, and expressed meaning towards the question of how the formatting of an art object (not limited to its morphology, but including its placement, scale, material, and so on) implies the behaviour of its observers.²²

According to David Summers, the first self-described postformalist, aesthetic formalism results from a re-conceptualization of imagination as a faculty of synthesizing the manifold of perception. This ‘pictorialization of imagination’ conceives of imagination as a framing device that organizes perceptual data into formal relations. The pictorialization is influenced by the early modern conception of the workings of the optical apparatus and culminates in Immanuel Kant’s transcendentalism paralleled in the development of ‘optical naturalism’ in painting. The newly acquired freedom of the pictorialized imagination to distance itself from the world and endow it with formal relationships opens the possibility that it is used to non-purposive ends, that is, that it seeks such a synthesis of the sensible data that would be gratifying to the mind. As the imagination synthesizes the manifold in perception into a coherent form, so the painter transcribes their optical experience into a framed painting. The process of framing and structuring the data is in both cases an active process of the mind and thus susceptible to misapprehension but also potentially influenced by other, external factors, be they psychological, cultural, or social.²³

Formalism thus can both serve as an aesthetic criticism that addresses the unique yet in principle universally communicable character of aesthetic objects and be a historical method of establishing contact with remote minds that have used their imagination to express aesthetic form, and to classify the forms into styles that correspond to collective psychological, cultural, or social configurations.²⁴ Summers’s claim is that artefacts produced by those who do not conceive of their imaginative capacities on the pictorialized model, say, European mediaeval artworks, are not intended for an experience that has the structure of detached attention to formal relations. This experience then fails to establish contact with such remote minds.²⁵

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Ernst Cassirer's notion of the aesthetic space can usefully demonstrate Summers's point. It presupposes the idea of space as an organization of relations that in its concrete realization always materializes certain values or meanings. There is no such thing as a perception of space *simpliciter*; nevertheless, there are genres of space perception based on the kinds of values the perception is tuned to. Aesthetic space is such an organization of spatial relations that is a distanced experience of form, which the imagination synthesizes, dissects, and orders following a rhythm. Cassirer presents such a conceptualization of the aesthetic space as having been made available thanks to advancements in the understanding of space as a philosophical and a scientific concept.²⁶ If we accept Summers's assumption that such an understanding comes with a corresponding notion of the aesthetic experience and the production of art, the consequence would be that prior to such an understanding of space, there simply would be no such aesthetic experience to be had. Gottfried Boehm claims as much in his Hegelian narrative about the appearance of space as an artistic problem for sculpture to tackle: Once the aim of sculpture is no more perceived as freeing or materializing an ideal form of corporeality any more, that is, once the sculpture no longer has the potential to imbue space with ideal apparition, the problem of sculpture as an object in space appears for the first time.²⁷

Summers suggests that instead of assuming that objects appearing to merit the modern aesthetic attention are intended to be appreciated for their abstracted formal configuration, we should focus on the objects' conditions of presentation. The fundamental data we have access to are their coordinates with respect to the necessarily anthropocentric space they share with us. But the conditions of such 'real spaces' are always put in service of a human praxis; they shape and in turn assume a 'decorum', a 'familiarity with formats, circumstances and conventions'. A comparative research into such basic habits ought to be the main subject of finding reasons for why artefacts look the way they do. The assumption is that our shared bodily predicament lets us in on some basic values derived from the conditions of real space. These conditions are universal,²⁸ but whether certain conditional values are exploited is a question of local context.²⁹

For Summers, to focus on remote objects' conditions of presentation involves also attending to their purposeful configuration – again, in contrast to the formalist's abstracting from the appearance of an object its pure form stripped of any purposefulness. Even if we cannot make sense of the specific purpose to which an artefact served, its evident having-been-made-for-a-purpose is often enough to get us going. Configuration is an 'evident disposition to an end'. It is a mark of function, that is, of a common purpose that informs the shaping of the artefact. We can make an educated guess *vis à vis* function more reliably than with respect to culturally specific purpose that is dependent on local context (it is easier

to identify an artefact as a vessel rather than as a communion cup). Those features of an artefact that do not appear functional in this sense constitute its 'artefactual surplus', which in turn becomes essential to art-historical reconstruction. This surplus is arbitrary in the sense that it is inevitably subject to local group and individual conditions of presentation – there is no such thing as a pure instantiation of a configuration. An artefact, having been made, that is, having conformed to a configuration, as first in its class, tends to be treated as a pattern to be replicated which leads to a stylistic series that cannot be reduced to manifesting aspects of the configuration. Such a local definition acquires social significance as an authoritative pattern of production ('is' becomes 'ought') and it is integrated into a shared second nature as part of a decorum of making, using, and valuing things. Eventually, it can become expressive of the whole group and its values.³⁰ Arbitrariness thus leads to local definition, which in turn leads to authority, a formula governing the relative stability, but also variation of local instances of a configuration. Values of spatial art are thus first and foremost understood as values of authority, not of formality. Reconstructing the authority of an artefact becomes the central task of an art history understood in postformalist terms.

Summers re-describes global art history as a discipline studying the artefactual surplus and its social significance. Artefactual surplus becomes evident, however, only once an artefact is treated as an instantiation of a configuration, of an 'evident disposition to an end'. As an instantiation, it is studied as part of a local definition (a stylistic norm) and thus as part of a series. The basic data set for an art historian becomes not the form of an artefact but what gets replicated with and in an artefact as part of a local configuration series – a position postformalism inherits from George Kubler.³¹ As Whitney Davis comments:

the serial making of assemblages (or environments) of things in real spaces in history is [for Summers] the elementary (quasi-Kublerian) datum of our archaeology, not the form of the artwork as put into it by a spatializing sensibility said to precede the agent's experience in the world and especially the agent's experience of socially shaped topography – of particular cultural 'places' in 'real space'.³²

The postformalist move Summers makes beyond the antinomy between formalism and anti-formalism consists of (1) denying that disinterested acquaintance with abstracted formal configuration gives one a universal access to the significance of an artwork, and (2) universalising the contextual conditions of art through such notions as real space and artefactual surplus. The resulting understanding of 'spatial arts' creates the basis for reconstructing the meaning of an artwork starting from its anthropocentric real spatial conditions. It is, however, not immediately clear how one arrives from these conditions to the embedded values, beyond intimations

of certain quite crude ones (of the kind: ‘this was probably important because it is elevated in comparison to the rest of the spatial arrangement’). Reliance on the content of one’s bodily experience of a remote artefact may not get us very far in reaching its particular, embedded values. Often, the universalist promise of formalism has been precisely that we can gain access to the significance of remote art in its particularity; postformalism has difficulty keeping this promise alive. But as I have suggested, the question of ascertaining the public mandate bestowed on remote artefacts’ visual appearances should be distinguished from the problem of assessing its particular merits in delivering on the mandate. The universalist promise of formalism – and in any case, not of every formalism – is thus not a standard postformalism should recognize as its own; the latter should rather focus on what material traces public mandates are likely to leave behind.

1.3 From Art History to Aesthetics

Both art-historical and aesthetic postformalisms are characterized by the rejection of formalist intuition as a reliable means of determining the public mandate of a remote artefact as well as by the affirmation of certain universal symptoms of modes of commanding visual attention. From both the rejection of formalist intuition and the optimism about discovering traces of prescribed attention modes issues the major postformalist axiom:

Format before form: Before asking what meaning an artefact’s form ‘expresses’ or what style it instantiates, one needs to establish what features of the artefact’s surface and setting contribute to its salience, or, in other words, with respect to what visual attention is the artefact formatted or situated.³³

This axiom can also be put differently:

Pragmatics before semantics: what makes an artefact visually conspicuous in a certain context may remain invisible until one starts to reconstruct the behavioural patterns it exploits. In different use contexts (sometimes even within the same ‘culture’), one and the same artefact can take on different visual aspects.³⁴

Both phrasings of the axiom attack head-on the ‘black box’ approach associated with holistic or structuralist methodologies that tends to treat artistic expression as an emanation of culturally established meaning through naturally visible form. At the same time, the two formulations reveal a major challenge: while ‘Format before form’ stresses the need to analyse formatting patterns, ‘Pragmatics before semantics’ raises the

spectre that these formatting patterns can only be established when one has prior access to behavioural patterns, that is, to the context of use surrounding the artefact. This is just another formulation of the problem we have already encountered with Summers's postformalism: it is questionable how one can read from a largely decontextualized visible configuration of artefacts the behavioural patterns motivating it beyond very crude and vague approximations. This is a problem that will be addressed in this book specifically with regard to the aesthetic register.

At first glance, the axiom addresses the question of reconstructing strategies employed to draw visual attention to artefacts, that is, to make them stand out visually for whatever purpose. What may be less apparent is that it also concerns the question of reconstructing the standards of success at capturing visual attention. Embodying a meaning, instantiating a style, or any other way of being visually conspicuous may be comparatively more or less successful; sometimes, the bar is set relatively low or not much is at stake socially in failing to reach it. But as the social stakes increase, the question of comparative success or failure and the corresponding ability to tell the difference gain in importance: the ability to 'see' what makes, say, this warrior shield's pattern more fearsome than others or this king's portrait more regal becomes a crucial skill. Yet this question has not figured prominently in postformalist writings. This book is, among other things, a plea for an extension of the postformalist enquiry to the question of merit.

As virtually any other art-historical current, postformalist art history aims primarily at explaining the look of artworks, what it is, or was, like to see them. But equally important, and from the point of view of aesthetics even more so, is the question, what it is, or was, like to appreciate them, or, to be more precise, what it is like to respond to them in a merited way.³⁵ When an artefact merits my visual attention, I exercise a sensitivity to the mandate its merits accomplish. The historicization of visual aspectivity that postformalist art history embraces has potentially deep consequences for the theory of visual representation;³⁶ accordingly, the historicization of 'aesthetic aspectivity' should have deep consequences for aesthetics. As we have seen already in case of Summers, postformalist art historians have generally understood the latter historicization to imply the conclusion that the aesthetic sensitivity through which art objects attain distinctly aesthetic values is a fairly recent development specific to Western modernity.

The reluctance to address the topic of merit may be a side effect of an effort to make a clear distinction between the reconstructive task of postformalist art history and formalist aesthetic criticism. Summers, for example, claims: 'works of art [...] were *not* made for our aesthetic experience [...] at least until it was possible to frame the intention of making "aesthetic" works of art.'³⁷ And in his writings on the general theory of visual culture and what he calls a 'historical phenomenology of pictures',

another major postformalist, Whitney Davis, has been consistent in explicitly distancing himself from any involvement in explanations of the status of pictures as objects of aesthetic interest.³⁸ Like Summers, Davis sees questions of aesthetics as being relevant only to a particular form of historically developed sensitivity that has informed artistic practice (at least in the ‘fine arts’) in the West during the last two centuries and has been codified in an ‘aesthetic ideology’. For Davis, aesthetic aspectivity – objects demonstrating aesthetic properties – is a form of visuality, that is, a visual culture, to which one needs to ‘succeed’ in order to acquire a sensitivity that makes aesthetic aspects perceptible.³⁹ It then follows that it would be misleading for an art historian to ascribe aesthetic aspectivity to objects intended for other visualities – unless it can be demonstrated that aesthetic sensibilities were developed within them.

Yet in some respects (and, given the subject-matter of the discipline of art history, not surprisingly), questions of aesthetics, that is, very roughly speaking, of privileging artefacts for their looks, are never far from Davis’s and Summers’s concerns. It could be argued with some justification that Summers’s ambitious project of a postformalist world art history aims at developing tools for the reconstruction of historically specific norms for privileging certain looks of artefacts; these norms are embodied in what he calls the spatiotemporal ‘second nature’ that informs, and is informed by, the production of art objects.⁴⁰ As for Davis, in a more recent essay he recognizes three applications of the term ‘aesthetics’: as describing proprioception (close to its etymological meaning); as a label for culturally embedded processes of meaningful encounters with works of art (modern aesthetic ideologies); and, finally, as a ‘colloquial’ term for positive or negative responses to art.⁴¹ Accordingly, one can be said to be aesthetically experiencing a Mondrian (to stick with Davis’s example) as soon as one visually registers its surface; or when one’s looking at a Mondrian involves the kind of visual-cultural competence in which the category ‘abstract painting by Mondrian’ makes sense; or when one responds to the work’s merits. Davis allows for all three meanings of the term to capture some features of visually encountering a Mondrian within a visual culture (or visual cultures) where things like Mondrian paintings ‘look like art’.

To be sure, Davis’s main interest lies in ‘aesthetic questions in the ancient etymological sense’,⁴² more specifically, in how sensory perception integrates and gets integrated into ‘successions’ to and ‘recursions’ within and between visual cultures; these cultures, as Davis rightly insists, need not be aesthetic in the second sense, that is, need not be of the kind where a Mondrian is made sense of in virtue of its looking like a work of art. But the relationship between the first two senses of aesthetics (pertaining to sensory awareness and pertaining to ideologies of art) and the third, ‘colloquial’, also repays close scrutiny in a postformalist enquiry. After all, works of art like Mondrian paintings do not become

conspicuous just because they are integrated into ‘networks of visible and invisible forms of likeness’,⁴³ but also because of their relative success in displaying merited aspects. Works of art are intended to merit a certain response, but for various reasons they may fail even when they are recognized as candidates for appreciation (they are ‘boring’, ‘uninteresting’, and so on). They are usually not intended just to attract a specific kind of visual attention, but also to meet or exceed the standards inherent to their category – typically in competition with other artefacts in that category.⁴⁴ A comprehensive grasp of the reasons for an artefact’s appearance – tools for which Davis has been developing – must therefore include a consideration of its comparative standing vis à vis other artefacts vying for the same kind of visual attention.

This consideration applies in principle to all objects relying for their public success at least in part on attracting attention to their appearance and in turn being assessed on this merit. At this level of generalization, such a characterization arguably does not rely on the historically developed preconceptions about artistic expression, medium, or purpose which we normally associate with modern Western art culture. The practices that fit the description may not necessarily aim at providing, say, an intrinsically rewarding experience of the appearance of artefacts⁴⁵ and can be found outside the ‘aesthetic ideologies of modern art’ as well. The fear-inducing designs of warriors’ shields of the Asmat of Papua, for example, would pass for products of such practices, insofar as it would make sense in the given visual culture to exercise sensitivity towards the varying degrees of frightfulness of the shields based on their looks.⁴⁶ To be sure, it may prove difficult and often even impossible to decide whether, when, and for whom an artefact’s visual conspicuousness has relied on assessing its appearance. This difficulty, however, should be familiar to any bona fide postformalist, for it is just a version of the difficulty that potentially affects any historical research into reasons for the looks of a particular artefact that tries to scale down to the level of actual beholders’ encounters with it.

I have tried to sketch the grounds on which this book builds in developing a case for a postformalist reconstruction of mandated responses to artefacts’ appearances – a case that would be immune to the misgivings about aesthetic enquiry expressed by Davis and Summers, since it would not assume that the range of such responses would be somehow linked to the artefacts’ potential to provide an intrinsically rewarding gratification of the senses, of the intellect, or of both together. Such a broad investigation into the nature of evaluative attitudes towards visually conspicuous artefacts represents a necessary step towards establishing whether aesthetic appreciation in the more traditional, ‘colloquial’ sense is aimed at. For a postformalist, it cannot be ruled out that the question of what looking at an artefact is “aesthetically” like in the colloquial sense – that is, pleasant, unpleasant, relaxing, boring⁴⁷ – shows up as relevant in visual cultures that have not developed anything like modern aesthetic ideologies.

But even if it were the case that nothing like aesthetic cultures exists outside of the one that originated in modern Europe, that is not to deny that in virtually all visual cultures there are ‘artifacts made to be unusually visible, what is called “art”’.⁴⁸ Explaining the existence and functioning of such unusually visible artefacts and developing conceptual tools for the understanding of various historical scenarios under which artefacts are elevated to the status of unusually visible objects – of ‘artefacts commanding visual attention’ or ‘objects of visual authority’, as I will call them – must then be an indispensable part of any truly postformalist aesthetics. Such an aesthetics can contribute to a better understanding of the various responses unusual visibility may merit across the vast array of contexts in which art objects are studied.

Postformalist aesthetics finds its natural habitat in the missing overlap between formalism and anti-formalism, that is, between the affirmation of a global access to the aesthetic via aesthetic judgement and the denial of the very idea of any such access.⁴⁹ As one postformalist put it recently, postformalist theory instructs:

art writers (or historians, or critics) [...] to track the rules and shapes as they make and re-create themselves and in doing so *not just to rely on their own intuition* – which will, as Greenberg and many others recognized, be a function of the shapes they have already familiarized themselves with – but suspend reliance upon aesthetic judgment until their acquaintance with new shapes and worlds can have reworked their capacity for judgment accordingly.⁵⁰

One of the lessons this book offers is that in some ‘remote’ contexts – characterized by the absence of first- or second-hand aesthetic competence – reliance on aesthetic judgement will have to be suspended indefinitely without fatally compromising the prospects of aesthetic analysis by other means.

1.4 Towards a Postformalist Aesthetics: An Outline

The journey towards a postformalist aesthetics should start with an analysis of the present state of aesthetic theory in the disciplines studying distant visual and material cultures. The next chapter (‘Aesthetic Suspicions’) aims at just that and characterizes the present state as one of anxiety about the prospects of escaping the prison house of one’s own aesthetic culture and attuning to the norms of a remote one. A controversy surrounding Cycladic marble figures’ aesthetic status is used to exemplify the paralyzing effects the anxiety has on the study of remote artefacts. Various forms of the anxiety’s manifestation are catalogued, drawing on a wide range of sources from archaeology, art history, and anthropology. The aim is to clear the ground for the idea of an aesthetic

analysis of remote artefacts immune to the anxiety. The anxiety cannot disappear as long as aesthetic analysis is understood on the model of aesthetic criticism under the conditions of remoteness. The chapter closes with a proposal that establishing an aesthetic status of a remote artefact should in the first place be part of a quest after the norms of engagement an artefact's kind signalled to the intended audience by its appearance. What this general quest should look like is the topic of the three following chapters.

Chapter 3 ('What Is a Format?') provides an outline of what turns out to be the central concept of postformalism – format. In contrast to 'style', 'medium', or 'form', the concept has received comparatively little theoretical treatment from art historians or aestheticians. Building on the work in cognitive psychology and artefact ontology, the chapter investigates the relation between instrumental structure and artefact categorization. Instrumental-cum-recognitional features are identified as those that signal and prescribe artefacts' appropriate mode of handling, position intended users spatially with regard to the artefact, make artefacts perceptually salient, and navigate attention to artefacts' instrumental features. Instrumental-cum-recognitional features cannot be properly called formal, medium, stylistic, or design features. They are closely related to media formats as stable, culturally specific modes of presentation that tailor media for particular communicative contexts. A broader notion of format is thus proposed that would cover also instrumental structures whose function is not communication. The crucial take-home lesson is that to format an artefact helps make its instrumentality public, which in turn increases the probability that the formatting will be visible even by uninitiated observers, who will be able to reconstruct its public purpose.

The next chapter, 'A Theory of Image Format', develops an account of a particular kind of format, which it demonstrates on a series of examples ranging from Biographic Art of the Great Plains tribes through Late Gothic wooden altar retables. On a standard understanding, image format is the shape or proportions of image's material support that delimit figurative content by non-figurative means (think your typical photo frame). In other words, image formats are frames that delimit but do not themselves design figurative content (that is, they do not depict it). Frameless images – such as rock art imagery – are thus format-less. The chapter argues that we should abandon the view that identifies formats with artificial frames in favour of the view that understands acts of image formatting as acts of delimiting figurative content to align it with the norms of image's intended communicative context.

Using the example of collective style, Chapter 5 ('Universal Style') focuses on what is at stake in inferring from artefacts' visual traits their public purpose. It revisits the once promising but now largely abandoned idea that style analysis can provide an independent source of insight into an artefact's non-stylistic context. The chapter makes explicit what one

commits to when one treats collective style as such a source and develops a new framing for the idea that avoids the criticisms largely responsible for the decline in theoretical interest in the epistemic import of visual style analysis since World War II. This re-framing consists in the proposal that inference from style to context is permissible on those occasions when a collective style signals by its morphology its suitability to serve a certain function. And it does so because it prescribes publicly certain modes of behaviour or spectatorship. Furthermore, the public nature of the signalling may be such that it allows even uninitiated spectators to get a sense of it and thus to gain access to some of the motivations and norms informing the collective's form of life.

The last chapter ('Aesthetic Analysis and Its Formats') ponders the question whether there can be aesthetic formats. Its main argument is that to serve the purposes of a student of remote aesthetic cultures, post-formalist theory needs to develop such a concept of aesthetic status or mandate that would be focused on the perceivable traits the mandate may leave on an artefact. It thus delineates as artefact classes of primary interest those whose production is associated with a strong incentive to make their visual salience at least partly context-independent by making the visual encounter with them as close to unavoidable as possible on repeated occasions and perhaps in varying contexts. Building on the insights of previous chapters, the chapter proposes that aesthetic analysis should take as its subject matter artefacts endowed with aesthetic mandate that are a sub-class of objects with the public mandate to command visual attention. Their formatting makes them suitable not just to command the field of vision, but to command attention to their mode of delivery.

Notes

- 1 Isaac Asimov, 'Nothing for Nothing', *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* 3, no. 2 (1979): 142–44.
- 2 Liu Cixin, *The Dark Forest*, trans. Joel Martinsen (New York: Tor Books, 2015), 429.
- 3 This kind of effect has received sustained philosophical attention from Carolyn Korsmeyer. See her 'Aesthetic Deception: On Encounters with the Past', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 117–27; 'The Triumph of Time: Romanticism Redux', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2014): 429–35; 'Real Old Things', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2016): 219–31; *Things: In Touch with the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). An important precursor (and inspiration) to Korsmeyer is Alois Riegl, 'The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin' (1903), trans. Kurt W. Foster and Diane Ghirardo, in *Oppositions Reader*, ed. K. Michael Hays (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 621–51. See also Owen Hulatt, 'On a Naqadan Vessel: Our Aesthetic Response to and Restoration of Prehistoric Artefacts', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2016): 265–79; Jakub Stejskal, 'Art and Bewilderment', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2016): 131–47. Arguably, a similar effect is produced in

- ethnographic contexts where the nature of the distance may not be temporal, but rather cultural.
- 4 Some have claimed that the perplexing sense of distant familiarity – or familiar remoteness, what Walter Benjamin called ‘aura’ – is an essential part of any properly aesthetic experience. See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
 - 5 See Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds: The Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 133–34.
 - 6 Stephen Davies, ‘First Art and Art’s Definition’, *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 35 (1997): 27.
 - 7 Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2, 46.
 - 8 Davies, ‘First Art and Art’s Definition’, 31.
 - 9 Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 30.
 - 10 For a recent version of this argument, see Alva Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), 74, 99, and passim.
 - 11 Gregory Currie, ‘Art and the Anthropologists’, in *Aesthetic Science: Connecting Minds, Brains, and Experience*, ed. Arthur Shimamura and Stephen Palmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 110–11.
 - 12 Self-described postformalists and fellow travellers include David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003); Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); ‘What Is Post-Formalism? (Or, *Das Sehen an sich hat seine Kunstgeschichte*)’, *nonsite.org*, no. 7 (2012), <http://nonsite.org/article/what-is-post-formalism-or-das-sehen-an-sich-hat-seine-kunstgeschichte>; *Visuality and Virtuality: Images and Pictures from Prehistory to Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Wolfram Pichler and Ralph Ubl, *Bildtheorie zur Einführung*, 3rd ed. (Hamburg: Junius, 2018); Noë, *Strange Tools*; Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); ‘Defamiliarization and the Unprompted (Not Innocent) Eye’, *nonsite.org*, no. 24 (2018), <https://nonsite.org/article/defamiliarization-and-the-unprompted-not-innocent-eye>; C. Oliver O’Donnell, ‘Revisiting David Summers’s *Real Spaces*: A Neo-Pragmatist Interpretation’, *World Art* 8 (2018): 21–38; Sam Rose, *Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2019).
 - 13 See, for example, Michael Podro, *The Manifold in Perception: Theories of Art from Kant to Hildebrand* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Lambert Wiesing, *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes: Geschichte und Perspektiven der formalen Ästhetik* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1997); Richard Wollheim, ‘On Formalism and Pictorial Organization’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (2001): 127–37; Nick Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).
 - 14 This line of formalist thinking has recently been explored in Sam Rose, ‘The Significance of Form’, *nonsite.org*, no. 20 (2017), <https://nonsite.org/feature/the-significance-of-form>; *Art and Form*.
 - 15 See, for example, Keith Moxey, ‘Art History after the Global Turn’, in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 209; Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 72; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), ix; Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, *Art Is Not What You Think It Is* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 85.

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- 16 But see Davis, 'What Is Post-Formalism?'.
- 17 See *ibid.*; Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 136–59; 'The History of Vision', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 2015 (73): 259–71.
- 18 See Summers, *Real Spaces*; O'Donnell, 'Revisiting David Summers's *Real Spaces*'.
- 19 David Summers, "'Form", Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description', *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 393, comp. Summers, *Real Spaces*, 27.
- 20 Davis, 'What Is Post-Formalism?', § 5.
- 21 Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, trans. Jonathan Blower (1915; Los Angeles: Getty, 2015); Nanay, 'History of Vision'.
- 22 See Pichler and Ubl, *Bildtheorie zur Einführung*, 135–210.
- 23 Summers, *Real Spaces*, 28–32.
- 24 See Davis, *General Theory*, Part Two; Rose, *Art and Form*.
- 25 Summers, *Real Spaces*, 33.
- 26 Ernst Cassirer, 'Mythischer, ästhetischer und theoretischer Raum' (1931), in *Symbol, Technik, Sprache: Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1927–1933*, ed. Ernst Wolfgang Orth and John Michael Krois (Hamburg: Meiner, 1985), 93–119.
- 27 Gottfried Boehm, 'Zeit-Räume: Zum Begriff des plastischen Raumes', in *Die Sichtbarkeit der Zeit: Studien zum Bild in der Moderne*, ed. Ralph Ubl (Munich: Fink, 2017), 257–70. For a dissenting view claiming the universality of 'aesthetic sense', see Noë, *Strange Tools*, 54–57.
- 28 With the exception of devising planar surfaces, which is a historical achievement – but other 'fundamental' conditions have remained mostly unchanged (Summers, *Real Spaces*, 39).
- 29 *Ibid.*, 42–43.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 63–66.
- 31 See George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008). Summers studied with Kubler.
- 32 Davis, 'What Is Post-Formalism?', § 3.
- 33 For various versions of this idea, see Kubler, *Shape of Time*, 41; Meyer Schapiro, 'On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs', *Semiotica* 1 (1969): 223–42; Summers, *Real Spaces*, 335–36; Pichler and Ubl, *Bildtheorie zur Einführung*, 135–210. The relevant sentiment is captured – here in the context of depiction theory – in Davis, *General Theory*, 166: 'The question of discerning a picture-maker's intentions, then, must be shifted from the spot in which it is commonly asked – the supposed problem of *discerning what the maker's picture means*. It must be refocused on what actually decides that issue, namely, the problem of *discerning what marks the maker effectively intended to preserve* and for what reasons (attending to which aspects of the marks) and purposes (projecting what role these aspects can play).'
- 34 This version's variants can be found in Susan Feagin, 'Paintings and Their Places', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1995): 260–68; Summers, *Real Spaces*, 27; Davis, 'What Is Post-Formalism?', § 5.
- 35 On the notion of merit in aesthetics, see John McDowell, 'Values and Secondary Qualities', in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 131–51; C. Thi Nguyen, 'The Uses of Aesthetic Testimony', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (2017): 19–36.
- 36 See Nanay, 'History of Vision'.
- 37 Summers, *Real Spaces*, 59.
- 38 Davis, *General Theory*, 3–5.

- 39 Ibid., 322–40.
- 40 Summers, *Real Spaces*, 53–55.
- 41 Whitney Davis, ‘Visuality and Vision: Questions for a Post-Culturalist Art History’, *Estetika* 54 (2017): 249–50.
- 42 Davis, *General Theory*, 5; see also his Introduction to *Visuality and Virtuality*.
- 43 Davis, ‘Visuality and Vision’, 250.
- 44 For a standard account of categorial anti-formalism, see Kendall Walton, ‘Categories of Art’, in *Marvellous Images: On Values and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 195–219.
- 45 ‘Intrinsically rewarding’ is the universal characteristic of (good) art according to Davies, *Artful Species*, 187.
- 46 I elaborate on this example in the last chapter.
- 47 Davis, ‘Visuality and Vision’, 250.
- 48 Davis, *General Theory*, 232.
- 49 That is not to claim that the need to move beyond the dichotomy must be met only in the general direction I outline. ‘Is there no medium between a de-historicizing formalism and a contextualizing historicism?’ asks Kamini Vellodi in her recent book and argues, like me, that the answer is a matter of aesthetics. However, her arguments pull the reader in a completely different direction. See her *Tintoretto’s Difference: Deleuze, Diagrammatics, and Art History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 6.
- 50 Rose, *Art and Form*, 158.