

Aesthetic Investigations

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Aesthetic Disinterestedness in Neuroaesthetics. A Phenomenological Critique.

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Abstract: In recent neuroaesthetic discussion, neuroscientists have linked aesthetic pleasure to the brain's reward systems, but they have also attempted to dissociate it from utilitarian rewards and ultimately explain it as a disinterested state of mind. This article examines this neuroaesthetic approach, juxtaposing it with elements of phenomenological thought on the subject of aesthetic disinterestedness, to present three interrelated concerns that can be raised from a phenomenological perspective, as well as to outline how to overcome these problems phenomenologically. The article ends with the suggestion that neuroaesthetics, if it is ever going to offer something important or useful regarding our understanding of aesthetic experience, has to become phenomenologically sensitive and informed.

I. TWO DECADES OF NEUROAESTHETICS

Toward the end of the twentieth century, as neuroimaging methods and techniques triggered sudden progress in brain studies, the first steps in the search for a neurobiological basis of aesthetic experience were taken. Neuroscientists who had previously focused their research on visual perception started looking for the neural underpinnings of our experience of beauty in art, thus establishing a new scientific discipline.¹ Neuroaesthetics, so named by neuroscientist Semir Zeki, is today at the cutting edge of human brain research. And it does not restrict itself to the investigation of the perception of beauty in works of art or even beauty in general.² Rather, neuroaesthetics has developed a broad scope covering all aspects of our relation to aesthetically evaluable objects in art and nature.³

Of course, the neuroaesthetic program has not escaped critique. Several objections have been expressed regarding, for example, the process of reductively deconstructing aesthetic experience into arbitrary elements in an attempt to quantify them; the triviality of the core suggestion that we need a brain in order to enjoy art; the neglect of crucial factors of aesthetic experience, such as the cultural and historical backgrounds of both subject and object; the insufficiency of neuroaesthetic concepts for discussing multilayered individual artworks; the narrow attempt to relate aesthetic interest to the erotic reflex; the reduction of personal experience to sub-personal brain functions; and the neglect of our bodily and worldly relation with things.⁴

With a few notable exceptions, though, neuroaesthetics has not been a point of focus for the phenomenological community.⁵ This is probably because the neuroaesthetic paradigm is part of the more general program of naturalising consciousness, which has itself become a repeated target of phenomenological arrows. Without doubt, the systematic articulation of a general and detailed phenomenological critique of neuroaesthetics would be more than welcome. Such a project would have to draw heavily on the classical phenomenological critique of the intentionality-blind psychologism of attempts to found logic, mathematics, and the normative sciences in general on empirical psychology. This path of critique would, more particularly, illuminate the need for seeking the essential and not only the factual conditions that render aesthetic consciousness possible. A systematic phenomenological criticism would, moreover, have to question neuroaesthetics' metaphysical presuppositions and discuss the constitutional role of consciousness. Neuroscientists basically work within the paradigm of realism unquestionably presupposing the independent existence of both physical reality and of the scientific objects of their research. Phenomenology, on the contrary, investigates how all different levels of reality are constituted for and are given to consciousness; in this sense, it has a lot to offer regarding aesthetic consciousness in particular. In that same direction, a phenomenological criticism of neuroaesthetics would have to emphasise our intentional relation with aesthetically evaluable objects and shed light on how their aesthetic significance becomes manifest. Consciousness is not a box or a container and conscious mental acts are not relations to its immanent contents. Phenomenologically viewed, consciousness is intentional, which amounts to saying that it functions precisely as openness to transcendent objectivities that are always given with a certain meaning; they matter to us – embodied subjects within the world – perceptually, cognitively, practically, ethically, and, of course, also aesthetically. These crucial aspects of how meaningful objectivities are constituted for consciousness and are given to it in the specific way they are given escape the theoretical armory and the methods of neuroscientific research. But, furthermore, phenomenological criticism would have to question representationalist and reductive accounts of aesthetic experience, paying attention to the difference between causal explanations and phenomenological elucidations. According

to the mainstream neuroscientific model of the mind, our epistemic relation to physical reality is explained by assuming mental representations produced on the basis of causally determined neuro-chemical brain processes. A line of thought like that, however, ignores the subjective aspects of undergoing an experience. These subjective aspects cannot be captured by a third-person neuroscientific causal account. Phenomenological descriptions, on the other hand, aim at elucidating precisely the subjective, phenomenal, qualitative dimensions of our lived-experience including those of our aesthetic conduct. A final and equally important point that should be mentioned here is that the exploitation of neuroscientific findings leads to the formulation of natural laws. Such laws, though, describe things as they are and not as they ought to be under the prism of truth, goodness, or rightness. The appropriate phenomenological criticism would, thus, have to point out the limits of the inductive generalisations of neuroaesthetic research and stress the neuroscientifically untraceable dimension of aesthetic normativity.

In the present article, I choose to set aside these more general lines of thought. Instead, I will direct my critical focus toward the, so to speak, smaller issue of aesthetic disinterestedness and the way it is dealt with in neuroaesthetics. Neuroscientists basically refer to this philosophical notion by pointing in a rather vague and general way to Kant's Third Critique without discussing its theoretical dimensions, neither within the context of Kantian philosophy nor with regard to subsequent varied interpretations. Disinterestedness is, thus, unquestionably presupposed as a main characteristic of aesthetic experience, the neuro-physiological substrate of which neuroaesthetic research seeks to determine. My principal aim in the present article is to show that neuroscientists' preconception about the philosophical idea of aesthetic disinterestedness is flawed. By examining how this notion is addressed by neuroscientists, and by juxtaposing this with elements of phenomenological thought on the subject, I aim to reveal an important theoretical deficit that plagues neuroaesthetic discussion. More particularly, I intend to show that while neuroaesthetics has accumulated important empirical findings, it lacks the analytic tools to interpret them in a way that is both theoretically sound and true to aesthetic experience from a first-person perspective. As it operates with a rather limited set of concepts and/or with binary oppositions in its discursive approach to a rather complex phenomenon, its explanatory value and its phenomenological accuracy are overly compromised.⁶ My final suggestion – briefly – will be that neuroaesthetics, if it is ever going to offer something important or useful regarding our understanding of aesthetic experience, has to become phenomenologically sensitive and informed.

II. THE REWARD SYSTEM AND AESTHETIC DISINTERESTEDNESS

One of the first important findings within neuroaesthetics was the association between aesthetic experience and brain reward mechanisms. Experimental results suggest that aesthetic experience is related to activation of a region of the medial orbitofrontal cortex belonging to the brain's reward system. Semir Zeki and Vilayanur Ramachandran have attempted to explain this by emphasising our epistemic relation to works of art.⁷ Zeki's basic assumption is that the brain is able to capture, and therefore know, within the vast amount of data processed, the stable and essential elements of the things we perceive. And according to Zeki, the artist does exactly what our visual brain does: organises visual data, abstracts the inessential elements, and maintains the essential characteristics of the represented thing in each case.⁸ Similarly, Ramachandran claims that art presents the essential elements of perceptual objects, albeit selectively accentuated, tapping into something that facilitates their recognition and is supposedly central for eliciting aesthetic experience.⁹ Both Zeki and Ramachandran, then, claim that our access to what is essential (and hence to knowledge or recognition) is accompanied by satisfaction, by pleasure registered in the brain's reward circuits.

But to construe aesthetic experience as a state that simply brings satisfaction is highly restrictive and problematic. First, it is a rather simplistic picture that does not correspond to the richness or multifaceted nature of aesthetic phenomena in practice. Second, this picture cannot contribute to the differentiation of the aesthetic experience from other experiences that seem alien or irrelevant to it, such as the satisfaction given by food or drugs. In order to overcome these issues, neuroscientists are now seeking new data and offering more elaborate theories. Of utmost importance is the attempt to distinguish aesthetic pleasure from other pleasures that also have their neural correlate in the brain's reward systems. In particular, research is exploring whether aesthetic pleasure is related to the reward mechanism of disinterested liking and not the distinct reward mechanism of wanting.¹⁰ That is to say, neuroscientists treat aesthetic pleasure as a reward independent of the satisfaction of desires.¹¹

This idea is based on Kent Berridge's extensive research work on the brain's reward systems. Experimenting with rats, Berridge and his colleagues have shown that 'liking' and 'wanting,' which normally function together, are dissociable subcomponents geared around reward and have distinguishable neural substrates.¹² 'Liking' here denotes neural or behavioral hedonic reactions and not the subjective experience of liking something.¹³ By pharmacologically blocking dopamine release, or even by destroying dopamine neurons, the researchers found that appetitive seeking ('wanting') was dramatically reduced, whereas 'liking' reactions remained completely intact.¹⁴ After the destruction of their dopamine cells, the rats stopped eating; they would actually starve to death if not force fed. Nevertheless, they continued

to have ‘liking’ reactions when given sweet solutions. In contrast, chemical manipulation of the endogenous opioid system revealed an alteration or even a complete reduction of ‘liking responses to sweet stimuli, whereas ‘wanting’ reactions were left unimpaired. The researchers thus found that ‘liking’ is mediated by opioid and cannabinoid neurotransmitters in the limbic system, while ‘wanting’ is mediated by the distinct mesolimbic dopaminergic system.¹⁵ Such dissociations of liking and wanting have also been observed in humans. For example, individuals on drugs that block dopamine ‘are less inclined to act to get what they want, a state called “psychic indifference” in the clinical literature,’¹⁶ even though ‘they do not change how much they like objects.’¹⁷

By independently delineating ‘liking’ behaviours, neuroscientists believe they have discovered the brain network that sustains *all* kinds of pleasure. According to this ‘common currency’ reward network hypothesis, the ‘[p]leasures of food, sex, addictive drugs, friends and loved ones, music, art, and even sustained states of happiness can produce strikingly similar patterns of brain activity.’¹⁸ Aesthetic pleasure is thus explained as having its neural underpinning in the liking reward mechanism instantiated in the opioid and cannabinoid systems of the brain. Crucially, though, Anjan Chatterjee, a principal proponent of this view, also rushes to clarify that this does not mean that aesthetic pleasures coincide with mere appetitive likings. He contends that ‘[e]ven though our pleasures funnel through the same deep brain systems, to say that our pleasure in art is the same as the pleasure we receive from tasting sugar would be silly.’¹⁹ So, in contrast to appetitive likings, which normally go hand in hand with wanting, adherents to this theory suggest that aesthetic pleasure is a *disinterested* liking that occurs without activating the dopaminergic systems that sustain wanting. As Chatterjee and Vartanian put it, ‘[t]he mental activity of [aesthetic] disinterested interest may reflect activity in the liking system without activity in the wanting system.’²⁰ In the eyes of leading neuro-researchers, this is the proper way to approach aesthetic experience in congruence with its philosophical construal as a cognitively and emotionally disinterested state. Furthermore, in order to delineate the special character of aesthetic pleasure, they argue that, in contrast to liking food, drink, or sex, aesthetic pleasure is part of a broader experience that is emotionally nuanced and cognitively penetrated.²¹

III. PHENOMENOLOGICAL WORRIES

A closer look at how aesthetic disinterestedness is treated in neuroscientific discussion reveals several misconceptions that result from neuroaesthetics’ theoretical-phenomenological weaknesses.²² The following sections present three interrelated concerns that can be raised from a phenomenological perspective, as well as the basics of how to overcome these problems phenomenologically.

III.a Disinterestedness as presupposing real existence

The starting point for a phenomenological clarification of the essential characteristics of aesthetic disinterestedness has to be the abstention from any concern regarding existence. When we aesthetically contemplate an object or event, we are indifferent regarding its actual being.²³ This crucial factor is hardly considered by neuroscientists, who confuse the notion of aesthetic disinterest with indifference in the most ordinary sense of our comportment toward things in our empirical reality.

In our everyday lives, we continuously posit the being of actual objects and events in which we are interested or about which we are indifferent. For instance, I might like ice cream, dislike yogurt, and feel indifferent about milk. But in such cases, I always presuppose the actual existence of those consumables. Husserl calls such feelings ‘object feelings [*Gegenstandsgefühle*]’ or ‘actuality feelings [*Wirklichkeitsgefühle*]’ and makes clear that they are founded on a belief in existence.²⁴ Even the *adiaphoron* (ἀδιάφορον) is existentially present for me, or, more accurately, existentially presupposed. The fact I am indifferent toward it does not mean that I do not posit its real being.

From a phenomenological standpoint, aesthetic disinterest is not indifference in the ordinary sense. This is a recurrent theme in Husserl’s thought. In the *Logical Investigations* – where it is first mentioned – but also in his famous letter to Hofmannsthal, the texts gathered in the *Husserliana* volume *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, the first volume of *Ideas*, and his late working texts, Husserl insists that aesthetic contemplation (*Betrachtung*) has nothing to do with questions regarding the existence of the appearing object; aesthetic experience is disconnected from the being or non-being of its object. So, for example, in his working notes from December 25, 1931, where he discusses the method of the phenomenological *epoché* in comparison to the aesthetic stance, he contends that:²⁵

the aesthetic stance is not a ‘disinterested’ stance in the ordinary sense. [...] The indifferent [*Gleichgültige*] [in the ordinary sense] can be and actually is taken, considered, and again left, in its existential validity [*Seinsgeltung*], but is not – as in aesthetic seeing – bereft of its actuality.²⁶

According to Husserl, aesthetic experience always involves neutralisation of belief, even when we engage with real objects. He uses here the metaphor of the ‘image’ to refer to the manner of appearing, for example, of aesthetic objects of nature. In a manuscript from 1906 he asks, ‘Why does nature, a landscape, [sometimes] act as an ‘image’?’²⁷ In response, he attempts to describe the *disconnection*, so to speak, of the seen landscape from its perceptual horizon and its ordinary givenness as actual, which momentarily turns the landscape into a quasi-actual appearance. As Husserl notes at another point: ‘[i]n a certain sense, I can view anything as an “image”. I

inhibit all actual belief; I have no interest in the thing's reality and take it as an image, as [e.g.] "mountain".²⁸ Certainly, the positing of the real existence of the landscape remains in the background, but we do not carry it out. In Husserlian parlance, we 'do not live in belief'.²⁹ Rather, we live in aesthetic valuing, which excludes positional performance.³⁰ This important point will be further clarified in the next section, where I will discuss how the different attitudes one can adopt are related.

III.b The idle liking-without-wanting

Neuroaesthetic analyses entirely disregard the suspension of belief discussed above and thus fail to capture the essential nature of aesthetic disinterestedness. This is not the only flaw, though. In addition, neuro-researchers typically equate aesthetic *disinterestedness* with an *absence of wanting*. But what kind of absence is that? We have seen that rats, and let us suppose humans, are incapable of wanting when their ability to process dopamine is removed. However, *not being able to want* is not the same as *not wanting*. And *not being able to be interested* is not the same as *being disinterested*. It is true that suspension of belief in the existence of an aesthetically evaluable object or event pauses our pragmatic concerns. This *pause*, though, does not *eliminate* our practical concerns, something that would, in fact, abolish even the possibility of praxis. Instead, this *pause* leaves open the possibility of switching from one attitude, such as the aesthetic one, to another cognitively or practically oriented one. We can draw on Husserl's remarks in order to shed light on this.

In *Ideas II*, Husserl explains that, in the aesthetic attitude, we abandon ourselves to what is aesthetically given and live in the performance of the aesthetic act.³¹ This is then our principal act (*Hauptakt*) and the aesthetically given thing is our principal (though not theoretical) theme; it is our 'main thing' (*Hauptsache*). If we change our attitude and adopt a theoretical stance in order, for example, to objectify, explicate, and describe a beautiful appearance, *this* becomes the stance we live in and its correlate objectivity becomes our principal (now theoretical) theme. And yet our previous aesthetic intentions are not lost. They remain 'lifeless' in the background.³² As Husserl puts it:

I can live in the sorrow, the joy, the pleasure; or I can be occupied with the object perceptually, conceptually, judgementally, and still experience the feeling 'in the background,' though without living 'in it'.³³

This is true for all acts that cease to be principal:

Cognitive acts, acts of pleasure, volitional acts do not simply disappear when we no longer carry them out from the standpoint of the ego; they become background lived-experiences.³⁴

It could, thus, also be that our theoretical interest is somehow aroused while we are living in aesthetic consciousness, and that these open theoretical intentionalities remain in the background even though we do not follow them. The theoretical theme, then, does not become principal; it takes on a ‘supporting’ or ‘collateral’ role within the context of aesthetic experience.³⁵

For Husserl, aesthetic disinterestedness, as the absence of interest in pursuing cognitive and practical goals, is always embedded within a horizon of cognitive and practical actualities that are, nevertheless, potential actualities. However absorbed we might be in our aesthetic experience or however caught up with an aesthetic object, the horizon of our potential praxis (cognitive or practical) continuously supports our aesthetic attitude. This latent horizon codetermines whose aesthetic experience it is and what it is overall to have such an experience. Without this horizon, aesthetic experience is at risk of collapse on both epistemic and phenomenological levels. And we would then be faced with a pathological situation whose examination would be unable to reveal the proper nature and disinterested character of aesthetic experience.

But it is not only that aesthetic experience has a horizational structure of open praxial possibilities. Contrary to what neuroscientific descriptions make us assume, aesthetic experience does not imply an absolute absence of interest such as experienced in the case of, for example, intense boredom. As phenomenological analyses reveal, the aesthetic attitude comprises a very special interest and, in this sense, comprises a special *turning toward*, which could be well described in terms of motivation, tendency-toward, and striving. In Husserlian terms, an aesthetic experience involves an ‘aesthetic interest’³⁶ directed toward the *how of the object’s appearance*.³⁷ This notion of aesthetic interest is of great significance, especially given that suspension of existential commitment and bracketing of praxis are necessary but not sufficient components of the aesthetic stance. It is not enough to delineate aesthetic consciousness as consciousness ‘directed toward what appears and what is to be described irrespective of its being and nonbeing’.³⁸ According to Husserl, aesthetic consciousness must be ‘directed toward what appears in its respective “manner of appearing”. The manner of appearing alone is aesthetic’.³⁹ It alone is the ‘bearer of aesthetic feeling-characteristics [*Gefühlscharaktere*].’⁴⁰ Comparing aesthetic experience with an act of phantasy, in which we are directed toward an unreal object without contemplating it aesthetically, renders this plain. This is why Husserl claims that ‘What is essential for the aesthetic attitude, therefore, is not phantasy, but the focusing on what interests me aesthetically, the objectivity in its How’.⁴¹ If we do not contemplate *the manner of appearing*, we are not living in aesthetic consciousness.

III.c Aesthetic disinterestedness and the attenuation of emotion

Another way in which researchers in neuroaesthetics deal with aesthetic disinterestedness is to associate it with a state of psychical distance and, more

specifically, emotional attenuation.⁴² The idea here is that, in encountering works of art, cognitive processes related to art expertise intervene and regulate our emotional responses, achieving a kind of emotional dissociation that facilitates proper aesthetic appreciation. This is based on the work of the cognitive psychologist Helmut Leder. Leder and his colleagues have investigated how laypersons and art experts differ in the way they respond to visual artworks. On the basis of participating subjects' self-reports and physiological reactions measured using facial electromyography, the researchers found that emotional response to artworks was less extreme among the art experts examined.⁴³ This, supposedly, is 'in line with the Kantian notion that an aesthetic stance is emotionally distanced'.⁴⁴ This reasoning has subsequently been adapted and presented in neuroaesthetically oriented discussions. Chatterjee and Vartanian are quite explicit on the matter:

some recent behavioral evidence suggests that experts may be more capable of adopting a stance reflective of disinterested interest than novices. [...] [Leder and colleagues'] findings are consistent with the Kantian notion that adopting an aesthetic stance is emotionally distanced, at least among people knowledgeable about visual arts.⁴⁵

However, the idea of treating disinterestedness as a matter of reducing the intensity of emotive response via cognitive modulation of emotion is problematic. Aesthetic disinterestedness, phenomenologically illuminated as suspension of any positing of belief, *does not occur by degrees*. In turning toward an object aesthetically, we might experience pleasure or displeasure, which can have gradations. And the aesthetic object can be given with different degrees of evidence, placing it further from or closer to its optimal givenness. But indifference to existence is not graded.

We cannot have, as it were, a little bit of 'as if' belief in the existence of something. Of course, we might be ambivalent about how much we like something, but even then we maintain a non-positing aesthetic attitude. And this is certainly different from doubting the existential status of that which is aesthetically given. Indeed, Husserl argues that such doubt is the enemy of the aesthetic stance. In one text he gives the example of seeing a mannequin in a wax museum and explains that when we move back and forth from the positing perception of a real man to the non-positing image-consciousness of a fictional man, the image is not '*clearly* set apart from reality'.⁴⁶ Here, image-consciousness does not last long because of the high degree of similarity between the mannequin and the real human being. And since we lack 'peaceful and clear consciousness of imaging,' which grounds aesthetic pleasure, any delight we might get in such cases is far from aesthetic.⁴⁷

In fact, the non-positing character of aesthetic pleasure (or displeasure) can explain the distancing inherent to our aesthetic encounters with persons, objects or events, which is independent of how much we like or dislike them,

how positively or negatively we evaluate them, or any ambivalence we feel in this respect. Moreover, phenomenologically, this distance is not a kind of detachment that comes with the limitation or elimination of further feelings evoked besides aesthetic pleasure (or displeasure) in the how of the object's givenness. Aesthetic experience can be highly emotional, eliciting intense feelings like joy, sadness, pity, fear, compassion, etc. Husserl's observations on the involvement of various feelings awakened in artistic contexts can help us deal with this issue.

It may well be the case that such feelings arise in the face of images (broadly meant) that present real persons, things or events: the bust or the portrait of a historical figure, photographs, a movie based on actual facts, and so on. Those are, then, genuine positing feelings (*object* or else *actuality* feelings) that presuppose belief in the (past, present, or future) actual existence of their intentional objects. Various feelings may also arise in the face of fictional persons, objects or events. Even then, the fear, pity, sorrow, joy, sadness, etc., we might feel when encountering fictional themes in a painting, sculpture, movie, theatrical play, or novel are, according to Husserl, genuine feelings:

The miserably tormented person in the picture awakens my compassion. I actually have a feeling [*Gefühl*] of compassion, just as I actually have a thing intuition, indeed, a thing perception. But it is a modified feeling. The ill person in the image is pitiable; he is the 'poor' sick person. [...] Like any feeling, it [i.e. compassion] helps constitute something about the subject matter that pertains to it 'intuitively'.⁴⁸

Husserl further clarifies that such genuine feelings in the face of unreal themes are non-positing:⁴⁹

If a delight (or sorrow) is directed toward a mere image object, then it is nonpositing delight [or sorrow].⁵⁰

But what does this non-positionality mean? Let us discuss this via the example of the fear we feel when encountering, say, a poisonous snake. Such a fear is an object-feeling founded on belief in the real existence of the live snake. Confronted with a toy snake, by comparison, we can approach it and touch it without a trace of fear. We would only feel fear if we believed, mistakenly, that the toy snake was a real, living snake. Accordingly, while watching an actor playing with a toy snake that is presented as such, we feel fear neither in empathising with the actor, as real Egos worried for his or her safety, or as phantasy Egos projected on stage. But we may feel fear if the toy snake is presented as real and dangerous in the 'as if' world of the theatrical play. In that case, our fear would be founded on a quasi-belief in the 'as if' reality this particular object has within the fictional world of the

play. Whereas the aesthetic pleasure we might take in a snake is exclusively a matter of the *how* of its givenness, irrespective of whether it is alive, a toy, a painting, or a vision in a dream, other emotions elicited within such an artistically relevant context presuppose its quasi-existence. We can say that such modified acts (compared to being directed toward actual, non-fictional objects) are *quasi-actuality feelings*.⁵¹ Understanding the character of non-positionality as quasi-positionality can also phenomenologically explain the distance we experience when we are emotionally engaged with fictional objects or events. But, again, the distance inherent to how we relate intentionally to fictions has nothing to do with the attenuation of emotion about which Leder and his colleagues speak. The first is a qualitative moment of our experience, while the second denotes intensity of feeling.

The quasi-actuality feelings aroused by fictional objects or events, like the actuality feelings aroused, for example, by nature, or by images and representations of real persons, objects or events, are not in themselves aesthetic. However, they can play a significant role in our aesthetic experiences. Husserl claims that the way actuality feelings or quasi-actuality feelings fluctuate belongs to the ‘manner of appearing’ toward which aesthetic consciousness is directed. The actuality or quasi-actuality feelings ‘can combine with ways of exhibiting, and the like, into a unity’⁵² and in this sense codetermine aesthetic objectivity. And, importantly, the combination of disinterested pleasure with actuality or quasi-actuality feelings enhances aesthetic delight.⁵³

It becomes clear from the above that, while neuroscientists take aesthetic disinterestedness to be a state of psychical distance susceptible to gradation and accomplished through proper emotional attenuation, Husserlian phenomenology (i) treats it as being a qualitative character independent of the intension of aesthetic pleasure or other aroused feelings; and (ii) shows that the actuality or quasi-actuality character as also the fluctuation of these feelings positively affect the aesthetic experience. Phenomenologically speaking, it is thus misguided to consider a layperson’s response to artworks as less, or not at all, disinterested, and hence less properly or less genuinely aesthetic on the basis that the higher order acts associated with expertise are absent in their case. Disinterested aesthetic pleasure is equally possible for both art novices and art experts independently of top-down cognitive penetration, or even, importantly, in the absence of such penetration. A short clarification is in order here.

Aesthetic pleasure (or displeasure) belongs to feeling-intentionalities and, according to Husserl, is always founded on some objectifying act. This means that it always presupposes an already constituted object, or objectivity in general, toward which, or, more accurately, toward the *how* of the appearance of which, it is directed. Of course, our aesthetic attitude may concern objectivities that are correlates of other founded acts. These can be intuitive, like how the aesthetic pleasure we take in a painting presupposes image-consciousness, which itself is founded on the perception of the physical

bearer of the picture. Or they can be higher-order intentionalities that involve conceptualisations, theoretisations, and idealisations, like the aesthetic pleasure we take in literature, or even in a scientific proof or theory. At the undermost level of transcendent experience, though, aesthetic pleasure (or displeasure) is founded on simple perception, which is not itself a founded act. Husserl speaks about this originary aesthetic experience in terms of ‘value-(re)ception [*Wertnehmung*]’ (namely evaluative perception, analogous to ‘per-ception [*Wahrnehmung*]’).⁵⁴ In such experience, perceptual spatio-temporal objects charged with value-characters appear to us. For example, beauty is given in the originary intuitional act of value-reception as an objective character of the object, as ‘value-objectiveness’.⁵⁵

Undoubtedly, aesthetic experience is a complex state that involves an interplay of affective and higher order cognitive dimensions. Husserlian phenomenology points, however, to the possibility of a primordial aesthetic state, an originary act of value-reception, which transcends simple perception of mere natural things and, when founded on ‘simple objectivating perception’, precedes acts of predicative thinking, explicit identification, classification, content interpretation, etc.⁵⁶ The possibility of such a primordial aesthetic state, which is existentially disinterested in the phenomenological sense discussed, is open to everyone irrespective of their artistic education.

IV. FINAL REMARKS

The above discussion has, hopefully, clarified that neuroscientific preconceptions regarding aesthetic disinterestedness are theoretically naïve and that neuroscience’s experimental findings have been interpreted using theoretical tools that in many regards are misguided. As I show, this has involved overlooking crucial notions such as the *absence of belief in real existence*; the *suspension of pragmatic concerns* that, however, maintain a *horizon of open possibilities*; the *interest in the how of the appearance* of the aesthetic object; the distinction between *actuality feelings* and *aesthetic pleasure*; the phenomenologically interpreted *engagement* and *detachment* of quasi-actuality feelings involved in aesthetic experience; and the *founded character of feeling-intentionalities* and the possibility of some *primordial aesthetic pleasure*. In addition, whereas neuroaesthetics is supposed to deal with aesthetic experience, it seems it has great, not to say unsurpassable, difficulties explaining what precisely, phenomenologically speaking, it is that makes an experience *aesthetic*.

Intense research conducted during the last two decades may have led some to believe that the discipline of neuroaesthetics had come of age.⁵⁷ However, critical evaluation of the qualitative assertions made by neuroscientists reveals a discipline that lacks solid theoretical foundation. This is the classical – for the genesis and development of a science – case of accumulating a plethora of important empirical/laboratory data yet lacking the necessary

philosophical/theoretical context to classify, organise, and explain the results achieved. Contemporary neuroaesthetics appears in need of an explicit, coherent theoretical framework to delineate and determine its subject matter, to describe in detail all the different levels of consciousness' functions and the various parameters involved in aesthetic experience in particular, and to appropriately interpret its rich empirical findings. If (neuro-)empirical research is to positively contribute to our understanding of aesthetic experience, it should be theoretically/phenomenologically informed and grounded. But a dialogical relation with neuroaesthetics would also benefit phenomenology, with empirical research contributing to the updating, readjustment, refinement, and deepening of phenomenological concepts and positions, as well as opening new theoretical paths that could remain closed to isolated *a priori* (armchair) inquiry.⁵⁸

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NOTES

¹Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999; Zeki 1999.

²E.g., Pearce et al. 2016.

³E.g., Chatterjee and Vartanian 2014.

⁴E.g., Currie 2003; Tallis 2008a and 2008b; Massey 2009; Chatterjee 2010; Hyman 2010; Noë 2011 and 2015.

⁵See, though, Gallagher 2011; Bundgaard 2015; Firenze 2015.

⁶It should be stressed, though, that the present article does not offer an argument either for the correctness of the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness or for the appropriateness of its specifically phenomenological reading over other theoretical approaches. That would, of course, require separate extended analyses. By adopting a specifically phenomenological, and more precisely Husserlian standpoint, on the issue, the critique attempted here aims to trace the deficits of neuroaesthetic talk on aesthetic disinterestedness but also to provide the theoretical resources, again from a phenomenological point of view, needed to overcome those deficits.

⁷Zeki and Ramachandran are the main representatives of the 'first wave' of researchers in neuroaesthetics. Chatterjee calls this first wave a 'descriptive science of the arts' or 'descriptive neuroaesthet-

ics'. Its basic aim was to investigate and uncover 'parallels between what artists are doing and the way our brains process information'. (Chatterjee 2014, 127).

⁸Zeki 1999, esp. Part One.

⁹Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999, 17ff.

¹⁰E.g., Chatterjee 2014, xixf, 103ff, 181; Chatterjee 2012, 309; Chatterjee and Vartanian 2016, 184.

¹¹E.g., Chatterjee and Vartanian 2014, 372; Chatterjee 2011, 399.

¹²E.g., Wyvell and Berridge 2000; Berridge and Kringelbach 2008; Berridge and Kringelbach 2015.

¹³E.g., Berridge and Kringelbach 2015, 647. Adherents to this theory maintain that conscious liking occurs via later cortical processes in the brain. For instance, after receiving a sweet or bitter solution, rats express 'liking' by rhythmically protruding their tongues and licking their lips, while they express 'disliking' by gaping and moving their heads side to side. According to Berridge, these 'objective' orofacial reactions show hedonic or aversive tendencies and offer a way to objectively measure 'liking' or 'disliking'. 'Wanting,' meanwhile, denotes the mesolimbic motivation process of incentive salience and its objective consequences, such as the rats' runway per-

formance or cue-triggered efforts to obtain food rewards. Berridge and Kringelbach 2015, 648.

¹⁴Berridge and Kringelbach 2015, 648.

¹⁵Of course, the liking/wanting experimentation itself presupposes that experiences of ‘liking’ and ‘wanting’ remain the same before and after their dissociation. It is probable, however, that pharmacological modulation affects the very being of those experiences, something that neuroscientists do not take into account.

¹⁶Chatterjee 2014, 104.

¹⁷Chatterjee 2014, 104. See also Robinson and Berridge 2008, 3142f.

¹⁸Berridge and Kringelbach 2015, 649. Or, as Chatterjee and Vartanian put it, ‘it is perhaps even more surprising that a diverse set of pleasures – including those derived from food, drink, sex, addictive drugs, friends, loved ones, music, and art – activate the same limbic hot spots in the brain’ (Chatterjee and Vartanian 2016, 184).

¹⁹Chatterjee 2014, 181.

²⁰Chatterjee and Vartanian 2016, 184. Or, elsewhere: ‘Whether the liking/wanting distinction generalises to humans or to visual stimuli remains to be seen. However, one might test the hypothesis that a self-contained reward system exists and forms the basis for aesthetic disinterested interest’ (Chatterjee 2010, 58). ‘Reward systems integrate liking, wanting, and learning. Liking and wanting normally operate together. However, as stated earlier, they can uncouple. The possibility of this uncoupling is important, especially when we consider encounters with art’ (Chatterjee 2014, 108.) See also Pearce et al. 2016. Cognitive researchers Martin Skov and Marcos Nadal object to the appropriation of the idea of disinterested aesthetic experience. (See Skov and Nadal 2018; Nadal, Gálvez, and Gomila 2014, 37–8.) They believe that this keeps neuroaesthetics tied to obsolete philosophical language and impedes the complete naturalisation of the aesthetic.

²¹Chatterjee 2014, 111–12, 181.

²²Many philosophers in aesthetics and philosophy of art today are critical of the notions of aesthetic disinterestedness

and the aesthetic attitude. Characteristic of this is what Dabney Townsend says in his historical introduction to aesthetics: ‘the apparent consensus that aesthetics is about disinterested experience of a unique kind has now largely dissolved under the multiple pressures of artistic and cultural diversity and philosophical skepticism’ (Townsend 2006, xvii). See, though, Hilgers 2016 and Asavei 2018 for a recent resurgence of interest in aesthetic disinterestedness. In the present discussion, I will confine myself to how aesthetic disinterestedness is treated in (primarily Husserlian) phenomenology.

²³I take this to also be the heart of Kant’s discussion about aesthetic disinterestedness. Danielle Lories expresses this point beautifully: ‘the disconnection of existence, the neutralisation of any positional modality, and the rigorous exclusion of any existential stand that is characteristic of the purely aesthetic attitude are only different names – more phenomenological names, perhaps, certainly more Husserlian – for the Kantian notion of disinterestedness’ (Lories 2006, 38).

²⁴See, e.g., Husserl 1980, 391; Engl. transl. 2005, 464. Henceforth cited as *Hua* XXIII, followed by the German then English page references. I will generally adopt this form of citation for Husserl’s works: *Hua* A, B/C, where A is the latin number of the Husserliana series, B the German page reference, and C the English page reference, when available.

²⁵According to Dorion Cairns in his *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*, Husserl was discussing the doxic neutrality of aesthetic contemplation with his interlocutors just two days earlier (December 23, 1931). Cairns 1976, 58f.: ‘Husserl spoke of the aesthetic contemplation of a landscape as involving a neutralisation of the normal doxic or thetic comprehension of the landscape’.

²⁶*Hua* XXXIV, 368–69; trans. mine.

²⁷*Hua* XXIII, 144/167.

²⁸*Hua* XXIII, 593/713.

²⁹*Hua* XXIII, 442/522; see also 391/463–64.

³⁰‘When an aesthetic consciousness is based on an intuition that is characterised

doxically, on the perception of nature, and so on, the feeling there does not have its basis in the doxic position taking: we do not live in the latter when we are comporting ourselves aesthetically. We do not live in the doxic but in the valuing intentions'. (*Hua* XXIII, 386/458-59.)

³¹E.g., *Hua* IV, 10-1/12.

³²See, *Hua* XXIII, 442/522; also, *Hua* IV, 12f./14f.

³³*Hua* XXIII, 365/437.

³⁴*Hua* XVII, 365/20.

³⁵E.g., *Hua* IV, 12/14.

³⁶*Hua* XXIII, 586/704.

³⁷Or, in other words, toward 'what appears as it appears' (*Hua* XXIII, 587/705), 'what *presents itself as it presents itself*' (*Hua* XXIII, 538/647), 'the presented object in the How of its presentedness' (*Hua* XXIII, 586/704), or 'the objectivity in its How' (*Hua* XXIII, 591/710).

³⁸*Hua* XXIII, 391/463.

³⁹*Hua* XXIII, 391/463.

⁴⁰*Hua* XXIII, 389/462.

⁴¹*Hua* XXIII, 591/710.

⁴²Chatterjee and Vartanian 2016, 184.

⁴³E.g., Leder et al. 2014, 6; Chatterjee and Vartanian 2016, 184.

⁴⁴Leder et al. 2014, 1137. The same idea occurs again shortly after this passage: '[t]he emotionally distanced mode would resemble what Kant proposed to be the essential aesthetic stance' (Leder et al. 2014, 1138).

⁴⁵Chatterjee and Vartanian 2016, 184.

⁴⁶*Hua* XXIII, 41/44.

⁴⁷*Hua* XXIII, 41/44. It goes without saying that image consciousness does not necessarily go hand in hand with the aesthetic stance.

⁴⁸ *Hua* XXIII, 465/554; see also 383/455.

⁴⁹This brings us into confrontation with some version of the so called 'paradox of fiction,' which very much troubles scholars in analytic aesthetics. The paradox, roughly put, regards how it is possible for rational beings to be moved (positively or negatively) by entities or events we know not to exist. (For an enlightening discussion of this issue from a Husserlian point of view, see Summa 2018.) The present article, however, does not intend to offer a

phenomenological solution to the 'paradox of fiction'. That would need its own space to be properly discussed. Just to stress here that a thorough treatment of the issue would certainly require the separation and close investigation of the following phenomenologically different distinctions: (a) that between what is actually present and what is presentified, (b) between what is existing and what is non-existing, (c) between what is existence-dependent and what is existence-independent, and (d) between what is actual and what is fictional. Accounts that dismiss one or more of these phenomenologically distinct levels of analysis are incomplete. Derek Matravers 2014, for example, offers a probing and enlivening discussion, but as he puts emphasis on the first distinction – in his terminology on the distinction between confrontations and representations – he disregards the still crucial difference between (represented) actuality and (represented) fictionality. Phenomenologically speaking, an emotional response in the face of a non-fictional representation is not the same with the emotional response in the face of a fictional one. (Consider, for instance, the decapitation scene in a terrorists' film and a similar scene in a science-fiction movie.)

⁵⁰*Hua* XXIII, 471/560.

⁵¹It is important to notice here that the way Husserl deals with emotional responses to fiction is opposed to accounts that consider them to be pretended and not genuine. In his so-called 'make-believe theory', Kendall Walton 1990 refers to the thus construed pretended emotions as quasi-emotions. However, this terminology should not mislead us. In Husserl's relevant analysis the prefix 'quasi' refers exclusively to the positing character of the act and in no way means pretense. Husserlian phenomenology allows genuine, full-fledged emotional experiences founded on the belief in the quasi-existence of fictional persons, objects or events. At the same time it precludes approaches from an illusion theory perspective, since, in our encounters with fiction, we are continuously aware of the as-if existence (or as-if non-existence) of fictional objectivities, while we continuously have a background aware-

ness regarding the reality of both our direct environment as also of the reality of the physical substrate of the artwork, of the actors filmed, and so on.

⁵²*Hua* XXIII, 392/464.

⁵³*Hua* XXIII, 391/462.

⁵⁴On this subject, Husserl says, “The most original constitution of value is performed in feelings [*Gemüt*] as that pre-theoretical (in a broad sense) delighting abandon on the part of the feeling Ego-subject for which I used the term “value-reception” [*Wertnehmung*] already several decades ago in my lectures. The term is meant to indicate, in the sphere of feelings, an analogon of perception, one which, in the doxic sphere, signifies the Ego’s original (self-grasping) being in the presence of the object itself.” (*Hua* IV, 9/11.)

⁵⁵As regards the ‘objectiveness’ of values, there are certainly many interpreta-

tive problems for Husserlian scholars concerning the status of non-objectivating acts, nourished by Husserl’s own, at times, ambivalent descriptions. Be this as it may, I restrict myself here to discussing Husserl’s approach in *Ideas* II. For example, we read there: ‘In that case, there is built, upon the substratum of mere intuitive representing, an evaluative which, if we presuppose it, plays, in the immediacy of its lively motivation, the role of a value-‘perception’ (in our terms, a value-reception) in which the value character itself *is given in original intuition*’. (*Hua* IV, 186/196; emphasis added.)

⁵⁶*Hua* IV, 16/18.

⁵⁷Chatterjee 2010.

⁵⁸I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer whose insightful comments helped me clarify some critical aspects of my argument.

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