

Aesthetic Investigations

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Aesthetic Value and Aesthetic Judgement. The Key Problem for Contemporary Aesthetic Naturalism.

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Contemporary aesthetic naturalism integrates various scientific approaches into the common effort to provide an explanation of the main topics of aesthetics on the basis of empirical methods or in line with available evidence. Although these approaches have recently achieved very relevant empirical and theoretical results, contemporary aesthetic naturalism still does not solve the traditional key problem of naturalism as such, that is the explanation of value in scientific terms. Firstly, I analyse the possible responses to this key problem, showing that aesthetic value, particularly in the version of artistic value, remains outside the scope of current empirical approaches to aesthetics. Then I propose that this apparently strong philosophical limitation can be easily reduced to an ordinary epistemological limitation if aesthetic naturalism accepts to improve the interaction with art criticism, the discipline in the humanities characterised by a privileged access to the historical and social reasons that justify aesthetic judgements.

I. THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES TO AESTHETICS

In the last decades the scientific approaches to aesthetics have attracted a huge attention. At present the most well-known lines of research are empirical aesthetics, neuroaesthetics, evolutionary aesthetics, and the statistic approaches to aesthetics. Although these fields of research cannot be considered as fully developed scientific disciplines, with established theoretical frameworks, common methods, and shared objectives of research, they continue to grow fast and to achieve relevant empirical findings.

Empirical aesthetics was founded in the 19th century and represented one of the first fields of psychology. At present it is a rich area of research with multiple directions. Some of the most important lines of investigation concern expertise,¹ the link between insight and appreciation,² the use of stimuli embedded in real context in order to improve ecological validity,³ the use of flexible methods in order to catch the temporal dynamics of perceptual and evaluative processes,⁴ the elaboration of a complex model with multiple factors.⁵ Neuroaesthetics emerged more recently in the 1990s, when modern neuroimaging became available. It is the study of the neural basis for the production, perception, and appreciation of artworks, as well as non-artistic objects and natural phenomena that evoke intense feeling, often of pleasure.⁶ Because research is at an early stage, neuroscientists still have different backgrounds, interests, and questions. So, they use different stimuli, procedures, and techniques. As a result, collected data are somewhat divergent.⁷ However, in recent years the neuro-psychological approach has definitively overcome the flimsy and simple-minded early efforts, exclusively focused on perceptual beauty, simple preferences, and sensory perception. Many empirical investigations have framed aesthetic experience as a complex and multifaceted experience of knowledge and learning.⁸

This rich conception of aesthetic experience was already present in evolutionary aesthetics from the beginning. Even when evolutionary theorists have denied the status of adaptation to aesthetic experience, they have recognised that by means of it subjects can explore and simulate possibilities.⁹ At present, evolutionary psychology is aiming at focusing the fine-grained specificity of aesthetic experience and art as distinct from other human adaptations and activities.¹⁰ Statistic approaches to aesthetics use quantitative methods to obtain common behavioural data. At present the shared effort is to consider the performance at stake as an embodied simulation in order to catch its subjective and personal dimension.¹¹ For instance, the numerically aided phenomenological approach to literary studies uses statistical methods to analyse readers' personal response in order to identify common patterns of subjective experience.¹²

Moreover, in addition to these scientific approaches explicitly devoted to aesthetics, it is important to highlight that in the last decades many interesting data and theoretical constructs have been developed by scientific fields that are not directly focused on aesthetic issues as such. For instance, affective neuroscience has identified the reward and pleasure circuits.¹³ Cognitive and social psychology have identified specific mechanisms of fiction.¹⁴ Cognitive archeology, cognitive anthropology, and ethnology have identified empirical support to the hypotheses of evolutionary psychology.¹⁵ Therefore, based on so many different lines of research, it is inevitable that the various scientific approaches to aesthetics do not have strong interdisciplinary integration.

However, it is possible to highlight a general common core of them. From the theoretical point of view, all the approaches are based on the effort to

naturalise aesthetics. This means that they try to provide an explanation of the main topics of aesthetics on the basis of empirical methods, or in line with the available empirical evidence and the theoretical frameworks derived from it. From the methodological point of view, they involve the explanatory pluralism, one of the epistemological conceptions most accepted in neurocognitive sciences. According to this non-reductive approach, the best form and level of explanation depend on the kind of question the research seeks to answer. Therefore, the ordinary functioning of research requires simultaneous investigations of the same explicantum at different levels. Only in this way it is possible to enhance the development of each level and to answer all questions in the best way possible.¹⁶ So, neuroscientists have focused on the brain system. Psychologists have focused on stimuli and context. Evolutionists have focused on adaptive advantages. Statistic approaches have focused on behavioural data.

However, in my reading what is still absent from this complex system of relationships is an appropriate interaction with the disciplines in the humanities that have traditionally been concerned with aesthetic topics. In particular, in the next two sections I will argue that the inadequate relationship with art criticism represents one of the strongest limitations for contemporary aesthetic naturalism.

II. CONTEMPORARY AESTHETIC NATURALISM AND THE KEY PROBLEM OF AESTHETIC VALUE

Taken together, the scientific approaches to aesthetics inevitably face the traditional key problem of naturalism: the understanding and explanation of value in scientific terms. It is well known that the version of naturalism inspired by the neopositivist frame simply argued that aesthetic values do not refer to facts, states of affairs, and natural properties, so aesthetic judgements are not objective, they do not afford knowledge, they do not have truth conditions, they are not empirically falsifiable. Aesthetic values only express personal feelings and prescribe personal attitudes.¹⁷ This metaphysical fact-value dichotomy has been deeply criticised and contemporary naturalism has overcome it.¹⁸

However, what still represents a key problem is the normativity of the aesthetic judgement. This normativity is not rule-governed in such a way as to allow us to know that an aesthetic predicate is correctly applied solely by being able to specify certain non-aesthetic feature of the object.¹⁹ Nonetheless, as it was clearly stressed by Kant, each aesthetic judgement demands for intersubjective validity, making ‘a rightful claim to the assent of everyone’.²⁰ According to Kant’s approach, in contrast to individual and ‘sensory preferences’, the ‘judgement of taste’ has an aspiration to universal validity.

Different areas of research have proposed various responses to this key problem. However, all the possible hypotheses fall along a continuum de-

fined by two extreme and opposite theses. The first thesis is developed at the subpersonal level and it is common in the neuropsychological approach. The second thesis is developed at the personal level and it is common in evolutionary psychology, in particular in literary Darwinism.

Recently the first position has been clearly exposed by some of the main researchers in the neuropsychological approach.²¹ They argue that the problem of the aesthetic evaluation, including the artistic evaluation (that is, an evaluation prompted by an artwork), concerns the general study of how and why sensory information acquires hedonic value, that is how it comes to activate processes in the reward circuit. According to this point of view, the aesthetic evaluation (again, including the artistic evaluation) is reduced to aesthetic pleasure and, in turn, this is reduced to a not specific sensory pleasure. The authors explicitly underscore that, even if aesthetic pleasure is activated by an artwork, it is not different from the pleasure triggered by food, money, and sex. The criterion of a successful explanation of aesthetic value coincides with the identification of the computational mechanisms by means of which incoming sensory information is imbued with affective reward. So, a successful explanation reduces artistic value to aesthetic value and this one to the general computational principles of the affective mind. In this perspective, aesthetics fully becomes a topic of psychology and neuroscience.

This proposal is completely unsatisfactory. The main critical point is that the aesthetic evaluation (and, a fortiori, the artistic evaluation) cannot be reduced in principle to aesthetic pleasure, because aesthetic pleasure only represents an affective and non-conceptual recognition of aesthetic value at best.²² On the contrary, when aesthetic judgements do not simply constitute the verbal expression of an affective reaction (and, a fortiori, when they are part of art criticism), they can be conceptual, intentional, systematic, and reason-based evaluations. In line with the Kantian approach, subjects do not judge merely for themselves, but for everyone, so when they disagree, they can argue their aesthetic judgements – even if the aesthetic predicates are not rule-governed. In terms of cognitive psychology, aesthetic pleasure is similar to Kahneman's system 1, whereas aesthetic judgement is similar to Kahneman's system 2, and, obviously, system 2 cannot be collapsed into system 1.²³

Moreover, although reductionist in spirit, the proposal is inflationary. Conceived in terms of system 2, the aesthetic judgement is simply outside the scope of scientific aesthetics proper. So, according to this perspective, scientific approaches, at best, can give information about the subpersonal causes of an aesthetic judgement, without accessing the reasons that justify it.

The opposite thesis is explicitly proposed by literary Darwinism.²⁴ Although linked to evolutionary psychology, literary Darwinism is inspired by sociobiology and the adaptationist program. It aims at providing a biological foundation of literary studies and, on this basis, establishing a new practice

of interpretation. According to this point of view, great literary works are based on the human nature and refer to adaptive problems. Both the human nature and the adaptive problems are universal and constant across cultures. However, different habitats and environmental variations produce different local solutions to the same adaptive problems.²⁵ The criterion of a successful explanation of the aesthetic value (that, in contrast to the previous proposal, is largely considered as artistic value) coincides with the identification of the universal adaptations and the cross-cultural adaptive problems under the cultural particularities described in the literary works. So, a successful explanation reduces aesthetic (that is, artistic) values to the general design of the human mind. As a consequence, aesthetic (again, artistic) judgements simply become a topic of evolutionary psychology. In addition, art criticism not subsumed by literary Darwinism becomes irrelevant for understanding aesthetic values and aesthetic judgements.

This thesis also is completely unsatisfactory. The main critical point is that the aesthetic (or better, artistic) evaluation cannot be resolved into human universals: artistic values emerge from cultural particularities that cannot be completely explained by the general theory on the human nature. For instance, Duchamp's ready-mades, Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, and De Maria's *Vertical Earth Kilometer* are considered valuable artworks according to the social practices of the contemporary artworld.²⁶ These cultural stipulations cannot be justified, at least in a salient manner, by any universal adaptations taken as such.²⁷

Therefore, although reductionist in spirit like the subpersonal one, this thesis also is inflationary. Conceived as the product of social and historical agreements, the artistic judgement is simply outside the scope of scientific aesthetics proper. It remains an exclusive matter of art criticism, that in turn cannot be limited to an aprioristic adoption of the scientific frame. So, according to this second perspective, scientific approaches, at best, can give information about the personal causes of an aesthetic (artistic) judgement derived by our biology, without accessing the social and historical reasons that justify it.

III. THE KEY PROBLEM OF AESTHETIC VALUE AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL LIMITATION

Both the opposite theses proposed by contemporary naturalism in order to solve the key problem of aesthetic value share a common negative limit. Although the first thesis reduces artistic value to the aesthetic value and this, in turn, to aesthetic pleasure, whereas the second thesis reduces aesthetic value to artistic value and this, in turn, to human universals, they underscore the so-called second nature, the conceptual space of reasons, socially and historically conditioned.²⁸ The first thesis simply ignores it and reduces the aesthetic judgement to aesthetic pleasure, collapsing an extensive, analytic, reason-based judgement into an affective reaction. In addition, affective pleasure is modelled on what Kant called ‘sensory preferences’, without considering (or best, denying) that aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic emotions are ‘disinterested’. Again in line with Kant, they are not activated by instrumental goals, practical needs, pragmatic processing, ordinary problem-solving, immediate concerns, and direct survival.²⁹ On the contrary, they are sought for their own sake.

The second thesis apparently recognises the space of reasons, but it collapses this social and historical space into the human nature, misunderstanding the essential role that the collective stipulations play in determining artistic values. Even if aesthetic experience is a human universal (or, at least, it is the product of human universals), art is the result of intersubjective recognition based on the forms and the practices of collective intentionality.³⁰ This means that artistic value is attributed according to the norms of belief, assertion and evaluation embedded in the art-related collective intentionality.

Therefore, even the contemporary and sophisticated version of aesthetic naturalism does not catch aesthetic value, and in particular artistic value. However, it is important to stress that this limitation does not derive from the theoretical failure of the discussed responses to the key problem. On the contrary, this limitation is directly embodied in the current experimental practice. Empirical studies concerning art have hitherto assumed as granted what the collective intentionality had already established on single artworks and they have grounded the empirical investigations on these collective stipulations. Precisely, they have accepted a specific token as art (of different levels: high-quality art, low-level art, popular art, and so on) in order to study the perceptual, affective, evaluative, cognitive processes activated by it.³¹ Even literary Darwinism, that pretends to be a practice of interpretation (or better, the fundamental practice of interpretation), has taken as reference great artworks already evaluated as such by the collective intentionality and have (re)interpreted artworks’ contents in terms of human universals.³²

However, this limitation is not necessarily really bad news for naturalism. It absolutely does not involve an inescapable hard problem, an insurmountable philosophical limitation. On the contrary, it represents an ordinary epistemological limitation. According to the explanatory pluralism, this limita-

tion simply means that – the form and the level of explanation provided by – art criticism (at least, still at present) has a privileged access to aesthetic and artistic values and its understanding of social and historical reasons constitutes the inevitable starting point of empirical investigation on art. So, the key problem of value can easily disappear if aesthetic naturalism definitively reconsiders its reductive tendencies and accepts a conceptual shifting, directly indicated by its ongoing pluralist and non-reductive experimental practice: art criticism cannot be eliminated or reduced. On the contrary, a renewed and in-depth dialogue with art criticism represents a crucial factor for future successful empirical research.

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NOTES

- ¹Leder et al. 2014.
²Muth and Carbon 2013.
³Pelowski 2017.
⁴Carbon 2019.
⁵Pelowski 2017.
⁶Skov and Vartanian 2009.
⁷Nadal and Skov 2013.
⁸Consoli 2015.
⁹Pinker 1997.
¹⁰Consoli 2014; Dissanayake 2015.
¹¹Gibbs and Herbert 2019.
¹²Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora 2004.
¹³Kringelbach and Berridge 2010.
¹⁴Consoli 2018.
¹⁵Henshilwood and D’Errico 2011.
¹⁶Bechtel 1991.
¹⁷This position was explicitly formulated by Ayer 1936.
¹⁸Putnam 2002.
¹⁹This is the classical position expressed in Sibley 1959.
²⁰Kant 1790, 98.
²¹Pearce 2016; Skov and Nadal 2020.
²²Consoli 2016b.
²³Kahneman 2012.
²⁴Here I mainly refer to Carroll 2004; 2011.
²⁵This aspect is clearly expressed by Sugiyama 2003.
²⁶the final version of the theory of ‘transfiguration’ argued by Danto 2007.
²⁷Different authors have highlighted this point, for instance see Kaufman 2016.
²⁸the naturalistic perspective on the second nature exposed by Edelman 2006.
²⁹Different lines of naturalistic research explicitly refer to Kantian disinterest. See for instance Winfried Menninghaus 2019.
³⁰About the role of collective stipulations in the artworld see Thomasson 2005. About the role of these stipulations in aesthetic judgements see Consoli 2016a.
³¹See, for instance, some influential studies on literature that explicitly adopt this perspective: Miall and Kuiken 1994; Djikic, Oatley, and Carland 2012.; Kidd and Emanuele 2013; Koopman and Hakemulder 2015; Pino and Mazza 2016.
³²See, for instance, Barash and Barash 2005 on *Madame Bovary*; Nordlund 2007 on Shakespeare; Gottshall 2008 on Homer; Carroll et al. 2012 on Jane Austen; Saunders 2018 on American literary classics.

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