

Aesthetic Investigations

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Special Issue – Empirical Aesthetics

Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*

Reviewed book: Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

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In the *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, Bence Nanay argues that views familiar to the field of philosophy of perception stand to enrich the field of aesthetics. His broad conception of perception includes ‘cross-modal influences, categorization, conceptualisation and all kinds of top-down influences from non-perceptual processes’ plus ‘attention’ (7). In the first chapter, he demarcates aesthetics from the philosophy of art and suggests that philosophy of perception’s alternate role as the philosophy of experience proves especially relevant for aesthetic experience. Over the next five chapters, he develops five perceptual processes that he considers particular to aesthetic experience: distributed attention, a ‘threefoldness account’ of picture perception, aesthetically-relevant properties, semi-formalism and uniqueness. In sum, when we have an aesthetic experience, we treat an artwork as unique. Lacking a blueprint to follow, we must attend to everything, which warrants ‘distributed attention’ (127). Verging slightly from this discussion, the last two chapters explore the advent of twofoldness and vicarious experiences’ dependence on non-distributed attention.

While I wholeheartedly endorse Nanay’s claim that aestheticians should be more savvy about philosophy of perception, his methodology seems to contradict what philosophers of perception actually do. They show how everything in our environment modifies our perceptions. Since perception is multi-modal, there’s probably no such thing as looking at pictures the way Nanay describes. Nanay attributes his notion of aesthetic experience to hours

spent studying pictures with Richard Wollheim. Terming this process ‘aesthetic attention’ (p. 25), he argues that distributed attention, such that we free up our minds to take in an object’s myriad properties, optimises aesthetic experience. ‘You are trying to make sense of the object by trying out attending to a wide variety of its properties – just as you would do with an object you have never encountered before’ (134). Strangely, Nanay never identifies attention’s source, as if spectators freely direct their attentions at will, but this is especially difficult when puzzling artworks overwhelm our thoughts. He notes that Monroe Beardsley singled-out singletons (29), yet Nanay ignores his having actually credited objects with directing our attention.

While I heartily endorse Wollheim’s warm-up exercise (eerily reminiscent of Alfred Barnes), it is woefully inadequate so long as it ignores the artwork’s environment and presentational history. Even if we perceive one picture at a time, we remain mindful of its prior contexts. Moreover, perception is comparative. Studying several things at once helps us grasp more of each. Our facility with colours, forms, styles, symbols, themes and genres arises from our ability to compare and contrast properties between extant things, present or not. Like food plating, wall colours modify artworks’ colours. A well-placed bench can improve a long-term observer’s aesthetic experience, even if it doesn’t warrant aesthetic attention. Since the environment influences what we attend to, Nanay’s imagining artworks extracted from their environments effectively cleaves spectators from world.

Given that we *never* experience one artwork at a time, save perhaps at art auctions, Nanay’s focus on *unique* singletons (solitary pictures extracted from their constitutive set on display) seems superfluous. Aesthetics certainly could benefit from philosophers’ assessments of Charles Spence’s restaurant research or Tröndle and Kirchberg’s museum studies, but Nanay ignores their findings. For example, researchers evaluating diners’ experiences study how *everything* present impacts their aesthetic experience, including their mood, table companions, utensils, plate shapes, ambient music, plating, plate angles and finally the food. After twenty years of research, it is clear that food is not isolatable, inspiring chefs keen to improve aesthetic experiences to fine-tune environments. By comparison, Nanay focuses exclusively on the food; isolating objects for observation, as if their presentations and contexts play no role in availing what he terms aesthetically-relevant properties (ARPs).

Initially, I suspected that his aesthetic ‘semi-formalism’, which privileges visually salient properties (94) over imaginative interpretations (105), is a holdover from his early days as a film critic. But I now see that Nanay’s view is predicated on an assumption that aesthetic experiences trigger mental imagery, not mere thoughts of x, such as thoughts of events. He rightly advises critics use ARPs to bolster their evaluative judgements, yet the conceptual art cases he analyses to flesh out ARPs tend to derive their ARPs from

conventional knowledge, which can take decades to secure. When I experience Duchamp's *Mona Lisa Rasée* (1965), I recall *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) and certainly connect the two events, but I don't register a mental image of the earlier work. In fact, it is nearly impossible to memorise interesting artworks, let alone visualise them in our mind's eye. When we experience them in person, they stimulate us to recall everything we know about them.

Although Nanay's advice for critics is well-founded, I don't see ARPs replacing aesthetic properties as conceived by Frank Sibley. We defer to aesthetic concepts precisely because we cannot specify the very properties to which he insists we attend. For example, the critic describing Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953) during its first exhibition would have had no access to its imperceptible ARP, which hinges on artistic fame and was hardly self-evident in 1963. I wonder whether Nanay has ever assessed a curated exhibition's success at availing ARPs. To formulate each painting p 's constitutive dependence on its semi-formal properties q , he writes 'If p depends constitutively on q then q makes p what it is' (100). As it turns out, this same formulation applies to curated exhibitions, whose set members' constitutive dependence prompts the very thoughts of x that guide spectators to negotiate the artworks on view.

I worry that Nanay's tying aesthetic experience to isolated pictures suffers the same problem that Fred Dretske's 'Goldilocks' thought experiment does. Aiming to defeat cognitive penetration, Dretske claims that if a pine-tree expert and a novice paint what they see, their resulting pine-tree paintings would look alike, assuming identical rendering skills. Nanay who upholds cognitive penetration knows this is not so (148), yet he still implores novices to employ aesthetic attention distributively, as if their experiences could resemble those of experts. Novices may be *unprompted*, but cognitive penetration eschews parity (132). Given his decidedly 'un-enactive' stance, his well-meaning technique would benefit from an understanding of how exhibitions direct spectators to pick out ARPs and the way the imagination assists novices (typical of school children). Nanay expects his methodology to augment aesthetic differences, but it actually has the opposite effect for social viewers who claim that attending to artwork contents diminishes their aesthetic experiences.

The seventh chapter builds on what came before but reorients our vantage from looking at a picture to looking backwards through history to determine when twofold attention (attending to the relationship between scene and surface) became *de rigueur*. Although Nanay concludes that 'our visual experience of looking at pictures changed in the sixteenth century' (156), he strangely never mentions vanishing points, whose absence from East Asian art could explain East Asian spectators' attention to background context, which he does discuss (156-158). Nanay ends with a delightful analysis of how vicari-

ous experiences coupled with epistemic asymmetries lead us to identify and engage with those characters we read about or observe, whether in person, in literature or in film. Interestingly enough, his account of vicarious experiences tethers spectators to world in ways his aesthetic-attention technique nixes.

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