

Metaphorical Perception and Mental Imagery

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[EXCERPT]

What is beauty? Is it subjective or objective? What is taste? Who is entitled to establish the standard of taste? What is an aesthetic property? What is art? What is a work of art? Which is the relation between the two? What is the relation between art and beauty? What is authenticity? What is a fake? What is the relation between aesthetic and ethical values? How does art relate and how it ought to relate to ethical and political issues? Given the variety of aesthetic questions, philosophy developed a long tradition of discussions about the exact nature of the aesthetic endeavor. And whereas a historical reconstruction of these debates is not at stake here, a preliminary clarification is worth making in order to start narrowing the field of my inquiry. Aesthetics as a discipline can be divided into two interconnected but distinct areas of interest: (a) philosophy of perception focusing on a special kind of allegedly rewarding experiences and (b) philosophy of art.

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In order to develop my arguments, I refer to aesthetic experience as involving perceptual and imaginative states. In doing this, I draw on philosophy of mind – the branch of philosophy interested in how our mental states relate to the world – but also on non-philosophical disciplines concerned with the mind, namely cognitive and neuro-sciences. Empirical approaches to understanding the mind and its aesthetic relation to the world are nowadays particularly flourishing. This trend includes the birth and increasing success of “neuroaesthetics” (Zeki 1999, Di Dio & Gallese 2009) and, more broadly, the growing interest of cognitive sciences in psychological mechanisms underlying aesthetic appreciation and creativity (Meskin & Robson 2018, Cova & Réhault 2018).² But although joint ventures of philosophy and psychology seem to be particularly fruitful in this domain, the capacity of experimental approaches to answer aesthetic questions is still debated (Brown & Dissanayake 2009, Hyman 2010). In particular, on the one hand, lacking a clear theory of what aesthetic experience is, empirical data cannot be interpreted in a consistent manner, thereby remaining silent. On the other hand, philosophers still disagree on the nature of aesthetic experience thereby failing to provide scientists with a unified view on the matter. Keeping this impasse before mind, I try to deal with the phenomenology of experiences that are discussed both by philosophers and by psychologists. Psychological evidence that correlates, is consistent with or might challenge philosophical views will be taken into account – but neither as a knock-down argument nor as a proof. Rather, it will serve the purpose of enriching a cluster notion of aesthetic experience as nuanced and as comprehensive as possible.

Here is the plan of my working paper: first, I will introduce the aesthetic background of my inquiry

(§2), then I will narrow the focus to a particular kind of experience, namely “metaphorical perception”, suggesting that it might be explained by mental imagery (§3). At that point, I will offer an overview of recent views on mental imagery from a philosophical and from an empirical standpoint (§4). Finally, I will try to apply mental imagery to metaphorical perception (§5). If my attempt is successful, then a tile will be added to the puzzle of aesthetic experience and a task will be added to the already vast job-description of mental imagery.

[...]

There is no agreement about which phenomena mental imagery can account for. Granted, the explanatory potential of mental imagery is particularly appealing for philosophers of mind. Mainly based on the features that the phenomenology of mental imagery and of perception have in common, mental imagery has been exploited to shed light on various ambiguous perceptual phenomena – but in most cases counterarguments have been put forward too. Among these phenomena are: perceptual attention (Fazekas & Nanay 2017, Moriya 2018), amodal perception (Nanay 2010 vs Briscoe 2011), expressive perception (Noordhof 2008 vs Benenti & Meini 2017), action planning and navigation (Briscoe 2018), hallucination (Nanay 2016), perception of pain (Philips 2011, Nanay 2017), cognitive penetration of perceptual contents (MacPherson 2012).

What is at stake in these debates is the extent to which perception can accomplish cognitive tasks without the intervention of imagination. As soon as imagination gets involved in the explanation of what we tend to consider perceptual experiences, our intuition is that we are no longer dealing with the reality “out there”. Rather, we believe that we are *interpreting* reality through a distorting lens at least partly under our control. But can we really *decide* whether to see something depending on our imagination-driven attention? Can we *decide* to see occluded parts of objects? Or to feel pain? Or to hear a piece of music *as* lamenting? Can we *decide* how intense a color looks like? These questions haunt philosophers of mind.

[...]

I have tried to account for a specific sort of aesthetic experience by focusing on mental states and their alleged neural implementation. Sure, such a theoretical proposal needs to find further support in psychological evidence, something that I plan look for.

As to the contribution to the aesthetic debate, metaphorical experience can be legitimately considered *aesthetic* as long as it is not limited to the mere observation of what is there, but presents us with complex and branched contents. Also, I have assumed (but this can clearly be questioned) that we do not engage in metaphorical perception to achieve practical goals, so that it can be considered a *disinterested* relation to its objects – for what it is worth. I am aware that, compared to the vast realm of aesthetic questions, metaphorical perception is just a tiny spot. Yet, there is a final suggestion that I feel tempted to make. This same mechanism that can explain metaphorical perception might be well suited

to explain further kinds of aesthetic experiences. As long as perception is involved, the unaware, involuntary, but potentially complex and creative intervention of imagination is in a good position to cast light on our relation to arts and aesthetic appreciation more generally. No doubts, mental imagery can only account for a low level layer of aesthetic experiences. Higher level factors such as expertise, intellectual background and cultural context play a major role in our aesthetic relations to the world. Nonetheless, mental imagery easily lends itself to interactions and integrations with more complex contents, thereby promising to root our explanations in low level perception while at the same time leaving the door open to richer analyses.