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The Repertoire as Aesthetic Category

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ABSTRACT. The main focus of this paper is the aesthetic significance of the concept of repertoire and its relevance to research in empirical aesthetics which addresses the question of beholding, understood as engagement in appreciative behavior when confronted with stimuli of potential aesthetic interest. Despite the meta-disciplinary appeal of the concept of repertoire, which is a heuristic device used both in reception aesthetics (Iser, 1976; Moles, 1958) and psychologically informed analytic aesthetics (Wollheim, 1990; Hopkins, 2001), there is no articulate view of the repertoire as aesthetic category. I hold that the innovation in the study of aesthetics that the repertoire might be introducing is establishing a conceptual basis for a cognitive aesthetics of reception and providing a naturalistic alternative to aesthetic categories that are given a transcendental essence.

1. Introduction

Questioning the cognitive foundations of aesthetic appreciation is a topic enjoying a resurgence in the theoretical landscape of recent developments in cognitive science after having been already present in the early layers of traditional philosophical aesthetics and art theory, with their "once prized mental heritage" (Berenson, 1953,

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270). Concepts of cognition went from playing a central role in philosophical aesthetic thinking (Schaeffer, 2000; Iseminger, 2005; Nanay, 2019) to informing discussions of hierarchical models of information processing in the psychology of art (Bartel, 2014; Seeley, 2018). A consequence of this ongoing development might be articulated in terms of a shift in emphasis from distinctive aesthetic states of mind (Levinson, 2016; Iseminger, 2006) toward more general information-processing states of mind that shape an aesthetic encounter. Comparably, work in anthropology and art theory situate the question of art appreciation within the framework of universal human dispositions – biological and psychological anthropological constants, operating below or above the threshold of consciousness (Berenson, 1953, 20; Morphy and Perkins, 2006). Moreover, the anthropological basis of art appreciation is becoming foregrounded with the expansion of the aesthetic field, which seeks to integrate modes of responsiveness to art forms and creative practices from outside the established canon of fine arts (e.g. indigenous cultural practices, Miner, 2014; Townsend-Gault, 2014) and to account for global artistic circulations of art forms (Espagne, 2015).
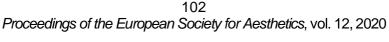
The heterogenous sources mentioned above call for a refinement of mental categories relating to appreciative behavior, which are to be kept within nature's bounds (Berenson, 1953, 41). These categories could and do indeed start to make the object of a cognitive repertoire (Schaeffer, 2003, 147; Wollheim, 1990, 104-105),

which is yet to receive thorough analysis.

In this paper I aim to clarify the concept of repertoire in relation to two seemingly divergent theoretical traditions, namely, literary studies in the German tradition, more specifically, reception aesthetics, and philosophical aesthetics in the Anglo-American analytic tradition. My focus will be on the theoretical assumptions of Wolfgang Iser and Richard Wollheim about the repertoire in connection with textual and pictorial artifacts. Both Iser and Wollheim argue to a greater or lesser extent against the irrelevance of psychological considerations in the aesthetic context and, as I suggest, work towards a cognitive aesthetics of reception, given their interests in mental acts underlying episodes of aesthetic appreciation. I hold that the innovation in the study of aesthetics that the repertoire might be introducing is establishing a conceptual basis for a cognitive aesthetics of reception. In what way does the concept of an aesthetic-centered repertoire challenge the problem of beholding, that is, the relationship between the beholder and creative practices? Does it allow for differentiated notions of appreciative response, unique to each form or genre of creative practice, in keeping with their specificity, or does it hold a more generalist appeal? Moreover, what kind of experience does a repertoire foreground (active, contemplative, self-reflexive etc.)?

In addressing these questions, I first settle a technical point by elaborating on the status of the repertoire as second-order aesthetic category. I proceed with a survey of the major theses of reception

aesthetics and psychological aesthetics in order to provide some framing and trace back the notion of repertoire to already established discourses. I then unpack the elements of the literary and pictorial repertoires, as they appear in Iser and Wollheim's writings. My general claim is that by bringing to the fore the complexity of the beholder's cognitive repertoire, one opens the prospect for overcoming the shortcomings of existing models of aesthetics that characterize aesthetic appreciation exclusively in terms of privileged mental states (e.g. attention, pleasure, disinterestedness etc.), and take steps towards reassessing its "compound nature" (Levinson, 2016, 35).

2. The Repertoire as Second-Order Aesthetic Category

The repertoire is a heuristic category for the study of reception which restores the relevance of the beholding subject in discussing aesthetic appreciation. As opposed to first-order aesthetic concepts, understood in Sibley's sense (Sibley, 1959), as terms that we use in making a judgment with respect to features intrinsic to particular works such as unified, balanced or delicate, the repertoire works as an organizing system, capturing links between such first-order concept ascriptions and shedding light on how states and processes that govern aesthetic appreciation connect to each other. Given that it is a category relating to the very nature and conditions of appreciation itself and to the ways in which first-order concepts are instantiated in the first place, whether through "the exercise of taste,

perceptiveness, or sensitivity, of aesthetic discrimination or appreciation", as Sibley (*ibid.*, 421) has it, I take the repertoire to be a second-order category. Generally absent from the art critics' talk, who focus rather on first-order concepts, the repertoire appears in rather theoretical aesthetic discussions, to which I will now turn.

3. Two Frames of Reference: Reception Aesthetics and Psychological Aesthetics

One can trace back the notion of repertoire to two theoretical traditions in which is manifested a concern with the beholding subject, namely, reception aesthetics, developed since the late 1960s in the German literary tradition and psychologically informed aesthetics in the Anglo-American analytic tradition. Wolfgang Iser and Richard Wollheim are in this respect two important reference points for understanding the processing of both textual and pictorial meaning. This section will give an overview of their main theses.

3.1. Reception Aesthetics

Reception aesthetics brings to the forefront an explicit acknowledgement of the beholder and his role in producing an aesthetic object. Building on philosophical discourse – and more particularly phenomenology – rather than empirical evidence (Iser, 1989, 43; Holub, 1984, 84-85), reception aesthetics is not concerned with a historically documented reception of art practices across time, performed by real beholders (past or contemporary), but with the

reception of implied beholders, and, more specifically, as regards Iser's original model, with the aesthetic response that implied readers experience in the act of reading. The proposed model is an idealized, heuristic one, aiming at disclosing the operations which lie at the basis of processing a literary text (Iser, 1989, 49). Literary processing operations are made manifest through textual "response-inviting structures" (i.e. structures that play with the bounds of indeterminacy in a text, between the reader's own experience and the meaning conveyed by the text or between text and reality), understood as inherent structures liable to trigger an aesthetic response and to secure a communicative efficacy (*ibid.*, vii, 5-6, 12).

A question that arises is related to the aesthetic and experiential statements that permeate the aesthetics of reception (Kemp, 1998, 183). If the main object of reception aesthetics is the aesthetic effect felt at the level of the beholder's perceiving consciousness (Iser, 1976, 49), it is questionable whether the primary aesthetic experience of real or empirical subjects is given full due. One of the pitfalls in the method of reception aesthetics is precisely that it "prestructures a certain role for the reader", who is more acted upon than properly activating for himself the aesthetic object, being thus possibly subject to a form of literary determinism, and reduced to a textual condition (Holland, as cited in Iser, 1989, 43, 45). It is hard to tell in what respect or to what extent the idealized aspects of beholding brought into focus by reception aesthetics make a phenomenal difference at the experiential level.

Here is Iser's understanding of reception: "what I call reception is a product that is initiated in the reader by the text but is modeled by the norms and values that govern the reader's outlook. Reception is therefore an indication of preferences and predilections that reveal the reader's disposition as well as the social conditions that have shaped his attitudes. If I wish to access such a product, I must examine the response-inviting structures of the text, so that I can see how much the actual reader has selected from the potential inherent in the text." (Iser, 1989, 50). While it focuses on commonalities in response to an ideated meaning inherent in the text rather than in differences in expectations and response, the model seems to assign no constitutive role to the individual reader's stock of experience in constructing an aesthetic object. Quite the contrary, the individualized store of experience of the reader is assumed to be molded by the very act of engaging in literary reading, which should ideally be resulting in cognitive learning and in an extension of the self or of ones horizons of consciousness, as one can read in the following passage: "Divergent responses would be an interesting basis for investigation into the proliferative effect resulting whenever a literary text is to be incorporated into the individual reader's store of experience. A new idea of research would open up, relating to the degree in which 1) fictionality activates human faculties in a way not called upon during our everyday lives, and 2) why we are able to understand a literary experience that an actual experience has never been our own" (*ibid.*, 53, 56). The new idea of research that Iser

mentions here is reframed in terms of literary anthropology (*ibid.,* vii, 6, 7, 261, 264), a discipline that would investigate ways in which literature reveals the workings of the human mind and its creative responsiveness. This would lead to a reappraisal of faculty psychology whose original partitions may no longer be meaningful and intelligible (*ibid.,* 274-275, 280).

3.2. Psychological aesthetics

The repertoire comes equally under the purview of psychological aesthetics in the analytic tradition, whose main representative is Richard Wollheim. Building on psychological discourse, Wollheim addresses the constitution of pictorial meaning and aesthetic appreciation, which can be comprehended by appealing to the cognitive capacities of beholders or appreciators. As a complement to textual understanding, what Wollheim brings anew in considering pictorial understanding is a conceptual construct that he calls "an internal spectator" (Wollheim, 1990, 102), whose mental activity is determinant for the conception and perception of art. Introducing this pictorial strategy is meant to induce an appropriate mental condition in the mind of the empirical, external spectator, more specifically one that parallels the mental condition of the artist, comprising required sensitivity and required information (*ibid.,* 357). One can see that Wollheim shares with Iser the epistemic assumptions of an appropriate response to works of art, that could not be resumed to sheer unruliness and arbitrary subjective impressions. The success

of the performance of transmitting artistic meaning is tested against the survival of art: the enduring intelligibility of paintings for an appropriate spectatorship would thus be due to a common human nature manifested in human societies (Matravers, 2007, 143) that enables it.

If Iser is not concerned with the individual psyche in his reception aesthetics (Iser, 1976, 50, 58), Wollheim marks a change in the scope of addressing aesthetic response or the effect a works has on us in that he puts emphasis on the constitutive role of psychological traits for appreciation and the active completion of the beholder. He also marks a change with respect to theories prevalent in the analytic aesthetic tradition to which he belongs such as attitude theories, reputed to describe aesthetic appreciation almost exclusively in terms of distinctive or paradigm aesthetic states of mind (such as aesthetic contemplation, aesthetic pleasure, disinterested, distanced or detached aesthetic attitude etc.); Wollheim thus avoids reductive or all-encompassing categories. One of the ambitions of the repertoire is, as we shall see, to demarcate the processes that enable aesthetic experience from the capacities that preclude it, while avoiding segregating aesthetic behavior from other human concerns and general forms of response that define our relation to the world (Schaeffer, 2003, 147; Levinson, 2016, 30). What is needed is an account that would allow to go from simpler, natural responses to more complex ones.

What goes into a repertoire built on psychological premises?

And what are the capacities that occupy the mental space in an aesthetic episode about which psychological theses are supposed to be making a point? In trying to answer these questions, in the following sections I highlight the polarities of the literary and pictorial aspects of the repertoire flowing from the two seemingly opposing traditions of reception aesthetics and psychological aesthetics briefly sketched above.

4. The Literary Repertoire

The repertoire of a literary text is made, according to Iser of "conventions necessary for the establishment of a situational frame", that is, of a common ground between the work and the reader (Iser, 1978, 66-67; 1976, 127). The situational frame within which the act of reading is set is to be distinguished from a pragmatic or situational context of action, wherein meaning is stabilized. Here is Iser's definition of the literary repertoire:

> The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged— in brief, to what the Prague structuralists have called the "extratextual" reality. The fact that this reality is referred to has a two-fold implication: (1) that the reality evoked is not confined to the printed page, (2) that those elements selected for reference are not intended to be a mere replica. On the contrary, their presence in the text usually
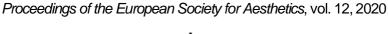
means that they undergo some kind of transformation, and, indeed, this is an integral feature of the whole process of communication. The manner in which conventions, norms, and traditions take their place in the literary repertoire varies considerably, but they are always in some way reduced or modified, as they have been removed from their original context and function. (Iser, 1978, 69; 1976, 128-129).

Thus, conventions serve as a determinate normative background against which one comprehends a work. As mentioned in the passage above, conventions can relate to traditions of past literature alluded to in a text (e.g. Homeric and Shakespearian allusions in Joyce's *Ulysses*; Iser, 1978, 79), to a cultural and social prevailing system, or, to some extent, to the subjective norms and dispositions of the reader (Iser, 1989, 8). Conventions introduce another kind of dependence, different from perceptual determination (i.e. properties that appeal to perceptual senses), in that they appeal to the experience and knowledge of prospective readers and provide a minimal structure for expectations that arise in the reading process. At the same time, literary conventions, which remain to be discovered in the reading process, deviate from, call into question or at least throw in a new light conventions and old norms by reshuffling, depragmatizing and reorganizing them in unexpected combinations while dismissing their regulative function and disrupting the projected expectations of readers (Iser, 1978, 60-61).

The repertoire also consists of unfamiliar territory, of structures

which lead to indeterminacy in a literary text, which needs to be resolved by appeal to the reader's imagination (Iser, 1989, 36, 40-41; 1978, 85; 1976, 304). Through this emphasis on unfamiliar territory, the reader's participation is made manifest (Iser, 1978, 73-74). Indeterminacies take the form of blanks or abstract idealized structures acting as triggering signals for a response. It is this very reorganization of the repertoire of both familiar and unfamiliar elements that is deemed to have an effect on the reader.

Furthermore, the effect on the reader will be determinant for establishing the aesthetic value of a work, which is not formulated explicitly in the repertoire but emerges out of the suspension of validity and recodification of familiar norms: "aesthetic value constitutes the structural 'drive' necessary for the process of communication. By invalidating correspondences between the elements put together in the repertoire, it prevents the text from corresponding to the repertoires already inherent in all its possible readers; in this respect, the aesthetic value initiates the process whereby the reader assembles the meaning of the text" (Iser, 1978, 81-82). Conveying aesthetic value is, in Iser's reception aesthetics, tied to the proper functioning of any communication system entailing the repertoires of producers and recipients. Thus the repertoire of the sender (mainly, the author) is deemed to be continuous, although not identical or equivalent with the repertoire of the receiver (the spectator, the audience etc.), since some minimal overlapping is necessary for the communication to take place (*ibid.*, 82-83). At the

same time, while familiar elements need to be recognizable in order to make the work understandable, the ultimate goal is to change the recipient's repertoire, bringing him or her to revise and reshape his or her background beliefs and familiar schemata. The balance between the representation and alteration of the familiar is captured by the notion of "coherent deformation", a notion Iser draws from Merleau-Ponty which broadly amounts to placing familiar elements in an unfamiliar context, thus disturbing the illusion of an intrinsic orderliness of the world (Iser, 1978, 82-83; 1976, 150). It is a textual strategy that appeals to the reader's experience and individual memory store in order to draw him or her in the literary communication process while seeking to transform this very individualized store of experience.

Iser's deviationist approach appears as a counterbalance to a well-known model of representation and reception in pictorial art, namely Gombrich's model of schema and correction (Iser, 1978, 90-91), whereby correction of schemata takes place through close perception and a continuous matching process of one's familiar classifications against what the world has to offer. Gombrich's model is not operative for literary purposes (nor for pictorial arts that do not aim primarily at naturalism) since it relies exclusively on perceptual normative principles. Iser retains nonetheless from this model the idea of going against norms of expectation, which is common both to pictures and literary texts, even though the norms brought into question have a different nature.

An objection raised against Iser is that, by giving so much weight to deviation or deformation, he promotes an aesthetics of negativity which, rather than bringing into play and broadening the reader's store of experience, it goes against it, negates it – along with conventions of the represented world – rather than transforms it (Holub, 1984, 87; Iser, 1978, 73-74).

The literary repertoire is consistent with Iser's project of literary anthropology which is deemed to capture human nature within a frame. A literary repertoire may be picturing thought systems operative at specific historical moments (e.g. the prevailing norms of eighteenth-century thought systems and social systems, represented as governing the conduct of the most important characters of Fielding's *Tom Jones* such as "norms of latitudinarian morality, orthodox theology, deistic philosophy, eighteenth-century anthropology, and eighteenth-century aristocracy"; human conducts such as "benevolence, corruption of human nature, ruling passion, natural superiority of the nobility" etc.; Iser, 1989, 37-38). The aesthetic object thus becomes "the whole spectrum of human nature" arising from negated possibilities and what the representation of norms occlude, giving access to the diversity of human experience: "the repertoire of the novel … combines and levels out norms of differed systems which in real life were kept quite separate from one another. By this selective combination of norms, the repertoire offers information about the systems through which the picture of human nature is to be compiled. The individual norms themselves have to be

reassessed to the extent that human nature cannot be reduced to a single hard-and-fast principle, but must be discovered, in all its potential, through the multifarious possibilities that have been excluded by those norms" (Iser, 1978, 76). The repertoire would thus give a picture of variations on possibilities regarding human experience. The question remains open as to how an aesthetic-oriented repertoire may be contributing to anthropology and adding to a study of man.

5. The Pictorial Repertoire

If we were to arrange in contrasting patterns the literary and the pictorial repertoire, one would say that the elements of the latter repertoire are here to be tracked in the work (and, more specifically, for Wollheim's purposes, in a special category of representational painting; Wollheim, 1990, 102), not in conventions and extrapictorial norms.

Furthermore, Wollheim, as opposed to Iser, gives more weight to cognitive interaction, to the inner life of the beholder, only that the beholder – here, the spectator – is no longer external or implied, as we have seen with Iser, but internal to the picture, to its virtual space. In other words, there are differences in what the beholder is supposed to be when comparing the two traditions of reception aesthetics and analytic aesthetics. Wollheim's move is to say that the real, empirical spectator of the picture is drawn into the composition of the painting through identifying with an internal spectator, without

having to accrue the picture's content (*ibid.*, 185).

In order to explain pictures that contain an internal spectator, Wollheim appeals to an analogy with perspectival visual imagination (*ibid.*, 103-104), of which we have a more intuitive grasp. Just as one can imagine an event from the inside, from a first-person point of view in which I (or someone else) am protagonist, or from the outside, from a third-person point of view, so one's engagement with pictures may require a perspectival approach, and more specifically, adopting the perspective of an internal spectator. Importantly, protagonists or internal spectators, which remain unrepresented as such although they are given along with the content of the picture (*ibid.,* 101-102), are endowed with an assigned repertoire, by which is meant dispositions to act, see, think, remember and feel (*ibid.*, 104), and this repertoire is to be retrieved by external spectators when engaging with pictures. Here is how Wollheim introduces the pictorial repertoire:

First, the artist determines the identity of the spectator in the picture. In doing so, he has the same options open to him as I have when I engage in centrally imagining. He can choose between a spectator who is a particular person and a spectator who is merely a person of a particular kind, the kind itself varying in specificity.

Secondly, the artist, having fixed the identity of the spectator in the picture, will go on to assign him a repertoire. He will assign him dispositions that will generate and constrain his outer life and his inner life […] what is really significant is that part of the repertoire

which controls the inner life" (*ibid.*, 104-105).

In addition to being a fully-embodied "perceiving, thinking, feeling, acting, creature" (*ibid.,* 130), the internal spectator, in order to give the external spectator a distinctive access to the content of a particular picture (*ibid.*, 129-130; Hopkins, 2001, 217-218) must be a total spectator with an extended repertoire comprising an all-encompassing visual field and acute sensibility, a particular form of enhanced attention to the represented content, as well as expressive elements that match this rich inner life (Wollheim, 1983, 96). Moreover, as stressed in the passage above, it is the artist who constructs the repertoire of the inner life of the internal spectator and inscribes it in the painting during the depictive process (Wollheim, 1990, 164-166, 286-287). In other words, constructing a repertoire is a matter of artistic skill and the retrieval of the elements of the repertoire is conditioned by pictorial devices. With respect to knowing how one accesses the repertoire of the internal spectator, the solution proposed is through an imaginative engagement licensed by pictorial devices which enables an experience corresponding with what the internal spectator experiences inwardly and leaves us in a condition similar to his: "Though imagining from the inside someone's inward responses doesn't require me actually to have these responses myself, the upshot of the imaginative project, or the condition in which it leaves me, is that it is for me as if I had responded in these ways. Imagination, without inducing the experience I imagine, delivers the fruits of experience" (*ibid.*, 129). It

is as if the external spectator were delegating his or her mental processing in order to have an appropriate, enhanced understanding of the pictorial content, the effect of this understanding being free from real consequences or sanctions, an idea that we can also find in Iser. Pictorial experience becomes thus primarily a matter of experience through imagination since the assumption is that the elements of the repertoire enter the content of occurrent experiential states of the external spectator.

One of the main objections to Wollheim's proposal regards the dismissal of the external spectator's psychology (or at least part of it), whose sensory, motor or affective behavior patterns are counted out from the proper understanding of the pictorial content (Wollheim, 1990, 181-182, 237). An undesired consequence flowing from this approach would be to postulate "a distinctive positive psychological repertoire different from ours" (Hopkins, 2001, 229-230) comprising alternative sensibilities, affections and cognitions, only inscribed in a specific category of pictures. It is not clear what resources would be needed in order to comprehend such a distinctive repertoire.

Another problem with the repertoire (both literary and pictorial), is that it may not be too comprehensive enough and may not reflect the intrinsic divisions and ramifications of capacities and functions in the mental realm. Given that both the literary and pictorial repertoires aim to give a picture of variations of inner states (Iser, 1978, 76; Wollheim, 1983, 94-95), further inquiry regarding the possibility of an aesthetic-centered repertoire more anthropologically and biologically

contextualized is needed.[2]

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