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Marginal Attention and the Aesthetic Effect of Inconspicuous Art*

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ABSTRACT. This article discusses the role of faint or peripheral forms of attention in appreciating subdued forms of art (Munro 1957), which function as an accompaniment to activities that are not driven by an aesthetic urge. My main claim is that we should leave open the possibility that forms of art that do not impose themselves as such upon the observers may give rise to an aesthetic effect in the long run. In support of this claim I first provide four criteria for differentiating between several types of attentional processes, namely selectivity, duration, intensity and agency. Based on these criteria I then draw the spectrum of attention phenomena, focusing particularly on the place of marginal attention within this framework. Finally, I analyze the conditions under which forms of art to which we initially pay only marginal attention are liable to elicit an aesthetic response.

I. Introduction

It is well established that attention phenomena and aesthetic appreciation that we associate with the arts share a common fate deeply rooted in the tradition of aesthetics and philosophy of art. Authors such as Wolff (1738/1756, pp. 221-222), Lessing (1767-1769/1869, pp. 327-328) and Beardsley (1958/1981, pp. 527-528), to name but a few, famously argued that works of art arrest our attention and give us a privileged access to meaningful properties of the world by eliminating background noise and other inconvenient distractors pervading our everyday environment. Clearly by “attention” they mean, selective or focused attention. But art didn’t always have

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the function to be maintained within selective focus, much less to evoke aesthetic feelings. My aim here is to shed light on the relevance of faint or peripheral forms of attention for aesthetic appreciation and the need to reconsider in this light the theories available in philosophical aesthetics.

First of all, there are numerous settings in which art was merely meant to provide the backdrop for activities that were not driven by an aesthetic urge. Consider, for instance, a painting that is nothing but as a piece of furniture designed to cover bare surfaces in a seventeenth-century bourgeois Dutch home (Zumthor 1959/1994, p. 195). The main claim of this paper is that we should leave open the possibility that forms of art that do not necessarily impose themselves as such upon the observers may have an aesthetic effect in the long run. In other words, there may be forms of art which do not rely primarily on a definite sensorial or expressive “mode of presentation” (Munro 1941/1956, pp. 163-166) in order to make themselves salient but which succeed nevertheless in creating an aesthetic effect when experienced regularly. It is Thomas Munro, especially known as the founder of the American Society For Aesthetics, who advances the idea that works of art usually have “modes of presentation” or differing degrees of salience addressing specific senses: thus, painting and sculpture specialize primarily in visual presentation, music in auditory presentation as well as literature, opera in both visual and auditory presentation and so on and so forth. Not every form of art, though, has perceptual salience. Some of them are ‘inconspicuous’, as Munro (1957, p. 308-309) calls them, and what classifies them as such is a psychological category, namely a particular of mode of attending, diffused or marginal. Art is understood here in a broad, loose sense, as the product of organizing various sensuous materials into a relatively coherent whole. We would therefore identify this non-established type of art not by a particular type of content designed to silence the senses (as with Cage’s 4’33”) but by the attentional process correlated with it. The methodological proposal advanced by Munro is that one should turn to psychological categories that reflect modes of human experience in order to classify the materials of art (Munro 1941/1956, p. 165). How could then such forms of inconspicuous art trigger an aesthetic experience? This also raises the question of whether faint or peripheral forms of attention are relevant for aesthetic appreciation, challenging most of the theories available in philosophical aesthetics on the topic.

The aim of this paper is to give an account of this marginal attention and of the conditions under which it can give rise to aesthetic experience.

In order to address these questions, I will start by providing four criteria for differentiating between several types of attentional processes, namely selectivity, duration, intensity and agency. These criteria concern some geographical issues related to the reach of attention, its temporal span, qualitative feel and the presence of subjective control. Secondly, I will focus on the range of attention phenomena with varying intensity and on the phenomenological flavor that accompanies them. Where does attention begin and where does it end? Is there a way to settle the bounds of attention? Between the lack of attention (or inattention) and the focused or selective attention there is a whole range of intermediate processes that need to be pointed out. More specifically, the position of marginal attention within this hierarchy and its relation to aesthetic experience, that is my main concern here, will be given a thorough analysis.

2. Criteria for Differentiating Attentional Processes

The first and less contested characteristic of attention is no doubt its selectivity. Attention is known to have a limited capacity to process information; not all incoming data can reach its focus; as for the exact length of this focus there is no common agreement: the focus of attention has been compared altogether to a spotlight (Husserl 1893-1912/2009, pp. 81-82), a lantern (Gopnik 2010, p. 125) and a landscape (Datta et al. 2009, p. 1044; Block 2010, pp. 44-45), whose size could possibly be adjusted at will (Carrasco 2014, p. 184), thus presenting a truly irregular geographical span. When selectivity is poor, incoming information is coarse grained and the attended region is larger. This criterion helps, for instance, in distinguishing between distributed and focused (i.e. selective) attention, two processes that differ with respect to the attended content, that is, how much of the stimuli are attended to (Nanay 2016, p. 22) and with respect to the resolution or granularity of the attended content, that is, to what extent we can discriminate various entities composing this attended content. As mentioned in the introduction, fine art was generally thought to elicit focused attention, selecting either the fine-grained properties of artistic compositions or art products as coherent wholes.

Secondly, duration or temporal span is a criterion for distinguishing sustained from transient forms of attention. Thus, endogenous attention, controlled by top-down processes, is deployed at a late level of processing and can be sustained “for as long as is needed to perform a task” (Carrasco 2014, p. 185). Endogenous, sustained attention may be at work in aesthetic experiences defined in terms of a contemplative mode although the idea of performing any task whatsoever could be problematic here if we were to associate contemplation with a disinterested stance. On the other hand, exogenous attention, controlled by external stimuli, rises and decays quickly, peaking at early levels of processing and occurring “even when the cues are known to be uninformative and irrelevant and when they impair performance” (Carrasco 2014, p. 185). The pendulum-beat of a clock, for instance, may briefly arrest attention every now and then. Likewise, objects or entities that are strikingly beautiful or ugly may give rise to “aesthetic distraction”, that is, following Höfel and Jacobsen (2007, p. 21), “involuntarily switching attention towards aesthetic processing of an entity”. Involuntary, transient attention may be subsequently complemented by sustained attention.

Another characteristic is that attention comes in varying degrees, expressed at the subjective level by intensity variations. In this regard, attentional engagement with stimuli would be high, mid-range, low etc.; one can pay more or less attention to an object or to a location and this variation of intensity is liable to make a phenomenological difference, which means that the activity of attending will modify our overall experience by reason of its force.

Finally, agency is the last property of attention that I would like to mention here. Attention can be under voluntary control when a stimulus becomes interesting in association with some external goal, or on the contrary, rise involuntarily, as a consequence of the stimulation itself, without relation to anything else. The concept of “disinterested attention” (Nanay 2016, p. 20) was particularly significant in the aesthetic debates, where disinterestedness referred to an attitude of total engagement with an object or configuration of forms, free of self-interest (Maquet 1986, p. 46). This attitude is close to passive contemplation but the question then arises as to whether one can hold a disinterested stance while maintaining sustained attention, knowing that higher-order thoughts, inevitably self-

relevant, must at some point come into play (Jacobsen 2010, p. 253).

To sum up, the criteria roughly sketched in this section, namely, selectivity, duration, intensity and agency allow us to have a better understanding of the spectrum of attention phenomena, to which I shall now turn.

3. The Spectrum of Attention Phenomena

3.1. Preattentive Processing

In order to grasp the multi-level assessment of attention phenomena I propose to think of them as a spectrum. Thus, the first phenomenon that lies at the bottom of the spectrum – or rather operates outside of it – is *preattentive processing*. The standard definition given par Ulric Neisser in the first manual of cognitive psychology describes preattentive processes as automatic, global and holistic, producing the units to which attention may be directed subsequently in a more focused way (Neisser 1966, pp. 86-89, 92-93, 301-304; Neisser 1976, p. 18). In other words, preattentive processes help in crudely structuring the perceptual environment. They have also been reframed in terms of anticipatory schemas embedded in our cognitive systems (Neisser 1976, pp. 54-55, 57, 60-62, 94-95), which allow taking on information of a certain sort and ignoring the rest. Furthermore, preattentive processing is a preliminary stage to further processing but not yet a full-blown attentive process; we can be sensitive to information outside the current original focus of attention but even though some features or global properties of the environment are detected in this preliminary stage, they have to be passed on to subsequent stages of processing in order to be identified as parts of “fleshed out” perceptual objects. For instance, an absentminded person can walk along a path without noticing the details and still not bump into obstacles that she may come across. Another characteristic mentioned by Neisser is that preattentive processes affect only the immediate present and they could hardly give rise to perceptual learning, which is a capacity to distinguish progressively more fine-grained aspects of the perceptual environment. Finally, it appears that preattentive processes don’t provide emotional content either (Neisser 1966, 102-103) and this particular property will be significant when engaging in an aesthetic

debate.

3.2. *The Mere Exposure Effect and Perceptual Fluency*

Nevertheless, information analyzed without focal attention is not necessarily lost. Consider next the *mere exposure effect*, which refers to those situations in which repeated exposure to indeterminate stimuli generates enhanced affect ratings of those stimuli. Repeated exposure to different stimuli helps preserve them in long-term, implicit memory thus preventing them from disappearing unnoticed for good. Like preattentive processes, the mere exposure effect is a passive automatic process, “fleetingly conscious”, and it can give rise to perceptual fluency or ease of processing (Reber et al. 2004, p. 364). This means that the perceptual encoding processes involving previously encountered stimuli will be facilitated due to the effect of habituation or familiarity that is created through repeated exposure. The effect has also been related to perceptual implicit learning, a process through which we acquire the ability to discriminate different stimuli without being aware of doing so: for instance, the ability to detect pitch relations and regularities can be acquired through mere exposure to the musical system of a culture (Tillman et al. 2011, p. 378).

It is well known that when an object (property, scene etc.) is integrated in the usual routine of performing certain acts, we only allocate it diminished attention, if any. A good illustration of the effect of habit upon attention is given by James, who remembers how, “on revisiting Paris after ten years of absence, and, finding himself in the street in which for one winter he had attended school, he lost himself in a brown study, from which he was awakened by finding himself upon the stairs which led to the apartment in a house many streets away in which he had lived during that earlier time, and to which his steps from the school had then habitually led” (James 1890, pp. 114-115). As this passage suggests, objects or scenes lurking in the background of our awareness may subsequently reach the center of focused attention when they cease to be available, that is, when they cease to be part and parcel of perceptual habits (Nanay 2015, pp. 113-114).

As mentioned above, mere exposure to stimuli entails developing preferences for them. The effect has been observed both for mere exposure

to representations of artworks belonging to canon of art (Cutting 2006, p. 184) and for stimuli we encounter in everyday life. If this effect is sufficiently robust, then even objects or scenes to which we only dimly pay attention to could end up progressively building up aesthetic experiences. The problem is that, in everyday situations, we are exposed to a profusion of sensory impressions (the noises of the humming fridge, the traffic lights etc.); how would we know which ones are liable to give rise subsequently to aesthetic experiences? Unless there is a hidden import or value that is susceptible, hypothetically at least, of becoming salient at a later time, the vast majority of the impressions that the environment offers will be discarded (Meskin et al. 2013, p. 146).

3.3. *Psychic Overtones*

With the notions of *fringe of consciousness* and *psychic overtone* we move towards conscious phenomena that have a qualitative feel. Unlike preattentive processes, fringe experience does contain an affective component. In this particular case, psychic overtone consists of a dim awareness of relations and objects that we gain by mere acquaintance (i.e. bare impression) and which comes with, to quote William James, a “feeling of harmony or discord” that accompanies our thoughts (James 1890, pp. 260-261, Mangan 2014, p. 156). William James describes overtones in music as follows: “different instruments give the same note, but each in a different voice, because each gives more than that note, namely, various upper harmonics of it which differ from one instrument to another. They are not separately heard by the ear; they blend with the fundamental note, and suffuse it, and alter it” (James 1890, pp. 258-259). Using this musical comparison of the auditory perception of harmonics, which is always contextual, he goes on to call “psychic overtone”, “suffusion”, “halo” or “fringe” “the influence of a faint brain process upon our thought, as it makes it aware of relations and objects but dimly perceived” (p. 259). He illustrates fringe experiences with an example from word comprehension in the process of uttering a phrase:

No word in an understood sentence comes to consciousness as a mere noise. We feel its meaning as it passes; and although our object differs from one moment to another as to its verbal kernel or nucleus,

yet it is similar throughout the entire segment of the stream. The same object is known everywhere, now from the point of view [...] of this word, now from the point of view of that (James 1890, pp. 281-282).

The same process holds true for a sequence of fugitive visual impressions: “illuminate a drawing by electric sparks separated by considerable intervals, and after the first, and often after the second and third spark, hardly anything will be recognized. But the confused image is held fast in memory; each successive illumination completes it; and so at last we attain to a clearer perception” (pp. 440-441).¹ What James seems to describe here is the temporal dynamics of making a sensation or idea distinct (a phrase to be understood, a tone to be heard, an image to be recognized etc.) through a series of inward and outward activities: recollection, perceptual expectations as well as immediate perceptual experiences concur in giving shape to fringe experiences.

4. Marginal Attention

Now, what is the relation of these psychological phenomena to *marginal attention*? In line with the Jamesian approach to fringe experiences, marginal attention concerns the qualitative feel of cognitive processing of stimuli (i.e. dim or faint awareness) irrespective of the sensorial content towards which this processing is oriented. As its name implies, marginal attention deals with coarse-grained, vaguely sensed information located away from the center of the receptive fields and it is the exact opposite of the state of deep absorption and concentration with which we usually associate focused attention. It is to be distinguished from multifocal, or distributed attention (Nanay 2016, pp. 22), which is mainly concerned by quantitative rather than qualitative issues, namely the amount of sensorial content

¹ The explanation continues as follows: “We hear a sound in which, from certain associations, we suspect a certain overtone; the next thing is to recall the overtone in memory; and finally we catch it in the sound we hear; the impression awakens the memory-image, which again more or less completely melts with the impression itself. In this way every idea takes a certain time to penetrate to the focus of consciousness. And during this time we always find in ourselves the peculiar feeling of attention. [...] The phenomena show that an adaptation of attention to the impression takes place” (James, 1890, pp. 440-441).

(number of objects, properties etc.) which can enter the focus of attention. For instance, when attending an opera, spectators may have to distribute attention to a large number of properties and widen their field of interest in order to fully grasp the performance; they may of course also marginally attend to it and ignore the heavy attentional demands (or the performance altogether), but the two phenomena are different. Moreover, marginal attention is to be distinguished from covert attention in that it is not under the control of the observer nor does it have the same resolution or intensity: for instance, we can deeply, covertly, attend to something in the corner of our eye in order to satisfy a particular interest or need. Whereas marginally attending to an area in the periphery engages the early stages of processing; it is momentary and does not require cognitive effort or subjective control in order to be maintained. This early phase dealing with input from the periphery was also called “ambient processing” (Zacks & Eisenberg 2016, p. 1), as opposed to a focal phase dealing with fine-grained information. Coupled with the phenomena of repeated, diffuse exposure, it can provide the basis for generating an aesthetic experience. When a stimulus is perceived marginally and through repeated exposure, allowing information to be stored in long-term memory, it can give rise to aesthetic effects that we may become eventually aware of. Thomas Munro, who is the first philosopher, to our knowledge, to have introduced this psychological process into the aesthetic debates, describes marginal attention to inconspicuous art as follows:

Many kinds of art are made to be perceived marginally, not with focused attention: to recede somewhat into the background or periphery of attention, while the observer carries on other activities. [...] Subdued, inconspicuous art, like a gently insistent person, may have a deeper effect in the long run because one can enjoy its continuous or repeated presence. One’s conscious attention is usually elsewhere, but one is vaguely aware of a shifting sensory field or background of sights and sounds, tactile sensations, occasional tastes and odors. [...] A work of art which is seen or heard marginally on many occasions, such as a church or garden which one passes daily, may have deeper aesthetic effect in the long run than another which is seen once only with undivided attention, such as a motion picture film (Munro 1957, pp. 306-309).

The suggestion is that in this type of artistic encounter, the aesthetic effect acquires its force only gradually, through repeated exposure; the development of a definite aesthetic experience is thus deferred. This was true, according to Munro (1957, p. 306), “on the whole of music to be heard while dining (much *Tafelmusik* was written expressly for that purpose by 18th century composers)”; likewise, it could have been true of the Dutch paintings whose main function was to cover bare surfaces, to come back to the example² given in the introduction, and it could very well be true of many of the works that we experience in our daily environments, be they short musical compositions functioning as next-station announcements in tramway systems, *in situ* installations that we come across daily or just, as Munro says, an ordinary church that happens to be next door. Deployed in many everyday situations, marginal attention to objects to which we have an increased and intimate access could thus eventually elicit aesthetic responses, affecting us in a subtle but powerful way.

5. Aesthetic Appreciation and Memory for Inconspicuous Art

My suggestion is that the aesthetic effect of this kind of subdued art, to which we pay initially only marginal attention, roughly resembles the perception of overtones described by James: in other words, we first experience some fugitive sensorial impressions that we cannot hear alone and then we recall them in memory, thus allowing them to reach the focus of consciousness and, consequently, the focused attention. Through repeated presence subdued art is held fast in memory and then each act of retrieval renders it readily observable. Moreover, experiencing it frequently would bring about a modification of our aesthetic sensibility (Souriau 1955,

² Other examples, provided by Anthony Savile, include, arguably, manuscript illumination or Pompeian frescoes; according to Savile though, these are mere additives or even nuisances to more absorbing activities. See Anthony Savile (1987), *Aesthetic Reconstructions: The Seminal Writings of Lessing, Kant and Schiller*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 67. Valuable considerations on subdued art might also be found in Ernst Gombrich (1979), *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, “The Wrightsman Lectures delivered under the auspices of the New York Institute of Fine Arts”, Oxford: Phaidon. Significantly, a potential title of this book was *The Unregarded Art* (p. 116), that is, art experienced without focused scrutiny.

p. 8) oriented toward this type of stimulation. Thus, aesthetic experience starts as a vague dispositional state and then becomes actualized through a subsequent act of remembering; it is not immediately felt, but is constructed in time by a series of endogenous acts which operate on what is originally given in the exercise of direct perception. A question that we may ask is why would we need to appeal to memory retrieval in the first place when speaking of the aesthetic effect of inconspicuous art? Why not stop at the moment of the original, crude stimulation? An answer to this is that just as we do not have immediate access to fringe experiences without altering their very nature (James 1890, 189), the aesthetic disposition originating from sensory encounters peripherally attended to would not be manifest to us, much less transparent. It is then problematic to know whether aesthetic experience can be merely dispositional, implying no subjective access whatsoever. What is exactly the process that takes place when evaluating subdued art? Are we merely reporting an aesthetic feeling felt in the past, experienced on the fringe of consciousness so to speak, of which we only become aware later through remembrance or is it the case that the aesthetic response, rather than being elicited in the immediacy of every individual weak sensory stimulation, is formed in the very late act of recall, thus appearing only in the memory mode?

The complex dynamics described here may account for a particular kind of experience likely to become aesthetic, such as nostalgia (Starr 2015, pp. 251, 256), which does not rely primarily on intensely perceived sensorial contents. In nostalgia, which can be triggered both by an external cue (a postcard, a tune conjuring up past events etc.) and by a voluntary act of remembrance, these sensorial contents reach the focus of attention only *post-mortem*, they are not fully apprehended in their immediacy. If this is a legitimate example, aesthetic experience could then be considered to be extending beyond the primary sensory encounter; it would rely on memory traces of object or scenes improving and becoming more precise over time rather than on deep immediate apprehension. Bence Nanay, who speaks of the lingering effect (2016, p. 17) of some aesthetic experiences, also expresses this idea, although in a very different context: he mentions the continued presence of certain aesthetic experiences in our memory immediately after the object of contemplation ceases to be available, for instance, after leaving a concert hall or the cinema; in the examples I have

considered so far the time span of the lingering effect would be much wider and would not be caused by a powerful aesthetic encounter that would alter subsequently our perception of the world. The trouble with this story is that in order to make it plausible and convincing, inconspicuous art has to be filled in our long-term memory store in the first place, it has to become available for further analysis; could there be memory storage of dimly attended perceptual information? From the perspective of the psychology of perception (Kuhl & Chun 2014, p. 826), there is some evidence that support the idea of implicit learning with respect to poorly attended information; in the realm of the arts, however, there are only few memory assessment studies that test the success of encoding and retrieval of non-salient artworks. Repeated exposure should in principle facilitate implicit learning and one can understand why Munro mentioned it as an essential ingredient of aesthetic experiences of marginally attended works. Another hypothesis put forth by psychologists is that perceptual learning may be greater when poorly attended information is unobtrusive, because it is less liable to be suppressed by higher order mechanisms (Kuhl & Chun 2014, p. 826); thus, rather than being parasitic upon more important activities, subdued, inconspicuous art may after all have a positive effect in the long run and enrich our perception of the world. An argument in favor of this idea comes from studies on liking and memory as a function of exposure. For instance, Szpunar et al. (2004, p. 376) found that for incidental listening to musical stimuli ecologically valid memory ratings as well as liking ratings increased linearly with increasing exposure. On the other hand, the effect of exposure on liking was not produced for focused listening; in this case, the stimuli were recognized with increased accuracy over repeated exposures, leading eventually to satiation. The quality of the attending experience – incidental or focused – does seem to have therefore an effect on preference ratings and it is not always focused attention that leads to increases in affective response.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have addressed the question of appreciating forms of art that are not apprehended primarily through focal attention and direct sense perception. Although I reject the idea that we can have an aesthetic

experience with no awareness, occurring at a pre-attentional level, I would like to keep open the hypothesis that aesthetic response might originate from stimulations taking place far from the center of one's focused attention. I have argued that given certain constraints, such as repeated exposure, perceptual learning, encoding in long-term memory and possibility of retrieval, subdued, inconspicuous art can elicit aesthetic experiences.

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