

# Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



Published by



## **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: [proceedings@eurosa.org](mailto:proceedings@eurosa.org)

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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The European Society for Aesthetics



Department of Philosophy

University of Fribourg

Avenue de l'Europe 20

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

Internet: <http://www.eurosa.org>

Email: [secretary@eurosa.org](mailto:secretary@eurosa.org)

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## *Multisensory Experience of Paintings*

René Jagnow<sup>234</sup>

*University of Georgia, Athens, USA*

ABSTRACT. In this paper, I will argue that certain figurative paintings, namely paintings that depict atmospheres, such as Pissarro's *Snowscape in Louveciennes*, 1872, can elicit multisensory experiences in their viewers. The relevant multisensory experiences do not just involve different sensible qualities. Rather, the sensible qualities are fused together in such a way that a new sensible quality emerges that cannot be experienced in a single sense-modality.

### **1. Introduction**

In this paper, I will argue that some figurative paintings like Pissarro's *Snowscape in Louveciennes*, 1872 (Fig.1) are able to elicit genuine multisensory experiences in their viewers. When we view paintings like these, we sometimes imagine what the cold snow under our feet would feel like, what it would sound like to walk through the snow, what it would be like to breath in the cold air, and so on. My thesis in this paper is stronger. I believe that some paintings can elicit in their viewers what I will call *multisensory fusion experiences*. A multisensory fusion experience is an experience that involves a distinct sensible quality that we cannot experience through one single sense-modality.<sup>235</sup> I will call such sensible qualities *fused qualities*.

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<sup>234</sup> E-mail: [rjagnow@uga.edu](mailto:rjagnow@uga.edu)

<sup>235</sup> Sensible qualities are distinct from sensory qualities. A sensible quality is a quality that one perceives, a sensory quality, in contrast, is a quality of an experience. See Byrne (2009) for a clear exposition of the distinction.



My argument for the claim that paintings can elicit multisensory fusion experiences in their viewers is based on an analysis of how painters recreate atmospheres in paintings. We often find that the space surrounding us affects us in a certain way. For example, when one visits a desolate landscape, one might be struck by its gloomy atmosphere, or when one visits a beach, one might be struck by its serene atmosphere.<sup>236</sup> Painters often try to recreate atmospheres in their paintings, that is, they try to create paintings that are able to elicit experiences of atmospheres in their viewers.<sup>237</sup> In section 2, I will first argue that experiences of atmospheres

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<sup>236</sup> Many efforts to analyze atmospheres and their relation to aesthetics from a philosophical perspective come from outside of mainstream anglophone philosophy of art. Analyses of experiences of atmospheres in the phenomenological tradition can be found, for example, in Schmitz (2012), Böhme (1993, 2013), and Hauskeller (2018). Excellent summaries of the genesis of the concept of an atmosphere in the philosophical literature can be found in Rademacher, M. (2018) and Riedel, F. (2019).

<sup>237</sup> Some philosophers who have written about atmospheres also mention the ability of paintings to create atmospheres. Hauskeller, for example, talks about Van Gogh's painting "Wheatfield with Crows" as an example of a painting that creates an atmosphere. See Hauskeller (2018). Saucchelli talks about Francis Bacon's *Head I* (1948) as an example of a painting that creates a horrifying atmosphere (Saucchelli 2014). See also Böhme (1993, 124). For analyses of atmospheres in paintings from an art-historical perspective, see, for example, Cleveland (2009) and Novak (2019).

are multisensory fusion experiences. In section 3, I will then show how a painter can recreate a particular atmosphere in a painting in part by depicting the ambient light that is typical for this atmosphere. I will make clear what I mean by *ambient light* later on in this paper. In section 4, I will argue that, under appropriate conditions, the depicted ambient light can activate the sensory imagination in such a way that viewers enjoy a multisensory fusion experience that involves the fused quality associated with the atmosphere that the painter aims to recreate. These viewers experience the atmosphere recreated in the painting.

## 2. Experiences of Atmospheres as Multisensory Fusion Experiences

We often, perhaps always, experience the atmosphere of the space around us.<sup>238</sup> Literature and poetry are rife with descriptions of atmospheres. But here I will take a description of an atmosphere that comes from a philosopher as my point of departure. In her book *Everyday Aesthetics*, Yuriko Saito writes:

How many of us have experienced going to New York City and absorbed its ‘sense of place’ by walking on the street, which sometimes vibrates under our feet with the subway passage, noisy with honking taxis, surrounded by skyscrapers, with aroma of burned chestnut and pretzels and the saxophone melody by a street musician wafting in the air? These ingredients together give rise to the atmosphere of vibrancy and zaniness. (Saito, 2010, p. 123)

This quote allows us to point out a number of important features of experiences of atmospheres. First, we experience atmospheres as *expressive qualities* of the surrounding space. In Saito’s case, the surrounding space expresses excitement. There is a sense in which this excitement is infectious. We not only experience the space as exciting, we also experience ourselves as being affected by the exciting atmosphere.

Second, experiences of atmospheres are *multisensory* experiences. Saito characterizes the exciting New York atmosphere in terms of tactile sensible qualities (vibrations under our feet), auditory sensible qualities (the honking taxis and the saxophone melodies), olfactory sensible qualities (the smell of pretzels and chestnuts), and visual sensible qualities (the skyscrapers).

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<sup>238</sup> I provide a more extensive discussion of experiences of atmospheres in Jagnow (forthcoming).

Finally, we usually experience atmospheres *peripherally*. For example, when walking through New York, we may be entirely engrossed in a philosophical discussion and pay very little attention to our surroundings. We may nevertheless be affected by the exciting atmosphere. In fact, the experience of this atmosphere may even enliven the experience of our philosophical discussion. Of course, we can also focus on an individual sensible quality of an atmosphere, but we do not need to do this in order to experience the atmosphere.

As I stated in the introduction, I believe that experiences of atmospheres are a special type of multisensory experiences, namely what I called *multisensory fusion experiences*. I will first explain what I mean by a multisensory fusion experience and then provide two reasons in support of this claim.

We often experience objects through multiple sense-modalities at the same time. For example, when a car approaches you, you will simultaneously see and hear it. Similarly, you may simultaneously see a rose and smell it. These experiences are multisensory experiences in which you are simultaneously aware of multiple sensible qualities, such as visual sensible qualities, auditory sensible qualities, olfactory sensible qualities, and gustatory sensible qualities. But the phenomenal character of each of these sensible qualities is determined entirely by the sense-modality through which is experienced. We now know from various experiments that sense-modalities can influence each other. For example, in the case of the McGurk effect, one might hear a sound either as a *d* or a *b*, depending on the observed movements of the speaker's mouth (McGurk and MacDonald, 1976). But whether one hears a *d* or a *b* sound does not change the fact that the phenomenal character is entirely auditory.

A *multisensory fusion experience*, in contrast, is a multisensory experience that involves a sensible quality that we cannot experience through one single sense-modality. In other words, a multisensory fusion experience is a multisensory experience that involves an entirely new sensible quality. As I indicated in the introduction, I will call these sensible qualities *fused sensible qualities*, or *fused qualities*, for short. Casey O'Callaghan suggests that flavors are plausible examples of fused qualities, such as the mintiness of mint-flavored ice cream.<sup>239</sup> The idea here is that an experience of mint-flavor fuses taste, touch, and retronasal smell together into a unique quality that cannot be experienced through one single sense-modality. I find this

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<sup>239</sup> See O'Callaghan (2019, pp. 74-77).

example very plausible from a phenomenological point of view. When I experience the mintiness of mint-flavored ice cream, it does not seem to me that the experience is exhausted by the sensory qualities belonging to taste, touch, and retronasal smell. Rather, I experience the individual sensory qualities as fused together in a way that results in a new sensible quality. It is possible, at least to a certain degree, to focus one's attention on individual sensible qualities, say, for example, on the smell. But this is different from experiencing the mint-flavor.

There are two reasons for thinking that experiences of atmospheres, such as the one described by Saito, are multisensory fusion experiences. The first reason is that we can sometimes recognize an atmosphere in a different place. For example, when one walks through a forest on a sunny day, hears the birds singing, and feels the warm air on one's skin, one might recognize the very same atmosphere that one experienced previously when one was walking through a different forest. Similarly, under the right circumstances, one might recognize the atmosphere of a particular restaurant when one visits another similar restaurant. But, if it is true that we usually experience atmospheres peripherally, that is, without paying attention to the individual sensible qualities, this is best explained by saying that we recognize the atmosphere because we recognize the distinct fused quality associated with it, that is, the sensible quality that results from the fusion of individual sensible qualities.

It might help here to think of the similarity to O'Callaghan's example of mint-flavor. When eating mint-flavored ice cream, you may not pay much attention to the individual sensible qualities, that is, to the retronasal smell, the individual taste qualities, such as the sweetness, and the tactile properties. Nonetheless, you will be able to recognize the mint-flavor when you eat mint-flavored ice cream again. In my view, this is possible because mint-flavor is a distinct and recognizable fused quality.

The second reason for saying that typical experiences of atmospheres are multisensory fusion experiences is that we can experience the same atmosphere even if certain individual sensible qualities change. Suppose you are walking through New York and experience the exciting atmosphere described by Saito. In this case, many of the individual sensible qualities will change constantly. You will see different buildings, the honking of the cars will become more or less intense, the smells will change, and the sounds of the street musicians will become louder or softer. Nevertheless, you might still be able to experience the exciting atmosphere. In fact, it would make little sense to speak of the exciting New York atmosphere if you could

experience it only in one single location. This fact is best explained if we assume that we experience the different sensible qualities as fused together into a distinct sensible quality that can persist even if those individual sensible qualities change. There are of course limits to this. But a certain degree of stability is necessary for the continued experience of an atmosphere.

Again, considering the example of mint-flavor might be helpful here. When you eat mint-flavored ice cream on different occasions, the individual sensible qualities may vary to some degree. Perhaps, the ice cream has a slightly different consistency and is sweeter. But, within certain limits, you will nevertheless recognize the distinct fused quality of mint-flavor.

To summarize: We experience atmospheres as expressive qualities of the space around us. For example, the New York atmosphere described in Saito's quote expresses excitement. At the same time, we are affected by atmospheres. The exciting New York atmosphere makes us excited. Experiences of atmospheres are multisensory experiences, that usually involve visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile sensible qualities. Moreover, these sensible qualities are fused together in a way that results in a distinct fused quality, that is, a quality that cannot be experienced through a single sense-modality.

### **3. Recreating Atmospheres in Paintings**

In this section, I will show how a painter can recreate a particular atmosphere in a painting in part by depicting the ambient light that is typical for this atmosphere. I will proceed in two steps. I first argue that the light present in a scene, the ambient light, is often a particularly important factor in determining the overall phenomenal character of an atmosphere.<sup>240</sup> I then show how a painter can depict the ambient light that is typical for a particular atmosphere.

Let me begin with a remark about the way in which we experience the sensible qualities associated with atmospheres. We usually experience colors and shapes as instantiated in particular objects. Perceptually, an object simply has a certain shape and color. We also usually experience smells and sounds as emerging from particular objects. For example, we hear a ringing as emerging from a particular bell and a smell as emerging from a particular flower. However, we can also experience sensible qualities as divorced from particular objects. This is very well illustrated by the way in which Saito describes the sensible qualities associated with

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<sup>240</sup> For a more detailed analysis of ambient light and its function in paintings, see Jagnow (forthcoming).

the exciting New York atmosphere. She writes that the aroma of burned chestnut and pretzels and the saxophone melody by the street musician are “wafting in the air,” and that “the street” sometimes vibrates under our feet and is noisy with honking taxis. The expressions “wafting in the air” and “the street” refer to the surrounding space, rather than to particular objects. I will call sensible qualities that we experience as divorced from particular objects *ambient sensible qualities*. We can then say that we experience atmospheres, in part, by experiencing ambient sensible qualities. Given what I have said in the previous section, the experience of ambient sensible qualities gives rise to a distinct fused quality.<sup>241</sup>

I also think that we usually experience the light present in a scene as an ambient sensible quality, that is, we experience light as filling the surrounding space without experiencing it as emerging from particular objects or light sources.<sup>242</sup> I will call light that we experience in this way *ambient light*.<sup>243</sup> It is true that we cannot literally see light. Rather, light is what allows us to see particular objects and their properties. But this does not mean that we cannot experience light as an ambient sensible quality. One way to see this is by means of the following scenario. Suppose you are in an entirely dark room and turn on a flashlight. At first, the flashlight illuminates only a small portion of one wall. In this situation, you will experience a dark room with a partially illuminated wall. Suppose then that you turn on other flashlights that illuminate other walls and slowly increase the sizes of the illuminated portions of the walls. You will eventually no longer experience the space as dark. At this point, the space around you will appear to be filled with ambient light. We do not need to worry here at what point this shift happens. The shift is most likely going to be gradual. The scenario nevertheless shows that there is a difference between experiencing a dark room with partially illuminated walls and experiencing a room that is filled with ambient light.<sup>244</sup>

Ambient light has a remarkable phenomenal complexity, that is, the phenomenal

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<sup>241</sup> As I mentioned above, I believe that we can focus on individual sensible qualities, say on the sounds of the street musicians while still experiencing the atmosphere. But what is important for my argument is that a new fused sensible quality is also part of the experience.

<sup>242</sup> This is not to deny that we can also experience light as emerging from a particular object, such as when we see a light beam emerging from a flashlight or a lighthouse.

<sup>243</sup> I want to emphasize that I do not use the term *ambient light* in the sense in which it is used in photography, where it refers to the light that a photographer does not bring to the shoot. I also do not use the term as it is used in indoor design, where it refers to the lighting that provides the overall illumination of a room.

<sup>244</sup> It is possible that we sometimes experience a space as filled with darkness. But I will not argue for this here.

character of ambient light can change along a large number of dimensions. In order to see this, consider the light in your living room. In the early morning on a sunny day, the light will have a low color temperature and appear to have a warm reddish tint, it will have a low angle of incidence, and it might be relatively dark.<sup>245</sup> Later in the day, the light will become more bluish, the angle of incidence will be much larger, and it will also be much brighter. On a sunny day, the light will be sharp, and on a cloudy day, it will be diffuse. The ambient light will also appear to be distributed differently through different regions of your living room. For example, it will appear brighter near the windows and darker in places that do not receive as much light. The light can also enter your room directly, as, for example, when it comes directly from the sun, or indirectly, as, for example, when it is reflected by some other object, say a large wall or a house. Finally, the ambient light might also be more static or more dynamic. Suppose, for example, that the light that enters through the windows is filtered through trees that move in the wind. In this case, the ambient light will change continuously. Summarizing this, we can say the phenomenal quality of ambient light is complex and can change along the dimensions of color temperature, brightness, diffusion, distribution, direction, and directness/indirectness. In addition, ambient light can be static or dynamic with regard to these phenomenal dimensions.

Ambient light often plays a particularly important role in determining the overall phenomenal character of an atmosphere. Consider the two images in Fig. 2. The images show the same room, the same *scene*, illuminated in two different ways, namely once with a yellowish light and again with a bluish light. We experience the room either as filled with yellowish ambient light or as filled with bluish ambient light. Since we kept the scene the same, and since we do not experience any non-visual sensible qualities, the only difference concerns the phenomenal quality of the light that fills the room. And, yet, there is a very big difference with respect to the experienced atmosphere. The room in the image on the top has a warm and lively atmosphere. In contrast, the room in the image on the bottom has a cool and calming

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<sup>245</sup> I use Color Temperature as short for Correlated Color Temperature (CCT). CCT is a specification of the color appearance of the light emitted by a light source, relating its color to the color of light from a reference source when heated to a particular temperature, measured in degrees Kelvin (K). The CCT rating for light is a general “warmth” or “coolness” measure of its appearance. Reddish light with a CCT rating below 3200 K is usually considered “warm,” while bluish light with a CCT above 4000K is usually considered “cool” in appearance.

atmosphere. I used images here to make this point. But I think that it is clear that ambient light also often plays an important role in determining the overall phenomenal character of an atmosphere in a natural scene. Suppose, for example, that you have an apartment with view of the ocean. You may always see the same scene, but its atmosphere will change dramatically, depending on the quality of the ambient light.<sup>246</sup>



**Figure 2:** Room illuminated in two different ways

A painter whose aim is to recreate the atmosphere of a certain place can do so by depicting the scene and the ambient light present in this scene. I will not say much about the depiction of the

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<sup>246</sup> I also want to mention that there is some empirical evidence that experiences of atmospheres in photographs correlate with experiences of atmospheres in the photographed scenes. Salters and Seuntjens (2011) demonstrated that it is possible to use simulations on a screen or on printouts for the evaluation of atmosphere characteristics. Having subjects evaluate the atmosphere of a typical office room under different types of illumination, they showed that although the absolute values of these evaluations differed between real life, computer display, and printout, the relative values followed the same trend.

scene. I just want to point out that if a painter wants to create a painting that is able to elicit an experience of a particular atmosphere in its viewers, as we see, for example, in Pissarro's *Snowscape*, the painter needs to choose an adequate scene. Since we can experience the same atmosphere in different places, the painter needs to choose the right *type* of scene, say a certain kind of snowscape. But, as the two images in Fig. 2 show, in those cases in which the ambient light plays a large role in determining the atmosphere, it is equally important that the painter depict the right kind of ambient light. Given what I have said in the previous paragraph, this requires that the painter modulate the phenomenal qualities of the depicted ambient light in such a way that the resulting phenomenal character matches that of the ambient light associated with the original atmosphere.

Many painters have explored how to depict ambient light.<sup>247</sup> An excellent example is Monet's famous painting *Grainstacks* (1890) in Fig. 3. This painting is part of a series in which Monet was trying to capture the changing atmosphere during different seasons and at different times of the day, or what he calls, "instantaneity." He writes:

The further I go, the better I see that it takes a great deal of work to succeed in rendering what I want to render: "instantaneity," above all the *enveloppe*, the same light spread over everything, and I'm more than ever disgusted at things that come easily, at the first attempt.

The passage makes clear that Monet was particularly interested in what he called the *enveloppe* – "the same light spread over everything." As I understand him, he uses the term *enveloppe* in this quote to refer to the depicted ambient light. In order to capture the atmosphere of the sunny and warm late summer afternoon, Monet focuses closely on the phenomenal character of the ambient light present in the scene. Most noticeably, the ambient light has a low yellowish-reddish color temperature, illuminates the scene from a low angle (which is indicated mostly through the long shadows), and is very diffuse (which is indicated by the hazy air). Moreover, the ambient light appears highly dynamic – it seems to shimmer – an effect that Monet achieves through his use of broken colors.

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<sup>247</sup> For a detailed analysis of the techniques that allow painters to create atmospheres, see, for example (Gurney, 2010).

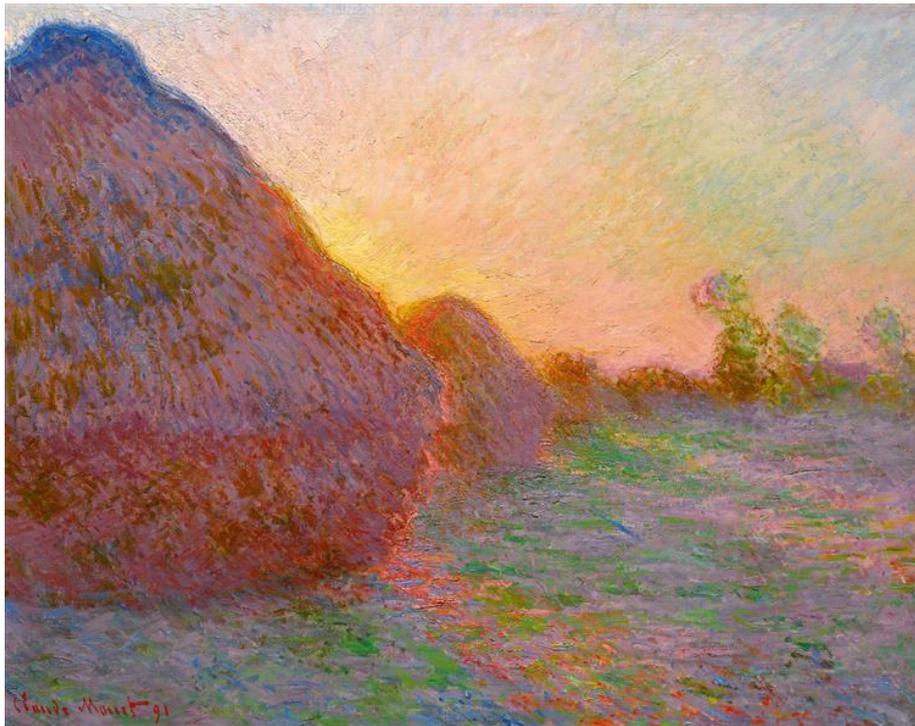


Figure 3: Claude Monet, *Grainstacks*, 1890

Before concluding this section, a clarification is in order. I argued above that ambient light often plays an important role in determining the atmosphere of a scene. But there are also situations in which the ambient light is less important. For example, you may experience the exciting New York atmosphere during different times of the day when the ambient light is rather different. The fact that ambient light can play a more or less important role in determining the atmosphere of a scene has to do, in part, with the fact that the phenomenal character of ambient light can be more or less noticeable. On a cloudless day at around noon, you will probably not notice the ambient light very much. However, this is different, for example, when the light is yellowish-reddish, as when you observe a beautiful sunset, or bluish, as when you experience a cold and sunny winter day. In other words, ambient light becomes particularly noticeable when some of its phenomenal qualities, such as the color temperature, become particularly salient. I think that it is plausible to say that ambient light plays a larger role in determining the atmosphere of a scene when it is more noticeable, that is, when one or more of its phenomenal qualities become particularly salient.

To summarize: We usually experience the surrounding space as filled with light. I called the light that we experience as filling the surrounding space *ambient light*. Ambient light is

phenomenally complex. The phenomenal quality of ambient light can vary along multiple dimensions – color temperature, brightness, distribution, state of diffusion, direction, directness/indirectness, and whether or not these phenomenal dimensions are static or dynamic. The phenomenal character of ambient light is often an important factor in determining the overall phenomenal character of the experienced atmosphere. In those cases, in which the ambient light present in a scene plays a significant role in determining an atmosphere, a painter can recreate this atmosphere by depicting both an appropriate scene and the right kind of ambient light. In order to depict the right kind of ambient light, the painter has to modulate its phenomenal qualities appropriately.

#### **4. Multisensory Fusion Experiences of Paintings**

In the previous sections, I argued that experiences of atmospheres are multisensory fusion experiences, and I explained how a painter can recreate an atmosphere by depicting the scene and the ambient light present in that scene. In this section, I will argue that, under appropriate conditions, the depicted ambient light can activate the sensory imagination in such a way that viewers enjoy a multisensory fusion experience that involves the fused quality associated with the atmosphere that the painter aims to recreate.

In order to make this case, I will put forward two arguments. First, I will present a phenomenal contrast argument in order to show that the ambient light depicted in a painting can activate the sensory imagination in a way that elicits a multisensory fusion experience. Second, I will argue that, if everything goes well, the fused quality of the multisensory fusion experience just is the fused quality associated with the atmosphere that the painter aims to recreate.

The phenomenal contrast argument proceeds as follows. I first describe a phenomenal contrast between the experiences of two paintings that depict different ambient light and elicit experiences of different atmospheres in their viewers. I will then argue that this phenomenal contrast is best explained by saying that the depicted ambient light activates the sensory imagination in such a way that it elicits a multisensory fusion experience.

Compare the visual impression that you have when you look at Pissarro's *Snowscape 1872* with the visual impression that you have when you look at Sisley's *A Village Street in Winter 1893* (Fig. 4). Both paintings depict winter scenes. The space in Pissarro's *Snowscape*

is filled with cold, bright, bluish ambient light. In contrast, the space in Sisley's *A Village Street in Winter 1893* is filled with warm, brownish ambient light. As a result, there is an impressive phenomenal contrast between the experiences caused by the two paintings. But this phenomenal contrast is not just a contrast in visual phenomenology. I experience the light in Pissarro's painting as accompanied by a slight sense of "coldness," and I experience the light in Sisley's painting as accompanied by a slight sense of "warmth." I assume that this is similar for other viewers. I put "coldness" and "warmth" in quotation marks to indicate that I use these terms to refer to the nonvisual phenomenal aspects of the two experiences. I will later argue that the nonvisual aspects of these two experiences are not exhausted by sensations of warmth and coldness. But, for now, "coldness" and "warmth" just refer to the nonvisual aspects.



**Figure 4:** Alfred Sisley, *A Village Street in Winter*, 1893

I believe that the best explanation of this phenomenal contrast is that what I described here as “coldness” and “warmth” designate, at least in part, two different fused qualities that result from the activation of the viewer’s sensory imagination.<sup>248</sup> In other words, the phenomenal contrast is the result of two different multisensory fusion experiences. In order to support this conclusion, I will now consider possible alternative explanations of the phenomenal contrast.

First, one could suggest that the phenomenal contrast is a difference in cognitive phenomenology, that is, it is a result of different cognitive states that accompany the experiences of the paintings. But this seems highly implausible. Suppose, for example, that when I look at Pissarro’s painting, I *think* that the painting makes a cold impression on me, and that when I look at Sisley’s painting, I *think* that the painting makes a warmer impression on me. There are at least two problems with this explanation. First, it does not seem to me that the phenomenal contrast is a contrast in cognitive phenomenology. Second, I could think the opposite, namely that Pissarro’s painting makes a warm impression on me and that Sisley’s painting makes a cold impression on me. But this would not switch the sensible qualities of my experiences of the two paintings.

Second, one might suggest that we can explain the phenomenal contrast by appeal to moods or feelings that accompany the visual experiences of the two paintings. Again, like in the previous case, moods and feelings can change, but the impressions of “coldness” and “warmth” remain the same. The phenomenal character of the ambient light might cause certain moods and emotions, but not the other way around.

Third, one could try to explain the phenomenal contrast by appeal to the deliberate employment of one’s sensory imagination. For example, one could suggest that when I look at Pissarro’s painting, I *imagine* some sensory impression, say, cold snow under my feet, and that when I look at Sisley’s painting, I *imagine* another sensory impression, say, slightly warmer snow under my feet. In other words, one might try to account for the phenomenal contrast by appeal to the sensible quality’s *warmth* and *coldness*. According to this suggestion, the phenomenal contrast would involve literal experiences of coldness and warmth. But this is equally implausible. Even if I don’t actively and consciously imagine having these sensory

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<sup>248</sup> Sensory imagination here refers to our ability to imagine sensible qualities that belong to all sense-modalities, that is, visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile sensible qualities. The sensory imagination that is able to produce fused qualities is multisensory.

impressions, I will still experience the phenomenal contrast. And just like with the previous two explanations, I could imagine the snow in Sisley's painting feeling somewhat colder than the snow in Pissarro's painting. But this would not switch the sensible qualities. Thus, the impressions of "coldness" and "warmth" may lead me to imagine cold and warm snow under my feet. But not the other way around.

Fourth, in response to my argument in the previous paragraph, one could now suggest that the phenomenal contrast is the result of a kind of synesthetic experience that comes about through the unconscious activation of the viewer's sensory imagination. More specifically, one could suggest that the blue color that is so prominent in Pissarro's painting causes a synesthetic experience in which we experience blue as literally cold, and, similarly, that the brown color that is so prominent in Sisley's painting causes a synesthetic experience in which we experience the brown as literally warm. Since we do not feel coldness or warmth on a specific part of our bodies, one would have to say here that the synesthetic experiences involve a faint and unspecific sensation of warmth and coldness.

Although this fourth proposal points in the right direction, it is still problematic. I suggested above that the best explanation of the phenomenal contrast appeals to the viewer's sensory imagination. I therefore think it is right to say that the phenomenal contrast may involve faint and unspecific sensations of warmth and coldness. However, the present proposal has two shortcomings. First, appeal to color alone, that is, to blue and brown, is unable to account for the subtle differences between experiences of atmospheres in paintings. We could imagine, for example, a painting in which blue tones are prominent, like in Pissarro's painting, but that elicits an experience of a different atmosphere in its viewers. It is possible, for example, that the blue tones are used to depict a scene at night, like in Fig. 5. Given this, it is more plausible to say that the sensory imagination is not activated by the color alone, but rather by the phenomenal quality of the depicted ambient light together with the scene. Second, even if we accept this, it is still implausible that the phenomenal contrast can be exhaustively explained in terms of this kind of synesthetic experience. We can recognize an atmosphere in a painting if we have experienced that atmosphere before. But, as will become clear from my next argument, recognition of an atmosphere in a painting requires a fused sensible quality in addition to, or perhaps even in lieu of, various sensible qualities, such warmth and coldness.

This concludes the phenomenal contrast argument. If my argument is accepted, we can

best explain the phenomenal contrast between the experiences of the two paintings by saying that the ambient light depicted in them activates the sensory imagination in a way that causes two different multisensory fusion experiences, that is, two experiences that involve different fused qualities. But this raises a question. Why should we think that the two fused qualities are the fused qualities associated with the atmospheres that Pissarro and Sisley wanted to recreate in their paintings? In other words, why should we think that the fused quality that we experience when we look at Pissarro's painting is the same as the fused quality that is associated with the atmosphere of a cold and sunny winter day? And why should we think that something like this also holds for the experience of Sisley's painting?

My main reason for this claim is based on the fact that we can recognize the atmospheres in these paintings. Consider again Pissarro's painting. When you look at his painting, and everything goes well, you will experience the winterly scene with its unique atmosphere. When asked to describe the atmosphere, you will probably say that it is the typical atmosphere of a cold and sunny winter day. You may also be more specific. You may add, for example, that this is the typical atmosphere of cold and sunny winter day in mid-afternoon. Yet, no matter how much detail you add, it is clear that you recognize the atmosphere depicted in the painting. But, as we have seen above, the ability to recognize an atmosphere is best explained by appeal to the distinct fused quality that results from the fusion of the individual sensible qualities. This strongly suggest that the fused quality of the experience elicited by the painting just is the fused quality associated with the atmosphere of a cold and sunny winter day in mid-afternoon.

I argued in the second section that experiences of atmospheres are multisensory fusion experiences. If what I have said in the previous paragraph is right, we can now explain the fact that paintings are able to elicit experiences of atmospheres in their viewers, even though they are purely visual objects. This explanation goes as follows. We have experienced many different kinds of atmospheres. Experiences of atmospheres involve distinct fused qualities that result from the fusion of different ambient sensible qualities. In many cases, ambient light plays a particularly important role in determining the emerging fused quality. It is then plausible that, under the right circumstances, that is, if the painting depicts the right kind of scene, and if the viewer has experienced the atmosphere before, the depicted ambient light will activate the sensory imagination in a way that produces the distinct fused quality associated with that atmosphere. When this happens, the viewer will experience the atmosphere.

This explanation does not exclude the possibility that paintings elicit experiences of unfamiliar atmospheres. If my explanation in the previous paragraph is correct, the sensory imagination is activated by the visual experience, and, most importantly, by the experience of the depicted ambient light. Under the right kind of circumstances, it should then also be possible to activate the sensory imagination by depicting ambient light that is associated with an unfamiliar atmosphere. One way in which this might happen is when the depicted ambient light is sufficiently similar in certain respects to the ambient light associated with a familiar atmosphere. In this case, the similarity will suffice to activate the sensory imagination in the same way as the ambient light associated with the familiar atmosphere. The experienced atmosphere would nevertheless be different because the depicted ambient light is different. Consider the atmosphere in James Abbott McNeill Whistler's painting *Nocturne: Blue and Silver* (Fig. 5). When I first encountered this painting, I had not experienced the kind of bluish ambient light depicted in it. But the painting, nevertheless, elicits an experience of a very calm and quiet atmosphere in me. I think this is possible because I have experienced a similar kind of calm atmosphere associated with a similar kind of ambient light before. The fact that the ambient light here is uniformly blue modifies and enhances the impression of calm and quiet. The fused quality is novel. But the experience builds on a familiar multisensory experience.



**Figure 5:** James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Silver*

Before concluding this paper, I would like to draw the reader's attention to some of Goethe's remarks in his *Theory of Color*. Goethe's observations have, of course, had a large influence on painters, and especially on painters who are interested in atmospheres. I believe that if we interpret these remarks in the right way, they lend further support to my argument in this paper.

In Part V of the *Theory of Color* (1810), which is entitled the "Sensory-moral effects of colors," Goethe describes the impressions elicited by different colors. For example, he writes about yellow:

We find from experience, again, that yellow excites a warm and agreeable impression. Hence in painting it belongs to the illuminated and emphatic side. This impression of warmth may be experienced in a very lively manner if we look at a landscape through a yellow glass, particularly on a gray winter's day. The eye is gladdened, the heart expanded and cheered, a glow seems at once to breath towards us.

What is interesting here is that Goethe is not describing the effects of pure colors, such as yellow printed on single page. Rather, he first speaks about colors in paintings. Presumably, he is thinking of what I called ambient light and describing the fused quality elicited through the depiction of ambient light with a yellowish color temperature. He then mentions the effect of looking at a wintery landscape through yellow glass. But looking at, say, a snowscape, through a yellow glass changes the perceived illumination. The scene appears to be filled with ambient light that has a yellowish color temperature. If this is the right interpretation of Goethe's remarks, he is describing the effects of ambient light on the experience of atmospheres, both in paintings and in natural scenes, rather than the effects of pure colors.

To summarize: In this section, I argued that, under the right circumstances, depicted ambient light can activate the viewer's sensory imagination and, in this way, elicit a multisensory fusion experience, that is, an experience that has a distinct fused quality. I also argued that the fused quality just is the fused quality associated with the atmosphere whose ambient light has been depicted in the painting.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that paintings can elicit a special kind of multisensory experience in their viewers, namely what I called a multisensory fusion experience. A multisensory fusion experience is an experience that involves a novel fused quality. If my argument holds any water, we experience many paintings not just visually. Rather, we experience these paintings literally with all of our senses. However, it is easy to overlook this fact. For, first, when we experience atmospheres in paintings, we do not usually actively imagine individual sensible qualities. As I said at the beginning, when looking at Pissarro's *Snowscape*, we can actively imagine what the cold snow under our feet would feel like or what it would sound like. But we usually do not do this. And, second, the distinguishing feature of a multisensory fusion experience is a fused quality. Such sensible qualities are difficult to grasp and understand, precisely because we cannot assign them to a single sense-modality.

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