

# Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 16, 2024

Edited by Vítor Moura and Christopher Earley



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



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## *Effort in Aesthetic Appreciation: from Avant-Garde to AI*

Emanuele Arielli<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** This paper starts from the debates on whether the seemingly *effortless* creation of AI artworks, and by extension some avant-garde pieces, diminishes their artistic value. This leads to a broader inquiry into how effort, or the lack thereof, influences our perception of an artwork's quality and significance. Traditionally, effort in art has been seen in two ways. On the one hand, a skilled artist's work, which may appear effortless, is often valued for its apparent ease, reflecting genius or inspiration. On the other hand, the Romantic era highlighted the artist's internal struggle, shifting emphasis from technical proficiency to emotional and intellectual effort. Contemporary empirical research seems to confirm the existence of an "effort heuristic", suggesting that artworks perceived as requiring more effort are generally valued higher. Finally, this paper suggests defining a notion of "distributed effort" as a category for the appreciation of content and artworks that are the product of complex influences, traditions, and technological advancements. In conclusion, this paper suggests that we must investigate the possibility of "artificial effort" in AI-generated art.

### **1. Introduction**

The contemporary discourse surrounding AI-generated artifacts – spanning images, texts, musical compositions, and beyond – appears to overlook a crucial implicit assumption: beneath the prevailing skepticism toward artificial intelligence lies a deeper, largely unexamined concern linked to the apparent ease with which these technologies can produce human-like creative works.

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Traditional creative processes typically demand substantial investments of time, skill development, and cognitive resources. In contrast, AI systems can now generate sophisticated cultural artifacts with minimal human input, democratizing capabilities once reserved for skilled professionals. This radical reduction in the "cost" of creation – measured in terms of human labor, time, and expertise – may implicitly influence negative perceptions of AI-generated works. AI-generated outputs would be thought to be less valuable due to their quick, automated, and apparently effortless production. In other words, since those artifacts lack human *effort* then there is no sign of any kind of creative struggle, which may be defined as overcoming some material, technical but also cultural and mental barrier.

This paper examines whether resistance to generative AI might be partially rooted in an implicit devaluation of creative works that circumvent traditional human effort and mastery. Does the very efficiency of AI-driven creation paradoxically diminish the perceived value of its outputs in the eyes of critics and audiences? This point is well illustrated by the following anecdote: singer and songwriter Nick Cave runs a blog called *The Red Hand Files* where he engages directly with his fans. One particularly enthusiastic fan wanted to pay tribute to the singer with a song generated by ChatGPT “in Nick Cave’s style.” This was Nick Cave's response:

“This song sucks. [...] Songs arise out of suffering, by which I mean they are predicated upon the complex, internal human struggle of creation and, well, as far as I know, algorithms don’t feel. Data doesn’t suffer. [...] Writing a good song is not mimicry, or replication, or pastiche, it is the opposite. It is an act of self-murder that destroys all one has strived to produce in the past. [...] It’s a blood and guts business, here at my desk, that requires something of me to initiate the new and fresh idea.”<sup>2</sup>

A fundamental observation about AI systems is their essentially "Platonic" mode of operation: they first extract generalized patterns from training data, then generate specific instances based on these abstractions. While generating variations requires minimal computational effort, the real work occurs during the training phase when these patterns are extracted. This process differs fundamentally from human artistic creation. An artist does not simply implement pre-existing

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/chat-gpt-what-do-you-think/>

patterns. Rather, their creative process involves *uncertain* explorations, moving through various possibilities without predetermined paths. As Nick Cave suggests, artistic creation is characterized by an exploratory process that defies established rules, where each variation stands independently and must establish its own aesthetic validity. Thus, creative effort inherently involves grappling with uncertainty and the possibility of failure. In contrast, AI-generated outputs can appear overly predictable and mechanistic, lacking this essential element of uncertainty; what they do appears too smooth, mechanical, and pre-determined.

This tension also echoes significant debates from 20th-century art history, when critics and audiences questioned the apparent “simplicity” of certain avant-garde art forms—ready-mades, abstract minimalism, conceptual art, and performance pieces. The criticism primarily targeted the perceived minimalism of the artistic gesture (such as Lucio Fontana's canvas cuts), questioning whether such apparently simple actions sufficiently justified the works' artistic value.<sup>3</sup>

This leads us to explore an essential aspect of aesthetic evaluation: the role of *perceived* effort in shaping our appreciation and judgment of artworks. When engaging with an aesthetic object, viewers often assess not only the end result but also the artist's labor, time, and energy involved in its creation. This perceived investment plays a key role in how we attribute both artistic and conceptual value to the work. "Perceived effort" is conceptually distinct from actual effort. While actual effort refers to the actual amount of time and energy invested in creating a work, perceived effort relates to the viewer's interpretation or sense of that investment.

The connection between perceived effort and aesthetic appreciation functions on several levels. First, there is the immediate sense of technical skill and time commitment—whether in the detailed precision of a painting, the complexity of a musical composition, or the skilled craftsmanship of a sculpture. Second, there is the perception of intellectual and creative effort—the idea that the artist has engaged deeply with their medium, confronted artistic challenges, and arrived at original solutions. Finally, we acknowledge the “learning” effort—the years of practice, training, and experimentation that underpin artistic expertise.

This point raises the issues whether effort is just an indicator of an artwork's relevance and quality, or if it has *intrinsic* value and quality in its own right, that is, we *aesthetically* value the

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the post-war debate in Italy on this issue see Cavellini, 1961.

effort, since we may tend to judge the end product by our knowledge of how it was made. In other words, is effort merely an indirect *signal* of an artwork's quality, or does it possess aesthetic value when it is perceived or assumed by the viewer? This has also been empirically investigated in recent times, but the philosophical and conceptual underpinning of this fact has not always been clear-cut. In fact, the history of aesthetics also shows that attitudes on this issue are quite different to what we might consider intuitively: in fact, too much effort is not necessarily a good thing in aesthetic evaluation, as it will be discussed in the next section.

AI aesthetics, therefore, touches on a general theoretical question: if (perceived) effort determines our aesthetic judgment, would you look, listen or read the work with different eyes according to how much “suffering” there is behind it? And since machines do not suffer (as Nick Cave says), could this be an element of our suspicious attitude toward AI-generated artworks? Or, alternatively, could machines suffer (make effort) or at least *show* (aesthetically pleasing) effort?

## 2. The Origins of the Debate

First, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by “effort,” but doing this in a systematic fashion would go well beyond the scope of this paper. Quite surprisingly, there are not many explicit definitions of effort in philosophy or psychology: we may start from Aristotle’s theory of habit formation, or in the discussion of the transition from possibility to actuality in the *Metaphysics*, or see effort through the lens of the notion of “conatus” in the ancient philosophy of nature, or look to Spinoza, Nietzsche, or today’s attempts at a definition in analytic philosophy (Gendolla & Wright, 2009; Massin, 2017; Bermúdez & Massin, 2023). According to Massin (2017), the analysis of effort has traditionally followed four main conceptual approaches. The first views effort as a primitive feeling – an immediately accessible, irreducible sensation (see also James, 1880). However, this view struggles to account for effort's goal-directed nature and its role as an action rather than a mere sensation. The second approach focuses on explaining our awareness of effort through the comparison between intended and actual outcomes, but fails to fully capture effort's intensity independent of success. A third view analyzes effort in terms of resource expenditure or energy consumption, seeing effort as the allocation of limited resources toward goals. The fourth

perspective, which Massin favors, understands effort as essentially involving the exertion of force against resistance. On this force-based account, effort consists of two key components: a force intentionally exerted by an agent and a resistive force that opposes it. This view helps explain why we consider efforts praiseworthy—because they involve overcoming resistance—and how we can enjoy effortful activities despite their inherent unpleasantness, through the satisfaction that comes from meeting challenges. The force-based account captures several essential features of effort: its intentional and goal-directed nature, its connection to resistance and difficulty, its potential for success or failure, and its role as grounds for both enjoyment and moral (and, we might add, aesthetic) praise.

In applying the concept of "effort" in the specific domain of art, we similarly find a range of meanings that illuminate its role in the creative process. Firstly, effort can be seen as the straightforward use of time and materials in artistic work (effort as *labor*). This perspective focuses on the physical resources and time invested in creation. However, effort might also concern the application of learnt skill and the capacity of the artist to deploy it in order to overcome limits, solve problems, and reach a specific goal (effort as *achievement* – see Bradford, 2013; 2015). Effort, in this sense, is a proxy for the very idea of *agency*, that is, the fact of one being able to bring about an intended state of the world by means of actions that are able to transform an environment that resists such changes. From this perspective, mastery and effort serve to impress or engage viewers of the artist's feats. On the subjective level, effort can be considered a deeply internal experience, involving emotional and psychological challenges that the artists go through. This internal struggle, though less visible, is a crucial part of the creative journey. Lastly, effort might imply a connection to exceptionality in the skills needed to realize a specific work (effort as a proxy of *scarcity*): the artist's mastery is a rare gift, thanks to which artworks are made possible in ways other humans would not be able to realize. The artist, so to speak, is capable of a kind of effort other people would not be able to display. The time and dedication needed to complete a work, combined with the limited number of individuals capable of such a creation, add a unique value to the art.

As mentioned earlier, besides defining what effort can actually be, one important point is that it can be the object of observation, feeling, and judgment: the public might *feel* or *see* effort in

what the artists did, and the artist could more or less openly *display* effort in the creative process and in the artwork. “Perceived effort” is, therefore, a matter of attribution by the audience but also of exhibition of effort by the artist.

In the domain of visual arts, we might assume that the knowledge that a painting required months of labor, rather than being completed in a single day, significantly influences its appreciation. On this point, we might observe a historically bivalent attitude toward effort in craftsmanship. The degree of an artist's or craftsman's skill might reveal – as said – what Leonardo da Vinci called *ostinato rigore* (stubborn rigor or tenacious application). But from another perspective, the wonder and admiration of the artist's product might even be *inversely* related to the effort exercised in creative process. Skilled artists or craftsmen can produce artifacts with less effort compared to novices. And we admire exactly the skillful mastery in realizing through *apparent effortlessness* something that less skilled artists would manage to produce only by means of great effort and difficulty, if at all. On this point, we could recall a famous quote by Michelangelo: “If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery, it would not seem so wonderful at all”. That is, the talented artist might show geniality or (even divine) inspiration not in his effort but in his *ease* in accomplishing what others cannot do or in manifesting *sprezzatura* (Castiglione 1528/1975), the apparent effortlessness in his craft.

From this perspective, art should conceal its artificiality and give an *appearance* of effortlessness even though it actually required great effort both in the realization and in the *concealment* of this effort. The Latin saying *Ars est celare artem*, which translates to “Art is to conceal the art,” emphasizes the idea that true and valuable art often hides the effort put into its creation. This principle suggests that the most impressive art appears effortless, even though it may require immense skill and labor (see D’Angelo, 2018). For human artists, achieving a seamless and effortless appearance in their work often requires a high level of mastery and skill. The artist's struggle, experimentation, and refinement are hidden behind the final product, which appears natural and gracious (Kant, 1790). Contrary to that, the appearance of too much struggle and pain is not a positive thing; it signals that the artist may not be that capable or inspired and appears too contrived and *artificial*. This inverse relationship, however, could imply that skill is the outcome of *past efforts* applied through a lengthy learning process, or it can be attributed to the artist's

exceptional and unusual abilities: the artist is great because he seems able to do effortlessly what other people could do only with great effort or are not able to do at all. Excessive effort can, in a way, indicate a lack of learning, experience, or talent.

On the other hand, the notion of effort has also been understood in history as an active struggle, both material and spiritual, in the creative process which adds value to the final product. Particularly, the Romantic artist's struggle for self-expression and his quest to find the best means of conveying his ideas focuses on the internal (mental and spiritual) effort than on the material and technical effort in the creative process. Romantic authors, in this respect, criticized the affected and artificial nature of art forms bound by formal conventions, advocating instead for the immediate authenticity of their own spirituality. They rejected the idea of excessive formal effort in favor of expressive spontaneity. At the same time, while they downplayed effort as diligence in the formal construction of poems, artworks, or compositions, they placed great value on effort as inner struggle and personal turmoil.

This perspective somewhat anticipated the radical shift in the role of technical effort in craftsmanship within the traditional avant-garde. Here, the geniality of the conceptual idea was more important than the length of time and effort in crafting a work. Lucio Fontana's cut canvases serve as a prime example of this shift. Fontana's straightforward yet innovative act of slicing through the canvas redefined the concept of effort, moving away from labor-intensive techniques towards an emphasis on conceptual depth and its provocative aspect. His work illustrates that a single, decisive gesture charged with conceptual genius could override traditional measures of effort and skill in the realm of art.

The effort and skill involved in conceptual art are predominantly intellectual in nature, and it is important to recognize that intellectual prowess can be as commendable as physical effort and technical skill. However, the challenge lies in the fact that this is not always readily apparent to the broader public. The worn-out phrase “even my kid could do that” reveals that, contrary to audiences appreciating the artist’s “sprezzatura” – namely the artist’s apparent effortlessness in doing something that would require effort for the normal individual – they see in the work an apparent effortlessness in doing something that everyone else could also do. Due to its non-obvious nature, these kinds of contemporary artworks always risked being perceived as irrelevant or less engaging.



Consequently, it became imperative for artists and art gallery curators to clearly articulate how a piece of conceptual art embodies effort and skill on a more abstract, spiritual, and mental level. For instance, early detractors of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings criticized them as creations anyone could replicate. Art critic Leo Steinberg, intending to dismiss these criticisms, pointed out: “Questions as to the validity of Pollock’s work, though they remain perfectly good in theory, are simply blasted out of relevance by these manifestations of Herculean effort, this evidence of mortal struggle between the man and his art.” (Steinberg, 1955).

The misunderstanding with the broad public stems from the fact that intellectual effort does not consist in some kind of formal and technical mastery, but involves the ability to break away from pre-existing rules and generate innovation and originality. While it is true that anyone can now cut a canvas as Fontana did, it was Fontana who first conceived of this innovative and provocative gesture. The distinction in creating something new does not lie in the inability of others to replicate a specific technical skill, but rather in their inability to replicate a comparable capacity (and effort) for innovation. One point that should be noted in these debates is the fact that all sides still agree on the assumption that effort and value are correlated: no matter if technical or intellectual, material or spiritual, value necessarily must emerge from some kind of hardship. There is no value without struggle, and there is still the strong assumption that the appreciation of effort and skill is linked to concepts of moral excellence and authenticity.<sup>4</sup>

### **3. Empirical Evidence: the “Effort Heuristic”**

It is interesting to consider some relatively recent empirical evidence that has been done on this issue, confirming the tendency – defined as “effort heuristics” – to use effort as a proxy of aesthetic value.

Kruger and others conducted an experiment in 2004 where adult participants were asked to evaluate two abstract paintings in terms of their likability, quality, and economic value. The

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<sup>4</sup> Algoe & Haidt, 2009 and Bloom, 2010 have linked the appreciation of effort and skill to concepts of moral excellence and authenticity. This seems to be validated also by empirical studies that show how we naturally link effort with value, see Liu et al, 2017.

participants were divided into two groups. One group was informed that the first painting took four hours to complete while the second took twenty-four hours. The other group was given the reverse information. In both scenarios, participants consistently showed a preference for the painting they *believed* took longer to create. They also rated it higher in quality and assigned it a greater monetary value.

We could suggest, in this regard, a similar ideal experiment conducted with AI-generated artifacts, by showing participants under experimental conditions images or texts generated by a machine that are described as having taken less or more time, or using less or more computational effort, or have recombined and explored a more or less extensive training database. If we get similar results, then “effort” should be understood here as the sum of all physical or temporal resources used by the machine. This would extend effort beyond the perspective of goal-directed human agency and would include mechanical effort as relevant for aesthetic appreciation. Mechanical effort, in turn, is an expression of the human effort invested in the creation of this technology and in the data on which it has been trained.

One recent empirical research has sought to transpose this issue onto the subjective evaluation of works created with the aid of AI. A study by Chamberlain et al. (2018), for instance, shows how people exhibit different prejudices against computer-generated art. They mostly argue that intentionality, authenticity, and – most of all - effort play a role in their acceptance and appreciation of an artwork. The answers people gave to this investigation are quite straightforward:

‘I did favor the ones I now know are not AI, since I do value the time, skill, and effort put into those. As an artist, it's insulting seeing people pass off these generated images as their own art, since these images are still using others' hard work.’ Many other commentaries confirm the point we are here making: ‘Yes, because AI-generated images will never require as much effort, sweat, and years of practice as human-made drawings. [...] each stroke requires judgment and incredible artistic knowledge in order for the composition of the drawing to piece together. I'm actually very surprised by what AI can achieve after taking this test, but it will never (to me), be able to achieve the sensibility humans can convey in their drawings.’ (Chamberlain et al, 2018).

The issue of appropriating “others' hard work” concerns the fact that AI models fundamentally rely on vast repositories of human cultural production for their training, whilst being so far inherently

incapable of generating genuinely novel content or artistic styles. This observation illuminates a deeper point about our conception of effort in the artistic domain: we primarily understand effort as an *individual* undertaking. Whilst we acknowledge the notion of collective effort in certain domains – the construction of the pyramids, space exploration, or the management of complex organizations – and recognize these as paradigmatic instances of coordinated human endeavor, our understanding of artistic effort remains largely individualistic. To be sure, certain artistic enterprises, such as moviemaking, do exemplify collective achievement. Such complex collaborative works command our admiration precisely because they transcend the capabilities of individual effort, thereby demonstrating humanity's remarkable capacity for cooperative work.

But in domains like text writing or image production, *less* value could be perceived if something is seen as the product of a collective effort instead of an individual endeavor. To investigate this point, consider the empirical work by Smith et al. (2014). They showed that when literary artworks were attributed to *multiple* authors, they were perceived as requiring less effort, which seemed to lower their perceived quality. In their study, some participants were asked to write a poem, either alone or in a group of three. When a separate group of participants rated these poems without knowing how they were produced, the method of production had no impact on their ratings. However, if these raters were informed that the poem was written by a single person, they judged it to be of higher quality than if they were told it was written by three people. Collective group effort was therefore linked to *less* individual effort and implicitly used as a cue in the quality evaluation of the poem.

#### **4. Distributed Effort and *Artificial Sprezzatura***

The idea that AI-generated art is "too easy" and lacking in effort can be challenged in at least two ways. First, beyond casual or amateur usage, the work of artists using AI systems is far from simple or automatic. It requires a deep understanding of the medium and the technologies involved, along with a complex, detailed process to bring the final work to fruition. For instance, crafting a sufficiently sophisticated prompt to capture the artist's precise creative vision is often a demanding

task that is anything but automatic. Second, the issue arises whether we can conceptualize a form of "machine effort" or "artificial struggle" in the production of content by AI systems.

The issue of collective effort, mentioned before, becomes particularly relevant in discussions about AI-generated art. While some may perceive AI art as “too easy” and lacking in effort, this view overlooks the considerable work involved in developing AI technologies and the human contributions implicitly embedded in the training datasets. The outputs of these systems are not the product of an openly coordinated, collective group effort but rather emerge from the amalgamation of diverse influences and content from different periods, as the systems learn from the works of past artists. Instead of collective effort, we might define the concept of a *distributed* aesthetic effort, which allows us to appreciate the cumulative impact of past influences, individual contributions, and technological progress leading to a specific artifact or artwork. The distributed nature of AI's development and learning processes means that its effort is, in fact, a collective one, spanning numerous individuals and technological advancements.

In the domain of art and in traditional human artistic creativity, however, effort is not viewed as collectively distributed, even though we acknowledge that every artist operates within the scope of their past experiences and cultural context. While we recognize, for instance, that scientists stand “on the shoulders of giants” drawing from a vast network of past influences and contributions, the effort attributed to an artist is primarily seen as their own, beginning from the point at which they engage with their heritage. It is the individual artist's effort from that moment onward that is recognized and valued in their work. We do not typically regard the effort involved in a work of art as encompassing the entire historical and cultural network that shaped the artist's perspective and technique, because these accumulated human efforts were not the result of an intentional, coordinated action aimed at producing that specific artwork. We attribute creative effort to the individual artist, recognizing their personal struggle, skill, and intention in the work they produce. This *romantic* notion is closely tied to the belief that creative work arises from an individual's unique subjectivity and agency.

The general question of the author, understood as an “individual subjectivity,” is therefore central to how we perceive and assign value to creative works. Unlike human artists, AI lacks individual subjectivity or authorship, and we are reluctant to attribute agency to it. The distributed

effort in AI-generated art lacks a singular, identifiable agent to whom we can credit the creative process, aside from the human operator who engages with the system through prompts and commands, often with what appears to be minimal effort.

To bridge the gap between human and machine creativity, it might therefore be necessary to challenge a rigid, anthropocentric conception of agency and rethink what effort means in the context of AI. One way to do this is by acknowledging the collective and technical effort behind AI systems, as said. If we were to accept the notion of distributed effort as a valid way to assess AI-generated content, then its apparent effortlessness could be seen as a form of *artificial sprezzatura*: a well-concealed effortful endeavor that only superficially appears as effortless. From this perspective, AI would just *seem* to produce its creations with agility and ease, leaving in the background the complex computational processes, the significant energy consumption, the extensive mathematical processing of data, and the vast cultural knowledge embedded in the AI's training. The implications of this issue also extend to a topic that cannot be explored in this contribution: the legal recognition of human works in the training of AI systems and the ethical considerations of using human effort as a component of artificial effort.

Just as the effortless grace of a skilled artist conceals years of training and refinement, the apparent ease with which AI generates content conceals the intensive computational processes and collective human labor involved in its development. Acknowledging this hidden effort allows us to value both human and AI-generated art, recognizing the deep and often unseen labor behind works that seem effortless. Beyond the actual quality of AI-generated content (after all, the AI-produced “Nick Cave” song might turn out to “suck”, as the songwriter said), this kind of appreciation requires a fundamental shift in how we value effort and agency, moving beyond a purely subject-centered focus.

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## *Perceptual Learning and Aesthetic Criticism*

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ABSTRACT. A crucial and old problem in aesthetics concerns whether critical discourse should be conceived as an argumentative practice starting from some premises and rationally leading to a conclusion (Beardsley, 1962), or rather as an invitation to experience an object (typically an artwork or, more broadly, an artistic performance) in a certain way (Sibley, 2001). The clash between these two approaches is patent: on the one hand there is the intuition that aesthetic criticism is a rational activity that can draw on shared principles and rational arguments. On the other hand, the idea is defended that aesthetic criticism should make people agree on what an artwork looks like. In this article I unpack the disagreement in terms of a different stand on the nature of perceptual experience and I exploit the notion of *perceptual learning* to mitigate this apparently inescapable contrast. In particular, I argue that certain aesthetic experiences involving the perceptual detection of aesthetic properties qualify as reason-responsive perceptual experiences and conclude that a theory of perceptual experience that admits the phenomenon of perceptual learning can better do justice to both the rational and the perceptual nature of critical aesthetic discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101062570.



## 1. Introduction

A crucial and old problem in aesthetics concerns whether critical discourse should be conceived as an argumentative practice starting from some premises and rationally leading to a conclusion (Beardsley, 1962), or rather as an invitation to experience an object (typically an artwork or, more broadly, an artistic performance) in a certain way (Sibley, 2001). While the outcome of a successful argument is meant to be a belief endorsed by a subject, the result of an invitation to perceive, or to notice an aspect, is arguably a perceptual, or, more broadly, experiential state entertained by her.

The clash between these two approaches is patent: on the one hand there is the intuition that aesthetic criticism is a *rational activity* that can draw on shared principles and rational arguments. On the other hand, the idea is defended that aesthetic criticism should try to make people agree in their *experiential* appreciation of what a work of art is like. Both these intuitions seem to capture important aspects of criticism that, ideally, one should want to preserve equally in a satisfactory theoretical proposal. However, as Robert Hopkins has questioned: “How can there be an argument with a perception as its conclusion?” (Hopkins, 2006, p. 137).

In this talk, I exploit the phenomenon of *perceptual learning* to mitigate this apparently inescapable contrast. Making room for the possibility that the perceptual contents of one’s experience are subject to changes upon training, rather than being stable and encapsulated throughout, perceptual learning promises to account for the gradual acquisition of detection capacities. As such, it may help to explain how we learn to grasp complex properties such as values, and to justify some of our aesthetic ascriptions.

To begin with, I will unpack the disagreement between defenders of critical discourse as a rational endeavour and upholders of art criticism as an invitation to perceive in terms of differences in their stance on the nature of perceptual experience. Then, I will introduce the notion of perceptual learning and focus on perceptual learning prompted and sustained by *conceptual feedback*. Drawing on recent contributions in the philosophy of mind, I will argue that perceptual learning allows us to treat some perceptual experiences as responsive to reasons. Besides helping to account for a fundamental aspect of aesthetic expertise, the phenomenon of perceptual learning promises to do justice to both the rational and the perceptual nature of critical aesthetic discourse.

## 2. Critical Discourse: Perception and Beliefs

Although it is not a monolithic practice with its own consistent rules, art criticism has been struggling for most of its history with the issue of how to produce rational judgments about objects whose appreciation requires: “the exercise of taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity, of aesthetic discrimination or appreciation.” (Sibley, 1965, p. 421). On the one hand art criticism seems to offer arguments towards (or against) the aesthetic appreciation of artworks, like when one *derives* the claim that an actress’s performance is “deliciously eccentric” or “amazing and hilarious” based on a series of remarks pointing at her “faintly jerky head movements and unselfconscious gait – awkward and yet somehow elegant at the same time” (Bradshaw, 2024). On the other hand, critical discourse seems to be dealing with properties that cannot be argued for – no more than one can argue for or against the actress’ dress being blue. Such a claim – that the actress’s dress is blue – does not seem to be supported by reasons. Instead, it appears as the mere ascertainment of a fact. Therefore, one may come to *believe* that the actress’s performance is actually amazing in virtue of the way she is described as moving on the screen. Yet, for this to be an aesthetic judgment of the artist’s performance, it should be stating something that requires the recipient to *experience it* as such.

One way to make this contrast salient is to suppose that disagreement emerges about the actress’s performance. Suppose some critic says that in that same performance the actress simply is given opportunities “to spread open her legs and reveal more than her acting ability. Degradation, sadness and horror—she embraces every negative emotion stark naked, devouring raw oysters and rutting like a pig – the critic says, to the point that they ask: This is acting?” (Reed, 2023). What would be the correct way of settling the disagreement? By urging more refined arguments and better justifications? Or rather by exhibiting aspects of the acting performance that, supposedly, cannot but manifest themselves in the recipients’ experience?

This conundrum can be seen as stemming from a sharp distinction between perception and beliefs based on reasons. Perceptions are considered paradigmatically impermeable to reasons. To mention a classic example: no matter how good a reason one may have for believing that the two

segments of the arrows depicted in the Müller-Lyer illusion are congruent, one's perceptual experience will still be of two lines of different lengths. Reasons, on the other hand, are usually conceived of as providing epistemic justification for certain mental states, especially beliefs. While beliefs are rationally evaluable as justified or unjustified, perceptions are not.

Yet, although perception is standardly considered outside the scope of rational evaluability, many attempts have been made in the philosophy of mind to question this distinction. In particular, moral and aesthetic practices – that is, activities in which we deal with *values* – challenge this picture, requiring a particular treatment as features that are perceivable but at the same time seem to be epistemically evaluable (Bergqvist & Cowan, 2018). Even if they appear in our experiences as perceptible saliences, moral and aesthetic values have at least two sides. On the one hand, we access them through perception, i.e. through our senses, while, on the other hand, they can be justified or unjustified, i.e. epistemically evaluable. This makes it particularly difficult to explain moral and aesthetic values in purely perceptual terms – which would overlook the evaluative side – or in purely evaluative terms – which would not do justice to the kind of experiences in which they are instantiated.

Among the hypotheses that have been put forward to explain the nature of perceivable yet evaluable properties, one that seems still little explored appeals to *perceptual learning*. As I will try to show, this phenomenon allows one to think of at least certain perceivable properties as something one can *gradually learn to detect*, rather than as something that is simply given in one's experience. The upshot is a more flexible view of perception that promises to make it available for rational evaluation.

### 3. Perceptual Learning

In philosophy of mind and in the cognitive sciences, the label *perceptual learning* refers to changes in perception that result from practice or experience. Although the definition traces back to Eleanor Gibson's article "Perceptual Learning" (1963), the intuition that perception is subject to change is old and widespread. Already in the third century, when Diogenes Laertius described Stoicism, he made a clear reference to the idea that the trained eye of a sculptor sees the same statue in a different

way from that of the ordinary man (1925, p. 161). In the 18th century Thomas Reid spoke profusely of "acquired perceptions", referring to perceptual skills that can be gained through repeated experiences and cross-modal correlations (1997, p.171). In 1890, William James wrote that an expert sommelier may become able to distinguish between the top half from the bottom half of a bottle of a particular type of wine by relying on his taste (1980, p. 509), and John Dewey's discussion of habits seems to lever precisely this idea when he writes that "to have a clear-cut sensation [...] is a sign of training, skill, habit" (Dewey, 1922, p. 31).

However, not all changes in perception can be counted as the result of perceptual learning. Hence, in the philosophical and psychological literature on the subject, some criteria are adopted to distinguish cases of perceptual learning from other phenomena that can be explained by different mechanisms. Standard criteria are, first, that the changes result from practice or experience; second, that they are long-lasting; and third, that they are genuinely perceptual (Connolly, 2019).

### ***3.1. Some Requirements***

First, the requirement of training, or practice, as a necessary condition for a change to be considered a result of perceptual learning means that the effects of physical modifications, such as injuries to the perceptual apparatus, cannot count as perceptual learning. As a consequence of being operated on, a formerly myopic person will perceive the world differently, and this change will undoubtedly be long-lasting. Yet, such changes are not due to any learning or training processes.

Secondly, by requiring that a perceptual change be long-lasting in order to be considered the effect of learning, one can exclude short-term perceptual changes from the category of perceptual learning. Suppose we enter a dark room after having been in blinding sunlight. Adapting to the new lighting conditions may take some time, so our perceptual experience may undergo some changes, but this will last only for a few seconds. Although genuinely perceptual, these changes are neither long-lasting nor do they result from any practice and, therefore, would not count as the result of perceptual learning.

Third, requiring the changes to be genuinely perceptual allows us to retain the distinction between perceptual learning and post-perceptual modifications, that is, changes based on

perceptual experiences whose content remains unaltered while related beliefs change. Suppose one is taught to recognize the perceivable look of concrete in architectural works. At the end of the training, it seems that one can perceptually distinguish a building made of concrete from one made of rammed earth. Arguably, this will not count as perceptual learning until the recognition will occur without the application of conceptual instruction to “interpret” the perceptual material. Notably, a purely phenomenological perspective that appeals to introspection to establish whether one’s recognitional capacity is the result of perceptual learning or, rather, the application of updated beliefs to unchanged perceptual contents is doomed to uncertainty. In such cases, empirical tests can determine the extent to which first-person changes align with significant neural modifications in perception (Gilbert et al., 2009).

Finally, the debate about perceptual learning intersects with the discussion about whether perception is permeable to concepts. A classic example is our tendency to attribute emotional expressions to expressively neutral faces based on contextual knowledge. Those who argue that perception is encapsulated and paradigmatically non-conceptual explain such examples in terms of inferential knowledge based on perception, while those who insist that concepts can enter and shape perceptual contents appeal to cognitive permeation (Siegel, 2012). Cognitive permeation and perceptual learning can overlap in some cases (Arstila, 2016; Ransom, 2020; Landers, 2021). However, typical examples of cognitive permeation do not meet the long-term requirement for being the result of perceptual learning: if I see someone as angry because I believe they are, this will not be a case of perceptual learning, for it is not a long-term change.

### ***3.2. Outcomes of Perceptual Learning***

For the most part, perceptual learning results in creating new perceptual units or – as some have put it – in *chunking reality* in different ways (Stokes, 2020; Jenkin, 2022). In psychological literature, different kinds of chunking are discussed. I will briefly introduce three of them and suggest that the arts offer good examples for each one.

*Differentiation* is the acquired ability to distinguish between properties that, before training, seemed indistinguishable. For example, after years of practice, a professional photographer will

immediately detect the degree of exposure of an image. A beginner, on the other hand, will simply observe the respective darkness or brightness of the same image without detecting the correct lighting.

*Unification* is the counterpart of differentiation. In unification, one comes to perceive as a single property what was previously perceived as two or more distinct properties. Let us take an example from proprioception. Before learning to perform a given movement, a dancer will have to learn its different motor components, i.e. how to move their arm, how to coordinate it with their legs, how to bend their back, how long to stand still. While at the beginning of the learning process, the dancer will execute the movements disconnected from each other and therefore feel them as if they were separated, at the end of the training the movement will appear to them as unified.

In *attentional weighting*, through practice or experience one comes to systematically pay attention to certain objects and properties and move away from others. Historians of painting who become capable of attributing paintings to their authors by looking at the works' features acquire the capacity to *automatically* allocate their attention to certain particulars while overlooking other, less relevant ones. The automaticity of this process is crucial for distinguishing it from standard attention allocation. That is, one can be told to look at certain features over others and learn to do this every time one sees a painting. Yet until this process is automatic it would not count as perceptual learning. Automaticity – it is said – *is* the product of the learning process (Stokes, 2020).

### ***3.3. Perceptual Training and Reason-Responsiveness***

Thus, I have listed the criteria for identifying a perceptual learning process and illustrated some of the possible effects according to different mechanisms for *chunking*. Now, in order to further explain the phenomenon, it remains to describe the training processes that make it possible.

It is commonly agreed that perceptual learning requires repeated exposure to perceptual stimuli. Consistent with the original Gibsonian framework, the ecological approach to perceptual learning maintains that perceptual learning is the result of *direct perception* of already rich information available in one's environment (Gibson, 1966). According to this view, one becomes increasingly better at selecting the right informational variables in order to achieve a definite goal.

Thus, perceptual learning amounts to repeated interactions with the stimuli of an informational space that does not need any cognitive or higher-level integration in order to succeed. Rather, perceptual training exposure and interaction with the environment improves one's capacity to choose an appropriate goal, to focus one's attention on the appropriate cues and adjust one's behavior to the constraints imposed by the environment (Raja, 2019).

Notably, ecological psychology is not the sole framework that allows for perceptual learning that does not require any cognitive integration. One example of perceptual learning that is explained entirely by perceptual exposure (although combined with emotional reaction) is the so-called “mere exposure effect”, i.e. the phenomenon that repeated previous exposure to a stimulus makes the appreciation of that stimulus more likely (Zajonc, 1968). Moreover, studies on the classic mere exposure effect have shown that heightened liking also results from exposure to stimuli that, although novel, comply with some internalized system of rules (Gordon & Holyoak, 1983).

However, it has been noticed that mere exposure is insufficient to improve perceptual capacities in a significant way, that is, in a way that makes one an *expert* perceiver. Perceptual “expert performance” (Stokes, 2020) is usually taken to require conceptual categorization.

Birdwatchers, for instance, become experts in recognizing birds if they receive systematic feedback about the categories the detected animals belong to (Tanaka & Taylor, 1991). Radiologists, who are trained in diagnostics, perform better than x-ray technologists in perceiving the relevant saliences in radiographic images, although the latter are more exposed to the images (Nodine et al., 1999). Chess masters can reconstruct chessboards after viewing them for 5 seconds thanks to their capacity to unitize the pieces based on the moves they afford, that is, the conceptual rules of the game (Jenkin, 2022).

Perceptual learning that results in perceptual expertise is accordingly the outcome of a combination of repeated and systematic exposure to stimuli accompanied by conceptual categorization which functions as feedback and as a guide for further perceptual experiences. Thus, when perceptual learning occurs, the training process leading to automatic attentional unification, differentiation, or attentional weighting requires the intervention of concepts and beliefs that, paradigmatically, respond to reasons.

Conceptual categorization of perceptual stimuli is admittedly an intricate issue. Concepts are not univocal, and neither is the way in which they interact with perceptual stimuli when we perform categorization tasks. This is why I can only gesture towards a proposal by assuming that concepts are the building blocks of beliefs. Thus, intuitively, part of what it is to categorize is to make perceptual material available for belief grounding. And, as said, beliefs paradigmatically respond to reasons.

According to philosopher of mind Zoe Jenkin “A mental state can be based on epistemic reasons only if it is formed or sustained by a mechanism that is responsive to the agent’s epistemic reasons” (Jenkin, 2022, p. 15). Therefore, perceptual mechanisms can be seen as responsive to reasons through perceptual learning, that is, thanks to the fact that perceptual learning is prompted by and sustained by reasons. For example, she claims that “as chess players learn to perceive chunks their visual systems store information in response to reasons provided by their experiences of chess boards and their beliefs about available moves.” (Jenkin, 2022, p. 16).

Even if it is far from uncontroversial, this proposal invites us to think that, although perceptual experiences are not paradigmatically subject to rational evaluation, at least some of them resulting from perceptual learning can be reason-responsive and therefore rationally evaluated.

#### **4. Perceptual Learning, Expertise, and Criticism**

To conclude, I shall point out how the nature of perceptual learning I have just outlined can help shed light on two interconnected aspects of the problem of aesthetic criticism introduced at the beginning.

First, insofar as aesthetic criticism is a practice that requires certain experience, the phenomenon of perceptual learning can clarify the notion of *expertise*, very often invoked by theories of aesthetic judgement. According to the Humean *topos*, what can converge the aesthetic taste of the non-expert with that of the ideal critic is the practice acquired in the evaluation and comparison of aesthetic objects: “Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character” (Hume, 1874, p. 278).



What this overview suggests is that this process of improvement, perfecting, and clearness can be explained by appealing to the phenomenon of perceptual learning as a kind of practice that requires exposure coupled with conceptual feedback. In essence, the ability to make aesthetic judgements about works of art involves processes of exposure to features of artworks accompanied by conceptual categorization. Achieving this expert aesthetic point of view would then be the result of perceptual learning processes that makes one chunk and organize the contents of one's experiences accordingly. This assertion, which may seem trivial when examining actual educational strategies in the field of art, could find a rigorous theoretical formulation as well as be backed by empirical confirmation.

Second, the reconfiguration of perception as something that is complex, changes over time, and can be supported by reasoning helps reconcile the clash between the approaches to criticism we began with. Critical discussions in aesthetics can actually follow the rational rules of argumentation starting from non-evaluative perceptual premises (the faintly jerky head movements) and getting to evaluative perceptual conclusions (the amazing performance), and be *justified* in such conclusions, as long as they are the upshot of a perceptual learning process that incorporates reasons. This suggests that the ability to appreciate and critique artworks can be taught and learned, emphasizing the importance of education and exposure in developing aesthetic sensibilities. Accepting the idea that perceptual capacities can be improved by conceptual instructions allows us to carve out some minimal space for rationality within perceptual experiences. An experienced perceiver contributing to the aesthetic discourse may be more or less *justified* in perceptually detecting certain characteristics. Such a detection process would, in other words, comply more or less with the epistemic reasons of the subject (or of their community) and, as such, be assessable as more or less "correct". As a corollary and a possible reply to Hopkins' worry, accepting this thesis is tantamount to accepting that certain perceivable properties – those whose recognition is the result of a perceptual learning process sustained by concepts – may actually figure as the conclusion of a critical argument.

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## *The Role of Arguing in Aesthetic Appreciation*

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I examine Peter Kivy's *De Gustibus* (2015) and his inquiry on the *raison d'être* for our arguing about taste. In the face of full-blooded subjectivism and widespread skepticism about the point and persistence of taste disagreements, Kivy confronts the inconsistency of ruling objectivity out of matters about taste and still engaging in aesthetic arguments. According to him, the reason why we engage in aesthetic disputes is, in analogy with factual matters, to persuade others that one's belief is true and theirs is false. I analyze whether Kivy's solution grasps the appreciative dimension of our arguing and present three main objections to his approach, with emphasis on two key aspects of aesthetic disagreements, namely: the priority of our reasons above others and the difficulty of changing one's appreciation. I thus suggest that a closer look at the practice of art criticism may shed some light on the motivations for arguing about taste, as well as on the practice of giving (and asking) for reasons for appreciation.

### **1. Introduction**

Peter Kivy's last book, *De Gustibus: Arguing About Taste and Why We Do It* (2015), covers the phenomenology and metaphysics of the quintessential philosophical issue of our arguing about

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taste. Though primarily focused on the “disputative phenomenology” of aesthetic discourse – that is, on the reason why we argue about taste – the book also examines the virtues of a realist ontology in aesthetics. Against skepticism about aesthetic objectivism, held by the layman as much as by philosophers, Kivy lays out the following question: if matters of taste are subjective and lack objective criteria by which our aesthetic arguments might be settled, why do we engage in such conversations at all? In other words, is our arguing about taste rational? *De Gustibus*’ main goal is therefore to answer why we argue about taste and whether it is a proper and fruitful debate. Kivy’s starting point is that people interested in art – or in any aesthetic matter – argue about taste because they are aiming to persuade others about the truth and falsity of each other’s beliefs.

After examining Kivy’s solution to the issue of the rationality of our arguing [section 2], I present three objections to his phenomenological approach to aesthetic arguments [section 3]. Though much needed when it comes to the study of disagreements about taste predicates, I claim that the particular way in which he appeals to objectivity brings about important difficulties in our understanding of our conversations about taste. Namely, the comparison between empirical and aesthetic matters evades rather than addresses our concerns about the specificities of taste disagreements. The result, therefore, is an incomplete picture of the expressive dynamics of aesthetic arguments, incapable of accounting for our legitimate resistance to others’ reasons and the difficulty of changing our aesthetic experiences. In turn, I endorse Salvador Rubio’s aspectualism [section 4] not only as a better approach to the subject matter, but also as a more comprehensive understanding of changes in appreciation and developments of taste.

## 2. Kivy’s Solution to Our Arguing about Taste

As mentioned above, Kivy starts by identifying the subject to which the “why” question on aesthetic arguments is addressed: “of course, if one has no particular interest in the arts [...] then one is likely to give ‘the aesthetic shrug’ and eschew argument.” (Kivy, 2015, p. 49). And he suggests “it is, needless to say, people who are interested in aesthetic matters that display aesthetic argument behavior; and of such there are and have been multitudes.” (*ibid.*). Casting doubt on the *raison d’être* of such “multitudinous” practice, skepticism about aesthetic objectivity is widespread

among the layman as well as philosophers, among which moral theorists appear to stand out.<sup>2</sup> With regards to the former group, Kivy observes a general sympathy towards the old saw *De gustibus non disputandum est*, which also has its English and French analogues: “there is no disputing about taste” and “à chacun son goût” (that is, “to each his or her own taste”). People sometimes use it as a reason to avoid an aesthetic argument, whereas others adopt this behavior after a long, deep and hard-settling disagreement. Its use rests on an appeal to subjectivity and autonomy and, more so, on the assumption that the expectation of agreement and the hope of objective criteria is out of place when it comes to matters of taste. This inclination is said by Nick Zangwill “to constitute part of the intellectual air in certain parts of the humanities.” (Zangwill, 2021, p. 7).

The latter, on the other hand, rejects aesthetic objectivism and opts for relativism or subjectivism based on the long-alleged contrast between empirical and aesthetic matters, but also on assumed differences between aesthetic and moral values. Accordingly, disputes about taste are often considered entirely pointless, fruitless, or even irrational. For instance, moral realist Russ Shafer-Landau compares our arguing about taste with “entering an intractable debate about whether red or orange was really the most beautiful color.” (Kivy, 2015, p. 46). On these occasions, “the point and persistence of moral disagreements” (*ibid.*) is defended by moral philosophers at the expense of a characterization of aesthetic arguments as hard to settle and irrational. Whereas moral disagreements are compared to factual ones, taste disagreements less often enjoy that status. And even though both moral and aesthetic judgements are value judgements, the latter are frequently characterized as a matter of personal preference, rather than a normative endeavor.

Kivy therefore denies a view of matters of taste as, in Zangwill’s terms, “individually” or “socially” relative, since it turns aesthetic arguments into fruitless, pointless conversations.<sup>3</sup> Were full-blooded subjectivism true, it would be hard to make sense of our arguing about taste. Without no criteria beyond each person’s own subjectivity, the rationality of aesthetic arguments is at risk, as well as a strong sense of the notion of disagreement when it comes to taste. *De Gustibus*,

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<sup>2</sup> Aesthetic relativism, as pointed out by Dominic McIver Lopes (2017), is also highly popular among philosophers of language. Much of the discussion around predicates of taste and disagreement appear to take the following structure of dialogue as a reference: A: “This [chili] is tasty”; B: “No, it isn’t!”. See Barker (2013); Bordonaba Plou (2020); Egan (2010); and Schafer (2010). For a critical commentary of the use of these expressions as paradigmatic cases of deep, aesthetic disagreements, see Lopes (2017) and Kivy (2015).

<sup>3</sup> See Zangwill (2021, p. 7).

to the contrary, replies to aesthetic skepticism by rejecting the alleged contrast between matters of taste and matters of fact as the rational grounds for our arguing about taste. Objectivity, therefore, holds up as the most direct way to make philosophical sense of our arguing about taste and the expectation of coming to an agreement.<sup>4</sup> Mainly, Kivy's vindication is based on the denial of the long-since alleged difference between taste disagreements and factual ones. The rationality of aesthetic disagreements, he argues, rests on an identification of matters of taste as matters of fact. The following quote illustrates this characterization: "Why are they arguing about *The Philadelphia Story*? If you asked them, I think [they], would find the question as odd as being asked why they are arguing about *any other* matter of fact." (Kivy, 2015, p. 139; my italics).

Kivy gives a two-fold argument for this comparison. First, he proposes that there are two major reasons for arguing in general: (i) "with the ultimate aim of motivating one's opponent to some specific action", or (ii) with the purpose of "convincing one's opponent that one's belief is true and his is not." (Kivy, 2015, p. 95). He rejects (i) for the same reason he denies aesthetic emotivism: since action is the conclusion of practical reasoning and "there is no relevant action, normally, at issue" (Kivy, 2015, p. 96) in aesthetic disputes, the first reason isn't appropriate to make sense of our arguing about taste. Of course, there are reasons – e.g. prudential or moral – to do some actions related to our aesthetic life, like reading music magazines to keep up with new releases or going to art exhibitions. But those would be *motivating* reasons for a certain action or experience, and "there normally seems to be no action the partaker in an aesthetic dispute would have a stake in motivating, so no reason to bring an opponent around to her attitude of aesthetic approval or disapproval." (Kivy, 2015, p. 95). The conclusion for Kivy is then that the only available explanation for engaging in aesthetic arguments must be that, as (ii) suggests, we try to persuade others that our aesthetic judgement is true and theirs is false. Second, Kivy notes that this phenomenological answer doesn't ontologically commit us to the existence of an aesthetic truth. For it does not really matter if aesthetic truth, qualities, and value are real properties of things: what

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<sup>4</sup> Not so straightforward, since there are psychological, social or prudential reasons for arguing about taste as well: for the sake of arguing, because one loves conflict, because "one likes to annoy people" (Kivy 2015, p. 95), as a channel of expressing other emotions, due to social pressure, as an *ad hominem* excuse, and so forth. In contrast, *De Gustibus* is concerned with a phenomenological explanation of our arguing about taste.

is significant is that, when judging and arguing about taste, one believes it so, at least partially, even with “low confidence”, and behaves *as if* they were.<sup>5</sup>

Kivy’s solution may be summed up in the following quote:

If aesthetic disputes, like ethical ones, are genuine disputes about matters of fact, then there seems to be good reason for one person wanting to bring another around to his aesthetic attitude. He is trying to get the other to get the facts straight, as in all disputes about how the world is. (Kivy 2015, p. 35)

The main appeal of this lies in its normative explanation of our arguing about taste: the fact that we behave as if aesthetic features were real properties of objects means that our aesthetic appreciation is guided by objective criteria by which our taste disagreements may be fruitfully settled. On the basis of this objective criteria is built the expectation of convergence. Consider the following example that Kivy uses to illustrate the sensibility and appropriateness of aesthetic arguments. “Two well-educated individuals” – but not art experts – a dentist and an accountant, argue about the Hollywood classic *The Philadelphia Story*. While “the accountant didn’t think much of the movie, the dentist did.” (Kivy, 2015, p. 137). The former felt uncomfortable with the movie’s worldview on social classes: “it ennobles the rich, by inheritance, over the ambitious, upwardly mobile middle class.” (Kivy, 2015, p. 138). The latter, “quite naturally, tries to convince his friend that the film was quite successful.” (Kivy, 2015, p. 137). Kivy claims that persuasion, “among other things”, consists in “pointing out what [he has] been calling aesthetic features, both the emergent and non-emergent ones, the presence of which in the film he thinks are what makes it a successful one: what makes it a *good movie*.” (*ibid.*). Both then try to persuade each other:

The dentist touts the very attractive features of the film, its setting, its humor, its intriguing characters and amusing plot as his *reasons for believing* that it’s a great film of its genre, while the accountant points to the moral flaws of the ‘world view’ [...] that he sees the movie as projecting, in defense of his negative judgement of its merit (Kivy, 2015, p. 139; my italics).

Aesthetic (and in this case, also moral) features of the artwork are used here as reasons not only to defend and back up their overall judgements, but also to persuade each other that one’s belief is

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<sup>5</sup> See Kivy (2015, p. 159).



true and the other's is false. The goal of our arguing, according to Kivy, depends on the ability of the dentist to persuade his friend that something is, or was, in the work, and to persuade the other of the truth of his belief. He then rejects the definition of aesthetic arguments as “non-straightforwardly factual” ones, one of the characteristics of which is an alleged absence of “smoking guns” or “pieces of evidence that could ‘settle the debate in a way that convinces all parties’.” (Bordonaba Plou, 2019, p. 170). In contrast, Kivy would defend the idea that there actually are “smoking guns” to be pointed to and persuaded about in aesthetic experience. For him, only the acceptance of such objective criteria can make sense of our arguing.

I believe that Kivy is right in his appeal to objectivity as the only way to make sense of our arguing about taste and aesthetic appreciation in general as normative practices. But *De Gustibus*' appeal to persuasion, I suggest, doesn't fully explain the dynamics of taste disagreements and the autonomy of aesthetic appreciation. In the next section, I will present three main objections to his account.

### 3. Three Objections to Kivy

My first concern with Kivy's approach has to do with the comparison of taste disagreements as empirical or theoretical ones, which overlooks relevant differences in their respective dynamics and our expectations in each domain. Kivy's equation between matters of taste and matters of fact is, in a way, quite appealing: comparing our arguing about taste to theoretical or empirical arguments, the rationality and pertinence of which is not under debate but taken for granted, simplifies our making sense of aesthetic arguments. Moreover, the comparison is correct in a sense: aesthetic judgements, just like theoretical ones, aim to (correctly) describe and apprehend the world. And it's this orientation towards the world and its objects that rationally grounds our engagement in taste disagreements and our expectations of coming to an agreement. By drawing an characterization of aesthetic disagreements as empirical, factual ones, Kivy responds to criticism about an alleged lack of objectivity in aesthetic discourse, which is set as the *De Gustibus*' main goal from the beginning. The “why” question that heads up the book title echoes the subjectivist doubts about the pointlessness of aesthetic arguments. My suspicion, nonetheless, is that not all our

philosophical concerns about the *raison d'être* for our arguing emerge from skepticism about the possibility of aesthetic objectivity. Some of them, I argue, issue from an agreed-upon contrast between theoretical and aesthetic arguments. For even though the two kinds of judgements are object-oriented (or, even truth-oriented), aesthetic and empirical arguments are not of the same nature. Namely, the former involve a kind of difficulty and resistance to others' reasonings which wouldn't be so appropriate – or at least, usual – in the latter. This contrast, denied by Kivy in his assimilation of matters of taste to matters of fact, is related to aesthetic autonomy. On this regard, Eileen John refers to Robert Hopkins' stance on the matter:

In empirical matters, when several others share a view that I do not, this can suffice to give me reason to adopt their view. But in aesthetic matters, while others' shared opposition can give me reason to be less confident about my judgment, it seems I do not have reason to adopt their view. Rather, I should 'if possible, test the issue by reexamining the disputed item' (John 2012, p. 194).

The priority of aesthetic autonomy, the legitimate resistance to others' reasons, and the difficulty of changing one's experience are, therefore, fundamental aspects of our arguing about taste. Acknowledging them, I claim, requires a phenomenological answer as well: why would someone (even multitudes!) engage aesthetic disputes if they are entitled to prioritize their own experience over others' and aren't forced to retraction in the same way that they are in straightforward factual disagreements?<sup>6</sup> The point of this objection is that, even if Kivy successfully dealt with full-blooded subjectivists and skeptics, he wouldn't account for any of the aspects above, since his view overlooks taste disagreements' deep roots in our subjective experience. Notably, his account doesn't seem to capture the familiar struggle of changing one's appreciation. Even though changes in appreciation may lead to the formation of new beliefs, changing one's mind – in this case, one's taste – involves much more than a switch of beliefs from a false to a true one, but rather different experiences. What the dentist did exceeds any mere beliefs about the amusing plot or the intrigue of the movie's characters. Plus, Kivy accounts for such change of mind by appealing to persuasion, so the explanation of the resulting evolution of someone's taste would rest on the opponent's ability

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<sup>6</sup> David Bordonaba Plou (2020) defends an asymmetry between straightforwardly and non-straightforwardly factual disagreements in terms of retraction and persistency.

to convince others, and not so much on the new, conflicting engagement that it requires from someone like the accountant to exercise of his cognitive, affective, and rational faculties.

Another problem with Kivy's approach is that reasons for believing, to which he appeals, cannot *on their own* change appreciation. This is not to deny that beliefs with aesthetic content can play an important role in appreciation, which they certainly do, but instead to reject that the resulting belief from a theoretical reason may be equated with appreciation. For instance, changes in someone's appreciation of screwball movies (say, from feeling indifference to praising them) may give rise to all sorts of beliefs about the genre's golden years, or gender stereotypes. Similarly, the acquisition of beliefs about its social, economic and political roots also may help us realise relevant features missed in our first watch, the acknowledgement of which might compel a revised outlook on the genre and a different appreciation of it as a result. Nonetheless, even such changes in appreciation cannot be explained by the formation of new, true, and justified beliefs on their own. According to Keren Gorodeisky, "a true belief about the value of the work is not a fully successful response to the critic even though it is true (and even justified). [...] Such a belief is not responsive to the critic's reasons, and to the value of the relevant work." (Gorodeisky, 2022, p. 325) Consider again *The Philadelphia Story* example: the dentist's *reasons for believing* that the movie is good are expected to persuade his friend that his belief is false. Our response to theoretical reasons – reasons for believing – is a true, justified belief. But that doesn't seem to be the appropriate response in the aesthetic domain. In other words, reason-responsiveness isn't of the same nature nor has the same "success conditions" in the aesthetic realm than it does in the theoretical one. According to Keren Gorodeisky and Eric Marcus, to take something as an aesthetic reason and to be responsive to it (*qua* aesthetic reason) is not to believe a certain proposition, "not even the proposition that the object merits a certain feeling" (Gorodeisky & Marcus, 2018, p. 117), but instead "is itself to be in a certain affective state" (*ibid.*). When the dentist touts the "very attractive features" of the movie, its setting, humor, intriguing characters and amusing plot, he doesn't only believe in a true and justified way that *The Philadelphia Story* is a wonderful movie, but also and foremost loves, praises, and expresses an appreciative attitude towards it. And for that reason, it wouldn't be a successful response from his friend to just believe that the movie has this and that virtue; instead, the dentist's expectations are that the accountant comes to *appreciate* it in

a similar way to him. The love, praise, and thrill that the dentist expresses wouldn't match up with a mere belief that the accountant acquires from recognizing its value. The expectation of convergence that pervades taste disagreements, therefore, doesn't aim for a change of belief, but a different response.

Aesthetic reasons, on the contrary, are appreciative. As Gorodeisky and Marcus claim, they are “reasons for feeling a certain way”, the role of which is at the same time to “explain why we in fact judge the object to be beautiful – which is to say, why we appreciate it – and also why one ought to so judge it” (Gorodeisky & Marcus, 2018, p. 117). Appreciative reasons not only are object-directed but also, in contrast with reasons for believing, “self-directed”: “by being conscious of what the object merits, the subject is conscious of her feeling's property.” (Gorodeisky & Marcus, 2018, p. 119) The puzzle of *The Philadelphia Story* debate isn't that the accountant doesn't believe, for instance, that the plot is amusing. (It is highly likely that, given the fact that most of his thoughts on the movie appear to be on the moral worldview portrayed, neither he believes that the plot is *not* amusing). In a sense, their disagreement would be even deeper if the accountant believed that the plot was amusing but didn't express such a feeling. Arguably, a theoretical understanding of the practice of reason-giving cannot account for nothing else than a belief as a result, which doesn't satisfy the appreciative condition of what Stanley Cavell calls “the hope of agreement” towards which aesthetic judgements aim.<sup>7</sup>

The third objection is that there isn't an appreciative reason to argue about taste in Kivy's account, since the only two major reasons offered for our arguing in general are either theoretical or practical. For him, *either* one argues for practical reasons, to motivate some specific action in our opponent, *or* one does so for theoretical reasons, to persuade someone that one's belief is true and hers is false. As Kivy examines which one accommodates our arguing about taste better, he rejects outright a practical justification: “there is no reason for me to want you to share my aesthetic attitude because there is no action of yours relevant to that attitude that I have any stake in motivating.” (Kivy, 2015, p. 33) And “that *leaves* the second alternative.” (Kivy, 2015, p. 100; my italics) Kivy opts for a theoretical justification of our arguing about taste, but he does so as the result of what Gorodeisky defines as the “either/or” assumption. She brings it up in the context of

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<sup>7</sup> See Hansen & Adams (2024).

another debate within the discipline, following the discussion on the nature of critical reasons. She observes that all sides of the debate agree that there “can only be *either* theoretical reasons (namely, those that explain what to believe or what propositions are true) *or* practical reasons (namely, those that explain what is to be done or what actions are good/required/called-for/otherwise-worth-doing).” (Gorodeisky, 2022, p. 314) I claim that a similar assumption underlies Kivy’s approach, the result of which is a theoretical solution to the subject matter that, as argued above, “falls short of the mark of the relevant success in this domain” (Gorodeisky, 2022, p. 325) and a cloudy view of the appreciation involved in our arguing about taste.

Moreover, according to Gorodeisky, “mere beliefs about the value of works don’t aptly capture what the critic [of the relevant genre] articulates in her practice.” (Gorodeisky, 2022, p. 315) What turns art critics into ideal appreciators is instead to “standardly articulate their appreciation of the work, and *guide* their audience to appreciate the work similarly.” (*ibid.*). The constraints of the “either theoretical or practical” framework in which Kivy is embedded don’t make room for a third appreciative justification of our engagement and interest in aesthetic arguments. An appreciative understanding of our arguing about taste that explicitly involves the exercise of our cognitive and affective capacities cannot be apprehended by a theoretical one, for it doesn’t leave room for the (sometimes) deep persistence of (some of) our taste disagreements, the difficulty to change one’s experience – not to mention one’s aesthetic taste or personality –, the priority of aesthetic autonomy, and the consequent resistance to others’ reasonings. All of this, I claim, doesn’t pose a problem to aesthetic objectivity itself, but just to Kivy’s theoretical account of it and the tight identification between aesthetic and empirical disagreements that he offers, which leaves unanswered some relevant issues concerning our arguing about taste.

If the objections above are correct, the success of Kivy’s proposal is at risk. And even if some of the worries here raised are not of *De Gustibus*’ concern nor the target of Kivy’s inquiries, I suggest that a more comprehensive understanding of aesthetic arguments would constitute a better option to grasp unresolved aspects of the practice. I believe that this alternative can be found in Salvador Rubio’s (2019) aspectualist approach to the matter, as well as in some analysis of the activity of art criticism.

#### 4. Not a Matter of Persuasion: Aspect-seeing and Reason-giving

In the previous section I argued that the phenomenological answer offered by Kivy has some loose ends in relation to two intrinsic aspects of our arguing about taste, namely the difficulty of changing one's mind and the tendency to resist others' reasons. Were my analysis right, Kivy's standpoint – especially his vindication of objectivity in aesthetics – wouldn't be completely rejected, but the prospects of an alternative view capable of accommodating those neglected aspects of appreciation would be better than his to grasp appreciation. I believe that such accommodation is provided by Rubio's Wittgensteinian approach to our arguing about taste and changes in appreciation. Rubio accepts Kivy's realist phenomenology, but claims that the former's approach accounts “confusingly (or insufficiently, at least) of our arguing about taste” (Rubio, 2019, p. 27). Rather than aiming for persuasion,

[w]e argue about taste because we are willing to see, and to make other people see, what an artwork, or a piece of an artwork, means or expresses. Of course, that ‘seeing’ is always related (fortunately) to the twofoldness of the aspect seeing: when I see the new aspect of the thing, I see that the thing is completely different, but at the same time I see that it is the same thing. Consequently, what I see ‘is’ always ‘in’ the thing, but at the same time it is dependent on my seeing in order to have this aspect (*ibid.*).

The twofoldness of aspect-seeing captures both our pursuit of the object's merits and the inescapable bond between this pursuit and our seeing.<sup>8</sup> Seeing an aspect once unseen is often the result of arguing and speaking about art. Changes in appreciation come along with the recognition that the newly seen aspect is “in” the thing, as an objective feature, which explains our interest in correctness and our engagement in aesthetic arguments, as well as with the realisation of the dependence of the aspect on my seeing, which completely modifies my seeing of the thing. Therefore, aspect-seeing has the internal resources to account for our resistance to others' reasons and the difficulty of changing one's appreciation *without* giving up objectivity. For the accountant

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<sup>8</sup> Gorodeisky and Marcus' Kantian account of aesthetic pleasure grasps the unity of both aspects of appreciation similarly: “aesthetic pleasure is both ‘object-directed’ and ‘self-directed’: by being conscious of what the object merits, the subject is conscious of her feeling's propriety” (Gorodeisky & Marcus, 2018, p. 119).

to see *The Philadelphia Story* under a new, different aspect and pay more attention to the aesthetic merits of the movie and less to the moral worldview, the dentist will have to do something more than persuade him: he will have to help him see. Rubio's aspectualism contrasts here with Kivy in the two following points.

Firstly, Rubio says: "I see that the seeing is a seeing, rather than just a trial to convince someone else (to make someone believe) that something is in the work." (Rubio, 2019, p. 27) Consider, for instance, a disagreement between two people on the last Justine Triet movie *Anatomy of a Fall*. One of them complains about that the film, technically exquisite and impeccably scripted, doesn't really break the audience down, in the sense that she waited for an "emotional shock" that didn't come, whereas the other likes it precisely because of that. Persuading the other of the presence of an aesthetic feature, which is the goal of our arguing about taste for Kivy, doesn't seem to be the solution here. For they both believe, truly and justified, that there is an emotional absence in the movie. The way in which Kivy understands our grasping of objective facts leaves no room for the unavoidable dependence of my seeing that comes along with aesthetic objectivity. The fact that both grasp the absence of an emotional shock doesn't mean that their grasp is phenomenologically identical, nor that the content of their beliefs is entirely the same. Trying to persuade the other that there is something in the work – in this case, an "emotional shock" that doesn't come – wouldn't end the disagreement, since the main issue here is that their respective seeings of that *something* aren't the same. This kind of disagreement is not uncommon in aesthetics, but an explanation of it in Kivy's terms, in contrast with aspectualism, comes with difficulty.

Secondly, Rubio argues that "my seeing reveals a natural link, not only to the features in the work, but to the external world around it" (Rubio, 2019, p. 27), and illustrates this idea with Jordi Llovet's strategy to help us understand the unity of *Le Nozze di Figaro*. He invites us

[...] to raise our eyes from the music and looking to the musical and dramatic building of characters [...] to understand and justify the organic unity of the music. [...] But it is also an invitation to look at the music again, remarking on the musical diversity in a new seeing now coherent with the whole artistic plan of the opera (Rubio, 2019, p. 31).

The “typical procedures” we use to argue about taste are not just pointing to the aesthetic features of a certain artwork, which for Kivy would include both emergent as well as non-emergent features, but also activities that involve seeing beyond the movie *and* returning back for a different sight of it. Let’s consider how the emphasis Kivy puts on pointing to aesthetic features as a way to form new, true beliefs fits with the activity of criticism. Regarding again *The Philadelphia Story* argument, film criticism would also point to aesthetic features of the movie, but I believe that this “pointing out” isn’t just realized by the assertion of, for instance, its bitterness, but instead by getting the audience to experience it. Compare, therefore, the pointing out of the intriguing characters and amusing plot of the movie with the first clue that the Spanish film critic and director José Luis Garci gives to the audience to appreciate the movie in general and the bitter taste of it.<sup>9</sup> Similarly to Llovet’s strategy, he invites the audience to raise their eyes away from the movie and compare *The Philadelphia Story* with the lightness of fellow screwball comedies. Apart from comparisons, famously vindicated by David Hume<sup>10</sup>, critics are mostly expected to get the audience into a position to have a certain experience. In this regard, Stanley Cavell claims that the story about Sancho Panza’s relatives discussed in Hume’s ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ “is *not* a good model for understanding the form of aesthetic judgements” (Hansen & Adams, 20124, p. 745), because

it dissociates the exercise of taste from the discipline of accounting for it: but *all* that makes the critic’s expression of taste worth more than another man’s is his ability to produce for himself the thong and key of his response; and his vindication comes not from his pointing out that it is, or was, in the barrel, but in getting us to taste it there. (*ibid.*).

Here Nat Hansen and Zed Adams identify in Cavell a phenomenological reason to argue about taste, this time in terms of appreciation: what he refers as “the discipline of accounting for” aesthetic judgements may be interpreted as “a readiness to argue for the correctness of one’s aesthetic judgements in the face of disagreement, with the aim of bringing about a shared feeling or emotion in one’s interlocutor.” (Hansen & Adams, 2024, p. 746). And they conclude: “the

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<sup>9</sup> Garci’s critical commentary of *The Philadelphia Story* belongs to a series of screen classics’ discussions for the Spanish TV programme *Cine en blanco y negro* (Telemadrid).

<sup>10</sup> See Hume (1757/1910).



vindication of the critic's judgment comes from 'getting us to taste' what he tastes in the object being judged" (*ibid.*).

Persuasion may have an expressive meaning here, in contrast with Kivy's approach: what people involved in aesthetic arguments aim for is *showing* their opponent how to appreciate a certain aspect or artwork. The resulting response from the audience to this "showing how" can be understood in terms of what Gorodeisky calls "mirroring" what the critic has done:

Critics neither rationally support the audience's appreciation of the relevant work independently of the audience's own appreciation of these reasons, nor communicate premises on the basis of which the audience is to infer a conclusion. Instead, by articulating their own rationally supported appreciative experiences of works, critics offer themselves as our appreciative mirrors (Gorodeisky, 2022, p. 327-8).

Aiming or, in Cavell's terms, 'hoping' for agreement would not be then a matter of persuasion (to adopt a true and justified belief), but of getting others to see things differently, either by means of expression (of approval or disapproval) of how it looks to get things right, or by giving reasons.<sup>11</sup> The consideration of the latter I will hopefully get to examine elsewhere. But for the time being I believe that the practice of giving aesthetic reasons, far from being the premise by which one can infer aesthetic judgements as conclusions, is not to be "dissociated" – as pointed out by Cavell's quote – from the activity of judging itself. Further inquiry into the rational dimension of aesthetic judgements, understood by Fabian Dorsch (2013) in inferential terms, will test the viability and appropriateness of a non-inferentialist account of reasoning in aesthetics.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper I've argued that the approach to the issue of aesthetic arguments outlined by Peter Kivy is partially incorrect. Even though his appeal to objectivity is successful on the rejection of full-blooded subjectivism and skepticism about our arguing about taste, the comparison between factual (or theoretical) and aesthetic domains that he puts forth is misleading, as well as his picture

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<sup>11</sup> See Hansen & Adams (2024).

of persuasion as our motivating reason. On the one hand, his approach faces major difficulties in accounting for the resistance to other's reasonings, the priority to our experience above others', and the struggle to change one's appreciation. This difficulty, nonetheless, doesn't issue from appealing to objectivity in aesthetics, but from Kivy's characterization of aesthetic arguments as factual, empirical ones. On the other hand, the theoretical justification of aesthetic arguments suggested in *De Gustibus* doesn't apprehend their appreciative dimension: what appreciators do when judging is different from believing certain (sets of) propositions, even if those beliefs are true and justified and have aesthetic content. I've claimed, in turn, that Rubio's aspectualism gives a better explanation of our arguing about taste, taste developments, and changes in appreciation. The activity of art criticism, on this regard, hints at the unity of our judging and accounting for and justifying it: the reason behind our arguing is, against Kivy, not a matter of persuasion, but instead a "willingness" to see and "getting" others there as well.

## Acknowledgements

21838/FPI/22. Fundación Séneca. Región de Murcia (Spain).

The research for this project was supported by the project "The Rationality of Taste. Aesthetic Appreciation and Deliberation" (PID2023-149237NB-I00) funded by the Spanish National Investigation Agency – AEI.

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## *Ecological Imagination: From Kant to a Complex World*

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I develop the notion of ‘ecological imagination’ based on a reading of Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Firstly, my aim is to show how the set of philosophical issues encompassed by this notion, which I define as the capacity to create images that ‘make sense’ of a complex or ecological world, finds an important historical antecedent in the epistemological reflections of Kant’s third Critique. In my reading, this text marks the emergence of a post-mechanistic conception of nature, one that is inevitably bound to an imaginative pursuit of ‘sense’. The transcendental problem of making “an interconnected experience” of the world despite its “infinite multiplicity of empirical laws” finds in Kant an aesthetic-epistemological solution. This solution, as Emilio Garroni ties it to the concept of “*sensus communis*”, emerges particularly in the third Critique with the transcendental discovery of an “imaginative freedom” not yet conceived in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Subsequently, following a reference to Goethean developments of these reflections, I turn to the contemporary ecological crisis as a “crisis of the imagination” (Ghosh). Here, I seek to draw on conceptual tools derived from the reading of Kant’s text to engage with the idea of ‘complexity’ – notably the complex interrelatedness of living systems that underpin an ecological conception of the world. I aim to show that an epistemology of complexity refers to a transformative interaction between a ‘sense-making’ observer and a ‘formative’

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or ‘organized’ system. A complex ‘nature’ can thus be approached only through an original synthesis of the aesthetic and the epistemic: a complex system, such as an organism or an ecosystem, is knowable only as far as it ‘makes sense’. Ecological imagination is thus understood as a cognitive disposition that nurtures the dialectic between this subjective striving for sense and the empirical manifestations of forms or principles of organizations within the living world.

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I will present some ideas from my current research on the notion of ‘ecological imagination’. The issues on which I will focus are the following: why does the present state of global and epochal danger call us to develop not only new concepts but also, and maybe primarily, new *images* of what until now we have been calling ‘nature’? And how does the idea of ‘complexity’ play a key role in shaping new ways of imagining the ecological world? As I will define it, the problem of ‘ecological imagination’ is centered on the necessity of *making sense of a complex world*.

The arguments I will develop in this paper are part of my doctoral thesis project. There, I suggest that, in the thought of philosophers and scientists such as Kant, Goethe, Novalis, A. von Humboldt and others, scientific-epistemological reflection on living nature is fundamentally linked to an aesthetic reflection, with a pivotal role given to the faculty of imagination.<sup>2</sup> It is in this connection between aesthetics and naturalism, image and biological knowledge, form and lifeworld that I find the essential philosophical insights for the elaboration of what I call ‘ecological imagination’. It could be said, then, that the problem of ecological imagination, as I address it, is originally Kantian and Romantic. However, the issues I turn to in my research – living complexity theory, socio-ecological crises, and so on – are thoroughly contemporary. Therefore, my use of those non-contemporary philosophical sources is not at all historical-philosophical, as evidenced by my use of terms such as ‘complexity’, ‘chaos’, and ‘ecology’ in their distinctly contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> In developing this interpretation, the works of contemporary scholars such as L. Dassow Walls (2009), C. Malabou (2016), E. Millán Brusslan (2019), J. Steigerwald (2019) and D. Nassar (2022) have been essential along with others, some of whom will be referenced later in the text.

senses. The reference to late 18th- and early 19th-century thinkers is based on the belief that, during this historical period, an inquiry developed into the conditions for knowing the world of phenomena – particularly those characterizing the living world – conceived in its indeterminate variety, universal interconnectedness and irreducibility to simple mechanical laws.<sup>3</sup> Two fundamental approaches emerge in response to this critical encounter with a nature that is in many respects ‘post-Newtonian’ and ‘post-Cartesian’: the necessary turn to an *aesthetic-epistemological perspective*; and the revival of an almost Renaissance or early-modern necessity (albeit now filtered through a persistent trust in the potential of science, or properly modern ‘reason’) to identify *principles of organization and formativity* entirely within materiality. It is in the recapitulation of these reflections – still fundamentally original, unparalleled and in many respects still not fully understood (though certainly not inconsequential) – that I believe it is both possible and essential to develop an inquiry into the set of aesthetic, epistemological and political issues I refer to as ecological imagination.

Of course, the ambition of this paper is far more modest than the scope outlined above. Here, I will focus primarily on Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which I see as the mature expression of a discourse on the living world that highlights the central epistemic role of imagination and, *ante litteram*, establishes the conditions for thinking about a nature that is indeterminate in its variety and universally interconnected. From there, I will extract some foundational philosophical tools to move into a discussion of contemporary issues.

## 2. Kant: imaginatively confronting ecological complexity

### 2.1. An ‘interconnected experience’ of a complex nature

In the published Introduction to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant acknowledged the necessity of a “task” for the knowing subject that the critical project had not yet clarified: “the task of making an *interconnected experience* out of given perceptions of a nature that in the worst case

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<sup>3</sup> However, these issues can certainly be traced back to mid-18th-century reflections, as demonstrated by Reill (2005).

contains *an infinite multiplicity of empirical laws*” (Kant, 2000, p. 71, my italics). When attempting to develop a conceptual understanding of a phenomenon (whether physical, chemical or otherwise), the subject must proceed with the conviction that the manifestation of that particular phenomenon *fits within* a ‘nature’ conceived as a system of empirical laws. This implies that the knowledge of the phenomenon is coherent and continuous with other knowledges and forms of knowledge, and that the laws governing the phenomenon are not eccentric, occasional, or impermanent, but rather integrated into a universal system of genera and species, causes and effects, continuity and stability, and so on. In other words, to navigate the world of phenomena – amidst the particular laws, processes and entities, which are potentially infinite and may resist being unified into a comprehensive view that resolves their multiplicity – the subject must rely, in some way, on *the possible interconnectedness of this astonishing variety*. This requires a transcendental grounding, a set of *a priori* conditions that support the subject’s ‘trust’ in the systemic composition of nature.

The *Critique of Pure Reason* did not provide the subject with sufficient reassurance to tackle this ‘task’. There, the understanding was capable of imposing *a priori* laws *only* on nature *in general* (*formaliter spectata*). Lacking intellectual intuition and clairvoyance, the subject is obviously incapable of establishing *a priori* the *empirical* laws that constitute nature in its phenomenal particularity. These laws must instead be obtained through empirical investigation, and are thus established *a posteriori*.<sup>4</sup> However, to make an “interconnected experience” means being able to encounter “a certain order of nature” *in the world of phenomena itself*, in the actual experience of the empirical world, and thus not only at the ‘formal’ level of the pure concepts of the understanding. Order is no longer sought exclusively within the *a priori* categorial system that sets the general conditions of the experience of nature. Here, the order must be found *by* the experience *within* the particular experience of particular phenomena. What is meant by ‘order’ is a principle of conformity that unifies, for the purpose of knowledge, the immense variety of forms, processes, and facets through which the world manifests itself. Without this “guideline for an experience of [nature] in all its multiplicity”, *chaos* would reign, that is, the fragmentary dis-order of phenomena. It would be impossible to grasp the subordination of specific forms to generic ones,

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<sup>4</sup> “Particular laws, because they concern empirically determined appearances, *cannot be completely derived* from the categories, although they all stand under them. Experience must be added in order to come to know particular laws *at all*” (Kant, 1998, p. 264)



the connection of different processes to similar principles, to ‘trust’ the preservation (or the least sudden transformation) of the world into a state similar to the one just observed, and so on. Here, in my words, Kant’s critical philosophy acknowledges the essential *complexity* of a nature that he recognizes as capable of manifesting “in infinitely many ways” (Kant, 2000, p. 70).

Natural complexity thus presents the knowing subject with the task of discerning orders, forms, structures, and patterns within it, *despite* the seemingly ‘chaotic’ appearance of this boundless diversity of phenomena. As Rachel Zuckert argues, the central problem around which the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* revolves – and which may signify the fundamental link between the first and second parts of this work – is the “representation of objects as complex unities (i.e. unities of the manifold)” (Zuckert, 2003, p. 70), that is, the problem of “order among diversity, and of the subjective ability to discern such order” (p. 5). Consequently, again, this raises the question of what *transcendental principle* ensures that the subject does not get lost in complexity, losing balance on the threshold of chaos.

Kant finds this principle in the *purposiveness of nature*, which, however, should not be understood as an objective or conceptually understandable purposiveness, but rather as a “subjective principle (maxim)” that drives experience ‘from within’, so to speak, like a sense of ‘hope’. After all, to conceptually hypostatize an absolute Order or Purpose in itself (let alone a rationalist ‘pre-established harmony’) within the world of phenomena – without it being in any way directly experientially accessible – would constitute a metaphysical move that violates the most fundamental premises of critical philosophy. The possibility of encountering order and form in nature can only appear contingent on our understanding, “as if it were a happy accident which happened to favor our aim” (Kant, 2000, p. 71). Kant’s transcendental discourse here takes on an unusual tone: at the level of the conditions for the possibility of understanding nature, the complex yet “systematic unity among merely empirical laws” presents itself to the subject *as if* it ‘favors’ or ‘chooses’ them – not conceptually, but through the arousal of a “feeling of pleasure” (p. 73). It is within the “intrinsic contingency” (p. 77) of this pleasure, delight, relief, or admiration (all terms used by Kant) that the attribution of purposiveness to an otherwise chaotic nature is justified. The transcendental guideline for orienting oneself within an infinitely varied and complex nature thus takes on a fundamentally *aesthetic character*. The conceptually impossible unity of a protean world

can only be found at the level of aesthetic representation, and thus in a feeling of pleasure, which – by “mak[ing] us attentive to the purposiveness of nature” (p. 74) – serves as an aesthetic ‘anticipation’ of nature’s knowability.

Thus, Kant’s third Critique asks: what *ought we to feel* in order to have the possibility to experience an infinitely varied and intricate nature? And the answer is: we ought to feel that our understanding can move across the world *as if* the world is ‘welcoming’ toward us, *as if* it ‘conforms’ to our cognitive capacities.<sup>5</sup> The “agreement of nature with our faculty of cognition” takes on an aesthetic tone: it is something that is ultimately *felt*: “If we succeed in this accord of [the empirical laws of nature] for our faculty of cognition, which we regard as merely contingent [that is, not ‘objectively’ necessary], pleasure will be felt” (p. 74).

## 2.2. *Making sense of nature*

Now, Italian philosopher Emilio Garroni highlights how Kant associates this feeling of subject-world conformity to another notion: the one of ‘sense’.<sup>6</sup> Garroni defines ‘sense’ – as opposed to ‘meaning’ or ‘signification’ – as “the feeling of being-in-the-experience, that it *makes sense* to have experiences”; the feeling, in other words, that “we are at home in our experience” (Garroni, 1992, pp. 221-222).<sup>7</sup> In order to have the possibility to know the world or also to just live in it, we ought to be able to *make sense* of it, that is, to *feel* an unconceptualizable *conformity* of the world –

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<sup>5</sup> Juliet Floyd discusses a “*mutual* relationship of ‘purposiveness’ between the structures of our faculties of cognition and the structure of nature” (Floyd 1998, p. 218). See also Hughes (2007).

<sup>6</sup> “In our knowledge, and as a precondition for its actual possibility, there exists an irreducibly aesthetic ‘something’, a formal and subjective choice that cannot itself be traced back to intellectual principles. Something that, *in itself*, neither presupposes nor produces concepts, yet it remains ‘advantageous’ for the cognitive faculties. This ‘something’ is a principle [...], but a principle we are aesthetically, not logically, aware of (we are not aware of the principle as such, but rather of its ‘effect’). It functions more as an ‘ideal’ rule (an ‘idea’) whose only representatives are singular feelings, which – singular but not always individual – can be referred to as ‘common feeling’. This *Gemeinsinn* [common sense/common feeling] is something we must postulate for actual knowledge to be possible, even though it neither immediately rests upon nor produces knowledge. It is linked to knowledge as an indispensable condition, yet remains independent from knowledge itself” (Garroni 1998, p. 88, my translation).

<sup>7</sup> “Sense-feeling’, of course, but at the same time ‘sense’ as the indeterminate condition of meaning, of the meaningfulness of experience, of language and of the significance of concepts and words” (Garroni 1992, pp. 196-197, my translation). See also Velotti (2023).

regardless of how ‘complex’ it may be – to our transcendental equipment.<sup>8</sup> The reference, of course, is to the *Gemeinsinn* or *sensus communis*, which for Kant signifies – in continuity with what I have already outlined – a ‘subjective principle’ that expresses, not through concepts but rather through a sense of purposiveness, a feeling that something somehow normatively *ought to be* in a certain way (Ginsborg, 2001). Kants understand the *sensus communis (aestheticus)* as a cognitive “disposition” towards the world based on a particular “proportion” of the cognitive faculties (pp. 122-123, 173-176). This proportion is one of *imaginative freedom* – yet a freedom always bound to intellectual lawfulness.

While it remains true, as in the *Critique of Pure Reason*,<sup>9</sup> that every imaginative synthesis must be oriented toward intellectual knowledge – and thus even the most radical imaginative creativity, at least in the case of a sound mind, will never be delirious or rule-breaking but will always be bound to the transcendental ‘production’ – it is equally true that, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, imagination is granted the (still pre- or pro-epistemic) ability to “schematize without a concept” (p. 167). In the first Critique, what imagination ‘produces’ is a schema, which is “the representation of a general procedure of the imagination for providing a concept with its image” (Kant 1998, p. 273). To recognize the imagination’s newly acknowledged ‘freedom’ in its ability to “schematize without a concept” means thus granting it the capacity to *create images of sense that are not anchored to specific conceptual determinations*<sup>10</sup>: representations of indeterminate conformity, imbued with feelings; “originary disclosures” that create fields of affinity between the subject and the world by affectively “enlivening” in the former a sense of familiarity with the latter (La Rocca, 2003, p. 245-266).

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<sup>8</sup> A reading in continuity with that of Garroni – also focused, though in a different manner, on the notion of ‘sense’ – is the one of Eric Weil, who writes: “It is the fact of sense, of perception, even of the creation of sense, that is at the heart of Kantian thought”. (Weil, 1970, p. 73, my translation). See also Hughes (2006, p. 568), when she writes: “Kant’s aesthetics seeks to uncover something that is all too easily missed, namely that we stand in relation to empirical nature only in so far as we are capable of presupposing that, at least in principle, it will make sense to us”.

<sup>9</sup> For an agile overview of the role of the faculty of imagination in the first Critique, see Ferrarin (1995).

<sup>10</sup> For an interpretation that emphasizes the distinctly ‘creative’ nature of this imagination, see Kneller (2007).

### 2.3. *The human's strive for sense and nature's formative power*

In order to ‘make sense’ of nature, the subject mobilizes imagination.<sup>11</sup> In other words, sense is an image that orients us in the world, or an imaginative disposition that is the affective and representational source of all possible schemes of conceptual knowledge. Now, in the second part of the third Critique, a subjective principle such ‘sense’ is made necessary for a scientific understanding of living nature that goes beyond a merely mechanistic view. What we called, after Garroni, sense, that is an aesthetic-imaginative principle, gains a structural – even though not constitutive, but merely regulative – naturalistic value: notably, it gains the role of a “guideline for the observation” (Kant, 2000, p. 248). The empirical evidence of order and organization in nature leads to the analogically derived maxim that “everything in the world is good for something, [...] nothing in it is in vain; and by means of the example that nature gives in its organic products, one is justified, indeed called upon *to expect* nothing in nature and its laws but what is purposive in the whole” (p. 250, my italics). This purely subjective and *still* universally necessary ‘expectation’, this both sensitive and transcendental ‘trust’ in the purposiveness of nature, that is, in the idea that even this impossibly complex and multifaceted empirical world ‘makes sense’, has a properly aesthetic-imaginative character. The observation of complex and singular physical phenomena – not to mention the teleologies and purposiveness that seem to characterize the phenomena of the living world – induces in the subject a distinctly aesthetic sense of “admiration”, occasioned by the sense that there is “something lying beyond those sensible representations” (p. 238; cfr. p. 74). This ‘something’ does not stem from an uncomfortable metaphysical speculation about a platonically supersensible idea or a third rational entity. Rather, this ‘something’ is much simpler and more ‘critical’: it is an epistemically necessary and aesthetically inflected principle of synthesis or unity, serving solely *to totalize the multiplicity of real phenomena “beyond” their mere sum*. This is what Kant, in a striking phrase (though certainly not coined with citation in mind), refers to as the principle of the “advantageousness of one thing for another” (p. 241). The surprising fact is that,

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<sup>11</sup> Through a different approach, Fiona Hughes reaches a similar interpretation of Kantian imagination when she asserts: “Synthesis, thus, is the subjective capacity through which we presuppose that mind and nature are in harmony” (Hughes, 1998, p. 190).

within this web of ‘things’, within this ecological interplay of advantage and conformity that seems to constitute the world, also the knowing human subject *ought to* be included, as we shall see shortly.

This aesthetic or qualitative epistemology of living nature – which, on an analogical-affective ground, declares the objectivity<sup>12</sup> of a principle of ‘advantageousness of one thing for another’ – preaches the transcendental ability to spontaneously produce and trust an image of nature as manifesting *a tendency toward order or form*, or what Kant, after Blumenbach, calls a “formative power” (p. 246). I suggest that this *formative power* can be thought of as the objective correlative of the subjective *strive for sense*: while confronting the complexity of nature, the ‘task’ of acknowledging a *system of experience* and/as a *system of nature* cannot but project this systematicity through a transcendental mirroring between an ‘internal’ sense of purposiveness and an ‘external’ observation of order.<sup>13</sup>

#### ***2.4. Kant, Goethe, and the (imaginative) premises for an ecological view of the world***

It is thus possible to argue that the challenging dialectic in Kant’s third Critique between *an imagination free to produce schemas beyond conceptual constraints* and *a complex, living nature shaped by non-mechanical formative forces* starts to characterize what we might call an ecological view of the world.

Scientists named ‘ecology’ the idea that the world is not formless, atomistic or linearly mechanistic (Odum, 1963; Bateson, 1979). We can define ecology as the investigation of forms or structures that constitute complex, organicist, apparently teleological and often non-linear relational patterns among different individuals, species, environments, and so on. Ecology is the

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<sup>12</sup> As is well known, in the third Critique this objectivity takes on an explicitly regulative character. However, the organicist reflections in the *Opus Postumum*, as Mathieu (1989) explains, suggest a degree of dissatisfaction with this solution and a perhaps post-critical (though ultimately incomplete) attempt to grant ‘natural ends’ a constitutive status.

<sup>13</sup> Although it is well known that establishing such *traits d’union* between the first and second parts of the third Critique is made challenging by Kant’s careful phrasing, we may perhaps identify in the two Introductions to the work the most favorable textual space for interpretative experimentation in this direction.

science that emerges from the idea that *form and organization actually exist* and shape reality, beyond mechanistic and reductionist causal chains. Using a morphological lexicon, we can say that an ecosystem, such as a forest, for instance, is a complex stage of affective and expressive relationships among all the organized and organizing ‘forms’ that compose it – including the life forms that inhabit it, the chemical configurations of the environment, the morphology of the terrain, the form of life of the proximate human communities, and so forth.

It might be said that Kant contributed to establishing the critical premises for conceiving such an eco-morphological conception of nature. The world is neither pure chaos nor a mere mechanistic universe, as we *ought to* be able to experience organization. Nature ought to make sense; it ought to manifest a systematic configuration that facilitates the observer’s necessity to find forms within it. In nature, *we expect* to find principles of recursive agreement between the whole and its parts, harmonization between distant elements and contexts, a tendency towards order and organized development, and so on. In Kant, the discovery of *this* nature does not occur metaphysically, but *aesthetically*: the formative power that ‘animates’ the world and welcomes the systematizing gaze of those who observe or experience it, is not a concept but an idea, that is, *an image that guides my reason by enlivening my feeling of conformity*.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, a “formative power” determines a conception of nature as always already imaginatively/synthetically organized or *felt as making sense*. On the one hand, the subject intuits, imagines, and models the systematic organizations of things. But, on the other hand, the subject sees their own horizons of sense *re-shaped*. As claimed by Catherine Malabou (2016), the diversity of existing forms modifies the transcendental: the observation of the polymorphic patterns of reality transforms the very sensibility and imaginative disposition of the subject. Goethe, who followed and radicalized Kant’s morphological approach and ecological imagination, best accounted for this plastic or epigenetic character of the observer of an ecological reality. First, Goethe argues that,

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<sup>14</sup> The use I make here of the notion of ‘idea’ refers – without ambitions of philological rigor in textual interpretation – to the ‘aesthetic ideas’ discussed by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*. Kant defines aesthetic ideas as follows: “by an aesthetic idea, however, I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., *concept*, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible. – One readily sees that it is the counterpart (pendant) of an *idea of reason*, which is, conversely, a concept to which no *intuition* (representation of the imagination) can be adequate” (Kant, 2000, p. 192).

while confronting with complex living realities, the observer must be able to ‘visualize’ *ideas* (Goethe, 1988, p. 20, pp. 28-29, pp. 33-34). Goethe believes that ideas are visible realities, or at least have a *constitutive* character rather than a regulative one. Ideas, or images of universal conformity, do not merely serve as guidelines for observation, as in Kant’s view, but more fundamentally provide evidence of *an ontological connection implied in a visual harmony*. Let us imagine, for example, a scientist like Goethe, in the public garden of Palermo, meticulously observing every leaf of every plant, comparing all of them with each other (Goethe, 1982, p. 251-252). While he focuses his sight on a particular leaf of a particular plant, his peripheral vision can still be captured by the luxurious variety of the garden as a whole. In this visual and imaginative tension and oscillation between the singular element and the overall environment, a sufficiently detailed and prolonged comparison of numerous and diverse plants allows an *Urpflanze*, a perceptible idea of a plant, to appear before the observer’s eyes. This idea, when it suddenly and *aesthetically* appears after a careful observation of an empirical reality, restructures the very conditions of observability of the world, since what Goethe calls the observer’s ‘eyes of the mind’ now reconstruct the botanical world, the garden, in the image of the *Urpflanze*, which is an idea, *a new horizon of sense*. Accordingly, the goal of the subject that confronts themselves with natural complexity is to “form an amalgam [with the object of observation] in a rational way” (Goethe, 1988, p. 25). This rational amalgamation is a (critical) immersion in the living complexity of the world: an aesthetic-epistemological solution to the problem of working out synthetic perspectives, or images of sense, despite the infinite diversity of a complex reality. This implies, according to Goethe, that the principle of metamorphosis must first and foremost concern the observer. Nature imposes an affective and intellectual transformation on the very observer of a complex and polymorphic reality: “Every new object, clearly seen, opens up a new organ of perception in us” (p. 39).

### 3. The contemporary quest for an ecological imagination

Therefore, what I call ecological imagination – which refers to the emergence of a new, non-mechanistic and morphological conception of nature, inevitably tied with an imaginative search for

sense – was initially conceived by authors such as Kant and Goethe in the awareness of a confrontation with the two seemingly contradictory goals: on the one hand, the aim to acknowledge nature’s diversity, and, on the other, the aim to demonstrate that all elements of nature are closely related (Nassar, 2022, p. 5). Kant and Goethe – but also, in different ways, authors such as Novalis and A. von Humboldt – addressed this issue of the paradoxical coexistence of the diversity of nature and its universal relatedness through aesthetic-epistemological solutions, highlighting the role of imagination in producing a synthesis, that is, a “system of experiences” or an image that allows us to feel at home in this world despite the infinite heterogeneity of the perspectives it can be viewed from.

I will now attempt to examine in what way the ecological crisis represents the critical point at which it proves epistemologically necessary to recover and develop the originally Kantian and Goethean insights.

Amitav Ghosh (2017) famously stated that the present ecological crisis is a “crisis of the imagination”. If we consider ‘imagination’ as the faculty of a pre-epistemic ‘making sense’ of the world, we can say that our contemporary imaginative crisis is due to the fact that our modern images and imaginaries of ‘Nature’ fail to make sense of the complexity of ecological worlds. We can attribute the persistent unpreparedness of institutions to anticipate or respond to disasters such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves, to a deeply rooted inability to picture complex causal networks. These networks encompass climatic, environmental, and so-called ‘natural’ factors, as well as anthropogenic or ‘social’ factors like urbanization and carbon emission. The dualisms and linearizations that have characterized both intellectual and political practices have fueled the disastrous fantasy of a human society abstracted from the complex networks of interdependencies that make the world inhabitable. As a result, the socio-ecological dialectics cease to make sense. We don’t feel at home in this world anymore.

While acknowledging the crisis of imagination discussed by Ghosh, we must develop practices that can conceive and nurture new post-dualistic, non-simplifying images of the socio-ecological networks. A new ecological imagination requires us to perceive the interplay of *polymorphic diversity* and *universal relatedness* that appeared to Kant and his contemporaries as a paradox to address by aesthetic-epistemological means, an apparently paradoxical nexus that is



now defined by the natural and social sciences as ‘complexity’ (Prigogine, Stengers, 2018; Gell-Mann, 1994; Cilliers, 1998; Mainzer, 2007; Ladyman, Wiesner, 2020). Despite a seemingly chaotic molecular, cellular or environmental composition, complex systems such as organisms, ecosystems and societies manifest, using a Kantian expression, a formative power (Solé, Bascompte, 2006). The core of the notion of complexity is well grasped by this formulation by Marilyn Strathern: “the relation always summons entities other than itself” (1998, p. 28). Fully grasping or predicting the entire process of con-formation of an organic, societal, or ecosystemic structuration is impossible, as each attempt at understanding one aspect of the system unravels others. As already understood in the third Critique, complex morphogenetic processes imply a seemingly teleological and *ultimately inscrutable* dialectic between the part and the whole, so that paying attention to only one or some elements cannot keep track of the innumerable networks of relations in which those elements are taken, and this often results in what, to the limited eyes of a finite observer, are nonlinear and nonsensical outcomes. This establishes the centrality of the *situatedness* of the observer, and so a strict epistemological and ontological interdependence between the observer and the system (Morin 1992).

In order to understand the structure and chains of symbiotic relationships that constitute, for example, a coral reef, and in order to intervene in this ecosystem to favor its survival, we cannot expect to be able to only count on abstract know-how. Rather, the scientist and the activist must every time familiarize themselves with the *singularities* that characterize that particular reef and must do so on multiple scales: the genetic one, the geographic one, the political-economic one, and so on. The intersection of all these scales, ranging from the molecular, to the organism, up to the logics of global economic and ecological systems, do not allow them to all be linearly and hierarchically maintained in a single and simultaneous overall view (NAS, 2019; Bellwood et al., 2019).

Thus, the observer, in order to know or intervene in a complex system, must make choices about what it *makes sense* to do and understand, and what does not. They must be *sensitive* to the manifestation of the most relevant scale and dimension, *while* necessarily creating structural blind spots (Maturana, Varela, 1998, pp. 241-242). And a point arrives when – at the end of any necessary generalization and application of abstract schemes or rules – the observer, on the basis of their past

experiences, present feelings, and non-conceptualizable intuitions, must in turn be able to conceive an image of the system that renounces the pretence of an overall view and *just* behave as a synthetic whole, *just* makes intellectual and practical sense in orienting knowledge and action, despite the potentially limitless set of alternative images or perspectives that could have been produced on that system (Audouin et al., 2013).

An *epistemology* of complexity is therefore always an *imaginative sensitivity* toward complexity: a dialogue or a transformative co-affection between the observer and the system that aims at performative and situational sense-making rather than at the establishment of universal and timeless conceptualizations.

The subject, by renouncing to any pretence of totality or cosmic uniformity, must be able to make sense of a complex world through a synthesis or image that aesthetically enlivens their cognitive connection to a world that would otherwise appear hopelessly chaotic. What is generated by the nexus between image and nature, unity and diversity, feeling and system, is the possibility of a complex nature, where ‘complexity’ means *an immeasurable but imaginable proliferation of forms*, and not formless chaos.<sup>15</sup> A complex nature cannot be approached except in an original mixture of the aesthetic and the epistemic: a complex system, such as an organism or an ecosystem, can be known only in the premise of ‘sense’.

The experience of an ecological reality implies a conception of knowledge as a space of constant mutual reshaping between the subject’s eyes *and* the manifest picture of reality – as the example of the Goethean *Urpflanze* makes clear. The observer of an ecological reality should be conceived as a subject capable of critically immersing themselves in a zone of indistinction between image and reality, between feeling and knowability.

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as observed by René Thom: “Whatever is the ultimate nature of reality (assuming that this expression has meaning), it is indisputable that our universe is not chaos. We perceive beings, objects, things to which we give names. These beings or things are forms or structures endowed with a degree of stability; they take up some part of space and last for some period of time” (2018, p. 1).

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The strive for sense is an infinite and never conclusive imaginative operation, and therefore *there is always a need to rediscover, to explore the horizons of what ‘makes sense’, a need to continually produce new images* of what we want to know or deal with intellectually and pragmatically. The proposal for an aesthetic-epistemological framework that I have presented under the name of ‘ecological imagination’, points to the impossibility of separating feeling and knowledge, sense and meaning, image and concept in the encounter of complex realities such as endangered ecosystems, socio-ecological risk zones and, in general, all those risky interweavings of society and nature, all those post-dualist “metamorphic zones” (Latour, 2017) that, according to Ghosh, the modern imagination has not yet been able to represent appropriately. If complex realities require that we remain both sensitive and rational, then it is through what Kant called the ‘free play of imagination and understanding’ that we must build the barriers for the non-sense that constantly threatens to make us no longer feel at home on this Earth. Awareness of complexity opens up the way for sense-making practices – amidst the arts, sciences, political actions, etc. – that can only occur in maintaining a living oscillation between *aisthesis* and *episteme*.

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## *Taste and Art Criticism*

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ABSTRACT. This paper analyses Danto's and Carroll's approaches to art criticism. Both authors propose an objective model of criticism in which taste is set aside. For Danto, art criticism is an interpretive intermediary between the work and the public. I argue that once aesthetic qualities have been brought to the fore through interpretation, taste can still be present in the approach. For Carroll, criticism consists of evaluating works of art, conceived as artefacts defined by their purpose and judged by their success or failure in achieving that purpose. I show the limits of this account on four grounds. First, the reasons why a work is a particular kind of artefact are not the reasons why it is worthy. Second, the list of categories relevant to evaluation is endless, to the point of being a list of possible artistic evaluative predicates that allow evaluative judgment, but not types of artefact. Third, it is not clear what kind of artefacts works of art are. And fourth, positive properties in art criticism are not always standard, but very relevantly contra-standard, i.e., properties that are contrary to the definition of the category. Finally, the paper defends the idea that taste is not incorrigible or immune to reason but that its role in criticism allows for the recognition of a proper experience of art.

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<sup>1</sup> Email: fpc@um.es The research for this paper was supported by the project "The Rationality of Taste. Aesthetic appreciation and deliberation" (PID2023-149237NB-I00) funded by the Spanish National Investigation Agency - AEI).

## 1. Danto on taste and criticism

Arthur Danto's challenge to the aesthetic definition of art brought with it the denunciation of taste as the basis of art criticism. For Danto, postmodern art, Pop-Art especially, showed the limits of taste-based criticism.<sup>2</sup> He argued that works of art like Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, whose appearance does not differ from that of other commonplace things, challenged the modern philosophy and criticism of art. Taste-based criticism might have been adequate for modern art, produced under an aesthetic, perceptualist concept of art, but not for works whose value was not perceivable by the senses. Certainly, the modern philosophy of art and taste-criticism have been intertwined since Hume. The value of fine art lies in its potential to raise aesthetic pleasure among persons with a cultivated taste. The judgement about the quality of a work of art is a judgement of taste, considered to be the expression of the critic's experience of pleasure. Good critics' taste can discriminate and respond correctly to the aesthetic qualities of an artwork. On this basis, they can make a just judgment of the aesthetic value of artworks.

Against this conception, Danto believed that taste could not be the basis of art criticism. The critic does not make a judgment of taste but "an intellectual judgment of (i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation. Criticism needs nothing further" ("From Aesthetics to Art Criticism" 98) That is, it does not need taste. According to Danto, the main task of criticism is interpretation, where the critic serves as an intermediary between the work and the public, disclosing the content that turns a mere thing into an artwork. Besides, the critic also judges the means of presentation of that content. The intellectual judgment is not only about the content and its means of presentation since artworks are "embodied meaning". The relationship between both aspects is the crucial point: how the means of presentation actually present the content, that is, how they give access to the content or (pressing a bit more) how they set up the content, making it sensible.

Now, in Danto's theory, the means of presentation 'colour' the content of an artwork. Using Frege's notion of *Farbung*, Danto holds that artistic means of presentation colour the content without changing the sense and reference of the symbol. Means of presentation give artistic

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<sup>2</sup> Danto called it "response-based criticism", that is, criticism based on the critic's response to the work.



representations their colour through the excess of rhetoric, expression, and metaphor that in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* are considered as the properly artistic in artistic representations. Colour inflects the artistic symbol and explains the particular effect of an artwork on the audience. Colour is perceived and felt. The critic's judgment is about the relationship between means and content, the correctness, fitness, suitability, or originality of the means, and eventually about how they contribute to the spectator's experience.

If the interpretation of a work of art involves all this, then there seems to be room in Danto's theory for something beyond 'intellectual judgement': a certain sensitivity to the inflexion that embodiment triggers, a certain insight into how sensory properties contribute to making the content perceptible and producing an effect on the viewer.

Danto never rejected the idea of aesthetic properties of artistic objects, but noted that the aesthetic properties only emerge after interpretation. What Danto diminished as the role of taste in criticism was the ability to discriminate and respond to the sensory properties an object has as a commonplace or natural object. That is, aesthetic properties in art are not identified and do not operate independently of meaning, and not only of meaning but also of artistic theory ('the art world'). On this point, he was not far from Greenberg's theory of art criticism when he stated: "The trouble with the Milky Way, however, is that as art it is banal". (Greenberg, "Modernism with a Vengeance", CEC, 303). This implies that proper background knowledge of the art world and the right interpretation must inform taste. By acting as interpretive intermediaries, providing the clues necessary for audiences to properly grasp the meaning of works, critics enable audiences to recognise and be affected by coloured, embodied meaning.

### ***1.1. We can like everything***

Despite the above interpretation suggesting a place for taste in Danto's approach, his position on taste in criticism was always firm on the idea that "criticism needs nothing more" than intellectual judgment. He referred to taste mainly in terms of the critic's art preferences. Even if the critic's taste is the most sensitive and informed, her judgment shouldn't be based on taste. Clement Greenberg was the art critic he had in mind. In effect, Greenberg made and sanctioned judgments

that were dependent on taste, that is, the informed and sensitive response of the critic. Because Greenberg's aesthetic conception of art and artistic value was based on the modern notion of taste, his art criticism was somehow justified on the basis of his personal taste. Besides, this fell together with a philosophy of art history that led to Abstract Expressionism and, more generally, to abstraction, precisely the artistic movements he favoured. It is this image that Danto rejected more strongly. Historically, Abstract Expressionism was surpassed by Pop Art; philosophically, Danto's art theory surpassed Greenberg's modern aesthetic art theory.

The concept of taste was reduced in Danto's writings to personal preference, mainly induced by (mistaken) art theories. So, according to the new theory of art, critics should separate their taste from their criticism: "Likes and dislikes fall by the wayside" (Danto, 1998, p. 201). So, a critic could have a preference for, say, Constructivism but be capable of writing Dalí's *The persistence of memory*'s critique (1931). Moreover, the good thing about actual artistic pluralism and the overcoming of the modern philosophy of art is that, as Danto put it, "we can like everything", which means that after the artistic revolution of the 1960s, no style, tendency, or movement is forbidden on the grounds of taste. Good taste is not dictated by a particular type of art, for taste does not determine what constitutes great art. Critics and audiences do not need to endorse a particular art movement or style because taste is no longer the key to art appreciation.

Danto is right that tolerance is a virtue also in aesthetic matters and that it is alright to give a chance to the reasons of those who have a taste for the style, the author, the topic or the genre of works that we are not in principle inclined to adopt. To give these reasons a chance is to try to experience the work by going down paths our aesthetic habits would not take. We may like everything because there are no likings better than others and because it has nothing to do with art criticism.

To sum up: for Danto, taste is not required for art criticism because:

- criticism is a matter of interpretation,
- taste is just a question of personal preferences, and
- 'we may like everything'

## 2. Carroll on forgetting taste

Noël Carroll has developed a philosophy of art criticism, arguing for an objective criticism that goes beyond Danto's insights. In 'Forget Taste' he challenges Danto's theory of artworks as embodied meaning, suggesting instead that artworks are artefacts and are consequently defined by their function. Moreover, unlike Danto, Carroll's account of criticism holds that the ultimate goal of criticism is evaluation rather than interpretation. Criticism is evaluative, and interpretation is only a necessary step in objective evaluation. Criticism based on taste should be replaced by objective criticism, or purpose-driven criticism, which assesses the fulfilment of the functions proper to the concrete work of art.

Like Danto, Carroll's denunciation of taste in criticism is a form of reproving elitism and the belittlement of mass art or certain artistic genres. A taste for horror or comedy movies is as valuable as a taste for opera or ballet. In this sense, everything is allowed, and we can like everything, enjoying *The Battleship Potemkin* and *The General* equally. Comedy is not inferior to tragedy, and a taste for comedy is not inferior to a taste for tragedy. Each in their genre, both films are great works that deserve their place in the history of cinema. The philosophy of art cannot be based on the high and low culture distinction or the avant-garde and mass art distinction. We can like everything.

Critics and the public have personal taste and subjective preferences. Taste only “pertains to what individuals like. Despite some current discussions about it, I don't think it is of great philosophical interest” (Carroll, 2022, p. 2). Taste may play a role in choosing the movie we want to watch or the picture we buy for our home. But it has nothing to do with the quality of the movie or the picture. As a matter of fact, we often recognise this by taking pleasure in things and artworks that are not of good quality, even indulging in “guilty pleasures”. There is a theoretical separation to make between personal taste and art criticism. Against subjective preferences, artworks possess objective value, which is to be rationally discussed by criticism. Thus, based on the objective value of the work and the rational character of the discussion, a critic may evaluate in objective terms a work she dislikes: “... it is both logically and psychologically possible to critically evaluate

something positively that one doesn't like or take pleasure in. There is no contradiction here.” (Carroll, 2022, p. 3)

Carroll discusses taste in another sense, as the capacity of ‘quality-detection or quality recognition’. However, he thinks this is also not of interest to critical evaluation. Taste as a faculty or an inner sense may be defended as an organ for beauty, a property apprehended through pleasurable contemplation. Still, beauty or pleasure are not general objectives of art. Therefore, taste as a quality detector is of little use to art criticism.

As suggested above, taste understood as ‘quality detection or quality recognition’ might be recoverable for Danto's theory, since aesthetic properties that emerge after interpretation still play a relevant role. But Carroll argues against this. One reason is his deflationary conception of the aesthetic, where only formal and expressive properties are considered aesthetic. So, even if we consider not only beauty but aesthetic properties in general, they represent only a small part of the meaningful and valuable elements of works of art. This is evident in his distinction between movies and cinema. While in avant-garde cinema, aesthetic properties may play a greater role, in movies the importance lies elsewhere, namely in the narrative. Usually, the spectator automatically follows the story without noticing the aesthetic qualities or the way the content is presented, concentrating on the narrative. Embodiment and the aesthetic effect that embodiment might produce have no place in the general account.

### **3. Carroll on objective criticism**

Against taste-based criticism, Carroll proposes objective criticism or criticism as evaluation ‘backed up by reasons’ (Carroll, 2009), later labelled ‘purpose-driven criticism’ (Carroll, 2022). The account can be summarised as follows:

1. Artworks are artefacts defined by their purpose.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Carroll (2008, 2009). Carroll (2022) gives more weight to the authors’ intentions (the work’s ‘constitutive purpose’) and less to artistic categories.

2. The value of an artwork depends on the achievement of its purpose or the function the artefact is created to serve.
3. Art criticism is “essentially a matter of evaluation grounded in reasons” (Carroll, 2009, p. 153)
4. Reasons in criticism concern the fulfilment of the function.

According to Carroll, six operations provide the reasons for evaluation. From the simplest to the most complex, they are description, classification, contextualisation, analysis, elucidation, and interpretation. Each step is free of personal taste and entirely objective. Now, in this account 'classification' is crucial given Carroll's conception of artworks as artefacts. The placement of a work in the category of artefacts to which it belongs, and therefore the purpose it serves, is crucial. The definition of each category gives the rule by which the work is assessed: “(m)ovies are evaluated in terms of whether they succeed or fail in realizing their purposes” (Carroll, 2008, p. 221). If the film conforms to the rules, it is good. If it does not, it fails.

In what follows, I would like to point out some of the limitations of considering criticism as an evaluation of the fulfilment of a function.

### ***3.1. The reasons why a work belongs to a category are not the reasons why it is worthy***

For example, a film could be evaluated as belonging to the 'vampire story' genre. According to the rules for vampire stories, the film must contain a vampire with the right characteristics: *prima facie*, it must drink blood, have sharp teeth, live at night, and inspire fear and repulsion in the viewer.

However, the evaluation cannot merely consist of checking whether or not the movie properly accomplishes the purposes of its genre, or whether or not it follows the rules of its category. Carroll himself points out that it is not the fact that certain work falls into one category or another that makes it bad, average, or excellent. The reasons why a work belongs to a certain kind are not the reasons why it is worthy. And this is the relevant part of criticism, according to the evaluative approach.

### 3.2. *It is not clear what kind of artefacts are works of art*

Let's say there's a vampire in the film, and it's scary and repulsive. Just as there are better and worse 'dehumidifiers' (Carroll), some vampire stories are better than others. However, works of art are generally a little more complicated than dehumidifiers. There is usually more than one function a work of art is trying to fulfil. Carroll tries to account for the cases of trans-categorical works that instantiate different genres, for instance. And he argues that the rules by which the works are assessed can be combined on a case-by-case basis. For example, *Let the Right One In* is an example of a vampire story, but it is also a love story and a story of personal growth. Some artefact theories admit that an artefact is not defined by a single function. But works of art are an exceptional case of multifunctionality.

In addition, a work of art may be instituting a new category or subcategory, or inaugurating a new genre or subgenre. Criticism and theory often propose new categories for analysis and evaluation: for instance, in *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell grouped several films under the category of "Hollywood comedy of remarriage" (Cavell 1984). This could not be a constitutive purpose, as these comedies were produced long before the category was postulated.

Carroll himself admits: "...how does one find the right category? That is the million-dollar question" (2008, 199). The articulation of different categories in the work is probably more relevant than the success of each of them. Moreover, a work of art is not good or better just because it combines different categories. A vampire story is good not only because it has a scary and repulsive vampire that combines with a love story and a story of personal growth, but also because it is coherent or intriguing, the characters are psychologically interesting, it is well acted and filmed, it has great music, and so on. In other words, it is not just the category to which it belongs but all sorts of features that can give grounds for assessment. Indeed, all these factors come in degrees, and their relative weight is taken up by interpretation, contextualization, and the rest of the operations articulated by the critic in a judgment. The critic's judgment seeks to articulate the achievements and the weight of each element within the whole.

Some reasons come into play regardless of the category to which the work belongs. Certainly, criticism must be grounded on reasons, but these are not limited to genres, styles, artistic movements or other artistic categories. They can be based on very general aesthetic principles, such as unity or regional intensity, on cognitive, political, or moral principles, on philosophical considerations or historical context, etc. Reasons in art criticism belong to different levels and include all kinds of properties of the work. But then, we are already out of the argument about artefactuality.

### ***3.3. What categories are relevant for identifying a work as an artefact?***

According to Carroll's account, artistic evaluation measures achievement. The appropriate category provides a basis for the evaluation. But which categories are relevant? Carroll (2008) identifies a number of motion picture categories:

suspense, horror, structural films, melodramas, mysteries, thrillers, trance films, action films, war films, platoon films, German expressionist films, science fiction films, neo-realist films, bio-pics, comedies, mythopoetic films, art films, westerns, socialist realist films, ninja films, fantasy films, musicals, surrealistic films, Bollywood films, costume films, new talkies, fluxus films, anime, and various New Waves (add the country of your choice here...) Of course, I've barely started; I could go on for pages" (Carroll, 2008, p. 208).

Genres, styles, and artistic movements are mentioned in the paragraph. But the most successful examples of Carroll's approach are genres, characterised by their intended effect: a good tragedy should provoke fear and pity, and horror movies should arouse fear and repulsion.

Not only are there many of them, but genres or styles can also be very narrow categories in order to give rules of evaluation. Artistic purposes are not only marked just by artistic categories. Authorial intentions (constitutive purposes) may likely go beyond them. A genre may serve as a mere frame to introduce an authorial purpose that better characterises the work. This is certainly close to Carroll's intentionalism about artistic meaning and interpretation, but it does not fit into his proposal of objective criticism, which in principle seeks to avoid a general aesthetic and medium-specific definition of artworks and criteria of evaluation. In the very general sense of

‘artefact’, works of art are artefacts, i.e. intentional products of human action. But beyond this, it is not clear what kind of artefacts works of art are, and, as seen in 3.2., which artefacts are concrete works of art.<sup>4</sup> But the suggestion that criticism considers each work as a member of an artistic category, avoiding the general class of art, does not seem to be a viable solution.

The list of categories is so long and inexhaustible, as Carroll admitted, that the categories are no longer names for different kinds of artistic artefacts, but simply different predicates usually used to discuss the value of particular works. What is problematic is that reasons in criticism are limited to kinds of artefacts (basically genres and styles) or that the constitutive purposes of the works are best understood as belonging to one of these categories.

### ***3.4. Contra-standard arguments***

Since reasons can have different weights depending on the case, it can be said that reasons are particular, i.e., they can explain the success of a particular case but not necessarily of others. Moreover, the same features can become reasons for or against the quality of a work. While there is no reason why a dehumidifier should not dry out the room, there may be reasons why a vampire story is better precisely because the vampire is not so scary or repulsive, or the story is inconclusive, ambiguous or poorly filmed (for the standard).

We often welcome work that deviates from the category to which it belongs. For example, an author's style is a relevant category. You may value the work as the culmination of an author's style. But it is also possible to value the work as a deviation from the style, as a pre-stylistic or late style. Is the author not following her style or has it changed? If there is a change, is it permanent? Belonging to a genre, movement or style can be a reason for or against the value of the work. We value some films as paradigmatic of a genre or movement, but also as an evolution of the genre or as transgressive.

In this sense, it is said that there are no aesthetic principles or rules of criticism. Not that there are no reasons to support an evaluation, but that the reasons are specific to each case. Different works are good for different reasons. Moreover, the same feature can work for or against the value

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<sup>4</sup> See Terrone (2024) on works of art as experiential artefacts.



of a work. Reasons may vary their valence from case to case. A vampire story may be better because it's very scary (more than usual) or because it's not so scary; because it masters the rules of the genre, which is, let's say, paradigmatic, or because it breaks some rules.

A work of art may be better because of its standard properties or its contra-standard properties. But if they are contra-standard, then, by definition, it does not fulfil the purpose of the category, or the purpose and the category have changed. Discussions in art criticism often arise from differences in the appreciation of these contra-standard or anti-normative features. No rule says when a deviation from the norm is the best thing to do, or when it is just a mistake. But reasons must be given for each case, and their validity must be proved each time.

Each feature may be a merit or a defect and may have more or less weight within the whole. Poor lighting can be a stylistic device or compensated for by exceptional acting, the banality of the subject can be overcome by the ingenuity of the script, and the lack of unity by regional intensity. The articulation of all these elements is the argument of good criticism. It is a rational exercise, but it is not exhausted by following rules, making comparisons, or by bringing the canon to the fore. Taste, as an exercise in reflective balance, seems to be at work here.

#### **4. In favour of personal taste**

I have suggested that taste plays a role in the articulation of critical arguments. But what about personal taste? Personal likes and dislikes can be part of understanding and appreciating art. Ernst H. Gombrich, as an art historian inclined and compelled to qualify works of art and artists objectively, spoke of an objective and a subjective pole of art appreciation. Giving reasons, providing explanations, and trying to explain art and art quality rationally were part of his work as a scholar and corresponded to his humanistic concept of art. From time to time, however, he acknowledged the power of taste or the subjective elements in art criticism and their value for art. Moreover, he understood taste to depend not only on artistic tradition and personal biography, but also on fashion, snobbery or the 'social test'. Nevertheless, he believed that completely objective criticism was not only impossible.

Both Danto and Carroll acknowledge the ubiquity of taste, but understand it as irrational, or at least as that which would oppose rational criticism. Both imagine the ideal of artistic criticism as being completely separate from judgements of taste. However, Carroll (2008) acknowledges that not only critics, but audiences in general, love to judge films. We discuss works of art with friends, and the discussion usually includes differences in likes and dislikes. Discussion is one of the pleasures of going to cinema. We try to see our preferences shared and to be able to convince others of our appreciation. Indeed, we also hope to gain a better understanding or appreciation of details we may have missed. But supporting our preferences with reasons is an important part of the activity.

Now, Carroll claims that once the discussion about the value of a work begins, the justificatory reasons turn into objective reasons, focusing on the objective features, devices and strategies present in the work that make it good or bad. Carroll presents the situation as if a complete change of conversation had taken place:

... of course, quite often the conversation does not end with a summary of personal preferences. The discussion may often turn to whether or not the motion picture is good or whether it worked. That is, there is an almost ineluctable tendency for the conversation to drift from reports of subjective enjoyment or lethargy to questions of objective evaluation (Carroll, 2008, p. 194)

At a certain point, he says that “we have left off talking simply of our likes and dislikes. We are speaking in the idiom of good and bad” (Carroll, 2008, p. 195). And later on, he puts it drastically: “the correlation between what is liked by people and what is objectively worthwhile is radically contingent” (Carroll, 2008, p. 195. *my italics*) This conclusion seems to me entirely gratuitous.

To defend the case for taste in art criticism is simply to acknowledge that there is no such thing as a gap between subjective liking and objective evaluation. Indeed, giving reasons often seeks to justify our liking, understanding, or experience of the work. Objective evaluation discusses the content of our experience, pointing out those features of the object that may also be the content of the other's experience. This is what we can call objective evaluation. And it certainly must be, for the work remains the common object of a shared experience, and the only proof and refutation of the correctness of our experience and judgment.

Carroll follows the argument about critical discussion by asserting that “you have abandoned the domain of psychology and embraced normativity. ... you are now conversationally implicated in establishing that *Inside Man* is a good movie, for anyone with functioning eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mind suitably prepared, to appreciate it.” (2008, p. 196) In passing, he intimates that taste is not required once the eyes see, the ears hear, and the mind works properly. But taste is not an organ, or another faculty to be added, but the personal way in which senses, mind and affect collaborate.

Sometimes, apart from his insistence on reasons as rules, Carroll refers to “reflective equilibrium”, “understanding”, or “moral understanding” as necessary for the appreciation of art. Reflective equilibrium and moral understanding are collaborative exercises of the senses, emotions, and cognition under the aegis of a subject agency.

From time to time, instead of reading history, psychology, science or philosophy and being persuaded by arguments, we want to be persuaded sensitively and affectively. To be persuaded in a way that connects us to the significance of things, or to our usually overlooked inner selves. Appreciating a work of art has something to do with feeling that it is OK and finding sensitive and emotional meaning in it. Likes and dislikes are not entirely divorced from objective reasons, and the aim of understanding and making sense of the works of art. Personal ways of interpreting and articulating things, events, properties, and values are part of the work experience. The expertise of the critic is to give reasons that allow us to enhance this experience. But even if this were not the case, I hope to have shown that purpose-driven criticism is still no serious rival to taste-based criticism.

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*The Artistic and the Real:  
Schiller's Aesthetic Theory in Lukács' Perspective*

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ABSTRACT. This contribution explores Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic theory through the lens of György Lukács' Marxist critique. Specifically, it emphasizes Schiller's role in bridging between German Idealism and the dialectical-materialistic aesthetics proposed by Lukács. For Schiller, an aesthetic education represents the solution for the fragmentation of human nature in bourgeois society. Although in Lukács view Schiller's approach is criticizable because of its idealistic limits, at the same time he acknowledges that Schiller's contributions to the reflection on aesthetics as a form of human praxis offer a solid base for the development of a materialistic and dialectical aesthetics, which sees art not only as an idealistic product, but as a reflection of social reality that engages both the subjective and objective side of the real. From this perspective, art can be equally seen as an essential means to reveal human essence and transforming the socio-historical world.

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## 1. Introduction

The reason for this contribution was initially related to the 100th anniversary of *History and Class Consciousness*' publication in 1923. My former intention was to underline some themes and ideas advanced and discussed in this text and, subsequently, to challenge them through a comparison with the most recent developments and reflections in Marxist social theories. Afterwards, the focus changed. Throughout the reading of the chapter "The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought",<sup>2</sup> I was surprised by the thoughts Lukács dedicates to Schiller's aesthetic conceptions. In those pages, I think some interesting insights arise which motivate a reassessment of Lukács' Marxist-based aesthetics.

Perhaps it is not inappropriate to state that reading *History and Class Consciousness* inevitably leads to discussion with a genuine attempt to deconstruct modern philosophy (German Idealism in particular), whose aporias, according to Lukács, needed to be highlighted and questioned in order to move towards an historical-dialectical materialist perspective. During the same years, interestingly, Lukács paved the way for a further development of his interests in a systematic aesthetic theory, which did not appear in a full form until the 1963 with the publication of *The Specificity of the Aesthetics*.<sup>3</sup>

As is known, Schiller is an author of great interest in the history of aesthetics. His most important text in this realm is *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, first published in 1795. Hence, Lukács' interest can be undoubtedly explained if we place his reflection in the framework of a critique of German Idealism. Furthermore, it can also be explained from the perspective of an elaboration of a scientifically, materialistically, and dialectically grounded aesthetics, that in the *History and Class Consciousness* years had not yet been declared, but that certainly was already present in Lukács' thinking.

Therefore, I will try to briefly reconstruct Lukács' reflections on Schiller's aesthetics since I believe that such an attempt could be a propaedeutic for an understanding of Lukács' aesthetics

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<sup>2</sup> This section is notably included in the essay *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* (see Lukács, 1971, pp. 83-222).

<sup>3</sup> This book has been translated into English for the first time in 2023 (see Lukács 2023).

itself. Thus, I assume that Schiller's aesthetic thought represents a means for Lukács to touch upon some themes that subsequently will contribute to the development of his own aesthetic theory.

## 2. Lukács' critical assessment of modern philosophy

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Schiller is presented amongst those thinkers who bear what Lukács calls the "antinomies of bourgeois thought". Namely, the philosophers (above all, Kant) whose reflections, in accordance with the urge felt by Lukács in those years, would prevent classical German philosophy from providing a "transformative understanding" of historical and social reality. The Kantian theoretical separation between forms and contents, freedom and necessity, reason and sensibility and, again, the "problem of the thing-in-itself", represents for Lukács the most critical issue of modern philosophy. We shouldn't be surprised by such an account if we take into consideration at least the following aspects: a) the historical and biographical moment which gave birth to a text like *History and Class Consciousness* – a time when Lukács engages personally in a critical confrontation with the first phase of his philosophizing (characterized by a deepening investigation of neo-Kantian thought); b) his need to elaborate a transformative role for the philosophy, in order to decline it as an instrument of social change through its practical application (namely, the praxis).

Western philosophy posed to itself the problem of the "philosophical realization of society" from the very beginning. Yet, from Lukács' perspective, in this process it encounters several problems – for example, the issues expressed by the categories of thought in the act of philosophizing objects merely as "lifeless nature". This is a crucial point that concerns modern philosophy that, according to Lukács, has been carrying on since the development of Descartes' rationalism and the Scientific Revolution. According to such an approach, modern philosophy can exist only as a reifying thought, since its logical processuality is based on a mechanism in which nature is represented as a lifeless, de-spiritualized, objectified element. In this sense, nature is something that can merely be interpreted, broken down, analyzed, and deciphered at will. This also applies to man considered as a part of this impartial happening.

Nevertheless, according to Lukács this is not the unique conception of nature experienced by philosophical modernity. There is another one, in fact, that allows one to identify nature and being in terms of “true essence”. Understanding nature’s true essence or, again, “authentic humanity” as a specific part of nature, could enable us to overturn the problems of modern philosophy’s antinomies. Of course, this perspective would risk carrying an old metaphysical conceptions if Lukács didn’t move into the realm of a Hegelian immanent metaphysics. From this standpoint, being man equals being conceived as a part of a totality, a unity of parts that cannot be decomposed. According to Lukács, understanding nature itself as a human-based totality permits us (alongside the overcoming of ancient metaphysics) to understand all its manifestations in the domain of human praxis. As far as we’re concerned, art is one of the forms that expresses this domain. Lukács asserts that the birth of aesthetics temporally coincides with a phase in which modern philosophy (or ‘bourgeois thought’ in his terms) becomes aware of its own crisis. Reflecting on art as a form of human praxis thus means to “demolish the contingent relation of the parts to the whole and to resolve the merely apparent opposition between chance and necessity” (Lukács, 1971, p. 137). Yet, it also means reflecting upon what man realises from himself and through the world.

As Lukács writes, “it is in Schiller’s aesthetic and theoretical works that we can see, even more clearly than in the system of the philosophers [...] the need which has provided the impetus for these analyses” (Lukács, 1971, p. 138). In describing the play-instinct [*Spieltrieb*] as an essential feature of human beings, Schiller explicitly encloses man’s authenticity into an aesthetic principle whose consequences go far beyond aesthetics itself. By theorizing man as a playful animal, Schiller pushes the antinomies of modern philosophy to their extreme consequences, allowing us (in Lukács’ view) to recover the specificity, the proper nature, and the typicality of man through and into the aesthetic. In Schiller (in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* in particular), man’s natural disposition toward play and thus toward aestheticization (namely, toward the search for a particular union of form and content) represents the rescue of the human essence from a social context that tears it apart, dismembers it, parcels it, and reifies it. As Lukács writes:

In the aesthetic mode, conceived as broadly as possible, they may be salvaged from the deadening effects of the mechanism of reification. But only *in so far* as these contents become aesthetic. That is to say, either the



world must be aestheticized, [...] Or else, the aesthetic principle must be elevated into the principle by which objective reality is shaped (Lukács, 1971, pp. 139-40).

### 3. The systematic development of a dialectic-materialistic aesthetics

Lukács proceeds more systematically in his analysis of Schiller's aesthetic thought in an essay composed in 1935 (during the so-called "Moscow period", 1933-1945) entitled "On Schiller's Aesthetics", collected in the 1954 book *Contributions to a History of Aesthetics*.<sup>4</sup> At that time, as a researcher at the Marx-Lenin Institute, Lukács begins to outline his project of founding a Marxist aesthetics, explicitly invoked in the very introduction to the *Contributions*. To give it substance, he proceeds again in a dismantling of modern/idealist philosophy. In order to accomplish this purpose, Lukács returns again to Schiller, since in his view he represents the thinker who (Hegel excluded) rooted his reflections mostly in: a) a real, historical conception of man; b) a partial overcoming of the issues posed by modern philosophy; c) the search for a way to take man's being away from the reification process (the result of bourgeois social structure); d) the repossession of man's true essence through art. For all these reasons, Schiller's thought can be circumscribed to a very specific goal of a socio-historical nature: the realization of a society where beauty, morality and truth mutually match through and in artistic activity. It is precisely for achieving this purpose that Schiller finds it necessary to arrange for an aesthetic education of men. In Lukács' view, in Schiller's aesthetics art making becomes a project aimed at the foundation of a new humanity. Nevertheless, it is precisely in the rollout of this project that Schiller shows both his merits and his demerits.

On one hand, Schiller in fact ends up reproducing the same aporetic problems of modern philosophy. On the other hand, he embodies the forerunner of an anti-subjective Idealism that finds its crowning in Hegel. Although Schiller has made a considerable leap forward from Kant's subjective Idealism, he fails to distance himself completely from it at the same time. This is a noticeable contrast for Lukács, given the fact that reason and sensibility, ethics and aesthetics, form

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<sup>4</sup> Since the text is still untranslated in English, we referred to the Italian translation (see Lukács, 1957). Moreover, the original version in German has been mentioned in the references (see Lukács, 1954).

and content appear to merge into the totality that is man in Schiller's theory of aesthetic education, but essentially as separated elements outside of it. By enclosing moral and social renewal in the fulfillment of aesthetic civilization, Schiller reveals himself as a careful and sensitive observer of his time, when the social consequences of the division of labor overtake the development of man's true essence: the creation of forms, namely the basic definition for art making and aesthetic education.

But still, this is a rather short-sighted view according to Lukács, because it simply proposes both an idealistic and proto-romantic expedient as a solution for adjusting society's material forces. Therefore, it's almost as if Schiller correctly formulates the diagnosis but misguides the therapy. In order to regain a lost totality, he opposes an inverted perspective which claims to produce a specific configuration of social being from the consciousness of the original and authentic aesthetic character of man. As much as he grasps the precise characteristics of the historical movement of bourgeois society, Schiller falls back on a vacuous and ineffective idealistic appeal, even though he tries to resolve these same characteristics via a theorization of a practical principle (the play).

Paradoxically, in the very proposition of an aesthetic solution, Schiller reproduces the same antinomies of bourgeois thought that he wants to criticize. Although he successfully analyzes the state of laceration of the human, he remedies this latter through an idealistic transformation that has a vain effect in Lukács' perspective. As he writes:

Schiller undertakes the impossible attempt to construct an objectivistic theory of aesthetic creation on the basis of a theory of subjective idealistic knowledge [...] he fails to see that the problems of the sensitive objectivity of art can achieve a coherent solution only on the basis of philosophical materialism, that is, on the basis of the recognition of the independence of the objects of human consciousness (Lukács, 1957, p. 58).

This brings us to the following issue posed by Lukács: in order to develop a "objectivistic theory of aesthetic creation" whereby men can freely deploy the totality of their faculties in a conscious praxis, it is essential to adopt a dialectical viewpoint. Only this can overcome Kant, Schiller, and, generally, modern philosophy's gap between reason and sensibility so as to look at human-historical reality not as a "lifeless thing" but, on the contrary, to understand it as the product of a dialectical synthesis given by the mutual encounter between a creative subject (the man/the artist)

and an objective reality. In aesthetic terms, this means man must develop the ability to perceive the historical world as a dynamic dimension whose structure and appearance lay entirely on men's creative, practical and productive capacities to shape it, but to also perceive that, at the same time, these very capacities are objectively founded in historical praxis. This implies that the same social and historical structures and men's ability to perceive them (as well as the capacity to influence them through the creation of forms and the making of art) are in a dialectical, mutual relationship.

This is the reason why Lukács will choose to draft a theory of reflection (partially based on Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*) that he will discuss systematically in 1963's *The Specificity of the Aesthetics*. From Lukács' perspective, the answer to the theoretical problems posed by modern philosophy cannot be concealed in either vulgar materialism or fatuous Idealism. Therefore, to decline the relationship between the subject and the shapeable, sensitive world in the terms of mirroring (or reflection) represents a need that cannot be conceived as a copying mechanism, but rather as an experience of the translation of reality. From an aesthetic perspective, the philosophical foundation of this dialectical synthesis constitutes, as Lukács argues, the ultimate goal of his aesthetic foundation project.

To grasp art's place in the totality of human activities (i.e. the multiple and differentiated attempts to respond to the external, human-based reality), we ought to analyze the specific characteristics of aesthetic reflection. According to Lukács, art represents a particular form of the reproduction of reality which is formally (even if not substantially) different from other forms of reproduction, such as science, ethics or religion. Therefore, if we wish to understand why humans are inclined to make art and why their ways of making art materially changes over time and space, then we are called to consider the general law of reflection of our social reality. That is to say, if we intend to think of art as a product of a dialectical relation, then we have to argue with pre-Hegelian idealistic approaches and their hierarchical reasoning which places subject consciousness above a reality that is conceived as the direct product of subject itself. In Lukács' opinion "there is being without consciousness, but there is no consciousness without being" (Lukács, 2023, p. 12). In that sense, getting rid of Idealism's problems concerning the objectivity of social being cannot involve starting from the knowing subject. For Lukács, as well as for Hegel, the real (social and

aesthetic at once) and its knowability constitutes the product of a reciprocal relation between a subjectively produced objectivity and an objectively produced subjectivity.

Obviously, going beyond Idealism and the problems of subjectivistic modern philosophy cannot mean completely getting rid of the subject. But that's the whole point: through art the essence of the real is shown as the result of a mediated reproduction. As Lukács writes:

For any genuinely consistent Idealism, a form of consciousness that is meaningful for everyone in human existence – thus, in our case, the aesthetic form of consciousness – must be of a 'supratemporal' and 'eternal' nature, since its origin is hierarchically founded in the context of a world of ideas. [...] For it necessarily follows from this that the aesthetic, both on the side of production and reception, belongs to the 'essence' of man, [...] Our materialist way of looking at things must yield a completely opposite image [...] The scientific reflection of reality attempts to disengage itself from all anthropological, sensuous, and mental determinations, that it strives to render objects and their relations as they are in themselves, independent of consciousness. In contrast, aesthetic reflection proceeds from and is directed at the human world. As shall be expounded later, this does not amount to simple subjectivism. On the contrary, the objectivity of objects is preserved, albeit such that all of the typical relatedness to human life is included in it such that it appears in keeping with the current state of mankind's inner and outer development, which is a social development. This means that any aesthetic formation intrinsically includes and itself arranges the historical *hic et nunc* of its genesis as an essential aspect of its decisive objectivity. (Lukács 2023, pp. 14-16)

#### 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, Schiller is the first thinker associated with German Idealism to grasp these insights. In the framework of his aesthetic theory, the knowability of the world becomes guaranteed by the existence of artistic praxis that reflects the real without leaving it in the obscurity of the thing-in-itself. Unfortunately, Schiller does not carry out all the consequences arising from this perspective. Thus art, unable to be a mere imitation of reality, is forced to make itself an imitation of the ideas of reason, ultimately revealing his ambivalence in this regard. Hence, the work of art in Schiller's aesthetics shows itself bound to the real insofar as it detaches itself to stand as a transformative idea. But not, as Lukács hopes, as conscious praxis. In his view, all this faithfully expresses the

vacuous Romantic attitude of critique of bourgeois society which, in the end, is ineffective for producing a plan for the real transformation of human environment and existence.

Nevertheless, the aspiration for objectivity in Schiller's objectivism represents an important attempt towards an overcoming of Idealism and the formulation of a dialectical engagement between man and the world. Schiller rightly finds objectivity in the aesthetic products themselves, clots of humanity whose beauty derives precisely from their human nature. Indeed, beauty is, according to him, in man insofar as it is in nature and insofar as man takes part of this nature. In a sense, his aesthetics represents both a theory of self-creation and self-understanding of nature. Subjective mediation takes place inasmuch it represents a moment of objective nature which, through man, aesthetically thinks, creates, and reproduces itself. The aesthetic, therefore, loses its detached character about the ontological structure of the real to become a theory and practice of social transformation.

Unfortunately, this transformation remains in Schiller merely ideal; he reveals himself as a proto-dialectical and a proto-romantic thinker at once. Nonetheless, from the point of view of the evolution of philosophical thought, he represents for Lukács the 'Pillars of Hercules' of modern philosophy's subjectivistic formalism and a bridge between the bourgeois consciousness of the Enlightenment and the crisis of this conscience. From Lukács' perspective, Schiller prepared the ground for the development of dialectical materialism in the field of aesthetics, representing the first thinker to give to the artwork the character of a dialectical movement whose effectiveness is revealed, rather than in the real's disruption, in its implementation mediated by art.

I think this excerpt from Schiller's *The Bride of Messina*, mentioned by Lukács in his 1947 work *Goethe and His Age*, could bring this contribution to a good conclusion:

Art can be truer than any reality and more real than any phenomenon. Hence, it automatically follows that the artist cannot use a single element of reality as he finds it, that its work must be ideal in *all* its parts just as it must, as a whole, possess reality and accord with nature (Lukács, 1968, p. 89).

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## *Framing Resemblances: Puy, Young, and Goodman on Musical Expressiveness<sup>1</sup>*

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ABSTRACT. This paper addresses James Young's critique of Goodman's views on musical expressiveness, as well as Nemesio Puy's response to Young, which both accepts and partly challenges that critique, while also engaging Stephen Davies's earlier objections. I argue that contrary to Young's claim that Goodman's theory collapses into a variant of resemblance theory, resemblance theory is better seen as an incomplete form of "frame theory" – of which Goodman's own exemplification theory is a special case. Resemblance theory is a frame theory without the "frame": a contextual conceptual device that shapes and directs experience. While Puy hints at this idea, its full significance remains underexplored. I propose that a frame theory of expressiveness stands independently of orthodox Goodmanian commitments.

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<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the Instituto de Filosofia-FLUP-Universidade do Porto, Via Panorâmica Edgar Cardoso, s/n, 4150-564, Porto, Portugal. It is a modified and adapted English version of a longer piece originally written in Portuguese, and dedicated to the memory of Professor Maria do Carmo d'Orey (1933-2023). Young's and Puy's contributions were also written with this purpose. The paper draws extensively on Carmo d'Orey's remarkable work on Goodman (Carmo d'Orey 1999), with translations from the original Portuguese provided by me.

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## 1. Young's Critique of Goodman

James O. Young's recent critique of Goodman's views on expressiveness in the arts, particularly in music (Young, 2023) together with his earlier critique (Young, 2001, pp. 70-80) can be condensed into a dilemma: either the theory of expressiveness as metaphorical exemplification collapses into a version of the resemblance theory, or it is flat-out unintelligible. The unintelligibility, for Young, lies in the notion of "metaphorical properties" whose existence he believes is presupposed by the notion of metaphorical exemplification. If a metaphorical description could be true, it would have to be made true by the described thing's possessing metaphorical properties, which is absurd.

Young thinks that the concept of metaphorical exemplification adds nothing to a bare formulation of the resemblance theory. He finds evidence of this in a passage from Goodman (1968, p. 91): "Music and dance alike may exemplify rhythmic patterns, for example, and express peace or pomp or passion; and music may express properties of movement while dance may express properties of sound." Here, he sees the implication that "music can exemplify tones of voice and patterns of movement of the voice under the influence of emotion." (Young, 2023, p. 261) In sum, Young aims at a *reductio* to sheer possession of co-instantiated properties, equating then possession with expressiveness.

For Young, what best explains that we seem to hear sadness in a piece of music is that it resembles the behavior of people under the influence of sadness. Sad music moves similarly to how sad people move, or sounds similar to how sad people sound when emoting. Hence, descriptions of music in emotional terms are literal, not metaphorical. Young concludes that Goodman's theory of expressiveness lacks motivation.

## 2. Puy on Young's Critique of Goodman

Nemesio Puy (2023, pp. 269-270) provides his own reconstruction of Young's objections to Goodman in three main claims:

1. Goodman's theory of expressiveness is a version of the resemblance theory.
2. If the discourse on expressive musical properties is literal (as Young argues), then Goodman's theory, as a description of our appreciative practices, lacks motivation.
3. Goodman's version of the resemblance theory offers no advantage over standard versions of that theory.

Puy argues that Goodman's "revisionism" could retain its motivation were it to offer theoretical payoffs over standard formulations of the resemblance theory. Puy concedes 1 and 2, but rejects 3: Goodman's revisionism does offer theoretical payoffs. I do not think we should grant 1 and 2. While there is more to be said about this, let us stick for now with Puy's reasons for rejecting 3.

Both Young and Puy speak of standard versions of the resemblance theory, but no version is explicitly mentioned. For the benefit of the reader, I quote here a version presented as "standard" by Andrew Kania (2020, p. 40): "A passage of music, M, is expressive of an emotion, E, if M is heard, by competent listeners, as resembling the phenomenology, or vocal or bodily behavior, typical of someone experiencing E." Proponents of different versions of the resemblance theory emphasize different aspects mentioned disjunctively in this formulation.

According to Puy, Goodman's distinction between literal and metaphorical exemplification helps us to deal with an important piece of empirical evidence: that people tend to agree much more about the properties they think music *doesn't* express than about the properties they think it does express. The formalist considers such disagreement about positive attributions evidence that music neither represents nor expresses emotions. Puy responds to this using Goodman's distinction: there is broad agreement on the properties literally exemplified by music, but disagreement about its expressive properties. In a performative context, musical works exemplify "combinations of sound frequencies, timbres and rhythms, as well as the structural properties" of the relevant genre (Puy, 2023, p. 275); the context selects for our attention those properties the work literally possesses. This contextual selection will bring out resemblances to different objects that literally possess some expressive features. For instance, the performative contexts of the symphonic genre, minimalist, or serialist musical works select different properties for our attention.

Puy sees these examples as special cases of a more general principle: resemblance relations are not dyadic but triadic, that is, they are not relations between two particular objects or sets of objects, but between two or more particular objects and a context. The identification of expressive properties – i.e., those properties that are “beyond the score” – involves reference within a dense and replete system (Goodman, 1968, pp. 252-255; 1978, pp. 57-70) and, therefore, is also a matter of “infinitely fine adjustments.” In such cases, disagreement about expressive properties is not anomalous but rather expected, not differing, in this regard, from the infinitely fine adjustments involved in the interpretation of a painting.

This applies to the interpretation of a simple metaphor: the properties relevant to understanding the metaphor “Juliet is the Sun” are not the same as those governing the description of Louis XIV as the “Sun King” (Carmo d’Orey, 1999, pp. 425-426). This would be puzzling if resemblance relations were dyadic instead of triadic, as Puy rightly argues. In some contexts, the resemblance between the Sun and bleach (the Sun bleaches or fades colors) will be more salient than the resemblance between the Sun and a lit candle.

At this point, the musical formalist might raise the problem of normativity: why should we be placed in contexts that select these expressive properties rather than others, or none at all? Puy’s Goodmanian answer is that we should be placed in those contexts “in which we can make sense of the work’s point in light of the normative background of our musical practice as a whole.” (Puy, 2023, p. 277) For example, listening to minimalist works as expressive of emotion would be to misunderstand those works. Therefore, we should place ourselves in contexts that proscribe the identification of such resemblances. In contrast, to understand the purpose of a Baroque concerto, we must be placed in contexts where such identification is prescribed rather than proscribed. Goodman’s distinction frees us from the illusion of a non-contextual response to the problem of normativity.

Puy’s use of the distinction between “purely musical” properties – “those that are not beyond the score” (2023, p. 276) – and expressive properties, correlating them with the theory of expressiveness as metaphorical exemplification, is quite ingenious and insightful. My objection to Puy doesn’t concern the soundness of his inferences but rather how he represents their scope. He fails to see how this allows him not to grant Young claims 1 and 2. Puy’s discrimination of the vital

role played by contexts in expressiveness allows him to reject the idea that the literalness of emotional predicates applied to music deprives Goodman's theory of motivation. The reason for this is that metaphorical resemblance itself is context-dependent.

### 3. Frames and Doodles

In his autobiography, Frank Zappa makes a humorous observation about a “humble appliance” being “the most important thing in art”. He was speaking of *frames*. The frame marks the boundary between art and “the Real World”: “You have to put a ‘box’ around it because otherwise, what is that shit on the wall?” (Zappa & Occhiogrosso, 1990, p. 140). The frame doesn't have to be literal or a physical object; it can be a conceptual device, e.g. as when we treat a recording of someone's (say, John Cage's) gurgling carrot juice as a musical composition.

The notion of a “conceptual frame” – one that, when applied to objects and their properties, transforms the way we perceive them – is particularly interesting. It reminds me of an album cover of Zappa's, *Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch*, which employs a “doodle” by Roger Price, who invented doodles in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> The word “doodle” is a portmanteau of “doodle” and “riddle.” It names a popular form of visual entertainment in that decade and consists of a minimalist drawing that explores pareidolia, the human tendency to impose meaning on visual stimuli. Each doodle is accompanied by the implicit question “What is this?”, and the puzzle is solved by uncovering a title revealing the image's “true” meaning. The doodle on the album cover is formed by five lines: four of which make up two triangular shapes, one larger and one smaller, positioned over another horizontal line in the lower region of the image. Upon reading the title, we cannot help but see one of the shapes as the bow of a ship and the other as the (yet) unsubmerged tip of a pointed witches' hat. The psychological vividness of the effect could not be achieved with just any shapes, nor could any title achieve the same vividness. In Price's original book, the humorous effect is heightened with an alternative interpretation: “This, of course, appears to be ‘A Mother Pyramid Feeding Its Child,’ but it isn't.” (Price, 1972, p. 3) In doodles, the title or subtitles provide a context that selects the relevant resemblances. The phenomenological vividness of the selected

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<sup>3</sup> Zappa, Frank (1982), *Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch*, Barking Pumpkin Records.

resemblances is indifferent to the absurdity of some interpretations. The lines evoke the strange image of a pyramid behaving like a bird feeding its offspring just as clearly as they evoke the bow of a ship and a witch's hat, or even the jaws of a fish emerging from the sea<sup>4</sup>. This suggests that context has great power even over a prior disposition to bring out some resemblances rather than others. Any such disposition is merely part of a context. We are as much producers of new frames as we are inheritors of evolutionary dispositions to see, e.g., a willow as a sad human being, rather than a frozen waterfall (Davies, 2011<sup>a</sup>, p. 10), although we can also see it that way.

Let us shift to a musical example. There is a long-standing association between the minor mode and minor triads (three-note chords) and the expression of sadness. Young (2012) argues that the role of convention is smaller than it seems, even in such cases. However, it is misleading to attribute expressive character to isolated intervals and chords. Both major and minor triads include a minor third interval. If we arpeggiate a D major chord, the second interval will not sound “sad” on account of it being a minor third; but when arpeggiating a D minor chord, the second interval will sound more “subdued” than the second interval of the D major chord, even though it is a major, not a minor third. The arpeggio of a major triad will sound “brighter” and “more open” than the arpeggio of a minor triad, yet both chords contain minor thirds. The lesson is that context is more relevant than any supposedly inherent characteristic of intervals or scales, defined by more or less dissonance and chromaticism when we listen to melodies in the minor mode.

Consider now the acoustic phenomenon called “enharmony.” Enharmony is the relationship between any two musical entities (interval, chord, scale, etc.) that are acoustically identical but “syntactically” distinct in virtue of harmonic context. An interval described as a minor third can also be described as an augmented second depending on the harmonic context. A scale where the latter interval occurs is the “double harmonic” scale. An example of the augmented second is found in the opening of the *Cántico de San Francisco de Asís* by the Spanish composer Joaquín Rodrigo, specifically in the flute melody. The presence of an augmented second rather than a minor third there *makes a phenomenological difference*, and yet they are acoustically the same if taken in isolation.

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<sup>4</sup> I thank Monika Jovanović for the latter interpretation.

#### 4. Possession, Exhibition, and Reference

Any painting literally exemplifies many pictorial properties: it has certain combinations of lines, pigments, shapes, and textures. These are not merely possessed but selected for our attention, highlighted, emphasized, referred to – in short, they are exemplified. Literal exemplification plays a fundamental role in some paintings: the viscosity and gestural quality of the applied paint, as seen in abstract expressionism, for example.

However, this cannot be all that paintings do through exemplification if we want to use exemplification to explain how works of art can have considerable cognitive value. Metaphorical exemplification is required. We can clarify this notion by considering how the so-called “formal” properties of a painting are often described with non-literal vocabulary: the painting expresses a certain rhythm that depends on the layout of its pictorial elements (e.g., Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*); we talk about visual balance, clashes of forces, tensions, a struggle for dominance between colors and volumes in the pictorial space, or how certain elements resolve the conflict introduced by others, harmonizing or balancing them out. We cannot avoid this fundamentally anthropomorphic way of describing formal relationships, lest our descriptions of artworks become bland, utterly losing sight of what matters in any work.<sup>5</sup> These descriptions make sense, yet they are not literal nor can they be reduced to combinations of literal descriptions. However, such use is underpinned by the pictorial properties the painting genuinely possesses. The “rhythm” of *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* is no less a property of the painting, than the shapes and pigments on its canvas.

As Carmo d’Orey (1999, p. 429) emphasizes, Goodman’s theory of metaphor reverses the explanatory order between symbolization and resemblance: metaphorical resemblance is explained in terms of exemplificational co-reference. There is nothing in the idea that recognition generates resemblance that compels us to avoid that perspective, which happens to be the core of the theory of expressiveness as metaphorical exemplification. Hence, the idea that Goodman’s theory is a mere version of the resemblance theory can be reversed: Goodman’s theory does not collapse into

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<sup>5</sup> Carmo d’Orey’s observations about Arnheim and Gestalt psychology are, in this regard, very enlightening (1999, pp. 469–470).

a verbose version of the resemblance theory; properly understood, it is the resemblance theory that turns out to be a severely restricted version of the frame theory. Although this may seem strange, Goodman once almost put it in these words, in his exchange with Beardsley regarding the latter's difficulty in digesting the idea of properties of artworks not simply possessed or exhibited but also referred to and, thus, exemplified. The debate occurs in two articles by Beardsley (1975; 1978) and an epistolary response from Goodman, part of which Beardsley reproduces in the first article.<sup>6</sup> I believe Young's resistance to the concept of metaphorical exemplification is similar to Beardsley's. Against the theory that relevant properties of artworks are those they exemplify, Beardsley contrasts his own theory, which he names "exhibition theory," that artworks possess or exhibit their relevant properties but don't refer to them. Goodman's response (Beardsley, 1975, pp. 25-26) is illuminating and ironic. He ripostes: "the Exhibition theory is the Exemplification theory under another name," but also that while Beardsley infers from this that "the Exemplification theory contains something superfluous (the reference to reference)," he thinks that "in setting forth the Exhibition theory," Beardsley "overlook[s] something essential (the fact of reference)." The crucial aspect is that exhibiting, highlighting, emphasizing, and calling attention to are, for Goodman, forms of reference not to be mistaken for denotation.

The difficulty in clearly distinguishing denotation from exemplification is at the root of the confusions perpetuated by some of Goodman's critics who are also advocates of the resemblance theory. The first confusion introduced by Stephen Davies (1994, p. 9), for example, is that between reference and denotation. This is precisely why he incurs the very same *faux pas* as Beardsley in stating (Davies, 1994, p. 137): "Usually the cloth doesn't denote or refer to blueness; simply, it possesses and displays an instance of the quality without denoting the property it possesses." Some of Davies's criticisms (1994, p. 140) leave no doubt that, for him, mere possession of properties is sufficient for expressiveness, while reference is a "surplus" symbolic function, subsumed in denotation (as if pointing to a bee as a sample of *Apis mellifera* falls short of an ulterior symbolic function the bee would perform). Davies (2011b, p. 22) formulates Goodman's concept of expressiveness thus: "an artwork is expressive if it metaphorically possesses a property and that metaphorical property is used to denote its literal equivalent." This illusion of an ulterior symbolic

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<sup>6</sup> See Carmo d'Orey (1999, pp. 242-246).

function modelled on denotation pervades Davies's objections to Goodman (e.g., that the theory presupposes rather than explains expression, because possession must precede the referential function).

Beardsley's idea that works of art exhibit properties but don't refer to them (and so don't exemplify them) overlooks what is essential, which is precisely the salience of some properties relative to others as an inescapable element of representation, artistic or otherwise. Young himself brings out the missing element: "giving an account of what makes a property salient will be difficult." (2023, p. 259) Exemplification theory seeks to address this difficulty: non-denotative reference is the key to expression. Even Young (2001, p. 82), when describing his list of techniques for generating the perspectives<sup>7</sup> afforded by artistic representations, does so with the following revealing words: "The use of these techniques makes it possible for such representations to *draw attention to* features of objects, *place* them in context, *display* their consequences and draw comparisons between them." (my emphases). Young's own distinction between semantic and illustrative representation requires exemplification. Ironically, Young is more Goodmanian than he thinks, and certainly no less than Beardsley in his *faux pas*.

Another aspect of framing concerns the placement of the work in a given symbol system rather than another. Carmo d'Orey (1999, p. 482-497) illustrates this compellingly with the example of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, placed within the system of his previous works or within the system to which the *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin* by Gino Severini belongs. In one system, that painting "expresses vibrancy, joy, and rhythm because we consider it in the context of Mondrian's works, which are rigid, sober, and austere"; considered in the other system, "we might say that it expresses restraint, rigidity, and austerity" (1999: 486). The power of framing is also clearly seen in examples such as Mozart's *Musikalischer Spaß* (K522). This music ingeniously exemplifies a series of compositional "mistakes", "blunders," inelegancies, and clichés of poor musical thinking. Failing to listen to this piece as a parody is to misunderstand it. If the music possessed these properties without referring to them, it would not be a clever parody of bad music but an example of bad music.

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<sup>7</sup> Young (2001, pp. 82-85) distinguishes several techniques through which artists generate perspectives: *selection*, *amplification*, *simplification*, *juxtaposition*, *correlation*, *connection*.



## 5. Literal Possession, Metaphorical Ascription

The second claim conceded by Puy overlooks some crucial aspects of Goodman's view of metaphor. For instance: the boundary between the literal and the metaphorical is a "floating" (Carmo d'Orey, 1999, p. 432), context-dependent one. The debate about whether descriptions of music with emotional predicates is metaphorical or literal turns out to be less relevant than Young's own recognition that such attributions involve a shift in domain, i.e., cross-domain mapping or "the transfer of concepts derived from one sensory modality to experiences derived from another sensory modality" (Young, 2014, p. 19). Goodman's extensionalism makes the distinction between literal and metaphorical, to which Young gives far too much emphasis, a matter of degree; that is, a metaphorical phrase doesn't function abnormally, as in the Davidsonian conception preferred by Young (Davidson, 1978). This corollary of Goodman's theory of metaphor cannot be used as evidence that his theory of expressiveness lacks motivation. Using it that way suggests misunderstanding the third of Goodman's four metaphors to explain metaphor: the bigamous marriage (Goodman, 1968, p. 73; Carmo d'Orey 1999, pp. 432-444).

According to Goodman, a musical piece expresses only a subclass of the properties it possesses and metaphorically exemplifies (Carmo d'Orey, 1999, pp. 474-482). These properties must be properties the music possesses *as an aesthetic symbol and as music*, that is, music can only express properties that depend on its acoustic properties. A painting expresses only those properties that depend on its pictorial properties. Both a musical piece and a painting can be metaphorically described as warhorses; they can even exemplify (metaphorically) that property (by being used as samples of the class of artworks often cited as examples in disputes), but they never express it. This is where Young digs his heels: if emotional predicates applied to music are literal, then music cannot express properties that belong in the domain of pathos or affect, for it cannot metaphorically exemplify what it possesses literally – Young thinks that nothing metaphorically exemplifies anything, for exemplification can only be literal. His objection to Goodman follows Goodman's criterion: only what is metaphorically exemplified is expressed. If literal exemplification is of

literal properties, it makes sense to think that metaphorical exemplification is of metaphorical properties. If there are no such properties, there can be no metaphorical exemplification.

Goodman himself has contributed to the confusion, with his talk of “metaphorical possession” of properties (1968, p. 68). Objects only have the properties they actually possess; it is descriptions of objects that can be literal or metaphorical. From the fact that the sharing of properties is the key to metaphorical attribution, Young infers that Goodman’s theory of expressiveness is a version of the resemblance theory. He clearly sees how shared properties are properties that both extensions, literal and metaphorical, of the predicate in question possess literally. The lake is metaphorically and appropriately described as a sapphire (Goodman, 1979, pp. 125-126) because (just like the sapphire) it is literally blue, translucent, iridescent, coruscant, etc. None of the lake’s properties is metaphorical; only the representation of the lake is. “Metaphorical possession” is a confused notion that breeds confusion. Even the terminology of “literal properties” contains a seed of confusion: both “literal” and “metaphorical” apply only to modes of representing properties (to the “labels” that refer to them), not to properties themselves. Strictly speaking, these are neither literal nor metaphorical.

Some metaphors “wear out with use,” becoming dead metaphors. In such cases, two facts always remain: 1) the distinction between being a dead metaphor and never having been one is not a volatile distinction; 2) a dead metaphor is as much a result of cross-domain mapping as a living one. The boundary between being a living metaphor and a dead one is volatile, but the boundary between there being cross-domain mapping or not is not volatile.

Now consider the practice of calling certain buildings “wedding cakes.” Famous examples of architectural “wedding cakes” would be: 1) the Palace of Parliament in Bucharest; 2) the Monument to Vittorio Emanuele II in Rome; 3) Moscow State University, among others. It is not difficult to understand why someone would call any of these buildings a “wedding cake.” No “metaphorical property” is described or generated by this practice. Nothing but the building’s actually possessed architectural properties is described. By describing a building as a “wedding cake,” are we speaking literally or metaphorically? If describing a piece of music as “sad” is literal because it describes the music’s “contour”, based on a resemblance between the appearance of the music and the appearance of emotionally expressive behavior, then we could argue that “wedding

cake” is a literal predicate in the architectural context, since all that is at stake is an analogy between appearances, contours, or shapes. *Sicut in musica et in architectura*. How to respond to this? On the one hand, it's clearly a bad argument, because it would lead us to reclassify as literal many metaphorical expressions whose adequacy is based on appearances. Such reclassification would be a true clinical case of what Puy calls “revisionism.” On the other hand, even if it seemed plausible to reclassify the architectural use of “wedding cake” as literal, that wouldn't alter the fact that using it involves cross-domain mapping – from the confectionery to the architectural. In Young's words, an appropriate vocabulary for the experience of one type of thing is applied to the experience of another type of thing. One way to explain this would be through one of the four metaphors Goodman uses to explain how metaphors work: the idyllic relationship between “a predicate with a past and an object that yields while protesting” (1968, p. 69); that despite the attraction that makes things work in the new application, there is also a resistance, responsible for the vividness of the metaphor. But the third of Goodman's four metaphors brings out how negligible the literal-metaphorical distinction is in fending off metaphorical exemplification. This is the metaphor of the bigamous marriage: the idea that the relationship between the predicate and its literal and metaphorical extensions is unlike the amalgamation of a legitimate monogamous marriage with an extramarital relationship, that is, metaphorical and literal uses do not differ in kind or epistemic legitimacy. I am not saying that we have to accept Goodman's theory of metaphor and that, in light of such dogmatic imposition, Young's critique fails. I am saying that Goodman's extensionalist approach makes the presence or absence of cross-domain mapping the determinant feature to know which properties an aesthetic symbol expresses *qua aesthetic symbol of a certain type*, instead of whether a description is literal or metaphorical according to the *vox populi*.

In any case, the distinction between “the metaphoric description of a literally possessed property and the literal description of a metaphorically possessed property.” (Davies, 1994, p. 148) is irredeemably confusing, and Goodman is not blameless in breeding that confusion, due to his condescension with a *façon de parler* that includes the notion of metaphorical possession. Nevertheless, this oversight of Goodman's doesn't determine the success of Young's critique, as Puy acknowledges, by turning a blind eye to the second crucial point of the objection. Here is a much more interesting aspect: when we describe those buildings as “wedding cakes,” just as when

we describe music as “dark,” “melancholic,” “sad,” and “gloomy,” we are not perforce relying only on resemblances between appearances or visual experiences of things. The purpose of the architectural metaphor is not simply to awaken in us the resemblance between the building’s shape and the shape of a wedding cake. It alerts us to an open set of characteristics united not by the mere shape or contour of a cake, but by the incongruity between the building and the rest of the urban fabric in which it is inserted. It serves as a corrective, making us see pompousness, ostentation, and arrogance as misplaced, and perhaps even as alien, where the “innocent eye” might see only another example of grandeur, without the large-scale political *kitsch* made painfully evident by the metaphor (I am not saying that this is necessarily the case with all buildings thus described). There are no metaphorical properties here, nor any properties “metaphorically possessed.” There are only the real architectural properties that determine this peculiar type of incongruity. This incongruity is the property described, which a building can express, but a musical piece cannot (no musical works are wedding cakes). It doesn’t stem from a simple correspondence between the contours of objects, but rather a complex cluster of properties, each of whose descriptions would allow for an adequate but incomplete and unsatisfactory paraphrase of the metaphor. This is why a building can, despite the intentions of those who commissioned or designed it, express arrogance rather than magnificence. It is also for this reason that Young and Davies ask in vain for the rules that would allow them to single out genuine cases of metaphorical exemplification. There are no such rules, just as there are no rules for interpreting metaphors. Young was right in his original critique based on the non-existence of metaphorical properties, although he was wrong in thinking that this provides a reason to reject metaphorical exemplification. He is wrong, I think, in his recent critique, which sees Goodman’s theory as a mere version of the resemblance theory, not because resemblance should not feature in the theory, contrary to what Goodman himself believed, but because what is truly effective here is the (conceptual) frame, not the experienced resemblance (i.e. the effect). The Goodmanian theory is therefore not a resemblance theory, but a frame theory. The frame is the invisible device that selects properties and creates the relevant resemblances.

Without a frame, metaphor doesn’t work; i.e., without exemplification, there is no metaphorical resemblance. Here is how Carmo d’Orey explains it:

What basically happens in metaphor is that objects *that do not usually function as symbols are proposed as symbols*. In Romeo's metaphor, Juliet and the Sun are presented as *exemplificational symbols* of one and the same property. This is why they come to resemble. So, by creating the metaphor, Romeo creates the resemblance. (...) Explaining Romeo's metaphor in terms of resemblance between Juliet and the Sun is not to say that Juliet resembles the Sun in *any* property, nor that she resembles the Sun in *all* properties. It is to say that she resembles the sun in *certain* properties. Such properties are those that Juliet and the Sun exemplify in the context in which they function as symbols. It is knowledge of the context that allows us to identify, based on its relevance, what those properties are. (1999: 427)

The point is that metaphor cannot work unless both the metaphorical and literal extensions are taken as exemplificational symbols of the relevant common properties on which the metaphor rests, which always consist of properties literally possessed by both extensions.

## 6. Conclusion

Young places excessive emphasis on the starting point of musical experience, whereas the endpoint – or rather the endpoint as shaped by the development triggered by the start – is where true interest lies. Musical experience depends on more than a “contour” revealed at first impact, shaped by biological or evolutionary dispositions. Resemblance itself evolves with experience. Goodman's theory captures this, without collapsing into a resemblance theory or being held hostage by the literal/metaphorical distinction. I conclude that Puy had good reasons to refuse all three of Young's central claims.

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## *On the Road to Virtuousness: Empathy for Rough Heroines*

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines a challenge regarding the role of moral development in empathetic resistance to fiction by introducing a problem from moral philosophy, recently described by Olivia Bailey as the “puzzle about the relation between empathy and virtuousness.” In the first part, it is argued that one’s moral development or progress on the road to virtuousness should be considered in explaining our engagement with rough heroes. The second part examines whether there are cases in which empathetic imagination should be cultivated with vicious perspectives, focusing on rough heroines. The paper concludes by offering two motivational grounds (one moral and one epistemic) for empathizing with certain vicious perspectives: first, it contributes to our moral education by helping us recognize that sometimes what motivates us to refrain from empathetically engaging with morally challenging perspectives is the influence of implicit bias; second, empathy with morally challenging perspectives is the best way we have to turn our attention towards the existence and scope of our implicit biased background and thus improve our cognitive skills.

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## 1. Introduction

The present paper starts from the assumption that carefully considering the relation of empathy and virtuousness in our engagement with fiction may shed light on both the limits of our ability to empathetically engage with morally vicious fictional narratives and the nature of our moral stance towards vicious perspectives in fictional and real-life narratives. Previous discussions on rough heroes have predominantly focused on aspects such as the rough hero's characteristics (Eaton, 2012), the perspective of the narrative (Eaton, 2003; Gaut, 1998) and the tactics employed to foster pro-attitudes (Vaage, 2016, Paris, 2022), or the nature of the ethical flaws of the artwork (whether intrinsic or extrinsic, whether quarantined in the work or expanded towards actual persons) (Clavel-Vasquez, 2020). My approach will instead shift the focus to the audience, examining how a reader's moral character and progress toward virtuousness influence her engagement with rough heroes.<sup>2</sup> I will do so by introducing a problem from moral philosophy, recently described by Olivia Bailey in terms of the "puzzle about the relation between empathy and virtuousness". Following John McDowell's Aristotelian account, Bailey has argued that the virtuous person cannot empathize with vicious perspectives, because part of what it means to be virtuous is that one cannot perceive the world in a less-than-virtuous manner. In this paper, I will discuss the puzzle in relation to fiction and argue that one's moral development is related to difficulties in engaging first-personally with vicious perspectives.

## 2. Empathy for Rough Heroes

We often enjoy engaging imaginatively with morally flawed or rough heroes and unethical actions. We are fascinated by the authors' ability to create fictional circumstances that allow us to overcome the initial resistance we experience during imaginative engagement with the narrative, prompting us to sympathize and align ourselves with characters whom, in real life, we would want to see

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<sup>2</sup> From this point of view, I agree with Panos Paris that "Eaton is mistaken not only to suggest that the phenomenon of RH-empathy reveals more about the works than it does about the audience, but also to imply...that these can be clearly separated" (Paris, *forthcoming*). In line with this, Clavel-Vasquez argues that imaginative resistance to rough heroines can be explained by considering one's own interpretative horizons, which are determined by the sociocultural context (Clavel-Vasquez, 2018).



punished.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, the way the narrator presents the story enables or prescribes something more: by following the flow of fictional events, we relate to the heroes and “test” their point of view (Moran, 1994, p. 105). Through this first-personal or empathetic imaginative engagement with the hero’s perspective we are prompted to not only see the world through their eyes and understand their situation, scope, and emotions, but also to relate affectively with the hero’s experiences from a first-personal perspective.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, we can use our imagination to switch perspectives, which allows us to simulate or recreate first-personally the thoughts or feelings of the fictional other. Still, it is not always clear what this “first-personal” engagement or reenactment of experience consists of. Olivia Bailey presupposes that empathetic engagement with another’s perspective requires an understanding of why a person is in a particular emotional state by apprehending the other’s emotions as intelligible (that is, as appropriate or fitting). Through this type of “rich” empathetic imagination, which Bailey calls *humane understanding*, we gain a deep understanding of what it is like being in their situation by experiencing affective states ourselves.

However, in the case of rough heroes, this type of engagement raises psychological and moral concerns. How can anyone relate empathetically to a hero who embraces evilness, such as Tony Soprano? What does it say about us if we adopt the perspective of a character like Walter White of *Breaking Bad*? Since most of us consider ourselves fair, ethical, and virtuous (Tappin & McKay, 2017), our ethical attitudes towards such heroes should be different. In real life, the revelation that an individual is a drug dealer and murderer would evoke horror and outrage, and our reaction would not be alleviated by any information about the perpetrator’s other positive character traits. One may, of course, deny that we actually empathize with rough heroes. We may understand their situation, scope, and emotions, sympathize or ally with them, but we do not engage with them from a first-personal perspective. For some, empathizing may be too hard, or even impossible. Thomas Szanto argued that we resist empathically relating to an evil character either because we do not want to be morally tainted, or because empathizing with an evil character can make us reassess our moral self-conception (in ways that may be unfavourable to us). Others accept

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<sup>3</sup> I take it that sympathy refers to an affective state related to the character’s emotional state that is nevertheless not isomorphic to it (see de Vignemont & Singer, 2006). Allegiance refers to the “sustained, strong pro-attitudes that keep us invested in the success of a deeply morally flawed protagonist” (Clavel-Vasquez, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, an empathic response to a character is neither required for engagement with every work of fiction nor the only mode of imaginative engagement.

that we can and often do empathize with rough heroes and this comes with certain merits: Anja Berninger (2021) maintains that since empathy creates a sense of similarity between the empathizer and the target of empathetic response, empathy towards morally problematic heroes may undermine our self-trust, which can be morally beneficial in various ways (for example, we become aware of our moral fallibility). William Kidder (2022) also stresses the cognitive value of empathy towards rough heroes, in that we acquire an important lesson about “humanity’s susceptibility to moral deviance”.

### **3. Empathy and Virtuousness**

While most discussions assume that we respond empathetically to fictional characters in much the same way we engage with real agents (Robinson, 2010, Currie, 1997, Coplan, 2004, Gilmore 2020), little attention has been given to the correlation between the difficulties we encounter in relating empathetically with real-life morally problematic narratives and the problems in relating to vicious perspectives in fiction (Goldie, 2003, pp. 65-66 is an exception; see also Sodoma, 2024, p. 7).

I will now introduce a problem from moral philosophy, recently described by Olivia Bailey in terms of the “puzzle about the relation between empathy and virtuousness”. Following John McDowell’s Aristotelian account, Bailey argues that the (truly) virtuous person cannot empathize with vicious perspectives, because part of what it means to be virtuous is that one cannot perceive the world in a less-than-virtuous manner. Yet, as Bailey argues, people who are less than virtuous sometimes need their “minorly vicious” perspectives to be empathized with, because they desire for the appropriateness of their (mildly vicious) emotions to be “appreciated” at first-hand. Insofar as the above thoughts are plausible, it seems that the virtuous person would be unable to understand the perspective of the less-than-virtuous in a first-personal manner and attend to the other’s need for their vicious emotions to be empathetically understood. Therefore, the (truly) virtuous person is missing a potentially crucial way of understanding other perspectives of the world in a first-personal manner and responding to the needs of the less-than-virtuous others.

I will try to summarize why this thesis is, I believe, correct. As much discussed, McDowell’s Aristotelian conception of the “fully” virtuous person is very demanding – some even ascribe to

McDowell the demand for “a god-like nature” (see Blackburn, 1998). However, we need not address this issue here. For the present discussion, it is enough to maintain that for ordinary people who go on to become virtuous (people at various stages of moral development) certain morally deviant possibilities do not appear as attractive (Bailey, 2021, p. 9632; see Curzer, 2002, pp. 154-155). McDowell argues that the way we perceive virtues and vices, whether in life or in art, depends and draws on a practical knowledge of how to act that is shaped by our upbringing and our participation in the relevant social practices. Thus, moral character functions as a ‘second nature’ which allows us to perceive a moral reality by seeing an action as right or wrong, and to determine the reasons for our actions. The fully virtuous person is one who has silenced all “considerations which compete with the demands of virtue” (Seidman, 2005, p. 68); such a person cannot empathize with vicious perspectives because these do not appear as having intelligible motivations. *Mutatis mutandis*, individuals in earlier stages of moral development (yet striving for progress) similarly experience difficulties empathizing with more vicious viewpoints. So what the “puzzle about the relation between empathy and virtuousness” shows is that one’s moral development or progress on the road to virtuousness is related to difficulties in engaging first-personally with vicious perspectives, in that “increasing virtue translates into a diminishing ability to empathize deeply or precisely with vicious emotions” (Bailey, 2021, p. 9632).<sup>5</sup> Even the morally mediocre person’s attempt to take in the perspective of someone who is considerably less virtuous is impeded; nevertheless, morally mediocre people are in a better position to fulfil the vicious others’ empathetic needs, and according to Bailey, this is a significant moral role that the less-than-virtuous people have (referred to as the “division of moral labor”).

#### 4. Points of Entry to Vicious Perspectives

The above analysis of the relationship between empathy and virtuousness stops short of explaining how the less-than-virtuous (the morally mediocre) can nevertheless empathize with seriously vicious perspectives and relate to experiences that are far removed from their own, such as being

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<sup>5</sup> As Bailey herself comments, Adam Morton also argued for the “blinkering effect” to our empathetic capacities. Our moral sensitivities constrain our empathetic imagination not only towards those who perform atrocious acts, but also in understanding less vicious and relatively harmless behaviours (Morton, 2011, p. 318).

the mob boss Tony Soprano or the sociopath Ripley.<sup>6</sup> There are at least two possibilities we should examine.

One possibility could be that ordinary individuals have first-personal access to certain vicious perspectives, in the form of memories from past situations and previous stages of their ethical development.<sup>7</sup> For example, according to this idea, we can understand and empathize with a friend's sense of *schadenfreude* regarding an opponent's failure, because we can imaginatively return to previous stages of our moral development, even though this emotion is out of our *current* emotional repertoire. Even though this idea seems at first plausible, things are significantly more complicated. I may remember that I used to feel *schadenfreude* towards some rivals at work. Yet, I am no longer able to first-personally engage imaginatively in the emotion, in the sense of appreciating *schadenfreude* as an appropriate emotional response for the rival's failure. For this kind of imaginative engagement would require that I quarantine my background emotional dispositions to relate to a past self from a first-personal perspective (see Goldie, 2011). However, in case I have gone through a moral transformation, such that I have built up new dispositions (and, possibly, acquired new virtues), this first-personal access to a past self is disrupted (see Paul, 2017, pp. 267-268). I might be able to relate from a third-personal perspective, but I cannot simulate my former emotional perspective from my current first-personal perspective.<sup>8</sup> So, the idea of triggering past experiences may suffice to explain an understanding from the third-person perspective, but does not explain first-personal or empathetic engagement.

Another possibility is to accept that the ordinary virtuous person can at most experience empathy with *some parts* of a vicious perspective. Maybe taking in or endorsing a vicious perspective is gradable. This alien perspective involves several mental states, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, desires, motives, and so on. One need not imagine believing, feeling, perceiving, and

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<sup>6</sup> Anja Berninger (2024) discusses the case of the experience of Holocaust survivors as being “too far removed from the sorts of experience the audience can draw on in trying to imagine what things were like” to argue that we are not able to empathetically imagine what they have been through.

<sup>7</sup> This idea assumes that to be able to empathize with another's emotion, it is necessary that one has experienced a similar emotion, see P. Bloom *Against Empathy* (2016, pp. 147-149).

<sup>8</sup> Compare from M. Boyle: “A person who consciously inhabits a point of view, we said, does not merely have some first- order mental state, on the one hand, and a second- order belief that she is in this state, on the other. Rather, her point of view on herself and her point of view on the world fuse into one, in such a way that she can express her first-order point of view in thinking herself to be in the corresponding mental state” (Boyle, 2024, p. 169).

desiring what the fictional hero thinks, feels, perceives, and desires in full. For example, it is possible to imagine being a mob boss without imagining from the inside every aspect of what it is like being a gangster. I can imagine being Tony Soprano and realizing that I have to murder my beloved cousin to end a bloody conflict with another crime family. I imagine being coerced and feeling guilty and stressed, so I stand in a first-personal relation to *this aspect* of Tony's mental situation. I cannot, however, imagine *choosing* murdering my cousin (see Sodoma, 2024), nor do I see the proposition that I have to murder my cousin as convincing (see Boyle 2024, p. 96). I can imagine certain aspects more or less vividly. For example, I vividly imagine "from the inside" feeling guilty (after all, I do too experience guilt over how I treat some of my relatives). But I can imagine desiring what Tony desires up to the degree that I can imagine seeing something good or desirable about it (see Scanlon, 1998, p. 38).

Drawing on Carlotta Pavese's reflections on kinds of gradability of know-how (Pavese, 2017), I would like to suggest that empathy is gradable in regards to how many aspects of the other's experience one imagines, and in regards to how well or vividly one imagines those aspects (see Aumann, 2023; also Bailey, 2018). Our moral development affects our imaginative capacities and limits what we can empathize with and to what degree; nevertheless, the morally mediocre person is in a better position than the virtuous person to imaginatively apprehend vicious perspectives. As Bailey correctly points out, following McDowell, just as the non-virtuous seek "independently intelligible" desires or what McDowell calls "points of entry" into appreciation of a moral outlook, *mutatis mutandis* the morally mediocre can find "points of entry" to the vicious perspective. What could be such a "point of entry" be?

One shortcoming of the discussion about engaging with vicious perspectives is the acceptance of the idea that we can somehow empathize or simply ally with a hero despite them being utterly remorseless.<sup>9</sup> But the narratives of such heroes – if they exist in fiction – would not allow for a point of entry to their emotional state. What needs to be addressed is the role of reflective thinking and remorse in vicious narratives as the required "point of entry" (Kidder, 2022 is an exception): what makes a vicious perspective a candidate for the virtuous person's empathetic

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<sup>9</sup> See Eaton 2003; Clavel-Vasquez is cautious to say that they "show remorse but it is not a central part of the narrative" (Clavel-Vasquez, 2018, 203).

response or compatible with it is that the non-virtuous agent expresses some kind of remorse or relates with her own reprehensible emotions in a reflective way. She has to some degree objectified the viciousness of her perspective, she is self-aware of the morally flawed nature of her beliefs and dispositions, and that means that she has not “surrender herself” to them but maintains a psychological distance. She may be viewing the world from an immoral perspective, she is perhaps vicious, but at the same time she has not capitulated to viciousness.

What I would like to suggest, therefore, is that what contributes to the differentiation of vicious perspectives enabling an empathetic response from vicious perspectives that do not, is the vicious hero’s experiencing moments of remorseful behaviour. For if the hero hadn’t tasted remorse or stood reflectively towards her own perspective, then indeed we would not be able to empathetically adopt her perspective and, furthermore, we would not perceive any moral reason to do so. Part of what permits the readers to engage first-personally with vicious heroes is that fiction provides a rich narrative universe which often (if not in all of the cases) invites the reader to share the vicious hero’s moments of remorse and self-reflective thinking, even if these moments are not central to the narrative. It might be more difficult to empathize with real-life vicious perspectives, because their self-reflecting thinking (if existing at all) is not usually available to the second person perspective.

## **5. Should we Empathize with Vicious Perspectives?**

In the final part of my essay, I focus on the second challenge posed by Bailey, namely whether there are cases when we should cultivate empathetic imagination with vicious perspectives. Bailey argues that at least in the case of “mildly vicious” perspectives, humane understanding or first-hand appreciation of the intelligibility of another’s emotion is something everyone needs because it contributes to one’s flourishing. According to Bailey, “not receiving the sort of humane understanding which empathy affords is a source of suffering” (2021, p. 9639). Obviously, vicious perspectives from fiction, such as rough heroines, are a different case given that they do not exist and do not need to be humanly understood. But this remark entails that the ethical flaws and immoral perspectives are quarantined in fiction and overlooks the many paths through which

emotional responses to fiction transfer to real life. As Stacie Friend has argued (2020), emotions in response to fiction may carry over to similar real-life narratives and heroes and still be subjected to appropriateness or correctness categories. Empathy for fictional characters has the power to motivate desires to act (Harold, 2000) and can have “a profound, lasting, and more often than not unconscious influence on our attitudes” (Paris, *forthcoming*). So, examining whether we should empathize with rough heroines involves allowing that sometimes our emotional responses to fiction interact with other mental states or motivate action towards non-fictional female criminals. If fiction can morally affect audiences, are there any reasons we *should not resist* empathetically engaging with vicious perspectives? Although I cannot here examine this problem in depth, I will outline the main points of a possible account by focusing on the special case of rough heroines.

Let’s take *Griselda*, Netflix’s portrayal of the terrifying drug lord, the Cocaine Godmother. The narrative depicts a heroine who, although transcends her gender role since she runs a cartel, nonetheless reflects basic gendered representational stereotypes about women who commit crimes (Griselda is initially presented as a victim of her abusive husband, and eventually as a deranged monster, reflecting the “mad, sad or bad” stereotypical representation of female criminals). Griselda aspires to be a rough heroine – after all, Sofia Vergara, who portrayed Blanco and participated in the production of the show, stated that her goal was to create a heroine in the tradition of Tony Soprano.<sup>10</sup> Yet, despite the narrative’s prescriptions, we find it difficult to sympathize or ally with Griselda; instead, we experience what Adriana Clavel-Vázquez described as affective resistance: we need greater effort to develop strong and sustained sympathetic attitudes towards rough heroines because we perceive them as violating gender norms and expectations (Clavel-Vázquez, 2018, p. 202).<sup>11</sup>

As argued above, morally mediocre agents are posited as being better than the virtuous to empathetically apprehend vicious perspectives, opening up a significant moral role for them. Let’s suppose, moreover, that morally mediocre folks like us care to improve morally and progress on the path to virtuousness. Do we have any motivational grounds to empathize with rough heroines?

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<sup>10</sup> “I always dreamed of Griselda to be a little bit like Tony Soprano. He was a very bad guy, but you wanted him to win; you could justify some of his behaviors”, Vergara stated to the *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/24/arts/television/sofia-vergara-netflix-griselda-blanco.html>

<sup>11</sup> Clavel-Vázquez considers engaging with the rough hero as allegiance, and others as sympathy or strong affection (Eaton, 2003, Carroll, 2013).

In my view, we have at least two. The first is moral: the tension between the prescriptions of the narrative and our emotional responses can trigger a reflection on the grounds that tend to impede our empathetic response to rough heroines. Understanding that the reasons for empathy's failure (and thus for our fictionally inappropriate response) might result from stereotypes and implicit biases can be necessary to surmount deeply rooted obstacles in the path to virtuousness. Specifically, reflection on the differences between empathizing with rough heroes and rough heroines can draw the attention of the empathizer to ways in which her empathetic skills are problematic, despite her belief that what motivated her response was the heroine's vices. It can, in other words, become a tool in the process of moral development, by enhancing a "clear [moral] perception" that "insulates" (McDowell, 1988, p. 91) the sexism or other biases they may have. After all, as Robert Johnson points "we think better of those who acknowledge their social or cultural biases and trust the insights of those who are in a better position to see what they may have difficulty seeing" (Johnson, 2003, p. 824). So, we have at least one moral reason to *voluntarily* try to empathize with rough heroines: it contributes to our moral education by remaining aware that sometimes what motivates us to refrain from empathetically engaging with morally challenging perspectives is the influence of implicit bias.

The second reason is epistemic: biased ways of seeing socially disadvantaged groups are widespread and are not restricted to fiction (Goffin & Friend, 2022, p. 135); for example, female criminals are seen as deprived of agency and autonomy, and a "misogynistic form of punishment" (Manne, 2017) is sought for them because they have violated the essence of femininity (Kennedy, 1992). Allowing that sometimes our emotional responses to fiction interact with other mental states or motivate action toward non-fictional agents, empathizing with rough heroines can provide phenomenal knowledge about female criminality. The objection is, however, that implicit biases are deeply rooted and affect both our epistemic beliefs and motivations for action even when we explicitly reject discriminations and honestly have good intentions. Empathy is also biased in various ways, as its opponents have fiercely argued (Bloom, 2016; Prinz, 2011). Yet, empathy with alien perspectives is the best way we have to turn our attention towards the existence and scope of our implicitly biased background and, in this sense, improve our cognitive skills. From that point,



attending to the stories of rough heroines can be a means of recognizing female criminals' subjectivity and accepting their agency.

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## *Der Wille zur Gestaltung: Cassirer and Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>*

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ABSTRACT. The juxtaposition of Nietzsche and Cassirer might appear counterintuitive. Nietzsche is not the philosopher one would expect to hear mentioned in the same breath as Cassirer: his presence in Cassirer's writings is marginal. Nevertheless, it would be meaningful to compare their works, since, as Raio has suggested (Raio, 2005, p. 33), the original and aesthetic motive underlying Nietzsche's and Cassirer's philosophies is similar, even though the two followed different paths. In this paper, I consequently aim to rethink Cassirer's interpretation of Nietzsche. In sum, I will show that Cassirer's references are limited and that they force him to adhere to an oversimplified reading of Nietzsche's philosophy. As for the structure of the paper, I will divide it into three sections. In the first, I will explain why we can interpret Cassirer's system as dialectical aesthetics. In the second section I will look at Cassirer's interpretation of Nietzsche. Finally, in the third and fourth sections, which contains the concluding remarks, I will point out that a more precise analysis of Nietzsche's work forces us to modify the view that emerges from Cassirer's assessment, alongside with the general evaluation of their thought.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Neriojamil Palumbo and Luigi Imperato for their valuable advice and the insightful discussions we had concerning this paper.

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## 1. Cassirer's Dialectical Aesthetics

It is well known that Cassirer rejected Kant's notion of intuition in his epistemological writings. In particular, he could not accept the receptive structure of Kant's subjectivity, which would imply the unjustified endorsement of the copy theory of knowledge, i.e., the fact that our concepts should reproduce the world as it is (Cassirer, 1953, p. 32 *et passim*). Rather, he held that we codify reality through mathematical relations and thus we understand it symbolically (Cassirer, 1953, p. 149; pp. 267-269).

It is equally well known that Cassirer extended this program to every understanding of reality: the rejection of the receptive structure is preparatory to the symbolic foundation of the cultural world. In fact, the copy theory implies that all living beings 'react' to given stimuli, but the refutation of Darwin's understanding of "expression" proves that this stance is wrong. Assessing the emergence and meaning of language, Cassirer opposed von Humboldt's concept of *ἐνέργεια* to Darwin's idea that there is no principled distinction between the reaction of a dog to its beloved master and that of a human smiling at another human (Cassirer, 1955a, p. 180). So, the point is that human actions and faculties overarch the purely instinctual and biological level – indeed, Cassirer will differentiate "human responses" from "animal reactions" (Cassirer 1956, pp. 44-62). Reality as determined by human responses is the world of culture, for which we should accordingly elaborate a different method of study and different criteria for explanation. The former is a revised version of Hegel's phenomenology (Cassirer, 1957, pp. XIII-XVII), while the latter are semantic functions ("expression," "representation," "meaning function") and basis phenomena.

These two points are obviously interwoven. Although Cassirer did not accept what he called "speculative metaphysics," i.e., a teleological version of the history of concepts and culture (Cassirer, 1920, pp. 362-377), he nonetheless undertook massive reconstructions of empirical research that he tried to frame unitarily. For example, the development of language goes from a sensitive to a purely conceptual and symbolic systematisation by virtue of its intrinsic emancipation from givenness. In turn, this scheme is abided by in the analysis of every "symbolic form," which essentially consists of a system of "self-poietic signs" that stand halfway between humans and the world (Cassirer, 2003, p. 79).

The theory of basis phenomena is the necessary completion of this structure. It is exposed in the first volume of Cassirer's *Nachlass*, i.e., *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*. The general perspective is presented in a text entitled *Über Basisphänomene*, thought to have been written around the 1940s. In short, a “basis phenomenon” is the authentic starting point determining the semantic aspect of a cultural form. In Cassirer's very words, “they are the *look* that we *cast* on the world” (Cassirer, 1995, p. 132). Here is a list of the different versions of basis phenomena:

- (i): *Ich-Phänomen* (I), *Wirkens- Phänomen* (Acting), *Werk- Phänomen* (Work);
- (ii): *Phänomen des Selbst* (Self), *Phänomen des Andern* (Other), *Phänomen der Welt* (World);
- (iii): *Ich* (I), *Du* (You), *Es* (It).

The third triad is perhaps the most famous. To begin with, the I is not the “cogito”; rather, it is “pure flow” and simply designates the tendency to outwardly express one's own basic mental structures and emotions. That is, it mainly corresponds to the expressive function (Cassirer, 1995, p. 123). After that, the “thou” surfaces. It is basically the appearance of “otherness” in terms of subjects living in this world as agents encountering the I. In this case, we become acquainted with the possibility of representing something outside the “monadic being” (Cassirer, 1995, p. 123-124). Finally, the “es” pertains to all the objective representations of natural events and states of affairs, alongside all the products of our actions (Cassirer, 1995, pp. 125-126). A synoptic table that brings together semantic functions and basis phenomena may be of help:

Expression →	I →	Myth
Representation →	Thou →	Perception and Language
Semantic Function →	Es →	Language and Science

The arrows are very schematical and serve an introductory purpose: they show how the formation of symbolic forms is made possible by the passages indicated. For instance, the shift from myth to religion involves the representation of the transcendence of divinity as otherness and thus of the thou, which can however also be introduced in the field of language. This also allows us to enter the world of the Es, where language is deprived of its sensitive heritage and science entails the primacy of pure mathematical thinking.

Furthermore, in each form the balance between subjectivity and objectivity is variable. In the world of myth there is no difference between an actor playing a god and their conviction of *being* that god (Cassirer 1955b, p. 39); the subject is dominated by the “almighty of thought” (Cassirer, 1955b, pp. 157-159) and cannot realise which objects in the world are independent from it and which are conversely the product of its “desire.” It just defines as real what stems from its expressive faculty. In short, no clear partition between subjectivity and objectivity is defined and the subject is immersed in the world, which is made of its creations. Immersivity is only lost once we get out of mythical thinking and need to construct reality according to other conditions, e.g. when using the scheme thing-property (Cassirer, 1957, pp. 118-141).

In conclusion, Cassirer’s philosophy is dialectical, since the boundaries between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ are determined *on the way*. Moreover, it is aesthetic, since the constitution of symbolic forms depends on an original impulse either from expression or the I that Cassirer also calls “*Wille zur Gestaltung*” (Cassirer, 1995, p. 27). It is relevant that this category is introduced in opposition to Nietzsche.

## 2. Cassirer on Nietzsche

The passage to which I was referring at the end of the previous section is the following:

The philosophy of symbolic forms aimed to follow [...] the path which goes through the *concrete* productions of the spirit. However, in this way, spirit unfolds everywhere not as much as “will to power” (*Wille zur Macht*), but as “will to formation” (*Wille zur Gestaltung*). Language, myth, art, knowledge and religion don’t struggle for the *mastery* over the world, but rather for the *formation* of the world (Cassirer, 1995, p. 27).

Here is my hypothesis: both the will to power and the will to formation point to a grounding impulse that can be assimilated to the artistic and, more generally, to the aesthetic transformation of the world. As I have already said, from a Kantian perspective this implies the rejection of receptivity. At this point we can first discuss Cassirer's interpretation of the will to power and second, in the next section, its reliability.

Let me begin by saying that Cassirer considers Nietzsche a philosopher of life, i.e., a thinker who identifies "life" with immediateness. In his view, this has important consequences, since it would be impossible to ground the distinctness of symbolic forms. Furthermore, the objectivity of forms hinges on the autonomy of culture: it is repeated that cultural creations cannot be understood as organic reactions in terms of "fitness" and survival of the species – which also bears on "consciousness" (Nietzsche, 2023, §§ 4 and 11, p. 42 and pp. 47-48; notebook 11, fragments 177-182, pp. 362-366). The philosophy of symbolic forms is conversely idealistic, as the reference to Fichte's concept of "pure seeing" (Cassirer, 1995, p. 28) testifies.<sup>3</sup> To exemplify this point, suffice it to think that if the moon appears as a goddess there is no advantage for those who believe this. It is only to 'pure sight' of humans that the moon might sometimes be a mythical object and other times a scientific object.

Once the autonomy of the cultural world is established, Cassirer may concede that there is an original moment in which symbolic forms do justice to the "almighty of the will" (*Allmacht des Willens*), characterised by the interpenetration of "emotion," "need," and "will" itself. Nevertheless, each form conveys an intrinsic breakthrough which will explain the passage to another form, as in the case of the shift from myth to cults: "Already in myth the human being steps back against the world of things, to live in a world of pure formations (*Gestalten*): the mythical effectual world gradually gives way to a pure world of mythical intuition" (Cassirer 1995, p. 27). In Cassirer's terms, then, this is a step towards the discovery of the concept of symbolic form, which we learn to understand as the opposition of subjectivity to a world of objects created by the self.

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<sup>3</sup> The only exception that I know of is the Yale seminar on *Symbolism, and the Philosophy of Language*, where Cassirer defined symbolic forms as cultural responses not dissimilar to biological adaptations of animals to their environment (Cassirer, 2005, pp. 252-262). Nevertheless, he still specified that culture represents a qualitative jump if compared with nature.



We have quoted thus far from “*Geist*” und “*Leben*,” which was likely written in the late 1920s, and in any case immediately after the completion of the third volume of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, between 1927 and 1929. Let us now return to *Über Basisphänomene*.

Here Cassirer’s target remains unchanged. Nietzsche’s thought surfaces again as regards the analysis of will. In short, the problem is that if we conflate the spiritual with the organic character of creativity and formation, we risk jeopardising the autonomy and free determination of the subject. Also, there would be no point in trying to distinguish between “truth” and “error”: “Is not perhaps *everything* we call truth and value such an error? Is not it born from the *impulse to life* (*Lebensdrang*), which seeks protection and footing for itself [...]?” (Cassirer, 1995, p. 183). As a consequence, Cassirer is trying to eradicate Nietzsche’s conviction that cultural forms are merely “illusions” growing from the tree of life. Symbolic forms are not masks that can be thrown away as we please, but authentic manifestations of the will to formation (Cassirer 1995, pp. 47-48).

It remains to be seen whether Nietzsche’s train of thought can be entirely embedded in this frame.

### 3. Back to Nietzsche

Paradoxically, given Cassirer’s celebrated meticulousness as a historian of philosophy, it is strange that he never cites specific passages from Nietzsche’s works. However, we know that Cassirer owned copies of *The Will to Power*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *The Genealogy of Morals* (Cassirer, 1995, p. 397). The first edition of *The Will to Power* in particular may have influenced his interpretation, pushing him to criticise the intertwining of organic and cultural aspects in the will to power (Nietzsche, 1988, notebook 9, fr. 102, pp. 393-394, *Will to Power*, fr. 801). Nevertheless, a look at *The Birth of Tragedy* (1st ed. 1872) may be instructive in revising this perspective.

We know that Nietzsche’s main claim in that book is that the authentic sense of the Greek spirit does not consist of the harmony and beauty of artistic forms represented by the Apolline. Rather, it is the tumultuous originality of tragedy that Nietzsche identifies as the “will to live” and calls: “Dionysos.” A definition is given in the following excerpt:

These Dionysiac stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting, awaken either under the influence of narcotic drink, of which all human beings and peoples who are close to the origin of things speak in their hymns, or at the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 17).

Here is the point. If “self-forgetting” is a dialectical category – the I is lost *through* and *within* myth – then Dionysos is not immediateness. Indeed, it involves the deconstruction of subjectivity in favour of a return to the roots in which the I and the world are melted together – the Greek supreme thought, ἔν καὶ πᾶν. Nietzsche even writes that humans in this situation become “works of art.”

Singing and dancing, man expresses his sense of belonging to a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and talk and is on the brink of flying and dancing, up and away into the air above. His gestures speak of his enchantment. [...] He feels himself to be a god, he himself now moves in such ecstasy and sublimity as once he saw the gods move in his dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: all nature’s artistic power reveals itself here, amidst shivers of intoxication, to the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 18).

Nietzsche is thus aware that the revival of Dionysos is far from being accomplished. In fact, it is the Apolline that synthesises the Dionysian “*in a symbolical dream-image*” (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 19). Accordingly, the Apolline tones down the Dionysian experience, but it also makes it vivid, suggesting that irregularity or chaos cannot be rendered without symbols. Nietzsche’s examples of the Dionysian, to wit, “the unified stream of melody and the quite incomparable world of harmony” (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 21), are telling. It is not by chance that Nietzsche underlines that “Dionysos” is the name for the explosion of the symbolic activity:

The essence of nature is bent on expressing Itself; a new world of symbols is required, firstly the symbolism of the entire body, not just of the mouth, the face, the word, but the full gesture of dance with its rhythmical movement of every limb. Then there is a sudden, tempestuous growth in music’s other symbolic powers, in rhythm, dynamics, and harmony. To comprehend this complete unchaining of all symbolic powers, a man must already have reached that height of self-abandonment which seeks symbolic expression in those powers: thus the dithyrambic servant of Dionysos can only be understood by his own kind! With what astonishment the Apolline Greeks must have regarded him! With an astonishment enlarged by the added horror of realizing

that all this was not so foreign to them after all, indeed that their Apolline consciousness only hid this Dionysiac world from them like a veil (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 21).

The complete structure of this alternation between Apollo and Dionysos is grounded in the eruptive creativity of music, which “stimulates us to *contemplate symbolically* Dionysiac universality, and it causes the symbolic image to emerge with the *highest degree of significance*” (Nietzsche 1999, p. 79). But clearly, the fact that the return to life does not entail embracing unformed immediateness also reveals that the Dionysiac spirit is something behind the Apolline, according to the classic scheme phenomenon-noumenon. The overcoming of the Kantian and Schopenhauerian structure is here gained by Nietzsche only genealogically, and perhaps not in *The Birth*.<sup>4</sup> However, it is interesting that here the Dionysian corresponds to an immediate “*myth*”-creating process, which is

[...] a unique example of something universal and true which gazes out into infinity. In true Dionysiac music we find just such a general mirror of the world-Will; a vivid event refracted in this mirror expands immediately, we feel, into a copy of an eternal truth (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 83).

The Dionysian is therefore, on the one hand, life in its authenticity and, on the other, the transfiguration of this authenticity. Indeed, the chorus of tragedy, as Schiller pointed out, is “a living wall which tragedy draws about itself in order to shut itself off in purity from the real world and to preserve its ideal ground and its poetic freedom” (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 38). Being “relieved from the very outset of any need to copy reality with painful exactness” (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 39), which is overtly consistent with Cassirer’s epistemology and philosophy of culture, the chorus of tragedy is but a “fictitious *state of nature*” populated by “fictitious *creatures of nature*” (Nietzsche 1999, p. 60), which is nonetheless not consistent with Cassirer’s approach because cultural creations are here understood as fake objects. Nevertheless, the chorus itself remains “self-mirroring of the Dionysian man” (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 42). Thus, although the satyr has the same relationship with “the cultured human being” as Dionysian music has to “civilisation” – that is, even though the

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<sup>4</sup> These passages are beautifully explained by Kemp Winfree, who, dealing with the concept of de-subjection, clarifies that only genealogy could avoid questions concerning the dualistic arrangement of the Apolline-Dionysian pair and its metaphysical reverberations (Kemp Winfree, 2003, pp. 67-68).

latter, according to Richard Wagner, is “extinguished (*aufgehoben*) by music, just as lamplight is superseded by the light of day” (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 39) – Dionysos is a mask, or more precisely the masquerade itself.

It follows that it is hard to judge whether and to what extent Nietzsche and Cassirer agree. On the one hand, tragedy is symbolic and at least representative in Cassirer’s terms (Kemp Winfree, 2003, p. 70), since the scene is a “*vision*” of the chorus itself (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 44).<sup>5</sup> As Cassirer stated in *The Myth of the State*, “the expression of a feeling is not the feeling itself – it is emotion turned into an image” (Cassirer, 1946, p. 43). It is then not accidental that Nietzsche distinguished “the Dionysiac spectators from those who were under the spell of Dionysiac magic” (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 42). But on the other hand, the Dionysian is less “counterfeit” than other artistic representations. This contradicts Cassirer’s view twice: first, we would be going backwards – if not to life – to the roots of spirit; second, we would be trying to tear apart its vestiges.

Be that as it may, the authentic betrayal of Dionysos is not that of Apollo, but rather that of “Socrates,” which stands for Greek rationalist philosophy and science. While all three indicate a psychological type, it is only the Socratic that goes too far from the Dionysian. If the Apolline has the scope of making life tolerable despite its tragic essence (Nietzsche, 1999, pp. 76-77), it is the Socratic that not only transposes the Dionysian into an *image* but kills it through the rationalisation of all vital instincts (Nietzsche, 1999, pp. 54-64). However, the authenticity of myth resurfaces if, for instance, we consider the case of Plato, who exploits myths where science cannot succeed. Here, rational thinking is reconverted into “*art*” and cannot “*correct*” existence, as it normally does (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 73).

At this point, we can reconsider Nietzsche’s belonging to the category of the philosophers of life. Truth be told, even the case of Bergson would deserve further attention, since immediateness is for him realised more on the side of the intellect and will, rather than on that of “being,” whereby reality is multifaceted (Cassirer, 1995, pp. 46-47). By the same token, we have just seen that in Nietzsche diversity is explained through the existence of different psychological types, while immediateness has a plastic character. The only issue that remains is the switching off of

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<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche refers to the fact that dithyrambs were played in circle around the scene at the beginning, before the chorus gathered on the upper stage of the theatre.

subjectivity. Let us consequently reconsider Nietzsche's claim that humans are works of art. He writes:

We may very well assume we are already images and artistic projections for the true creator of art, and that our highest dignity lies in our significance as works of art—for only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*—although, of course, our awareness of our significance in this respect hardly differs from the awareness which painted soldiers have of the battle depicted on the same canvas (Nietzsche, 1999, pp. 32-33).

The self-forgetting of the I causes the transformation of the subject into a character possessed by the will to live, which is reshaped at the outset and is a non-Kantian and almost non-subjective will to transfiguration<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, we should now acknowledge that “culture” is an “illusion,” since it is a reaction that high spirits must embrace as a consequence of “the burden and heaviness of being” (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 85). Nietzsche even dares to say that “all those things which we now call culture, education, civilisation must someday appear before the judge Dionysos whom no man can deceive” (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 94).

This view is far from that of Cassirer, and again his manuscript *Über Basisphänomene* is of service in illuminating the distance. Discussing the “objective character of the *Ausdrucksfunktion*” (Cassirer, 1995, p. 121), Cassirer recapitulates that, at the beginning, we simply take every perception as true. Afterwards, behaviourism and physicalism teach us that a breakthrough must occur and that we can only trust assertions relating to empirical contents. In the end, we limit both worlds: we reject the nostalgia of immediateness, into which the philosophy of life (Bergson, Klages) slides, just as we mitigate the claim of physicalism, otherwise we could not grant existence to cultural phenomena.<sup>7</sup>

We are now ready to approach the evaluation of Nietzsche's and Cassirer's aesthetics. I should reiterate that both individuated a faculty of transfiguration as the essence of human activity;

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<sup>6</sup> From a Kantian perspective, I have sought to delineate Cassirer's potential critique of Nietzsche. Specifically, Kant's principle of autonomy, a cornerstone of his ethics, is arguably undermined if the individual subject is subsumed within an objective will to live. Consequently, to establish the autonomy and ethical dimension of culture, it becomes necessary to prioritise the “I” as the productive force of myth, rather than myth itself. See below.

<sup>7</sup> Is it significant that Cassirer in this passage does not mention Nietzsche? The character of Cassirer's posthumous writings does not enable us to answer this question.

however, they reacted differently to this discovery. On the one hand, Nietzsche tried to portray this will to transfiguration as an ‘instinct’ that would provoke the melting of the subject into the world and its oblivion. Quite interestingly, Nietzsche himself recognised that this is a mythical condition, and pushed forward with his endeavour, to such a point that he understood each cultural construction – above all language and science – as metaphorizations (Kofman, 1971). By way of example, in *Human All too Human* he argued that “the scientific human being” was merely “a further development of the artistic one” (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 152), suggesting that only the latter is actual.

I do not think that *The Birth* is foreign to this claim, although it shares more with Cassirer’s metaphysics of symbolic forms than any other of Nietzsche’s works. Indeed, Nietzsche argued that we can distinguish three kinds of culture (*Socratic*, *artistic*, or *tragic*) depending on the balance that knowledge, art, and metaphysics can reach (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 85). This somewhat resembles Cassirer’s basis phenomena; however, such dialectics remain illusory.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, it is the interplay of “*beginnende Äußerung*” and “*Anfang der Entäußerung*” that in Cassirer justifies the objectivity of forms (Cassirer, 2011, p. 59). Therefore, if the I is the word standing for this “initial exteriorisation” and if objectivity should be removed from its being external, the result of this process is a sort of self-awareness of the I concerning its creations, not its self-forgetfulness in them.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, we cannot avoid mentioning that Nietzsche’s metaphysics of the artist, which advocates the immersivity of myths, could be seen by Cassirer as a kind of preamble to the political use of myths in Germany under fascism. Truth be told, Cassirer explicitly attacked Hegel for that (Cassirer, 1946, p. 273), but it is hard not to think that Nietzsche was an obvious target. Indeed, the concept of “*Weltgeschichte*,” which neutralises the individual, would pave the way for Nietzsche’s “immoralism” (Cassirer 1946, p. 268).<sup>10</sup> So, there are political reasons behind Cassirer’s criticism

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<sup>8</sup> In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche will even say that his work “smells offensively Hegelian” (Nietzsche, 2021, p. 257).

<sup>9</sup> The difference between Cassirer and Nietzsche on this point can also be extrapolated from an essay Cassirer devoted to Schiller. There, Cassirer argued that “aesthetic phantasy” cannot confuse the boundaries between “reason” and “imagination,” to wit, between “aesthetics” and “logic,” although we must recognise their connection (Cassirer, 2001, p. 323).

<sup>10</sup> Plus, the sentiment of “*Pathos der Distanz*” would characterise the emergence of racist theories (Cassirer, 1946, pp. 235-236).

of Nietzsche, which suggests that he may have either overemphasised or overlooked some theoretical elements. In this context, his engagement with the works cited at the outset of this section might have appeared adequate for the confirmation of his ideas, with the result that we experience a diminution of his customary mastery and theoretical composure in the history of philosophy.

Let me conclude by referring to Carnap. In his famous paper *Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache*, he explained that metaphysics as a system of logical propositions regulated by inferences and implications is simply meaningless, but that it is still possible as art. If the task of metaphysics is “the expression of the feeling of life” (Carnap, 1931, p. 238), there is indeed no need to use logic. Therefore, while thinkers such as Heidegger would only assert nonsensical statements, authors such as Nietzsche are the only type of metaphysician who is coherent with meaninglessness: he is irrational, he is a poet – although he is a true empiricist as a genealogist and psychologist of morality. But this may also mean that he is not really a metaphysician, since he has transcended metaphysics as a logical system. By contrast, Cassirer appears to be the last heir of the German tradition, for he was committed to giving a metaphysically rational structure to an otherwise purely empirical cultural analysis.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I hope to have shown that interpretations of great philosophers cannot be standardised. I dealt with Cassirer’s theory of basis phenomena to shed light on what I called “dialectical aesthetics,” to wit, the idea that reality is symbolically transformed from the standpoint of culture. After that, I highlighted that Cassirer considered Nietzsche as a philosopher of life, whose main concept – i.e., the will to power – does not allow us to lay the foundations of the world of culture. In the third section, I explained why Cassirer’s interpretation is narrow. Indeed, the bibliographical references are lacking and sometimes controversial, as well as contaminated by political reasons. Accordingly, Cassirer failed to realise that Nietzsche’s metaphysics of the artist, especially the one of *The Birth*, can be partially reconciled with the notion of will to formation.

However, I did not want to underestimate the differences between the two authors. Nietzsche aimed to restore the original meaning of life; for his part, Cassirer conversely aimed to preserve all symbolic forms as true objectifications of the spirit. In short, while for Nietzsche “reality” is Dionysos as the principle and place of the original transfiguration of life, for Cassirer it is rather everything that extends beyond it that constitutes the real manifestation of human culture as the result of the activity of the I, of the will to formation – with nothing left behind to be glimpsed, with nothing in which to be melted down.

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***The Epistemic Value of Sad Music:  
Reflection as a Motivation to Listen to Sad Music***

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ABSTRACT. Why do people enjoy sad music? Recently, empirical studies on this issue exploded and offer valuable insights into the paradox of sad music. Importantly, it appears that people listen to sad music *especially when they feel sad* (contextual issue). Personal traits, notably empathy and absorption, predict the enjoyment of sad music (personal issue). And the perils of sad music, particularly rumination, are well documented (dysfunctional issue). This article uses these findings to refine the paradox of sad music. I argue that the main philosophical accounts fail to address the refined paradox. As a remedy, I offer a solution that relies on the epistemic function of sadness. Sadness motivates reflection and comes with epistemic benefits, such as more realistic beliefs and an analytic mindset. I claim that sadness' epistemic value illuminates the allure of sad music. People listen to sad music, especially when they feel sad, because they exploit the reflective mindset of sadness. I offer three arguments that pertain to the contextual, personal, and dysfunctional issues raised by the refined paradox: the reflective mindset nicely illuminates these issues. As sad music helps us to reflect on what truly matters, it is no wonder that people often deem it profound.

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Let us start with a vignette case that will guide my investigation.

*Breakup:* It's been a while since my partner and I had issues. And today we broke up. I am heartbroken and devastated. I can't help thinking: Why did this happen? What am I going to do with my life? Back home, I decide to relax by listening to music. I put a playlist on, and Los del Rio's *Macarena* pops up (the application was on shuffle mode and we hosted a party last night). I immediately cover my ears out of annoyance. This ridiculously happy song doesn't fit my mood at all – I am so desperate. I thus switch to the next song. This time, it's Max Richter's *Sarajevo*, an intense ambient piece crystallized around musical screams and vocalizations that poignantly evoke suffering, grieving, and despair. I decide to give this piece a chance. I listen to it, and I cry and cry and cry. What a delight. I find it ethereally beautiful. I even feel frissons. It helps me breathe deeply and calms me down. It's *exactly* what I needed to the point that I spent the entire evening listening to Max Richter. After having cried rivers and thought about love all night, I peacefully fell asleep on the sofa.

As this example illustrates, many people love sad music, i.e. music that is expressive of sadness and that tends to induce sadness (§1). Yet, when it comes to ordinary life, except pathological cases, people usually avoid sadness and sad situations, i.e. situations that involve or elicit sadness. Now, the appreciation of sad music doesn't seem to be pathological. There is nothing wrong or masochistic in preferring to listen to *Sarajevo* rather than the *Macarena* when one is heartbroken; listening to sad music sounds like the perfect thing to do in such circumstances, at least for some people. Why do we enjoy sad music? What do we gain by listening to sad music? This paradox of sad music has fascinated philosophers since Antiquity. Recently, empirical studies on this issue exploded and offer valuable insights (see Garrido, 2017 for a review). Curiously, it appears that people listen to sad music *especially when they feel sad*, just like in our vignette case. Sadness and distress are the best predictors for choosing to listen to sad music. Studies also reveal that listening to sad music *intensifies* sadness (Vuoskoski & Eerola, 2011). This renders the puzzle even more perplexing. Why do people seek sad music especially when they feel sad? Why do

people not choose to listen to joyful music instead, such as the *Macarena*, as this would cheer them up, put a smile on their faces, and distract them from their misery? This article addresses this *refined* puzzle: Why do people seek *sad music*, as opposed to music expressive of other emotions (particularly *joyful music*), *especially when they feel sad*?

In fact, not everybody enjoys sad music, and some people do resort to cheerful music when they feel sad. According to recent studies unraveling the personal profile of sad music lovers, the main personal determinants of the appreciation of sad music are high levels of empathy, high capacity of absorption and imagination, introversion, openness to experience, and neuroticism (§1). Clinically depressed people have a strong preference for sad music. This often results in cognitive rumination or obsessive thinking about negative situations, which is dysfunctional. However, as observed, not all love for sad music is pathological. On the contrary, sad music can be used as a means of emotional regulation and thus may contribute to well-being. How?

Building on these findings, this article offers a refined formulation of the paradox and examines the most influential accounts – particularly Davies (1997), Levinson (1982) and Sizer (2019) – in light of it. It appears that these accounts leave the refined paradox unexplained and fail to capture the specificity of sadness. This is not to say that there isn't a grain of truth in these proposals. Indeed, studies suggest that there are various motivations to listen to sad music. In principle, there is no reason to think that people choose to listen to sad music for *one* reason only. Several considerations play a role, such as aesthetic values and preferences, emotional communion (“misery loves company”), relaxation, or the need to weep, among other factors (Van den Tol, 2016). If one embraces a pluralist framework, it appears that the main philosophical accounts nicely capture the appeal of sad music in some cases. That being said, I offer a new motivation to listen to sad music which can help to address the refined paradox and which relies on the epistemic value of sadness. Studies reveal that sadness has epistemic benefits (§3). When feeling sad, people tend to reflect carefully. They form more realistic beliefs, are less prone to epistemic biases, and approach problems in a more analytical way than when they are happy. In a nutshell, sadness involves the reflective mindset; its function is epistemic. I propose that the epistemic value of sadness illuminates the allure of sad music, at least in some cases. People choose to listen to sad music, especially when they feel sad, because sad music intensifies and guides the reflective

mindset. As sad music helps to reflect carefully, listening to it comes with long-term benefits. Although the appreciation of sad music can exploit other facets of sadness, particularly the relief afforded by weeping and the calmness of low arousal, sadness's epistemic value affords more straightforward benefits and illuminates key features of the allure of sad music.

This article is divided into 4 sections. Section 1 formulates the refined paradox by raising the contextual, personal, and dysfunctional issues. Section 2 examines influential accounts in light of these issues. Section 3 dives into sadness and its epistemic function. Section 4 defends my proposal by disentangling the three issues.

## 1. The Refined Paradox

Traditionally, the paradox of sad music is formulated as follows: why do people enjoy sad music, as they usually avoid sadness and situations that elicit sadness? Let me start with three clarifications.

First, I assume that sad music can elicit sadness (*pace* Kivy). People report feeling sadness, nostalgia, peacefulness, or tenderness when listening to sad music, and emotions elicited by sad music are similar to sadness regarding physiology, expressions, and neuronal activity (Young, 2014). I thus assume that sad music can elicit sadness, although the experience can consist of mixed feelings that encompass sadness and pleasure, such as nostalgia or being moved.

I also assume that sadness is unpleasant. This is compatible with the idea that sad music can be pleasant, as the experience may be a mixed feeling. Still, the pleasure we feel is intimately related to the presence of sadness. Otherwise, we would seek happy music, as the latter tends to elicit pure pleasure. It seems, then, that we gain something from feeling sad.

Lastly, the original paradox is formulated in terms of enjoyment. Yet, conceptually speaking, three issues should be distinguished. Why do people *enjoy* sad music? Why do people *seek* sad music? Why do people *value* sad music? Although these issues are related, they are not identical. For instance, a listener may decide to listen to sad music but fail to enjoy it. In this case, one could not explain the motivation for listening to sad music by actual enjoyment, as there isn't any. Conversely, one may hear sad music unintentionally and enjoy it, in which case the enjoyment

cannot be explained by the motivations to seek sad music, as there weren't any. These observations reveal that the issue of *enjoyment* differs from the issue of *seeking* sad music. One may also *value* sad music, yet refrain from listening to it on some occasions (say, a cocktail party). In this paper, I shall be mostly concerned with the question of why people seek sad music, as recent findings offer new insights into this puzzle.

In fact, in the last decade, empirical studies on the motivations for listening to sad music exploded. Philosophers have not paid sufficient attention to this body of evidence (see Young, 2023 for an exception), although it offers the barebones of an informed philosophical theory. Three sets of findings are particularly relevant and can be used to raise three refined issues.

First, as observed, people listen to sad music especially when they feel sad (Garrido, 2017). Arguments, failures, frustrations, death, love-sickness, or break ups are among the typical situations in which people seek sad music. People also listen to sad music when they feel alone, miss somebody, feel homesick, want to retrieve memories, need to be understood, need consolation, are in an introspective mood, want to relax, are tired, or in nature (Van den Tol, 2016). Why? Call this 'the contextual issue'.

Second, we are not all equal in our love of sad music. The allure of sad music emerges quite late, as 3-8 years old children tend to dislike it. A parent offers a poignant description of the paradox of sad music: "[A]t church, the hymns make him sad, and he wonders why in the world do we need to have so sad songs" (Saaraikallio, 2009, p. 461). In adults, the chief personal determinants of the love for sad music are high levels of empathy, high capacity of absorption and imagination, introversion, openness to experience, and neuroticism (Garrido & Schubert, 2011). Low emotional stability and the tendency to ruminate are also significant predictors. Why? Call this 'the personal issue'.

Lastly, studies document the vices of sad music, particularly in the depressed population. Listening to sad music can prompt cognitive rumination or dwelling about negative situations, which is dysfunctional. How are we to explain the peril of rumination? Call this 'the dysfunctional issue'.

We are now in a position to refine the paradox. Why do people listen to sad music *especially when they feel sad* (contextual issue)? How to account for the *personal traits* predictive of the

appreciation of sad music (personal issue)? How can the solution illuminate *dysfunctional* uses of sad music, particularly the tendency to ruminate (dysfunctional issue)? As I will argue, the main philosophical accounts leave these issues unexplained.

## 2. The Refined Paradox and the Main Solutions

This section examines three influential accounts – Davies (1997), Levinson (1982) and Sizer (2019) – in light of our refined paradox. For reasons of space, I only highlight and criticize the core idea of each account so as to motivate my proposal (see Lauria, 2024 for a review).

Davies (1997) argues that people are generally interested in music for the enjoyment of *understanding* music. People can then enjoy sad music even when it makes them feel sad, because this response yields understanding of the music. The emotion felt is welcome because it constitutes understanding. Sadness is the price to pay for understanding the music.

Turning to the refined paradox, this proposal appears to be silent on it. Why would people enjoy understanding *sad*, as opposed to, say, happy music, especially when they feel sad? Happy music can also constitute a source of musical understanding. One may as well choose to listen to well-crafted and interesting happy music so as to attain and enjoy musical understanding.

Likewise, why would the traits mentioned impact the love for sad music if the latter is explained by musical understanding? It is unclear that, say, empathy, neuroticism, and absorption play a special role in musical understanding. And even if they do, it is not straightforward that their role is specific to understanding *sad* music as opposed to music expressive of other emotions.

Lastly, consider the dysfunctional issue. Vices of musical understanding pertain to musical abilities, such as failure to understand music. This is one way in which things can go wrong. However, this is far from the vice of rumination described earlier. Although Davies's proposal may be true in some cases, it fails to capture the specificity of sad music and is at pains at illuminating the specific issues raised by the refined paradox.

Levinson (1982) has offered an influential solution to the puzzle that relies on eight rewards offered by sad music. The first reward is that of *savouring* sadness, just like we savour wine, for instance. Although the feeling of sadness is unpleasant, we can appreciate it because it is not



accompanied by the strong unpleasantness of everyday life sadness. This affords the rewards of *understanding* sadness and feeling *self-assured* about one's emotional abilities. Other rewards depend on imagination. As music induces sadness via imaginative involvement with a persona, the feeling is an empathetic response. In identifying with a persona, listeners imagine feeling the same emotion while listening to the progress of the music, which elicits a rewarding sense of satisfaction and control. Because of this identification, listeners are also under the impression that they are expressing their own emotions. In some cases, they may even feel connected with the artist, when they experience the music as the expression of the author or performer's sadness.

This proposal is rich and has been empirically tested (Taruffi & Koelsch, 2014). People report that they listen to sad music in order to *express* sadness, *savour* it, *understand* it, and feel *reassured* about their emotional abilities. To a lesser extent, people report that sad music makes them feel connected and less lonely (*emotional communion*). Imaginative involvement is also among the most frequently mentioned motivations, although this holds for happy music as well.

Levinson's account fits well the role of empathy and imagination in the appreciation of sad music. Thus, it partly addresses the personal issue, although it is unclear how it illuminates other personal determinants, such as introversion and neuroticism.

More importantly, it leaves the core of the refined paradox unexplained. Music-elicited sadness is still an unpleasant feeling, although to a minor extent than real-life sadness. Why would people want to savour sadness, or have a sad companion, considering that sadness feels bad? Even more strikingly, why would one want to savour sadness especially when one is already sad? The puzzle strikes back (I return to expression of sadness in §4.2).

Finally, it is unclear how this proposal captures dysfunctional uses of sad music. It allows for some pathological uses. For instance, one may savour sadness too much, like people do with wine. Or listeners may fail to express or understand sadness. Yet, the link with rumination remains to be articulated.

Let me close this section by discussing a recent account. Sizer (2019) argues that sad mood and sad music reinforce each other. Sad music induces a sad mood that involves a particular focus on the music, which in turn reinforces the mood. This particular focus on sad music explains its appeal.

This proposal is informed by interesting studies on the cognitive effect of sad moods, but it hardly generalizes. As argued by Young (2023), studies reveal that listeners tend to mind-wander when they listen to sad music (Taruffi et al., 2017). This mind-wandering dimension, Young argues, does not square well with the idea that listeners focus on the music. Moreover, Young observes that Sizer's account is at pains at explaining the personal determinants predicting the enjoyment of sad music, particularly empathy. Why would empathetic skills have an impact if the enjoyment is explained by the focus on the music?

More importantly, the account does not straightforwardly explain why people listen to sad music especially when they feel sad. Focused listening is not restricted to sad music; well-crafted happy or anxious music can be conducive to it too. The gain of sad mood is thus unclear: sad people may as well opt for focused listening of happy music.

Lastly, the proposal does not fully capture the vicissitudes of sad music, as it suggests that the main dysfunction pertains to attentional flaws of focused listening. Although rumination can be seen as a mental action that prevents one from properly attending to the music, there are other ways of losing focus on sad music (e.g. one may simply be distracted). And it is not clear that these other ways of losing focus are dysfunctional, let alone pathological. The perils of rumination remain to be explained more straightforwardly.

It appears that the main accounts leave the refined issues unsolved and do not capture the specific appeal of sadness, as opposed to other emotions, in musical appreciation. A detour into a characterization of sadness will thus prove instructive.

### **3. Sadness**

What is so special about sadness that may explain the allure of sad music? Four dimensions of sadness – namely, physiological, expressive, cognitive, and functional – are relevant to our discussion.

Physiologically, sadness involves low arousal (see Huron, 2024 for a detailed exposition on the distinction between sadness and grief). This is one way in which sadness contrasts with joy, as joy involves high arousal. Low arousal is manifest in physiological reactions (e.g., slow heartbeat,

respiration), lumped posture and slow movement, and the prosody of sadness (low volume, slow tempo, low pitch, descendant intonations, tendency to stay silent, etc.). Low arousal is not specific to sadness; calmness and relaxation also involve low arousal. This will be relevant later.

A second paradigmatic feature of sadness pertains to emotional expressions. Typical facial expressions of sadness involve tears, crying, weeping, and flushed face (see Huron, 2024 for more details). These facial expressions impact the vocal expression of sadness. For instance, crying involves modifications in nose and larynx that explain the breaking voice of sad people (Huron, 2024). Tears are not exclusively the expression of sadness: there are tears of joy, of being moved, and of irritation.

Third, in light with cognitivist-evaluativist conceptions of emotions (Tappolet, 2016, Deonna & Teroni, 2012), sadness involves cognitive appraisal. In feeling sad, one appraises a situation in a negative light, namely as a loss or as unfortunate. Typically, this involves appraising the situation as goal-relevant, goal-obtrusive, and as falling beyond one's control. For many scholars, cognitive appraisals of this kind are specific to sadness.

Most importantly, sadness has a functional role. The role of emotions typically pertains to their specific action tendencies. For instance, anger has the function of reinstating justice; fear's function is to avoid threats, etc. What is the function of sadness? Intuitively, sadness does not involve action tendencies, as it is typically characterized by apathy and lack of motivation. Interestingly, studies reveal that the function of sadness may be cognitive. Sadness has epistemic benefits. When feeling sad, people are prone to reflect and analyze situations (Nesse, 1991). They thus tend to form more accurate beliefs, to avoid the pitfalls of cognitive biases, and to carefully scrutinize situations (so-called “depressive realism”, Huron, 2024). Call that “the reflective mindset”. Sadness contrasts with the epistemically shallow mindset characteristic of positive emotions which correlate with biases and epistemic irrationality, such as wishful thinking and self-deception. This opens the path for an epistemic function of sadness. The function of sadness lies in reflection and the careful analysis of situations; it pertains to the epistemic value of sadness. I suggest that this function is key to our appreciation of sad music.

## 4. The Epistemic Value of Sad Music

This characterization allows for various motivations to listen to sad music that recruit various features of sadness. Yet sadness's epistemic function plays a paramount role.

### *4.1. Arousal*

One may listen to sad music in order to induce low arousal, i.e. feelings of relaxation or calmness. Although this is true at times, this does not exhaust the appeal of sad music.

First, one may achieve the same goal by listening to calm/relaxing music. Although listeners tend to conflate calm and sad music (Huron, 2024), sad music cannot be equated with calm music. Some relaxing music is not sad (consider calming music with nature sounds), and some sad music is not calm (e.g. intense grieving music).

Second, as observed, sadness typically involves low arousal. Why would people want to induce feelings of low arousal especially when they already are in such a state? True, agitated sadness and grief can involve high arousal. In these cases, listeners may recruit sad music to decrease arousal levels. But sadness isn't typically like that.

Third, this proposal does not clearly illuminate the vices of sad music. It allows for the vice of apathy: listeners may indulge in low arousal and be apathetic. But this differs from rumination.

Fourth, the account does not capture the relevant personal traits predictive of the enjoyment of sad music. Low arousal plays no special role in traits such as empathy and neuroticism, among others.

### *4.2. Expressions*

One may think that the expressive profile of sadness offers a more promising account. People tend to cry when listening to sad music. This emotional release may result in pleasant relief. Listeners may thus opt for sad music to regulate their emotions through emotional expressions.

This may be true of some cases but it hardly generalizes. For one thing, when feeling sad, people already are inclined to cry. Although sad music intensifies this tendency and may render it irresistible, the already existing sadness often achieves the same result.

More importantly, although crying may confer short-term pleasure, studies suggest that it does not have long-term benefits (Huron, 2024). Typically, the benefits of crying pertain to the assistance that observers are inclined to offer to crying individuals. Such benefit is of little help to understand why people listen to sad music (particularly when they are alone), as it is unclear how music could properly assist them.

Lastly, the account is silent on the personal and dysfunctional issues. For instance, although excessive crying may be a vice, this offers only a partial account of dysfunctional uses of sad music. And the shedding of tears does not seem to be particularly relevant for traits such as imagination, introversion, or openness to experience.

### ***4.3. Reflection***

Recall that sadness involves the appraisal of unfortunateness and the reflective mindset. This offers a new perspective on the allure of sad music. As sadness involves epistemic benefits, it can help to reflect on unfortunate situations. People may then recruit sad music in order to enjoy these epistemic benefits.

This can take various forms. Sad music may be used to reflect, understand, reappraise, remember, or accept sad things. Indeed, studies suggest that acceptance is the main motivation for listening to sad music (Van den Tol et al., 2016). My proposal also nicely fits the role of mind-wandering, as the latter is an important dimension of reflection. The proposal is in line with the idea that sad *songs* help listeners to understand sad things (Smuts, 2011) and extends it to pure sad music. Listeners may use sad music to reflect on their own situations or on sad situations in general, such as the tragedies of life. They may also reflect on their own emotions or sadness in general, yet the reflection can extend to the subject matter of these emotions, namely sad *things*. My proposal thus goes beyond Young (2014)'s account of the value of expressiveness in terms of emotional knowledge, as it incorporates knowledge about evaluative significance.

Most importantly, it can disentangle the three issues raised by the refined paradox.

First, it can explain why people listen to sad music especially when they feel sad. When one feels sad, one tends and needs to reflect. By attending to sad music, this tendency is intensified, which results in stronger epistemic benefits. In addition, listening to sad music may also help to guide one's reflections thanks to lyrics or the development of musical structures. By intensifying and guiding reflection, sad music may thus result in long-term benefits that are specific to sadness. It is no wonder that people tend to listen to sad music when they are sad, in nature or alone; these contexts are conducive to reflection.

Second, the proposal nicely captures dysfunctional uses of sad music. Rumination importantly differs from reflection: whereas the former is dysfunctional, the latter is functional. Sad music may prompt poor reflection and obsessive dwelling on unfortunate things and negative experiences, which is sub-optimal. The proposal naturally lends itself to illuminating the perils of rumination as distortion of the epistemic function of sadness.

Third, it addresses the personal issue. Introversion, imagination and absorption, neuroticism, and openness to experience all involve cognitive elements. Reflection is a key dimension of these traits, notably when considered in the context of sad music. With regard to empathy, I conjecture that the personification of music allows for collective reflection of sad situations. As in social life, sharing one's sadness (say, with friends or therapists) may result in various benefits such as acceptance, understanding, and emotional communion that are partly achieved through reflection. By contrast, young children may be averse to sad music, as they may not have the cognitive resources to reflect on sad things and exploit the value of sadness.

This proposal is compatible with the idea that sad music elicits the emotion of being moved (Vuoskoski & Eerola, 2017), i.e. a mixture of sadness and pleasure. But why would listeners want to be moved? Here again appealing to epistemic benefits is promising. Being moved involves appreciation of one's core values. Listening to sad music may then prompt reflection on one's core values and reinforce them.

This proposal can be developed further to account for musical preferences pertaining to expressiveness more generally. Why do people want to listen to, say, happy, angry, or hate music? I propose that listeners' choices importantly depend on the function of particular emotions: love

for music expressive of emotion E recruits the function of E. For instance, one may enjoy angry music (consider its use in political protests) in order to intensify anger's function, say, retribution. One may prefer happy music and exploit the explorative function of happiness (say, by jumping in one's living room). One may enjoy hateful music as it reinforces the function of hate, say contempt and exclusion of some groups. The function of emotions is not all there is to musical preferences, yet it confers a great deal of value to expressive music.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I have used the insights of empirical studies to refine the paradox of sad music. There are various motivations to listen to sad music, and the philosophical proposals capture some of them. After all, sadness involves several dimensions, such as low arousal and expressions, which explain the appeal of sad music in some cases. Still, I have argued that one important motivation pertains to the epistemic value of sadness. The reflective mindset characteristic of sadness has the resources to account for the key features of the love of sad music. In making us reflect on what truly matters, it is no wonder that sad music is often deemed profound.

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## *Towards a Two-Level Account of Imaginative Resistance*

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper develops a new account of imaginative resistance based on a two-level taxonomy. It argues that resistance can occur at two distinct cognitive levels. Accordingly, two types of resistance are identified, i.e., resistance of a lower-level kind and resistance of a higher-level kind. Lower-level resistance concerns difficulties in the processing of the fictional content in imagination. Higher-level resistance, by contrast, has to do with the endorsement in imagination of an evaluative attitude towards content. The paper explores the main differences between these two levels, with an emphasis on the role of emotions. It concludes that the puzzle of imaginative resistance cannot be properly addressed appealing to a single phenomenon.

### **1. Introduction**

The problem of imaginative resistance refers to psychological difficulties in imaginatively engaging with a work of fiction. Despite the apparent clarity of this definition, imaginative resistance has been analysed along different lines and has given rise to different kinds of puzzles.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, the debate has focused on four main puzzles: the imaginative puzzle, i.e., our disengagement from the work's imaginative prescription; the fictionality puzzle, concerning the principles governing the generation of fictional truths; the phenomenological puzzle, i.e., how 'it is like' to experience resistance, its distinctive 'odd' phenomenology; and the aesthetic puzzle, i.e. if resistance can compromise the work's aesthetic value. Weatherston (2004) is credited with being the first to identify the four puzzles.

In this paper my primary concern will be the *imaginative* puzzle in relation to the fictional context. I will therefore examine our difficulty in following the imaginative project of the artwork, when our imaginative responses diverge from those prescribed by the author. Following the canonical formulation of the problem within the contemporary debate, I will mainly focus on linguistic representations.<sup>4</sup> With this focus in mind, I will try to answer the following questions: where should we locate the source of resistance? And, crucially, are all instances of resistance reducible to one and the same phenomenon?

In what follows, I will defend a *two-level* account of imaginative resistance, in the belief that a dualistic approach better succeeds in clarifying the nature of the puzzle. I will defend what I label as the Asymmetry Thesis, viz., I will claim that both descriptive and moral deviant propositions are good candidates for resistance, but resistance *of a different kind*. Accordingly, I will classify descriptive and moral cases on two different levels of complexity, i.e., lower-level and higher-level respectively. I will conclude that lower-level and higher-level resistance should be separately addressed since they have distinct sources and concern distinct cognitive processes.

## 2. The Asymmetry Paradox

Theoretical principles and speculative opinions change incessantly. Changing our moral opinions and sentiments, by contrast, requires from us a great amount of effort. This idea was convincingly expressed by David Hume in the famous passage at the origin of the debate:

There needs but a certain turn of thought or imagination to make us enter into all the [speculative] opinions [...], but *a very violent effort* is requisite to change our judgment of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind from long custom has been familiarized. (Hume, 1985, p. 247)

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<sup>4</sup> In the original formulation of the paradox, Hume refers primarily to writings. Secondly, I believe that pictorial representations deserve a distinct analysis also in virtue of the controversy over narration in pictures (see Walton, 1990; 1994).

The contemporary debate has resumed this problem in the context of our engagement with fiction. Following Hume, the advocates of the Asymmetry Thesis state that we usually follow the author when she prescribes to imagine factual deviant scenarios, but that we are less tolerant towards morally deviant scenarios (Walton, 1994; Gendler, 2000).<sup>5</sup> This thesis has been claimed to be paradoxical. Indeed, the Asymmetry Thesis must explain why we are less prone to imagine deviant moral worlds given how easily we imagine unreal and surreal scenarios in fiction, e.g., time-travels, demons, grotesque distortions of the body.

The Asymmetry Thesis has been challenged by (Yablo, 2002; Weatherston, 2004) who have stated that even descriptive errors can be sources of resistance. Advocates of the Symmetry Thesis defend a monistic approach to imaginative resistance, i.e., they claim that our resistance towards descriptive and moral errors is one and the same phenomenon since its source is the same in the two cases.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, I will attack this very assumption. I will claim that the difference between descriptive and moral cases should be reframed as a difference between two distinct kinds of resistance. Accordingly, I will distinguish between different causal processes, i.e., lower-level and higher-level processes, which correspond respectively to less and more sophisticated ones. The purpose of this paper is precisely that of clarifying the different types of phenomena involved in lower-level and higher-level resistance.

### 3. A Two-Level Account

Both parties in the contemporary debate have failed to distinguish the different types of resistance involved in descriptive and moral cases. The advocates of the Symmetry Thesis argue that moral and descriptive errors elicit the same kind of resistance. By contrast, the advocates of the Asymmetry Thesis maintain that our resistance differs in the two cases, but *only in degree*. In what

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<sup>5</sup> The labels 'Asymmetry Thesis' and 'Symmetry Thesis' are mine.

<sup>6</sup> See Tooming (2018) for a more recent formulation of monism.

follows, I will defend a version of the Asymmetry Thesis but, unlike its original formulation in Hume, I will focus on a difference in kind rather than in degree.<sup>7</sup>

My two-level taxonomy is based on three distinct criteria: 1. The kind of concepts at stake; 2. The different imaginative prescriptions involved; 3. The role played by emotions.

What I define as lower-level resistance refers to some difficulties in processing the fictional content in imagination. Higher-level resistance, by contrast, concerns our attitude towards content, once it has been processed in imagination. For this reason, higher-level processes are posterior to lower-level ones since the subject must first have processed the content in imagination to adopt an attitude towards it. These two levels also correspond to different imaginative prescriptions, since only at a higher level the reader is expected to assume in imagination an evaluative attitude towards the content, which crucially involves more demanding evaluative dispositions and affective sensitivities. It is this very attitude that the reader refuses to endorse, even in imagination. I will show how this refusal is primarily grounded in our emotions. For this reason, emotions play a fundamental explanatory role in higher-level processes, but not in lower-level ones.

## 4. Lower-Level Resistance

### 4.1. Response-Enabled Concepts

As previously noticed, Stephen Yablo was among the first to advocate the Symmetry Thesis, arguing – *contra* Hume – that even resistance of a descriptive kind is possible. To prove this, he builds the following story:

They flopped down beneath the giant maple. One more item to find, and yet the game seemed lost. Hang on, Sally said. It's staring us in the face. This is a maple tree we're under. She grabbed a *five-fingered* leaf. Here was the *oval* they needed! They ran off to claim their prize (Yablo, 2002, p. 485).

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<sup>7</sup> The thesis that we experience a lower degree of effort towards errors of a descriptive kind has also been empirically questioned (see Barnes and Black, 2016).

I agree with Yablo that this is a genuine case of fiction which triggers resistance. In what follows, I would like to consider some aspects of his theory that can be integrated into my account of lower-level resistance.

Yablo explains imaginative resistance by appealing to a specific kind of concepts, that he labels as ‘response-enabled’ (2002, p. 465). Following Yablo, ‘response-enabled’ concepts (e.g., oval, crunchy, smooth, lilting) are a special kind of observational concepts which enable stable patterns of responses in the subject. These patterns serve to track the semantic extension of the concepts: for instance, we normally grasp the meaning of ‘oval’ with reference to a specific recognitional pattern (i.e., ‘egg-shaped’). Unlike theoretical concepts, which are normally grasped intellectually, response-enabled concepts are grasped experientially, viz., to determine their extension in a world we must ‘cast our gaze over that world’ (2002, p. 461). In this respect, they are very similar to response-dependent concepts. Still, following Yablo, what distinguishes response-enabled concepts is that they remain stable across worlds, even included fictional worlds. Accordingly, when an author violates their extension in fiction, we are likely to experience resistance since ‘we insist on judging the extension ourselves’ (2002, p. 485). In other words, what is stated by the author and how we are invited to react are irrelevant since we evaluate these concepts with reference to our actual criteria.

Although Yablo does not refer to mental imagery, I believe that considering the role it plays would result in an improvement of the theory. The following section will be devoted to this.

#### ***4.2. The Role of Mental Imagery***

The reason why we cannot easily imagine that a five-fingered leaf can be oval is to be found in a conflict within mental imagery. I take mental imagery as a specific type of representation which is crucially related to our perceptual phenomenology, viz., ‘it represents objects and their features in a way that resembles the content and phenomenology of perceptual experience’ (Stokes, 2019, p. 734).

How do response-enabled concepts relate to mental imagery? As already noticed, response-enabled concepts are crucially related to recognitional patterns of response which remain stable across worlds. My hypothesis is that the ability to successfully recognise a pattern depends on mental imagery in a given sense modality or modalities.<sup>8</sup> So, for example, we associate the meaning of ‘oval’ with a specific response in a sense modality, typically in the visual domain, and this response is itself related to an instance of mental imagery in that modality. This means that, when response-enabled concepts are involved, mental imagery is the best heuristics we have to test concept application. When response-enabled concepts feature in a contradictory statement, they typically trigger two incompatible instances of mental imagery, that the reader is unable to integrate into the relevant sense modality, i.e., in Yablo’s case, the visual one.<sup>9</sup> In these cases, obstacles at the level of mental imagery provide the subject with perceptual evidence for contradiction. Lower-level resistance, then, results from the violation of our standard responses in fiction and manifests itself as a conflict at the level of mental imagery.

### ***4.3. Lower-Level Processes***

Lower-level resistance manifests itself as the inability to fully process the fictional content in imagination. I therefore endorse a ‘cantian’ explanation of lower-level resistance (Geldler and Liao, 2016), according to which resistance is better explained as resulting from an inability on the reader’s part, when she or he cannot imagine what is prescribed by the work.

When confronted with a passage like Yablo’s, a possible strategy would be to break the object down into simpler components (e.g., the oval on one side and the five-fingered shape on the other). Indeed, this would mean transforming the object into a changing one, formed by the alternation of the two shapes. This would result in forming an ambiguous visual object. Still, Yablo’s story does not involve a verbal ambiguity. In the story, we are asked to imagine the conjunction of the components and not the components disjunctively, and this is a task we are

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<sup>8</sup> The idea that concept application is governed by association with mental images is also in Tooming (2018).

<sup>9</sup> The same analysis can be also applied to other sense modalities as in Moran’s example: ‘seven and heaven sound just as they really do in English, but do not rhyme’ (1994, p. 101).

unable to perform. Another strategy to process the content would be that of taking an evasive perspective on the object. Again, this would not count as a proper act of imagination, since it would require infringing the principle of ‘openness to inspection’, according to which a description of an impossible situation should be ‘detailed enough to convey the nature of the impossibility’ (Sorensen, 2002, p. 343). In both cases, the subject cannot imagine the contradiction, since the intentional content is, in the first case, moving and inconsistent and, in the second, indefinite.

#### ***4.4. The Objection from Contextuality***

Several authors have noticed that contextual as well as individual factors can significantly change our imaginative responses. Accordingly, the same proposition can trigger different reactions depending on the context in which it is embedded. This thesis has led to a sceptical conclusion, i.e., the claim that resistance results from the contingent incomprehensibility of the proposition (Stock, 2005). The objection goes as follows:

- i. A contradictory sentence *p* can always be imagined if embedded within a coherent context;
- ii. If the appropriate context is provided, resistance does not arise;
- iii. Imaginative resistance is not a genuine phenomenon.

Against this objection, I will claim that it is possible to find fixed parameters which determine whether a contradiction is tractable or intractable, namely if the contradiction can or cannot be accommodated within the provided context. I will prove that only intractable contradictions elicit resistance. I will conclude that imaginative resistance is a genuine phenomenon that can be predicted looking at specific accommodation parameters.

Gendler’s story ‘The Tower of Goldbach’ (2000) aims to show that we can imagine impossibilities in fiction, if embedded within a coherent context; hence, that impossibility does not preclude imaginability. I will mention only a part of the story:

But when God heard this display of arrogance, God was angry. From heaven roared a thundering voice: "My children, you have gone too far. You have understood too many of the universe's secrets. From this day forth, no longer shall twelve be sum of two primes." And God's word was made manifest, and twelve was no longer the sum of two primes. (Gendler, 2000, p. 67)

Following Gendler, the reason why we can conceive impossibilities in fiction is that we focus on precise aspects of the imaginative content, engaging our selective attention. According to Gendler, the many regions of local coherence help the reader to disguise the global incoherence of the story. I agree with Gendler that this story does not trigger any resistance. Indeed, I take this story as a prominent example of tractable contradictions.

#### ***4.5. Accommodation Criteria***

The reason why we do not experience resistance in reading 'The Tower of Goldbach' is that the story meets some parameters: i) response-enabled concepts are not involved since the story focuses on pure *theoretical* concepts; ii) it does not concern how we respond to things, but how things are *in themselves*. Therefore, Gendler's story is not a counterexample to my account since our responses are not at stake here. As a consequence, it does not involve a conflict at the level of mental imagery, since the latter is not directly involved in the task.

Let's try now to change the story a little:

But when God heard this display of arrogance, God was angry. From heaven roared a thundering voice: "My children, you have gone too far. You have understood too many of the universe's secrets. From this day forth, ovals shall have four corners." And God's word was made manifest, and *ovals were four-cornered*.

Despite having replaced theoretical concepts with response-enabled concepts, the contradiction seems still tractable. Does this prove my theory to be false? Before answering we should look at the context provided. The fictional situation is again the effect of God's decree. We cannot rely on our standard criteria, since our responses are no longer valid in this context.



In a similar vein, a contradictory ‘square circle’ can be made tractable if embedded in the following scenario, a slightly modified version of Borges’ ‘The Library of Babel’ (2000):

The mystics claim to have, during ecstasy, the revelation of a *square* room with an enormous *circular* book with a continuous spine that fits perfectly the space of the walls.

In this last example, the represented situation is the effect of mystical ecstasy. Since ecstasy is an extraordinary situation, which presupposes an alteration of our ordinary responses, we cannot evaluate the content employing our standard criteria. As in Yablo’s, we cannot form a stable and definite image of the situation. The cognitive conflict is not eliminated; rather, it is accommodated within the context.

As a rule, unless the text explicitly says the opposite, we tend to rely on our ordinary responses to evaluate content. A story can discredit our normal responses if it provides a context in which (i) other criteria apply; (ii) these criteria justify the suspension and the replacement of our standard responses in fiction. If, on the contrary, our responses are explicitly contradicted but not invalidated, imaginative resistance is likely to arise, as in ‘Sylvan’s Box’:

Carefully, I broke the tape and removed the lid. The sunlight streamed through the window into the box, illuminating its contents, or lack of them. For some moments I could do nothing but gaze, mouth agape. At first, it thought that it must be a trick of the light, but more careful inspection certified that it was no illusion. The box was absolutely empty, but also had something in it. (Priest 1997, p. 575)

Priest’s story involves an impossible object, a box which is empty and full at the same time. Central to the story is how the object appears to the character. Since the story does not provide us with further criteria that would replace ours in that context, the contradiction remains intractable.

## 5. Higher-Level Resistance

### 5.1. *Against a Monistic Approach*

As already noticed, several authors in the debate have defended the Symmetry Thesis. This thesis can be divided into two fundamental claims: (i) we are equally intolerant towards both descriptive and moral errors in a work; (ii) imaginative resistance in descriptive and moral cases is one and the same phenomenon. I agree with the first claim, i.e., I believe that resistance occurs both in descriptive and in evaluative contexts, but I reject the second since it implies a monistic approach to resistance.

The basic idea behind a monistic approach is that the rules governing concept application in the descriptive domain are to be equally extended to the moral (and evaluative) domain. Additionally, this approach presupposes a commitment to cantism, viz., when moral violations are involved, we cannot even form a content in imagination. In Weatherston (2004), the source of resistance is to be found in the violation of grounding relations between higher-level and lower-level properties; Tooming (2018), by contrast, locates the source in a cognitive mismatch at the level of mental imagery. In both authors difficulties concern lower-level processes even in moral cases since we experience obstacles in the very act of processing the fictional content in imagination. This being the case, my distinction between lower-level and higher-level resistance would collapse since higher-level processes would be reduced to lower-level ones.

In the following sections I will show how a monistic approach is open to several problems. First, it cannot account for the distinctive nature of moral (and evaluative) concepts as well as the different nature of the imaginative prescription in the two cases. At a higher level, indeed, the imaginative prescription is more demanding, since it requires endorsing in imagination specific evaluative dispositions and affective sensitivities. Secondly, in higher level cases, the content is apprehended as salient on a personal level, and this explains why emotions are so crucially involved in those cases.<sup>10</sup>

## ***5.2. The Source of Higher-Level Resistance***

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<sup>10</sup> The idea that evaluative predicates have an important connection with our affective attitudes is not new. An emotional approach to value concepts has been defended by Mulligan (1998), D'Arms and Jacobson (2000; 2023), D'Arms (2005), Tappolet (2016) and Deonna and Teroni (2021).

Consider the famous example by Walton: “In killing her baby, Giselda did the *right* thing; after all, it was a girl.” (Walton, 1994, p. 37) It is generally accepted that, in reading a passage like this, we have no problem in imagining the factual content, even in detail. We can in principle imagine Giselda’s action, even if we may not like dwelling too much on that content. Resistance arises when we try to imagine that action *as right*. Indeed, here the work does not merely prescribe what to imagine; rather, it also prescribes to assume a certain evaluative attitude towards that content. But what does it mean to perform this kind of task? My claim is that such a task involves higher-level processes, i.e., more demanding processes in which emotions play a fundamental explanatory role.

Unlike lower-level cases, here the source of resistance is not to be found at the level of mental imagery. By contrast, it concerns our emotional engagement with the artwork. In the example of Giselda, the work establishes what is the appropriate form of engagement the reader should have. Resistance arises when the reader is not willing to engage since she or he believes that the fictional scenario deserves a different kind of attitude. This sort of evaluative disagreement is at the origin of higher-level resistance.

Compare Giselda’s example with a non-moral case, taken from Kōbō Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes* (1964):

He recalled that someone had said that there was nothing that tasted so good as one’s own ear wax, that it was better than real cheese. Even if it weren’t that bad, there were all kinds of *fascinating* things one never tired of smelling ... like the stink of a decaying tooth (1964, p. 124).

Also in this case, we resist endorsing the evaluative perspective proposed by the author but, unlike Giselda’s sentence, our resistance is not grounded in moral reasons. This passage calls in our aesthetic sensitivity, our sense of what beauty is and what seductive is. In principle, we could imagine that smell as seductive, since strong acrid smells may elicit in us a kind of attraction. Leonardo Sciascia, for instance, in *To Each His Own* (1992), describes the sweat of the beloved as seductive. Therefore, resistance does not stem from a lack of intelligibility. In both the abovementioned cases the source of resistance is to be traced back to an emotional gap, eloquently described by Richard Moran as ‘the distance between what we are enjoined to feel and what we are actually inclined to feel’ (1994, pp. 95-96). The divergence between our emotional reaction

(i.e., moral indignation, disgust) and the attitude required (i.e., approval, attraction) is what justifies our resistant behaviour.

### ***5.3. The Motivational Role of Emotions***

I have claimed that emotions are significantly involved in the causal processes at the source of higher-level resistance. My proposal is that the role played by emotions in higher-level processes is motivational.<sup>11</sup> Consistently, higher-level cases display a motivational profile that lower-level ones do not have. Higher-level resistance is to be conceived of as a kind of action aimed at specific (even if not necessarily conscious) purposes.

Higher-level cases can be consistently analysed along three different dimensions:

- i. The reader apprehends the content as evoking the relevant emotion [appraisal];
- ii. The emotion itself provides justification for the evaluative disagreement [disagreement];
- iii. The relevant emotion motivates the subject to disengage [motivation for action].

I defend a ‘wontian’ approach to higher-level cases, i.e., I favour an explanation of resistance as unwillingness rather than inability. I therefore assume the not uncontroversial thesis according to which competent readers can in principle extend their emotional repertoire to include different and even contrasting world views. The reason why we are seduced by certain pieces of fiction is precisely that they succeed in making those views intelligible and coherent in that context. Still, in some cases, we are *not willing* to engage with those perspectives since we perceive them as a threat to our emotional integrity. Indeed, that would require endorsing attitudes and dispositions which are perceived as too distant from those which are constitutive of our personal identity. I therefore argue that the influence of emotions on our imaginative engagement is explicable only if the fictional content is apprehended as salient for the reader *on a personal level*.

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<sup>11</sup> The role of emotions in motivating behaviour has been emphasised by Scarantino (2014) and Deonna and Teroni (2012, 2015).

Personal valence is then among the elements that distinguish higher-level cases from lower-level ones.

#### ***5.4. Personal Valence***

As emphasised by Jonathan Mitchell, what is peculiar of affective representation is that the intentional content is apprehended as ‘mattering for me, or as being significant for me’ (2021, p. 3532). What distinguishes higher-level cases from lower-level ones is that only the first, but not the latter are experienced as having a personal valence. In higher-level cases, the fictional content is apprehended as having a negative valence, viz., the subject experiences an affective attitude of disapproval, repulsion, retreat or disavowal which radically impairs the imaginative task. This ‘personal level representation’ (2021, p. 3519) is distinctive of higher-level cases and is crucially connected to their motivational profile.

The distinctive personal valence of higher-level representation is what grounds the fact that higher-level and lower-level resistance have different accommodation criteria. Since higher-level resistance has an emotional source, accommodation can ultimately only be achieved by means of emotional regulation. This in accordance with empirical findings on malign moral violations in a text. McGraw and Warren emphasise how humour typically occurs ‘in contexts perceived to be safe, playful, nonserious, or, in other words, benign’ (2010, p. 2). By contrast, violations perceived as ‘malign’ are those which elicit strictly negative emotions without the display of humour. I will therefore use ‘malign’ as an equivalent of ‘intractable’ in the moral context. What makes a moral violation ‘malign’, i.e., intractable in that context, is (i) the reader’s commitment to the violated norm (see also Veatch, 1998); (ii) a decrease in psychological distance.

In relevant cases of resistance, both a decrease in psychological distance and an increase in cognitive penetrability can be observed, i.e., the work is permeable – at least in those passages – to the reader’s affective sensitivity and evaluative disposition. This means that: the fictional sentence is taken seriously and perceived as extending beyond the work’s limits; the content is salient for the reader; it represents a threat to the reader’s self-interest, i.e., her or his moral, cultural and emotional integrity.

## 6. Conclusion

I have tried to show that the puzzle of imaginative resistance cannot be properly addressed appealing to a single phenomenon. I have therefore distinguished between resistance of a lower-level kind and resistance of a higher-level kind. I have claimed that these two levels should be kept apart since they have distinct sources and concern different cognitive processes. I have also shown that a clear separation between the two can be drawn appealing to emotions. I have concluded that lower-level cases involve less sophisticated processes which concern the processing of content in imagination. Higher-level cases, conversely, pertain to more demanding processes in which emotions play a distinctive explanatory and motivational role.

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## *Sense Without (Semantic) Meaning? The Case of Asemic Writing*

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ABSTRACT. This paper analyses asemic writing, with a focus on Luigi Serafini's 1981 *Codex Seraphinianus*. Asemic writing, i.e. writing characterised by a lack of semantic meaning, is explored through the lenses of literature and aesthetics, emphasising intentionality, non-semantic meaning, and shared value. Positioned at the intersection of avant-garde literature and abstract art, the linguistic analysis of asemic writing reveals the intricate relationship between graphemes and phonemes, generating a pluri-semantic text with "open" interpretation. The paper proposes a reconsideration of the concept of sense within asemic writing, identifying a pre-linguistic and pre-semantic field that prompts reflection on conventional writing practices. Reader engagement is discussed, highlighting asemic writing's accessibility to a broad audience and its cooperative nature. A minimal set of shared conventions allows for unique freedom, fostering a striving game over an achieving one. The case study, the *Codex Seraphinianus*, is examined through various lenses, including an intellectual "striving" reading by Italo Calvino and deciphering attempts. These analyses unveil the text's nature as a presuppositional machine,

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<sup>1</sup> Email: [martino.manca@unito.it](mailto:martino.manca@unito.it). Some results of Section 4 were made possible by a research period I spent from March to May 2022 at the "Labirinto della Masone" in Fontanellato (Parma, Italy), accessing the archives of publisher Franco Maria Ricci. This research period was generously supported by a scholarship from Cecilia Gilardi Foundation. During my research, I consulted some unpublished material and gained deeper insight into the *Codex*, including the rare opportunity to "read" the original edition; however, for copyright reasons, I am unable to disclose the full details of the unpublished texts I accessed. I am also grateful to Carola Barbero, Enrico Terrone, and Alberto Voltolini for their invaluable insights, as well as to Laurence De Looze for sharing some of his unpublished works with me.

contributing to the understanding of asemic writing as a complex, cooperative interplay between authors and readers.

## 1. Introduction

*Se risquer à ne-rien-vouloir-dire, c'est entrer dans le jeu*  
(Derrida, 1972, p. 23)

There is a certain bias according to which we tend to see written text whenever we observe some graphemes arranged in a linear order – according to our culture, from left to right and from top to bottom. When observing some old AI-generated images featuring some text, we attempt a reading even when the text is actually a jumble of graphemes vaguely resembling Latin letters; AI models have now gotten much better and have shifted the hallucinatory nature of such images from the graphical aspect (random pseudo-graphemes) to the syntactical and semantic one (random and invented words randomly placed), but until few months ago it was not uncommon to come across such pseudo-texts.

This kind of pseudo-text, on initial analysis, is what has been called “asemic writing” (from now on: “AW”). While admittedly a niche form of art, there are examples of intentional AW as artworks, which seem to raise several issues worth analysing. First, they are cases of “nonsensical” written language – i.e. cases where language fails its main goal of either communicating something (locutionary) or doing something (perlocutionary), see Austin, 1975 – yet they have both an artistic (i.e., they are recognised in the artworld, see Danto, 1964) and aesthetic (i.e., we can have an aesthetic experience of them) value. Second, they seem to communicate something beyond their conceptual nature and their obscured semantic value – namely, they tell us something about the nature of writing (and of written language) itself. Hence, they have some kind of “meta” value. Third, they show a cooperative nature for art (in a similar fashion to Eco, 2020), gaining value only insofar as the game between authors/artists and readers is correctly set up and regularly played by all the actors involved. Fourth, they are problematic in their collocation, being at the intersection of linguistic and figurative objects.

In this paper, I will attempt to delve into these questions without claiming to be exhaustive. AW lacks a specific aesthetic analysis, and it is precisely this gap that I intend to fill by drawing upon the few previous conceptions and discussions. It is eventually my belief that a specific study of AW can provide interesting results for the discussions about language and its functions beyond the classical meaning-reference conception, moving us towards a reintroduction of the somewhat outdated notion of Sense.

## 2. Definition

Most of the available definitions of AW are those formulated by artists practising this form of art. As a rule, I feel that one should be adequately sceptical of definitions that come “from the inside” of a specific form of art, since they generally lack the needed breadth and scope and shift their weight towards the normative side, rather than the descriptive. This is to say that, often, definitions coincide with manifestos. It is then with caution that we ought to approach the discussion and the reconstruction of the conceptual *archaeology* (Foucault 2008), however brief it may be – since the concept of “AW” is no more than fifty years old. Another problem emerging from this kind of analysis is the term “asemic” itself; while having a precise origin, it lacks the etymological clarity for the object I am discussing, looking like a confused importation of a misused term for a completely different concept. Yet, the authors’ choice of the term is relevant in a way.

At the end of my preliminary analysis, which is very much an operation of reconstruction, it will be possible for me to draw some conclusions that, far from being a comprehensive definition, will outline some necessary conditions for something to be recognised as “asemic writing” as an art form.

### 2.1. Definitions Review

The first precise definitions of asemic writing can be found in some blog posts, art books, and journal issues edited and written by the very artists who chose this label for their art (see Gaze & Jacobson, 2013 for an anthology). The first to identify this concept were the two artists Jim

Leftwich and Tim Gaze – the former American, the latter Australian – who, looking for a suitable label to describe the quasi-calligraphic works they were creating at the end of the Nineties, ended up not only with a term but with a full-fledged movement. In a January 1998 letter by Leftwich to Gaze (Leftwich, 2016, p. 3), we find the first formulation of the idea: “An asemic text [...] might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning”; and again Gaze in the Introduction to his *The Oxygen of Truth* specifies, without much doubt, “the word ‘asemic’ means ‘having no semantic content’” (Leftwich, 2016, p. 4).

In the first issue of their journal *asemic movement*, the first page is a systematic recollection of the artistic practices of the movement in the decade 1998-2008. Here, we can find the standard definition of AW. They write: AW is “anything which looks like writing, but in which the person viewing can’t read any word” (Gaze, 2008, p. 2), a “class of visual phenomena” which are “(i) deliberately made as an illegible form of writing; (ii) writing intended to be legible, but that, for one reason or another, is not legible; (iii) something that accidentally looks like illegible writing”, then proceeding to list the various possible reasons for which an “accidental” AW might happen in the forms of (ii) or (iii) – including, for example, faulty writing instruments, decay of the support, natural formation, mental or physical distress of the person writing, etc.

Peter Schwenger, a Canadian professor of English, in the first chapter of his *Asemic. The Art of Writing* – probably the only book devoted to AW – attempts a similar reconstruction to what I am doing and explains that AW is made by signs that “don’t belong to any familiar system. [but that] at the same time, [...] put themselves forward in the form of a sign system, recognizable as marks disposed on a page according to certain conventions.” (Schwenger, 2019, p. 2). His discussion recalls Leftwich and Gaze’s original conceptions and eventually links the birth of the asemic movement with the crisis of writing (namely, cursive writing on paper) in the United States and the Western world more generally.

Both of the definitions proposed by Leftwich & Gaze and by Schwenger have, in my account, two substantial problems.

First, they are too broad. It does not seem desirable to place on the same level bad writing or misprint sheets with an intentional form of art that builds on the writing gesture: while the *technological* aspect might be the same, there is a relevant distinction between the *epistemological*

level of what *seems to be* asemic (e.g. an unknown alphabet, as it might be an Asian one for European readers – we have no way to distinguish an authentic Chinese alphabet from the pseudo-alphabet of *A Book from the Sky* by the artist Xu Bing) and the *ontological* level of what is, indeed, truly asemic (a form of writing which cannot be read in *any* case, different even from a cipher as the *Voynich Manuscript* is supposed to be).

Second, they are, so to say, too *parole*-centric rather than properly *langage*-centric (the distinction between *parole* and *langage* is, of course, in Saussure, 2014, pp. 30-32). Asemic seems not to be a matter of a “word”, i.e. of a specific utterance of and use of *langue*, but rather a system that encompasses the *langue* readers are familiar with and their literacy as a general knowledge of *langage* in general. Otherwise, any random string of letters would be AW since “the person viewing can’t read any word” – as stated by Leftwich and Gaze (quoted in Schwenger, 2019, p.2).

The biggest merit of those definitions, which together well summarise the general view of both artists and scholars on AW, is the more or less implicit acknowledgement of the reader-centred stance required to assess AW. AW is then not a simple matter of inscribed traces; Leftwich and Gaze conclude, rather abruptly, “whether something is AW or not is subjective [...] the quality of being asemic is not in the writing, but a consequence of whether a particular person can read it at a particular time”. However, a reader-centered stance does not equate with a “subjective” conception, but rather it has to do with the complexity of a phenomenology of aesthetic experience and, in this case, of a phenomenology of reading – carefully constructed in the past (e.g. by Ingarden, 1973 and Iser, 1980) precisely to avoid the possible “slippery slope” of subjectivism (or rather, *solipsism*) of Husserlian phenomenology.

A better, more precise definition comes from another asemic artist, Michael Jacobson, curator of one of the most relevant blogs on AW (*The New Post-literate*). In a 2013 interview for *Asymptote*, he defines AW as

A wordless, open semantic form of writing that is international in its mission. How can writing be wordless, someone may ask. The secret is that asemic writing is a shadow, impression, and abstraction of conventional writing. It uses the constraints of writerly gestures and the full developments of abstract art to divulge its main purpose: total freedom beyond literary expression. (Jacobson, 2013)

From this latter definition emerges what is a characteristic of AW: semantic freedom, both from a fixated meaning (AW, as it will be clear, multiplies meanings) and from a meaning at all (strictly speaking, AW does *not* have a meaning altogether).

Before drawing some conclusions, let us briefly retrace the history of the term. As will be evident in the next paragraph, it is not devoid of problems.

## 2.2. The Term “Asemic”

The etymology of the term “asemic” seems to be rather clear: from Greek, privative alpha (a-) + “sema” in the adjective form. Now, “sema” means both sign (in the physical sense, trace, inscription) and, following semiotics, “minimal unit of meaning” (seme or sememe). Of course, the first meaning (“sign”) generates a paradox: writing is composed of signs, hence how can we have something composed of signs without signs? The second meaning seems to work better: a form of writing non-reducible to even a minimal unit of meaning. In any case, the privative alpha bears with it the mark of absence/privation, contrasting with something (writing) which, by definition, insists on a metaphysics of presence (see Derrida, 1985). This contrast does convey well the impasse of approaching something that seems familiar but that has no meaning, the attempt to read the unreadable. However, it is worth mentioning that there are other alternatives.

A joint post by Jim Leftwich and Marco Giovenale (another artist of the movement, and author of a massive *Asemic Encyclopædia*) suggests the alternative term “pansemic” (again from Greek, “pan” as “all”): since “everything makes sense”, the asemic actually solicits an emotional sphere of sense-making that generates an endless and processual operation of attribution of meanings (see Giovenale & Leftwich, 2015). Therefore, it is not much about the *lack* of a minimal unit of meaning but rather a multiplication that, eventually, encompasses *all* possible meanings. While the proposed solution is interesting as it underlines the duality of absence/infinite multiplication of meanings from AW, it does a disservice to the philosophy of language by claiming that “everything may find its way to – at least – an inner ‘emotional’ (scribble of) meaning”. Whatever this “emotional” component may stand for (but a sensation is not a meaning), what is simply wrong here is that *everything* (i.e. every linguistic expression) eventually has a semantic

content. Instead, there is something, as well envisioned by Wittgenstein when discussing nonsensical expressions, that as long as it *does not* have a semantic content *is* outside of language; however, this does not mean that is devoid of value (this is the point against which Leftwich and Giovenale seem to argue, missing the subtlety of a philosopher) but rather that it may have a “second-order” value, on a meta-cognitive level or in a *critical* one (in the Kantian sense, an analysis on the conditions of possibility). Wittgenstein writes (*PI*, §499 – see Wittgenstein, 2001):

To say “This combination of words has no sense” excludes it from the sphere of language, and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary, it may be for various kinds of reasons. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players are supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may show where the property of one person ends and that of another begins; and so on. So if I draw a boundary line, that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for.

If everything has meaning there is no space left for the absence of meaning (note that Wittgenstein is referring to sense, but, in his account, a proposition has no sense as long as one of its components does not have a meaning); if there is no space for the absence of meaning the field of language becomes an omnivorous monster that encompasses everything, even the formless gibberish, and it becomes impossible to form “life on the borders”, as the one suggested by Wittgenstein. For these reasons, in the following pages, I will maintain that AW has *no* (immediate, semantic) meaning but rather develops other forms of *unities* – of derived second-order meanings.

Another possibility to substitute the term “asemic” is the expression “asemantic” coined in unsuspecting times (in 1974! More than twenty years before the works by Leftwich and Gaze) by Gillo Dorfles when discussing the works by Irma Blank (an artist later included below the tag of “asemic”). He writes that her works feature

an ‘asemantic writing’, a sort of grapho-orthography, which uses a clear individualized sign [...], yet empty and void from any explicit semantics since it is not constructed nor is it separable into ‘discrete signs’ either from a regular or modified alphabet or from ideograms, however altered and newly formed they may be. (Dorfles, 1974, my translation)

Dorfles is very precise in his discussion and, by quoting Husserl, anticipates a point that will be quite relevant later: the fact that this level of writing seems to refer to a *pre-semantic* and pre-logical dimension of language where the primordial sign (and the gesture that produces it) is still undifferentiated and esoteric.

For clarity and to stick to the historical accuracy of the concept, I will still be using “asemic”, but it is evident that the discussion is much more nuanced than what the single term could suggest.

There is another reason, however, for sticking to the term “asemic”, a *philological* reason. The introduction of the term by Leftwich and Gaze is not a *creatio ex nihilo*: it is grounded on a very specific *corpus* of texts and authors (not by chance I referred to Derrida at the beginning of this paragraph...), i.e. the works of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida on writing in a couple of years at the beginning of the Seventies, frequently quoted in the paratexts mentioned about AW.

The early grammatological Derrida discusses in *La double séance* (Derrida, 1972, originally published in *Tel Quel* in 1970) the possibility of a non-mimetic and non-linear writing by discussing an intersection between Plato’s *Philebus* (38e-39e, about truth and falsehood in writing and representational arts) and Mallarmé’s *Mimique* – executing in practice a *deconstruction* of the concepts of meaning and reference, and suspending the certainty of thought on an abyss of undecidability (the *double bind* both co-present and logically irreconcilable). In this context, when discussing the “blank” (the empty space of indeterminateness), he calls (in brackets) the *plus* of the blank (the “*marque supplémentaire*”) an “asemic spacing” (“*espacement asémique*”) – opposed to the fullness of semic (Derrida, 1972a, p. 290). Here, the term asemic is very precise and does not leave any space for a sem-antic interpretation; Derrida is talking about the act of writing, not about the presupposed meaning of a *graphé*. The impressionistic use by the “asemic movement” of Derrida is quite peculiar, yet it still confirms the relevance of the French author for the definition of a conceptual framework outside philosophy.

Much more relevant seems to be Roland Barthes’s semiotic approach to writing (*écriture*). In his *Écrivains, intellectuels, professeurs* (Barthes 2015 – originally published in *Tel Quel* in 1971), he brings forward an example that has already emerged in my analysis: the accidental AW caused by a faulty writing instrument, for example, in copying a manuscript. In those cases :



Le mot produit par la faute (si une mauvaise lettre le défigure) ne signifie rien, ne retrouve aucun tracé textuel ; le code est simplement coupé : c'est un mot asémique qui est créé, un pur signifiant ; par exemple, au lieu d'écrire « officier », j'écris « offivier », qui ne veut rien dire. (Barthes, 2015, p. 383).

In another text written in 1972, *Variations sur l'écriture* (a sort of encyclopedic list of “keywords” related to writing with a brief explanation), for the voice “*Illisible*” (“unreadable”) he never mentions the word “asémique” but he discusses the case of Mirtha Dermisache (yet another artist later added to the asemic canon) and all those artistic AW that, while ontologically different from untranslated alphabets (e.g. the language of Easter Island’s rongorongo glyphs), are undistinguishable from “real” writings.

Il existe aussi des écritures que nous ne pouvons comprendre et dont cependant on ne peut dire qu'elle sont indéchiffrables, parce qu'elles sont tout bonnement hors du déchiffrement : ce sont les écritures fictives imaginées par certains peintres ou certains sujets (il peut en effet s'agir d'une pratique d'« amateur », située loin de toute carrière artistique : tels les cahiers de graphismes de Mirtha Dermisache). [...] Or, l'intéressant – le stupéfiant –, c'est que rien, absolument rien, ne distingue ces écritures vraies et ces écritures fausses : aucune différence, sinon de contexte, entre l'indéchiffrée et l'indéchiffrable. C'est nous, notre culture, notre loi, qui décidons du statut référent d'une écriture. Cela veut dire quoi ? *Que le signifiant est libre, souverain. Une écriture n'a pas besoin d'être « lisible » pour être pleinement une écriture.* On peut même dire que c'est à partir du moment où le signifiant [...] se détache de tout signifié et largue vigoureusement l'alibi référentiel, que le texte (au sens actuel du mot) apparaît. Car, pour comprendre ce qu'est le texte, il suffit – mais cela est nécessaire – de voir la coupure vertigineuse qui permet au signifiant de se constituer, de s'agencer et de s'employer sans qu'aucun signifié ne le soutienne plus. Ces écritures illisibles nous disent (et cela seulement) qu'il y a des signes, mais non point de sens. (Barthes, 2000, pp. 44-45, my emphasis).

His main point (i.e. that “a writing does not need to be readable to be fully a writing” and that in those cases of AW “there are signs but there is no sense”) is interesting insofar he (correctly) recognizes AW as a form of writing (this will be one of the points of my next section when I argue in favour of a linguistic analysis of AW).

Derrida and Barthes provide the (admittedly fuzzy) theoretical background for those artists recognizing themselves in the asemic movement. While it is relevant to acknowledge this more or

less competent inspiration, in my analysis I will often depart from the French background for more fine-grained formulations.

## 2.3. Requisites

It is now possible to discuss what is needed for any piece of writing to be considered AW. But first, a preliminary distinction has already emerged from what I have written so far.

I propose a double parallel distinction to better understand AW as a complex phenomenon:

1. Proper-ontological AW *versus* accidental-epistemological AW
2. Asemic Writing *versus* Asemic Reading

As I have already suggested, it is crucial to distinguish between AW *intentionally* created from those accidents where something that is *not* asemic appears to the reader as asemic. This contrasts with the original conceptions by Leftwich and Gaze, yet I believe this distinction gives credit where credit is due – to the artists actually creating AW.

The second distinction insists on the fact that every form of AW is open to an asemic reading, yet it is possible to asemically read something which is not AW. Consider the *illegibilis* by St. Thomas Aquinas, i.e. the original manuscripts in *littera cursiva* – or rather, a very poor *littera cursiva*. There are very few scholars in the world who can read Aquinas's handwriting. For anyone else it is probably completely asemic. However, this is not AW.

For the sake of this paper, I will focus on the left side of the double distinction – artistic intentional asemic writing. Therefore, there are three requirements for it:

- *Intentionality*: One may argue whether the AI-generated pseudo-writing is truly intentional, however, this is a borderline case. In all the standard cases (AW created by artists), we have no problem recognizing even a minimal form of intentionality in the object created. This allows us to exclude accidental AW in the form of bad calligraphy, untranslated alphabets, ciphered texts with regularly invented alphabets, malfunctioning of the medium (glitches,

printing errors, etc.), decay of the supports, natural “writing pareidolia”, impeded or blurred vision, etc.

- *Shared value*: Just as private language is impossible (Wittgenstein, *PI*, §243), AW should have an intersubjective value, being something more than a gimmick. This can be a consequence of its intentionality and is related to the implicit acceptance of a minimal set of rules within the AW that can work (e.g. the orientation of the writing: left to right, right to left, top to bottom, bottom to top, even calligraphic dispositions are fine) – scattered pseudo-letters is not AW.
  - As a corollary, it is clear that AW must insist on a shared form of alphabetical or ideogram writing (either deriving from it or resembling it, thus allowing a pseudo-reading).
- *Non-semantic meaning*: This is the point to be discussed in detail. As shown, AW does not have a semantic meaning, however, it does have *several* non-semantic meanings – what I call *unities* or second-order meanings. Phenomenologically, this happens in a second moment, once we overcome the contrast between observing something familiar (being acquainted with the formal conventions of writing) and the asemic effect at a further examination. My task is to show how these second-order unities are formed.

### 3. An Aesthetic Collocation

AW is at the intersection of abstract art and avant-garde literature. This is particularly evident when considering some authors who came to AW from literature and poetry rather than art. This is the case for one of the three “ancestors” identified by Schwenger (2019, pp. 19-31) – Henri Michaux (especially his 1927 *Narration*). Starting from words and coming to images and drawings moved by a need for unconstrained forms of expression and inspired by artists like Paul Klee, Max Ernst, and Giorgio de Chirico, Michaux accompanies his artistic work with a reflection on language and communicability. What seems to emerge is the idea of an absolute continuity between written words and abstract images, a continuity of the gesture and of the movement (one of his asemic works is titled *Mouvements*): script-like signs become images, compose and decompose in quasi-

organic structures, following a metamorphic state of dynamism. His handwriting organically becomes drawing, which, in turn, *represents* writing and eventually becomes writing again, and so on. There is a certain gestural pleasure in “reading” Michaux’s proto-asemic works, in arbitrarily following the flow from left to right, from top to bottom, catching glimpses of broken and disintegrated strings of letters; it is no surprise that the French poet was so influential for the early formulations of AW.

However, when analytically facing the works of Michaux, as a prototype of AW that explicitly intertwines the literary and the visual, the reader has two possible approaches, each working but mutually exclusive in the singular moment of experience:

1. *Representational solution*: Here, AW invites the user to contemplate it and consider the way it imitates (*mimesis*) the written words. Here, the AW is fully representational according to a mimetic relationship. It is figurative in displaying a primordial form of writing. The right support for this kind of view is, of course, the painting, with a frame, the single page on display – this is the way most of Michaux’s works are displayed.
2. *Enactive solution*: Here, AW invites the user to interact with it and with the environment in which it is inserted (including the physical aspects and the consideration of the “outsides” of text and paratexts), mainly through the act of reading. AW is familiar to us firstly because it appears as a form of writing, and writing invites us to read it, rather than merely contemplate the framed page for its representational value. The apt support is the literary text either in the form of the codex (the book) or in the form of digital text (not limited to digital literature), allowing the reader to experience turning pages or scrolling a screen. Interestingly, most 1990s AW was published and circulated as *blog posts* (see the bibliography for a list of the most relevant asemic blogs).

While both solutions work equally well, for my analysis, I will focus on the second one which seems to be more respectful of the authorial intentionality. Indeed, excluding figurative artworks *a posteriori* added to the AW canon, the vast majority of examples are presented in the form of a written text – printed, handwritten, or as displayed text on a screen. Moreover, keeping a

Western-centric approach (with its limitation), the typical form of unreadable writing of AW is based on *alphabetic* writing, consisting of graphemes that become un-phoneme-isable, rather than on an ideogram-based form of writing (a pictographic and mnemonic technology).

One last disclaimer: the two proposed solutions are, of course, on the side of general engagement and interpretation of AW artworks and do not have anything to do with the ontological status of those objects. I believe that, ontologically, one may reach the AW status from several different categories of art (Walton, 1970); one may be tempted to identify a set of properties specific to the set of AW (in a similar fashion to my requisites) and eventually define AW as a cross-categorical form of art (differently from the heuristic approach I have used when defining my requisites, which work *a posteriori*). While I may agree that, for sure, AW *crosses categories in art*, I do not believe there is enough autonomy in the definition of a set of properties (considering the derivative and constructed nature of the “movement”) to define AW as a *cross-categorical form of art*. Its strength, instead, relies precisely upon the possibility of being in movement across different categories rather than synthetically keeping two or more different and contrasting categories in a newly formed and static one.

### 3.1. Engagement

Now for the question: how does one engage with AW? Considering my previous point about an enactive approach, how does one *read* AW?

Laurence de Looze, in an unpublished work he kindly shared with me (de Looze, 2023), concludes that “*one has to know how to read in order to know how not to read*”. This means that the semic/asemic distinction can only arise from interpreters who are not only acquainted with shared writing conventions but also possess a minimal degree of literacy, specifically the ability to read the source alphabet upon which the AW is modelled. There is a technological aspect of reading that is independent from both the whole discussion about the meaning of the content and the problem of the form and style of a piece of literature; what De Looze is saying is that, on the one hand, there is the epistemic value of reading (reading-to-understand) and, on the other hand, there is the performative value (reading-to-perform, as in Kivy, 2006), and that AW heavily relies on this

second value. While reading can easily be substituted by other forms of narration without losing much of its original epistemic value (e.g., changing the medium to listening to an audiobook), this is, of course, impossible for AW.

What I suggest, then, is to reintroduce the “old” concept of Sense, broadly taken as a theoretical term expressing the cognitive significance of something, not limited to the meaning. While the Frege discussion in 1948 is much more focused on names, which Kripke’s critique (1980) also does, the theoretical relevance of Sense in this context is to accommodate the lack of semantic meaning (i.e. a direct reference) with the possibility of having common and shared unities of (second-order) meanings. Sticking to a Fregeian nomenclature (different, for example, from Putnam’s terminology in Putnam, 1973), Sense is the intensional dimension of a word, which is intersubjective, while reference substitutes the notion of meaning to indicate the extensional dimension of the social and communicable.

So, if the aforementioned criteria are verified, the AW makes sense and allows a reading of the performative kind. Reintroducing the idea of Sense also allows for a nice integration with speech act theory, which seems to be the most suitable for a performative reading: once the sense is individuated, it can be used, it can be played, it can thus incorporate some external elements that have something to do with the tone, the style, the context, and the paratextual map.

Assuming that an AW has a sense (otherwise it would just be dismissed), at that point the reader has to confront that game of frustrated expectations set up by the paradoxical nature of AW, which allows it to be approached with the expectation to unveil a meaning but that it reveals itself as unreadable. The two choices the reader has are, naturally, two *ludic* approaches, thoroughly analysed by C. Thi Nguyen (Nguyen, 2020):

1. *Achieving*. The reader chooses to try to solve the AW, treating it as epistemic AW, attempting a deciphering, guessing the real alphabetic letters hidden behind the AW. As for the “achieving game” for Nguyen, readers here achieve a solution, a non-disposable goal. Here the AW operates as a *resistance* to the readers’ interpretation, hindered and eventually impossible.

2. *Striving*. The reader accepts the absence of semantic meaning and resorts to the fuzzier nature of Sense. From this moment on the reader can *playfully* attempt some non-serious forms of achieving games (with end goals that are disposable) and persevering in the ludic nature of AW for the sake of the game itself, trying to interpret, explode, and imitate the AW. Here the AW operates as a *prompt* to the readers' (possibly infinite) interpretations (plural).

Again, both of these two approaches are perfectly acceptable. However, there are good reasons that the game set up by AW is precisely designed to resist the quest for a fixated solution, and never *serious*: the implied reader (Iser 1980) of AW is engaged in a striving type of game. This will become clearer when discussing a real case such as the *Codex Seraphinianus*.

### 3.2. Perception

Before moving on to the cognitive level (i.e. what kind of unities can we grasp from AW), it is relevant to briefly address the way we perceive the asemic.

A general definition of writing can be: the fixation of linguistic signs over a durable support and according to an organised system. More simply, the organised inscription of speech acts. As a consequence, it is clear that the main threat of writing is its functional nature. In writing, the illocutionary (communicating something concrete) and the perlocutionary (creating an effect to do something) prevail over the mere locutionary aspect of speech acts – i.e., it is not just a matter of writing down sentences. We appreciate writing (in a non-aesthetical way) precisely because it manages to successfully communicate something – a truth, an order, an instruction – by fixing it in a replicable trace. On the other hand, (one of) the main features of the aesthetic seems to be the disinterestedness of its judgments (see Kant's third Critique, especially the *Analytic of the Beautiful* – see Kant, 2015). In this framework, we appreciate art just because it is “beautiful” and not because we have any form of desire or end towards the artwork.

Writing, thus, is not limited to a semantic value but also has an aesthetic relevance that lies in the calligraphy, in the chosen font (a paper written in Comic Sans would be comically bad), in

the disposition of the written words, etc. AW attempts to capture this visual aspect of narrative in the physicality of written language rather than in *phoné*.

AW is a form of writing that is appreciable aesthetically (note that this is different from the aesthetic appreciation of the semantic meaning of a written text, as it happens for fiction – I have already ruled out this possibility by dismissing the meaning). Hence: is AW simply a form of writing failing in its premises, or rather a form of art that consciously uses the technology of writing as a way to create an aesthetic effect in the users?

In my view, the answer lies somewhere in between, or perhaps the two extremes can converge in this case. A proposal towards this direction has already been put forward more generally by Vittorio Gallese (Gallese, 2020) and the neuroscientific approaches, with the idea of unifying the aesthetical and the functional. Another attempt to systematically link the aesthetic and the technological, by considering artworks as “experiential artifacts”, is currently carried out by Prof. Enrico Terrone and his group working at the ERC Starting Grant titled “PEA – The Philosophy of Experiential Artifacts” (see Terrone, 2024 for a programmatic discussion of the project).

All in all, it does not seem too strange to consider the two aspects on the same level, especially when dealing with a form of (pseudo)writing: the function of writing is of course not respected in AW, yet it calls for a functional analysis and resists the “figurative pull” of the aesthetic side. Otherwise, we would not understand why graphological analyses and (futile) attempts to decipher what the “real” writing would have communicated, minus the asemic element, are so common in AW.

Also, consider that, at a perceptual level, there is only a minimal difference by degree between how we perceive real alphabetic letters and scribbles (similar to asemic graphemes) – as shown by Heiman, Umiltà & Gallese, 2013:

Analysis of the present EEG data showed that the observation of *all* stimuli (letters, characters and scribbles) produced central alpha ERD in both hemispheres [...]. Moreover, since the mean values of central alpha frequency power indicate an ERD also during the perception of “scribbles”, our data seems to support the notion that not only linguistic symbols, but *any possible hand-gesture trace* [...] can evoke the activation of observers’ cortical motor system. (Heiman, Umiltà & Gallese, 2013, pp. 2838-2839, my emphasis)



Of course, in the case of AW, as I will argue, there is a superior form of unity in the process, but, in general, this confirms what I said before: in the first moment (given the expectations), we perceive AW as normal writing, then, in a second moment, when focusing, we realize it is not proper writing.

### 3.3. Cognition

How do we understand AW? Relinquishing semantic meaning and accepting the field of Sense leaves us, the readers, in a middle ground where many possibilities appear equally valid. A plurality of unities can be derived, and an infinite game of interpretation can begin. This is not *beyond* meaning (even if I said it is a “second-order” level) but it is actually *before* semantics; this is explained with an analysis of epistemic AW, where, when we do not have immediate access to meaning, we start from pre-linguistic data we can gather (e.g. other statistical occurrences of the same writing system, if we are dealing with an unknown alphabet or a badly written regular text), and then we eventually attempt to go back to meaning – it is an *imposition* to understand. In true AW, we accept the absence of meaning and we take a step back to the pre-logical field of Sense, where a kaleidoscope of “second-order” meanings can be (playfully) generated and different unities can be found rather than relying on a singular, fixed reference.

The absence of an immediate semantic meaning allows this game, which is all *within* language (not limited to its verbal/visual nature), and the possibility of understanding is an *invitation* to imagine and play. The result is that, eventually, semantics can be freely imaginable in the second-order level of sense, while the only non-deductible element is the syntax – i.e. the formal element of language, which AW replicates making it, in a way, alien to us.

From this point, it is possible to develop a table of unities that are (not) present in AW at first and that, eventually, once the game (the *Sprachspiel*) has started, can ultimately be imagined within the field of Sense.

<i>Types of Unities</i>	<i>AW – first approach</i>	<i>AW – Sprachspiel</i>
Spatial	Present	—
Phonetics	Absent	Imaginable (constrained)
Morphology	Absent	Deductible
Syntax	Absent	Non-deductible
Semantics	Absent	Freely imaginable
Functional/Narrative	Possibly present	Freely imaginable
Metafictional	Possibly present	Freely imaginable

A brief explanation of each point:

- Spatial unity (or, alternatively, graphical and dispositional): It is, of course, the only immediately present unity since it relies on the purely visual aspect of writing and the minimal set of shared conventions about the writing system referenced (see the corollary of the “Shared value” requisite). This is to say that, for example, observing a Western-based AW, we can immediately understand that the spatial organisation of writing is the same one we know: from left to right, from top to bottom. And more: we can distinguish between prose (blocks of text) and poetry (ordered shorter lines of text) and individuate some textual elements only because of their spatiality – for example, lists, captions, etc. A good example of how AW does not need anything else but the spatial feature is Marcel Broodthaers’s rendition of Mallarmé modernist poem *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (“A throw of the dice will never abolish chance”) – realised in 1969 and based on the 1897 poem. Mallarmé’s poem is a free verse example of early concrete poetry, much relying on the typographical disposition and font dimensions of the verses; Broodthaers “blocked out the lines of the original work with solid black bars of varying width, dependent on the original type size, turning the original text into an abstract image of the poem” (from the MoMA

description of the artwork). Even a few black lines are enough to understand that this is (i.) pseudo-writing, hence with an AW artwork, and (ii.) some form of typographic poetry.

- **Phonetic unity:** It is absent, yet imaginable (we can try to imagine how the graphemes may sound). However, I believe, this imaginative act is not completely free since some cognitive biases come into play: it is somehow natural to associate a shape with a sound, as shown by the so-called “bouba-kiki effect” (Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001) – a non-arbitrary synesthetic connection between the shape of an image and the sound of the associated word. This, of course, applies to graphemes as well. For example: writing a (meaningless) word in a gothic-like font versus the same word in a cursive-like one, the sound we imagine is different.
- **Morphological unity:** It is absent but, rather than being imaginable, is deductible. This is the area that most achieving attempts tend to explore since a statistical analysis of morphemes and graphemes seems the best way to actually reach a semantic meaning. I will provide some examples in the next section.
- **Syntactic unity:** It is absent and non-deductible, since, even by grasping a morphological unity, there is no way to determine the role in the proposition of a certain recurring graphemic construction – this assuming that the AW language works syntactically in the same way as the one we know.
- **Semantic unity:** Absent but freely imaginable. As said, once we accept the game, AW can mean anything.
- **Functional/narrative and metafictional:** Those dimensions may be present in the paratexts that accompany the AW but are always freely imaginable. For example: when observing the “Martian” automatic writing by the French medium Hélène Smith, while knowing the whole discussions among the surrealists, we may understand Smith’s graphemes as a narrative support for her medium career and eventually metafictionally start an imaginative game on the nature of spontaneous and “trance” writing.

It is now the case to analyse a specific example of AW and to test my “table of units”.

#### 4. Luigi Serafini's Codex Seraphinianum

The *Codex Seraphinianus* is a two-volume illustrated encyclopedia created by the Italian artist (architect and designer) Luigi Serafini between 1976 and 1978 and published by the prestigious publisher “Franco Maria Ricci” in 1981 – the aristocrat from Parma is known for having built the biggest labyrinth in the world in the countryside of Fontanellato, for having published in Italian the works of Jorge Louis Borges and Diderot and d’Alembert *Encyclopedie*, for having started the most relevant Italian art magazine in the Eighties (*FMR*, pronounced *éphémère*, ephemeral) and for having collected over the years an impressive collection of previously undiscovered artists such as Antonio Ligabue. The *Codex* perfectly fits Riccian’s idea of a contiguity between writing and images and his encyclopedic ambition. In the introduction of the last volume of the series “La Biblioteca di Babele” (“Library of Babel”, edited by Borges himself), titled *Borges A/Z* and presenting a list of “Borgesian” themes in alphabetical order, Ricci writes “Each one of us brings with himself a little potential Encyclopedia: it is sufficient to ordinate our opinions by argument, then our arguments by alphabetical order, and the Encyclopedia takes form” (Borges 1985, my translation). A principle of contamination and unity that the *Codex* perfectly respects, as all the other books of the series “I segni dell’uomo” (“Human Signs”): for example, a volume on Ligabue with a poem by Cesare Zavattini; Calvino’s *Castle of Crossed Destinies* with the illustrations of Visconte’s tarot cards, Erté’s artworks accompanied by a text written by Roland Barthes, Aloys Zotl’s bestiary with the prose of Julio Cortazar. The unity of written words and images in the *Codex* does not need an external linking between two artists (one writer and one figurative artist), but it is rather contained within the text itself.

The *Codex* is presented as a manuscript with a cursive AW in a Semitic-like writing alphabet. The whole encyclopedia is consistent in its AW (thus allowing a morphological analysis), and features what is, without doubt, a table of contents, an afterword, several tables, lists, graphs, and other typical “encyclopedic” elements. The division into two volumes is coherent with the typical separation of knowledge into natural science and human sciences. By checking the typographical structure and the illustrations, it is possible to guess the fictional thematization of chapters (this is a second-order, inferred meaning!): for the natural sciences we have (i) Botany,

(ii) Zoology, (iii) Teratology, (iv) Physics and Chemistry, and (v) Mechanics; for the human sciences (vi) Anatomy, (vii) Anthropology and Mythology, (viii) Linguistics, (ix) Cooking and Food, (x) Games and Fashion, and (xi) Architecture. The illustrations are metamorphic, featuring some recurring themes, blending different categories of objects (the natural with the human-made), creating a sense of the uncanny and wonder.

There is no text without paratexts and *seuils* (Genette, 2002). For the *Codex*, the most immediate are:

- The Publisher presentation: the two volumes, with a black cover and golden letters and high-quality pagination and print, devoid of every other element that may break the fictional game of having a *real* “alien” encyclopedia.
- The name of the author reflected in the title: Luigi Serafini, not so well-known until the publication of the *Codex*.
- The title with the immediate insertion of it in the tradition of “*Codices*” (in the prefatory *Letter* it is compared to Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia*, Lucretius’s *De Rerum*, Vincent of Beauvais’s *Speculum Maius* and, of course, to the *Encyclopédie*).
- Two other paratexts: the *Letter by the publisher* in the original edition, printed on a separate page, and the small pamphlet, also separated, with the title *Decodex* included in the more recent Italian Rizzoli edition.

Of course, the *Codex* is immediately demystified, and its fake (or fictional) nature is quickly unveiled by the *Letter* and the *Decodex*. As stated in those texts, Ricci’s original idea was to include a comment in the form of a foreword realised by some of his authors (“from Borges to Calvino”). Still, then he realized that “it would be a mistake to introduce explanations into a work of encyclopedic nature, born to explain itself” (*Letter*, my translation), with the intent to create the same feeling that might have struck an illiterate Barbarian entering a Latin library and finding a miniated codex or like a child who cannot read but still can “rejoice in the dreams or the fantasies the images suggest.” (*Letter*, my translation) The *Decodex* (also titled, pretty explanatorily, *Quis Quid Ubi Quibus auxiliis Cur Quomodo Quando*) is even more transparent, providing a narration

of the context of creation and a glimpse into the autobiographical events leading to the *Codex*: Serafini, he narrates, starting from images to text, ended up composing the *Codex* in an almost “automatic” way of writing (just like Surrealists did), pushed forward by the original search of the feeling of approaching a text as an illiterate kids. Beyond a curious geographical obsession, the *Decodex* is rather laconic and simply dismisses all the fuss around the *Codex* by concentrating on a white cat Serafini met in those years. Writing asemic is nothing more and nothing less than writing anything else, as also confirmed by several interviews that Serafini released in the last decades: he is explicit that it is worthless to attempt any translation or understanding, since the *Codex* is (intentionally) asemic.

The *Codex* fascinated many intellectuals, from Alberto Manguel who references it in his *A History of Reading* (Manguel, 1998, ch. *Picture Reading*) to Douglas Hofstadter who discusses it in parallel with another wonderful and weird book – *A Humument. A Treated Victorian Novel* by Tom Phillips – in his *Metamagical Themas* (Hofstadter, 1985, ch. *Stuff and Nonsense*). There are some lost traces: in a 2017 interview in *Linus* (Carrozzi & Manuppelli, 2017 – where, among other things, Serafini discusses psychedelics, the Voynich manuscript, and the attempts of decoding), he mentions an idea of a comic (a “noir” graphic novel) discussed with Giorgio Manganelli – unfortunately, it never happened. In another online magazine article (rather relevant for “Seraphinians”, Taylor, 2007), the author reports that he got in touch with Shelley Jackson (author of narrative hypertext masterpieces such as *Patchwork Girl*) and Arthur Danto himself – but again, there is nothing written by the American art critic and philosopher about the *Codex*. While not exactly a cult, the *Codex* has undeniably created a bibliophilic, meta-narrative layer of discussions and debates that thrive beneath institutionalized art, and that moves on the Web and by oral transmission (note that Serafini’s art *has also* been institutionalized, see for example the recent MACRO exhibition in Rome and the various references in Vittorio Sgarbi’s academic works). It is always a pleasure to introduce someone to the *Codex*, making them part of a bigger game of inter-textual connections and imaginative speculations.

Let me try, now, to test my “table of unities” for the *Codex*.

#### 4.1. The Asemic Unities Tested – Two Readings

The table for the *Codex* is as follows:

<i>Types of Unities</i>	<i>Codex Seraphinianus</i>
Spatial	Codex/Encyclopedia model.
Phonetics	Cursive writing → Pleasant sounding phonetics?
Morphology	Recurring phi-like letters, recurring disposition of numerals at the bottom of the pages → We can try to decode it on a basic morphological level.
Syntax	—
Semantics	Semantics of sections linked to the images and the structural organization (captions) → We can try to imagine in detail what is about.
Functional/Narrative	We may speculate that it is an alien encyclopedia with the function of presenting an alien world to us.
Metafictional	Serafini writes about it in the <i>Decodex</i> and some paratexts (interviews, etc.) and may speculate that it is a metafictional reflection on writing itself, on art, and the nature of interpretive acts.

To better understand the possible readings of the *Codex*, I will briefly analyse two approaches: one focusing on morphological unity and the other on semantic unity.

The first one is a collective *achieving* attempt to decipher the *Codex*, pursued both in academic circles and across the Web. The only successful decoding involves the page-numbering system (admittedly, the only truly ciphered aspect), cracked by Bulgarian linguist and mathematician Ivan A. Derzhanski (in the *Linus* interview, Serafini says “The Bulgarians are good

mathematicians”, Carrozzi & Manuppelli, 2017, p. 8), where he discovers the base-21 system and briefly discusses the possibility of deciphering the text as well (Derzhanski, 2004). Tomi Melka and Jeffrey Stanley (Melka & Stanley, 2012), clearly fascinated by the *Codex*, attempted a transliteration rather than a deciphering, acknowledging the asemic nature of the writing (in the acknowledgments both Peter Schwenger and Tim Gaze are mentioned). Tomi Melka is not new to the transliteration of real (Melka, 2012 on *rongorongo* script) and invented (Melka & Misteckýc, 2019 on H. Beam Pier’s *Omnilingual* Martian script), and utilises the same approach for the *Codex* – i.e. e a frequency analysis of glyphs and an evaluation of the distribution and positional analysis to grasp a morphological consistency. Admittedly, “the tests [...] do not intend to definitely resolve ambiguities, rather than provide a number of plausible options from a writing system perspective” and “there is zero credible evidence that *Seraphinian* is phonetic”; the *Codex* here is a test sample for the methods used for a real-world script system. A more recent, more refined attempt, which goes along the line traced by Melka & Stanley, is in Ponzi 2023; having already worked on the *Voynich manuscript*, he applied a Neural-Network system (developed by Harald Scheidl) to transliterate the whole *Codex* (while Melka & Stanley worked on only a few pages), concluding with distributive frequencies of glyphs and words, comparing those results with other natural language texts. The takeaways are i) that Scheidl’s Neural Network system works consistently even with asemic texts, and ii) that certain features of the *Codex* are shared with another (apparently) asemic text, the *Voynich manuscript*, but not with other real languages. Those are:

- the existence of two distinct sections with different glyph frequencies;
- high rates of both perfect and partial reduplication;
- line effects (in particular the preference for certain glyphs to appear line-initially). (Ponzi, 2023)

Other web-based attempts to decipher the *Codex* were found on paleolaliens.com and the “Seraphinians” blog (both now inactive and accessible only through the Wayback Machine) and in Google Groups discussions on the *Codex*. While the efforts are heartfelt and the results somewhat interesting, it is clear that AW here works only as a heuristic test for a more or less consolidated system, since the impossibility of getting something more of an arbitrary morphological analysis is hindered by the very nature of the text itself. However, this is precisely the point: such attempts



are exactly the kind of interpretive games the *Codex* (and AW in general) invites. These endeavours are, in fact, part of the game itself.

The second semantic game is the one undertaken by Italo Calvino. While, as stated before, he did not write any foreword, he did write a short but witty article published in the first issue of *FMR*, with the title *Orbis Pictus Seraphinanus* (Calvino, 1982, also collected in his *Collection of Sand*, Calvino, 2007b, pp. 555-560). Here, Calvino lets himself loose in a *striving* game of savvy attempts to understand the *necessary* “deep mystery about the inner logic of language and thought” below the “shallow mystery” of its impenetrable alien syntax (Calvino, 1982, p. 64, my translation). Calvino describes “Serafini’s universe as teratologic” with a logic structured around the contiguity and permeability of various spheres of existence (e.g., anatomy and mechanics) and the centrality of metamorphosis. Calvino then describes briefly the various sections and identifies some recurring central figures: the *skeleton* (i.e. the resisting matter, what is constant despite the metamorphosis), the *egg* (i.e. the original and primordial element), and the *rainbow* (i.e. light, both beam and matter). Calvino’s game is no less fantastic than that of the *Codex* itself, lost in a myriad of hypertextual and hypermedia *fugues* (Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Lear’s *Nonsense Botany*, Bruno Munari’s “crazy” machines) and absolutizes the element of writing, concluding that Serafini’s universe is a “universe-writing” and that “maybe all that Serafini shows us is no more than writing: only the codex varies” (p. 64).

What is important here is to understand that Calvino is playing with us (and with Serafini), and, while all the games are in a way “serious”, we should not really believe that his is a systematic explanation – we are talking about the same author who recognized in the nonsense of Lewis Carroll the great virtue of “not taking himself seriously” (Calvino, 2007a, *Filosofia e letteratura*, pp. 188-196) and that begins his *American Lectures* with the word “Lightness” (Calvino, 2007c, pp. 631-655). However, just as with the previous decoding attempts, this approach is *perfectly valid*. The AW of the *Codex* calls for such playful interpretations

In conclusion, it seems that in readings of the *Codex*, any interpretation is valid as long as it maintains internal coherence. The interpretive level corresponds to the ontological sphere that Italo Calvino distributes in “levels of reality” when discussing literature (Calvino, 2007a, *I livelli della realtà in letteratura*, pp. 381-398); however (I suspect Calvino would agree), since in the AW

of the *Codex* the literary dimension is not enclosed exclusively by the (pseudo)text, here the level of reality is *chosen* – or rather *negotiated* – by readers and/or interpreters.

## 4.2. Metalepsis as the Key?

When discussing the *Codex*, Peter Schwenger surprisingly focuses less on its asemic qualities, describing it as a “hallucinatory encyclopedia” that conjures visual manifestations of impossible entities – arguably, a characteristic similar to any form of fantastical representation. His main point seems to be the contrast between the encyclopedia’s functional nature and the obstructed readability of the *Codex*, ultimately challenging traditional categories and exposing the arbitrariness of categorical order and selection. At the heart of this analysis is the connection between graphemes and phonemes. It has been proven (Dehaene, 2007; Kemmerer, 2014) that in the reading of alphabetic writing the two paths are distinguished but plastic – i.e. that it is possible both to associate the sound to a grapheme and to come to graphemes from onomatopoeic and glossolalic sound formations. Using this idea, though without directly referencing neuroscientific discoveries, Schwenger argues that the *Codex* script embodies “glyptolalia”, which, much like my own analysis, “simultaneously invites and withstands attempts at interpretation”. While the category is nicely introduced, I still believe that Occam’s razor is a good epistemic principle, so I will stick to the concept of AW.

In another analysis (Faucher, 2016), the duality between unreadability and playfulness in the *Codex* is explained through the narratological concept of metalepsis (see Pier, 2016 for an introduction). Faucher claims – and I agree with him – that we should read the *Codex* as the point of metaleptic intertextual convergence of various paratexts. In this case, metalepsis refers to the blending or violation of boundaries between diegetic levels on an ontological plane. Thus, it is possible to identify distinct diegetic frames within the *Codex*, which remain separate in analysis but are interwoven and entangled within its narrative

1. First frame (original idea): The *Codex* presents itself as a “found” book (*objet trouvé*), written entirely in an asemic writing (AW). Notably, Serafini initially intended to omit both a Latin title and his own name from the original edition.

2. Second frame (1981 edition): The *Codex* now includes the author's name and an introductory letter by the publisher, marking the first instance of metaleptic contamination. Here, Serafini disrupts the *Codex*'s narrative autonomy by introducing external, contrasting elements. There is still a possibility for decryption and Serafini himself may suggest so. Calvino's discussion in *FMR* enforces this possibility.
3. Third frame (subsequent editions, interviews, etc.): By this stage, it is evident that the *Codex*'s writing is asemic, making decryption impossible. Nevertheless, the interpretive game persists.

Regardless, the *Codex* exists as an object in the world and thus maintains a connection to a broader discourse. This connection can best be understood through the interplay between its writing and imagery, where text accompanies images and images correspond with text. Our reading is, therefore, since the first moment, always analogical, yet never resolved since the mimetic aspect of writing and, in general, of representation is broken.

Ultimately, what matters is the level at which we position ourselves as readers and the kind of interpretive game we decide to engage with, oscillating between the extremes of achieving and striving. In this process, we become narrators; though extra-diegetic, we are also, metaleptically, drawn into the diegesis as we reconstruct forms of unity using the interpretive tools we select.

## 5. Conclusions

Admittedly, choosing the *Codex* as the primary example for AW is, in a sense, cherry-picking. The *Codex* exemplifies AW *at its finest*, showcasing an elegance, intertextual finesse, and seamless integration of images and text that are often absent in more "vulgar" examples of AW. For instance, the most famous example of AW, the *Voynich Manuscript* (Beinecke MS408), which I have only mentioned briefly, is less compelling. To start with, it may not even be true AW. The script is far less precise and uniform, allowing for a broader interpretation, whereas Serafini's graphemes are immaculate and consistent. I would argue, however, that the same conclusions applicable to the *Codex* can easily transfer to any other example of AW, once we set aside the distinctive nuances

unique to Serafini's work: given its open nature and its invitation to generate a plurality of possible meanings, AW acts as prop for a plurality of different games (not limited to *representational* games) and, given the minimal acceptance of the convention AW shares, what is equally important is what we consider *beyond* the AW text itself.

Returning to Derrida: in *Of Grammatology*, his well-known phrase, “*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*” (“there is no outside-text”, Derrida, 1985, p. 227), does not imply that language encompasses everything, nor that everything can be reduced to language. Rather, it suggests – methodologically speaking (as indicated by the title *L'exorbitant. Question de méthode*) – a conjunctive logic that rejects verticality in favour of horizontality. This horizontality mirrors the intertextual network I've tried to construct around the *Codex*, and which is necessary for a nontrivial reading of any form of AW – otherwise, even mandarin peels arranged on a table might qualify as AW! What AW accomplishes, then, is to make explicit – beyond methodological debate – the need to temporarily bracket the traditional vertical structuring of language into signifier-signified pairs or Platonic ontological hierarchies, favouring instead a multidimensional horizontality or *field* approach. This is for the simple reason that leading AW back to language as I have chosen to do at the beginning of §3 it would be *uninteresting* to analyse it – a mere imitation of writing. In AW, Derrida's notion of “no outside-text” holds because every differentiation remains internal to its hallucinogenic textuality. The asemic field, then, eventually encompasses an entire intertextual game of infinite possible interpretations or *unities* that can emerge from it: the simplicity of the vertical meaning-referent simply does not work, and the text *is* the game

Thus, AW offers a valuable enclosed space to explore the boundaries of language and locally challenge traditional, static theories of reference, opening possibilities for new discoveries. Although the outcomes may be limited to local insights, a broader methodological caution emerges: we should avoid quickly dismissing what seems to “not make sense” upon first glance.

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## Asemic blogs and websites

Michael Jacobson blog:

<https://thenewpostliterate.blogspot.com/>

Tim Gaze blog (Wayback machine):

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Asemic blog (Wayback machine):

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Google Groups discussion on the *Codex Seraphinianus*:

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Seraphinians blog (Wayback machine):

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110807085743/http://seraphinianus.tribe.net/>

Snapshot from the paleoaliens thread (Wayback machine)

[https://web.archive.org/web/20210221213527/http://www.paleoaliens.com/event/seraphinianus/codex/matrix\\_1.jpg](https://web.archive.org/web/20210221213527/http://www.paleoaliens.com/event/seraphinianus/codex/matrix_1.jpg)





## *Is Attunement a Solution to the Antinomy of Taste?*

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ABSTRACT. Many discussions within aesthetics are built on the notion of taste as that which allow us to experience things aesthetically. As such, aesthetic taste traditionally refers to a kind of sensitivity that an individual has with regards to objects, and therefore points to both the subject and the object of appreciation. This two-dimensionality of taste becomes an ambivalence when trying to identify the key stage from which aesthetic experiences overall emerge: the aesthetic, and therefore the exercise of taste, is rooted in an act of either affective response or perceptual discernment. Irene Martínez and Elisabeth Schellekens try to reconcile these stages by turning to the notion of attunement as a process of emotional adjustment to the aesthetic character of objects. I dig into their proposal and compare it with an alternate view of attunement, namely Rita Felski's, with a twofold purpose: (i) to explore whether the intended synthesis is successfully carried out, and (ii) to delve into the explanatory power of attunement applied to aesthetics.

### **1. Attunement as a Solution to the Ambivalence of Taste**

In 'Aesthetic Taste. Perceptual Discernment or Emotional Sensibility?' (2022), Irene Martínez and Elisabeth Schellekens aim to clarify what they find to be an intrinsic dichotomy to the notion of taste as traditionally understood in Aesthetics. Generally speaking, taste can be defined as "the

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ability to secure access to that which we deem aesthetically valuable” (Martínez & Schellekens, 2022, p. 58). By stating this view, they seem to focus on taste as a skill, a sensibility, or an ability to notice things in the world, and therefore withdraw from the discussion at hand an alternative but nonetheless common understanding of taste as something built out of those aesthetic experiences that one finds most pleasurable, thereby constituting our individual preferences and attachments. Hereafter, I too will be using the notion of taste in the former sense, as it has been traditionally conceived in aesthetic discussions.

In their paper, Martínez and Schellekens identify five different ways in which we exercise this ability of taste for engaging aesthetically with what surrounds us:

- i. the discernment of aesthetic qualities – aesthetic perception
- ii. the affective response to aesthetic value – aesthetic pleasure or displeasure
- iii. the emission of judgements regarding aesthetic value – aesthetic judgement
- iv. the use of aesthetic terms and predicates – aesthetic attributions
- v. the recognition and enjoyment of aesthetic merit – aesthetic evaluation

As such, these so-called aesthetic acts may partake in “a coherent experiential whole which includes most, if not all, aspects of the aesthetic” (Martínez & Schellekens, 2022, p. 60). Therefore, we must also consider taste as the capacity required for successfully performing the different tasks that constitute an aesthetic experience, which in turn seems to be impossible to account for without studying taste as the enabler of all forms of aesthetic engagement. An underlying approach regarding this characterisation is a holistic view according to which “aesthetic experience is not made up of entirely separate and independent aesthetic events. Rather, it involves chain reactions between phenomenologically connected events that together constitute one coherent aesthetic experience” (Martínez & Schellekens, 2022, p. 61). A simple formulation of this holistic approach seems quite compatible with our initial intuitions regarding aesthetic experience as a whole, but Martínez and Schellekens point out two issues that may arise from it: on the one hand, the thinning out of the explanation of the different aesthetic acts and therefore of aesthetic taste; on the other hand, the assumption that taste can single-handedly trigger the performance of all aesthetic

activities, thus leading to a variety of misconceptions regarding the way aesthetic experience is generated.

Above all, even from a holistic point of view, what strikes Martínez and Schellekens as inevitable is the intuition that any sort of experience must have a starting point, that is, an act from which the various events that take part in the overall activity follow. With regards to aesthetic experience, this intuition leaves us with the need to identify one of the many ways of exercising taste – thus to engage aesthetically – as the act which initiates the experience, and there seem to be two main contenders among the five aesthetic acts previously mentioned: aesthetic experience is initiated either by the discernment of an object’s aesthetic qualities (i.e. aesthetic perception) or by an affective response to them (i.e. aesthetic pleasure/displeasure).<sup>2</sup> Consequently, one of these two tasks in which aesthetic taste is exercised also constitutes its principal role – aesthetic experience cannot be characterised independently from taste and vice versa, so whichever act we point out as the initiator of the experience will also become the defining aspect of taste as the capacity to engage aesthetically with the world.

It is this overview of aesthetic engagement that ultimately leads to identifying an ambivalence in the notion of aesthetic taste as we know it. On the one hand, adopting a “perception-based” account implies conceiving of taste as the ability to discern qualities in the object, therefore giving grounds for accepting an objectivist approach to aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, adopting an “affect-based” account involves accepting taste as, first and foremost, the ability to respond emotionally, thus somehow supporting a subjectivist approach. Martínez and Schellekens aim mainly towards a characterisation of aesthetic taste that successfully portrays its exercise as a relational process in which both perceptual discernment and emotional response influence one another, thereby synthesising the objective and subjective dimensions of taste.

To do so, they turn to the notion of attunement as “an adjustment of one’s emotional sensibility to the aesthetic character of the object of appreciation” (Martínez & Schellekens, 2022, p. 70), and such adjustment is what constitutes becoming attuned to something. Applied to the aesthetic case, the process of attunement seems to be able to account for the complexity of taste

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<sup>2</sup> See Ibid. (p. 61).

<sup>3</sup> See Ibid. (p. 63).

and the way we exercise it when appreciating an object. On the one hand, by referring to an adjustment to the aesthetic character of objects, Martínez and Schellekens point to the importance of recognising how an object presents itself for us to react or to have some inclination towards it, and thus to engage in an appreciative experience. It's not possible to talk about concrete aesthetic experiences without talking about the object that is being appreciated and how its features condition the kind of experience an agent has of it. On the other hand, by focusing on an agent's emotional sensibility as the way they adjust to the aesthetic character of an object, Martínez and Schellekens concede that becoming attuned involves an affective predisposition to discern the aesthetic character of an object and appreciate it correctly – we adjust our “emotional understanding” (Martínez & Schellekens, 2022, p. 70) to the object's aesthetic character for both “getting it right” and having a richer, more valuable aesthetic experience.

In this way, Martínez and Schellekens' application of attunement to the aesthetic case aims to account for the different aesthetic acts, mainly for the two contenders regarded as the starting point of aesthetic experience, namely aesthetic perception and response, but also regarding aesthetic evaluation:

- A. Attunement is understood as an adjustment to the “aesthetic character” that comes from “the agent's emotional understanding, where such understanding is grounded in perception” (Martínez & Schellekens, 2022, p. 70).

This characterisation comes to imply for Martínez and Schellekens an identification between aesthetic character and the “aesthetically relevant qualities” (Martínez & Schellekens, 2022, p. 62) of the objects of appreciation. Let's take Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life* as an example. Reading *A Little Life* as melodramatic would imply that an agent adjusts their emotional understanding – expectations, reactions and so on – to the aesthetic character of the book, namely its relevant discernible features such as the plot, the story, the characters, and so on. But if one were to read *A Little Life* as part of Hanya Yanagihara's overall work, they would still adjust their expectations and/or reactions to the relevant discernible features of the novel, which in this case would be those such as the writing style of Yanagihara. In this manner, Martínez and Schellekens

provide a plausible characterisation of the affective or subjective dimension of taste without disregarding the objective dimension, and they emphasise how attunement “renders a richer perceptual grasp of the object’s aesthetic qualities possible and therefore also opens up the possibility of a more rewarding experience overall” (Martínez&Schellekens, 2022, p. 67). Nonetheless, the question of whether one can discern the “aesthetic character” of an object of appreciation prior to the exercise of any kind of emotional understanding remains open.

B. Becoming attuned to an object invokes an affective predisposition for correct aesthetic appreciation.

The kind of emotional sensibility that comes into play in the process of attunement is “a kind of feeling with” (Martínez & Schellekens, 2022, p. 68) the object, which thereby implies approaching it with a certain affective attitude in order to notice and rightfully appreciate its aesthetically relevant qualities. Nonetheless, this affective predisposition does not necessarily translate into responding with one specific emotional response that is the appropriate one for the given object. In other words, even though an agent’s affective reaction depends on how they attune to the object, the process of attunement is not successfully performed only when a given response is expressed. For example, for an agent to be properly attuned to *A Little Life* as a melodramatic piece of literary fiction, they ought not to feel sadness. On the contrary, what is required of them is to assume the characteristic features of a melodrama – the exaggerated suffering the characters go through, the not-so-happy conclusion of the story, and so on – and to be prepared to respond with the appropriate emotions given the melodramatic character of the novel, e.g. hopelessness, angst, sadness, and so on. In this sense, the process of attunement is thought of as a precondition for having concrete emotional responses, rather than involving them directly and/or prescribing them.

C. By becoming attuned, an agent is properly oriented towards the aesthetically relevant qualities of objects and therefore aims for appropriate aesthetic evaluation.

The process of attunement involves directing our attention to characteristics of the object that are relevant for aesthetic appreciation. This being so, becoming attuned supports justified property ascription in the sense that it guides our perception towards features “which may serve as reasons for an agent in explaining why she has ascribed certain properties (and not others)” (Martínez & Schellekens, 2022, p. 69). An agent could consider *A Little Life* to be beautifully raw by means of attuning to it in a certain way – i.e. engaging with the stylistic choices of the author or with how the characters are developed throughout the story – and they could point to these features as reasons to justify their aesthetic judgement, which in this case would be the ascription of the property “beautifully raw.” This cognitive rendition of attunement – i.e. the better grasping of the content and evaluative significance of aesthetic objects – is what constitutes the ultimate purpose of attunement and, subsequently, of the exercise of taste, and by virtue of this, Martínez and Schellekens appeal to both the possibility of improving our taste through training and a non-accidental experience of aesthetic value.<sup>4</sup>

Hereafter, I will argue that, while Martínez and Schellekens masterfully direct attention to a notion such as attunement regarding the discussion of aesthetic taste and thus contribute to enriching the way we approach aesthetic engagement overall, their treatment of the notion at issue does not fully account for the exercise of taste in all its variety as they contend. As will be developed in the following section, I find that a key feature in Martínez and Schellekens’ characterisation of the exercise of taste as a process of attunement is the so-called aesthetic character of objects of appreciation, and that even by having in mind a broader sense of what that term might refer to, it may still raise a few issues that jeopardize the purpose of accounting for all kinds of aesthetic experiences.

## 2. The Aesthetic Character of Objects of Appreciation

In their paper, Martínez and Schellekens initially leave open the question of whether aesthetic experience starts with perceptual discernment or with an emotional response, but they ultimately seem to regard the former as the most plausible alternative. For the sake of the following arguments,

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<sup>4</sup> See Ibid. (p. 60).

I stand by that intuition and therefore identify the stage of perception as the starting point of aesthetic experience, that is, as the primary aesthetic act in which taste is exercised. If this is acceptable, and if the notion of attunement successfully accounts for how we exercise taste, then aesthetic perception already implies becoming attuned and, in turn, adjusting to that which we discern in the object of appreciation.

At this point of the discussion, it seems relevant to bring back a previously announced issue, namely whether we can discern an object's aesthetic character without simultaneously exercising an emotional understanding and the perception of said object of appreciation. According to Martínez and Schellekens, when an agent becomes attuned to something, they adjust their emotional sensibility to the aesthetic character of the object – applied to attunement in perception, this means that when they perceive an object aesthetically, they do so by adjusting their affective predisposition to the aesthetic character they discern in the object. But if the agent adjusts themselves to the aesthetic character, then the latter cannot be in any way dependent on the experience – it must already “be there” [in the object] before perception so that anyone can adjust their sensibility to it. In other words, the issue can be stated follows: if an agent can adjust their affectivity to the aesthetic character of an object, which Martínez and Schellekens identify with the aesthetically relevant qualities, then said character [and those qualities] is already determined prior to the aesthetic experience, which in turn demands a certain kind of emotional understanding towards the object.

However, there may be reason to think that we determine the aesthetic relevance of perceptually discernible qualities as we go, that is, during the actual experience. This idea may be responded by stating that without an emotional adjustment, those aesthetic properties might not be properly recognised – at least certain ones like affective or expressive properties. What they may be claiming is that it is not possible to have an adequate response – responsive to the way we are required to perceive and understand the object – without a previous attitude or predisposition to look at it from a certain emotional perspective. Indeed, we need to acknowledge the aesthetic character of the object of appreciation at hand, but in a general way: to properly respond to *A Little Life*, we must at least know if it is a melodrama or a horror story, if it's contemporary or medieval, documental or fictional, and so on. In this sense, the so-called aesthetic character of *A Little Life*



would be mostly related to the way it is classified or categorised as a piece of art, and that knowledge would be enough for us to engage with the work in an appropriate manner, regardless of the outcome of the experience.

The identification of an object of appreciation as belonging to a category is still rooted in particular features presented by the object that ground the attribution of said category to it, but for the most part these features are already accepted by the relevant community as traits of each artistic category, so in this way their aesthetic relevance doesn't really change according to the different aesthetic experiences of said object. For example, the quality "melodramatic" is relevant for the aesthetic appreciation of *A Little Life* because it belongs to the literary category of melodrama, which can be known by someone who has not read the novel. In this sense, its melodramatic character is assumable and therefore stands with independence from having read the book. However, once an agent actually reads the work, its melodramatic character is found rooted in objective properties such as the troubled nature of the main characters or the unfortunate events they go through during the story.

Despite all of this, a characterisation of the aesthetic character of an object as the artistic category in which they belong may not suffice for explaining what it is that we actually do in the aesthetic appreciation of a particular instance of said category. Identifying an artwork's category and adjusting to it may seem to be the starting point of aesthetic appreciation but, even if it was, it would not be all there is to it. In fact, the notions of aesthetic character, aesthetically relevant qualities and artistic categories collide in a way that brings out several issues:

1. Sometimes an agent cannot figure out in which category an artwork belongs and they can still appreciate (at least partially) its aesthetic value (e.g. ambiguous, original, hybrid or "transmedial" artworks).
2. An agent can find certain qualities of the object to be aesthetically relevant without them being identified as features by which said object belongs to any specific category.

This is best illustrated by the characterisation of variable and contra-standard properties regarding categories of art provided by Kendall Walton in 'Categories of Art' (1970). On the one hand,

variable properties are irrelevant for the object to belong in a category but are appreciated as aesthetically relevant qualities nonetheless. On the other hand, contra-standard properties are those that would tend to disqualify an object as belonging to a category but they don't, so the object belongs to its category *despite* them. Both are instances of aesthetic qualities whose relevance is either independent of artistic categories or negatively dependent; that is, it comes from the clash between that particular quality and the category to which an object belongs in spite of the former.<sup>5</sup>

3. Taste is exercised when an individual gets in contact with a specific object and articulates its properties appropriately and on their own account.

As addressed before, artistic categories are grounded in objective properties, namely accepted intersubjectively as features of each category. This could seem to leave little room for deviation in aesthetic appreciation of art but it is not the case: an agent can always focus on aesthetic qualities that are not usually associated with any particular artistic category before the experience and still have a correct appreciation of the object in question as belonging in a specific category *because of* those qualities. When appreciating an object, an agent reacts to its aesthetic qualities according to the way in which they contribute to their aesthetic evaluation of it, therefore they choose –by exercising taste– which features are relevant and which ones are not. As such, an agent can become attuned to an artwork by means of knowing its category, but the way each artwork fits into one same category varies and also do the aesthetically relevant qualities that would be considered common features of said category. Becoming attuned to *A Little Life* requires reading it as literary fiction –to read it as non-fiction would lead to reading it *incorrectly*. Nonetheless, the book's qualities that strike as aesthetically relevant for a particular agent to consider *A Little Life* a valuable piece of literary fiction are not fixed nor pre-determined for them. For example, they could point to the way Yanagihara plays with the limits between the plausible and the implausible regarding

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<sup>5</sup> See Walton (1970, pp. 338-354).

the amount of disgraceful events presented, or to the thorough character study carried out in the book, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

4. Natural objects don't belong in any aesthetically relevant category from which they get their aesthetic character.

Ultimately, Martínez and Schellekens' characterisation of aesthetic character lies in a further assumption, namely that every object belongs to a category whose aesthetic relevance is determined prior to the experience. When the exercise of taste is guided by categories – i.e. in the appreciation of some artistic objects – we can easily tell, at least to a certain extent, if an agent is having the correct experience of a given object by means of their attunement to the proper category. Adjusting to the category of an object would equate to grasping its aesthetic character, and, in turn, would allow for an agent to discriminate some of its aesthetically relevant qualities. However, appealing to categories (of any kind, but especially of art) is hard when trying to account for the aesthetic experience of natural objects. These instances don't belong in any sort of category that could be tied directly to its aesthetic character, so there is no way for an agent to become attuned to them by means of adequately discerning those qualities that are aesthetically relevant in virtue of their link to a specific category. In this sense, Martínez and Schellekens initially aim to explain the exercise of taste directed towards both artworks and non-artistic objects, but they end up leaving the aesthetic appreciation of natural objects unexplained. For example, there seems to be no category in which a lunar eclipse belongs whose aesthetic relevance directly constitutes the aesthetic character perceived in the eclipse. Here, the exercise of taste is somewhat free: the aesthetic qualities appreciated are objectively indeterminate and therefore dependent on the agent's particular exercise of taste.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This train of thought could lead us to discuss the possibility of an interpretative pluralism with regards to artworks. Robert Stecker, for instance, would argue that we can understand –i.e. affectively adjust to– an object of appreciation from various and equally appropriate perspectives. For more, see Stecker (1997, pp. 133-155).

<sup>7</sup> Allen Carlson and Marcia Eaton defend that in case of the aesthetic appreciation of nature natural sciences provide the categories for a correct aesthetic experience. In any case, subsuming an object under its natural kind is cognitive, not emotional adjustment: categories of natural sciences are not aesthetic categories *per se*, but they still can be aesthetically relevant.

The serious consideration of the exercise of taste regarding non-artistic objects inevitably leads us to rethink aesthetic character as a concept: if it makes sense to speak in these terms at all, what is the aesthetic character of a lunar eclipse? What exactly does an agent adjust to in order to attune to a lunar eclipse and, therefore, to experience it aesthetically? It seems that there are no features in a lunar eclipse, or in any non-artistic object for that matter, that we could consider aesthetic prior to the experience of it, and if this is true, then there seems to be nothing to adjust to in these cases. Furthermore, the indeterminacy of aesthetically relevant qualities for non-artistic objects leaves the door open for considering cases of exercise of taste, or of aesthetic experience overall, that are not directed towards aesthetic evaluation – e.g. there is more than one correct way of appreciating a lunar eclipse in an aesthetic manner.

Overall, the analysis of what Martínez and Schellekens refer to as the aesthetic character of objects of appreciation reveals that, when trying to account for the exercise of taste in all kinds of aesthetic experiences, their article is written with artistic objects in mind. The process of attunement makes sense at least as a metaphorical clarification, it fits with our general way of engaging with aesthetic objects because it points to a key aspect of this kind of experience, which is the interrelational dynamic between perception and feeling. But to successfully account for the totality of aesthetic experience, it must be applicable to cases in which an agent exercises taste for appreciating non-artistic objects and therefore they are not necessarily performing an act of aesthetic evaluation. In this section, I tried to show why Martínez and Schellekens' approach to attunement does not quite manages to do so, and in the following I will put it in contrast with another application of the notion of attunement to aesthetics, namely Rita Felski's, which Martínez and Schellekens explicitly refer to (and dismiss) in their paper.

### **3. Attunement as Attachment**

There are two crucial aspects regarding Martínez and Schellekens' treatment of attunement: (i) becoming attuned is a conscious appreciative mental process that depends on our aesthetic skills, and (ii) we don't ascribe aesthetic value based on personal associations but on the aesthetically valuable properties discerned in the object. In virtue of these two points, Martínez and Schellekens'

proposal contrasts with that of Rita Felski in her book *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020), to which they directly refer in their paper. According to them, Felski's notion of attunement (i) is based on personal attachment to artworks instead of on the aesthetic character of objects; and (ii) allows for aesthetic experiences to be ineffable, that is, for them to not be a result of conscious effort to exercise our appreciative skills. Ultimately, they dismiss Felski's approach as a subjectivist account in which personal taste is the only thing that matters.

Felski's main goal is to grasp the way in which we engage with artworks by becoming attached and claims the aesthetic as «premised on relation rather than separation, on attachment rather than autonomy» (Felski, 2020, p. 8). She also aims to reconcile the dichotomy of subjectivity versus objectivity regarding the appreciation of art: the aesthetic exists because we both react to and are affected by things in a certain way that we have come to call "aesthetic". But this first-person dependence does not take away from the fact that we act as if our aesthetic experience should be shared by the rest, we correct each other's judgements and we expect for ourselves and others to improve our appreciation skills (and we usually know what it takes to do so). The main point is that, at the bottom of our aesthetic practices, there is an intersubjective relationship that shapes our taste by means of which we find our appreciation of things to be valuable, and it is in this way that the aesthetic experience acquires its normative dimension.

When it comes to the appreciation of artworks, Felski identifies three ways in which we become attached: attunement, identification, and interpretation. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the former. Becoming attuned is to enter a responsive relation that is not characterised by content – that is, an internal emotion towards an external object – but by a "state of affectedness [...] It is not a feeling-about but a feeling-with" (Felski, 2020, p. 42). In this manner, it is a kind of resonance with the object, which ultimately means to experience an affinity: "attunement is about things resonating, aligning, coming together" (Felski, 2020, p. 42) when encountering an object of appreciation. There are several key aspects that characterise Felski's notion of attunement:

- i. It is an intentional process, in the sense that it involves a "state of readiness" (Felski, 2020, p. 52) – an affective predisposition – for connecting and guiding attention towards a distinct "other" i.e. the specific artwork that is being appreciated.

- ii. It is a conditioned process, in the sense that it is embedded in a personal and/or interpersonal history of aesthetic response, and therefore is not unconditioned.
- iii. It can operate both consciously or in the background – there can be aesthetic experiences that are ineffable, but not all of them are.
- iv. An agent can consciously hold beliefs about valuable objects that don't line up with the kind of artworks they become attached to – an agent can ascribe aesthetic value to an artwork without attuning to it, and vice versa.

As previously mentioned, there are several points of friction between the conceptions of attunement here presented. On the one hand, Martínez & Schellekens conceive the attunement process as conscious and directly dependant on our aesthetic skills, therefore giving much relevance to the impact that improving our perceptual abilities has on our discernment of aesthetically relevant properties; whereas Felski allows for attunement to operate unconsciously and acknowledges the possibility of aesthetic experiences to be ineffable. On the other hand, while Martínez & Schellekens identify attuning to an object's aesthetic character with identifying properties and merit and with ascribing aesthetic value to it, Felski states that beliefs regarding value and experiences of attunement are mutually independent. The latter is the more intricate issue because it brings forward an approach to attunement that detaches it from the appreciation of aesthetic merit, which was one of the five main aesthetic acts performed by means of exercising taste and, therefore, one of the five main ways of becoming attuned to objects of appreciation.<sup>8</sup> According to Felski, if for an agent to resonate with an object in this way doesn't imply that they appreciate its aesthetic value, then neither does it imply they have a correct experience of it and subsequently has little to do with the exercise of taste towards aesthetic evaluation. In fact, she rejects the very notion of taste and thus completely unties attunement from the exercise of an ability to properly appreciate things in an aesthetic manner, i.e. of getting things right aesthetically.

I think the main advantage of Felski's treatment of the notion of attunement is that she does not specify to what exactly in the object we become attuned to when appreciating it, and in turn she rightfully stresses the role of the agent in aesthetic appreciation. On the one hand, and despite

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<sup>8</sup> See Cohen (2004).

the explicit focus on artworks throughout her book, this kind of indeterminacy leaves room for it to vary from case to case and thus could account for the whole diversity of aesthetic experiences possible. On the other hand, although her approach could be understood as a form of aesthetic subjectivism, Felski fully recognises the intersubjective determination of aesthetically relevant qualities and, in turn, the somewhat objective dimension of aesthetic appreciation. Nonetheless, it is true that what Felski ultimately tries to account for is the ties we forge with artworks, which appear as groundless because we cannot fully point to the underlying reasons why they come to be. She argues that the fact of an agent not being able to make explicit the reasons for their attunement to an artwork does not mean that this experience is unsupported or unmediated by more or less determinate factors which would constitute an explanation for it. To Felski, however, for attunement to be grounded only means that it is not an appreciative connection experienced by an agent at random: experiences of attunement can be explained, but they don't need to be justified, and therefore, in principle, there is nothing normative about becoming attuned to an object if it remains independent from any kind of consideration about value.

I argue that Felski's emphasis on experiences of attunement independent from aesthetic evaluation is precisely what makes its proposal lacking and therefore also insufficient for accounting for aesthetic experience as a whole. The notion of attunement can throw light on the way we engage aesthetically with artworks in the first stages of aesthetic experience, namely aesthetic perception and response [or feeling], but its role regarding overall aesthetic evaluation is adjacent. Felski states that aesthetic evaluation is carried out through interpretation, this process being the most reflective and conscious form of attachment. It follows that attunement as a process ends up serving as an explanation of the way personality and affections intervene in aesthetic appreciation, and, in this way, it successfully accounts for the social/subject-related aspects of taste. However, attunement is presented as completely unrelated to the correctness of an object's aesthetic experience.

Felski understands the process of interpretation as a "second-order reflection" (Felski, 2020, p. 128) and that is the case regarding the role of art criticism as we know it. Nonetheless, the interpretative task involved in an ordinary aesthetic experience does not usually start in delay with respect to the perceptual stage and, in turn, is not as deliberate or reflective as she lays out. It

appears that Felski separates out a definite interpretation of an artwork, which is thought-out and rationally supported, and an immediate interpretation of it that is invoked in the experience of understanding, of “getting” the artwork, the latter not constituting an interpretative – and therefore normative – process but an affective one, namely one of attunement. However, if it were the case that in many artistic cases perception implies interpretation, realizing the artwork’s sense or purpose, then attunement must be accounted for as a process in which somehow the adjustment implied by it carries some sort of meaning.

#### **4. Final Thoughts**

Each one of the approaches presented throughout this paper serves different purposes, but both of them succeed in highlighting the explanatory power of attunement concerning our aesthetic engagement with objects of appreciation, especially artworks.

Regarding Martínez & Schellekens’ proposal, I argue that it drifts towards an aesthetic objectivism. While their paper stands out as a robust attempt to enrich the theoretical characterisation of the exercise of taste while preserving its two-dimensional nature, they fail to account for all kinds of aesthetic experiences by relying attunement on the adjustment to an object’s aesthetic character. The characterisation of aesthetic character as something given before the experience leads to them focusing on aesthetic qualities directly related to categories of art, and therefore on artistic objects of appreciation. This claim carries further implications than what they may have originally intended, and so the appreciation of non-artistic objects ends up being neglected. Moreover, it remains unclear how the ambivalence of taste can be balanced in perception, and the identification of aesthetically relevant qualities is left unaccounted for. In addition to this, Martínez & Schellekens take as the paradigmatic aesthetic experience that of art criticism as traditionally conceived. This implies an understanding of the exercise of taste as directed towards aesthetic evaluation, and in turn, they dismiss other ways of exercising taste in which the experience doesn’t necessarily involve an evaluative act.

Regarding Felski’s proposal, I hold that she drifts towards an aesthetic subjectivism. She manages to stress the relational nature of aesthetic appreciation but doesn’t quite grasp the



complexity of its implications. By detaching attunement to the recognition of aesthetic value and at the same time locating this process in perceptual and responsive stages of aesthetic experience, she both limits the role of attunement in aesthetic evaluation and take response and perception as non-normative aesthetic acts. Aesthetic experiences are both perceptual and responsive, and the latter implies more than an emotional attachment to that which is perceived because it generates a normative experience, one in which the agent not only reacts to the object in a certain way but feels like the rest should do the same. Felski addresses aesthetic normativity when referring to attachment as interpretation of art, but she seems to limit this process to the traditionally conceived role of art criticism, which does not exhaust the scope of the normative character of aesthetic experience. Moreover, she conceptualises taste as the overall construction and development of aesthetic personality, therefore rejecting taste as an appreciative skill and leaving its objective dimension – related to the discernment of aesthetic features – unaddressed.

To conclude, I defend the suitability of the notion of attunement primarily for clarifying the way subjective input is necessary for generating a normative experience out of the perception of an object. I find that the authors mentioned throughout this paper successfully manage to introduce the notion of attunement in discussions of aesthetic taste by approaching what seems to be the main issue regarding these discussions i.e. the struggle to account for both the subjective and objective dimensions of aesthetic appreciation and the importance of finding a balance and a synthesis between them instead of prioritising one over the other. Despite this, I find these applications of attunement to the aesthetic taste unsuccessful in their original aim, and argue that they can be seen as both instigators and symptoms of the ambivalent nature of the exercise of taste: while trying to reconcile it, they accentuate the breach. While Martínez & Schellekens fail to account for the subjective dimension of taste, Felski fails to do so with the objective dimension; and while Martínez & Schellekens claim more than what they may have originally intended, Felski claims less than what we would expect regarding the subject matter. Hence, objective and subjective remain at odds.

## Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was supported by the project "The Rationality of Taste. Aesthetic appreciation and deliberation" (PID2023-149237NB-I00) funded by the Spanish National Investigation Agency - AEI.

21837/FPI/22. Fundación Séneca. Región de Murcia (Spain).

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## ***Between Dancing and “Being Danced”: Dance as the Emergence of an “Aesthetic Sense”***

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ABSTRACT. This article aims to highlight the coincidence of the artistic creative process in dance with the emergence of an “aesthetic sense”. After analysing the moments of “misunderstanding” that take place between the dancers as not the cessation of dance, but rather of affirmation of this very aesthetic sense, the Strausian notions of pathicity and tonicity will be used to emphasise that, in order for this phenomenon of emergence to occur, the dancer must learn to replace a controlling attitude with one of openness and acceptance towards the “felt” dimension of his own body. This aspect will be further explored through the adoption of a neo-phenomenological perspective, which will make it possible to examine what changes at the level of the “felt” body lead to the acquisition of the “aesthetic know how” necessary to grasp and mediate in an expressive way the emergence of the aesthetic sense that takes shape with and through the dance.

### **6. Introduction**

When studying the art of dance, there is often a tendency to analyse those moments when, in the face of technical complexity, movements are executed with fluidity and without apparent effort.

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This tends to lead to a one-sided view according to which anything that prevents such fluidity is seen as a danger that threatens the success of the performance. The scenario changes, however, if we take at a closer look the cases in which such motor fluidity is lacking. This happens, for example, when, in a couple dance, one of the dancers misinterprets the motor intention of the other. The sociologist Robert Gugutzer examines such a case in which communication breaks down between two Argentinean tango dancers. He reports on the words of Knut, the male dancer, who conventionally plays the role of the one who “leads” the dance.<sup>2</sup> Knut says that he is unable to do the figure he wants to do because Irene, his partner, is on the “wrong” foot, out of line with the figure Knut wants to do. Knut blames himself for the resulting deadlock, because he has not been able to make Irene understand the motor direction he wants her to follow. This creates a feeling of “blocking” which appears therefore as an accident to be avoided or whose damage the dancers must try to limit as much as possible (Gugutzer, 2008, pp. 320-321). The resulting concept of dance is therefore one in which the motor flow flows uninterruptedly from one partner to the next, in a kind of harmony and fluidity that must be preserved, avoiding or “neutralising” any form of interruption. My thesis is that the artistic creative process at work generates itself and develops in a specific manner precisely thanks to moments of “blockage” which act as hubs that allow the motor flow to recreate itself from new foundations and to take on the specific course of that dance in that performance. These moments allow the discovery of hitherto unexplored ways of feeling and moving that make each performance different from the others for both dancers and spectators. The idea is that each dance performance, whether improvised or not, marks the emergence of an “affective”, “aesthetic” sense, i.e., a “way of feeling” which is always explained according to specific postures and movements that reflect the affective “tonality” of both the dance genre in question and the performance being played out in that circumstance. The coincidence of dance with such an emergent phenomenon implies that this art cannot be reduced to the mere repetition of motor sequences. In this article, I will focus on the fact that the dancer’s skills cannot be reduced to technical competences, but to an “aesthetic” knowledge, which the dancer does not develop after

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction between the one who – actively – “leads” and the one who – passively – “follows” in couple dances, is reductive. It is so not only because the one who leads must always act on the basis of the reactions to his movements by the one who follows, who therefore also assumes a leading role (Fischer, 2015), but above all because the movements of a dance can never be attributed to a single dancer; they are the result of a joint decision, arising from a common “feeling” that is formed together with the dance itself.

acquiring the technical-motor skills provided by the dance genre in question, but which, along with them, conditions his mode of learning these skills and their subsequent use. Only in this way, in fact, will the dancer develop a sensitivity towards bodily sensations in line with the affective tonality of that dance genre – sensuality for the Argentine tango and flamenco<sup>3</sup> – and with those that are inspired by the circumstances in which one dances, thus conveying the aesthetic sense that takes shape along with the dance.

## 7. “Blockages” as Pathways to Pathicity

### *7.1. Misunderstanding as a New Quality of Understanding*

The analysis of the above example is an effective way of understanding that the artistic process requires a continuous repetition of its conditions of possibility. The moments of “blocking” are, in fact, the moments that neutralise any resurgence in the dancers of the attitude of control and domination that characterises movements directed towards a goal, and instead bring them back to a dimension of “pathicity”: a hybrid state, in which one is neither actively acting nor passively “acted upon” by what is happening. It follows that these blocks are not errors, but necessary steps that enable the dancer to grasp the affective-motor modalities arising in the moment in a way that he or she could not have foreseen, whether the dance was improvised or not. To grasp such modalities, however, it is necessary not simply to stop seeing such moments of blockage as mistakes, but to see them more acutely, to revise one’s notion of “error”. Alessandro Bertinetto states, “an error is not just something that contradicts a given normative order: rather, it is something that contradicts a given normative order and does not contribute to changing these normative conditions [...] Thus, movements or qualities that were errors in an earlier normative order

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<sup>3</sup> The identification of a specific affective tonality for each dance genre is an issue that needs to be explored further. Although it may seem easier to identify such a tonality in the case of folk dances, it should not be underestimated that they change over time and take on different affective connotations. This is even more evident in the other dance genres of the Western tradition (classical, modern and contemporary dance) where, especially in the case of modern and contemporary dance, their specific affective characteristics also change depending on the approach taken by the choreographers. Nevertheless, an underlying affective dimension seems to persist, which is differentially declined by the dancers’ interpretation and the contextual factors in which the performances take place.

may turn out to be correct in the new context whose normativity they (more or less) accidentally helped to (trans)form” (Bertinetto, 2016, p. 285, my transl.).

In the case described by Gugutzer, if there is a mistake, it is not in the dancers’ steps, but in the fact that they have not understood that, with Irene’s movements, for example, a new “normative order” is taking shape which is in line with the direction the dance is taking. Knut was not able to “sense” this direction because he was in the grip of an attitude which is not one of listening and openness to the sensations arising from the interaction with Irene, but rather of “imposing” a certain motor direction on his partner. This “blocking” moment therefore marks the interruption not so much of the motor flow, but of the very attitude that inhibits the reception and development of the affective and motor characteristics of this dance, and thus of the artistic process itself. In this way, a misunderstanding, a fundamental misunderstanding, is created between the dancers at a pre-conceptual, affective level which, however, precisely because of what has been said about the error, is the opening up of a new level of understanding, not only of the other, but also of oneself and, at the same time, of the dance itself. This is what Undine Eberlein says about the misunderstandings that arise between dancers:

Understanding and recognising the other in its fundamental unfathomability is therefore always a “non-understanding”, a misunderstanding that can, however, lead to processes of change and new possibilities on both sides: allowing oneself to be reminded of one’s own strangeness in the encounter with the other stranger can lead to a process of transformation and open up a new quality of “understanding”: It would be the desire not only to see the threatening in one’s own and other strangers [...] but to allow oneself to be carried in the encounter with them to a “where” whose possibilities cannot yet be known. (Eberlein, 2016, p. 246, my transl.)

The misunderstanding between Knut and Irene can be conceived as the opening to a new quality of understanding, not of themselves or of each other as individuals, but above all the direction taken by dance itself. It is creatively fulfilling because it confronts an irreparable otherness, that of the very configuration of the dance, which it is now she who imposes, depriving the dancers of the role of masters of their own and each other’s movements. The misunderstanding that has arisen is an integral part of the emergence of the “shape” of the dance, a shape connotated by a specific affective tonality that escapes any attempt to plan and control the movements and the way they manifest

themselves. This form unfolds with and through the sensitivity and movements of the dancers only by being “felt” by them, for whom these “blocking” movements are like “thresholds” states that allow them to awaken and refine their receptivity.

## ***7.2. Doing Less to Feel More***

The kind of receptivity involved is not the ability to passively receive stimuli, but rather the ability to listen to the sensations and movements that emerge during the dance and give it its characteristic “shape”. This is particularly evident in improvised dance, where movements are decided in real time precisely in correspondence with these precious threshold states, which are an opening to the unpredictable unfolding that is discovered in its “making”, the dance itself. Referring to the Argentine tango, the philosopher Davide Sparti speaks of the need in improvisation

to know how to keep open and even [...] to extend this interstitial moment, staying ahead of the figures and the tested holds. Improvisation presupposes the ability to weaken control by proceeding by subtraction: I make room for the emergence of the new, I allow the unexpected to happen, I allow myself to be provoked by the situation or by the reactions of the other. It presupposes, in the words of Bateson (1972, 497), “the capacity [...] to retain an undiscounted potential for change” (Sparti, 2017, p. 142, my transl.).

What these moments of uncertainty imply is precisely the induction to grasp in them the potentiality of changing oneself, first and foremost in terms of one’s own ability to replace a controlling attitude with one aimed at listening to what is happening. It is a matter of acting by subtraction, whose “negative” side is the abstention from productive action, namely the “doing” instrumentally used to achieve a certain goal – such as the reaching of a place or a thing.

As Marito Olsson Forsberg points out – again with reference to Argentine tango – “not doing” is precisely the advice given to Argentine tango students who tend to be too rational and who are obsessed with the imperative of “doing well” or “doing something special”. On the contrary, almost paradoxically, their abilities as dancers develop

Not in doing, but in letting do and feel [...] The extra-daily body of tango is not built by adding to the daily body an extra “doing”, an extra tension, an extra demand, but by taking away from it: by doing less, but feeling more; by paying more attention. (Olsson-Forsberg 2013/4, p. 100, my transl.)

Doing less to feel more is the key principle to understand, in moments of impasse such as those described above, which movements give greater voice to the way of feeling that is developing in oneself and in one’s partner, and which is the “affective” sense through which the dance orientates the dancers’ motor choices. This does not mean that the dancers are mere executors of an external force that moves them; on the contrary, as soon as they listen to what they are feeling, they feel an irrepressible impulse to move, choosing the type of movement to perform according to what they feel is “right”, in accordance with this way of feeling, which depends as much on the affective tonality of the type of dance they are performing, as on the circumstances in which they are dancing, as on their experience as dancers and their individual sensibilities. We are therefore dealing with sensations that are constitutively expressed kinetically; this union of feeling and movement is precisely what characterises the attitude of listening and openness to the “affective” sense that emerges, which we call “pathicity”.

### ***7.3. Pathicity and Tonicity: A “Moving-Moved” Felt Body***

Introduced by the psychologist and phenomenologist Erwin Straus (1891-1975), the term of “pathicity” refers to the moment of our perception that is more concerned with the way we experience something than with what we experience (the so-called “gnostic” moment of perception). The subject is therefore neither active nor passive; it is not the initiator of this contact, and, at the same time, the contact can only take place with and through its movement. According to Straus, our “original” relationship with the world is characterised by this qualitative character, a relationship whose centre is not the object of perception, but the way we are affected by it. It is a state that can be characterised as that to which verbs in the middle voice in languages such as Ancient Greek refer. *Haptomai*, “to enter into contact”, for example, is a verb that, as Emile Benveniste puts it, “indicates a process of which the subject is the seat; the subject is internal to the process” (Benveniste, 1966, p. 172, my transl.). The process at work here is the one associated with



the dynamic of “grasping”, of being “in the grip” of an affective state that unfolds with the very perception of the thing that affects us affectively. Straus illustrates this dynamic with the example of music, the participation in whose spread in space we cannot escape, since we cannot exempt ourselves from listening to it and thus become an inescapable medium of its generation with and through a “felt” space that eludes any attempt to measure it. To hear a sound is to feel oneself in the grip of the tone of the sound that spreads, a tone that “has an activity of its own, it rushes towards us, seizes us affectively, takes possession of us” (Straus, 2005, p. 46, my transl.). The idea of “possession” at stake here implies the subject’s involvement in a dynamic in which the perceiver participates, thus contributing to the “shape” it takes, and which concerns a specific configuration of our relationship to the world.

This is also shown by the fact that the grasping sensation by which we are preyed upon is inseparable from a movement, even if it is only a change in our posture, which is immediately invigorated as if by a new energy. This is a true phenomenon of “dynamization” conceived as the urge to move, “set oneself in motion”, i.e., generate an autonomous movement as independent of any external factor. Such a phenomenon, defined by Straus as “tonicity” is, in fact, to be understood as “the living experience of self-movement” (Boissière, 2023, p. 107, my transl.). This experience is characterised by the sensation of a sudden increase in “tone”, understood as vital energy, which, instead of dictating a specific movement, provokes a generalised revitalisation. To be “grasped” by music is to suddenly feel “alive”, present, rejuvenated by a sense of vitality and openness to the “acoustic” space created by the resonance of an “acoustic”, sentient body, which is not “pushed” to move, but rather “pulled”, i.e., called into the movement through which the “felt” space itself opens up.

In this way, listening to one’s own pathic dimension is inseparable from the feeling of simultaneously moving and being moved by the space itself that moves with and through our body so that one feels oneself as the only author of his movements without, at the same time, being completely in control of them. As the philosopher and dancer Emma Bigé puts it, “dancing is an activity that places the dancer in a liminal, in-between state. Cause and mover, they are at the same time effect and moved by movements that are not theirs. Moving-moved: This is where dance places us, in movements that we make and that we are made of” (Bigé, 2019, p. 328). The moments

of “blocking” are those that allow the dancers to grasp the liminal, threshold state in which they find themselves, which indicates that they are not the fulcrum, the active cause of the movement they are performing, but rather an integral part of it. This leads us to question the relationship between physical movement and feeling; the protagonist of the experience of dancing is, in fact, not the physical body, i.e., the body we see and touch, but rather the body we “feel” to be and which, according to the phenomenological tradition, is defined as the “living body” (Leib), as opposed to the physical body (Körper). The “presential” movements of dancing are performed precisely on the thrust of their “felt-bodily” sensations, i.e., those linked with the feeling of being “present”, “alive”, thanks to the increase in vital energy provided by tonicity.

Dancers are required to maintain this state of “tension”, because it is from it that they derive the vital impulse not to be mere executors of predetermined movements, but modulators of the affective nuances experienced during the dance. This is why it is not enough for them to have motor skills, but also the ability to use them to increase their sensitivity and “open up”, so to speak, to the unexplored affective and motor modalities that emerge while dancing.<sup>4</sup> This seems to be possible thanks to the dancer’s adoption of a “pathic” attitude, an attitude of openness to the affective demands that come from who and what surrounds him and that stimulate his creative resources.

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<sup>4</sup> The specificity of dance would therefore be linked precisely to this search for new ways of feeling. It could be argued that this is not a prerogative of dance or of the arts in general. It could be said, for example, that even the success of those who practise sport at a professional level depends essentially on their ability to connect with their felt body (Camilleri, 2023). It could be also said that even those who practise sport in an amateur way may not have as their goal technical correctness, but rather a pleasurable experience in which new sensations, different from those experienced in everyday life, can be discovered and savoured. One could reply to the first objection claiming that, while it is true that the affective dimension can play an orienting role in sport, this does not mean that sport does not still have as its goal the achievement of certain records concerning the physical body. In dance, on the other hand, all physical abilities are placed at the service of the “felt” dimension, i.e. the ability to transform, one’s own sensibility according to the dance genre chosen, the choreographic style followed and the specificity of the circumstances in which one is dancing. This last observation allows us to respond to the second objection: the purpose of dance is not to discover “extra-daily” sensations in an extemporaneous way, but to carry out a research that focuses on that process of “shaping” one’s own feelings through a creative and expressive work that is absent in sport, and which consists in the “organic” exhibition, while participating in it, of the set of those affective-motor interrelationships experienced while dancing.

## 8. Dancers' "Aesthetic know-how"

### 8.1. From "Problem Solving" to "Problem Finding"

The kind of creativity we are talking about has nothing to do with the desire to impose a specific motor pattern on oneself and on others, and even when the choreography is not improvised, each movement does not come about because it is prescribed by such a choreography, but thanks to the dancer's ability to "sense" the "necessity" of that movement, its mode of execution, and its concatenation with those that precede and follow it. This means that the priority is no longer to perform the movements correctly, but to feel, on the basis of the affective and motor stimuli present, their demand – according to the dance genre and circumstances – for the specific way of moving required by the choreography. Therefore, movements should no longer be seen as something to be done to fulfil a task, but as a resource for discovering the movements to come. This only happens if, instead of having a "problem-solving" attitude – which underlies a controlling attitude one adopts a "problem-finding" attitude, which opens up to the "pathic" attitude.

As Alessandro Bertinetto says: "artistic creativity cannot be conceived (only) in terms of solving problems, but (also) in terms of finding problems" (Bertinetto, 2021, p. 161, my transl.). One can only experience the necessity of performing the movement envisaged by the choreography if one can grasp the binding power of the circumstances in which one dances, which is expressed not only in the type of movements they allow or do not allow, but also in the way they condition the perception of others. Consider the difference between performing a balancing pose in a confined space and in a wide space, and how this again changes when the confined space is empty and the wide space is filled with objects and people, or vice versa. What is at stake here is not simply the ability to adapt to the context in which one finds oneself, but rather the creative expression of this dimension: the ability to maintain that state of tension that allows one not only to grasp those affective stimuli, but also to keep them working, either by changing according to the movements taking place, or by changing over time, or by changing according to the circumstances – think of the different effects of music in a theatre, or in an open space, or in site-specific dance. The dancer must therefore learn how to use his technical and motor skills, possibly by reformatting them, to

remain receptive to such stimuli and their changes, and to allow himself or herself to be transformed by them, thus provoking in himself or herself, in the other dancers and in the audience, new ways of being affected by such stimuli. The idea is that the dancer must learn not to maintain a kind of continuity between stimuli, sensations, and movements, but to experience the discontinuities, the differences that are created with each performance, on an affective and motor level. Only in this way will the dance have the affective-expressive characteristics that are characteristic of the performance danced by these dancers.

## ***8.2. Aesthetic “Know how”, Expressivity, and “Aesthetic Sense”***

The ability that underlies the motor skills that the dancer acquires is precisely that of grasping these discontinuities, which implies a questioning – sometimes even radical – of one’s own habitual ways of feeling and moving. This applies even in the execution of a step that one has performed many times in the past, and which, however, one recognises as symptomatic of that “affective” sense that emerges along with this dance, and which leads one to reconstruct from scratch one’s own ability to perform this step. It is a matter of “reinventing” one’s own technical skills, which can only happen if these skills have been consolidated, thanks to a practice that, instead of leading to their atrophy, brings out their unrealised potential or new operability that has been created thanks to the circumstances that have arisen. Therefore, the two forms of “know how” identified by Giovanni Matteucci prove useful here:

The first form of know-how, the pragmatic one, is embodied in a technical competence: you have to learn certain rules that govern a practice – a method for playing a musical instrument, for solving a score, etc. [...] The second form of knowledge, the operative one, on the other hand, takes concrete form in what could be defined as “aesthetic know how”, where one has to orient oneself towards the material in order to find a way of also using what one incorporates into a practice in order to produce an expressive instance in the interweaving of objective and subjective elements. (Matteucci, 2019, pp. 94-95).

Aesthetic knowledge, then, is not acquired in a single exercise, repeated over and over to develop one technical skill after another, but as the practice of dancing, expressed both in training routines<sup>5</sup> and in the performances that take place daily, even at the professional level. In both cases, these are moments in which the dancers are confronted with the “artistic material”: their own and other people’s sensations and physical bodies, the music, the costumes, the spatial characteristics, the audience (if present). Being confronted with this material consists of dealing with the resistances and limitations they impose, practising from time to time to perceive these limitations and to respond to them in a way that corresponds to the sensations that prevail during the exercise and/or performance. In this way, the dancer develops the ability to grasp and follow an “expressive” way of orienting towards the creative material, where “expressivity” means that “modulation of feeling” (Matteucci, 2019, p. 201) that implies every moment of the unfolding of our relationship with the world. The latter refers to our being constitutively involved in the confrontation with otherness, a confrontation that presupposes a continuous participation in the “making” itself of what we are interacting with. The specificity of the creative-expressive work of the dancer seems to lie precisely in the fact that, while participating in it, he performs an operation of disruption of the conditions on which the relationship with the world is based, and in their creative reconfiguration, that is, in making us receptive to all those “discontinuities” which signify our being in the world and which, thanks to the perspective given by dance, turn out to be means of discovering unprecedented ways of “engaging” with the world. Dance thus restores the intrinsically relational as well as affective character of our experience, its being, that is, not only an experience “of” something, like an object detached from us that we tame and control, but an experience “with” the world of which we are a part: “When one is engaged in an experience with one, one finds oneself colluding with the manifestation of a sensible texture [...] The organism does not assist, but participates in the appearance of sensible texture.” (ibid., pp. 50-51, my transl.)

The whole process of learning a dance technique is permeated by the dancer’s ability to acquire an awareness of the type of sensation associated with the type of movement being performed. In this sense, dancers “pathically” participate – instead of “passively” assisting – in the manifestation of a “sensible texture”: an affective sense that is connoted as artistic-expressive

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<sup>5</sup> On the importance of routines in dance see Schneider, 2023.

because it is the result of the evocation, through technical-operational strategies discovered during the work, of certain “energies” of the sensible texture that show a “certain glimpse” of the “experiential field” we are part of. These energies are the environmental affective solicitations that influence mutually differently according to the period and the circumstance thus eliciting specific affective and motor modalities. The dancers can catch the “paths” created by these solicitations and that coincide with the expressivity of the peculiar texture constituted by the relationship between the subject and the environment:

The configuration is expressive when it outlines a path through the fibres of the sensible texture. The outline of such a path is the result of the encounter between the tendential constraints of the sensible texture and the conditionings due to the grain and ribbing that characterise the register and the expressive medium of the case. (ibid., p. 205, my transl.).

The “affective” sense that emerges while dancing is precisely such a result, which varies according to the dancer, the circumstances, but also over time, according to the dance techniques that the dancer has learnt and the experience that he has accumulated.

## **9. A Neophenomenological Approach to the Learning of a Dance**

### ***9.1. A Neophenomenological Perspective***

An effective way of analysing in more detail how dancers learn to grasp the emergence of the affective state specific to this dance is to use a “neo-phenomenological” approach. This approach, developed by Hermann Schmitz in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which aims to emphasise the involuntary dimension of experience and is based on the notion of the felt body, has the advantage of providing a veritable “alphabet” of the “felt body”, which is particularly useful for a detailed study of the learning process of a dance, where felt-bodily sensations have an undeniable centrality. According to this approach, the felt body is characterised by a “felt-bodily dynamic”, which is formed by a constant dialogue between tension and expansion. The way in which this dynamic is generated is manifested when we are intensely affected by something, such as an unexpected sound,

we experience an immediate sense of narrowness. In these cases, we feel a sudden sensation of contraction, to which we respond in an expansive way thus provoking a contractive reaction. Expansion and contraction bind together, and the felt-bodily dynamics are therefore formed.<sup>6</sup> Our physical movements are integral part of our expansive response to the contraction felt while being affected. Dance, with its moments of stillness as well as its moments of dynamism, of motoric impulse, is nothing other than the exhibition of the formation of one's own bodily dynamics, of its self-giving through the alternation of sensations of contraction and expansion.

Even if dance is not a central theme in Schmitz's thinking, and even if he makes no distinction between the motor skills acquired in dance and the non-artistic ones (e.g. riding a bicycle), his description of how we learn to dance, with some additions, is useful for understanding how the acquisition of a technical skill is already oriented towards the acquisition of "aesthetic know how". According to Schmitz, we learn to dance by relying primarily on our perceptual schema. This is the image of ourselves that we draw from our senses; it is the phase in which we must visually or mentally check that we are using the right parts of the body, calculating their position and distance from each other. Practice recur to this scheme becomes even more superfluous until the movement is entirely directed by our motor scheme. This consists of the set of "felt-bodily" directions that come from, or are directed to, the felt body by eliciting an expansive motor response and by the "felt-bodily isles" that these directions awaken or generate.

The latter are "felt" areas, irreducible to the anatomical zones to which they correspond, which arise when tension prevails over expansion. Some of them are more stable (as in the case of the chest or the soles of the feet), others are of more variable duration depending on the duration of a sensation (as in the case of the head in the case of a headache). They arise correspondingly to the sensations elicited by felt-bodily directions; the latter are "motor suggestions", intuitive prefigurations of movement present in the forms we encounter and experience within us: the shapes of objects, music, but also glances and gestures (Cf. Schmitz, 2018, 2019). Such prefigurations do not prescribe a single movement, but rather a tendency, a general way of moving. Music, for example, identified by Schmitz as the "realm" of motor suggestions, takes possession of our limbs

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<sup>6</sup> An example of this proprioceptive dynamic is pain, which triggers in us, on the one hand, a tendency to contract, which can be expressed in a contraction movement, and, on the other hand, a tendency to expand, which can be expressed, for example, in a cry.

and guides them towards a mode of articulation corresponding to the propagation of sound (the waltz imitates the swaying movements of the waltz).

Following Tonino Griffero – the author of an “atmospherological” approach developed within a “neo-phenomenological” perspective<sup>7</sup> – we identify motor suggestions with atmospheric affordances, understood as invitations to feel, to resonate with atmospheres. The word “affordances” is borrowed from the American psychologist James Gibson, whose ecological theory of perception (1979) is based on the idea that what we perceive of an environment are invitations to act in a certain way, invitations that arise from the encounter between our properties and those of the environment itself. Griffero, who accepts the emergent and relational character of affordances, denies their “active” character, insisting instead that they are first and foremost “invitations to feel” in a certain way. In fact, atmospheres are understood by him – following Schmitz<sup>8</sup> – as our affective states, which are not internal states to be projected out of us, but entities diffused in space that capture us and invite us to resonate with them, a resonance in which feeling is inseparable from moving in a certain way.

The notion of atmospheric affordances seems particularly effective for discussing the acquisition of “aesthetic know how”, because it highlights the fact that this knowledge is about the ability to welcome one’s own “pathicity”: to listen to one’s own felt-bodily sensations, i.e., the sensations elicited by the “affective stimuli” coming from the surrounding. These stimuli are precisely the atmospheric affordances whose perception triggers in dancers the increase of vitality that characterises tonicity. Furthermore, the atmospheric affordances seem to be an integral part of the tendential constraints of which Matteucci speaks, as orientations towards the lines of energy in which the sensual structure is configured together with and through the characteristics of the expressive medium – the dancer’s body and the technique he or she has acquired – and through which this configuration – and with it the experience of the world implied in it – constitutes a “performative unfolding” (Matteucci, 2019, p. 204 ).

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<sup>7</sup> See at least Griffero, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> The difference between Griffero’s approach and Schmitz’s is that for the latter there are only “prototypical” atmospheres that we experience as soon as we enter a space. In contrast, Griffero posits that there are also “spurious” atmospheres, i.e., atmospheres that we generate – in response to these prototypical ones – and “relational-derivative” atmospheres: the atmospheres that arise from the interaction between human entities and between human and non-human entities. (cf. Griffero, 2020)



## 9.2. *Motor Scheme and Peripheral Attention*

Following Griffero, atmospheric affordances coincide with the motor suggestions (or “felt-bodily directions”) that traverse the “felt-bodily directional space”, i.e., the space the dancer accesses as soon as, thanks to pattern, they no longer use the perceptual body scheme and exclusively recur to the motor body scheme. Once the dancer enters this space, he no longer acts according to the given instructions that we impose on our limbs, but because it is our limbs themselves that “make him decide” how to move according to the atmospheric affordances with which he resonates. What seems to happen at the motor level when we learn to dance seems to be what Schmitz says happens when we learn to manipulate objects: an involuntary and unconscious expansion of our motor pattern, whose set of felt body directions is enriched by the motor suggestions related to the music, the floor, the costume, the other dancers, the characteristics of the space, etc.

Through repetition, the dancer becomes accustomed to engaging with his environment in this way. This repetition leads the dancer, on the one hand, to execute the learned motor patterns with increasing ease and, on the other hand, to perceive the transformations that these patterns undergo with each realisation, as they are modified by the environment, which in turn is transformed by them. What happens is, in fact, a transition from an exclusively “focused” attention on the sensations learned to be correlated with these patterns, to a “peripheral” attention directed towards one’s overall affective state (Eberlein, 2013).<sup>9</sup> This makes the dancer more receptive to the influence exerted on his affective state by the environment. As he becomes more familiar with the sensations associated with individual movements through practice, his attention can now turn to the specific effect of the atmospheric affordances of his environment on his body. In this way, he notices that the same gesture in a given context can result in different sensations caused by different affordances or can have a different effect on him in that context. In this way, he develops what Alessandro Bertinetto calls the “(meta)habit of responsive sensitivity” (Bertinetto, 2024, p. 66), a habit of “sensory-affective attention to the concrete environmental situation” (Bertinetto, 2023, p.

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<sup>9</sup> Although this distinction has already been made by Ernst Gombrich (1979), we refer to Undine Eberlein because she uses these terms with the specific purpose of integrating Schmitz’s “alphabet” of the felt body.

40) that guides his artistic-expressive choices. It is only through this habit that the dancer adapts creatively to the circumstances. To adapt creatively does not mean that he tries to make the circumstances influence his way of moving as little as possible to preserve the steps, the poses, and, above all, the way of execution provided by the choreography. On the contrary, the dancer draws from the effect that the atmospheric possibilities present to him the cue to discover the affective and expressive potentialities inherent in those steps and poses, which, however, only those circumstances have called for.

## 10. Conclusion

In the light of these considerations it seems possible to identify in peripheral attention a key element that allows the dancer to notice the unexplored, unprecedented dimension that makes each dance performance different from the others. It is thanks to this attention that the constitutive surplus component of creativity is revealed: “the success of the work”, says Bertinetto, “emerges beyond the planning and realisation [...] The creative work, although produced with skill and intelligence, exceeds the control and intentions of the artist [...] The artist, however much he masters the techniques of his craft and has learnt and incorporated the relevant skills, does not completely dominate what he does” (Bertinetto, 2021, 162, my transl.). If it is true that the dancer, in spite of the skills he has acquired, does not fully control what he does, and if he has been guided in learning these skills towards the acquisition of an “aesthetic know how”, he has acquired the “meta habit” of perceiving the affective variations in his relationship with the world. By following his felt bodily sensations, the dancer makes these variations manifest and guarantee the efficacy of their operativity, i.e. he awakens in the other dancers and the spectators the ability to sense how atmospheric affordances transform their way of feeling itself, opening them up to the emergence of an “aesthetic sense”. The latter is the expression of being “engaged” with the world: a way of feeling, moving, and relating to the environment that inexplicably and yet unequivocally “makes sense”.

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## ***Conserving the Ephemeral: A Philosophical Problem for Contemporary Art***

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ABSTRACT. The objective of this paper is to reassess the role of conservation in light of developments in contemporary art. Conservation, traditionally defined as the practice of maintaining the original condition of a work of art over time, encounters a difficulty when dealing with what we might call transient art forms like installations, performance, and conceptual art. In this paper, I propose two potential approaches for rethinking conservation in contemporary art. The first, termed the positive approach, emphasises preserving the conceptual identity of artworks, irrespective of the persistence of materials. The second, the negative approach, dismisses the possibility of conservation, asserting that embracing the ephemeral nature of these art forms is crucial to respecting their originality. The presentation critically analyses the limitations and possibilities of each proposed approach, contributing to the delineation of the future of conservation in contemporary art.

### **1. Introduction**

Several works of contemporary art utilize ephemeral, perishable, or unstable materials. Confronted with artistic kinds such as installations, performances, and conceptual art one can legitimately raise

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<sup>2</sup> This research was funded by the ERC-StG Project 101040535 (“PEA – The Philosophy of Experiential Artifacts”).

questions concerning conservation and the transmission of our artistic heritage to future generations. Described as the practice of preserving the original condition of the work of art over time, conservation has historically translated into meticulous material care, aimed at preserving the identity of works of art.<sup>3</sup> While this practice has been effective for centuries, it now seems to face a difficulty considering developments in contemporary art and its ontological peculiarities. Therefore, it is useful to reconsider the role of conservation amid these changes with the aim of, on the one hand, better understanding the practice of conservation itself and, on the other, shedding some light on the ontology of contemporary art.

In this paper, I individuate two approaches to contemporary art conservation. The first, which I term *positive*, recognizes the feasibility of preserving works of art in spite of the problematic persistence of their material, emphasizing the importance of the conceptual aspect in identifying the work. The second approach, labelled *negative*, rejects the possibility of preserving these art forms since respecting their originality entails accepting their unique nature and, consequently, their ephemeral character.

I will explore these two alternatives, highlighting the pros and cons of each. Specifically, in section 1, I will discuss the positive approach, distinguishing between two possible positions within it; in section 2, I will discuss the negative approach. Finally, in section 3, I will defend a pluralist approach, and I argue that it has the potential for overcoming the shortcomings of both the positive and the negative approaches.

## 2. Positive Approaches

The first approaches I will consider are “positive” since they argue that the work of art can be conserved because it is not to be identified with its material aspect but rather with its conceptual

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<sup>3</sup> ICOM defines conservation as “all measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility to present and future generations (..) All measures and actions should respect the significance and the physical properties of the cultural heritage item.” (ICOM 2008) [ICOM-CC | Terminology for conservation \(2008\)](#); while UNESCO describes it as: “Conservation includes effective and active measures that can be taken by States Parties to ensure the identification, protection, presentation and transmission of heritage.” [UNESCO World Heritage Centre - Compendium](#). For a definition of the conservator’s work see also: [Burra Charter 2013 \(Adopted 31.10.2013\) \(icomos.org\)](#).

component. Conservation should focus on preserving the latter rather than the physical object. We can distinguish two different “positive” approaches depending on whether the conceptual component is considered either a) as a set of rules for execution or b) as a self-standing set of ideas.

### **2.1. Rule-Conceptualism**

The position I dub ‘rule-conceptualism’ considers contemporary art, especially installation art, as a two-stage art form, in which we can identify a first normative moment and a second executive moment. Rule-conceptualism fits well with Sherri Irvin’s (2005; 2008; 2022) theory, according to which the identity of artworks consists of rules specified by what she calls “the artist’s sanction”.

As a case study Irvin considers Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) whose display consists in a group of candies placed on the ground (weighing about 80 kg), which the public is invited to consume as a symbol of the progressive deterioration of Ross’s body due to AIDS. Irvin notes that the identity of Gonzalez-Torres’ work does not reside in the candies themselves, but in the rules that govern the appreciation of the work by specifying how to display it, interact with it, and take care of it. From this perspective, the candies are just means to the appreciation of the work that can be substituted from time to time without altering its identity. In works such as *Untitled*, originality and authenticity pertain not to the physical material, but to the set of instructions that the artist has established for the construction of the installation.

This approach bears similarities to how we perceive musical compositions. In music, we recognize a primary stage of the work in the normative auditory structure identified by the score and a secondary stage in its performance. From this perspective, Pip Laurenson (2006) claims that what she calls ‘time-based media installations’ should be viewed as analogous to musical compositions since “they belong to the category of works of art created through a two-stage process [...] where what is experienced is the performance, created at the beginning and then performed at later times”.<sup>4</sup> Such a comparison between works of contemporary art and works of music prompts

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<sup>4</sup> Laurenson draws on the works of Stephen Davies (2001) and Lydia Goehr (1992) on musical ontology. The full text is available at: [Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations – Tate Papers | Tate](#).

us to reconsider the role of conservation not in relation to the transient performance, but to the enduring rules. Just as the work of music can be preserved simply by preserving its score, the work of contemporary art might be preserved simply by preserving its rules.

This approach to conservation, however, faces serious issues. First, the practice of explicitly specifying rules is much less common in contemporary art than in music. While works of music usually have explicit scores, the rules for displaying works of contemporary art are often left implicit by the artist and, as time passes, it may be complicated to properly identify them in order to preserve the work. Furthermore, there are cases in which the rules may prevent the performances. This occurs when the artist's guidelines include conditions that are unrepeatable, such as being linked to a specific time and place or specific participants.

Among the conditions of unrepeatability that conservators encounter, we should also consider obsolescence. The scarcity of materials, for instance, affects video art due to the rapid advancement of technologies. Conservators of video art are often faced with the need to replace the medium to ensure the continued accessibility of the works. Such material substitutions may sometimes conflict with the artist's sanction. In these cases, the conservator must determine the extent to which the rules should be revised without compromising the identity of the artwork (van de Vall, 2015).

An example of this dilemma can be found in Nam June Paik's "TVs", such as *TV Garden* and *TV Buddha* made in 1974. Paik's televisions are constructed using obsolete technological components, such as cathode ray tubes, which deteriorate over time and become increasingly difficult to replace or repair. Although Paik established a rule allowing for the replacement of token cathode ray tubes with other tokens of the same type, he did not address the possibility of replacing them with tokens of different technological types (Irvin, 2022, pp. 179-182; Hölling, 2017). With the obsolescence of these components and the passing of the artist, it falls upon the conservator to interpret the artist's intentions and determine whether the replacement of the tubes with tokens of different technological types (for instance, digital ones) irreversibly compromises the identity of Paik's work.



In such situations, an age-old debate widely discussed in philosophy of art regarding the artist's intentions resurfaces.<sup>5</sup> Translated into the context of contemporary art conservation, it pertains to determining how faithfully the artist's directives should be adhered to (Dykstra, 1996; Maes, 2010; Wharton, 2015). This problem arises both when the rules are not explicit, requiring the conservator to interpret the artist's intentions (Van de Vall et al., 2011), and when the rules are explicit but challenge the interests of the conservator.

The wide variety of materials used in contemporary art often requires conservators to decide whether to prioritize the artist's prescribed display or to do what they believe is in the work's best interest to keep it accessible as long as possible. Starting from an assessment of the individual work, it may sometimes be more convenient to amend the rules or establish new ones to prevent irreversible damage; in other situations, however, preserving the subject matter may risk betraying part of the work's meaning by limiting proper enjoyment. Consequently, depending on the context, conservators may adopt an intentionalist or anti-intentionalist approach (Muñoz-Viñas, 2014; Irvin, 2022).

## ***2.2. Idea-Conceptualism***

Considering the identity of the work as a set of rules, as the above discussed "Rule-Conceptualism" advocates, presents difficulties for the conservator. In certain cases, conservators must review the rules to preserve the work's identity and adapt them to the new context, but it is not clear whether they are entitled to do so. The alternative position which opts to take the identity of the work to an even higher level of abstraction, might solve this problem. This approach, which I dub 'Idea-Conceptualism', makes the concern with execution secondary, allowing the focus to be on the conservation of the work's fundamental concepts, rather than on the contingent conditions for instantiating them.

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<sup>5</sup> Philosophers have engaged with this topic extensively, especially since the 1960s. See, among the many publications: Livingston, 2005; Carroll, 2000, pp. 75-95; Iseminger (ed.), 1992; Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946.

This position draws inspiration from one of the artistic genres that seem to pose the greatest challenges to traditional conservation: Conceptual Art.<sup>6</sup> Following the principle of conceptual art, which states that “the idea is king” (Kosuth, 1969), the identity of the artwork is located on a purely conceptual level. For this reason, Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens introduced the “Idea Idea”<sup>7</sup> (2007; 2009), suggesting that in conceptual works, what matters is the idea, while the physical material is a secondary and replaceable accessory: “In conceptual art, there is no physical medium; the medium is the idea.”

Regardless of the possible objections that could be raised against the “Idea Idea”,<sup>8</sup> this position seems to solve the conservation problem left open by the first positive approach. Thanks to the identification of the work exclusively with the idea, the theory proposed by Schellekens and Goldie avoids the problem of the inapplicability of the rules and of the consequent failure of instantiation of them. According to idea-conceptualism, the conservator should preserve the idea that constitutes the work of art, regardless of the materials through which it is expressed since the latter do not affect its identity.

Prominent examples of conceptual art that prioritize the idea over physical form can be found in the works of Joseph Kosuth (such as ‘One and Three Chairs,’ 1965) or Robert Barry (such as ‘Inert Gas Series,’ 1969). For these artists, the instantiation of the work is incidental; they employ a physical medium only as a means to convey the idea they wish to express. If the idea is not effectively conveyed, the preservation of the work is considered incomplete.

The first challenge faced by this approach lies in correctly identifying the underlying idea of a work. How can we ensure that the ideas attributed to a work are accurate? This problem existed even in ‘traditional’ art, where restorers had to discern the artist’s intentions to reconstruct the work.

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<sup>6</sup> Conceptual art can be understood in two ways: as a specific art movement from 1966 to 1972 (Lippard, 1973), or more broadly as any art form using ideas as its medium. Here, I refer to conceptual art in the broader sense.

<sup>7</sup> Conceptual art, as articulated by Sol LeWitt (1967) and Joseph Kosuth (1969), redefines art as involving ideas that constitute both the creative process and the object of appreciation, regardless of sensory and material aspects. This definition transforms the artist into a thinker. Building on the positions of LeWitt and Kosuth, Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (2007; 2009; Schellekens, 2022) use the expression “Idea Idea” to emphasize that in conceptual art, the idea is both the process of creation and the object of appreciation.

<sup>8</sup> Objections to the ‘Idea Idea’ have been raised by Julian Dodd (2016) and Wesley D. Cray (2014). Although not directly mentioning the thesis of Schellekens and Goldie, an opposing position can also be found in Stigter (2016; 2017; 2023).

Similarly, conserving contemporary (conceptual) art entails the risk of misunderstanding the artist's statements or neglecting pertinent information for proper archiving (Hölling, 2017).

A second challenge relates to making documentation and archival work accessible over time to make the artist's intended idea also accessible. Given the rapid evolution of culture, the conservator of the future might even be forced to update the conceptual content of the work to make it understandable to new generations. Balancing accessibility with respect for the idea is the central challenge posed by conceptual art to conservation. One can address this challenge by drawing on the 'Biographical' approach to conservation proposed by Renée van de Vall, Hanna Hölling, Tatja Scholte and Sanneke Stigter (2011). This approach is based on the idea that each work has its own history or biography, which each new installation updates. The task of the conservator is to document the "life" of the work through archival practice and to use this documentation to enhance the public's engagement with the work. According to this approach, the conservator becomes an interpreter, a mediator, or even a co-producer of the work.

### **3. The Negative Approach: Particularism**

An alternative approach to conserving time-bound and other ephemeral artworks involves rejecting the notion that conservation, defined as the preservation of identity over time, remains pertinent for them. This idea recalls Charles Baudelaire's (1863) claim that the signs of modernity are the transitory, the fleeting, and the contingent. In accordance with this perspective, some contemporary art adopts transience as a premise. Art critic Achille Bonito Oliva (1996, p. 186) characterizes contemporaneity by stressing the ephemeral nature of materials and the consequent perishable and transitory function of the work of art. In the face of a fleeting and transitory idea of contemporaneity, Massimo Carboni (2007; 2014) criticises conservation, preservation, and restoration activities aimed at contemporary artistic production, calling them "aporetic" and "contradictory", as they seem to contradict the identity that artists have chosen for their works. According to Carboni, contemporary art represents its own disappearance, so temporariness becomes a central aspect of its identity. Carboni suggests that the conservator should no longer strive to prolong the work's existence, but rather to ensure respect for what he calls the work's 'right to disappearance'. If the

idea of preserving the identity of works of art finds its highest expression in Romanticism, it is necessary to consider the possibility of contemporary art overturning priorities, embracing the fleeting and transitory as an integral part of its essence.

By advocating the essential transience of contemporary art, scholars such as Bonito Oliva and Carboni seem to presuppose a particularist ontology according to which the work of contemporary art is a particular concrete object or event having its own singular location in space. Works of contemporary art, from this perspective, ontologically resemble traditional works of art such as paintings and statues, except for the fact that, unlike the latter, they often deliberately challenge preservation.

Significant examples of artworks that assert the right to oblivion, by challenging conservation, include Gustav Metzger's *Self-Destructive Art* and Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit* (1992-1999). Both artists deliberately stage the disappearance of their works. Gustav Metzger is known for creating self-destructive art, where the destruction of the work becomes an integral part of the creative process. Zoe Leonard's work exemplifies decay by displaying fruit peels stitched by the artist, which rot over time until they disappear completely. In these examples, the artwork is identified with the process of decay, and any intervention to alter this condition only compromises the work's identity.

Still, accepting ontological particularism as a negative approach to conservation has questionable consequences. Firstly, the refusal to preserve ephemeral works of art overlooks the importance of transmitting contemporary art as part of our cultural heritage across generations. Secondly, this position seems to downplay the importance of documentation in contemporary art conservation, reducing it to mere photographic reproductions of paintings and sculptures found in museum bookshops. However, important artists such as Marina Abramović and Allan Kaprow meticulously document their performances, which then become the subject of museum exhibitions. Consequently, can we truly assume that Abramović and Kaprow's works are limited to performance? Many works of contemporary art can be primarily enjoyed through documentation, so not assigning an identity value to it restricts the experience of contemporary art to a very small number of people. By elevating transience as a distinctive feature of the contemporary, this position renounces the idea of art as a shared experience.

#### 4. The Pluralist Approach: Experientialism

The last approach I discuss is experientialism. Unlike the previous positions, it presents itself as a pluralist approach, not excluding any proposed alternatives but suggesting that, depending on the work, one can choose the most appropriate conservation strategy. This pluralist solution is inspired by Jean-Pierre Cometti's (2016) theory that the primary objective of art conservation is to maintain the function of the artwork. If, as Enrico Terrone (2024) argues, the artworks are "experiential-artefacts" whose function is to generate experiences, the question of contemporary art conservation can be addressed by considering the types of experiences that contemporary artworks are intended to generate. Specifically, each of the three approaches to conservation we have considered so far presupposes a different conception of the experience to be generated by works of contemporary art.

By conceiving of the work as a system of rules to be instantiated, Rule-Conceptualism involves the conceptual appreciation of the rules that constitute the work through the perceptual appreciation of its instances, just like a work of music as a system of rules specified by the score can be appreciated by listening to its performances. The appreciative experience, in this sense, is conceptual in virtue of being perceptual: one conceptually appreciates the system of rules in virtue of perceptually appreciating the instances (that are constructed by abiding by those rules), thereby drawing inferences from these instances to those rules.

The other positive approach to conservation, namely Idea-Conceptualism, differs from Rule-Conceptualism by giving up the mediation of instances that must be perceptually appreciated in order to conceptually appreciate the work. The appreciation of contemporary art, from this perspective, is conceptual all the way through. However, by acknowledging the possibility of a cognitive phenomenology (Pitt 2004), one can claim that the appreciation of works of contemporary art as ideas remains experiential despite not being essentially perceptual. Cognitive phenomenology, in this sense, reveals that the appropriate experience of conceptual art is not a matter of perception but rather of understanding, reasoning, conjecturing. Perception, at most, just offers some cues to enter such high-level cognitive states of appreciation.

While Rule-Conceptualism involves a mixed perceptual-conceptual appreciation, and Idea-Conceptualism favours an essentially conceptual appreciation, the third approach to conservation we have considered, namely Particularism, gives a central role to the perceptual (and possibly agentive) experience of the work. The reason why Particularism denies the preservation of contemporary art, indeed, comes from the conjunction of the need to perceive and the transience of what should be perceived. By casting perception (possibly supplemented by action) as the appropriate experience of the work, Particularism acknowledges that, when the work can no longer be perceived, it can no longer be appropriately experienced, hence no longer exists. The appropriate experience of the work, in this sense, is a perception accompanied by a sense of ephemerality of what is perceived.

Experientialism recognizes that different contemporary artworks may necessitate different conservation approaches based on the experiences they offer. For instance, Rule-Conceptualism is ideal for works appreciated through their construction principles, Idea-Conceptualism suits works best understood conceptually, and Particularism applies to works whose experience hinges on their transience. Experientialism offers us an approach to conservation that does not force us to select one option but rather enables us to conserve works of contemporary art by relying on the plurality of rewarding experiences they are capable of generating.

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## *A Puzzle about Fictional Points of View*

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ABSTRACT. It is widely claimed that one way novel-reading can be valuable is by offering the experience of “taking up the perspective of” a fictional character. However, an explanation of why these imaginings are valuable has received comparatively little attention compared to the prevalence and acceptance of the claim. Accordingly, my aim is to build on existing sketches to provide such an explanation. I will argue this “perspective-taking” can be valuable in the same way as when that point of view is non-fictional. I use this observation to provide new explanations for why imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view is valuable. However, there is a challenge to doing so (this is the puzzle at the crux of my argument). I will attempt to overcome that challenge, and present two kinds of explanation. The first captures its epistemic value – it is a way of finding out what certain experiences are like and understanding the world. The second captures its interpersonal value – it is a way of improving the reader’s awareness of others.

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## 1. Introduction

Novel-reading can be valuable as the audience is offered the valuable experience of imaginatively engaging with another's point of view. I use the phrase "imaginative engagement" as it presupposes the least about what kind of imagining the valuable experience involves, but that claim has been stated in various terms: "imaginatively inhabiting the perspective of another person" (Bailey, 2023, p. 218), "imaginative identification" (Budd, 1995, p. 7), "the occasion to shed our skin for a spell and inhabit other subjectivities" (Gibson, 2009, p. 438). Further, the point of view offered for imaginative engagement is usually fictional. That imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view is valuable "might initially strike us as obviously correct" (Bailey, 2023, p. 218). However, an explanation of why these experiences are valuable has received little attention, compared to the prevalence and acceptance of the claim. My aim is to fill in this gap.

First, I will argue that imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view can be valuable in the same ways as when that point of view is non-fictional. I will use this observation to provide two explanations for the value of imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view. The first captures its epistemic value – it is a way of finding out what certain experiences are like and understanding the world. The second captures its interpersonal value – it is a way of improving the reader's awareness of others. However, there is a challenge to doing so, namely that the non-fictionality of the point of view imaginatively engaged with appears to do important explanatory work. This is the puzzle at the crux of my discussion, which I seek to overcome.

## 2. Characterising "Imaginative Engagement"

First, I will characterise the "imaginative engagement" whose value I seek to explain. Borrowing Moore's phrasing, a point of view is one's "location in the broadest possible sense", which includes one's location in time, space, historical and cultural context, interpersonal relations, as well as their physical and psychological nature (Moore, 2000, p. 6). The characterisation I select is adapted from Denham (Denham, 2000, p. 206)

*The Subjectivity Requirement:* The imaginer imagines the experience first-personally.

*The Alterity Requirement:* The imaginer imagines the experience as being the experience had by another.

To motivate *The Subjectivity Requirement*, the experiences of imaginative engagement that artworks offer which are taken to be valuable are usually first-personal. In fact, first-personal imagination has been taken as a necessary condition for “perspective-taking”, understood as “an imaginative process through which one constructs another person’s *subjective experience*” (Coplan, 2011, p. 9, emphasis added).

To motivate *The Alterity Requirement*, I start with a common way of characterising the valuable imagining, as involving imagining “being [the other] in that situation”, through “a shift in self-location and a new grasp of how things appear and feel” (Langton, 2019, p. 78). However, “shifting self-location” is conceptually incoherent, because one’s “location in the broadest sense” cannot be changed via the imagination. *The Alterity Requirement* avoids this problem, as there is no incoherence in, for example, imagining the experience of hosting a party and imagining that experience as being the one that Clarissa Dalloway has in those circumstances.

### 3. Non-Fictionality and the Puzzle

Next, I will both motivate that imaginative engagement with a fictional point of view can be valuable in the same way as a non-fictional one and the non-fictionality of the point of view imaginatively engaged with seems to do important explanatory work, posing a challenge to seeking explanations of the fictional by looking to the non-fictional. I will understand a non-fictional point of view as those to belonging to a person the imaginer can have “direct sensory acquaintance with” (Matravers, 2024, p. 4).

### 3.1. *Shared Value with Non-Fictional Cases*

My motivation for the claim that experiences of imaginatively engaging with a fictional and non-fictional point of view can be valuable in the same way is:

- 1) The experiences of imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view of imaginatively engaging with a non-fictional point of view share the same kind of content.
- 2) If experiences share the same kind of content, then they can be valuable in the same ways.
- 3) Therefore, the experiences of imaginatively engaging with a fictional and non-fictional point of view can be valuable in the same way.

There is a worry one might have with (1). The details of a fictional point of view are not specified to the extent that the details of a non-fictional one are specifiable; a fictional point of view is only specified to the extent to which the text contains information about it, whereas all the details of a non-fictional point of view, which belongs to a person, are fixed. Therefore, it may seem that the content of imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view cannot be the same kind as when the point of view is non-fictional. However, the worry can be addressed by noting that novel-readers supplement the text with the following principle:

*The Principle of Verisimilitude:* Fictional states of affairs can be assumed to be like ordinary states of affairs, failing indications to the contrary (Lamarque & Olsen, 1996, p. 94).

Although the reader is given limited information about the fictional point of view, they are not given any indication that the fictional point of view is *not* physically and psychologically akin to a non-fictional point of view. So, there is no reason to think that imaginatively engaging with a fictional and non-fictional point of view differ with respect to their content, and (1) holds.

### 3.2. *The Puzzle*

The puzzle is that the non-fictionality of the point of view imaginatively engaged with appears to do important work in the standard explanations. To see the challenge, consider the explanations typically appealed to for the value of imaginatively engaging with a *non-fictional* point of view: epistemic and interpersonal explanations. The epistemic explanations hold that imaginatively engaging with a non-fictional point of view is *epistemically* valuable, because it is a way of finding out what certain experiences are like (Matravers, 2011, p. 26), and of improving our understanding of the world (Denham, 2001). The interpersonal explanations hold that imaginatively engaging with a non-fictional point of view is *interpersonally* valuable, because it improves the imaginer's awareness of other people as having minds of their own (Cavell, 1999, p. 421). The non-fictionality of the point of view does important work in explaining the epistemic and interpersonal value of imaginative engagement. In the epistemic explanations, that the point of view is non-fictional appears necessary for it to be related to the actual world, such that imaginative engagement with it can be a way of learning what certain experiences are like and about the world. In the interpersonal explanation, that the point of view is non-fictional appears necessary for it to be related to the reader such that imaginative engagement with it can be a way of illuminating the nature of interpersonal relations they stand in. Throughout, I will attempt to resolve this puzzle.

## 4. The Epistemic Explanations

I will present two epistemic explanations for the value of imaginatively engaging with a non-fictional point of view, a *Phenomenal Knowledge* explanation, and an *Understanding of the World* explanation.

### 4.1. *The Phenomenal Knowledge Explanation*

First, I will examine the *Phenomenal Knowledge* explanation. This explanation is commonly appealed to as a way of explaining the value of imaginatively engaging with both fictional and non-

fictional points of view, as imagining an experience is “naturally connected” to “[truths] concerning what other people’s experiences of the world are like” (Bailey, 2023, p. 218).

#### ***4.1.1. Sceptical Doubts about Phenomenal Knowledge***

First, I will give two reasons to doubt that imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view can afford the reader with phenomenal knowledge. The first worry is that imaginative engagement “distorts” the experience imagined (Goldie, 2011, p. 309). When the imaginer and the point of view they imaginatively engage with have different dispositions (for example, being claustrophobic or not), the imaginer’s imaginative approximation will have to attempt to accommodate for that difference, which requires consciously attending to what those dispositions are and how they shape the target experience (panicking in a tunnel). But, that is not how those dispositions feature in the target point of view’s own experiences, so, there are limits on how well the imaginer can approximate the relevant experience.

The second worry is an iteration of the puzzle mentioned above. Gibson states the worry as follows: there is “no *real* experience the what-it-is-like of which [fictional points of view] could inform us”, since being fictional, those points of view have never experienced anything at all (Gibson, 2008, p. 583, emphasis in original). The assumption here is that imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view can only provide epistemically valuable phenomenal knowledge by providing the reader with knowledge of what “real peoples’ experiences” are like (Bailey, 2023, p. 220). However, it is hard to see how mere approximation of a fictional experience can afford the imaginer with phenomenal knowledge of what real experiences are like.

#### ***4.1.2. The Subjectivity Requirement***

I will now consider what role The Subjectivity Requirement plays in explaining how it can improve the reader’s phenomenal knowledge. I will argue that, given the above worries, imaginative engagement with a fictional point of view is better thought of as providing the reader with phenomenal understanding, rather than phenomenal knowledge proper. I suggest that The Principle

of Verisimilitude can capture how the reader can come to an improved understanding of what “real people’s experiences” are like. When the reader first-personally imagines the experience of a fictional character, what is imagined is an experience of a fictional scenario which is relevantly like a non-fictional one. For example, when the reader of *Mrs Dalloway* imagines as subject the experience of hosting an awkward fictional party, they take the fictional party to be relevantly similar to a non-fictional one, such that the psychological and social facts which determine the obligations of the host and the rules of social etiquette are taken to be the same in the fictional and non-fictional case. Through their imagining, the reader can observe what an experience of the events described might look like. Therefore, even if there are no “real experiences” that a fictional character has, imaginatively engaging with them is a way the reader can improve their phenomenal understanding of what “real experiences” are like, as they can observe how the experience they imagine relates to the fictional scenario described, which they take as relevantly similar to a non-fictional one. Further, there are certain features of fiction which can address the “distortion” worry. For Bailey, “fiction can also manipulate our attention in ways that temporarily nudge us away from our home [dispositions]” (Bailey, 2023, p. 233). So, by manipulating the reader’s attention, the novel can direct it in such a way that mirrors the attention of one that someone with that disposition would have – such as the fretful disposition of Clarissa Dalloway. Therefore, the reader can come to an improved phenomenal understanding of what the imagined experiences are like, by imagining that experience whilst partly sharing the fictional character’s relevant dispositions.

#### ***4.1.3. The Alterity Requirement***

To see the role *The Alterity Requirement* plays, I will further clarify the nature of the phenomenal knowledge (or understanding) that novel-reading is taken to provide. For Denham, artworks “express” the “general form” of an experience; for example, Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* “expresses awe before the infinite itself, in its general form, and we see it as such”, rather than just “one particular occasion” of it (Denham, 2001, p. 625). That artworks express the “general form” of an experience is a claim also made tempting by Lamarque and Olsen’s account of literature – that it has “something to say about the ‘human condition’” (Lamarque & Olsen, 1996, p. 275). I



suggest that *The Alterity Requirement* is necessary for the improved phenomenal understanding that the reader acquires to have a character akin to acquiring knowledge of a kind of experience's "general form." Denham also takes it that "we see it as such", as having that general form. So, I suggest that *The Alterity Requirement* is necessary to draw the reader's attention to the generality of the phenomenal understanding they have acquired. Suppose that the reader has experienced a guest awkwardly arriving at a party. When they imaginatively approximate to Clarissa Dalloway's experience of the same kind, that approximation involves them determining which features of their experience to hold steady, and which to modify in the imagination. The process of imaginatively approximating to an experience imagined being one had by another draws their attention to the features of the experience which are independent of their specific circumstances.

#### ***4.2. The Understanding of the World Explanation***

Next, I turn to the *Understanding of the World* explanation, which holds that imaginative engagement with a fictional point of view is a way for the imaginer to improve their understanding of the world. Denham and Moore assume that each point of view has "unique access" (Moore, 2000, p. 3) to certain "aspects of reality" (Denham, 2001, p. 606). Suppose that the imaginer's friend has decided to withhold from their mother that she is dying. Standing in a relationship to someone provides us with "the power to illuminate [of that person] qualities which are not otherwise evident" (Denham, 2001, p. 606). So, as the imaginer does not stand in a familial relationship to the mother, certain qualities of her situation may not be otherwise evident to them, such as her serenity of mind or the true extent of her physical decline. In approximating the other's subjective experience, the imaginer also approximates the other's unique access to certain aspects of reality. So, imaginatively engaging with the friend's point of view is a way of coming to understand the peacefulness that dying in ignorance may bring.

However, there is a further iteration of the puzzle, that the non-fictionality of the point of view imaginatively engaged with appears to do important explanatory work. Here, the challenge lies in the fact that the "aspects of reality" that a fictional point of view has "unique access" to are the aspects of a fictional scenario. So, if imaginatively engaging with another's point of view can

reveal aspects of reality that the other has unique access to, imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view can only facilitate access to aspects of a fictional scenario, making it unclear how it could improve one's understanding of the world.

#### ***4.2.1. The Subjectivity Requirement***

Lamarque and Olsen consider the following account of how the reader of a literary work may learn about the “human condition” from literature:

*The Propositional Theory of Literary Truth:* The literary work contains or implies general thematic statements about the world, which the reader as part of an appreciation of the work, has to assess as true or false (Lamarque & Olsen, 1996, p. 325).

A work “implies” thematic statements in so far as appreciating the work involves using those propositions to “organise into an intelligible pattern the events and situations described literally in a work” (Lamarque & Olsen, 1996, p. 327). For example, consider Isabel Allende's *Violeta*, which follows the course of the eponymous narrator's life. As she ages, many of her friends and relatives die in quick succession. At first, that series of events may appear to be a coincidence, however, to organise these events into an intelligible pattern, the reader may use the proposition that “as one ages, the deaths of people you know become more likely.” Consequently, that proposition is implied by *Violeta*.

I will consider whether the subjectivity of that imagining affects the reader's understanding of that implied statement. *Violeta* has unique access to various aspects of the fictional scenario, including the suffering, peacefulness, untimeliness or poignancy of each loss. When the reader imaginatively engages with *Violeta*'s point of view, they imaginatively approximate the unique access she has to those aspects of the fictional scenario. So, if the reader subjectively imagines each death, the proposition that “as one ages, the deaths of people one knows becomes more likely” is implied by the organisation of events which the reader imaginatively approximates *Violeta*'s experience of. An improved phenomenal understanding of *Violeta*'s experiences means that the

reader has an improved phenomenal understanding of the pervasive sense of loss that surrounds her as she ages, giving their grasp of the proposition an experiential character. Therefore, the reader's grasping of the proposition has an experiential character, rather than merely involving entertaining its truth. Further, by *Principle of Verisimilitude*, when reading *Violeta*, the reader takes all the background details of the fictional events as being like actual ones, and when they imaginatively approximate Violeta's access to those events, they take her experiences to be of events which mirror non-fictional ones in certain ways. For example, they take facts about human biology, ageing, the kinds of events which can cause death in humans, and so on to be the same as in non-fictional scenarios. So, when they are struck by the proposition that death becomes increasingly prevalent throughout one's life, they are struck by it being true in circumstances which are relevantly similar to the actual world, such that the reader can learn that it is true in the actual world – resolving the puzzle here.

#### 4.2.2. *The Alterity Requirement*

*The Alterity Requirement* is necessary for the reader to become aware of the implied statement's generality. Prior to reading *Violeta*, the reader may “vaguely know” that “as one ages, the deaths of people one knows becomes more likely”, and the process of organising the events of the text into an intelligible pattern may draw their attention to what they “vaguely knew [...] but never saw before” (Murdoch, 1997a, p. 12). That general thematic statement could also be learnt by reading census statistics. Both offer the reader the chance to renew awareness of a proposition they already know, and of emphasising that the proposition is *generally* true – that it tends to be true for others. However, in studying statistical information, the reader merely comes to see *that* the increased likelihood of the deaths of close friends in old age is true for others. In contrast, when reading *Violeta*, the reader's awareness of that proposition is renewed via experiences which they are aware of as being had by *another*, allowing the reader to grasp the statement's generality. Therefore, an imagining's satisfaction of *The Alterity Requirement* is necessary for the reader to have a renewed awareness which involves grasping its generality in a certain way.

## 5. The Interpersonal Explanation

Next, I will present a further explanation of why imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view is valuable. It has “interpersonal value” – it is a way of seeing other people *as people*. With respect to non-fictional points of view, for Cavell, the process of “empathic projection” is how one comes to take other people as other people with minds of their own, rather than as mere objects (Cavell, 1999, p. 421). For Cavell, the significance of “empathic projection” lies in the fact that “if there are no other human beings, then [...] my soul [...] cheats me [...] into taking it that it has company” (Cavell, 1999, p. 424), and how it waylays concerns about the risk of “isolation from the other” (Avramides, 2023, p. 320). However, “empathic projection” with a fictional point of view cannot have the same significance, as being made aware of the mind of a fictional character cannot show the reader that they have “company” and are in a position to be known by others – a fictional character cannot know of the reader, nor do they stand in interpersonal relations to them. However, I will argue that the “empathic projection” explanation can explain the interpersonal value of imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view. Murdoch appears to attribute interpersonal value to novel reading, she states: “in the case of the novel, the most important thing thus to be revealed, [...] *is that other people exist*” (Murdoch, 1997b, p. 282, emphasis added). I will focus on developing a comparison between Murdoch and Cavell to provide a further explanation.

### 5.1. The Subjectivity Requirement

I will first consider the role of *The Subjectivity Requirement*. First, for Murdoch, what it is about other people which might require “revealing” to us is the “unutterable particularity” of their mental lives (Murdoch, 1959, p. 52). Grasping the “unutterable particularity” of the other’s mind involves “the extremely difficult realisation that something other than yourself is real” (Murdoch, 1959, p. 52). It is a matter of grasping their otherness, or the separateness of their mental life. Similarly, Cavell takes “empathic projection” to illuminate the other’s “unutterable particularity”. He is concerned with one’s ability to see the other’s mental life as it exists in “confinement from [them]”

(Cavell, 1999, p. 423). To say that novel-readers doubt or do not know that others exist in this way prior to reading a novel is too strong a claim. Instead, the “revelation” provided by the novel here is best thought of as another case of “renewed awareness”, of coming to grasp something that “we vaguely knew was there but never saw before” (Murdoch, 1997a, p. 12).

For comparison, Schier takes watching theatrical tragedy to be interpersonally valuable, as it reminds the audience that other people are like them, in the sense that they are interested in possible fates that may befall them (Schier, 1983, p. 84). This explanation cannot work for novels, as it hinges on being in the presence of others who are also engaging with the play (Goldie, 2008, p. 192). But, there is one claim of Schier’s interpersonal explanation which could be adapted to novel-reading, that the audience is put “on the most intimate footing” with the point of view imaginatively engaged with, which is necessary for there to be interpersonal value (Schier, 1983, p. 84).

Consider *Clarissa Dalloway* again. The details of her mental life could be learnt propositionally – that she has worries, past regrets, anxiety about the course of her life, the urge to perform a certain social role, and so on. However, the reader does not merely propositionally entertain those details, but instead they further attempt to take on those details of her mental life in the imagination, such that they come to grasp the phenomenology of her experiences and what she has “unique access” to. So, through their approximation, the reader is put “on the most intimate footing” with *Clarissa Dalloway*. Even if the reader can only have an improved phenomenal understanding of her experiences and what she has “unique access” to, that imaginative approximation nonetheless puts them “on the most intimate footing” which is available, given their separateness. Further, that close contact renews the reader’s awareness of the fact that (non-fictional) others exist as “unutterable particulars” in the second sense. Again, given *The Principle of Verisimilitude*, in grasping the intricate details of *Clarissa Dalloway*’s point of view, the reader is taking her point of view to be of the same kind as a non-fictional point of view, thereby renewing their awareness of the fact that other (non-fictional) points of view are “unutterably particular” in this way. However, *Clarissa Dalloway*’s lack of confinement from the reader only serves to emphasise the confinement of these other, non-fictional, points of view. So, I agree that being placed “on the most intimate footing” with respect to the point of view imaginatively engaged with

is necessary for it to renew the reader's awareness in the other's "unutterable particularity", in the sense of their "confinement".

## 5.2. *The Alterity Requirement*

Next, I will consider the role of *The Alterity Requirement*. For both Murdoch and Cavell, the awareness of the other's existence is non-cognitive. Grasping the other's "unutterable particularity" is a matter of "love", which is "the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness" (Murdoch, 1959, p. 52). Similarly, for Cavell, to appropriately grasp the other's existence requires "acknowledgement" rather than just knowledge, which is a matter of "recognizing what I know" (Cavell, 1969, p. 257).

For Murdoch, the apprehension of "unutterable particularity" is a sublime experience, which is characterised by a conflict between reason and imagination, sparked by what is "vast, powerful, and terrifying" (Murdoch, 1959, p. 45). As the imagination cannot "compass what is before us", 'reason imposes upon us as a law the comprehension of what is before us is a totality' (*Ibid.*, p.45), where a "totality" is a "total complete ordered picture" (Murdoch, 1997b, p. 263). Murdoch is unclear about what the process of "imposing" a totality involves, but it will be sufficient for my purposes to recall again *The Principle of Verisimilitude*, that unless given indications to the contrary, the reader takes fictional events to be like non-fictional ones, and that the reader takes a fictional point of view as being fully specifiable, rather than as a scattering of location coordinates. The typical thought is that what sparks sublime experiences is vast formlessness, such as nature, but Murdoch pits herself against that picture with her suggestion that what sparks the sublime experiences is instead "unutterable particularity, and the most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man" (*Ibid.*, p. 52). I will argue that adopting this eccentric account can explain the interpersonal value of imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view.

To see the role of *The Alterity Requirement*, consider *Violeta* again. The reader might attempt to "compass" the details of Violeta's point of view, by attempting to include in their imaginings all the details of Violeta's mental life which colour her experiences. For example, they might attempt to imagine the experience of trekking on a horse through Patagonia, for a young

woman, in the 1920s, but one who has been driven reluctantly out of the city due to great financial loss and is subsequently experiencing a fall in social status and living quality, who is attempting to relate to the locals, and so on. By struggling to imaginatively “compass” Violeta’s point of view, the reader imposes that Violeta’s point of view is a “totality”, which is to say, that there is a “total complete ordered picture” of her point of view, that all these details fit together such that they can form her point of view. Note, as it is the struggle to imagine Violeta’s experiences in fully detail which leads to grasp her “totality”, it is no problem for this explanation that the reader can only achieve phenomenal understanding of her experiences, rather than complete phenomenal knowledge.

If the imaginative engagement satisfies *The Alterity Requirement*, then what the reader imposes a “totality” onto is experiences imagined as not being their own, thereby creating the impression of a fictional totality existing separately to them. Further, *The Alterity Requirement* can draw the reader’s attention to the generality of the claim, where “generality” is understood in the sense of being a universal claim about how humans ought to be viewed. When the reader imposes a “totality” onto Violeta’s mental life, the reader takes their pre-reflective understanding of the nature of other people to their reading of the novel, via *The Principle of Verisimilitude*. Therefore, by imagining the experience as being had by another when imagining a fictional character’s experience, the reader’s attention is also drawn to that other, non-fictional, points of view may be such that they can exist as having their own experiences and being “unutterably particular”. The reader has their awareness of the existence of others renewed via experiences they imagine as being had by another, who they take to be relevantly similar to non-fictional points of view. Any non-fictional person may well have the morally significant existence of “unutterable particularity” that the reader pre-reflectively takes them to have and so is due “respect” and “acknowledgement” accordingly, bringing the generality of the claim to the reader’s attention.

## 6. Conclusion

I began with the observation that imaginative engagement with a fictional point of view is often taken to be one valuable experience artworks offer, but that the explanation of why these

imaginings are valuable as received little attention. To address that gap, I argued that it can be epistemically valuable as a way of finding out what certain experiences are like, and improving one's understanding of the world, and interpersonally valuable as a way of renewing one's awareness of the nature of others. My discussion may feed into a wider one, concerning whether there is any useful work that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction may do. Compared to some, I am inclined to give more room to the suggestion that there is an important distinction which raises various challenges, but, at least when it comes to explaining the value of imaginatively engaging with a point of view, the distinction is of little significance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> An example of the denial that there is a distinction of much significance is: (Matravers, 2024).



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# ***The Impact of Aesthetics on the Reception of Art in Public Spaces: The Undesirable Graffiti***

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**ABSTRACT.** This study examines the varied forms of art in public spaces, from commissioned monuments to illegal Graffiti and Street Art, to explore how aesthetics shape public reactions. By focusing on two case studies, in Athens and Vienna, it highlights artworks that incorporate Graffiti-inspired strategies and aesthetics, enhancing their conceptual depth but often impacting their public reception negatively. This analysis suggests that aesthetics may play a larger role in public acceptance than a work's intended message. Ultimately, the findings prompt further questions: if Graffiti expresses a claim for the 'right to the city', who should these works serve? Does the public need to appreciate public art, or is a certain level of disruption beneficial? These considerations open a larger discussion on the role of public art and its place within the social fabric.

## **1. Introduction**

For the purpose of this study, public space refers to areas that are open and freely accessible to the public at all times, without barriers or restrictions (Dickenson, 2021, p. 5), therefore only art that occupies these spaces is considered. Within this context, public art can be divided into unsanctioned and commissioned works, though despite their seemingly irreconcilable differences, they actually

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cover a spectrum that includes everything from Graffiti and Street Art to decorative public sculptures, monuments, and memorials. The most compelling case studies, as we will explore, arise when these media and strategies intersect, challenging traditional boundaries and expanding our understanding of public art's role and reception. Reception is measured via research done in media, through social media comments and channels, as well as in academic papers, and semi-structured interviews.

## **2. More Than a Taxonomical Difference**

Despite a general consensus among scholars studying unsanctioned art (Wacławek, 2011), the terms Graffiti and Street Art are still often used interchangeably, which is factually misleading. What is more, by making this distinction, light can also be shed on the reception of the works. Graffiti is quick and gritty as befits illicit activities, though it is clear that speed alone does not define it. The most common distinction comes from the fact that Graffiti generally centers on letter forms, while Street Art often employs logos (Wacławek, 2011, p. 32) and imagery. While this is undeniably a good starting point, it still proves insufficient since there have been very early Graffiti works that incorporated characters from popular culture (Thompson, 2009, p. 41). Simultaneously, there is plenty of Street Art solely consisting of lettering, including one of the case studies presented here. This means further important distinctions must also be made, such as the subject of the works, their aesthetics, and last but not least, the audience towards which they are directed.

This being said, Graffiti's subject is almost exclusively the author's nickname or a dedication (Thompson, 2009, p. 41). In contrast, Street Art addresses a broader array of themes and messages. This became one of the golden rules when establishing if something belongs to Graffiti or Street Art, but from here on out, distinctions can be further developed, especially when considering their audiences. While Graffiti is largely unreadable for people outside its artistic community and its aesthetics and value are judged solely by peer members, Street Art is distinctly directed at everyone it happens to come into contact with. Its aesthetic is also much more relatable and open to judgment and analysis, while its message is usually clear, even if it is just funny or whimsical. Even though their motivations both stem from the same desire to reclaim public space,

and to actively participate in its creation, they pursue this goal differently. Graffiti's exclusivist attitude and closed aesthetics render it hostile in front of the audiences, while Street Art courts a more general acceptance.

In his works on the 'right to the city', Henri Lefebvre is adamant in the fact that this right should act towards the wishes and the well-being of the citizens who spend their entire time in the city, or as he puts it the "working class" (Lefebvre, 2000, p. 154). This assertion could extend to the Graffiti-writing youth and is also why Graffiti can be considered a prime representation of the demand to be taken into consideration. It is the tool handled by a part of society that was, in actuality, cast aside by protesters in general. However, while Street Art makes friends more easily by being digestible and even funny, Graffiti tends to especially alienate the middle class by seeming foreign and even frightening.

Graffiti as a word originates from the Greek word *graphien* meaning "to write" and afterwards it was used in Italian as *graffito*, meaning "to scratch", mostly referring to words (DeNotto, 2014, p. 208) and it was in this sense picked up in the English language where it has been in use since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is a permanent confusion between 'Graffiti' as an art form with very specific roots and characteristics, and 'graffiti' as the writings on walls. The latter, also called "latrinalia" (Dundes, 1966; Trahan, 2011) or "bathroom graffiti" (Molloy, 2013) as it was named in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is an omnipresent practice at least from the Roman Empire onward. Contemporary Graffiti was named after it, which points to just how misunderstood the practice still remains – unworthy of even a proper taxonomical distinction, although some scholars might increasingly argue in favor of calling it Graffiti Art. Nevertheless, even nowadays, both variations are considered 'dirty words' (Jechow, 2015) with undesirable connotations.

In accordance with the etymology of the word, even the practitioners of Graffiti are most often referred to as 'writers' and their practice is actually just that, an often highly stylized form of writing their nicknames, as if the entire work consisted actually of only the artist's signature. This gesture of proclaiming 'I was here', however, does not seem to deem them fit for the label of artists, further underscoring how low on the artistic hierarchy these practices are. Contemporary Graffiti art long ago left the streets of Philadelphia (Waclawek, 2011, p. 10), New York, and the U.S.A. altogether, as did the word which perpetuated the confusion of the term. More often than not, it is

used to define the writing of political statements that are intentionally provocative (Jaffe, Rhiney & Francis, 2012, p. 2). It is perceived as an anti-institutional and radical way of communicating political ideals and reclaiming the city (Taş & Taş, 2014, pp. 328-320), but with little artistic intention or merit, if any.

Ever since its appearance, Graffiti has been seen as a threat, both by the authorities and by the outsiders of the culture. For the commuters using the trains, it spoke of violence, of a city no longer under control, and Graffiti was associated with poverty and urban decay but was also thought of as gateway crime (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). Neighborhoods in which it flourished became even more undesirable since they showcased the authorities' lack of interest or power in the area. Even the fact that spray paint cans were sometimes stolen by kids and teens who couldn't afford to buy them created a connection between this culture and shoplifting (Rahn, 2002, p. 9). These may seem like prejudices, and for the most part, they were, but they still prove very hard to combat, and the reason for that may just lie in the intrinsic characteristics of Graffiti, namely its closed-off aesthetics.

Most people encounter Graffiti without fully understanding it, and it is often not meant to be understood. It thus becomes increasingly hard to defend or even like something that is intended to keep you out instead of drawing you in. In a sense, Graffiti parallels the situation of postmodern art, which suffers from perceived elitism. Graffiti works are for the educated few, but educated not in the sense of being knowledgeable and sensible to contemporary art, but instead versed in the meanings and readings of Graffiti. For commuters, the tags on the trains created discomfort, so when these meaningless-to-them scrawls were washed away by the authorities, they applauded the effort. The people were even happy with trains running slower (Masilamani, 2008, p. 9) and with large amounts of taxpayers' money being spent on the clean-up, as long as they did not have to deal with the Graffiti anymore. This widespread lack of empathy for graffiti writers remains, as the art form too remains largely cryptic and hence more likely to be dismissed as vandalism.

Nowadays, Graffiti, though still very much a crime, is more frequently being viewed as part of a widespread youth culture whose members thrive on the low-level risk it provides while making them feel creative at the same time. The culture's members are not limited to any social class or education level, and they don't consider their behaviour to be in any way anti-social (Light,

Griffiths & Lincoln, 2012, p. 351) or linked to gang activity, for that matter. Although, in time, a certain liberalization has been noticed, there is still a long way to go before the decriminalization of Graffiti can be fully reached, and the situation is very different across geographical and cultural areas. Rather, a more common strategy is to co-opt the Graffiti aesthetics and push it towards commodification, by making their signatures more readable (Lombard, 2013, p. 98). Making their radical aesthetic milder ensures the gesture's survival on one hand, and on the other hand, 'clean' Graffiti murals are cited as responsible for discouraging Graffiti tagging (Lombard, 2013, p. 99) by occupying an otherwise blank wall.

### 3. Two Case Studies

The crossovers that do exist between Graffiti and Street Art can be grouped into four main categories: the aforementioned inclusion of figures in tags, polished graffiti murals often created on commission, Street Art that adopts the visual form of Graffiti, and Graffiti art that acts as a form of creative protest against the *status quo* in public art. These intersections show how Graffiti and Street Art can sometimes blur aesthetic and conceptual boundaries. The following case studies have been chosen because they belong to the latter two categories, offering prime opportunities to examine their strategies and aftermaths. Both examples are complex and reflect highly specific situations, which will not be fully described here since this study is limited to analyzing the impact that Graffiti aesthetics has had on their public perception.

#### 3.1. *Kessariani 22*

The area known as Kessariani, now part of the greater metropolitan area of Athens, Greece, was founded in 1922 as a refugee camp, primarily for those displaced from Smyrna. As far as settlements go, this setup is already intriguing – a home for the disenfranchised and the conditioned. The municipality's population subsequently became massively involved in the National Resistance movements and the Civil War, all of which left significant marks on the place's history and culture. Marking 100 years since its foundation, the project *Kessariani 22: Community Mural: Oral*,

*Archival and Spatial (Hi)stories* aims to bring this multi-layered history closer to younger generations by employing archival investigation, informal history lessons, and art and architecture workshops. The events were scheduled as part of the *Centenary of the Asia Minor Catastrophe* Continuous Open Conference, organized by the Municipality of Kessariani from September to December 2022 (Kessariani 22, 2024).

The project, conceived by curators and researchers Konstantinos Avramidis and Constantinos Diamantis, involved local high school students painting a mural under the guidance of Graffiti artist R-EAST, with full funding and support from Greece's Ministry of Culture (Kessariani 22, 2024). While the scope of this paper does not allow a deep dive into the methodological details and implications of the project, it is clear that the result extends far beyond a typical Street Art initiative, making future publications on the subject highly anticipated.

A key part of the project involved integrating students into the research process: they sifted through archival records, learned personal stories, and selected representative words and phrases to incorporate into the mural. The wall, cleaned and painted white specifically for this initiative by the city hall, was loosely divided into chronological sections, with each section marked, in large lettering, by prominent dates from 1922 to 2022, overlapped with corresponding words for each era (Avramidis & Diamantis, 2024). The 1940s particularly shaped the town's identity with two bloody events. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1944, 200 communists were executed in retaliation by the Nazis at the Kessariani rifle range, and on June 17<sup>th</sup> of the same year, 10 members of the United Panhellenic Organization of Youth who had been hiding in the Monastery of Kessariani were discovered and killed.

The mural transformed letters of the Greek alphabet into stylized versions of themselves, reminiscent of Graffiti block style (Thompson, 2009, p. 42) (Fig. 1), maintaining legibility at first, but becoming harder to read as quotes overlapped. This public creation process drew the attention of passersby, whose mixed reactions were observed. Although many appreciated the project's significance, some, especially older viewers, commented in the documentary that it seemed "fun but messy" and they were concerned that people would no longer be able to tell what it was by the end (Avramidis & Diamantis, 2024). The mural was, in fact, quite elegant since, unlike 'organic' Graffiti walls, the color scheme of red, white, black, and grey was consistent throughout its whole

area, as was the lettering style. And yet, the general consensus of those not involved in the project was that they liked it less and less as it progressed and believed that the final overall aesthetic of the piece just invited more Graffiti.

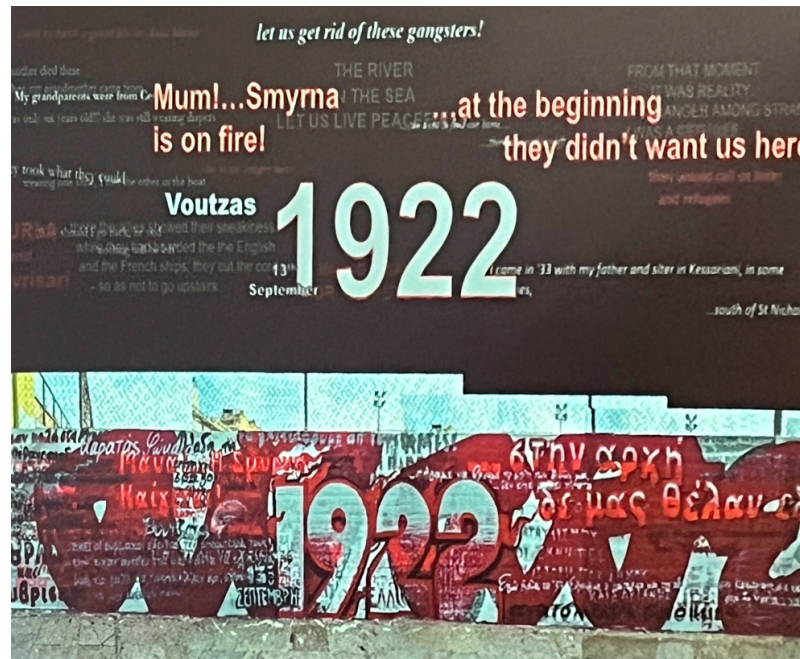


Fig. 1. *Kessariani 22: Community Mural* (detail with English translation), Konstantinos Avramidis and Constantinos Diamantis (curators), spray-paint, Kessariani, Greece, 2022.

The choice of Graffiti as a medium was deliberate, alluding to the quick, clandestine messages of refugees and those in hiding, with scrawled words intended for whoever might read them. It represented a resilient do-it-yourself attitude, reflecting the determination to still be seen despite adverse conditions (Avramidis & Diamantis, 2024), thus linking the refugees and fugitives to the marginalized youth of 1970s America. Although unmentioned by the curators, a deeper connection can be drawn: one of the earliest publications on Graffiti and tagging highlighted the fact that the most prolific tagger at the time was a Greek teen (Anon., 1971, p. 37). This reinforces



Graffiti's ties not only to immigrant communities in general but specifically to the Greek diaspora, which may also explain the candid embrace of the artistic taxonomy.

### ***3.2. Statue of Karl Lueger***

Karl Lueger (1844-1910) served as Mayor of Vienna from 1897 until his death, during one of the most transformative periods in the modern city's history. His policies undeniably left a significant mark on Vienna's urban geography, and for that, he is remembered throughout the city in numerous memorials. He was also regarded by Hitler as one of the "greatest German mayors of all time" (Hoare, 2021) and a teacher in the ways and beliefs of political Antisemitism (Kolirin & Halasz, 2023), and for that, his legacy is deeply contested. Lueger was renowned and beloved during his lifetime, yet his fame reached colossal proportions following his passing, which is reflected in the size and placement of the monument discussed here. Unveiled in 1926, following the earlier models of sculptor Josef Müllner, it was the very first monument dedicated to a modern politician on the Ringstrasse. It is also the largest personal monument erected in post-monarchic Vienna, and at 4 meters tall it is one of the largest monuments to a city leader anywhere in the world (Nierhaus, 2022).

Following the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, a wave of protests against questionable symbolic figures rippled all throughout the world. In 2020, the word "*Schande*" (German for "shame") was repeatedly spray-painted in capital letters around the monument's large octagonal plinth. Primarily in red, the inscription echoed the memorable 'walk of atonement' scene in *Game of Thrones* (2015), where Cersei's character is being followed by a bell-ringing observer chanting "Shame!". Soon after the initial intervention, the Vienna authorities promptly washed off the Graffiti (Hoare, 2021), except they appeared again and again in the same manner. Sometimes, golden letters were even applied in relief, vertically, on the center of the pedestal in addition to the red spray-painted ones.

As the city hall remained intent on eliminating the traces of the protest, artistic and civic groups organized a "vigil of shame" surrounding the monument and keeping watch against the cleaners (Hoare, 2021; Kolirin & Halasz, 2023). This action was concerned with keeping the protest

visible for as long as possible: “We stand here in order to stand guard over the graffiti that brands the monument to Lueger as what it is: a disgrace,” the artist Eduard Freudmann said in their manifesto (Hoare, 2021). But the vigil, stalling for time against the removal of the Graffiti, also forced the authorities to open up a public debate as to the future fate of this, and possibly other contested monuments. The solution reached after the roundtable discussions was one proposed all the way back in 2009 by Klemens Wihlidal, then a student at Vienna’s University of Applied Arts. Tilting the statue, pedestal and all by 3.5 degrees to the right is a minimal yet symbolically charged gesture (Kolirin & Halasz, 2023). It suggests the fragility of the great-man myth and serves as a reminder that both regimes and monuments can be toppled. Yet it is obvious that this creative act, chosen through a competitive process, contrasts with the raw energy of the ‘trashy’ Graffiti. Even though they both arise from the same anger and frustration, one is infinitely more demure than the other. The *Schande* signs became synonymous with the monument, becoming viral in their efficiency to mark the discontent, and yet they are set to be removed during the tilting process. Officials have announced they will refrain from cleaning future Graffiti if it reappears but are intent on starting the project with a clean slate (Marschnig, 2024). This may reflect their hope that the aesthetic, artistic intervention will suffice, and the need to further ‘deface’ the monument with spray paint will diminish.

Of course, not all are satisfied with the force, or lack thereof, of Klemens Wihlidal’s project, which is scheduled to be implemented in late 2024 or early 2025 (Kolirin & Halasz, 2023). It represents a clear aestheticization of the otherwise raw feelings of justified anger towards Lueger’s legacy. While authorities are wary of “cancel culture” and reluctant to erase his legacy outright (Hoare, 2021), they don’t seem to have a problem with erasing Graffiti. Obviously, removal is an undesirable, and uncreative solution, a sweeping-under-the-rug of sorts, which solves little in terms of dealing with contested histories, but it is notable how even in protests the aesthetic dimensions matter in what is considered acceptable or desirable, and Graffiti just continues to fall short.

#### 4. Questions Instead of Conclusions

While it is abundantly clear that aesthetics does play a role and affects reception, perhaps more so than the works' message, some questions still arise: Is aesthetics enough to increase the public's satisfaction? And is the public's satisfaction even truly the point? From an economic standpoint, public art is considered "mixed public good and bad", meaning that from different perspectives some will enjoy it, and some will despise it no matter what it consists of (Cordes & Goldfarb, 2007, p. 160). Following a capitalist logic, it would seem obvious that the negative reception needs to be decreased, yet where does that leave the artist's agency when dealing with art in public spaces? Should artistic license be sacrificed for the preferences of the public? Furthermore, does following the principles of asserting the right to the city imply that the public should like the art that is created through it? Or should an effort be made to advance more radical, grittier forms of public art in order to preserve a rawness that arguably is characteristic of the urban spirit? And finally, what is the price we have to pay for the aestheticization of public art? Does it inevitably lead to dreaded gentrification, or can the first exist without the latter?

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***Everynight Aesthetics:  
What Would Be Different from Everyday Aesthetics?***

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims to open new analytical perspectives on some understated or neglected areas of the ordinary aesthetic life: the *nightly* aesthetic phenomena, activities, experiences and objects. While Everyday Aesthetics (EdA) employ the “everyday” as a key concept for understanding the characteristics of our *daily* aesthetic life, I use the concept of “everynight” for offering insights into the complementary area of our *nightly* aesthetic life, and exploring the possibility of a genuine subfield called *Everynight Aesthetics* (EnA). I argue for EnA as an equivalent of EdA but complementary to it, aiming to map out, explore and account for different areas of the ordinary nightly aesthetic life: the world of *night work*; the regular, ordinary *social nightlife* and the *private nightlife*, seen as practices of self-expression, self-fashioning and well-being; the *dreams*, from wakeful dreams or reveries to nighttime dreams; the *night objects*. These are familiar to everyone yet remains largely unnoticed and not addressed systematically until now. The main questions concern how everynight or nightly activities are enacted by people and how this *nightness* affect their aesthetic life as well as the status of nightly objects compared to daily ordinary objects. In answering these questions, the paper is not only promoting a more inclusive and diverse understanding of our aesthetic life, but it also seizes upon a current major mutation in understanding “aesthetics” and the “aesthetic”.

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## 1. Introduction

In the recent subfield of philosophical aesthetics called Everyday Aesthetics (EdA), the *everyday* is a key concept for understanding the characteristics of our *daily* aesthetic life, notably the repeatability, commonality, familiarity and ordinariness of our daily activities or experiences (Saito, 2019). The experience itself is generally defined as a “general flow of conscious life” (Shusterman, 2006, p. 217), first and foremost when we are *awake*, as Alfred Schutz emphasized in *The Problem of Social Reality* (1962). For him, the world of everyday life is our paramount reality, the inter-subjectively shared reality of pragmatic action, where we are awake and working in standard time. In this view, the everyday world of working is the archetype of our everyday experience of reality, as distinct from other realities experienced as “finite provinces of meaning”, such as the personal worlds of dreams, of imageries and phantasms, as well as the worlds of art, of religious experience, of scientific contemplation, and so on (Schutz, 1962, pp. 231–232; Eberle 2014, p. 139; Ratiu, 2017, p. 43). Therefore, while going beyond the conventional approaches of art works and related experiences, the field explored by EdA remains specifically that of the aesthetic dimensions of our *daily* activities, experiences, or interactions with ordinary objects, while the core of the quotidian is equated with the “everydayness” equated with *dailiness*.<sup>2</sup>

All these insights are indeed important when analyzing our everyday aesthetic life. For instance, I have recently addressed the aesthetic dimension of the everyday world of work, which is usually neglected by the mainstream EdA (Ratiu, 2023). Nevertheless, they trigger questions about other neglected areas of our ordinary aesthetic life or experiences: What about our *nightly* or “everynight” activities or experiences? What about our experiences when we are not awake? Is *dreaming* – understood both as night- and daydreaming, including fantasizing or wakeful dreams – to be excluded from the flow of one’s aesthetic life? Arthur Danto assuredly would say no, at least for the *wakeful dreams* that he identified as another condition in the definition of art (along with earlier *meaning* and *embodiment*), thus capturing “the skill of the artist”. Yet, for him,

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<sup>2</sup> A recent and useful examination of the notion of “everydayness” in the contemporary aesthetic approaches also focuses exclusively on *daily* occurrences (see Giombini and Kvokacka eds., 2021).

*dreaming* (when sleeping) is a universal human characteristic as well – since “everyone, everywhere, dreams” in the ordinary world in which we live our lives (Danto, 2014, pp. 47–49). All these raise questions about the inclusiveness of this subfield of philosophical aesthetics, namely its comprehensive status or wide-ranging scope: Does EdA cover all the areas of our ordinary aesthetic life? What about an *Everynight Aesthetics* (EnA)? I coined the term “everynight aesthetics” half-jokingly, half seriously, as a language game on the English term “everyday”<sup>3</sup>, in the pleasant atmosphere of a night club in Dublin, where I was hanging out with some friends during the 2015 ESA Conference. Now I would like to thoroughly address the issue of a possible, genuine subfield (or part of it) called Everynight Aesthetics. What would be different from Everyday Aesthetics?

I will argue here for Everynight Aesthetics as a counterpart of EnA – similar but complementary to it –, aiming to account for different, neglected areas of the ordinary, regular, common *nightly* aesthetic phenomena, activities, experiences and objects, as well as the disruptions in daily ones, such as daydreams, reveries, fantasies or naps. These are familiar to everyone yet remains largely unnoticed and not addressed systematically until now. When exploring the subjective experience or attitude, the main questions concern how everynight or nightly activities are enacted by people and how this *nightness* affect their aesthetic life. When exploring the object’s side, the main question is how this *nightness* affect its status compared to daily ordinary object. Accordingly, the main EnA’s assumptions and new research directions or topics are as follows.

## 2. New Research Directions on Nighttime Aesthetic: Night Work, Ordinary Social and Private Nightlife, Dreams, and Night Objects

The “everynight” is here understood as comprising the quotidian *nightly* phenomena, activities, and objects which are assumed to share the characteristics of their daily counterparts, notably

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<sup>3</sup> Actually, only English affords such a language game: the equivalent terms of *everyday* in French or Italian – *quotidien*, *quotidiano* – do not allow it. The matching terms for “everynight” would be “quotidien nocturne” in French, and “quotidiano notturno” in Italian.



repeatability, commonality, familiarity and ordinariness, yet affording aesthetic experiences that are specifically shaped or marked by their *nightness*, that is, their nocturnal or *nightly* nature.

Therefore, the main directions of research shall address the quotidian nightlife in its aesthetic and cultural/social aspects or dimensions, to understand how people perceive, experience, and interpret the *nighttime aesthetic* and to bolster a more inclusive and diverse understanding of our ordinary aesthetic life and of the Aesthetics accounting for it. For instance, the following topics are in my view of major interest for EnA when exploring the nighttime aesthetic: the night work, the ordinary social and private night life seen as practices of self-expression, self-fashioning and well-being, the dreams (both night- and daydreams, including fantasizing or wakeful dreams), and the night objects.

### ***2.1. The world of night work***

The world of *night work* constitutes a major area of exploration. This includes the regular physical night jobs, particularly the activities of cleaning (houses, offices, streets), garbage collecting, night watching, and other regular night works that do not involve (much) public interaction. Although such night jobs share some characteristics of day jobs, they are different as they lack the social presence, interaction, and visibility of day jobs. Thus, their associated everynight aesthetic experiences might differ significantly from the everyday ones, being colored by their specific nocturnal quality.

For instance, EdA's scholars have already accounted for the ordinary activities of cleaning (the house, dishes, clothes etc.) and repairing, "which constitute, along with cooking, the bulk of our house chores" (Saito, 2007, pp. 151–152), yet exclusively in their *daily* and *private* occurrences, mostly at home. They pointed out though that some gender and social biases, such as the low status tag on professionals of cleaning (housemaids, servants, garbagemen), hamper the examination and aesthetic appreciation of this major aspect of our everyday life (Saito, 2007, pp. 152–153; Leddy, 1995, p. 267). In a recent keynote lecture, 'The Aesthetics of House Chores' (2023), delivered in the Budapest conference *Designing Everyday Experience. Objects, Environments, Habits*, Saito highlighted other significant aspects of our views on "housework and

similar tasks, such as street cleaning, yard work, and garbage collecting”: their “invisibility” and the supposed lack of “imaginative or creative engagement” (Saito, 2023, pp. 12–13). These insights are valuable as well for designing properly the investigation of the ordinary night works to capture – along with the specific, nocturnal aesthetic quality of their performing –, the social/aesthetic affordances and effects (negative or positive) of their *invisibility*, as well as the possible space open to *creativity* or *imagination* by the rhythmical routine physical works. I would have my own experience to discuss on the latter aspect of the night work, somehow opposite to that of the repetitive work famously illustrated by Charlie Chaplin in the hilarious factory scenes of his *Modern Times* film, 1936.



Fig 1. Factory scene in *Modern Times*, 1936, directed by Charlie Chaplin

## 2.2. *The social nightlife*

The *social nightlife* – yet conceived of as a regular, not as an out-of-the ordinary social life – is another major area to explore: for example, the nightlife experience in dance clubs, bars, pubs, and the associated nightclubbing or dance music subcultures. The sociologist of culture Sarah Thornton (1996) has already characterized nightclubs as “centralizing hubs for endless marginal aesthetic experiences” that “transform the night into a place of encounter, creation, recreation and exchange” (Thornton, 1996; Guerra and Grimaldi, 2022, p. 127). There are also some inspiring philosophical accounts of the aesthetic experiences of ambiance or atmosphere in the “third places” such as pubs, cafes, taverns and the like, as delivered as part of the symposium *Toward a Third Place Aesthetics: An Afternoon Symposium on the Aesthetics of Communal Life* at The New School for Social Research in New York (2022). However, the authors engaged the investigation of these “important locations of aesthetic experience and value” that are “not much discussed in contemporary Anglo-American aesthetics” (Meskin, 2022) rather in EdA’s terms and did not address explicitly the nighttime aesthetic experiences in these places. Nonetheless, such subcultures related to the quotidian nightlife and others related to *fashion* – seen as an “aesthetic” and way of *self-fashioning* – could be core topics for Everynight Aesthetics as well.

So, there is still place to explore the subjective experience of nightly life, examining how individuals perceive, interpret, and find the aesthetic in the mundane or nighttime. I would also include here some fashion styles or “core aesthetics” (aesthetics oriented toward a specific characteristic) inspired by diverse subcultures, from punk and cyberpunk, goth and cybergoth to rave and glam, that express creativity and rebellion and share a common interest in nightlife and (dark) music seen as *lifestyles*.<sup>4</sup> These could be also seen as examples of practices belonging to the field of Everynight Aesthetics, in that they connect look (aesthetic) and life (subculture) and experience fashion as a form of self-expression and self-fashioning, although there is no firm boundary between daily and nightly phenomena or experiences.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the fashion aesthetic websites or blogs by Lee Williams, 2021; Bateman, 2022; and Bjelic, 2023.

For example, the blog of Cosmique Studio lists “18 Types of Aesthetics” for girls in its ‘Ultimate Guide with Pictures [2024]’: “Indie, Grunge, Soft girl, Y2k, Dark academia, Baddie, VSCO girl, Kawaii, E-girl, Fairycore, Cottagecore, Pastel goth, Coquette, Soft boy, Edgy, Fairy grunge, Goblincore, Sanriocore” (Cosmique Studio, 2024). Each of these popular and fashionable aesthetics of clothing lists specific “makeup, accessories, key motifs, colors and values”, which are meant to ensure not only finding one’s “perfect aesthetic clothing style” but also its accordance to one’s “self-nature” and “personality.” As an example, “grunge” might be one’s personal aesthetic if one “likes speaking up, being a rebel, and not caring about what others think.” Instead, people who appreciate “dark academia aesthetic” (a popular subculture of academia aesthetic) “have a passion for intelligence and education, as well as for literacy, poetry, academia, research, art, historical studies, classics, old buildings, and diverse cultures.” (Cosmique Studio, 2024)

Likewise, there are aesthetic clothing styles for boys that, although not identical to those mentioned above, associate specific accessories, motifs and haircuts based on personal preferences and cultural influences for “creating a look that represents [one’s] unique style and personality.” For example, “soft boy aesthetic” fashion “is all about creating a comfortable and unique style that incorporates vintage and modern elements while promoting a softer and more sensitive form of masculinity” (Cosmique Studio, 2024).

It is also worth noting that such “core aesthetic” fashions, partly associated with Everynight Aesthetics practices and attitudes, share a characteristic that the action-oriented account of Everyday Aesthetics – which is typically inclined to integrate the aesthetic and ethical aspects of life –, assumes as a defining attitude: the fusion between the aesthetic and the ethic in ordinary life. The motto “Wearing the Aesthetic Clothing, Living the Ethic. This Store is a Manifesto in Stitches!” (Litlookz Studio, 2024), which figures on the forefront of the fashion store Litlookz Studio: Online Aesthetic Clothing Store for Gen Z, is a case in point.

### ***2.3. The private night life and nighttime routines and experiences***

The *private nightlife* and its routines or rituals may well be another important topic for EnA. This area may include the aesthetic atmosphere or ambiance that one cultivates and experiences on a

nightly basis, as well as its benefits in terms of aesthetic pleasures, relaxation and well-being. For example, the evening/nighttime routines or rituals as self-care activities, such as the routines for fast sleeping or well-being: reading, listening to calming music, aromatherapy and sensory design, or practicing mindfulness. However, the range of such routines or rituals is wider, because here too there is no firm boundary between daily and nightly. These may include as well the ritual of drinking coffee, however paradoxical it may seem<sup>5</sup>, as a scene from the film *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003, directed by Jim Jarmusch) humorously suggests: “I drink a lot of coffee before I go to sleep. So I can dream faster” (source: *Le Cinema World*, Facebook post, 6.01.2024).

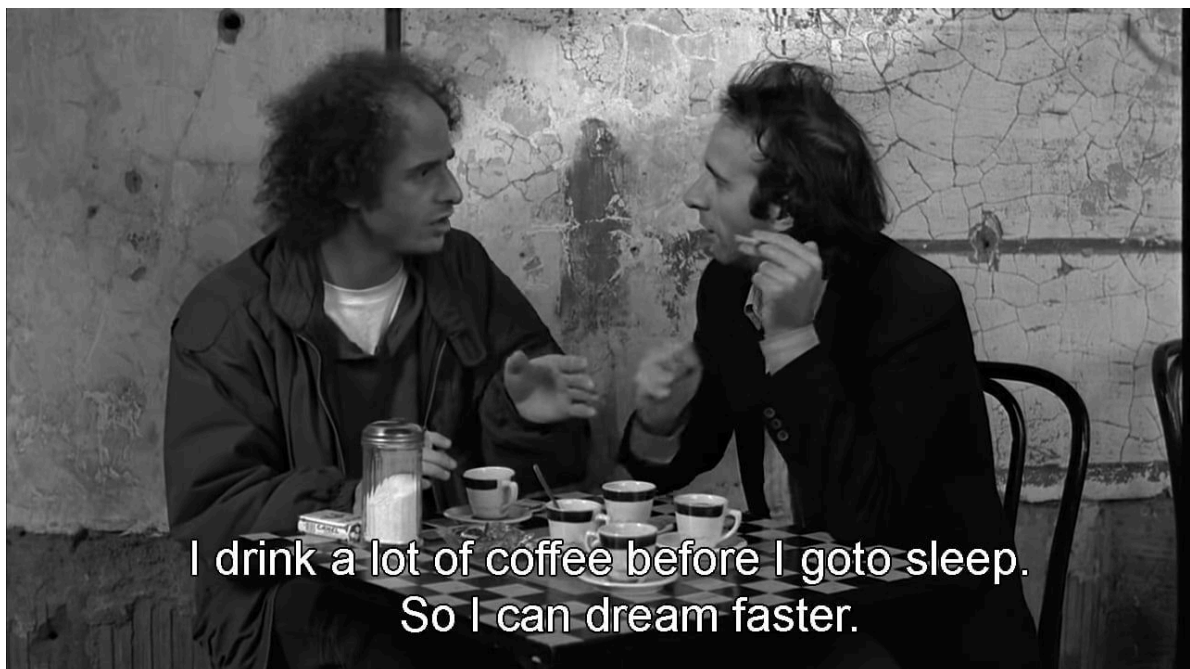


Fig 2. Scene from *Coffee and Cigarettes*, 2003, directed by Jim Jarmusch

<sup>5</sup> As Elisabetta Di Stefano states in ‘The Aesthetics of Coffee’ (2023), referring to Melchionne (2013), “The coffee ritual is a classic case for understanding everyday aesthetics, which focuses on repetition”. She analyzes ingeniously the complex experience – preparing, drinking, and appreciating – of this “typical drink of everyday life”, yet seen as a distinctive *daily* “aesthetic” practice, because performed “every morning when we wake up.” (Di Stefano, 2023, pp. 43, 45)

A topic I would particularly like to explore concerns how these nightly routines, rituals, or affordances, as well as the aesthetic fashions mentioned above, are employed to define or redefine the aesthetic for presenting, expressing, or styling oneself: there, the self-focusing on such repetitive quotidian practices blends with the celebration of creativity, self-expression, and self-fashioning. The answers would give us some insights into how everynight aesthetics would be different from everyday aesthetics.

On the one hand, while there is some overlap between the everynight and the everyday aesthetics, they differ in terms of their activities, functionality or effects, and their overall atmosphere. The emphasis is, in each case, on tailoring the aesthetic experience to the specific characteristics of night or day, respectively. In the area of private night life, the nightly aesthetic routines tend to emphasize relaxation, leisure, and activities associated with winding down, such as reading, listening to music, or enjoying a quiet evening. The range of sensory experiences might be at maximum, since it might encompass all senses as well as various sensory and emotional elements when creating an enjoyable, relaxing night atmosphere or environment through color palette, lighting, textures, scents, soundscape, décor, natural elements, and routine or rituals. This way, the style of the private nightly aesthetic is more introspective, focusing on peacefulness, tranquility, and serenity of nighttime. Instead, in the area of daily life, where private and public are intermingling in different ways, the everyday aesthetic mostly reflects the practical and functional aspects of daily life, accommodating work, socializing, and various other daily activities. Although the “relaxing effect” is not missing in daily aesthetic practices such as reading, listening to music, or the coffee experience, their dailyness commends other effects or characteristics. For instance, Di Stefano labels the daily coffee as an “intellectual drink” that is characterized mostly as a “form of sociality” (Di Stefano, 2023, pp. 45–46), rather than a relaxation ritual favorizing rest, sleeping or dreaming, as in the previous nighttime example.

On the other hand, the nighttime experiences or routines suggest a more personal sense of the aesthetic. The everynight aesthetic(s) may also be seen as a subjective concept or practice – that of creating a personal sense of style, atmosphere, or ambiance that one cultivates or experiences on a nightly basis, as some fashion styles or “core aesthetics” discussed above did. I have mentioned that many of these aesthetic fashions were inspired by different subcultures or artistic

movements and styles. I can add to this genealogy, for instance, that the popular style in fashion called grunge “started with the grunge music in the early 90s” (Coughlan, 2024), while the dark academia aesthetics “takes inspiration from darker, more somber sources, for example, the poetry of Poe” (Henrikssen, 2024). However, the connection between one’s aesthetic fashion and a subculture tend to become looser or freer nowadays, when such an aesthetic is the result of an individual preference, a free personal choice among the many existing aesthetics in the cultural store, rather than of the belongingness to a certain subculture group. As Danai (2022) observes:

Subculture style has moved from just being the uniform of a specific group and has evolved into being what we now call ‘an aesthetic.’ You don’t have to conform to a specific style of clothing just because of your work and hobbies, and you have the social freedom to alternate and pull from different aesthetics as you please (Danai, 2022).

While these aesthetic clothing styles are not directly or exclusively related to the nightly aesthetic experiences, being relevant for daily aesthetics as well, they allow us to seize a current major mutation in understanding the “aesthetic(s)” in a more personal sense, that is, as a personal style of self-expression and self-fashioning or a lifestyle, rather than a corpus of practices and theories related to and appreciating external objects, be they artistic or ordinary or natural.<sup>6</sup>

## ***2.4. The nightmares and daydreams***

Dreams – from daydreams and wakeful dreams when we are awake to nighttime reveries and dreams when we are sleeping – constitutes another major area of research for EnA. Here, dreams are conceived of as common aesthetic activities or experiences (since everyone dreams), yet not purely mental but also corporeal ones, possibly involving speaking, eyes movements, and even body wandering in sleepwalking type actions, or art-like cinematic impressions as in projecting,

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<sup>6</sup> In this sense, it is relevant that many bloggers, when discussing such aesthetic fashions, refer to definitions of the “aesthetic” in online dictionaries who have already consecrated this personal sense, for example: “Dictionary.com defines aesthetic as ‘a particular individual’s set of ideas about style and taste, along with its expression’. Which frankly means that an aesthetic is someone’s personal style, that, within this context, people collect under or imitate” (Lee Williams, 2021).



watching a film or acting in it, that engender effective, real bodily affects and emotions. These emotions could be both positive (joy) or negative (sadness, fear, anxiety) when having bad dreams or nightmares. Danto holds that “wakeful dreams” are not private, since they can be shared. It is true that he counts this characteristic as an advantage of wakeful dreams over the dreams that come to us in sleep, another advantage being that they raise important questions for art, such as its “end” and its relationship to reality (Danto, 2014, pp. 46–49).<sup>7</sup> However, as everyone’s experience may show, the dreams when sleeping can be recalled and shared as well, so these are not (exclusively) private.

I would hold the same for the dreams requiring that one sleeps, whether in the day or the nighttime, since the dreams are defined as “vivid, sensorimotor hallucinations with a narrative structure” that are experienced “consciously – seeing, hearing and touching with environments that appear completely real”, and can be “recalled by memory and described to other persons” (Koch, 2010, p. 16). Considering their very essence as conscious phenomena having emotional and experiential qualities<sup>8</sup>, through the wakeful dreams or nighttime reveries and the dreams when sleeping, elusive but rich, we can not only explore a way to unravel an epistemological puzzle, to test theories of consciousness and the self, or to provide a more unified account of mental life, as many philosophers did until now (see Windt, 2021). EnA can also approach aesthetically the formal properties of the dream, its narrative structure and content and its relation to one’s time perception in a new, fresh aesthetic way to clarify: A) the multiple perception modes and emotional states of a subject that, when dreaming, becomes an object to oneself, as well as B) the unfolding of a “reality” that is at once more spontaneous, subjective, immediate and faraway.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The topic of dreams plays an important role for Danto in conceiving of his method of the indiscernible, used to refine the mode of identifying/defining artworks versus their everyday counterparts. He discussed “the cases in which dream and waking experiences are indiscernible” referring to the famous use of the “vivid dreams of ordinary life” by Descartes in *Meditation* I.5 to motivate skepticism about sensory-based beliefs on the external world and his own bodily existence – the indistinction between perceiving and dreaming, between what is real and not-real –, much like the case of the artwork *Brillo Box* vs. the ordinary commercial Brillo Box (Danto, 2014, pp. 45–46). Likewise, Danto has already discussed the topic of dreams in his book *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, originally published in 1965 (Danto, 2005, p. 35), shortly after the seminal essay ‘The Artworld’ (October, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> Although different degrees of sub- or un-consciousness may be involved in dreams when sleeping compared to daydreams, reveries or lucid dreams. See Dai, 2021, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> This approach is indebted to the phenomenology of dreams proposed by Neves, 2014, pp. 1475–1477, which draws on the (untranslated) work of Maria Zambrano (*El Sueño Creador*, 1986; *Los Sueños y el Tiempo*, 1992). See also Grigorescu, 2024.



Through dreams, EnA can also explore the meeting point or convergence between our daily / nightly aesthetic experiences and art, as related modes to give figure to or configure the flow of our everyday or everynight experiences. For example, Charles Baudelaire in his essay about Delacroix (1863) used the term “daydream” to ascribe his “strange quality” to capture the intangible aspects of life (“the invisible, the impalpable, the dream, the soul”) and to convey them through his paintings, using only color and contour (Baudelaire, 1995, p. 44). Hans-Georg Gadamer in his essay ‘The End of Art?’ (1985) deemed art as an endless process to “shape [our] own lives”, to give figure to “human dreams and yearnings” (Gadamer, 2022, p. 76).<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, dreams – whether they are different types of day-dreaming (daily nap, wakeful or lucid dreams) or night-dreaming (from night reveries to nightmares) –, may reveal unnoticed aspects of our ordinary aesthetic life: we can grasp the daily naps or reveries as disruptions in the humdrum of our everyday activities, such as the work. And, conversely, the night dreams as activities that disrupt the rest or sleep routine with daily-like or art-like creative states and experiences, such as inspiration and creativity allowing the dreamer to tell a story, design a scenario, and direct, watch or even act in a (kind of) movie. Arguably, the “logic of dreams” is different from the logic of sober thinking, in that it “is neither persistent nor consistent, which would be the correct interpretation of the illogical nature of dreams”; likewise, the author of a dream is ignorant compared to the writer of fictional stories, as the dreamer does not know what is in the minds of the other characters in the dream (Dai, 2021, pp. 3–4). However, such distinctions do not impede the exploration of this neglected area of daily/nightly aesthetic experiences, however fuzzy, blurry, or mixed these may be.

There is another related aspect to discuss here. As mentioned above, dreams are a universal human characteristic (Danto, 2014, p. 49) and, more largely, of living creatures such as animals (cats and dogs also dream). It may be interesting to test some supposed characteristics or attributes of the generative AIs (Dall-E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion) – autonomy, creativity, authorship – through dreams or the attribute of dreaming. Paraphrasing the title of the famous 1968 novel by Philip K. Dick (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), I would ask: “Do AIs Dream of Artificial

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<sup>10</sup> The entire quote is: “An end of art, an end of the never resting will to create, which belongs to human dreams and yearnings, will never come to be, so long as humans shape their own lives at all. Any supposed end of art will be the beginning of new art.” Gadamer, 2022, p. 76.

Artworks?” The dream test may be useful for verifying the actual attributes of the generative AIs. Many people have remarked that AI-generated images look so dreamlike, meaning “bizarre”, similar to a surrealist painting (e.g. by Salvador Dali) or even look as nightmares (e.g. in representing hands). Usually, such a bizarre look is not explained by AI’s capability to dream, which would be impossible since this requires consciousness; it is rather due to current AIs’ inability, as 2D image generators, to understand the complex 3D geometry of something like a hand in a particular context or situation (Hugues, 2023). Nevertheless, some scholars that explore “the frontiers of artificial consciousness” and the controversial idea of AI experiencing similar sub-conscious phenomena tend to investigate the assumption that AI would be able to process information and emotions in a dream-like state, at least in a simulated form. Therefore, “exploring the realm of AI dreams” could offer both a “deeper understanding of how AI works” and “valuable insights into the nature of consciousness itself”, although such exploration “necessitates cautious considerations of ethical implications” (Wiselink Global, 2024).

## 2.5. *The night objects*

The ordinary *night objects* may be another major area of investigation for EnA. The aesthetics of everyday life addresses, as one would expect, the area of ordinary objects with which we interact (usually) during the day. For instance, a special issue of the journal *Aisthesis* (vol. 7, no.1, 2014) has dealt with ‘Everyday Objects’, including designed objects from clothes to accessories, from video games to cars to various technological products (Matteucci, Di Stefano, and Mecacci, 2014, p. 3), such as the everyday photographs (Leddy, 2014). I would ask: What about the “everynight objects” or everynight photographs? How does their *nightness* affect their status (as aesthetic objects) compared to ordinary daily objects?

One can have an idea about this by surveying popular websites, such as ‘Aesthetic night photos’ on Pexels.com, a collection of photos taken by ordinary people that reflect the night atmosphere and mood in popular imagery, or the ‘781 Night City Captions That Outshine The Moon’ on AdvertisingNews.com, a platform by media mavens and brandbuilders offering ideas, insights, and strategies, in this particular case for “the best night city Instagram captions (...) that

encapsulate the essence of your nocturnal adventure” (AdvertisingNews.com, 2024). In urban settings, the most frequent “night objects” are the city-lights, especially the neon lights related to clubs, bars, and skyscrapers, while in the natural world the stars and moon motifs prevail, such as the starry sky and dark forest with moonlight – all related to night activities, such as clubbing and stargazing (Pexels.com, 2024).



Fig 3. Night city lights (by Jonathan Formento), Pexel.com



Fig 4. Moon (by Chris F.), Pexel.com

Therefore, there is a category of specific *nightly* objects, such as the stars and the moon, since they are usually invisible during the day (although the categories of “day” and “night” may be flexible under specific geographical circumstances, such as their different seasonal alternance in northern and southern poles areas or sub-polar countries). Another, secondary category, is that of the (daily) ordinary objects yet perceived or experienced differently during the night, when daylight or some specific daily functions or interests are lacking. In this second sense, each of the “everyday objects” mentioned in the journal *Aisthesis* may be perceived or experienced differently during their *night* use or users’ nocturnal moods.

This insight may be corroborated with another one offered by an AI program/copilot, Windows Bing Chatbot (WBC), whose responses (or images in the case of generative AIs) are reputedly typical of the popular imaginary, since they are based on the commonplaces or stereotypes with which the AI is fed or trained. When prompted repeatedly to answer about “Everynight Aesthetics” (because at first it denied defensibly the existence of such academic discipline), WBC picked out the congregated commonality of the night life or nightly experience: the “emphasis on the themes of darkness and mystery” in “celebrating the night and its contrast with the day” (WBC: ‘Everynight Aesthetics’, 14.12.2023). This characteristic is close to that highlighted by the “expansive” approach of EdA, the experiencing of the extraordinariness in daily aesthetic life or, as Thomas Leddy put it, “the constant experience of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary” (Leddy, 2014, p. 62). The AI does not lack a kind of poetic drive either, as WBC’s answer included also the following (unsolicited) offer:

“Here is an example of a poem that I wrote in Everynight Aesthetics style<sup>11</sup>:

‘The city never sleeps, and neither do I

I wander through the streets, under the starry sky

The neon signs are calling, the music is loud

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<sup>11</sup> The first verse line is a *mime* one can find in many internet posts and tunes on YouTube, SoundCloud or Amazon. The style and themes of WBC’s poem reminds those of many poets, from Percy B. Shelley to the first urban poets Walt Whitman and Charles Baudelaire, but it prompts notably those of the poem ‘Sea Fever’ by the English poet and writer John E. Masefield (1878-1967). His biographers note that on his first voyage on sea (to Chile) he was awed by the beauty of nature, including a rare sighting of a nocturnal rainbow. On his appointment as Poet Laureate (1930-1967), *The Times* wrote of him that “his poetry could touch to beauty the plain speech of everyday life” (‘John Masefield’, Wikipedia, 2024).

I feel the adrenaline, I'm part of the crowd.

Every night is a new adventure, every night is a thrill  
I don't know what I'm looking for, but I know I never will  
Every night is a mystery, every night is a game  
I don't care about the consequences, I only live for the fame.”  
(Windows Bing Chatbot: 'Everynight Aesthetics', 14.12.2023)

In this regard, I would say that the ordinary nighttime aesthetic – when it is not a preparatory ritual for sleeping and dreaming – may be as well “a form of artful living that seeks to make every night a new adventure, a thrill, a mystery, or a game” (WBC: 'Everynight Aesthetics', 14.12.2023). In fact, this different sensibility in our nightly ordinary life, emphasized by Everynight Aesthetics (in AI's view), is not so remote from that conveyed by many artists, writers and poets. For example, that narrated by Baudelaire in his poems from 'Tableaux parisiens' (e.g. 'Rêve parisien') and other sections of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1868) or in *Paris Spleen* (1869), after watching and experiencing the theatrical, artificial „city lights” in that dreamlike artificial paradise prompted as well by the engagement in the flux of night life (Baudelaire, 1868; Baudelaire, 1869).

This observation leads to the next part of my paper, which tries to briefly sketch another main line of research for Everynight Aesthetics.

### **3. Perceptions and Representations of Everynight Activities and Objects: Social Media, Art Fiction, and Philosophical Discourses**

As an additional main line of research, EnA may explore how everynight activities or objects are perceived and represented not only by individuals in their own experiences and terms, but also in various public media and theories, such as the new social media, the artistic fiction, and philosophical discourses.

### 3.1. Social media and artistic fiction

*Social media* and *artistic fiction* (literature, painting, photography, film, music) could offer significant, substantial material to explore, by the perspective of both those who enact their own experiences and the other who perceive and appreciate them. These different new media and more traditional art mediums allow us to examine the cultural and historical perceptions of the *night*, *nightlife*, *night objects*, and *dreams* as well as their influence on the respective aesthetic choices and experiences. A handy example would be again Baudelaire's writings on Paris' night city life (some already mentioned), Edgar Allen Poe's novels, or Edward Hopper's paintings of the American night life, such as the iconic 'Nighthawks' (1942).



Fig. 5. Edward Hopper, 'Nighthawks', 1942, The Art Institute of Chicago

There are many other examples in literature, painting or film to investigate, I would briefly mention some of them:



- the ‘The Tilled Field’ (‘La terre labourée’, 1923–24) by Joan Miró: here, the juxtaposition not only of human, animal, and vegetal forms but also of day and night may function as an allegory of the complementarity of EdA and EnA.



Fig 6. Joan Miró, ‘The Tilled Field’, 1923–24, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

- the paintings in the exhibition *What work is* by Serban Savu (Romanian Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2024): here, the day nap/sleep stands as a “gap” or limbo between the worlds of work and leisure/rest, where “new ways of finding one’s meaning, identity, and freedom emerge”.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> In an interview with Serban Savu by Diana Marincu about the exhibition *What Work Is*, at The Romanian Pavilion at the 60<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia 2024, the painter declares: “This anarchy between





Fig 7. Serban Savu, 'The Polyptych of Work and Leisure', 2006–2024, Romanian Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2024

two worlds opens gaps where new ways of resistance and finding one's meaning, identity, and freedom emerge. Sleep is such an escape into an intimate, private world where you are vulnerable and innocent, but also free. Or activities like working in your spare time, cultivating the land for pleasure, gardening vegetable on the small plots around the apartment blocks. They are also a perpetuation of an older lifestyle, which mixed the rural and the urban and was populated by a hybrid character" (Marincu, 2024).



Fig 8. Serban Savu, 'The Polyptych of Work and Leisure', 2006–2024, detail, Romanian Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2024

- Charlie Chaplin's film *City Lights* (1931): here, the Tramp (who occasionally takes a job as a street sweeper) is an *invisible* benefactor, both for the sober millionaire who does remember him only when drunken and the (former blind) flower girl who does recognize him only by *touching*, in the iconic ending of the movie. This opens up the topics of *social invisibility* of some persons and of *blindness* and restoring of sight.



Fig 9. Scene from *City Lights*, 1931, directed by Charlie Chaplin

### 3.2. *Philosophical discourses*

*Philosophy* and *philosophical aesthetics' discourses* in particular are key sources and targets for EnA's investigations. Here, the focus may lie on how these theoretical discourses have explored and endorsed different aesthetic cultures, values, and experiences attached to the *day/ dailyness* compared to the *night/nightness*, as well as EdA's and (possibly) EnA's relationships to the traditional aesthetic theories and how they have shaped, reframed or challenged our perceptions of the *ordinary*, both *daily* and *nightly* one. A brief agenda for this kind of discourse analysis on a *philosophy of the night* may include the exploration of philosophical perspectives on the meaning and aesthetics of the nighttime, the examination of cultural and historical perceptions of the night and the nightly aesthetic expressions, as well as their influence on aesthetic choices.

## 4. Conclusion

To conclude, I conceive of the Everynight Aesthetics as a new specific subfield of philosophical aesthetics, complementary to the existing Everyday Aesthetics, yet different in its specific focus and approach of the ordinary aesthetic life. Instead of focusing on the aesthetic aspects of daily life, an Everynight Aesthetics would explore the often-overlooked aesthetic aspects of the nightly life or nighttime, recognizing them as an integral part of our aesthetic life. In short, it could represent a deeper exploration and appreciation of other, nightly aspects and dimensions of the ordinary aesthetic life that often go unnoticed, allowing us to see the aesthetic and its experiencing in new and unexpected ways.

An Everynight Aesthetics approach has potential to generate new research agenda and findings, by mapping out, exploring and offering new insights into understated or neglected dimensions of the ordinary nightly aesthetic life, such as: the night work; the social and private night life as well as the related fashion aesthetics seen as practices of self-expression, self-fashioning and well-being; the dreams, both night- and day-dreams, including wakeful dreams or fantasizing; and the night objects. This way, as already sketched here, EnA not only promotes a more inclusive and diverse understanding of our aesthetic life but also allows us to seize a current major mutation in



understanding “aesthetics” and the “aesthetic”. Notably, it highlights the emergence and prevalence of a more personal sense of the “aesthetic”, especially in the current youth cultures promoted by social media, which understands “aesthetics” as a personal style or self-fashioned lifestyle rather than a corpus of practices and theories related to and appreciating external objects, be they artistic or ordinary or natural.

Finally, a caveat is to be added. What I proposed here is a research agenda for an emerging field, with some exemplifications or case studies’ plans, rather than an expanded analysis of each possible Everynight Aesthetics’ topic. I intend to provide such analysis in the near future. I also encourage and hope for other researchers and scholars to contribute to this emerging field by developing theoretical frameworks or conducting empirical studies on any topic or direction of research sketched here or plausible in the future.

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## *Making Someone See an Aspect is not Persuading*

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ABSTRACT. One of the main attacks against a theory of aspects inspired by Wittgensteinian ideas consists of the claim according to which the fact of making someone see an aspect is just persuading (or convincing) him of something. In other terms, from this critical approach, an aesthetic theory of aspects (or *aspectism*, as I call it) would not, supposedly, be more than a *persuasivism*. The main aim of my paper is to argue against that line of attack. I will develop different sub-arguments to justify it and I will support my ideas with some examples about understanding in music.

One of the main attacks against a theory of aspects inspired by Wittgensteinian ideas consists of the claim according to which the fact of making someone see an aspect is just persuading (or convincing) him of something. In other terms, from this critical approach, an aesthetic theory of aspects (or *aspectism*, as I call it) would not, supposedly, be more than a *persuasivism*. The main aim of my paper is to argue against that line of attack. I will develop different sub-arguments to justify it and I will support my ideas with some examples about understanding in music.

Since the '80s, at least (*vid.* for example, Shusterman, 1983) until the last decade (*vid.* for example, Nachtomy & Blank, 2015) some relevant scholars have dealt with this topic. My theory of aspects (or *aspectism*) defends the idea that the possibility of me being able to come to see

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something as being the same object but at the same time seeing it in a completely different way (Wittgenstein, PU II) plays a crucial role in aesthetic understanding. In this respect, the famous example of the duck-rabbit has done a disservice to aesthetics insofar as it has hidden the fact that the scope of the notion of aspect goes far beyond the cases of perception of ambiguous figures and even beyond the realm of the perceptual. Furthermore, the notion of aspect (and there are multiple examples of this in Wittgenstein's works) reaches to the heart of aesthetic understanding, and the singularity of the understanding of works of art.

Of course, Wittgenstein speaks of persuasion in several paragraphs of his work, but always in the framework of an *aspectist*, not reductive, conception of understanding as seeing. In fact, Wittgenstein accepted that much of his philosophical aim, in general, was just persuading his readers to see a particular thing in a particular way, much as the critic tries to persuade his audience to see an artwork in a particular way. "What I'm doing is *also* persuasion. If someone says 'There is no difference', and I say 'There is a difference', I am persuading: I am saying 'I don't want you look at it like that'." (LC, 27)

According to the Cambridge Dictionary of English, to persuade means "to make someone do or believe something by giving them a good reason to do it or by talking to that person and making them believe it". Consequently, from a *persuasivist* view, when I succeed in making someone see the true meaning (or sense) of a work of art (or a part of it) I am merely persuading him because I am making him do or believe something by giving him a good reason.

In the '80s Richard Shusterman (Shusterman, 1983) launched an attack against some Wittgensteinians in aesthetics<sup>2</sup> (such as Hampshire, Sibley, Slater, Isenberg, Macdonald or Casey) for they slid from the genuine Wittgenstein's *perceptualist* (I say *aspectist*) conception of aesthetic arguments to the mistaken conclusion that "deductive and inductive models of critical reasoning are simply wrong and fundamentally wrongheaded" (Shusterman, 1983, 68). Shusterman thought that they were betraying the pluralism that Wittgenstein himself claims and that has room to incorporate those inductive and deductive models into aesthetic arguments. However,

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<sup>2</sup> In some of my own papers, I have proposed calling those authors the "first generation of antiessentialists".

Shusterman's claim refers to past historic periods and cultures<sup>3</sup> rather than being structural and synchronic models. On the contrary, from my *aspectism*, I am willing to accept the coexistence and functionality of inductive and deductive inferences (and causal inferences also) in contemporary aesthetic arguments, as well as *continuous seeing*.<sup>4</sup> That claim is no excuse for not recognizing the central theses of *aspectism*: the crucial place that the possibility of the dawning of an aspect<sup>5</sup> occupies in the framework of aesthetic understanding.<sup>6</sup> Shusterman equates the *perceptualist* theory (or *aspectism* in my terms) with *persuasivism* (he speaks of "Wittgenstein's perceptual-persuasive account of aesthetic argument", Shusterman, 1983, 69), but he is unable to differentiate *aspectism* from mere *persuasivism*. In fact, for him Wittgenstein's *perceptualism* adopts a "dialectic or rhetorically persuasive form [...] evaluated by its power in convincing or satisfying its readers" (Shusterman, 1983, p. 6)

Let us remember our initial definition of persuasion: "to make someone do or believe something by giving them a good reason to do it or by talking to that person and making them believe it". It is not clear what counts as a "good reason" for a *persuasivist*, but in any case, in his view there is a clear disregard, on the one hand, for the role of feeling (that is, of feelings and emotions), and, on the other hand, for the indirect ways of showing (*further descriptions*, in Wittgenstein terms) which are aimed at making someone see an aspect. Those indirect ways go beyond the "by talking to that person" put forward in the definition of "persuade". Very often, the range of things that we can do in order to make someone see something under the right aspect include non-verbal actions: you can sing or whistle in the right way to play a song, or you can offer a good object for comparison, you can make a gesture, or you can stop doing something (stop moving your body somehow when playing, for example).

Moreover, the *persuasivist* approach seems to reduce aesthetic understanding to a narrow believing or doing something. When I am able to see the painting under the correct aspect it is not

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<sup>3</sup> "In Aristotle's time there may well have been a shared essence of tragedy to define. In Johnson's time there seem to have been general principles and standards of criticism which were commonly held and firmly established." (Shusterman 1983, 70)

<sup>4</sup> "Chronic phase" in Nachtomy & Blank (Nachtomy & Blank, 2015) terms.

<sup>5</sup> "Acute phase" in Nachtomy & Blank (Nachtomy & Blank, 2015) terms.

<sup>6</sup> Even if, for Wittgenstein, persuasion (integrated into the framework of aspect seeing) is also present in science (Darwin, for example) or psychoanalysis (Freud, for example). (See LC 26-27).

just a matter of having believed a judgement or an argument (such as, for example, “Picasso’s *Crucifixion* is a chromatic scream” or “The augmented seconds in Bach’s *Aria* are lamentations”), but rather some more complex experiences crucially involving ways of feeling and ways of being moved by the work of art. And the consequences of such an experience are re-organizations of the inner relationships with the other elements of my comprehensive dimension.

Before going on to my example, I would like to just set out a contemporary philosophical approach<sup>7</sup> from the perspective of accounts of agency in epistemology<sup>8</sup> which in my opinion may help us to illuminate that topic in tune with my *aspectism*. The reduction of *aspectism* to a mere persuasiveness seems to confer a marked epistemically reductive imprint on aesthetic understanding. By contrast, the perspective of agency makes it possible, on the one hand, to grant feelings, judgement, and the particular context of the aesthetic experience, the very role that corresponds to them. On the other hand, the perspective of agency allows us to justify the idea of a pluralism in aesthetic understanding which avoids, in turn, relativism. From the epistemic perspective of agency, truth and knowledge are present in understanding insofar as they are the basic assumption shared by the stories in dispute, namely a space of reasons between antagonistic stories. From that perspective, knowledge is not just there as a mere instrument, but as the achievement of an agency in some of the dimensions in which that human characteristic is displayed. And that achievement of an agency takes place in particular personal, social, and political situations. In other words: the exercise of our aptitude as agents is a situational one. Normativity is also not absent because, even if there is always room for reasons (but no guarantees for a dialogue) between antagonistic narratives, not everything counts (intelligibly) as a reason. Knowledge, then, is an achievement of the agent supported by a narrative which is not a-normative insofar as the structure of narrativity where the narratives are based and the dialogue between narratives are themselves normative (that is, engaged with the question of truth).

If we import the epistemological concept of story (or narrative) to aesthetics, it is not difficult to think about critical truth obtained in the framework of a situation of aspect seeing as an

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<sup>7</sup> I will also set out (more briefly) some other possible developments based on recent scholars’ works (such as Appelqvist or Nachtomy and Blank) in the second part of that paper.

<sup>8</sup> I’m inspired here by the *agential turn* in epistemology, motivated by E. Sosa and developed recently by scholars such as F. Broncano, J. Corbí or J. Medina. Corbí (Corbí 2022) combines some ideas from the *agential turn* with Bernard Williams’ epistemology.

achievement of an agency, rather than a mere instrument for the goals of a particular person or institution. Aesthetic judgement, from an agential (and aspectual) view, becomes a voice of the knowledge of an agent, supported by a story whose narrative nature must be normative.<sup>9</sup>

In the last part of my paper, I will need to deal especially with the second part of the definition of “persuading” in order to show that being able to see an aspect is not the same thing as believing something, and being able to see an aspect is not the same thing as doing something. Even if we will never have absolute guarantees that someone has come to see the adequate aspect, very varied things can make the difference between having understood the true meaning or not: there is “imponderable” (*unwägbar*) evidence (PI II, xi: 194; LW II: 95) that includes “subtleties of glance, of gesture [and] of tone” (PI II, xi: 194), “internal connections” with other elements of the comprehensive dimension of the agent, coherence with other behaviours, but also moods, emotive expression, etc. which are implied in and involved in both the effective *doing* and *saying*.

In order to illustrate my arguments, I will propose a thought experiment (with some musical samples) based on the performance of the beginning of the 3rd movement (*Adagio*) of Mozart’s *Serenade* No. 10 for 13 Winds in B-flat major, K 361/370a “Gran Partita” (1781-82). Here goes my story.

Diego has been commissioned to play second oboe in the performance of Mozart’s *Serenade* that his young orchestra is preparing right now. His oboe teacher, Jesús, tries to make him understand the correct way to catch the relevance of that musical line, and then, the correct way to play the beginning of the *adagio*.

Diego is quite proud of his *naïve* performance, but Jesús is not happy at all. The performance is inexpressive, almost shy. He has not caught the real importance of the second oboe’s role here. Diego is a diligent student and tries to react to Jesús’ objection by means of adding some *crescendo* and *diminuendo* to the phrasing structure, every two measures. Jesús, the teacher, replies

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<sup>9</sup> The aesthetic space of reasons allows the coexistence (and perhaps the dialogue) of narratives even opposing ones, similarly as it occurs in the field of ICD (Inter-Cultural Dialogue) or in the field of moral judgements. Corbí (Corbí, 2022) has proposed the idea of a “locked point of view” (my translation of *punto de vista atrapado*) in order to explain the survivors’ *aspectuality*. Every aspect is a locked one while until a change of aspect occurs the alternative perspective is not a *seeing*, but just a *seeing-as*. Even though, the aesthetic aspect does not have the significance of a “locked point of view” (nor the costly requirements of access to an alternative point of view) that it has in the case of the survivor.

immediately that there is no indication of such *crescendo* and such *diminuendo* in the score, there is just a *piano* indication. The only secret to create the inner energy of the phrasing is to make the proper accents in the proper syncopated notes, but respecting the *piano* indication, not inventing false dynamics. I remember now Wittgenstein (LWPP 555) saying: “When I see a change of aspect I have to pay attention to the object”. Then, Jesús realizes that the student hasn’t really understood the right new aspect, or maybe that he hasn’t properly identified the actual features involved in that new aspect of the line.

Jesús has a wider range of things to do in order to make Diego see the right aspect of the line (and then to make him perform it properly): Jesús can play, for example, the two ways of phrasing to make the student compare the result, or he may suggest the student to listen to a version by the Members of the Orchestra of St. Luke’s (the best version for him) and to compare it with other versions. Jesús has even invited Diego to watch the scene of the film *Amadeus* where an invidious and wrong Salieri describes that beginning of the *adagio* as “a rusty squeezebox” preceding “the voice of God” (that is, the entry of the first oboe). Of course, Jesús has proposed it just in order to reinforce the idea of the relevance of the rest of the instruments (including the second oboe). And well, finally Jesús asks Diego: “Have you understood my idea?”, and Diego answers with conviction (apparently, at least): “Yes, I have understood, I agree, I see now that this is the right way to play that line”. Jesús invites Diego to play his line again with all the group and everything seems to be going very well: Diego imitates almost exactly Jesús’s way of playing and curiously even Jesús’s slight and characteristic body movements when playing. Great! A big success! Jesús has managed to persuade Diego! But has Diego really seen or really understood the very meaning of the line and of the musical passage?

Let us now imagine some possible subsequent scenes. A few bars later, the same compositional scheme reappears, and Jesús realizes that Diego reverts to the mistaken way of playing it. Or maybe this happens some time later, in another similar passage from another of Mozart’s work. Maybe it was no coincidence that yesterday, while they were commenting on the viewing of *Amadeus*, it seemed to Jesús that Diego had not grasped the irony regarding the character of Salieri, outraged that “the monkey” Mozart was capable of expressing “the voice of God”. Jesús now starts to suspect that Diego has always been a little obsessed with being a soloist

(and perhaps a little jealous of his friend Carlos, the first oboe of the young orchestra). And the worst thing is not even that, because now Jesús suspects that Diego has not understood the importance of the structural contrasts in Mozart's compositional style, and maybe not in polyphonic music in general. And even more serious: Diego has not understood the importance of the secondary parts and secondary instruments in a musical group.

There is room for a more optimistic possibility in my story: some time later, (when Diego has matured a little as a student and as a person), Diego is rehearsing some passages of the *adagio* with Jesús and, suddenly, says: "That is it! Now I understand the idea of the second oboe line!" And, since then, Jesús has realized (no doubt) that Diego has started to play not just the *Serenade* and Mozart in a much more expressive and fluent way, but all his parts in general. He has asked Jesús to watch *Amadeus* together again and he has asked to borrow Jesús' CD recording of the Orchestra of St. Luke's version of the *Serenade*.

Let us go back to the definition of persuasion proposed at the beginning of this paper: to persuade means "to make someone do or believe something by giving them a good reason to do it or by talking to that person and making them believe it". In the first part of my example, perhaps Diego seems to have *believed* my version about the correct way of playing the *adagio* and the reasons (spoken or not) by means of which Jesús has tried to persuade him, but I keep having serious doubts (as well as Jesús, the teacher) that he has really come to see the true aspect of that passage. Is this a mere matter of persuasion? I think not.

My story includes, in my opinion, other elements which may help us to illuminate my proposal of a non-reductive *aspectism*:

- 1) Before the optimistic turn of my story, we can say that Diego has been blind to the proper aspect of the musical line of the *adagio*, and we can also say that he is blind to the meaning of the line. Some recent developments about aspect blindness and meaning blindness (such as Nachtomý and Blank, 2015) would enrich that angle of my example.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> If seeing an aspect is something more than being persuaded, then aspect blindness (the incapacity to experience the meaning) and meaning blindness (that is, being unable to follow a rule, and being unable to see something as a sign) are intimately linked. When the reader is aspect blind, he is meaning blind also, because he is not in a condition to see the right aspect of the thing, and then he is unable to correctly play the language game consisting of following a



- 2) The evidence which Jesús appeals to in order to know if Diego has not really seen (and finally to know that Diego has really seen) highlights the consequences of such an experience running into a re-organization of the inner relationships of that element with the other elements of my comprehensive dimension, and not just regarding the organization of parts of the work.
- 3) Such consequences underline the concentric and expansive character of those kinds of aspectual changes: understanding a dynamic indication (such as *piano*), understanding a piece (as the *adagio* of Mozart's *Serenade*), understanding polyphonic music, understanding the secondary roles of the members of an orchestra, etc.
- 4) The fact that Diego is (or is not) able to play correctly a few bars later when the same compositional scheme reappears illustrates the presence of Wittgensteinian *rules-following*<sup>11</sup> and reinforces the idea of a basic normativity governing the criteria for checking the actual *seeing*.
- 5) In order to be able to see, very varied kinds of reasons may be involved (not excluding inductive, deductive or causal partial arguments), but also (and crucially) feelings, diversity of contexts, social interactions, etc.: Diego's musical process of maturing runs in parallel to Diego's personal process of maturing, including his *ego* management and social abilities and interactions, and even the relationship between music and other media (such as movies, or literature).
- 6) If Diego is finally able to see, then it is not because the goal of Jesús, or Mozart, or the School of Music has been attended to (as the *persuasivist* would defend), but as an

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certain rule (he is unable to perceive the sign as sign). "We become conscious of the aspect only when it changes" (RPP 1: 1034). The thought experiment that I propose in the final part of this paper wants to illustrate that idea.

<sup>11</sup> In Appelqvist 2017 we can find an interesting way of explaining the limits and developments of the rules-following in the framework of an aesthetic normativity which is, in my opinion, compatible with my *aspectism*. According to Appelqvist, Wittgenstein's remarks on aesthetics and the arts, especially music, allow us to distinguish between "two different aspects of rule-following [...], one for which we can find justification by means of a conceptual rule-formulation, another for which such justification is not available" (Appelqvist 2017, 125). In the first case... In the second case, Appelqvist is referring mainly to such aesthetic situations where the only possible answer to a demand for justification may be a grammatical sentence, as for instance "Every wall has some length" (when measuring baseboards) (Appelqvist 2017, 132). "But this does not mean that the basic moves in the game are not genuine cases of rule-following. It only means that some moves in those games are necessary for the possibility of others, and for such moves, that is, for grammatical statements, I can offer no other justification except the fact that 'this is simply what I do' (PI § 217)".

achievement of an agency. And even then, the truth of that content is not objectively guaranteed before nor beyond the intersubjective space of reasons.

- 7) In my story, there is another feature of “aspect seeing” which makes a difference with mere persuasion: its relationship with time and process. In despite of the sudden nature of the dawning of an aspect (the *click*), exhortations to see something under a certain aspect are largely attempts at persuasion aimed at educating the sensibility of others, not simply at obtaining the acquiescence of my interlocutor at a specific moment of discussion. Other notions, such as that of “the trained eye”, that of “education for sensibility”, or that of “imponderable evidence” can be invoked, from Wittgenstein himself or from his recent interpreters, in support of my idea. But that will be the subject of other later works, I hope.

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## *Values vs Emotions: How Artworks ‘Move Us’ to Change*

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ABSTRACT. While there is a widespread assumption that exposure to artworks such as literature, visual art, film or theater tends to broaden people's perspectives regarding certain issues, how artworks move us to reconsider our beliefs is under-theorised. This paper assesses three explanations. 1) The Cognitive Processing Theory claims that artworks change people's minds by presenting unfamiliar or complicated information in a palatable manner. 2) The Emotion Inducing Theory proposes that artworks arouse emotions that make people receptive to new ideas, thus inspiring them to reconsider prior beliefs. 3) The Engaged Values Theory asserts that people are likely to reconsider ideas they might otherwise reject so long as artworks engage their core values, even those that have yet to be specified. This problem resembles our wondering why we aesthetically appreciate some artworks, though not others. Is it: the reasons offered for appreciating an object, concurrent emotions, an object's particular aesthetic properties, or something about it that appeals to our values? Such situations also resemble “moral education,” such that artworks influence morality. However, my focus here is not how artworks prompt us to appreciate them or to do good, but rather how artworks get us to think differently, thus motivating us to modify our actions so that our future actions reflect our newfound beliefs. If we can grasp how artworks change our minds and alter our behaviours, perhaps we can begin to understand how philosophy stands to change our minds.

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## Of Practical Concern

Although an artwork's success as art hardly depends on its capacity to change people's minds, we must admit that many art-historically significant artworks have done just this. Universities and communities host galleries because exhibitions proffer forums that grant diverse audiences access to perspectives they may not encounter otherwise. I have in mind anti-war images such as the hundreds of paintings exhibited in "1917" (2012) at Centre Pompidou-Metz. While these artworks, all created in the waning years of WWI, cannot be credited with having ended WWI, they certainly convey war's atrocities, as well as the fatigue brought about by incessant distress. Moreover, museums are filled with artworks that have succeeded in getting visitors to reconsider what counts as fine art. Here I have in mind artworks ranging from Duchamp's readymades and Dada *objet trouvé* to Pop Art, Flux kits, conceptual art, feminist performance art, and land art. Since the 1990s, artworks have energised people to empathise with people suffering from HIV/AIDS, handicapped people, LGBTQ+ people, Indigenous people, as well as existential threats such as racism, sexism, power grabs, and economic inequity. No doubt, Guerrilla-Girls campaigns have persuaded gallerists and curators to include more women artists in their programming.

Moreover, art exhibitions organised to address climate change have flooded museums across the world. To name a few, there was "Climate Change" (2008) American Museum of Natural History, New York, US; "Rethink: Contemporary Art & Climate Change" (2009), National Gallery of Denmark plus two others, Copenhagen, DK; "Expo 1: New York" (2013) at MoMA/PS1, Long Island City, US; Søren Dahlgaard, "Maldives Exodus Caravan Show" (2013-present); "Hybridizing Earth: Discussing Multitude" (2016), Busan Biennale, Seoul, KR; "Sublime: The Tremors of the Earth" (2016), Centre Pompidou-Metz, Metz, FR; "Artists Need to Create on the Same Scale that Society Has the Capability to Destroy: Mare Nostrum" (2019), Chiesa di Santa Maria della Penitenti, Venice, IT; Ocean Space (2019-present), Venice, IT; "Weather Report: Forecasting the Future" (2019), Nordic Pavilion, Venice, IT; "Seeing Climate Change: Diane Burko, 2002-2021" (2021), American University Museum, Washington, D.C., US; "Reclaim the Earth" (2022), Palais de Tokyo, Paris, FR, "Still Present!" (2022), Berlin Biennale, Berlin, DE; "Our Ecology" (2023), Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, JP, among scores more.

In fact, TBA-21 Academy “successfully lobbied the European Commission to allocate 300 million euros of their climate budget proposal for the EU towards funding relevant cultural initiatives, successfully making the case that facts are unfortunately not enough to inspire both structural and behavioral changes and that culture has an important role in educating and motivating people, government and big business” (Reymann, 2021).

What do institutions that mount exhibitions of artworks to address climate change aim to achieve? Is it sufficient that members of the public experience the novel genre known as “eco-art” a merger of land art and eco-feminism? Is it simply that museums are finally exhibiting eco-art, having neglected this genre for decades due to its obviously “purposeful” aims? Are museums attempting to change people’s habits? If so, how do they envision this transpiring? Rather than strategise how exhibitions can be used to manipulate people’s actions, I aim to correctly assess how artworks motivate people to alter their perspectives. Aesthetics ought to be able to accurately depict how art moves people to shift their attitudes. I next explore three possible explanations for how this happens.

## **Cognitive Processing**

- 1) Artworks change people’s minds by presenting unfamiliar or complicated information in a palatable manner.

Originally, it was thought that people simply lacked accurate information. If only there were more science writers to explain climate change, evolution or vaccines, then people would naturally “fall in line,” and accept scientifically-proven truths. As it turns out, climate-change deniers are more likely to identify carbon dioxide’s role as the source of global warming than climate-change believers (Kahan, 2015). Similarly, people who don’t believe in evolution are typically capable of explaining how evolutionary processes work. Despite deniers capably explaining ideas, they still don’t accept them as true. Even when people have their facts straight, their beliefs don’t change unless they realize that the new situation aligns with their values. Similarly, beliefs about what

counts as beautiful or a degraded site's potential for remediation remain intact until people realize that their beliefs and their values are incoherent (Spaid, 2020b, p. 170).

Psychologists are especially interested in why people deny climate change, despite the evidence. One study has shown that white, conservative “confident” males are most likely to be climate skeptics (Pyper, 2011). A second study suggests a correlation between climate denial and the denial of racism (Kendi, 2019), while a third found that the “endorsement of free-market economics and a propensity for conspiratorial thinking are contributing factors to the rejection of science” (Lewandowsky, 2014). Incidentally, *Frontiers in Psychology*, which published Stephan Lewandowsky peer-reviewed 2013 paper that described the relationship between climate denial and conspiracy-theory acceptance, was forced to take down his paper due to libel threats from climate deniers (McKewon, 2014).

More recent research challenges a psychological mechanism known as “motivated reasoning,” such that “individuals bend facts to maintain a positive self-image especially when faced with the guilt of contributing to climate change through actions like frequent flying” (Study Finds Staff, 2024). Florian Zimmerman, the economist who led this study remarks, “Our data does reveal some indications of a variant of motivated reasoning, specifically that denying the existence of human-made global heating forms part of the *political identity* of certain groups of people” (Study Finds Staff, 2024, emphasis added). This outcome affirms the three earlier studies. If our political identities motivate our reasons, then our personal identities (the sum of our core values) drive our actions. Values are known to “shape factual beliefs across an array of phenomenon” (Pyper, 2011). Eager to point out that cognitive mechanisms are hardly unique to conservatives, Donald Braman adds, “If it's conservative white males on global warming, pick a different issue and you'll find another group [with different values] that has trouble thinking in a way that agrees with experts” (Pyper, 2011).

There is yet another aspect of cognitive processing that deserves scientific attention, since it could explain why visual art, though not scientific papers, is especially suited for engaging people whose political identities prevent them from accepting climate change. Researchers working on hate speech have coined the term “hate reading,” such that reading online comments prompts angry responses. It thus seems that written words are a terrible way to transmit controversial information.

I imagine climate deniers responding better to visual experiences free from information or emotional baggage. When German children were shown a short silent video of a snowman melting under the warm afternoon sun, they had the greatest galvanic response (skin sensations) and rated it the most pleasant, whereas they remembered the video accompanied by an emotionally-charged soundtrack. By contrast, the video featuring factual information had the greatest response in terms of heart-rate and breath, yet the children rated it least pleasant and barely remembered it (Massumi 2015, pp. 83-84). This suggests that people get more pleasure from images, while words pump them up; a point that might also explain adults' heated reactions to websites that invite them to read and/or contribute commentary (Spaid, 2024).

Perhaps the very act of assessing what others have written or said triggers negative responses. It's thus rather fortunate that ambiguous artworks serve as terrible editorials. According to Markus Reymann, director and co-founder of Ocean Space in Venice, IT, "Experiences—not facts or data—are more likely to challenge and change our behavior. Hard facts are important but what matters most, in terms of affecting change, is what moves us on a personal level" (Reymann). While I concur with him, I still wonder which aspect of the experience changes people's minds: nonlinguistic formats, induced emotions or engaged values.

## Emotion Inducing

- 2) Artworks arouse emotions that make people receptive to new ideas, thus inspiring them to reconsider prior beliefs.

Once people realised that information fails to alter people's perspectives, they started focusing on art's capacity to trigger emotions, thanks in part to Jesse Prinz's Affective Theory of Appreciation, which states "When we appreciate [art]works, the appreciation consists in an emotional response" (Prinz, 2011, p. 71). His two-stage model includes "response" and "assessment," both of which engender "pop-up thoughts." Not only is his view uncontested, but it seems to have spurred a cottage industry in aesthetics focused on art's emotional punch. One reason he focuses on emotions is that he considers measuring people's emotions (eye tracking, skin conductance, heart rate and

brain activity) easier than knowing what they believe. Prinz remarked how “Differences in taste are easier to pin on differences in *passions* rather than difference in beliefs – it’s far from clear what the related beliefs would be” (2011, p. 74, emphasis added). And indeed, the surfeit of neuroaesthetics labs has made pinpointing emotions remarkably easy.

I worry, however, that lab research tests tend to over-emphasise emotions, since they conflate subjective responses with aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, people’s positive emotional responses rather reflect familiarity, priming, and preferences, though not necessarily aesthetic appreciation, which takes years, not seconds. To demonstrate emotion’s limitations, I cite the results of Volker Kirchberg and Martin Tröndle’s research project *eMotion* (2015), funded by the Swiss government. Following this five-year-long research project, they identified three “exhibition types”: social, enthusing, and contemplative. Apparently, only enthusing spectators exhibit emotional responses. In fact, the contemplative types, those most likely to control and organise the artworld, fail to display any emotional responses to art, which definitely downplays the significance of emotion for appreciating art, though perhaps not remembering. But as the climate- and evolution-denier examples show, remembering is not enough.

According to Bruun et al. (2009), “It might be the case that although emotions do not themselves represent or present values, they are nevertheless associated with some sort of intentional relation to values.... Emotions should therefore be described as reactions to *felt* danger, injustice or other values or to what seems to be the felt danger of objects, the felt injustice of situations, etc..” This view sounds right, since emotions seem to *signal* values (Spaid, 2020a, p. 123). Just as our personal identities (sum of core values) drive our actions, our values motivate our emotional responses. For example, it seems that people who spontaneously flare up fail to value harmony.

## Engaged Values

- 3) People are likely to reconsider ideas they might otherwise reject so long as artworks engage their core values, even those that have yet to be specified.



During the fall of 2022, the National Academy of Sciences in Washington D.C. (in collaboration with Leonardo, the International Society for the Arts, Sciences, and Technology) hosted a zoom conference titled “Art, Empathy, and Climate Change,” whose goal was to figure out how artworks such as panelist Diane Burko’s “glacier paintings” convince people that climate change is real. Given this symposium’s title, the organisers’ working assumption was that art’s capacity to provoke empathy inspires people to take climate change seriously. In framing art as provoking empathy, the organisers presumed emotional responses cause people to change.

While the panelists on screen chatted confidently about the role of emotions, I was busy in the chat room, drumming up conversations regarding how artworks inspire people to identify their values, what Noë terms the “reorientation,” which “changes *what* we are” (2023, pp. 33-34, emphasis added). Moreover, artworks *surreptitiously* expose people to alternative values. Moreover, values drive emotions, though not the other way around, as those focused on emotions have claimed. For example, Burko’s paintings that depict shrinking glaciers over time invite people to think about climate change’s impact on the environment. I would imagine that people who don’t care a whit about nature or are climate-deniers are unlikely to give either Burko’s “glacier paintings” or her “melting iceberg” paintings the time of day. But let’s say climate skeptics incidentally find her painting technique curious or her imagery mysterious, so they stop for a few minutes to explore what’s going on. If their minds are “already made up,” they are likely to have a negative emotional response once they assess what’s happening. However, if this experience leads them to admit that glacier shrinking is occurring more rapidly than they initially thought, they may feel compelled to alter their beliefs to reflect their family values. Should they adopt an environmental value, they may find themselves opting to fly less or relying more on public transportation. As Noë puts it, “[T]he act of thinking, looking, and talking about what you see changes what you know and see. After this labor, now you can finally see” (p. 106). “The real work of aesthetics is precisely the adjustment of the values” (p. 109). Moreover, “We enact values in bringing the world into focus; we change our values as we struggle to do so” (p. 110).

More often than not, our actions *alert us* to our values. According to Quassim Cassam (2014), our beliefs remain opaque to us until we act on them. The *eMotion* survey suggests that appreciative attitudes track core or emergent values. For example, some people are driven to

construe otherwise ineffable artworks, while others believe that creativity itself must be protected at all costs. As Kevin Melchionne notes, thoughts can be disconnected from objects under reflection (Spaid, 2020a, pp. 129-130). In “Emotions and Empirical Aesthetics” (2020), I proposed that emotional responses signal values, but they are not *sine qua non*. For sure, appreciative attitudes prove key, yet it remains unclear what drives them. Is it beauty, priming, familiarity, emotions, reasons, or values? (Spaid, 2020a, p. 129). Not only did I conclude that “What people go to bat for is what they truly value, and thus appreciate” (Spaid 2020a: 130), but I recommended that researchers track the connection between aesthetic appreciation and values, which motivate emotions. I wrote, “Rather than look for a connection between appreciative attitudes and ‘strong positive emotions’, researchers should track the connection between aesthetic appreciation and values, which coheres with eMotion’s findings.” In that same paper, I suggested that people’s beliefs change either because their values have changed or their beliefs no longer cohere with their values. As a result, people act differently (Spaid, 2020a, p. 130).

My 2020 view was shaped by Kirchberg and Tröndle’s 2015 paper. They seemed to attribute visitors’ evaluations to core values, though not necessarily emotional responses; otherwise it wouldn’t make sense to create indices by averaging people’s assessments of ten extremely different artworks (presumably our values stay the same, though each artwork prompts different emotions). “For each visitor, we then calculated nine emotional and eight cognitive index variables by averaging the personal assessments of all artworks” (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015, p. 180). The researchers remarked, “Heart-rate variability was found to be generally associated with ‘aesthetic quality’ (the work is rated pleasing, beautiful; emotionally moving; well-done with respect to technique, composition, and content; artist and importance in art history) and ‘surprise/laughter’, but weakly associated with ‘curatorial quality’” (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015, p. 184). Moreover, skin conductance variabilities are described as indicators of emotional processes. Tröndle and Tschacher (2012) had found correlations with the factor “dominance” (the work is experienced as dominant; stimulating) (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015, p. 184). They conclude, “The physiological responses of visitors are significantly related to their aesthetic/emotional assessments” (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015, p. 184). As already noted, cognitive types, for whom learning matters most, fail to exhibit emotional responses.

## Concluding Remarks

Recent scientific research confirms my 2020 recommendation that researchers track the connection between aesthetic appreciation and values. “According to ‘appraisal theories of emotion,’ emotions arise when value concerns are at stake; according to ‘theories of value,’ a value that is threatened or supported gets infused with feelings” (Conte et al, 2023). Moreover, three recent experiments demonstrate “that values are indeed antecedents of emotions when emotional experiences arise in response to value-relevant stimuli” (Conte et al, 2023). And finally, “Individual differences in biospheric values predicted the intensity of emotional responses toward positive and negative information concerning nature and climate change, both when measured via psychophysiology and via self-report” (Conte et al, 2023). Only time will tell if climate-change exhibitions capably motivate changed actions. In the end, I find 1) sound advice, 2) a recipe for inaction, and 3) our best explanation.

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## *The Challenge of Hybrid Artworks to Art Categories*

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**ABSTRACT** Normally, it is easy to trace a work of art back to the art form within which it was created, but there are cases in which this is not so obvious. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the phenomenon happening to that kind of artworks which lies somehow in between two different forms of art. I call them cross-categorical works of art. Starting from two case studies, Jeff Wall's staged photographs and Gerhard Richter's hyperrealist paintings, I individuate two approaches to the phenomenon: (i) considering cross-categorical artworks as "monsters" or (ii) re-conceptualising them using a theory of metaphor. I suggest that this second option works better for understanding and appreciating this specific and unusual kind of works of art.

### **1. Introduction**

This paper analyses the phenomenon of artworks which appear somehow to be in between two different forms of art. The purpose is to find a proper way of considering this phenomenon that we might call the cross-categoriality of art, without forgetting the artist's intentions and the constitutive purposes of the works. I will use as case studies the *hyperrealist* paintings by Gerhard Richter and the *staged* photographs by Jeff Wall.

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In the first section, I frame the idea that appreciating artworks has to do with tracing them back to the artistic category they belong, but in the case studies I present this as not so easy to do. That is why, in the second section, I consider cross-categorical artworks as monsters. In the third section, I point out that another important condition for appreciating artworks is being able to individuate the constitutive purposes of the work. One way to individuate cross-categorical artworks' constitutive purposes is by considering them metaphorically. I explore this approach in the last section of the paper.

Let us start by mentioning Lopes's definition of art forms: "Art forms—such as music, literature and painting—are artistic categories that explain why works of that kind are produced by working (in certain ways) with certain artistic media, and not others" (Lopes, 2007, p. 247). If we wanted to give a definition *à la* Lopes of cross-categorical works of art, we could structure it as follows: cross-categorical artworks are produced by working (in certain ways) with certain artistic media, but with the purposes and the modes of others.

## 2. Appreciating Art through Standards

The first question I will raise here is: how can art forms be responsible for a proper appreciation of the artworks produced within their boundaries? I adopt Walton's (1970) assumption, according to which we tend to have a proper appreciation of an artwork when we recognise the hegemonic and specific artistic category to which it belongs. For example, if I am looking at a Vermeer, I can instantly trace it back to the category of painting. By doing this, I will appreciate the characteristics generally associated with the art form of painting: the rendering of colours, the study of light and shadow, the rendering of naturalistic shapes and spaces, the richness of the technique, and so on. In general, I will appreciate the overall appearance of its subject. Analogously, if I am looking at a Letizia Battaglia photograph, I will trace it back to the art form of photography and I will appraise its veridicality, its spontaneity and its status as a documentary work which bears witness to the heinous crimes of the Mafia during the Seventies and the Eighties in southern Italy. To be more precise, what we expect from these art forms are a series of characteristics that generally lead back to two different relations of the artwork with reality: intentional for painting, causal for

photography. However, we will arrive at an *impasse* when considering our case studies. It would seem that Richter's hyperrealist paintings and Wall's staged photographs cannot be easily traced back to an individual and proper art form as instead happens with Vermeer's paintings and Letizia Battaglia's photographs. Rather, they seem to have both painterly and photographic features, which tend to be incompatible and contradictory with each other – especially those features concerning their causal or intentional aspects.

### 3. Genesis of the Monster

The first way of addressing the issue of cross-categorical artworks is to draw on Carroll's (1990) conception of monsters, inspired by Douglas's (1966) theory of categorical impurity. According to this theory, the monster involves a clash between two incompatible categories: the living and dead in zombies or the human and bull of which the Minotaur consists.

We can apply this notion of monster to cross-categorical artworks. The clash of the 'living' and 'dead' categories embodied by zombies, for instance, is comparable to the clash between photography and painting in the case studies analysed.

#### *a) Jeff Wall*





The first artwork I will consider is Jeff Wall's photo 'Dead Troops Talk'. Wall repeatedly describes his project as "*painting* the modern life". Of course, this claim is provocative and ironic, but it could represent a good starting point for our purposes. Wall drew inspiration for the composition of his photographs from a wide range of traditional painters such as Delacroix and Géricault, to name just two of the sources. Specifically, 'Dead Troops Talk' recalls works such as 'The Raft of the Medusa' or 'Liberty Leading the People'. Wall can be considered an artist who represented contemporary life within a historical frame, by the means of photography, but with the intent and style of painting. His works were produced using a large format: the format which is traditionally identified with painting. 'Dead Troops Talk' represents one moment of the Soviet-Afghan War, which was fought between 1979 and 1989. The picture, however, is dated 1992. This is the first alarm bell calling us to the question of how we should properly consider this photograph. But let's move on by focusing on the picture's appearance. Looking at the picture, the observer might wonder whether it is a *proper photograph*: the composition looks very structured, the soldiers seem to have been positioned meticulously, there are lines conveying our attention on the execution of the soldier in the centre of the picture. At the same time, the observer cannot doubt that this *is* a photograph. This is one of the first cases of digital-imaging manipulation. Wall described his *modus operandi* as "blatant artifice": there is a meticulous study of the composition previous to the shot, a preliminary preparation, the collaboration with people who are being photographed and, as I mentioned, a digital manipulation of the image. The phenomenon of photographic manipulation is as old as photography - see, for example, the analogic photo-manipulations produced by Hannah Hoch in her photomontages from the early 1920s. But the real turning point of this phenomenon can be identified with the advent of the era of digital manipulation. The 1990s can be considered the cradle of digital photo-editing and image manipulation. Jeff Wall's 'Dead Troops Talk' dates back to these years in which photo editing started to weaken any claim images might have on reality.

All this considered, it is easy to see that 'Dead Troops Talk' cannot be considered as a photograph which possesses the canonical standards of photography. Wall's staged works can be compared to that of Pictorialist artists from the late 19th and the early 20th century. Pictorialism

was an artistic trend in photography in which the purpose of the artist was not documenting reality, but instead emphasising composition, color tonality and the subject's appearance - a mode similar to that of painting. All this considered, if we looked at Wall's photo as a documentary war picture, we would get fooled by it. Wall's staged photos seem to have something intrinsically different from photographs like Letizia Battaglia's reportages on the Mafia, which we appreciate for their truthful narration of facts. Wall's images can be placed in a blended category of painting and photography. In his works we can find some standard features both of photography and of painting.

***b) Gerhard Richter***



Let us see how something similar to the deception triggered by Wall's photos can happen in relation to another art form. The second case study is Gerhard Richter's painting 'Administrative Building'. Richter defines the painting technique for his hyperrealist works as "photo-painting". This

statement is not confined to considering Richter's works merely as painted reproductions of photographs or as paintings based on a photographic subject. Instead, the artist's aim is to put painting at the service of photography, to the point of *making photographs* with painting. This is intended to abandon the subjectivism typically linked to painting for an objective and automatic procedure of reproduction, leading the artist to create images as true-to-life as far as is possible. Observing this image, what immediately stands out is its *quasi-photographic* nature. The artist, using a monochromatic range of colours, creates a hyperrealistic sense of depth. The painting style aims to reproduce a blurred, black and white photograph. The depiction of the scene is so accurate that the viewer may ask herself what type of image it is, whether it is a painting or a photograph, that is, whether it is the free creation of its author or rather a trace causally dependent on some state of affairs. The work is simultaneously challenging traditional figurative art forms (and their standards), and our perception of the image, which we actually perceive as if it was a photographic image. It seems that the status of painting and that of photography improperly overlap here. In both Richter's and Wall's case, we are puzzled by the lack of a proper category to ascribe the artwork to.

If we adopt Carroll's thesis we might think of these works as belonging to a *monstrous* category: the Painting-Photography category, in which the fusion of art forms is analogous to the blend of man and bull in the Minotaur. Both Wall's and Richter's artworks might be subsumed under this category. This hypothesis, however, raises two problems (i) we are required to create a new category – and this is not parsimonious, and (ii) we cannot make a categorical distinction between two very different artworks, the one by Richter and the one by Wall, which would fall in the same puzzling category. Moreover, it also seems that, using this blended category, we miss a proper appreciation of each specific artwork, in terms of constitutive purposes (and, once again, they seem to have very different ones).

#### **4. Appreciating Art through Constitutive Purposes**

In a more recent article, Carroll (2022) sets out an important conditions for the appreciation of an artwork. His purpose is to replace the idea that every work of art has a meaning with that of having

a *constitutive* purpose or a set of constitutive purposes. The purpose or the set of purposes of every artwork is “essential to being the particular artwork it is” (Carroll, 2022, p. 8). Identifying the constitutive purpose or purposes of an artwork, Carroll says, enables the observer to understand the artwork. We have seen how the constitutive purpose of Letizia Battaglia’s photographs is to document the Mafia crimes and murders, as well as the constitutive purpose of Vermeer’s paintings is somehow connected to painterly virtuosity and to the subject’s appearance. Following Carroll, we will appreciate Battaglia’s photos for their veridicality and truthfulness and Vermeer’s paintings for their appearance. But what about Wall’s photos and Richter’s paintings? We will see how, by adopting a metaphorical reading of their works, we would be led to the understanding of their constitutive purposes and consequently, we could have a proper appreciation of this special kind of artworks I have called crossed-categorical.

## 5. Applying Metaphor to Cross-Categorical Artworks

Let us move to a better way of dealing with the issue. According to Black’s metaphor theory (1979), we have the opportunity to re-conceptualise one thing (*topic*) through the properties of the other (*vehicle*): for example in the expression “John is a shark” the communicative goal is not to entirely associate the characteristics of the animal with John, but to select only those of the *vehicle* (shark) useful for a re-conceptualisation of the *topic* (John), which can explain the reason for this unusual combination. Specifically, the relevant qualities which are usually selected are linked to the animal’s ruthlessness.

In order to prevent Wall’s and Richter’s masterpieces from being *monstrous* works of art, I propose applying a metaphor-based theory to the case of cross-categorical art. First, let us consider Richter’s painting. By adopting a metaphorical reading of the image and thus by selecting a cluster of characteristics traditionally associated with the photographic process (automatic and mechanical processes of reproduction, causal and counterfactual relation with the subject, truthfulness of portrayal, objectivity, lack of free interpretation, and of invention of elements during the process of reproduction) and by applying them to the painting, it can be said that Richter *metaphorically* creates a photograph by painterly means. If we apply the metaphor’s process to painting, this allows

us to read the pictorial image through the properties of photography – and therefore to overcome the anomaly generated by the overlapping of the two art categories. In this way the observer can appreciate the image's causal and counterfactual (rather than intentional) relation with reality, as would normally happen if she observed a photograph (cf. Atencia-Linares and Artiga, 2022). This also seems to fit well with the constitutive purposes of the work, which I would metaphorically identify as photograph, appreciating it for its truthfulness.

Analogously, by reading Wall's picture in a metaphorical key, we select and transfer some of the typical properties we expect from painting (study of the composition, preliminary preparation, peculiar style of the composition, free creation of elements, strongly subjective interpretation) to an image made by photographic means. The application of the metaphor's procedure to this type of photograph lessens the observer's interest in the image's accuracy or factuality and instead leads them to appreciate the artist's creativity and interpretation, just as when we look at a painting, the fact that the subject depicted does not necessarily coincide with reality does not prevent us from appreciating it, but allows us to appreciate it as the result of the artist's creativity and interpretation. Again, applying a metaphorical reading of this kind of photograph seems to let us go in the direction of the work's constitutive purposes and so to better understand it, in the light of the artist's creativity and interpretation.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are two ways in which we can address the cross-categoriality of artworks: (a) by creating a new monstrous category, as, for instance, the Painting-Photography category, where we can place all that artworks that seem impure in respect of their given category; and (b) by applying a theory of metaphor. I have argued that this second option is more epistemically valuable because of its parsimony, closer to practice, useful for a proper appreciation of the artworks in terms of artist's intentions and constitutive purposes and has the advantage of not leading to the creation of new monsters which, as we know, everyone is scared of.

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***Creativity in the Age of AI:  
A Post-Phenomenological Comparison between AI-Generated Content  
and Exquisite Worker' AI Surrealism***

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ABSTRACT. AI technologies such as neural networks and deep learning have revolutionized the arts, generating debate around creativity, originality, and the nature of authorship. The Exquisite Workers' 'AI Surrealism' exhibition exemplifies AI's potential to democratize art and expand digital aesthetics. This paper explores AI's impact on art's cultural role, starting from a theoretical and anthropological framework influenced by Benjamin, Noë, and Russo's ontology of machines, challenging traditional concepts of authenticity and authorship.

## **1. Introduction**

Since the turn of the millennium, groundbreaking technologies like neural networks, deep learning, and artificial intelligence (AI) have progressively permeated the realm of the arts. This era has witnessed the advent of systems designed for assessing, critiquing, and valuing artistic creations against aesthetic norms or popular preferences. Furthermore, AI's capability for image generation

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has been harnessed to produce innovative, synthetic art forms, leveraging its seemingly boundless image-generating potential. These machine learning technologies, when intensively trained on vast datasets, possess an extraordinary capacity for generating artistic content.

Instances where AI generates works evocative of Dalí, produces manga-style images, composes music reminiscent of the style of famous rock bands, or completes a Beethoven symphony, sparks debate. Critics claim, with good reason, that such creations lack originality or authenticity, branding them as intricate simulacra of human cultural achievements. This discourse revives the age-old inquiry into the nature of creativity: what permutations of ideas, unique analogies, and conceptual interconnections constitute authentic and original human creativity? Is it conceivable for AI to be genuinely creative and autonomous? What is the relationship between art and technology? Furthermore, how soon until AI's creative works render the artist's role obsolete?

The burgeoning of AI-generated art has brought the notion of authorship into question: Who is the rightful owner of an AI-created artifact? While some view an AI system as merely a tool in the hands of artists and programmers, the prospect of AI embodying a surrogate of independent artistic creativity, indicative of a certain agency, cannot be overlooked. Additionally, “deepfake” technologies, which allow for the alteration or creation of events, pose new challenges to the political landscape by disseminating misinformation.

Yet, AI also offers formidable artistic applications. A digital-native collective, Exquisite Workers,<sup>2</sup> launched an exhibition titled “AI Surrealism” from June 3-24, 2023, in New York, featuring a varied array of genres including: AI Photography, AI animation, and AI-infused jewelry and fashion design. The exhibition is also available online.<sup>3</sup> Since 2020, Exquisite Workers has pioneered the fusion of Surrealism with emergent technologies. The collective posits that AI and blockchain technologies can transcend the limitations of human experience, unleashing unprecedented forms of creativity. In this vein, digital technologies evolve from mere imitative instruments that replace human creators to potent facilitators of novel and immersive visual experiences. Surrealism, with its tradition of innovation and adaptability during significant societal

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<sup>2</sup> <https://exquisiteworkers.com/>

<sup>3</sup> The works can be viewed on X: [https://x.com/ew\\_corpse](https://x.com/ew_corpse)



shifts, serves as an exemplary foundation for exploring the confluence of AI and blockchain technology.

The “AI Surrealism” exhibition extended beyond physical confines, accessible online, thus revolutionizing traditional notions of presence. The works of art have also been sold online for a few cents or cryptocurrency, democratizing the art market. If in the previous century thinkers like Günther Anders (1944), Martin Heidegger (1980, pp. 1-70), and Walter Benjamin (2008) identified, from different and somehow irreconcilable perspectives, a crisis of presence within the museum and the reproductive dimensions of art, this paper will examine whether such frameworks remain applicable to art born digital and, in some instances, detached from its material base. The categories outlined by Benjamin and Anders pertaining to the “neutralization” of art seem to apply within online and Metaverse environments, where the work of art is digital since the beginning of its creation.

Benjamin noted that with the advent of technologies, enabling the mass reproduction of artworks, the “aura”—the unique space-time, cultural and historical context of an artwork—fades. He posited that mechanical reproduction, as opposed to manual reproduction like painting, modifies the essence of art.

This is not necessarily a negative trait; for example, since the Renaissance paintings, works of arts, and artists have circulated extensively through Europe, giving birth to new styles and artistic currents. The speed of information transmission, in this case, of artworks, resulting from the media through which such information is conveyed, is always a factor in accelerating and diffusion of processes. This shift led to various outcomes, including the democratization of art and its distribution. The recent mechanical reproduction of art dismantles elitist barriers, making art more widely accessible. However, it also introduces a change in perception; the audience engages differently with reproduced art compared to the original, prompting a reevaluation of how art is conceived and interacted with in the digital age. Furthermore, the loss of aura in art, as per Benjamin, could erode its traditional ritualistic and cultic significance, potentially fostering more politically charged and critical art forms. The pervasive and instantaneous spread of digital art, facilitated by the internet, has also transformed the political dimension of art, and its spatial and

temporal determinations. Lastly, the function of art transitions from being unique and ritualistic to a mass-culturally reproduced entity, affecting how art is produced, disseminated, and perceived.

Informed by post-phenomenology, which recognizes that technologies—especially media—exert a reciprocal feedback effect on their users (Idhe and Malafouris, 2019), this paper will explore the dichotomy between disruptive and proper uses of AI in visual arts based on the relationship between humans, technology, and art. First, it will consider the so-called entanglement (Noë, 2023) between art and technology from an anthropological and phenomenological perspective. Then, it will examine AI systems through a theory of machines (Russo, 2021). Next, it will analyze the case study of Exquisite Workers' aesthetics within the ontological and methodological framework established in the previous sections. Finally, within the post-phenomenological theoretical context, the discussion will turn to how AI might reshape our engagement with art, the role and status of the creator, and the modalities of artistic fruition and function.

## 2. The anthropological entanglement

Since the very beginning of our natural history, art has been a fundamental aspect of our being in the world. The extraordinary monuments of Paleolithic art are an immensely important discovery and a significant challenge to every theory of humanity, testing their validity.

Art and technology are two universal features of humankind, detectable at least in *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis* (Hoffmann et al., 2018). The ancient Greeks used the same word to define both phenomena: the term *techne*. Aristotle (Phys. II, 194 a21-22; 198 a15-20) argued that *physis* (nature) and *techne* (art/skill) were bound by analogy. According to the Greek philosopher, *techne* is *mimesis* (imitation) of *physis*, and both operate through final cause or purpose. *Technei onta* (artificial beings) are in Greek *Weltanschauung* artifacts, both technological beings and works of art. What distinguishes the artifacts from the natural being is the *causa efficiens* (efficient cause) and the *causa finalis*. In the artifacts the *causa efficiens* (*archè*) and the *causa finalis* (*telos*) are always external to the being itself; they reside in the *architecton* (the maker) that invent and realize the being, shaping matter according to a form or a project.

In his *De Argumentis Scientiarum*, a latinized expanded version of *Advancement of Learning*, Francis Bacon, following Aristotle, stated that artificial things do not differ from natural ones in their essence or form but rather according to their *causa efficiens* (Bacon, 2013). In a technological artifact, the *causa efficiens* is human, and likewise, human purposes are their final cause. Therefore, the finality in a technological artifact always has a social or individual origin. On the other hand, it is philosophically debatable if the finality in art is explicit or implicit, present or, according to Kant and romantic speculation, not immediately given. It is a common aesthetic cliché that Art is per sé or quoting Wilde “for its own sake”. In this context, we cannot further explore this highly complex issue; it would exceed the purpose and scope of the present essay. However, what immediately stands out is that the indifference of the Greek term *techne* is not fully adequate to describe the phenomena of art and technology; their mutual origin resides in our poietic faculty, but they pursue different purposes.

Writing, speech, and pictoriality are specific expressive and poietic “technologies” that, according to Alva Noë, we can define as habits (Noë, 2023). Habits are part of our cultural behavior, the natural way of our being in the world. Human is the only animal cultural by nature; therefore the dichotomy between nature and culture, from this ontological perspective, is only apparent (Descola, 2014). We are beings that are naturally technological and symbolical; therefore, in human nature and culture, art and technology are always entangled. According to this theoretical framework, if we consider technology as a product of both nature and culture, then the being-in-the-world of human being is bio-cultural. We are cultural, and therefore artistic and technological by nature. Art and technology are both part of our material culture, but they do not have the same role. Whereas technology has to do with the way we organize our both social and natural world, transforming the nature and ourselves, establishing new habits and even institutions, art is the disturbance of a habit as a reflective activity (Noë, 2023). Art has a reconfigurative and revolutionary power that exceeds habits. Rather than with the “unconcealment” (*aletheia*) revealing of the origin or of the root, as Heidegger stated in his masterpiece *Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (Heidegger, 1980), art has to do with changing and becoming; it has a dialectical nature whose essence is wandering. Walter Benjamin underlined this feature of artistic production, criticizing Heidegger: the artist is similar to the Flaneur, to the wanderer of the modern cities. Art has in the errancy its inspiration, and the

losing of the aura of the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproduction, with the consequent fluidification of its space and time, testify the very revolutionary nature of the artistic artifact. This is true especially in the digital era of information, where images are detached even from their material consistency. Technology and art then interact together like Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian; the first is will of form, the second is a force breaking down the boundaries, expressing the untamed aspects of existence.

They need each other: art needs technologies and techniques as expressive means, technology needs art to rework the raw materials of our organization and to open new horizons.

### **3. AI as a Machine**

The use of algorithms and computing technologies in art is neither radically "new" nor exclusively enabled by AI and machine learning. An early example is generative art, which originated in the 1950s as a process of algorithmically generating new ideas, forms, shapes, colors, or patterns. Generative art is an artistic process mediated by a non-human autonomous system, where the artist sets boundaries for the creative process that a computer follows to produce new works on their behalf. This approach was pioneered by Ben Laposky in his work with oscilloscopes and later by Manfred Mohr.

Generative art embodies the concept of "art that generates art," where the work is produced by an autonomous system capable of determining its characteristics (shapes, sounds, colors, etc.), which would otherwise require direct artistic decisions. In some cases, the human artist may view the final work as a representation of their artistic vision, while in others, the autonomous system assumes the role of creator entirely. Generative artworks can be produced through mechanical, robotic, computational, chemical, or randomization systems, among others.

Generative art can be regarded as a precursor to AI-generated art platforms such as Midjourney and OpenAI's image generation tools. Yet, as Soddu (2019) observes in the context of new AI-generated art: "The software of creative experimentation based on the subjective identity of the artist has given way, in most cases, to commercial software that has progressively

overshadowed the possibilities explored by early experimenters, making them, at least apparently, objective and detaching them from the creative identity of their original designers.”

This development may lead to what Roland Barthes described as the “death of the author”, as we later clarify. The use of a non-human autonomous system introduces a new kind of intentionality and agency in the artistic process, reconfiguring it. Contemporary AI systems seem to introduce a mixed intentionality (Di Martino, 2024), leading to unpremeditated outcomes in the artistic process. In this context, the intentionality and creativity of the artist are either enhanced or replaced by the intentionality of the machine and the engineer who designed it.

At first glance, this hybridization of human and machine creativity, in line with art’s reconfigurative function, leads to new forms of expression. However, this perspective also poses risks, as these new systems are capable of generating art independently of human intervention. It is therefore necessary to understand what it means to create or produce something.

Margaret Boden, in her essay *Creativity in a Nutshell* (2004), identifies three types of creativity:

1. **Combinational Creativity:** This involves novel combinations of existing ideas or concepts, akin to creating new recipes by blending familiar ingredients in unique ways. This combinatorial activity reflects relationships among ideas, as described by philosophers such as Descartes, Hume, and Kant. Here, imagination combines experiential materials to create new artifacts, ideas, and relationships.
2. **Exploratory Creativity:** This type explores the structured space of possible ideas within a particular conceptual framework or style, pushing existing boundaries to uncover new possibilities.
3. **Transformational Creativity:** The most radical form, in which the conceptual space itself is transformed. This involves altering the rules or foundational principles of a domain, leading to genuinely novel and original concepts. Examples include Einstein’s theory of relativity, Caravaggio’s exploration of light and shadow, and Duchamp’s conceptual art.

While AI can imitate and reproduce the first two types of creativity, transformational creativity remains an exclusively human prerogative. AI, by itself, cannot create entirely new domains, concepts, or forms of art that are fundamentally novel, either aesthetically or conceptually. This limitation stems from the nature of machine learning, which relies on human-generated knowledge or data, as well as the ontological nature of machines.

Therefore, a phenomenology of art and creativity alone cannot fully illuminate the phenomenon of AI-generated art. AI is ultimately a machine—a technological artifact. While it may appear to have a higher degree of autonomy than other technologies and may seem to mimic human agency and artistic behavior, its intelligence is, at best, only analogous to human intelligence and operates in a fundamentally different way (Cristianini, 2023). As a machine it cannot be fully autonomous, since it needs, as said, an external *telos*.

To understand the extent to which an AI system might be considered autonomous, it is essential to develop a theory of machines that provides a genealogical and methodological framework for analysis. According to Russo (2022), a machine is a particular kind of technological artifact, whose nature can be deduced from the etymology of the term. A machine is primarily an instrument—a medium between humans and nature. This mediating role aligns with the concept of *homo faber*: if the machine is the proper instrument of humanity, then humans are beings that build, project, and design instruments to mediate their relationship with nature, their habitat, and even themselves. This implies that the purposefulness of the machine is inherent in its design, making it an artifact created with one or more specific goals.

However, as a human-specific instrument, a machine is not merely a form of mediation also used by animals, particularly our closest relatives (Boesch, 2014). The Greek term *mechane*, derived from *mechos*, indicates both a medium and an expedient, trick, or remedy, and has its root in the Indo-European  $\sqrt{magh}$ , akin to the German terms *mögen* and *Macht*, indicating will and power. *Mechane*, and hence the machine, refers to a tool or trick that enables control or power. *Homo faber* is therefore also *homo habilis*—a creature with “many skills” or “tricks” (Russo, 2008). A machine is different from a mere mechanism; it has a specific function tied to achieving a goal or completing a task. Machines are artifacts that indirectly operate on nature.

These distinctions are not merely theoretical but are necessary to illuminate the general character of AI as a machine, especially when used in artistic creation.

It is therefore necessary to differentiate among instruments, tools, and machines:

- **Instrument:** This is the basic level of mediation, a first-order technology that directly mediates the animal-instrument-nature relationship. Instruments are used by animals as well (e.g., by monkeys, octopuses, crows) as natural entities used to enhance a specific organic function.
- **Tool:** A tool is a raw or nearly raw natural entity used to perform a specific task, directly aimed at achieving a goal (e.g., a hammer or brush). This is typically human and involves explicit purpose and rules for execution. Tools signal the emergence of technical skills unique to humans.
- **Machine:** A machine is a means to an end, but it follows an indirect path; it is not just an artifact but an artful procedure. It is an artifice to achieve desired outcomes from nature indirectly, somehow "tricking" nature. Compared to tools and instruments, machines possess a certain degree of autonomy. Therefore, every machine implicitly carries human power to organize and manipulate nature. However, a machine is not identical to a mechanism; it is more than the sum of its parts.

Following Russo's ontology of machines (2021), we can distinguish two types of machines: **apotelestatic** and **sympleromatic**.

- **Apotelestatic:** Derived from *apo* (starting from) and *telos* (end). This term describes machines that perform a defined, final function, no longer requiring the artist's intervention once completed. Apotelestatic machines typically operate on nature as executive instruments, fulfilling a pre-defined human goal, like a wind turbine or pneumatic drill.
- **Sympleromatic:** A sympleromatic machine is a technological artifact directed inward, impacting the user and enhancing their inner self through mediation. Examples include

writing, musical notation, musical instruments, and AI. Sympleromatic machines have a reflexive function, creating a feedback loop that alters or fulfills the user.

In summary, apotelestatic machines operate on nature, while sympleromatic ones operate on humans. Both types have an organizing function. According to some scholars, the oldest known sympleromatic machine is a Neanderthal-era flute found at Divje Babe in Slovenia, dating to around 43,000 years ago (D’Errico et al., 2015). Sympleromatic machines enable a feedback effect, modifying the user in an indirect way. While apotelestatic machines externalize a function and provide a degree of autonomy from that function, sympleromatic machines act dialectically, impacting the user in a transformative process.

According to this theoretical framework, AI can be seen as the paradigmatic sympleromatic machine, externalizing and objectifying many human functions (Kapp, 2015), such as calculation, reasoning, and artistic creation. It possesses a specific intentionality that impacts both the user and the consumer. However, as a machine, it always depends on its creators (engineers) as its *causa efficiens*; its *causa finalis* is still ultimately shaped by its creators, users, and society. For this reason, we can only metaphorically speak of agency, reasoning, or intentionality in machines, recognizing that these functions fundamentally differ in humans and artificial systems.

AI thus embodies what Mumford describes as “paradigmatic machines”—instruments that define an era. According to Noë, AI incorporates both organizational and reconfigurative functions, reflecting its role as a technology with organizational power and as an autonomous system capable of generating or facilitating art creation.

#### **4. Case Study: Exquisite Workers and *AI Surrealism***

As introduced earlier, the philosophy of Exquisite Workers and their exhibition, *AI Surrealism*, provides a concrete context through which we can examine and test theoretical assumptions regarding AI and art. In a 2023 interview for *Medium*, DEHISSENCE — a Toronto-based artist and prominent member of the Exquisite Workers collective — provides insights into his use of AI to create art:



I have no formal art training; my background is in forensic anthropology and, more recently, in healthcare. I describe my art as visual anthropological explorations of the human experience—a somewhat cumbersome term, but one that reflects my art’s grounding in interactions with the human body, shaped by both of my previous careers. [...] Regarding the integration of artificial intelligence in my artistic process, I experimented with Art Breeder in 2018/2019 but found it unsuited to my creative goals. I liked the concept of being able to ‘modify genes’ but ultimately felt limited by the lack of control over the output. This experience shifted my focus away from collage and digital painting toward AI as an artistic tool. As I studied gene editing technology for a residency, alongside my broader interest in medical technology, I became increasingly motivated to use technology to modify the human body artistically, edit my works, and develop models tailored to my needs. [...] My workflow is relatively standard. I start with a rough sketch or collage and then input it into Stable Diffusion, which I may run once or multiple times depending on the outputs and the adjustments required. I might manually edit the image between Stable Diffusion iterations, but this varies. Once I obtain images suitable for further refinement, I complete them in Photoshop or Procreate, using basic adjustments like color correction or more complex techniques like overpainting. For animations, I use Deforum Diffusion; recently, I have also begun experimenting with Runway Gen 2’s text-to-video capabilities. Since the release of Midjourney V5, I have used Midjourney’s blending option to merge older works into new base images for use with Stable Diffusion.

This interview reveals several noteworthy themes. First, AI provides a means for individuals without a formal artistic background to engage in artistic production. Historically, becoming an artist required acquiring the necessary technical skills to convey one’s creative ideas. With AI, however, individuals possessing artistic vision, but coming from disparate fields, can now produce credible art. In this sense, AI functions as an authentic *mechane* — a trick or “side street” toward a defined goal. Here, AI serves as an expression enhancer, a democratizing force that broadens access to artistic expression. According to Noë, AI art is revolutionary in that it reconfigures standardized cultural frameworks, which typically constrain artistic production—and, by extension, the artist figure—within fixed canons or stereotypes.

A second significant insight is that even without specific training in art, learning to use AI software can serve as a powerful outlet for creativity. AI operates with a purpose or telos established by the artist and, secondarily, in accordance with the program’s underlying architecture and ontology, as projected by its engineer. Despite the technological mediation, the artist retains control

over the creative process and the final output, functioning as both the *causa efficiens* (or at least one of them) and the *causa finalis*. Simultaneously, however, AI — functioning as a symptomatic technology with a degree of autonomy — exerts a retroactive influence on the artist, who must refine and adapt their approach to achieve desired outcomes.

Moreover, DEHISSENCE's work exemplifies the standardization of artistic procedures, indicating that once an approach is established, it often becomes habit, acquiring structure and form. In this regard, Generative art is no exception. Within DEHISSENCE's practice, artist and machine intentionality converge and interact in the creation of the artwork, aligning with Di Martino's concept of "mixed intentionality." The artist initiates the process with an original creation (e.g., a collage), which is subsequently modified by AI tools such as Stable Diffusion or Midjourney. In this dynamic, AI acts beyond the passivity of a mere tool like a paintbrush, instead engaging "actively" in the co-creation of the final artifact. The artist then intervenes with additional software, such as Photoshop, to finalize and refine the artwork.

## 5. Conclusions

This process serves as an exemplary case of a symbiotic collaboration between artist and generative AI to produce original art. Conversely, the widespread use of AI and autonomous software raises concerns about the future role of the artist. Soddu's apprehension regarding the decline of authorial subjectivity appears both apt and prescient. Proprietary software has progressively subsumed many of the creative possibilities originally explored by the pioneers of Generative art, rendering artistic production seemingly objective and distancing the artist from the programmer's creative identity. As Soddu (2019) observed, this development echoes Barthes' notion of the "Death of the Author" and signals the fragmentation of the artist's role into a network of social and artificial agents (e.g., software, programmers, engineers). The artist is no longer the creator of experimental software or codex uniquely tailored to their artistic needs; instead, they encounter these tools pre-packaged and commercially available.

Furthermore, the democratization of the artistic process introduces the paradoxical risk that if everyone can be an artist, then no one truly is. This is the central tension introduced by generative

AI in art. This shift suggests two possible trajectories: one aimed at establishing objective categories to optimize processes and classify creations, and the other emphasizing the distinctiveness and uniqueness of each artist, given the procedural complexity of design and the authorial signature it confers.

The Exquisite Workers collective appears to align with the latter trajectory. In their *AI Surrealism* exhibition, they seem to prioritize the poetic and philosophical underpinnings of art over the optimization and mass production of images. Each artist's individuality emerges from a foundation of shared values, lending authenticity to the collective's work. AI thus operates as a *mechane*, propelling creativity into new domains, and therefore as symptomatic technology — a powerful instrument reshaping the role and identity of the artist and of the socio-cultural ambient. In this context, as Benjamin noted, the artist's individuality surfaces as an ongoing project, a learning process that must account for other singularities: the technological singularity of the machine and the embedded social singularity within the scientific knowledge that underpins AI's development. Consequently, art reemerges as a protean, anthropogenic force, actively shaping our world, our imagination, and, ultimately, our conception of ourselves.

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## *Factive Pictorial Experience and Indexical Drawing*

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ABSTRACT. This paper presents a counterexample to Robert Hopkins's argument that handmade pictures cannot sustain factive pictorial experience. I argue that some drawings are indexical and that such drawings have the same capacity as photography to sustain pictorial experiences that are factive. This example also counts against other efforts that use the joint iconicity and indexicality of photography to distinguish photographs from handmade images.

### **1. Factive Seeing-in**

Robert Hopkins argues that traditional photography that uses photosensitive film and “the accompanying techniques for developing, printing or projecting images” does not only “offer us a way of finding out about the world that is more secure than that offered by handmade pictures” (2012, p. 709). It is also the case that “this epistemological difference is accompanied by a difference in phenomenology: we experience photographs differently from other pictures” (ibid.). When traditional photography works as it should, it sustains a special kind of seeing-in that is factive. By this Hopkins does not mean that we see the facts that a photograph records. Rather, he

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means that we see that the facts obtained when the photograph recorded them. When photography works as it should, it is the case that:

If S sees in P that p, then p (ibid., p. 713).

For a pictorial experience to be factive in this sense, it must do more than capture the facts, Hopkins argues. The experience must capture the facts as a matter of necessity so that “its accuracy is guaranteed” (ibid., p. 711). Few images seem to guarantee such accuracy. According to Hopkins, however, traditional photography is guaranteed to be accurate, since the causal process it employs is information-preserving. Photographs produced using photosensitive film and the accompanying techniques for developing, printing or projecting images are the result of a multi-stage process that functions to register, fixate, and display information about the world. When this process works as it should, later stages of the process contain the same information as earlier stages and no new information is introduced after the first stage (ibid., p. 714).

It is not an incidental feature that traditional photography is information preserving, Hopkins argues. Traditional photography preserves information because it is “designed to produce factive seeing-in” (ibid., p. 716). Given this general aim, every element of the causal chain is governed by norms of proper functioning that define “what it is for that element to function properly” (ibid., p. 717). For example, the shutter speed works properly when it is adjusted relative to the light and aperture “so as to let in the right amount of light to form a differentiated pattern on the film” (ibid., p. 716). The focus works properly when it is tuned so that the “light rays coming from a single point on the photographed object converge at a single point on the film” (ibid., p. 717).

Similarly, the film is developed properly when it is exposed to developing chemicals “for long enough to best preserve the differentiated pattern formed on the exposed film” (ibid.). Taken together, these and other norms make up an information-preserving system designed to produce factive seeing-in. It is from this overarching aim that each norm inherits its point. Importantly, however, the norms are not trivial, since it is possible to formulate each norm independently without referring to the general aim of getting things right (ibid.).

Hopkins denies that handmade pictures offer the same epistemic benefits as traditional photography. The reason is not that handmade pictures cannot capture facts accurately. Many realistic paintings, drawings, and prints are proof of the contrary. The issue, according to Hopkins, is that there is no guarantee that a handmade picture will capture the facts accurately. Because handmade pictures reflect how the picture-maker takes things to be, handmade pictures are “always vulnerable to error whether or not they succumb to it” (ibid., p. 715).

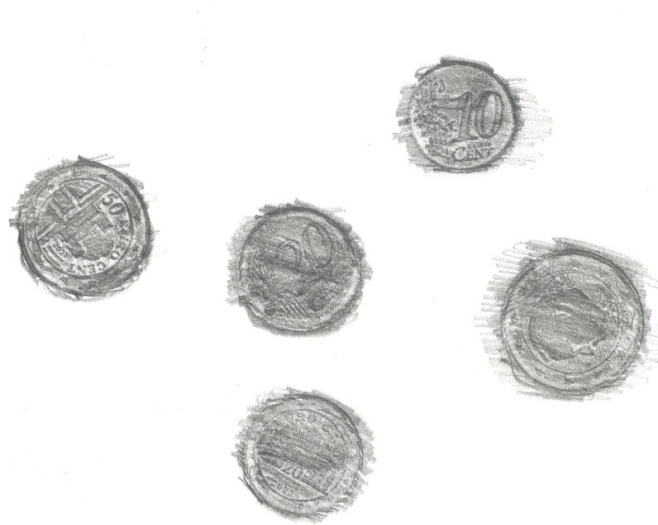
The vulnerability to error that the artist’s take on the world introduces is incompatible with factivity as it is characterized by Hopkins. Furthermore, Hopkins argues that it is not possible to shore up this vulnerability by articulating norms of proper functioning for handmade pictures. Such norms would still have to be followed by the maker of the picture. The vulnerability to error would remain, since “information from the object portrayed can only reach the viewer via the artist’s take on the world.” (ibid., p. 720). Secondly, any norms enjoining the artist to “draw things as he sees them to be” are trivial, since they invoke the very facts the accurate capture of which the norms are supposed to guarantee (ibid., p. 721). According to Hopkins, it follows that our experience of handmade pictures cannot be factive and that it therefore is “not itself epistemologically valuable as experience of photographs is” (ibid.).

## 2. Indexical Drawing

The success of Hopkins’s argument depends on what kinds of handmade pictures are compared with photography. His claim that only traditional photography sustains factive seeing-in is plausible when photography is compared with common handmade pictures such as figure drawings and still-life paintings. There are, however, convincing counterexamples which undermine Hopkins’s claim that no handmade pictures sustain factive seeing-in. Such examples can be found because the indexical quality that grounds the epistemic power of photography is not a feature that is unique to photographs. There are also handmade pictures that are indexical.

One example of a handmade picture that is also indexical is a drawing made using the technique of frottage where a textured surface is depicted by rubbing a paper placed over the

surface with a soft pencil or other drawing material.<sup>5</sup> Frottage drawings have both of the main qualities that Hopkins claims for traditional photography. They offer us a secure way of finding out about the world, and this epistemological difference is arguably accompanied by a difference in how we experience them (cf. Hopkins, 2012, p. 709). Yet, frottage drawings are not photographic images made with the help of light-sensitive materials. They are handmade imprints made by marking paper while it is in physical contact with a textured surface.



The above figure represents a drawing that supplied a secure way of finding out about the world. To limit my knowledge about what I was drawing, I asked a collaborator to place some coins under a sheet of paper while I looked away. Before making the drawing, I was therefore ignorant about how many coins there were, what currency they were, which side faced up, how the coins were rotated, and how they were placed relative to one another. Making the drawing produced knowledge about these and many other features. The drawing revealed that there were five coins, that four were tails up, that they were Euros, and so on. When the drawing was complete, I was able to verify these findings by lifting the paper and looking at the coins themselves.

The coin example shows that frottage has the same epistemic merits that Hopkins claims for photography. The pictorial experience that it sustains has special epistemic value not only

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<sup>5</sup> See Iversen (2020) for an art historical discussion and background.



because it is accurate. It is accurate as a matter of necessity. So long as a frottage is carried out correctly, it is *guaranteed* to be accurate regardless of what one takes oneself to be recording. Contrary to what Hopkins argues, it is not true that when pictures are made by hand “information from the object portrayed can only reach the viewer via the artist’s take on the world” (*ibid.*: 720). A consequence of this is that it is not only photography that supports factive seeing-in. Frottage too enables one to see what facts obtained when it was made. When frottage works as it should, it is the case that:

If S sees in F that *p*, then *p*

The coin example is of course a construed example designed to make a theoretical point. In most contexts of inquiry, the informativeness of frottage is not very salient. Plain observation is usually a much more efficient way of finding out about the world. That does, however, not entail that the epistemic merits that the example highlights are not genuine. Nor does it entail that they have no practical application. There are several contexts of inquiry in which frottage is useful because it preserves information. Notably, frottage was long an important instrument in the archeological study of petroglyphic rock art and is still used to some extent today.<sup>6</sup>

When frottage is used in a scientific context, it is employed with the same general aim as traditional photography: to enable accurate seeing-in. Several norms must be obeyed to achieve this aim. One must apply a certain pressure with the pencil. The paper must not be so thick that it does not adjust to the textured surface underneath it. The pencil must be soft enough to deposit enough graphite. One must shade out all the areas to be documented. The sheet of paper must be still during the making of the drawing. The object underneath the sheet must not move, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

All the above norms serve the general aim of accurate seeing-in. As with traditional photography, however, the norms can be formulated independently without mentioning the general

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Horn et al. (2018).

<sup>7</sup> When frottage is used for artistic purposes, it frequently violates one or more of the above norms. For example, the surrealists would collate incongruent elements by moving their paper or placing new objects underneath it. Such a strategy is comparable to double exposure in photography which is another norm-breaking strategy frequently used by the surrealists. Cf. Walton (1984, pp. 267-269) and Hopkins (2012, p. 715).

aim of accurate seeing-in. In other words, the norms are nontrivial. They can be specified without invoking “the idea of getting the facts right”. As such, the norms meet the triviality objection that Hopkins raises against attempts to show that handmade pictures can sustain factive seeing-in (2012, p. 720). Contrary to what Hopkins suggests, it is possible to identify norms for making pictures by hand that do not issue trivial instructions such as “draw things as you see them to be” (*ibid.*, p. 721). When these norms work in unison, they constitute a picturing technique which, like photography, is information-preserving.

### 3. Conclusion

Examples of indexical drawing show that if there is such a thing as factive seeing-in, it is not a way of seeing that is exclusive to photography. My argument does, however, not imply that frottage and photography are exactly akin. The two are different, since they are not indexical in the same way. Since frottage carries the imprint of surfaces which it has touched, its indexicality is of a *proximal* nature. By contrast, photography is *distally indexical*, since it registers light reflected from surfaces at a certain remove. Accordingly, there is a difference in the range of information that photography and frottage convey. Perhaps Hopkins’s view can be restated with the help of these terms. Perhaps what is really special about traditional photography is that it sustains factive seeing-in of distal objects. Assessing this claim would require further investigation, however. Even if frottage only sustains factive seeing-in of proximal objects, it remains to be seen whether there are other classes of handmade images that sustain factive seeing-in of distal objects.

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