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Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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Expressive Experience and Imagination

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims at questioning theories of expressive experience that rely on imagination. I will namely address Jerrold Levinson's Persona theory and Paul Noordhof's theory of sensuous imagining arguing that their problematic aspects are grounded in a misleading assumption about expressiveness. As an alternative, I will sketch an approach according to which expressive experience primarily consists in the perceptual experience of patterns of dynamic features.

1. Introduction

Pieces of music, especially of so-called “pure music”, paintings, landscapes – natural as well as depicted ones – and even more common inanimate objects are often described by means of psychological attributions. Music can be sad, cheerful, gay, impetuous; countryside may be described as serene or happy; a depicted landscape may look melancholy; an interior might be lugubrious, whereas certain shades of colours lively. More specifically, inanimate objects are said to *express* those psychological, affective, emotional states that we attribute to them. There exist a wide, although quite unsystematic, philosophical debate that is concerned with the question: how can inanimate objects, which are by definition devoid of psychological states, be nonetheless expressive of (at least some of) such states?

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2. Expression and Expressiveness

Within the analytic aesthetic debate of the Thirties and Forties, the focus of the discussion was the possibility that artworks express the affective (or, more broadly, the intentional) states of their creators by, so to say, embodying them. Among others, John Dewey, Robin Collingwood and Curt Ducasse addressed the problem of how emotions may result in artworks through creative processes – being creative processes themselves a form of expression. So called *Expression theory* that they, in various ways, supported, has been critically summarized by Alan Tormey (1971)²:

(E-T) [Expression Theory] If art object O has expressive quality Q , then there was a prior activity C of the artist A such that in doing C , A expressed his F for X by imparting Q to O (where F is a feeling state and Q is the qualitative analogue of F). (Tormey 1971:103)

In short, expressive qualities of objects are necessarily the result of the corresponding (intentional, since it is directed to an X) affective state felt and manifested by the artist in creating that object. Tormey overtly contended against this view that attributions of expressive qualities to artworks concern the works themselves, rather than their creators' intentional states, and that this is confirmed by the fact that such attributions cannot be denied or supported by references to the emotional state or biographical vicissitudes of the artist:

If it turned out that Mahler had experienced no state of mind remotely resembling despair or resignation during the period of composition of *Das Lied von der Erde*, the expression theorist would be obliged to conclude that we were mistaken in saying that the final movement (*Der Abschied*) of that work was expressive of despair or resignation; and this seems hardly plausible. (Tormey 1971:104-105).

² Jenefer Robinson pointed out that Tormey's analysis misinterprets Expression Theory (Robinson 2005:244 ff.), but for the purpose of this paper I will just assume E-T as a generic target of Tormey's criticism that helps understand the problem at stake, regardless of his interpretation of the tradition being correct or not.

Against Expression theory, Tormey insisted that the phenomenal aspect of objects is what our judgements are about and that any theory of expressive qualities of artworks is committed to account for its role in the first place:

Even those who argue that ‘music is sad’ can be translated ‘the music makes me feel sad’ or ‘...has a disposition to make me, or others, feel sad’ will agree that their accounts are only plausible on the assumption that the object has some properties which are at least causally relevant to the induced feeling. (Tormey 1971:104)

The most important consequence of accepting this point is that judgements about expressive features of artworks can be endorsed or falsified only on the basis of the features of the objects themselves. In order to convince someone that the piece of music we are attending to is *sad*, we will probably refer to the particular way it sounds, rather than to the mood in which the composer or executor allegedly were when creating or performing it.

In order to cast light on the conceptual confusion at the basis of Expression theory, Tormey introduces the distinction between *expression* and *expressiveness*. He argues that Expression theorists wrongly maintain that ‘express’ and ‘being expressive of’ an emotion are always synonyms. If this were the case, indeed, we would be forced to conclude that any expressive face is always expressing some felt emotional state, whereas this equivalence is not guaranteed at all (Tormey 1971:107). He claims that we use the term “expressive” in relation to facial patterns in at least three different fashions: first, we can use it *intransitively*, say, in such a way that would not legitimate the question “expressive of what?”. In this case, “expressive” only means the particular disposition of a face to display a wide range of facial expressions. We may for instance notice that an actor’s face is not as expressive as required by the play. Second, “expressive” can be followed by the specific emotion that a face may seem to express, such as “expressive of rage”, “expressive of joy”, in which case it can refer to the way the face looks, without necessarily implying that the expressed emotion is actually felt by the person. Third, the term may be used as a synonym of

“to express”, so that the statement “her gesture was expressive of anguish” could be translated as “she was expressing her anguish through that gesture”.

Far from being merely speculative considerations about common linguistic uses, these remarks pick up an important aspect of the problem, namely that expressive qualities of artworks do not bear any necessary relation to actual expressions of felt emotions. And this both because, especially in the case of artworks, being “expressive” does not automatically amount to express some specific emotion (a musician can be instructed to play a piece *espressivo* without expressing any particular emotion), and because being expressive of an emotion does not necessarily imply to feel that emotion.³

Most contemporary authors have taken on Tormey’s point (see for instance Kivy 1980, Davies 2005, Robinson 2005). According to Jenefer Robinson we must conceptually distinguish between *expression* and *expressiveness*, to the extent that: “expression is neither necessary nor sufficient for expressiveness” (Robinson 2007:36). Indeed, there can be expressions of emotions that are completely inexpressive, so that:

[...] although they can go together with marvelous effect, [expression and expressiveness] are related but conceptually distinct phenomena (Robinson 2007:39).

In her view, the term ‘expression’ refers to the external manifestation of some internal state. Therefore, both a face and a painting can be ‘expressions’ as far as they are means to manifest felt emotions. On this count, artworks *can* be expressions of emotions and there exist cases in which it is correct to interpret them in this way (Robinson refers in particular to Romantic painters and composers who explicitly conceived of their works as emotional expressions. See Robinson 2005:258 ff.).

³ The same distinction has been importantly taken on by Peter Kivy (1980), who famously phrased it in terms of “express” and “being expressive of”. According to Kivy, the former label applies to actual expressions caused by affective states, whereas the latter can be predicated both of animated and inanimate objects which display certain perceivable features – namely, expressive features.

‘Expressiveness’, instead, refers to the capacity of behaviours and works of art to convey some affective character to the audience, regardless of their being the outputs of felt emotions.

This being said, expression and the expressiveness of artistic objects cannot be discarded as notions disconnected from one another. As Stephen Davies pointed out, musical expressiveness would be completely uninteresting if it did not bear any relation to human emotions:

If the expression of emotion in music is seen as one of music’s most important features, then it can be only because we *recognize* a connection between the emotions expressed in music and in life, because musical expressiveness reflects and reflects on the world of emotions (Davies 2005:135).

The challenge of any theory of expressiveness is therefore to account for the specific relation between expression and expressiveness, provided that the conceptual distinction between the two notions is preserved. Dealing with this challenge consists in asking (and possibly replying to the question of) what the experience of expressive features amounts to. In turn, this means to account for the specific phenomenal character of expressive experience⁴ and in explaining what sort of features are actually experienced when we undergo such experience.

3. Expressive Experience as Imagination

According to most theories, we experience expressive features of objects, such as music’s sadness or landscape’s cheerfulness, as if they were perceptual features of those objects, namely, as if they did not depend neither on us, nor on the artist’s intentions. Nonetheless, this perceptual

⁴ I borrow this phrase from Noordhof 2008 as an abbreviation for “experience of expressive objects and features”. The label is clearly patterned after that of, say, “perceptual experience”, which means an experience with some more or less specific content and modality.

character of expressive experience is usually considered *sui generis* and explained as distinct from standard perceptual experience.

In his article *Expressive Perception as Projective Imagining*, Paul Noordhof (2008) elaborates on the expressive experience we can have of artworks and other inanimate objects. He is interested in paintings as well as in sculptures and music, but he suggests that his account could also apply to natural landscapes. His view stems from the idea that, although we seem to perceive expressive features,

[...] it makes little sense to suppose that something may be experienced as expressive quite independently of how we respond to it; that our experience of expressiveness can be simply an experience of features of the world (Noordhof 2008, p.342).

His intuition is that the sadness that we might hear in a piece of music cannot not belong to the piece in the same way in which its rhythm, notes and pitches do. In other words, notes and chords are perceptual components of music independently of the subjects' responses, whereas sadness seems to be more dependent on the way subjects respond or are disposed to respond to it. Such intuition is consistent with the idea that, since inanimate objects do not possess any affective state that they can literally express, then these affective states must be found somewhere else. If one follows Tormey in excluding that they belong to the creator of the work, then the experiencing subject must be responsible for the specific affective character of the experience. The question becomes explaining *how* the sentient subject is responsible for that certain objects (especially artistic ones) are experienced as expressive of affective states. The appeal to imagination is one of the most interesting strategy to answer the question.

3.1. The Persona Theory

One of the most influential theories of musical expressiveness is the so-called *Persona theory*, which explicitly appeals to imagination. According to Jerrold Levinson, who first put forward this theory:

[...] a passage of music P is expressive of an emotion E if and only if P, in context, is readily heard, by a listener experienced in the genre in question, as an expression of E. (Levinson, 2006:93)

That is:

[...] music expresses an emotion only to the extent that we are disposed to hear it as the expression of an emotion, although in a non-standard manner, by a person or person-like entity (Levinson 2006: 93)

Levinson shares the view that expressive experience is perceptual in character and that it has to be accounted for by explaining the relation between expressiveness and expression – and therefore to emotions. But being expressive experience admittedly a *sui generis* perceptual experience, Persona theory tries to fill in the gap between perceivable musical expressiveness and human expression of emotions resorting to our capacity to *perceive* (hear, in the case at stake) something *as* something else. Accordingly, what an experienced listener does when she hears a sad piece of music is hearing it *as* a behavioural expression of the emotion of sadness on behalf of some fictive person.

Experiences of perceiving-as are notoriously difficult to define, so that Levinson suggests:

[...] to locate hearing-as and hearing-in among perceptual acts that partake freely of, or that substantially enlist, the *imagination* [...] To hear music as such and such is, perhaps, to imagine *that* the music is such and such, and more specifically, to imagine *of* the music, *as* you are hearing it, that it is such and such. (Levinson 2006:95)

Imagination is therefore responsible for the fact that certain perceptual properties of music are experienced as expressive. More specifically, imagination vehicles what Levinson calls the “modifier” of the experience, that is, an allegedly cognitive content that modifies the perceptual content of

expressive experience (Levinson 2006:95). Thus, on the one hand, Persona theory claims that propositional imaginings *that someone is expressing her felt emotions through music* is responsible for expressive experience; on the other hand, Levinson insists that “immediacy is a proper desideratum for an account of musical expressiveness” (Levinson 2006:101), meaning that, since expressive features are “readily” recognised by listeners, expressive experience is perceptual in character.

It has been remarked that there is a tension between these two claims.⁵ Persona theory appeals to propositional imagination, whose distinctive content and phenomenology we should in principle be able to consciously experience. On the contrary most of our experiences of expressive music do not bear witness to such content and phenomenology: most of the time we do not imagine any persona – for how minimally characterised and maximally vague it may be – expressing herself through music. Despite it can be true that certain pieces or kinds of music *can* or even *should* be attended as if they were the emotional expression of a persona,⁶ the imaginative engagement with a fictive persona that does not apply to all kinds of pure music. Moreover, it is not clear how the immediacy of expressive experience could be preserved, given the appeal to propositional imagination. If we admit that sometimes we grasp the expressiveness of music thanks to an imaginative engagement with a fictional persona then, at least in those cases, the experience of expressive features is far from being as immediate as standard perceptual experiences.

In particular, Paul Noordhof pointed out that this difficulty to reconcile these two aspects of expressive experience depends on that Levinson does not clearly distinguish between two levels of the explanation. On the one hand, Levinson acknowledges that expressive experience is phenomenally perceptual, whereas on the other hand, he tries to account for the specificity of the experience by reflecting in its content an element (the imagined persona) that is required by the explanation, but that the

⁵ See for example Davies (1997); Walton (1999); Robinson (2007); Noordhof (2008).

⁶ Robinson defends the idea that this holds for most romantic music (Robinson 2007:27).

phenomenal content of expressive experience rarely attests. (Noordhof 2008:332).

3.2 Expressive Experience as Sensuous Imagination

Although he criticises Levinson, Noordhof is still persuaded that imagination is required to explain expressive experience. The methodological distinction he pursues between what he calls the phenomenal content and its explanation is meant to avoid the difficulties faced by the Persona theory. As to the former, Noordhof claims that it should be described differently: it is not *as if* the music were expressing emotions (or were the expression of an emotion on behalf of a fictive persona), but rather certain perceptual properties of music are experienced *as potentially expressive*. The phenomenal content of expressive experience instantiates properties that are perceived as belonging to artworks, as well as standard perceptual properties. Nonetheless, it is *sui generis* as long as it consists in the perceivable *expressive potential* of certain perceptual features.

[...] it is in virtue of this potential, that the properties in question are part of the realisation of expressive properties. [...] we simply experience the fact that they could be used to express something in much the same way that the potential uses of many things in our environment signal themselves to us (Noordhof 2008:332).

As already said, however, Noordhof is sceptic about the possibility to explain the experience of expressiveness in terms of mere perception. Thus, in order to preserve the intuition that expressive properties are better characterised as response dependent properties, avoiding at the same time the difficulties encountered by the Persona theory, Noordhof accounts for expressiveness relying on a different sort of imagining, namely *sensuous imagination*.⁷ Three features of sensuous imagination make it particularly

⁷ Sensuous imagination is also called *sensory imagination* and the best and most discussed example is *visualization*. It roughly consists in forming the mental image of

suitable to explain the *sui generis* nature of expressive experience. By definition:

- (i) its content is phenomenally similar to the one of perceptual experience, namely sensuous imagination *recreates* in imagination a perceptual experience;
- (ii) its content is experienced less immediately than the one of perceptual experience;
- (iii) its content is relatively under our control.

As to (i), Noordhof observes that expressive experience seems to present the very same features of the corresponding perceptual experience, say, the perceptual features of the work. When we see a melancholy landscape, we indeed experience the colours, shadows and slopes that constitute the landscape. Furthermore, (ii) may account for the fact that – according to Noordhof – expressive properties of works of art are not experienced with the same immediacy of merely perceptual ones. Finally, (iii) would explain the fact that sometimes we can, to some extent, *decide* whether to perceive the same artwork as expressive or inexpressive. Suppose, for example, that we focus on the correctness of the execution of a piece of music, rather than on its expressive value: it seems that we can control the content of our experience and this might be adequately accounted by sensuous imagination being relatively dependent on our will.

On such basis, Noordhof has to explain how sensuous imagination transforms merely perceptual experience into expressive experience. He claims that, when we experience a work of art as expressive of some affective state, we *sensuously imagine the emotion-guided creative process* that is or might have been responsible for making expressive certain merely perceptual features of the work (Noordhof, 2008:330). Such imagining does not imply that we imagine *someone*, like a fictive persona, who creates the work of art in such a way that makes it expressive; nor we need to imagine that we ourselves are engaged in a creative process. All is needed is that we

something as instantiating the same perceptual features that would be present in the corresponding perceptual experience.

recognise the phenomenal skeleton of an emotion leading such process, say, its causal power to give rise to expressive, creative behaviours. Accordingly, it suffices that we are triggered by the work to imagine how certain of its features might be the result of a process of selection and arrangement of properties (be they colours, materials or sounds) that is lead by the causal power of an emotion – even if such a process never took place. On this view, when we *perceive* the expressive features of a painting, we are actually *sensuously imagining* those features as being the result of an intentional creative process put in place under the guidance of the emotional state we see expressed.

Now, the problem with the Persona theory was that the imagined persona was not attested by average expressive experiences to be part of their content, as the explanation in terms of propositional imagination would have implied. Analogously, one may argue that it is definitely not the case that, when perceiving an expressive work of art, we are aware of imagining a creative process that gives expressive properties as its result. Noordhof replies that we can in principle be wrong about the fact that we are sensuously imagining rather than perceiving something, but not about the content of such mental state, since the two kinds of experience instantiate the same features – by definition and unlike in the case of propositional imagination. Which means that we might be wrong about the fact that the mental state we are in is an imaginative rather than a perceptual one, but right about the music sounding sad. The fact that its content is the result of an imaginative process is something we need not be aware of and this is enough to save Noordhof's account from the criticism against the Persona Theory.

4. Some Critical Remarks

Despite it avoids problems that other theories cannot solve, this account of expressive experience presents further problematic aspects that I shall discuss hereafter. More specifically, I will claim that Noordhof's reasons to appeal to sensuous imagination are weak, regarding both their phenomenological ground and their theoretical assumptions.

My first remark concerns the claim that, although it represents standard perceptual features, expressive experience lacks the typical immediacy of perceptual experience. It is very common to introduce the difference between perceptual experience and sensuous imagination starting from the lack of immediacy and of vividness of the latter compared to the former. Fabian Dorsch writes:

That sensory imaginings (as well as sensory memories) lack the immediacy of perceptual experiences means, first of all, that they do not present their objects as being there before us in our actual environment. When we see a tree, it seems to be right there before our eyes. But when we visualise a tree, we do not have a similar impression of its presence in our actual environment. (Dorsch 2012:83)

On this interpretation, immediacy is understood as some sort of feeling of presence that accompanies every perception, whereas it is lacking, or at least is diminished, when we undergo imaginative experiences. But is this description always accurate when it comes to expressive experiences? We do not seem to experience the sadness of a chord less immediately than how we hear the chord itself, nor the liveliness of a landscape less immediately than how we see its colours and slopes. Sadness or liveliness are no less immediately presented in experience than colours or shapes, nor experienced in a later moment compared to the auditory structure of music. Significantly, it has been noticed that:

It takes as long to hear the music's expressive properties as it takes to hear the passages in which those properties are articulated. (Davies 2005:181)

That is, it does not take more to hear the “noble and restrained passion” expressed by the principal theme of the First Movement in Gabriel Fauré’s Piano Quartet in C Minor, Op. 15, than it takes to hear “the strings with syncopated interjections from the piano” that Levinson takes to underlie it

(Levinson 2009:422). Expressive qualities are rather apprehended as immediately as merely perceptual features of musical pieces.

If, as I believe, Noordhof's notion of immediacy has to do with the phenomenal character of experiences, there is a more charitable way to interpret his claim. Indeed, one may take it to be that expressive experiences are not as *vivid* and as *stable* for a subject as perceptual experiences. On this view, the sadness that is expressed by a sonata would be experienced as being phenomenally fainter than the sounds and rhythm that constitute it. Even on this interpretation, however one may argue that vividness is merely a matter of degrees:

[...] it is not clear whether there could not be, on the one hand, perceptions [...] which are faint and, on the other hand, sensory imaginings which are vivid. (Dorsch 2012:82).

In his characterization of sensuous imagination, Dorsch points out that, even if we can agree on that vivacity (or vividness) characterizes the phenomenology of experiences, nothing guarantees that it is enough to distinguish perceptual episodes from imaginative episodes. Vividness comes in degrees, so that it is at best a typical qualification of the phenomenology rather than a criterion for classification (Dorsch 2012:82). Hence, I contest that immediacy (understood as vividness) offers good reasons to appeal to imagination when describing the phenomenology of expressive experience.

My second objection regards Noordhof's claim that the fact that expressive experience is relatively under our control makes sensuous imagination the best way to account for it. I will try to insist that being partially under control is not a prerogative of imaginative experience.

According to a general and widely accepted characterization, the main distinction between perceptual states and imaginings is that, whereas the latter are subject to will, the former are independent of the subject's will or agency.⁸ Along this line, Noordhof points at that there are occasions in

⁸ See for example Dorsch 2012 for an exhaustive account of imagination characterized as motivated action. He ascribes what he calls the Agency Account to Richard Wollheim, Jerry Levinson, Amy Kind and Colin McGinn.

which we can deliberately decide whether to experience the same piece of music as being expressive or affectively neutral. It must be noticed that the claim is not that we are totally free to imagine the same piece of music as expressive of whatever affective state, which would imply to deny any constraint of the perceptual, non-expressive structure of the piece on its expressive features. Rather, the idea is that we can control our experience and obliterate, so to say, its expressive component in favour of a neutral and merely perceptual experience. This remark captures an important phenomenal quality of expressive experience, namely its resulting more dependent on the subject than other perceptual experiences. It is indeed true that, while we cannot decide whether to experience Malevič's *Black square* as being or not "black", we have some control on our experience when it comes to seeing it as being or not "disquieting". And even if we ourselves can't help experiencing it as disquieting, it is not difficult to imagine that the art historian who is studying the painting and focusing on its shape and on the contrast between the black of the square and the white of the frame, will be able to neglect its expressive character in favour of an affectively neutral experience.

Accepting that the expressive character of things is phenomenally not as independent of our will as colours are, however, is not yet enough to rule out perception in favour of imagination. A fruitful strategy to support my objection is to consider perceptual experiences in which we exercise some control but that usually are not explained in terms of imagination. Let us take for example the shifts of perceptual attention from certain to other perceptual saliences. More specifically, let us consider the case of bi-stable (or multistable) figures perception. As it is well-known, we can experience figures such as the Jastrow's duck-rabbit either *as representing x* or *as representing y*, depending on the perceptual saliences on which we focus our attention. They are perceptual patterns that lend themselves to be perceived in different ways. Notoriously, seeing-as experiences are explained in terms of "seeing" or "noticing an aspect", following Wittgenstein famous remark:

I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience "noticing an aspect" (Wittgenstein 1986: II, xi, 193)

Such noticing, as well as the recognition of the duck in the duck-rabbit figure, or of Voltaire's portrait in Dalí's *Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire* (1940), is usually maintained to be perceptual in character (see for instance Gombrich 1960; Wollheim 2003; Jagnow, (2011)Voltolini 2015). Yet, it is also relatively under our control.

True, we may be able to stop seeing a picture as a picture (e.g. by attending to it in a certain way); and we may have some control over whether we see the duck-rabbit drawing as a depiction of a duck or as a depiction of a rabbit. (Dorsch, 2016:234)

Such characterization of seeing-as experiences suffices to point out that a phenomenology which mobilizes will and voluntary control is not peculiar of imagination, say, it does not indicate *per se* that imagination is involved.

My third remark has to do with the way in which Noordhof accounts for the role of emotions in expressive experience. As said at the beginning, this is an overt challenge for any theory of expressiveness. Indeed, the link between expressiveness and actual expression of felt emotions is precisely what a theory of expressiveness is expected to spell out. Noordhof takes the phenomenal skeleton of emotions to determine the content of the experience. How?

First and foremost, he does not want to claim that we consciously sensuously imagine the creative process guided by the phenomenal skeleton, but just that such process is responsible for our visualising expressive properties. Indeed, considering our capacity to *recognise* a highly complex thing like an emotion-guided creative processes as a necessary condition to experience expressive properties, would be a very demanding requirement. Moreover, it would be patently in conflict with evidences that not only artistically lay people tend to perceive certain artworks as expressive of emotions, but also that young children and children with autistic disorders

perform quite well in attributing expressive qualities to music (Heaton 1999).

In order to avoid such limitation Noordhof endorses simulation theory as the theory of mind-reading that best matches his philosophical perspective. I will not take side here on the general plausibility of the simulation theory among theories of mind-reading, but limit myself to show the outcome of its application to the imaginative theory of expressive experience.

Simulation theory is normally used to explain our capacity to understand others' mental states by means of sub-personal simulations of others' intentional behaviours. In particular, when we attribute affective states to others, there are affective states going on "off-line" in us, by means of which we automatically simulate their emotions. This view is particularly consistent with evidences about young children seizing others' emotions by means of non-cognitive simulations of their behaviours and expressions (Goldman 2006; Gordon, 1995; Gopnik and Meltzoff, 1996).

Applied to the case of expressive experience of works of art, simulation theory would explain our recognition of the phenomenal skeleton guiding a creative process in terms of automatic, off-line simulation, say, as "a relatively automatic response to features of the world" (Noordhof 2003:346). Moreover, the appeal to simulation theory allows justifying the fact that the emotion-guided creative processes that we simulate off-line "find certain [perceptual] features natural for expression and others not" (Noordhof 2003:347): it is no more than "a brute fact" and "There may be no explanation in nature apart from this for why pieces of music and human behaviour share expressive properties." (Noordhof 2003:345).

If the simulation processes that take place off-line, when triggered by certain perceptual features, cannot but be explained as brute, natural facts, then the account at stake is not committed to a highly demanding, intellectualist explanation: in order to experience a work of art as expressive we just need to be naturally equipped with working mechanisms of off-line simulation. No particular expertise nor background knowledge about emotions and creativity is required.

I see two problems here. The first is that, whereas the simulation mechanism might account for our capacity to recognise certain features as something like the natural outcome of expressive gestures, it is more difficult to apply the same explanation to a creative process. Indeed, unlike the causal skeleton of emotions, emotion-driven creative processes seem hard to simulate off-line without having previously acquired any background knowledge about creativity and artistic performances; or at least about the possible shapes that certain materials (visual as well as auditory) can take in creative hands. The appeal to a creative process is precisely meant to account for expressiveness in those cases in which the capacity to recognise and attribute expressions cannot do the job, namely with inanimate objects. It is expected to bridge actual expressions performed by animate beings and mere expressive features displayed by artworks. But if on the one hand explaining it as a sub-personal automatic mechanism does not account for the difference between experiencing an expressive objects and experiencing human expressions, on the other hand the appeal to a sensuously imagined creative process does not account for the fact that expressive experience of objects does not seem to require any specific knowledge.

The second reason for doubting about Noordhof's way of linking expressiveness and actual expression of emotions is his "brute fact" claim. On his view, there can be no reasons why certain perceptual patterns are experienced as cheerful whereas others are experienced as sad, it is just a causal mechanism that cannot be explained but as a matter of fact. If this is true, then the expressive potential of certain perceptual features does not have to do with the way they look like, but only with their causal power to elicit simulation.

I argue that this perspective is susceptible to the objection of the so-called *heresy of the separable experience*. Malcolm Budd coined this expression to indicate the attempt to account for aesthetic values of artworks by reference to experiences "which can be fully characterized without reference to the nature of the work itself." (Budd 1985:123). When we account for aesthetic values (broadly understood), he claims, we should not allow for explanations according to which the experience of such values

may in principle be caused by other means. That is, aesthetic features must be considered as what our experience is about, instead of tools that may cause such experience. On Noordhof's view, all we can account for depends on the way we naturally respond to certain causal stimuli, whereas we cannot say much about what such stimuli (that is, perceptual features of artworks) should look like in order for our experience to be of happy or of melancholy expressive qualities. This perspective locates the Sensuous Imagination account in the vicinity of Richard Wollheim's Projectivism (it is worth reminding that Noordhof names his account "projective imagining"), as attested by what Wollheim writes:

If what is wanted is information about how exactly [something] has to look in particular cases if it is to be apt for the projection of this rather than that feeling, then this demand must surely go unsatisfied.
(Wollheim 1993:154)

But if so things stand, then Sensuous Imagination theory of expressive experience cannot provide any link between the perceptual aspect of things and their expressive look, for "To ascribe dispositional predicates to a thing is not to attribute to it any expressive qualities" (Ridley 1995:52)

5. Expression and Expressiveness Again

I believe that the above discussed problems of imaginative accounts depend on some aprioristic rejection of a perceptual account. Their appeal to an imaginative experience for the purpose of doing justice to the perceptual phenomenal character they ascribe to expressive experience overlooks a more careful consideration of an account based on perception. Indeed, despite they acknowledge the perceptual character of expressive experience, the two theories appeal to imagination in order to compensate for the absence of a real expresser, that is, to account for the link to actual expression. Lacking an expresser, they resort to fictional or simulated expressions that would allow us undergoing expressive experiences. Such scepticism about a perceptual explanation, thus, goes hand in hand with a

conception of *expressiveness* which is still parasitic on that of *expression*. The more or less explicit assumption of these theories is that, since emotions are a human prerogative, then their expression is a human prerogative too. Accordingly, whatever experience of non-human things as being related to emotions must be explained in terms of psychological mechanisms of projection than necessarily make use of imagination. The experience of expressiveness must therefore be the experience of something that can be imagined as deriving from and depending on actual expressions of emotions.

But this assumption seems to have lost trace of the independence requirement made explicit by Robinson: expression is neither necessary nor sufficient for expressiveness and any theory of expressiveness should be able to account for the latter as independent from the former.

If this connection between the rejection of a perceptual account and the parasitic notion of expressiveness is sound, then it is reasonable to think that a perceptual account may do justice to the independence requirement. In this spirit, Stephen Davies has provided a theory that is as close as possible to a genuinely perceptual account.⁹ He repeatedly argued that expressive experience consists in the perceptual recognition of expressive features instantiated by artworks, especially musical works. He calls these features “emotion characteristics in appearance” (Davies 2005) and claims that both in the case of animated and of inanimate beings, our recognition of emotion characteristics in appearance is distinct in principle from our attribution of affective states. Which means, in turn, that our recognition of emotion characteristics in appearance is distinct in principle from our attribution of expressions. In short and in compliance with the independence requirement, for something to be recognised as sad or as cheerful, does not necessarily imply for it to be recognised as the expression of some internal state. Accordingly, there is no need to mobilize an imaginative engagement that fills the void left by the absent affective state.

⁹ Along with Peter Kivy, Stephen Davies supports Contour theory. Various versions of this basically perceptual account can be found in: Kivy 1980; 1989, 2002 and in Davies 1994; 2005; 2010.

In order to argue that this recognitional experience is perceptual instead of imaginative in the first place, a perceptual view must be able to replace the imaginative mechanisms with a convincing perceptual explanation. How do we perceive expressive patterns? That is – once more – how can certain perceptual patterns be experienced as expressive? Davies replies appealing to our capacity to recognise resemblances: we experience things as expressive of affective states as far as we can perceive their perceptual features as being *similar* to other things, namely, typical expressive behaviours and gestures. What would be required in such case, is neither the capacity to imagine an expresser, nor to engage in a simulation process triggering the imaginings of some creative procedure. The sole requirement would be the capacity to map perceptual patterns onto typical (mostly human) emotion characteristics in appearance. When musical contours are perceived in the light of the resemblances between them and typically expressive patterns of human behaviours, expressive experience is likely to be a case of *perceiving-as*: we hear a happy music as far as it resembles the speech of a happy person, or we see a weeping willow as sad insofar as it resembles the typical posture of a sad person. Unlike Levinson, Davies believes that perceiving-as experiences are cases of aspect perception that do not require imaginative engagements:

Because of the possibility that the same material object of perception may be seen under more than one aspect, aspect perception differs from ‘ordinary’ seeing despite remaining a perceptually based experience. (Davies 2005:139).

No doubts, this might often be the case and we can consider the experience of seeing-as as a genuinely perceptual experience. Nevertheless, I suspect that it is only part of the whole story. Expressive patterns such as the liveliness of a painting or the sadness of a melody, are not always recognised (nor in principle recognisable) as similar to expressive behaviours.¹⁰ In point of fact, in order to convince someone that a certain

¹⁰ This objection to Contour theory and to resemblance theories in general has been explicitly raised by Trivedi 2001 and Noordhof 2008.

painting is lively, we do not need to point at the similarities it displays with lively people. We can – and we often do – limit ourselves to point at those lower level perceptual properties like its colours and shapes. And the same holds for music: tempo, rhythm, texture, scoring – as well as colours, shades, slopes, shapes, contours of visual works – play the role of determinants of expressive features, marking the difference between a happy and a mournful perceptual content.

Would it be possible to argue that the brisk tempo, driving rhythm, open texture, bright scoring, etc. in the overture to Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* provide evidence that the overture is expressive of sadness? [...] Even if our hearing of the musical features of slowness, etc. in a musical work does not entail that we will also hear sadness in that work, these features may be relevant to our experience of the music's sadness. They could not be used to support the mistaken claim that the music expresses happiness in the way they may be used to support the claim that the music expresses sadness. (Davies 2005:143)

The subsequent question to be answered by a perceptual theory of expressiveness should therefore be to what extent such lower level determinants can be experiences as expressive *per se*?

As to this, much work can be done to both empirically and theoretically to establish the weight of contextual variables in the experience of very low level expressive features like colours, chords, simple shapes (see Parovel, 2012 for a rich overview of experimental results about expressive qualities). Along this path, correlations have been observed between the attribution of intensity to (stereotyped) facial expressions and the co-instantiation of very low-level perceptual features such as inclination, simple geometric figures and speed (Kamachi *et al.* 2001; Pavlova *et al.* 2005). Moreover, theories such as Spelke's *Core Knowledge* (Spelke 1995; 2000; 2007) may offer support to a perceptual stance on expressiveness: roughly, we may be equipped since a very early age to perceptually discriminate object boundaries, cohesion of shapes, intentional or self-propelled movements, say, to discriminate perceptual dynamic features all around our environment. Such dynamic features constitute expressive

patterns, whether they are instantiated by human behaviours or by inanimate objects (more on this has been discussed in Benenti & Meini 2017).

Clearly, talking about dynamic features is not yet talking about expressive patterns in a way that does justice to the complexity of certain expressive experiences of artworks. Especially for what concerns artworks, imaginative – both propositional and sensuous – and conceptual engagement are fundamental components of aesthetic experiences. Noordhof is certainly right in thinking that, when we experience expressive works of art, we are most of the times imaginatively engaged (see also Nanay, forthcoming, on this). Perceptual features of artworks lend themselves to imaginative projects for a bunch of reasons, from the creative process that have produced them, to the cultural and historical conditions of their realisation and fruition. So, it is more than likely that the best, richest and most adequate experience of a work of art and of its expressive character depend on the imaginative engagement we are able and disposed to entertain when attending it.¹¹

My minimal claim is that expressive experience, say, the experience of features, objects and artworks as being expressive of affective states, does not in principle *require* any imaginative engagement to take place. Moreover, the capacity to recognise resemblances between perceptual patterns and expressive behaviours may not be a requirement either. Instead, the capacity to recognise minimally expressive features might be acquired along with other minimal discriminatory capacities that keep together both perceptual and affective learning. Far from offering a solution, this approach may be a fruitful pathway for both philosophy and psychology.¹²

¹¹ Incidentally, this also allows accounting for the relevance of *expertise* in aesthetic experience: it is not by chance that most theories of musical expressiveness (such as Levinson 1996; 2006 and Robinson 2007) require an experienced, specialist, suitable, appropriate audience as one of their conditions.

¹² In her *Ordinary Expression and Musical Expressiveness* (2013), María José Alcaraz León put forward an account of musical expressiveness towards which I am very sympathetic. Regarding the issue of learning to recognise expressive features, she writes: “Especially in early childhood expressive forms are taken from both adult expressive behaviour (usually displayed in an exaggerated manner) and songs – lullabies, songs through which we learn animal and natural sounds; songs that facilitate language learning, etc. – pictures or toys, which represent expressive faces, dances where certain

6. Concluding Remarks

I have discussed two approaches to expressive experience that rely in imagination. First, I have presented and questioned Jerrold Levinson's view on musical expressiveness as implying an imaginative engagement with some fictive persona. I have referred to already existing criticisms against his view, highlighting the tension between propositional imaginings and the perceptual phenomenal character of expressive experience that Levinson wants to preserve.

Then, I have introduced and discussed in details Paul Noordhof's view based on sensuous imagination, showing how it does a better job than the Persona theory. However, I have argued that his rejection of a perceptual account is too quick and underestimates some relevant aspects of expressiveness. Namely, I tried to show that imagination is not required to account for expressive experience, by criticizing both the phenomenal characterization Noordhof offers of expressive experience, and his implicit assumption of dependence between expressiveness and actual expression of emotions. I insisted that the unnecessary appeal to imagination depends on the misleading conception of expressiveness as being parasitic on expression.

Instead, I suggested that a perceptual approach to expressive experience is preferable since it preserves the independence of expressiveness from expression. Perceptual accounts of expressive experience are already on offer. I especially referred to Stephen Davies' account of expressiveness in terms of *perceiving-as* experience, but I also suggested that the one he tells is not the whole story. Works of art can be experienced as expressive even in the absence of any recognisable similarity

bodily movements become associated with both emotional states and certain musical patterns. [...] our expressive repertoire grows not only as we acquire a particular behavioural repertoire within a community but also through our artistic expressive works and practices" (pp. 275-276)

to human expressions, say, they are expressive *per se*. I did not deny that such perceptual experiences of artworks can be enhanced and made more articulated by the intervention of concepts and imaginings connected to emotions, their causal power to trigger typical behaviours, our background knowledge about creative processes and of their wider context of creation. Rather, I suggested that these interventions can only take place on the ground of a perceptual experience of low-level features that are *per se* minimally expressive.

To conclude, expressive experience should be accounted for as a perceptual experience, for this meets both the phenomenological requirement for the perceptual character of the experience and the need to explain expressiveness as independent of actual expression of emotions. I moreover suspect that the link between expressiveness and our emotional life may fruitfully be explained in terms of our acquisition of discriminatory capacities for our own and others' emotions: it might well be the case that, as long as we learn to ascribe and self-ascribe emotions by means of expression, we also learn to ascribe affective values and meanings to perceptual low level features.

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