

Bence Nanay

Aesthetic Attention

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to give a new account of the way we exercise our attention in some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience. I treat aesthetic experience as a specific kind of experience and, like in the case of other kinds of experiences, attention plays an important role in determining its phenomenal character. I argue that an important feature of at least some of our aesthetic experiences is that we exercise our attention in a specific, distributed, manner: our attention is focused on one perceptual object, but it is distributed among the various properties of this object. I argue that this way of exercising one's attention is very different from the way we attend most of the time and it fits very well with some important features of paradigmatic examples of aesthetic experience.*

I. Introduction

This paper does not aim to give a general account of aesthetic experience. I don't think that there is one and only one kind of aesthetic experience; that it is a monolithic category. My suspicion is that we tend to call any strong (or intense, or emotionally significant) experience that we have in an aesthetic context 'aesthetic experience'. But this can mean very different things: experiences of overwhelming beauty, experiences of strong emotions, experiences of strong identification with a fictional character, musical *frissons*, and so on.

The aim of this paper is much more limited — I want to single out an important aspect of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience: the way we exercise our attention. This is not a particularly new angle — an old and influential, broadly Kantian, way of thinking about aesthetic experiences aims to understand what is special about

Correspondence:

Bence Nanay, Professor of Philosophy and BOF Research Professor,
University of Antwerp; Senior Research Associate, Peterhouse, University of
Cambridge. Email: bn206@cam.ac.uk or bence.nanay@ua.ac.be

aesthetic experiences in terms of disinterested or aesthetic attention. But the notion of disinterested attention (as the notion of aesthetic experience itself) has acquired a terrible reputation in the last few decades. The aim of this paper is to give a new account of how this 'special' kind of disinterested or aesthetic attention could be cashed out with the help of the conceptual apparatus of perceptual psychology.

The gist of this account is that, in the case of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience, we attend in a distributed and at the same time focused manner: our attention is focused on one perceptual object but it is distributed among a large number of this object's properties. This way of attending contrasts sharply with the most standard way of exercising our attention (which would be focusing on a limited set of properties of one or more perceptual objects). In other words, this way of attending is special and I argue that it is a central feature of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience. And this approach explains a number of puzzling features of these paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience and also captures the distinctive features of the way artists, novelists, and philosophers described their aesthetic experiences.

We know from perceptual psychology that attention can bring about radical changes in our perceptual experience. As inattentional blindness experiments show (see Simmons and Chabris, 1999; Mack and Rock, 1998), when we are not attending to a stimulus (because our attentional resources are used up for another task), we tend not to be aware of stimuli even if they take up a large part of the visual field. An example: you see a clip where people pass a basketball around. You are supposed to count how many times the team whose members are dressed in white pass the ball among themselves. Most participants who do this fail to notice that a man in a gorilla costume walks across the screen and takes up a significant part of the screen for a long period of time (Simmons and Chabris, 1999). Subjects are not aware of the gorilla, because their attention is directed elsewhere (to the passing of the basketball). If there is no counting task to perform, everyone immediately notices the gorilla. There is a debate about whether we really fail to see the gorilla or maybe we were conscious of the gorilla, but we immediately forgot it: whether we should talk about inattentional blindness or inattentional amnesia (see Wolfe, 1999). But regardless of which way we go, it remains true that different ways of attending influence our experience radically. But if we treat aesthetic experience as a kind of experience, then it should

also be true that the way we are attending is a crucial feature of aesthetic experiences. And I argue that if we take the attention we exercise in some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience to be aesthetic attention (where our attention is distributed among a large number of a single object's properties), we can understand some important features of aesthetic experience.

II. Varieties of Aesthetic Experience

I doubt that there is one kind of aesthetic experience: there are many, very different kinds of experiences that we tend to call aesthetic. The kind of aesthetic experience I will focus on is only one of these, but one that has been very influential in art, literature, and philosophy. Here is someone who can describe experiences of this kind better than I can:

But even the ugliness of faces, which of course were mostly familiar to him, seemed something new and uncanny, now that their features, — instead of being to him symbols of practical utility in the identification of this or that man, who until then had represented merely so many pleasures to be sought after, boredoms to be avoided, or courtesies to be acknowledged — were at rest, measurable by aesthetic coordinates alone, in the autonomy of their curves and angles. (Proust, 1928, *Swann's Way*, pp. 469–70)

A lot is going on in this quote. We have the (broadly Kantian) insight that this experience is devoid of practical utility. We also have a formalist spin with the emphasis on curves and angles. And also the seeing of something familiar in a new light, with fresh eyes. All of these themes are important and influential features of one particular kind of aesthetic experience — again, not all experiences in an aesthetic context. And the aim of this paper is to understand better how our mind works when we have an aesthetic experience of this kind.

I singled out the quote from Proust because he somehow managed to condense three important themes of what it is to have an aesthetic experience into one sentence. But one may still worry how 'paradigmatic' these instances of aesthetic experiences are. All right, Proust had them, but this surely doesn't make them paradigmatic. Indeed it wouldn't, but there are many, many artists, writers, and philosophers who talk about the same kind of experience: this is exactly what Robert Musil meant by the 'Other Condition' (see Nanay, 2014), what Julio Cortázar meant by paravision (in *Hopscotch*), what John

Szarkowski called the ‘abandonment to the uncomplicated pleasure of seeing’ (Szarkowski, 1964, p. 9), and what Jonas Mekas tried to capture in his films and, to throw in a really obscure reference, what Géza Ottlik described as ‘the freedom of perception’ in his 1957 novel, *Iskola a határon* — the list could go on indefinitely (and I will give some further quotes at the end of the paper), but let me add two more evocative examples. Here is Albert Camus:

In the cloisters of San Francisco in Fiesole, a little courtyard with arcades. Red flowers, sunshine and yellow and black bees. In a corner, a green watering can. Flies humming everywhere. In the warmth, the little garden breathes gently... I want nothing else but this detachment and this closed space — this lucid and patient intensity.¹

And the last example is from Aldous Huxley’s book *The Doors of Perception*, where he makes a systematic attempt at describing his drug-induced experiences, which he takes to be an intensified version of the aesthetic experiences I want to focus on here.

A small typing table stood in the center of the room; beyond it, from my point of view, was a wicker chair and beyond that a desk. The three pieces formed an intricate pattern of horizontals, uprights and diagonals — a pattern all the more interesting for not being interpreted in terms of spatial relationships. Table, chair and desk came together in a composition... I was looking at my furniture, not as the utilitarian who has to sit on chairs, to write at desks and tables, and not as the cameraman or scientific recorder, but as the pure aesthete whose concern is only with forms and their relationships within the field of vision or the picture space. (Huxley, 1954, pp. 21–2)

While these authors put their fingers on some important features of these paradigmatic examples of aesthetic experience, there are other important features. Robert Hopkins makes a distinction between judging beauty and savouring beauty (Hopkins, 1997, pp. 181–2; see also Scheffler, 2010, for a similar distinction). He points out that judging something to be beautiful is not a very demanding notion at all — it merely means forming a belief that it is beautiful. Savouring beauty, on the other hand, ‘implies responding to it in a more full-blooded way’ (Hopkins, 1997, p. 181). In the case of savouring beauty, our ‘sensibilities are engaged by that beauty’ (*ibid.*). It is possible to judge things to be beautiful without savouring their beauty. This was, allegedly, the way in which Ernst Gombrich experienced

¹ Albert Camus: *Carnets*, 1937, September 15.

artworks in the last couple of decades of his life: he saw that a painting was beautiful or graceful but it left him completely cold. But this would not constitute an aesthetic experience, at least not in the sense I am interested in here. What is also needed is that our 'sensibilities are engaged' and that the experience is more 'full-blooded'.

The reason why I used the Proust quote and the Hopkins distinction is not in order to give a precise definition of the kind of aesthetic experiences I want to focus on, but rather to help the reader recognize these paradigmatic examples of aesthetic experiences. I am assuming that experiences of this kind are something the reader is familiar with. Maybe you call it something else, but it is very likely that you have had experiences of this kind. But it is possible that you have no idea what I am (or Proust is) talking about, nor are you interested in some complicated description of a fleeting impression you have no reason to care about. This is not a reason to stop reading this paper. My aim is to use a very specific way of attending to characterize an interesting variety of experience. So you should not stop reading this paper if you are interested in attention or experiences or the relation between the two.

One tempting way of approximating what all these authors were talking about is something like an experience of overwhelming beauty (and this is the route Hopkins follows). But this is not a particularly helpful characterization as aesthetic experiences are not always and not necessarily overwhelming — they can be fleeting moments of beauty. More importantly, this characterization seems to tie the concept of aesthetic experience to the concept of beauty, but this does not exactly take us into crystal clear territory — it's not as if we have firm necessary and sufficient conditions for being beautiful.

Further, besides the general worry about the lack of clarity when it comes to the concept of beauty, an additional problem is that I am not even sure that all aesthetic experiences are experiences of beauty. The experience Proust talks about, for example, doesn't seem to be about beauty at all. But this way of thinking about aesthetic experiences may still help the reader to recall some of her own aesthetic experiences.

There is great variation between different people's aesthetic experiences of this kind. Richard Wollheim famously spent an average of two hours looking at a painting in order to arrive at an 'aesthetic judgment' of it and argued that the first glance impression is often misleading when it comes to assessing the aesthetic value of a painting (Wollheim, 1987, p. 8). I had the chance to observe him during this process and he insisted that it takes him at least an hour in front of a

picture to have anything reminiscent of an aesthetic experience (he used the term between air-quotes). Contrast this with Clement Greenberg (see Danto, 1996, p. 109; Hoving, 1993, p. 256), who took aesthetic experience to be instantaneous: he was known for making his assessment about the aesthetic value of a painting on the basis of whether he had an aesthetic experience in the very first split second of seeing it.

I talked about some important features of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience — following Proust's insights. But there are two further features that I take to be very important: (a) we do not have complete control over them, and (b) they have a lingering effect.

It has happened to many of us that although we have entered a museum with the specific intention of having an aesthetic experience of a specific artwork, it just didn't happen. We stand in front of it and we fail to experience it in an aesthetic manner, in spite of the fact that we really want to. Maybe we are too fixated on the lecture we need to give in half an hour. Or maybe we are still thinking of the conversation we had over lunch with a friend. Or maybe we are just too sleepy. In any case, the aesthetic experience is just not forthcoming. In this respect, aesthetic experiences are very different from the ordinary perceptual experiences of, say, colour or shape. If I am looking at an object and want to see its colour, this will guarantee, barring some odd circumstances, that I experience its colour. This is apparently not so when it comes to aesthetic experiences. I do not take this crucial aspect of aesthetic experiences to be controversial — many artists and art critics expressed their frustration about it — my favourite quote on this comes from Roger Fry:

There are days of lowered vitality when one may wander disconsolately in a gallery like the Louvre, in despair at one's incapacity to respond to the appeal of the great masters, whom one had thought to be one's friends, but who suddenly seem to speak an alien tongue. (Fry, 1927/1951, p. 40)

Here is another observation that I take to be an uncontroversial feature of aesthetic experiences and that is also surprisingly missing from the philosophical discussion of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experiences tend to have a lingering effect. They often do not stop when the contemplation of the object of the aesthetic experience stops. After leaving the concert hall or the cinema, one may still see the world differently. Whether this 'lingering effect' is better described as the continuation of our aesthetic experience or as the aesthetic experience colouring and altering the ensuing experience depends on how one

individuates experiences in general. But the main point is that, after having spent a day in the museum, our experience of the banal scenes on leaving the museum tends to retain some kind of aesthetic character (it is important that this doesn't happen all the time — something often distracts us — but tends to happen nonetheless). Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet's film *Une visite au Louvre* (2004) emphasizes this odd feature of aesthetic experiences, when they follow up 45 minutes of footage of brilliantly filmed artworks with a scene of the poplar tree outside of the Louvre. Our aesthetic experience of the tree outside is as strong as that of the paintings inside.

Finally, I need to acknowledge that the concept of aesthetic experience has acquired a terrible reputation in the last couple of decades. And I should make it clear that we can nonetheless use this concept in a relatively harmless manner and that we do not need to side with any highly controversial claims that made this concept acquire this reputation.

First, the concept of aesthetic experience has been used to define art. The idea is that those objects are works of art that are supposed to trigger aesthetic experiences or, alternatively, that trigger aesthetic experiences in a suitably informed spectator (see Bell, 1914, for a classic exposition). With some alternative definitions of art (see Dickie, 1964, and Levinson, 1979) as well as the general scepticism about the feasibility and desirability of a general definition of art (see, for example, Weitz, 1956; Lopes, 2008; 2014), this use of the concept of aesthetic experience is not something anyone who still talks about aesthetic experiences should feel obliged to take seriously.

Second, the concept of aesthetic experience has also often been taken to be the holy grail of how we should enjoy (great) art: if we enjoy (great) art the *right* way, we experience the work of art in an aesthetic manner. What seems to follow from this is that if we do not have an aesthetic experience when looking at (great) works of art, we are not doing what we are supposed to be doing: maybe we lack aesthetic sensibility or concentration or training. I will not assume that there is a *right* way of engaging with art, let alone that the right way is to have an aesthetic experience.

Third, I take aesthetic experience to be neither necessary nor sufficient for the experience of works of art. We can experience works of art in a non-aesthetic manner and we can experience objects other than works of art in an aesthetic manner. We experience works of art in all kinds of ways: sometimes we are only paying attention to their

price or to their colour (as in the proverbial case of buying an artwork to match one's sofa). These experiences are unlikely to be aesthetic experiences. Yet, what we experience in these examples are works of art. Also, presumably art thieves don't have aesthetic experience when they are robbing a museum. Conversely, we can have aesthetic experience of nature and of ordinary objects (see Carroll, 1993, and Irvin, 2008, respectively). In short, the concept of aesthetic experience should be detached from art: some, but not all, of our aesthetic experiences are of artworks and some, but not all, our experiences of artworks are aesthetic experiences.

Fourth, I don't want to restrict aesthetic experiences to perceptual experiences (although I will mainly talk about perceptual aesthetic experiences in this paper). It has been argued that we can have aesthetic experiences of entities that are not perceived: maybe ideas (in the case of engaging with conceptual art), maybe large scale narrative structure (Collingwood, 1938; Goldie and Schellekens, 2007; Shelley, 2003; Costello, 2013). I see no reason why we should exclude these from the circle of aesthetic experiences.

My aim is to explain some important features of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience in terms of aesthetic attention. And if this explanatory scheme works, it should also work in the case of these non-perceptual examples of aesthetic experience.

III. Disinterested Attention

Probably the oldest and most widely discussed account of aesthetic experience focuses on the phenomenal character of these experiences. The general idea is that, to put it simply, aesthetic experiences 'feel' different: what it is like to have aesthetic experiences is different from what it is like to have non-aesthetic experiences. The question then is: what is this phenomenal character that is proprietary to aesthetic experiences? Some of the most famous candidates are detachment, disinterestedness, and disengagement (Stolnitz, 1960, emphasizes disinterestedness, whereas Bullough, 1912, emphasizes emotional detachment) — and these are very much in the spirit of the Proust quote I started out with. The general Kantian insight here is that our aesthetic experiences are different from our other experiences in as

much as they are free from our everyday worries and practical outlook.²

The concept of attention has been very important both in the expositions of and in the objections to the ‘disinterestedness’ accounts of aesthetic experience. Eliseo Vivas, for example, defines aesthetic experience as ‘an experience of rapt attention which involves the intransitive apprehension of an object’s immanent meanings and values in their full presentational immediacy’ (Vivas, 1959, p. 227). Jerome Stolnitz also appeals to the concept of attention in his definition of the aesthetic attitude as ‘disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone’ (Stolnitz, 1960, pp. 33–4; see also Fenner, 1996; Kemp, 1999).

I will follow the same route: I also think that a crucial feature of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience is the way our attention is exercised and this way has a lot to do with disinterestedness (at least under some conception of disinterestedness). But it has to be acknowledged that talking about aesthetic attention and especially disinterested aesthetic attention has become a strict taboo in aesthetics since George Dickie’s influential rejection of the very idea of aesthetic attitude and aesthetic experience, which is based on a lengthy analysis of the concept of ‘disinterested attention’ (Dickie, 1964; 1974; see also Zemach, 1997). If we want to revive the concept of aesthetic attention, it needs to be pointed out that Dickie’s argument is incomplete or maybe even misguided. And, as it turns out, it is.

Dickie (reasonably) assumes that those accounts that define aesthetic experience (or aesthetic attitude) in terms of disinterested attention would need to have a clear distinction between interested and disinterested attention: aesthetic experience is characterized by disinterested attention and other kinds of experiences are characterized by interested attention. But, so the argument continues, attention is just not the kind of thing that can be interested or disinterested.

As Dickie’s supposed demolition of the myth of the aesthetic attitude seems to rely on this piece of conceptual analysis of attention, we need to examine the assumptions he makes about this concept. The most important assumption seems to be that there is one kind of

² I called this insight Kantian because this is a view routinely attributed to Kant, but see Zangwill (1992) for a more nuanced account of what Kant meant and for an analysis of how contemporary concepts of disinterestedness relate to the Kantian one.

attention: attention can have different motives and it can be stronger or weaker but we cannot talk about different types of attention.³ For Dickie, there is only one type of attention.⁴

But this is just a false claim. There are a number of ways of attending (overt/covert, endogenous/exogenous, focused/distributed, etc. — see Chun, Golomb and Turk-Browne, 2011, for a taxonomy, and see also Posner, 1980; 1984; Posner *et al.*, 1984; Hoffman and Subramaniam, 1995; Kowler *et al.*, 1995, for the specific distinctions). But if this is so, then we can bypass Dickie's argument and try to characterize aesthetic experiences in terms of the way our attention is being exercised. This is exactly what I aim to do — by turning to philosophy of perception for some help.

IV. Distributed versus Focused Attention

My starting point is the old and, within perceptual psychology, mainstream distinction between focused and distributed attention. Here is a brief exposition of this distinction:

When the attention of an observer is strictly or intensely focussed on a particular part of a visual scene... then only its object(s) are present in consciousness, but in most ordinary viewing situations attention is not so exclusively focussed. Rather, it tends to be far more broadly distributed, encompassing much of what is present in the scene. (Mack, 2002, p. 105)

The distinction between focused and distributed attention is not new: it was introduced in the early 1970s (Eriksen and Hoffman, 1972) and was routinely used in describing visual search experiments soon afterwards (see, for example, Treisman and Elade, 1980). It has been a standard distinction in the visual search and visual attention literature ever since (the same distinction is often referred to as focal versus diffuse attention; see, for example, Cavanagh and Alvarez, 2005; Chong and Treisman, 2005).⁵

³ 'There is only one way to listen to (to attend to) music, although listening may be more or less attentive and there may be a variety of motives, intentions and reasons for doing so and a variety of ways of being distracted from the music' (Dickie, 1964, p. 58).

⁴ Dickie does admit that we can attend to different properties of the same entity, but maintains that there is only one way of attending to a property.

⁵ This distinction is not the same as the widely discussed foreground/background distinction, that is, the distinction between awareness of the attended stimulus and awareness without (or with little) attention (see, for example, Neisser's, 1967, concept of pre-attentive processing; Rock and Gutman's, 1981, concept of inattention; see also

It is important to emphasize that the difference between focused and distributed attention concerns the size of the visual field or the number of objects one is attending to. To this empirically established distinction between focused and distributed attention I would like to add a conceptual one about what it is that we are attending to: to entities or to properties (see Scholl, 2001). We sometimes talk about attending to entities: to the pedestrian who is crossing the road in front of me or to the car that is trying to overtake me (James, 1892/1961, p. 39). But sometimes we talk about attending to properties: to the colour of the car that is trying to overtake me or to its speed, etc. Every entity has lots of properties. Hence, we can shift our attention from one property to another while still attending to the same object — say, when I attend to the colour of my laptop and then I start attending to its shape.⁶

The traditional distinction between focused *vs.* distributed attention we know from vision science is a distinction between two ways of attending to entities. But we can make a similar distinction between attending to *properties* in a focused or distributed manner. Suppose that I am attending to one object only (say, because there is only one object in my visual field). I can attend to only a few properties (or even only one property) of this object. But my attention can also be, to paraphrase Mack, ‘broadly distributed, encompassing’ various properties I perceive the object as having. The same distinction can be made if I am attending to a number of objects. I can attribute the same property — say, the property of being red — to all of these objects (this is in fact what happens during visual search experiments). In this case, although my attention is distributed in the sense that I am attending to a number of *objects*, my attention is focused inasmuch as I attribute only a few *properties* to them. But I can also attribute different properties to different objects, in which case both my attention to objects and my attention to properties are distributed.

Mangan, 1993; Schwitzgebel, 2007, for philosophical summaries). When our attention is focused, we may still be aware of some stimuli that are not attended to (in fact, in the Neisser and Rock experiments attention seems to be focused). And the same is true of distributed attention. The contrast between focused and distributed attention is about how much of the visual stimuli we are attending to and not how much of it we are conscious of.

⁶ I need to emphasize that what I mean by attention is conscious attention. This is not to deny (or endorse) that attention can be unconscious, but it is conscious distributed attention that I take to be an important feature of the aesthetic domain.

Thus, we get two cross-cutting distinctions: focused versus distributed attention with regards to objects, and focused versus distributed attention with regards to properties. I am interested in experiences where our attention is distributed with regards to properties but focused with regards to objects. I call attention of this kind ‘aesthetic attention’ and argue that it is a crucial feature of some paradigmatic examples of aesthetic experience.

Most of the time, we are attending to only a few properties of any object in our visual field. As Mack emphasizes above, our attention is normally distributed (with regards to objects): we are attending to a number of objects. But then given the limited capacity of our attention, we are unlikely to attribute a large number of different properties to them (see Wolfe, Klempen and Dahlen, 2000). Thus, attending to one object only but to a large number of different properties thereof is special — it is a very different way of allocating our limited processing resources from the standard case: it is allocated to one object only, but to a variety of its properties (and not to lots of objects and a limited number of their properties). And it is this ‘special’ way of attending that I call ‘aesthetic attention’.⁷

More slowly: the two cross-cutting distinctions (between focused versus distributed attention with regards to objects and between focused versus distributed attention with regards to properties) give us four different ways in which we can exercise our attention. Our attention can be:

- (i) Distributed with regards to objects and focused with regards to properties,
- (ii) Distributed with regards to objects and distributed with regards to properties,
- (iii) Focused with regards to objects and focused with regards to properties,
- (iv) Focused with regards to objects and distributed with regards to properties.

⁷ It is important to emphasize that the limitation of attentional resources applies in the case of distributed attention the same way as it does to focused attention. But while focused attention concentrates these resources to a limited number of properties, distributed attention doesn’t. Attending to many properties of one object and attending to one property of many objects are equally demanding in terms of attentional resources, but it utilizes these resources very differently.

An example of (i) is the way we exercise our attention in visual search experiments or in tasks where we need to sort through a pile of red and blue socks. In these cases, we are attending to lots of objects, but only to one property of these objects (in this example, their colour). In the case of (ii) our attention is all over the place: it is not fixated either on an object or on any given property: it wanders aimlessly. I take this to be a fairly common way of attending: this is what you are likely to do when you have to wait at the doctor's office and you forgot to bring anything to read. Another fairly common way of attending is (iii), where we are focusing on a specific property of a specific object: the performance of most perceptually guided actions presupposes attention of this kind (Hayhoe and Ballard, 2005). Finally, (iv), which seems much less common to me, is an experience where our attention is focused and distributed at the same time: it is focused inasmuch as we are attending to one object only. But it is distributed across the properties of this object. Our attention to properties is similar to the case of (ii) — it is not focused on one property only, but it is also very different from (ii) as this way of attending is always centred on one object only. And (iv) is clearly very different from (iii). If, as I argue, (iv) is a good bet for those who want to understand what disinterested attention is, (iii) would be the prime example of 'interested attention'. And (ii) would be attending characterized by no interest at all. Dickie offered us a choice between (ii) and (iii) and (rightly) pointed out that neither should be taken to be aesthetic attention. But he failed to consider other ways of attending. He failed to consider (iv), attending focused on an object but distributed across its properties.

A quick note on what I take to be the 'object of attention' when I talk about attention focused on an object: by 'object of attention' I mean perceptual object (or, as it is sometimes labelled, 'sensory individual'; see Cohen, 2004; Nanay 2013). If one has an aesthetic experience of a landscape, then the 'object of attention' is likely to be the entire landscape and not one tree or another (one, of course, can have an aesthetic experience of a single tree as well). And in this case, the attention exercised in this experience is still focused with regards to its object, while distributed with regards to its properties (and among these properties will be relational properties connecting various parts of the landscape).

This account of aesthetic attention is not vulnerable to Dickie-style objections: there is a very clearly defined difference between aesthetic attention and non-aesthetic attention — one of them is distributed across properties but focused on one object, whereas the other one is

not. But does this account capture the appeal to disinterestedness that drives the earlier accounts of aesthetic attention? Well, the answer depends on what one means by disinterestedness. Distributed attention is not strictly speaking disinterested if by ‘disinterest’ we mean the lack of interest, but I take this to be a good thing. It would be odd to suppose that what characterizes our aesthetic experience is the lack of interest.

But thinking of aesthetic attention as distributed attention does capture the original Kantian importance of disinterest in our aesthetic experiences. Practical interest in an object, which is supposed to exclude aesthetic experience, could be described as attention focused on a limited number of its features — the ones we are interested in from a practical point of view. It is only when we are free from practical interests that we have a chance to experience the object in an aesthetic manner. This does not mean that we experience it with no interest — Dickie is right about this. Aesthetic attention does not equal the lack of attention. It equals distributed attention among a variety of properties, which is nonetheless focused on the same object. Thus, we can say that aesthetic interest is not really disinterest but rather distributed interest.⁸

Here is an empirical reason to think that this account about aesthetic attention is on the right track. Attention, as we have seen, can be covert or overt. Overt shifts of attention are accompanied by eye-movements. Covert shifts are not. So not all changes in attention are tracked by eye-movements. But many are. And it can be and has been analysed how the eye-movement patterns of experts and naïve observers differ when looking at artworks. The findings show that at least the overt attention of art experts (that is, artists and/or people with between 5 and 11 years of art school training) is much more distributed (spatially) than that of naïve observers (Vogt and Magnussen, 2007). When looking at a picture of a scene with a human figure, the eye-movements of naïve observers tend to be focused on

⁸ This account, like most of the disinterested attention accounts, is formulated in a way that seems to fit best with our experience of the visual arts: a tranquil contemplation of a picture or a sculpture. But given that there is nothing about distributed attention that is tied to the visual sense modality and to a stationary scene we are observing, my account can also give a good description of our aesthetic experience of the non-visual and temporal arts — music and film, for example (see, for example, Peacocke, 2009, for an account emphasizing the importance of attending to relational properties, which I take to be a form of attending in a distributed manner, for the appreciation of music).

the human figure (and especially the face), whereas the eye-movements of experts tends to be distributed almost evenly across the image surface. I do not take these findings to be definite proof about the importance of aesthetic attention because I don't think that art school training strongly correlates with one's ability to have aesthetic experiences, and I also need to acknowledge that the distribution of attention these experiments are about is spatial distribution, whereas not all distribution with regards to properties is spatial distribution. But I do think that these experiments at least indicate that the account of aesthetic attention is on the right track.

V. Aesthetic Attention and Aesthetic Experience

My claim was that attending to a variety of properties of the object we are looking at, that is, aesthetic attention, is a central feature of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience — again, the claim is not that it is a necessary let alone sufficient condition for all different kinds of aesthetic experiences. No doubt, there are many experiences where our attention is distributed among a number of properties of the perceived scene that are in no way aesthetic experiences. And there are also experiences that people tend to describe as aesthetic but where our attention is not at all distributed.

Here is a potential candidate for a type of experience where our attention is not distributed — in fact it is very much focused. Suppose that I am looking at Van Eyck's *Man in a blue turban (or blue chaperon)* and I am mesmerized by the hue of the turban: that is the only aspect of the painting to which I am devoting all my attention. Do I have an aesthetic experience? Maybe I do, although one may wonder what this is an aesthetic experience of: clearly not of the painting or even of the turban — maybe of the hue. But even if it is an aesthetic experience, it is clearly not an aesthetic experience of the Proustian kind I have been focusing on. So, again, some experiences that may be called aesthetic may not require aesthetic attention. Nevertheless, those paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience I zeroed in on at the beginning of the paper do. But maybe I am too concessive. It could be argued that, when we are captivated by the colour of the turban, we may very well be distributing our attention among a number of properties. The turban has various shades and part of what the observer may describe as being mesmerized by the colour may in fact consist of attending to how the shade changes across the surface: how it is lighter on the left and slightly darker on the right,

how it is the lightest just above the forehead, etc. What the observer may describe as being mesmerized by the colour may also involve attending to the contrast between the blue of the turban and the dark brown of the man's clothes, or the contrast between the blue of the turban and the much darker, almost black shade of the background. If so, however, then her attention is in fact distributed among a variety of different properties of the object her attention is focused on.

More generally, one could argue that aesthetic experiences often have a lot to do with formal unity: the taking in of the artwork (or whatever is experienced in an aesthetic manner) as a single, integrated whole (see Beardsley, 1981, for a classic exposition of this). The worry then would be that this seems like focused and not distributed attention. But this way of thinking about aesthetic experiences is very much consistent with my approach. Remember that aesthetic attention is focused with regard to the object and distributed with regards to the properties. And this, I would agree, describes the features of aesthetic experiences Beardsley talks about: we do attend to the unified single integrated whole of the perceptual object: our attention is focused with regards to the perceptual object. But at the same time, our attention is distributed with regards to the properties of this perceptual object: the different aspects of this integrated whole and the different ways they contribute to its being an integrated whole. In order to appreciate the unity and integration of what we experience aesthetically, we need to exercise our attention in this focused (with regards to objects) and at the same time distributed (with regards to properties) manner: we need aesthetic attention.

Conversely, suppose that you have an experience where your attention is distributed. Will this experience automatically count as an aesthetic experience? Clearly not. If you promise to give me a lot of money if I manage to have an experience where my attention is distributed and I succeed, this will still be unlikely to count as an aesthetic experience. But then we may need to add a further condition: maybe that we shouldn't value this experience for the sake of something else (which seems to be what goes wrong with this example, see Levinson, 2013; Iseminger, 2006, for the importance of this 'valuing for its own sake' line of argument in understanding aesthetic experiences).⁹

⁹ This would also keep apart aesthetic experiences and other, more prosaic, experiences, such as that of unwrapping a gift.

Note that emphasizing the importance of aesthetic attention in thinking about aesthetic experiences captures some of the oldest platitudes about the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experiences. When I look at a Giacometti sculpture while being attacked by a burglar and looking for a defence weapon, I am unlikely to have an aesthetic experience. But when looking at it in a museum, undisturbed, with a lot of time on my hands, admiring its composition, then I am in a better position to have an aesthetic experience. When the burglar is attacking me, my attention is focused on one property of my environment only: on how I can use the objects around me for defending myself. So I am likely to see the objects in my visual field as belonging to two categories: things that I can use to defend myself and things that I can't. When I spot the Giacometti, I am very likely to take notice of one and only one of its numerous properties: its propensity to serve as a means of my self-defence (see Nanay, 2011; 2012; 2013). If, in contrast, I am looking at the sculpture in a museum, with a lot of time on my hands, admiring its composition, then nothing should stop me from attending to a number of its properties: nothing should stop my attention from being distributed with regards to the properties of the sculpture. It needs to be added that nothing *guarantees* that my attention will in fact be distributed with regards to the properties of the object. I may, after all, be obsessed with the size of the feet of Giacometti's figures and pay attention to only that one aspect of the sculpture. Or I may be looking for a sculpture that fits on my bookshelf and I am only interested in the size of the sculpture. In these cases, my attention is, again, focused on one property only — it is not an instance of aesthetic attention.

The very fact that in my account whether our experience is aesthetic is not guaranteed by the situation and our intentions should, in itself, be taken to be an indication that the account is on the right track. As we have seen in Section II above, we do not have full control over whether we have an aesthetic experience. We go to a museum to have an aesthetic experience of an artwork we had an aesthetic experience of a day ago, but it is just not happening. We stand in front of it and, although we really want to, we fail to experience it in an aesthetic manner. Most of the existing explanations of aesthetic experience (notably, the deflationary account — Carroll 2000; 2002; 2006 — and those approaches that talk about 'valuing for its own sake' — Levinson, 2013; Iseminger, 2006) fail to account for this interesting and unfortunate aspect of aesthetic experiences (see Nanay, forthcoming). If, however, aesthetic attention is indeed a central feature of

some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience, then whether we manage to have an aesthetic experience is at least to a large part a matter of whether we manage to attend in this specific manner. And attending in a certain way is not something we can always force ourselves to do (see Prinzmetal and Landau, 2008, for a good summary on this; arguably, this point was already made by Leibniz, 1704/1981, §54).¹⁰

The same goes for the other desideratum for accounts of aesthetic experience: the one about the lingering effect of aesthetic experiences. If aesthetic experience is a matter of the exercise of aesthetic attention, then what we should expect is that our way of attending in a distributed manner will be slow to change — because we do not have full control over the way we exercise our attention. But then, just because the movie or the concert is over or just because we left the museum, the way we exercise our attention does not have to, and often does not, change — it is the aesthetic way in which we are attending to the world that lingers.

But does this way of thinking about aesthetic attention adequately describe what the grand novelists were trying to capture? I hope so. Here is Robert Musil's characterization of aesthetic experience (what he calls the 'Other Condition'), which appears to make the same connection between aesthetic experience and distributed attention:

Everything was shifted out of the focus of attention and has lost its sharp outlines. Seen in this way, it was all a little scattered and blurred, and yet manifestly there were still other centres filling it again with delicate certainty and clarity. For all life's problems and events took on an incomparable mildness, softness and serenity, and at the same time an utterly transformed meaning. (Musil, 1979, pp. 144–5)

Some other old and influential descriptions of aesthetic experience also seem to support my emphasis on aesthetic attention. Take Roger Fry's famous description of his aesthetic experience of watching a film (which is also one of the earliest pieces of theoretical writing on cinema):

If, in a cinematograph, we see a runaway horse and cart, we do not have to think either of getting out of the way or heroically interposing ourselves. The result is that in the first place we *see* the event much more

¹⁰ I do not claim that my account is the only possible account that is capable of accounting for the fact that aesthetic experiences are not fully under our control. But my account can explain this and the other accounts that are on offer have difficulties doing so.

clearly; see a number of quite interesting but irrelevant things, which in real life could not struggle into our consciousness, bent, as it would be, entirely upon the problem of our appropriate reaction. I remember seeing in a cinematograph the arrival of a train at a foreign station and the people descending from the carriages; there was no platform, and to my intense surprise I saw several people turn right round after reaching the ground, as though to orientate themselves; an almost ridiculous performance, which I had never noticed in all the many hundred occasions on which such a scene had passed before my eyes in real life. The fact being that at a station one is never really a spectator of events, but an actor engaged in the drama of luggage or prospective seats, and one actually sees only so much as may help to the appropriate action. (Fry, 1909/1920, pp. 18–9)

Fry talks about irrelevant aspects of the perceived scene that, if the scene were observed in a non-aesthetic manner, would have gone unnoticed. In other words, we are attending to aspects of the perceived scene we would not be attending to otherwise. Our attention is aesthetic attention. D.H. Lawrence gives a surprisingly similar characterization of the way attention is exercised when we engage with art: ‘The essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention, and “discovers” a new world within the known world’ (Lawrence, 1928/2005, p. 107).

A much more detailed and more influential description of aesthetic experience comes from the Russian formalists. One of the key concepts of Russian formalism is defamiliarization (see Thompson, 1988, pp. 10–11). Here is what this concept means:

If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic... Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed... The object, perceived in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten... Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war... And Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (Shklovsky, 1917/1965, pp. 11–12)

This metaphor could also be interpreted easily in the framework I outlined above. If an object is unfamiliar, we do not know how to approach it, therefore we tend to attend to a number of its properties to

figure out what to do with it or what can be done with it. If an object is familiar, we just attend to those of its properties that we need to attend to. When the Russian formalists describe aesthetic experience as being similar to the experience of the unfamiliar, they really describe a way of attending to this object that is less focused than it normally would be. They describe what I call aesthetic attention.

Similar considerations apply in the case of the following famous quote by Giorgio de Chirico:

One clear autumnal afternoon I was sitting on a bench in the middle of the Piazza Santa Croce in Florence. It was of course not the first time I had seen this square... The whole world, down to the marble of the buildings and the fountains, seemed to me to be convalescent. In the middle of the square rises a statue of Dante draped in a long cloak, holding his works clasped against his body, his laurel-crowned head bent thoughtfully earthward. The statue is in white marble, but time has given it a gray cast, very agreeable to the eye. The autumn sun, warm and unloving, lit the statue and the church façade. Then I had the strange impression that I was looking at all these things for the first time. (De Chirico, 1912, cited in Chipp, 1968, pp. 397–8)

De Chirico seems to suggest that what is distinctive about aesthetic experience is that it is an experience that is very much akin to encountering something for the very first time. As encountering something for the very first time seems to imply some version of distributed attention (as we have no precedent to go by for approaching the object visually), these views seem to be consistent with the general line of argument I am proposing here.

This may also help us to give an answer to one of the most important questions about aesthetic experience, namely, why should we care? Why do we pay large sums of money to put ourselves in a position to have an aesthetic experience (which, as we have seen, doesn't always then materialize)? If we accept my claim about the centrality of aesthetic attention in understanding aesthetic experience, the answer will be straightforward: because aesthetic experiences allow us to see and attend to the world differently — in a way that we don't, and couldn't, see it otherwise.

References

- Beardsley, M. (1981) *Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
 Bell, C. (1914) *Art*, London: Chatto and Windus.
 Bullough, E. (1912) 'Physical distance' as a factor in art and as an aesthetic principle, *British Journal of Psychology*, **5**, pp. 87–98.

- Carroll, N. (1993) On being moved by nature: Between religion and natural history, in Kemal, S. & Gaskell, I. (eds.) *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, pp. 244–266. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carroll, N. (2000) Art and the domain of the aesthetic, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **40**, pp. 191–208.
- Carroll, N. (2002) Aesthetic experience revisited, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **42**, pp. 145–168.
- Carroll, N. (2006) Aesthetic experience: A question of content, in Kieran, M. (ed.) *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, pp. 69–97. London: Blackwell.
- Cavanagh, P. & Alvarez, G.A. (2005) Tracking multiple targets with multifocal attention, *Trends in Cognitive Science*, **9**, pp. 349–354.
- Chong, S.C. & Treisman, A. (2005) Attentional spread in the statistical processing of visual displays, *Perception and Psychophysics*, **67**, pp. 1–13.
- Chun, M., Golomb, J.D. & Turk-Browne, N. (2011) A taxonomy of external and internal attention, *Annual Review of Psychology*, **62**, pp. 73–101.
- Cohen, J. (2004) Objects, places, and perception, *Philosophical Psychology*, **17**, pp. 471–495.
- Collingwood, R.G. (1938) *Principles of Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Costello, D. (2013) Kant and the problem of strong non-perceptual art, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **53**, pp. 277–298.
- Danto, A.C. (1996) From aesthetics to art criticism and back, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, **54**, pp. 105–115.
- De Chirico, G. (1912/1968) Meditations of a painter, in Chipp, H.B. (ed.) *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Dickie, G. (1964) The myth of aesthetic attitude, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **1**, pp. 56–65.
- Dickie, G. (1974) *Art and the Aesthetic*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Eriksen, C.W.W. & Hoffman, J.E. (1972) Temporal and spatial characteristics of selective encoding from visual displays, *Perception and Psychophysics*, **12**, pp. 201–204.
- Fenner, D. (1996) *The Aesthetic Attitude*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- Fry, R. (1909/1920) An essay in aesthetics, in *Vision and Design*, London: Chatto and Windus.
- Fry, R. (1927/1951) *French, Flemish and British Art*, London: Butler and Tanner.
- Goldie, P. & Schellekens, E. (eds.) (2007) *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hayhoe, M. & Ballard, D. (2005) Eye movements in natural behaviour, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, **9**, pp. 188–194.
- Hoffman, J.E. & Subramaniam, B. (1995) The role of visual attention in saccadic eye movements, *Perception and Psychophysics*, **57**, pp. 787–795.
- Hopkins, R. (1997) Pictures and beauty, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, **97**, pp. 177–194.
- Hoving, T. (1993) *Making the Mummies Dance: Inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Huxley, A. (1954) *The Doors of Perception*, London: Chatto & Windus.
- Irvin, S. (2008) The pervasiveness of the aesthetic in ordinary experience, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **48**, pp. 29–44.

- Iseminger, G. (2006) The aesthetic state of mind, in Kieran, M. (ed.) *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, pp. 98–110, London: Blackwell.
- James, W. (1892/1961) *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, Allport, G. (ed.), New York: Harper & Row.
- Kemp, G. (1999) The aesthetic attitude, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **39**, pp. 392–399.
- Kowler, E., Anderson, E., Doshier, B. & Blaser, E. (1995) The role of attention in the programming of saccades, *Vision Research*, **35**, pp. 1897–1916.
- Lawrence, D.H. (1928/2005) Introduction to Harry Crosby's *Chariot of the Sun*, in Boulton, J.T. (ed.) *The Cambridge Edition of the Letters and Works of D.H. Lawrence*, pp. 107–116, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leibniz, G. (1704/1981) *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Remnant, P. & Bennett, J. (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levinson, J. (1979) Defining art historically, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **19**, pp. 232–250.
- Levinson, J. (2013) *Toward a non-minimalist conception of aesthetic experience*, in *Aesthetic Pursuits*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lopes, D.M. (2008) Nobody needs a theory of art, *Journal of Philosophy*, **105**, pp. 109–127.
- Lopes, D.M. (2014) *Beyond Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mack, A. (2002) Is the visual world a grand illusion? A response, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **9** (5–6), pp. 102–110.
- Mack, A. & Rock, I. (1998) *Inattentional Blindness*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mangan, B. (1993) Taking phenomenology seriously: The 'fringe' and its implications for cognitive research, *Consciousness and Cognition*, **2**, pp. 89–108.
- Musil, R. (1979) *The Man Without Qualities*, Wilkins, E. & Kaiser, E. (trans.), London: Picador.
- Nanay, B. (2011) Do we perceive apples as edible?, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, **92**, pp. 305–322.
- Nanay, B. (2012) Action-oriented perception, *European Journal of Philosophy*, **20**, pp. 430–446.
- Nanay, B. (2013) *Between Perception and Action*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nanay, B. (2014) The dethroning of ideocracy: Robert Musil as a philosopher, *The Monist*, **87**, pp. 3–11.
- Nanay, B. (forthcoming) *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Neisser, U. (1967) *Cognitive Psychology*, New York: Appleton.
- Peacocke, C. (2009) The perception of music: Sources of significance, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **49**, pp. 257–275.
- Posner, M.I. (1980) Orienting of attention, *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, **32**, pp. 2–25.
- Posner, M.I. (1984) Current research in the study of selective attention, in Donchin, E. (ed.) *Cognitive Psychophysiology: Event Related Potentials and the Study of Cognition*, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Posner, M.I., Walker, J.A., Friedrich, F.J. & Rafal, R.D. (1984) Effects of parietal injury on covert orienting of attention, *Journal of Neuroscience*, **4**, pp. 1863–1874.

- Prinzmetal, W. & Landau, A. (2008) Dissecting spatial visual attention, in Coltheart, V. (ed.) *Tutorials in Visual Cognition*, Hove: Psychology Press.
- Proust, M. (1928) *Swann's Way*, Scott Moncrieff, C.K. (trans.), New York: Modern Library.
- Rock, I. & Gutman, D. (1981) The effect of inattention on form perception, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, **7**, pp. 275–285.
- Scheffler, S. (2010) *Equality and Tradition*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scholl, B.J. (2001) Objects and attention: The state of the art, *Cognition*, **80**, pp. 1–46.
- Schwitzgebel, E. (2007) Do you have constant tactile experience of your feet in your shoes? Or is experience limited to what's in attention?, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **14** (3), pp. 5–35.
- Shelley, J. (2003) The problem of non-perceptual art, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **43**, pp. 363–378.
- Shklovsky, V. (1917/1965) Art as technique, in Lemon, L.T. & Reis, M.J. (ed.) *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Simmons, D.J. & Chabris, C.F. (1999) Gorillas in our midst: Sustained inattention blindness for dynamic events, *Perception*, **28**, pp. 1059–1074.
- Stolnitz, J. (1960) *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism*, New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Szarkowski, J. (1964) Introduction to *Andre Kertesz*, New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- Thompson, K. (1988) *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Treisman, A.M. & Elade, G.G. (1980) A feature-integration theory of attention, *Cognitive Psychology*, **12**, pp. 97–136.
- Vivas, E. (1959) Contextualism reconsidered, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, **18** (2), pp. 222–240.
- Vogt, S. & Magnussen, S. (2007) Expertise in pictorial perception: Eye-movement patterns and visual memory in artists and laymen, *Perception*, **36**, pp. 91–100.
- Weitz, M. (1956) The role of theory in aesthetics, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, **15**, pp. 27–35.
- Wolfe, J.M. (1999) Inattentional amnesia, in Coltheart, V. (ed.) *Fleeting Memories: Cognition of Brief Visual Stimuli*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wolfe, J.M., Klempen, N. & Dahlen, K. (2000) Post-attentive vision, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception & Performance*, **26**, pp. 693–716.
- Wollheim, R. (1987) *Painting as an Art*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zangwill, N. (1992) UnKantian notions of disinterest, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **32**, pp. 49–52.
- Zemach, E. (1997) *Real Beauty*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Paper received July 2014; revised March 2015.