

FILM, PERCEPTION, AESTHETICS

An interview with Bence Nanay

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1 Film

MARK WINDSOR: Before you started your academic career you worked for several years as a film critic, and served as a jury member for a number of international film festivals. What sparked your interest in film?

BENCE NANAY: I grew up in Hungary, in Budapest. Budapest was kind of culture-obsessed at the time, in the nineties. There were more than a hundred cinemas—most of them have closed down since then. They were showing these old films, old black and white films, so you could really get an education in film history just by going to the cinema—it was really great. It was the ideal milieu for starting a career as a film critic. And there were a lot of cultural monthlies and quarterlies where you could publish stuff on film. So I was not forced to do weekly film criticism, which invariably means writing about films one doesn't like.

Eventually I got into this organisation called FIPRESCI,¹ which is the International Federation of Film Critics, and one thing they do is nominate film critics for the critics' jury of various major international film festivals. The film festival pays for your costs, so it's a good gig,

¹<http://www.fipresci.org/>

especially as a graduate student, going from festival to festival.

SHELBY MOSER: What kind of films do you like?

BN: I like, you know, really boring films, like ‘dead tree bad weather.’

SM: ‘Dead tree bad weather’? [laughs]

BN: In the States there used to be a commercial for the Sundance Channel. There were these students in film school, and this professor with a thick Russian or maybe French accent who asks, ‘so what is photogenic?’ And someone says, ‘sunsets?’ ‘Ah, what kind of Hollywood bullshit is that?’ And someone else says, ‘dead tree bad weather?’ ‘Yeah, that’s exactly it, that’s what’s photogenic!’ I like films by Antonioni and Godard, that kind of thing. That’s the way I got into film. As a teenager I went to crappy Hollywood films with my friends, and then I found out about this Antonioni retrospective. I went there for reasons that had nothing to do with aesthetics, but started watching them; they were amazing pictures, amazing images. I went to see other sixties Italian stuff, sixties French stuff, and silent films, and it grew from there. Most of my film criticism I did was while I was in graduate school in California, to the utter dismay of my advisors.

MW: What made you decide to pursue a career in academia as opposed to being a film critic?

BN: I think I went into film criticism because I wanted to figure out what makes one film better than another, what makes one image blow my mind and the other not very interesting. It was good to go to film festivals because I saw a lot of great films that would have been difficult to see otherwise, but it didn’t really get me closer to understanding what the difference was. I guess that’s the reason why I went into aesthetics, to understand how our mind works differently when we look at an amazing film and when we look at a really crappy film.

SM: Do you still do film criticism?

BN: Maybe I'll get back to it eventually. It was a good life, being on the 'festival circuit', as they say: fancy hotels and restaurants and meeting famous directors, actors, actresses. But it was also interesting from a philosophical point of view. Being on a jury of three or five or however many people—all critics, but clearly not 'ideal critics'—and having to decide on the best film is an odd process from an aesthetics angle. A lot has been written about aesthetic agreement and disagreement, and it was good to experience that in real-life scenarios, to see how different people can have completely different aesthetic judgements. One thing I noticed more and more is that if two people grew up liking certain kinds of films, then it's more likely that in a selection of contemporary films at a festival, they're going to like the same films. It was interesting to see how agreement and disagreement about taste actually works, when we had to make a decision by midnight, and to figure out how to settle aesthetic disagreements.

Most aestheticians are realists when it comes to aesthetic judgements. But my jury work at film festivals made me a little suspicious of that. In many ways I think what's important is previous exposure to other artworks. As I said, if there are two critics who were exposed to very similar films during their formative years then they're going to like the same kind of films. If they are exposed to very different films, they will probably like very different films. I'm not ready to come out of the closet as a full-fledged anti-realist and say that beauty is all in the eye of the beholder, but at least it seems like there are ways of explaining aesthetic disagreements in an anti-realist way if you appeal to previous personal history or exposure to certain kinds of artworks.

MW: Does this relate to 'mere exposure effect'?

BN: I think a lot of people are extremely suspicious of that concept, so I try to avoid it. James Cutting did some interesting studies on this.²

²Cutting 2003.

He showed pictures of artworks to students during lectures in a completely value-neutral way; he just showed the slides without any comment. At the end of the semester he made the students rate the pictures that he had previously shown, and there was a correlation between how many times a picture was shown in class and how much the students liked it. That was supposed to show that mere exposure to an artwork makes it more probable that people will make a positive aesthetic assessment of that work. Cutting says that certain works are in the canon because the canon is self-reinforcing: because we encounter works that are in the canon more often, we're going to evaluate them more positively than works outside of the canon. Cutting is really flirting with some kind of anti-realist conclusion here—that there is no fact of the matter about whether something is beautiful or not; all there is for aesthetic judgment is that we like things more the more we encounter them. This is something that Aaron Meskin and Matthew Kieran and others were not very happy about. They thought, well maybe that's because the artworks that Cutting showed were good artworks, maybe it wouldn't work for bad artworks.³

One methodological problem I see in both the Cutting experiments and the Meskin et al. experiment is that they were only looking at individual artworks. Mere exposure to one token object will influence the aesthetic assessment of that particular token object, but that's not enough for aesthetic anti-realism. I think what would be more interesting would be to talk about objects of a certain type rather than single token objects. So if you presented seventeen early Impressionist paintings, and found that an eighteenth, unseen early Impressionist painting also elicited a more positive aesthetic assessment, that may be enough to establish some kind of anti-realism, or to help explain aesthetic disagreement in an anti-realist way. The other thing is that our exposure to works of art is very rarely 'mere'; most of the time it's very value-laden. Way more work needs to be done.

SM: This is sort of a miscellaneous question, but one that people will be interested in. Seeing as you were one of the last students of Richard

³Meskin et al. 2013.

Wollheim, is there anything you'd like to say about what it was like to work with him, or about his continuing influence on your work?

BN: I know that he was not universally liked, but frankly that bewilders me. I guess I met him during a tough period of his life, but he did not seem arrogant or anything like what some of the older aestheticians tend to say about him. He became a really good friend, besides being my teacher. We spent a lot of time sitting on the terrace of Café Roma, in Berkeley, sipping wine and talking about everything: art, music, literature, philosophy, love-life stuff, everything. I think that in many ways what I'm doing in aesthetics is a continuation of his project. Sometimes it shocks me that in some ways I'm really a disciple of Wollheim's, because he was the least likely person to have disciples. But I have to say that on some topics I had no idea what he was talking about. He was into Melanie Klein, and this whole psychoanalysis stuff is completely alien to me. But I think what you are really asking me to tell you is how I think I'm continuing his heritage. Should I talk about that?

SM/MW: Sure

BN: I think he took the whole idea of perception very seriously in the domain of aesthetics. He was probably the first one, in this tradition, who really saw that questions about aesthetics have a lot to do with perception, and obviously I'm trying to continue that. And I think he was basically right about twofoldness. Although that's one place where I think I probably should have detached myself more from his rhetoric in my publications on picture perception. But I really think that he was right. He was right both about picture perception and the aesthetic appreciation of pictures, but it was not very helpful that he didn't make a clear distinction between these two questions.

What he said was that twofoldness is necessary for pictorial seeing. There were really two things that he meant by this: there are two problems and two concepts of twofoldness that he used, completely interchangeably. So one problem he wanted to understand is what it

is to see something in a picture. Most of the time when we see things in a picture there's nothing aesthetic about it, right? When I'm watching a sitcom or when I'm watching a commercial on television or when I walk in the street and I see posters, I'm very unlikely to have an aesthetic appreciation of these pictures. So there's these two very different questions, one of them is picture perception, which has nothing to do with the domain of aesthetic appreciation at all, it's really a philosophy of perception question: what happens when you see something in a picture, regardless of anything aesthetic. The other question is what happens when you're aesthetically appreciating a picture. Wollheim slid back and forth between these two questions. I think Gombrich was doing the same thing. One may wonder why that was. Were they just so elitist that they could only see things aesthetically? [laughs] They admire the slightly asymmetric triangular compositions of *Friends* or something? It's very unlikely.

When Wollheim discussed twofoldness, which is the idea that you simultaneously see the picture surface and the three dimensional object, he sometimes clearly used it as a necessary feature for picture perception, and he sometimes clearly used it as a necessary feature for the aesthetic appreciation of pictures.⁴ How is that possible? I think that, if you want to be charitable—and I guess I want to be charitable—then what we could say is that he really used two different concepts of twofoldness. One concept of twofoldness, the one that's necessary for picture perception, has nothing to do with awareness. It just has to do with perceptions. You *perceive*, consciously or unconsciously, both the picture surface and the depicted object. For the appreciation of pictures, you have to somehow simultaneously be *aware* of them, to have a conscious perception of both. When you're looking at a picture, most of the time you're not at all attending to the surface, you're only attending to the depicted scene. When you're watching a sitcom you're not attending to the surface properties, you're only attending to Ross and Rachel . . . or Joey [laughs]

MW: . . . or Chandler [laughs]

⁴e.g. Wollheim 1987.

BN: . . . or Chandler [laughs]. But when you're aesthetically appreciating a picture, you attend both to the picture's surface and to the depicted object, and to the interrelation between the two. Having said that I have a new idea that it's not actually twofoldness but threefoldness.

SM: Could you say more about threefoldness?

BN: The idea is that you're actually aware of three things—that three things show up in your experience. Not just the picture surface and the depicted object, but the picture surface, the object that's visually encoded in the picture surface, and the depicted object. So if you're looking at a caricature of Mick Jagger, then the picture surface is just the picture surface, the three dimensional object that's visually encoded in the picture is, you know, a three dimensional dude with very . . .

MW: . . . big lips? [laughs]

BN: . . . big lips, exactly [laughs]. And then the depicted person is Mick Jagger himself. So there are these three things. Obviously, the second, the three dimensional person that's visually encoded in the picture is different from the actual depicted object, because one of them has larger lips than the other. There's these three things that you're aware of, but they are all different. And you can attend to any one of these three. And also to the various relations between them. To the relation between the first and the second if you're interested in depictive techniques. Or to the relation between the second and the third if you're interested in how naturalistic the picture is, or how good a caricature it is.

MW: And do we imagine the real Mick Jagger?

BN: There's two ways of going about it. You could say that's somehow part of the perceptual phenomenology. I don't want to endorse that. I think it's possible that you have some kind of visual imagery of him:

some kind of representation of the real Mick Jagger influences your experience of the picture. So you see this picture of a grossly thick-lipped person, and suddenly you realise it's a caricature of Mick Jagger. You're going to see it differently; there's a phenomenal change. It's going to be relevant in your perceptual phenomenology, but the representation of Mick Jagger himself doesn't have to be a perceptual one: it's some kind of mental, visual imagery.

2 Perception

MW: You've recently been working on two books, one of which was published last year, on philosophy of perception, and another, which is forthcoming, in which you use philosophy of perception as a means of approaching aesthetics. Let's start with the recently published book *Between Perception and Action*.⁵ Could you say something about what got you started on this project?

BN: It was very long ago when I started working on this. The general idea is that many of our perceptual states are really geared towards action, and you can't fully characterise these perceptual states without talking about action. In some ways, this topic has to do with my work in aesthetics, although the book has very little aesthetics in it.

One intuition about aesthetic experience, one that's very Kantian, is that it's free from pragmatic or practical outlooks, free from seeing something as a means. I think that a version of that is right, that aesthetic experience is disinterested in some sense. In order to understand what's missing from those experiences, I wanted to understand what's there normally. When you're running to catch a bus, or looking for your umbrella, you're really parsing the visual scene in terms of two properties only: is there an umbrella, is there not an umbrella? All that you perceive is geared towards your action. I wanted to understand what's going on there in order to understand what's going on in our aesthetic experience when that kind of stuff is missing.

⁵Nanay 2013.

Having said that, I think action-oriented experiences very important for understanding some important aesthetic phenomena, such as character engagement or identification. What goes on when you go to the theatre and you identify with Hamlet, or you go to the cinema and you identify with James Bond is something that I call vicarious perception. What you do is see certain things around James Bond as affording an action to James Bond. Very often we see things as being relevant to us, emotionally relevant, or relevant for our actions. But we also often see things as relevant, emotionally or in terms of action, to someone else. If I see you spilling some coffee on yourself then I tend to see that as affording an action to you, or as being relevant to your actions, or as being emotionally relevant. That is what I call vicarious perception. I think it's really important for our engagement with artworks, not just for identification, but also for our engagement with narratives.

MW: You talked about the way perception can be emotionally charged. Do you think this can help explain our emotional engagement with fiction?

BN: I think to see something as emotionally relevant to another person is extremely important for our engagement with fiction. If I see a rat running around my feet then I'm somehow going to see it or experience it as disgusting. That's an emotionally charged experience, but it's a self-centred emotionally charged experience; I attribute self-centred emotionally charged properties to the rat. If I see a rat sniffing around your feet, then I'm going to attribute other-centred emotionally charged properties to the rat; I'm going to see it as disgusting for you, not for me. I think that attributing these other-centred emotional properties clearly works very strongly in our engagement with artworks. I haven't really worked out the details of it, but that may be a good way of getting into the whole paradox of fiction stuff.

MW: If I see a rat as being disgusting to you, does that mean I also feel disgust?

BN: No it doesn't have to. I may love rats but know you find them disgusting. And vice versa: if I engage with a fictional character who loves rats, say, Charlie from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, even if I have a very different reaction to rats, I see rats as being emotionally relevant in a very different way for him than they would be for me.

MW: I'm trying to see how it would be useful for approaching the paradox of fiction.

BN: [groans] You want me to solve the paradox of fiction?

SM: [laughs] Right now . . .

MW: [laughs] 5 minutes . . .

BN: [laughs]

MW: . . . or at least indicate how it might be useful.

BN: In the paradox of fiction literature, people make a distinction between real fear and imagined fear or quasi-fear. I think that's a simplified way of thinking about emotions because it ignores the distinction between self-centred and other-centred emotions. I make a distinction between self-centred fear and vicarious fear. So self-centred fear is when the lion is running towards me. Other-centred fear is when the lion is running towards you—that's vicarious fear. I want to say that our engagement with fictional characters is a version of vicarious fear. Every emotion has vicarious equivalents—pity would be the vicarious equivalent of sadness. What you feel in response to fiction is vicarious fear.

That would be an elegant way of solving the paradox: to say that although there's the same term in these three claims, they don't mean the same. So here's the paradox of fiction: you do feel genuine emotions towards fictional characters; you know that they don't exist; and it's irrational to feel emotions towards non-existent things. I want to

say that it is vicarious fear, vicarious emotion, in the first of these three claims, so you do feel emotions towards fictional characters, those are vicarious emotions, and in the third claim it's actually self-centred fear, self-centred emotion. It's irrational to feel self-centred emotions towards things that don't exist. It's not irrational to feel other-centred emotions towards things that don't exist. So there's no paradox really because what is meant by emotion in the first claim—vicarious emotion—is different from what is meant by emotion in the third—self-centred emotion.

3 Aesthetics

SM: You recently gave the keynote talk at the Kent Postgraduate Conference in Aesthetics, entitled 'Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception,' in which you presented material from your forthcoming book of the same name.⁶ You've already talked about your approach in *Between Perception and Action* but before talking about the current book, could you explain a little more about what led you to approach aesthetics using philosophy of perception?

BN: The book is based on a really simple idea: a lot of questions in aesthetics seem to be about perception, so I use philosophy of perception as an apparatus for addressing questions in aesthetics. Now, I should say something so that I don't get misunderstood. I'm not saying that all aesthetic experiences are perceptual experiences, or that all aesthetic properties are perceptual properties. I also make a sharp distinction between aesthetics and philosophy of art: it would be crazy to argue that philosophy of art would benefit very much from a philosophy of perception approach. But I think it's not at all crazy to think that aesthetics would.

The book is focused almost entirely on the role of attention, which I take to be very much a part of philosophy of perception. It's a hot topic in philosophy of perception right now, and attention is super important for aesthetics. If you're paying attention to one property

⁶Nanay forthcoming.

of an artwork you're going to have a completely different experience than if you're paying attention to another property. If you're attending to the bass in a piece of music then it's going to be a very different experience than if you're listening to some other instrument. There's an abstract painting by Paul Klee with lots of patches of colour. It is called *Green X Above Left* and I saw it recently at Tate Modern. Once you read the title it is impossible not to attend to that 'X'. It changes the entire experience. Depending on what you're attending to, your experience will be very different. Because of that, it's actually a really important thing to figure out what properties of an artwork we should attend to and what properties we should ignore. That could really change or enhance your experience of the artwork.

I think attention is greatly underexplored in aesthetics; it should be extremely important and this book aims to readdress that. The main thread is about distributed attention: a way of attending to an object whereby you are attending to a wide variety of its properties. I think this way of attending is crucial for understanding a number of important debates in aesthetics—*aesthetic experience, formalism, uniqueness, and so on.*

MW: Could you say a bit about what you understand attention to be—does it have to be conscious?

BN: No. In my philosophy of perception work I'm a big proponent of unconscious attention. I think attention can be unconscious but I think in aesthetics that's less important.

I think for aesthetics purposes we can go along with an everyday concept of attention, or *attending*. Attending is something you do. Sometimes you don't do it voluntarily because something grabs your attention. Maybe there are cases where unconscious attention is relevant for aesthetics. Here's one possible example. There are experiments about how your eyes move when you watch a film. Eye movement is not the same as attention; you can move your eyes without changing your attention and you can shift your attention without moving your eyes. If you move your eyes while shifting your attention

then that's an overt shift of attention. If you are keeping your eyes fixated but you shift your attention—so, I am looking at you [Mark] but am shifting my attention to you [Shelby]—you can do that. That's a covert shift in attention. Eye movement is not the same thing as attention but very often eye movement is indicative of attention—at least indicative of overt attention.

So there are these studies about how your eyes move when you watch a film; there are certain systematic patterns. One thing that has been found is that in Hitchcock films, everyone's eye movement is always in the very same spot. Hitchcock very clearly directs your attention to the same spot. In *my* kind of films, it's definitely not going to be like that [laughs]. So, in Antonioni films when you have a long, half a minute take with pretty compositions and no one is really visible—you know, 'dead tree bad weather' films—then your eye movements are going to be all over the place. It's an interesting distinction and I think *that* will be one place where unconscious attention can be important or interesting. In the debates that I want to address in the book it's mainly conscious attention that plays the important role.

SM: You acknowledge in the introduction to your book⁷ that you take a liberal view on what counts as philosophy of perception, including questions about attention, sensory imagination, and emotion, and that those who find this use of the concept of perception too inclusive can read the title of the book *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Mind* instead. Why didn't you choose that title?

BN: Well, I do think these questions *belong* to philosophy of perception. If you look at what kind of papers and books are published under the heading of philosophy of perception there are going to be all these things. The role of attention in perception, or what attention does, or what attention is, the relation between mental imagery and perception, what role emotions play in our perception—those are all philosophy of perception questions. In philosophy of mind, there are a lot of things that are just utterly useless for aesthetics. So, ques-

⁷Available on <http://webho1.ua.ac.be/bence.nanay/>

tions about physicalism, or mind body identity—who cares? I think it's more specifically philosophy of perception that we can use for aesthetics.

MW: In your talk at Kent you mentioned that there might be a potential marketing benefit in using philosophy of perception to help bring aesthetics in from the cold of the philosophical fringes. Do you see that as something that actually might work?

BN: No. [everyone laughs]

SM: We're doomed?

BN: I think aesthetics is a little fringy, don't you?

SM: Maybe we're too isolated and on the fringe to tell.

BN: Yeah, so I think most philosophers don't believe that the questions aesthetics asks or answers are really important philosophical questions.

MW: It's seen as a bit lightweight, perhaps.

BN: Yeah, and I don't like that. I think aesthetics problems are genuinely important and as important as whether properties are tropes or universals, or the KK Principles of knowledge. I think it will start to sink in when you're out in the job market or trying to publish in non-aesthetics journals. It's very difficult to publish aesthetics in non-aesthetics journals. Some people make a point of doing this. Some aestheticians are very good at it. They have this ideology of how aestheticians should publish in non-aesthetics journals precisely to integrate aesthetics back into philosophy. I fully agree with that. I think we should try to reintegrate aesthetics into philosophy and make non-aestheticians see that aesthetics problems are genuinely important and interesting problems.

I'm trying to write this book in a way that will be accessible both for philosophers of perception who have nothing to do with aesthetics and for aestheticians who have nothing to do with philosophy of perception. And it's not easy. It's a little complicated in terms of what I can assume from the reader, but that could be a good thing for an aesthetician to do—to try to genuinely convince non-aesthetician philosophers that these are as important as, I don't know, the three versus four-dimensionalism debate. And maybe that's also a way of creating some hype. Let's face it, philosophy is very much fashion-driven. Some branches of philosophy are more successful than others in setting the trend. Aesthetics has been incredibly unsuccessful so I think we should try and change that. If we do consider some aesthetics problems as things that have a lot to do with philosophy of perception, then the hope is that even non-aestheticians should really take it seriously. I am really happy that there are a lot of philosophers of perception who are acquiring a side interests in aesthetics.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE: Bence Nanay is Professor of Philosophy and BOF Research Professor at the University of Antwerp, and Senior Research Associate at the University of Cambridge. He has published widely on topics in philosophy of mind, philosophy of biology, and aesthetics. He edited *Perceiving the World: New Essays on Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and is the author of *Between Perception and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWERS: Mark Windsor and Shelby Moser are both PhD candidates in History and Philosophy of Art at the University of Kent.

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