

# Rivista di estetica

69 | 2018 :  
empirical evidence and philosophy

---

## Is beauty in the folk intuition of the beholder? Some thoughts on experimental philosophy and aesthetics

EMANUELE ARIELLI

p. 21-39

---

### ***Abstract***

In this paper I will discuss some issues related to a recent trend in experimental philosophy (or x-phi), and try to show the reasons of its late (and scarce) involvement with aesthetics, compared to other areas of philosophical investigation. In order to do this, it is first necessary to ask how an autonomous experimental philosophy of aesthetics could be related to the long-standing tradition of psychological experimental aesthetics. After distinguishing between a “narrow” and a “broad” approach of experimental philosophy, I will then make a distinction between topics in aesthetics pertaining to perceptual and cognitive processes, and traditional issues involved in the analysis of general and culturally-laden concepts. The narrow program of experimental philosophy, focused on the investigation of folk intuitions, is particularly effective only when two general conditions are met: the use of hypothetical scenarios (testing of thought experiments) and the heuristic role of folk intuitions in drawing philosophically relevant conclusions. I will argue that, when aesthetics is concerned, these requirements are not easily met. These difficulties notwithstanding, I will support a pluralistic view where aesthetics is revealed as an instructive example of how experimental approaches and traditional “armchair” philosophy integrate, and enrich each other.

---

### ***Full text***

## 1. The recent trend in experimental philosophy and the case of aesthetics

<sup>1</sup> In the introduction of *A Course of Experimental Philosophy* (1734), John Theophilus Desaguliers, one of the most fervent promoters of Newtonian science, wrote: “All the knowledge we have of Nature depends upon Facts; for without Observations and

Experiments, our natural Philosophy would only be a Science of Terms and an unintelligible Jargon". He goes on to describe René Descartes, in particular, as an author of "philosophical romance," together with other unspecified philosophers that are accused, in general, of "lazy Disposition". In the long-standing rift between empiricists and rationalists such jabs were not uncommon. The former were critical of the exclusive reliance on *a priori* explanations in the latter's theorizing, while these lamented the lack of overarching philosophical foundations in the empiricists' mere *a posteriori* investigations.

- 2 Skipping a couple of centuries, and many thinkers (Kant included), "intuition-driven romanticism" is the definition that Weinberg, Nichols and Stich (2001) give to most epistemology, considered *armchair* theorizing without empirical proof, and curiously recalling Desaguliers' words. Their main reference is Stich's *The Fragmentation of Reason* (1990), where absolute and *a priori* definitions of epistemological concepts are questioned, one of the reasons being the possibility that other cultures and human circles could have cognitive processes and concepts substantially detached from ours.
- 3 The essay by Weinberg, Nichols and Stich is considered one of the precursors of the growing trend that has come to be known as *experimental philosophy* (or "Ex-Phi" for short), a subject of a lively debate after the turn of the century within analytic philosophy (Knobe and Nichols 2008; Alexander 2012; Rose and Danks 2013; Systma and Buckwalter 2016). Its starting point is the questioning of intuition's role as the main tool in traditional analytic philosophy (DePaul and Ramsey 1998). According to this view, armchair philosophers would support and reject claims by appealing to certain intuitions that demand to be accepted as such, specifically intuitions about what everyone (not only professional philosophers) would or should reasonably accept. But according to the advocates of Ex-Phi, such insights are by no means certain and should therefore be put to experimental test, in particular by using methods of scientific psychology.<sup>1</sup>
- 4 What precisely are experimental philosophers expected to investigate? On one side, a 'narrow' conception considers experimental philosophy's main task to be the use of empirical methods to study ordinary people's intuitions (*folk* or *naïve* intuitions) about philosophically relevant scenarios (Systma 2014). A "broad" understanding, on the other side, accepts all methods and subjects of cognitive science that could be relevant for advancing philosophical issues. According to Rose and Danks (2013, p. 525), "if experimental philosophers are to take the cognitive part of the project seriously, then they will need to avail themselves of the best experimental methods of cognitive science, including not just survey responses but also behavioral measures, neuroimaging data, and other measures of cognitive functioning, as well as the best techniques for modeling the data". Within this broad conception, philosophers are not clearly distinct from cognitive scientists, or they should strive to collaborate closely with them. Concerning this point, a further distinction has been made between true experimental philosophers conducting experiments by themselves and philosophers using findings of other disciplines, the latter being "empirically informed philosophers" (Prinz 2007).
- 5 One could wonder if Ex-Phi is still philosophy at all and not simply psychology and other social sciences applied to philosophical topics. But this would be only a concern about disciplinary boundaries and should be welcomed positively as the sign of a closer collaboration between different approaches. Deeper, more relevant, challenges go from typical methodological worries about external and internal validity of research findings, to strictly philosophical criticism about the relevance or the superficiality of lay people's responses about philosophical issues, and also their tendency to be influenced by irrelevant factors (Kauppinen 2007). A powerful criticism is in fact the "expertise objection" (Williamson 2011), suggesting that we should not take folk judgments seriously, because non-philosophers make errors, while professional philosophers are presumably better at analyzing concepts and making philosophically relevant distinctions. Others (Cappelen 2012; Deutsch 2009, 2010) have even denied that intuition is relevant in the philosophical argumentation. This debate has already spawned a meta-philosophical research topic of its own.

- 6 A glance in the *Philpapers* database (philpapers.org) shows that Ex-Phi has produced a very rich collection of research in moral philosophy, philosophy of action and epistemology, dealing with topics such as intentional action, causation, proper name semantics, knowledge, free will, personal identity.
- 7 Aesthetics, on the contrary, has been quite neglected. There are very recent contributions and programmatic accounts about the relationship between cognitive science and aesthetics (see for a general overview Meskin *et al.* 2017, and Cova *et al.* 2015; Kamber 2011; Liao, Strohminger, Sripada 2014, Torregrossa 2017), which demonstrate the current relevance of this issue. One question emerging from these contributions concerns the possibility (or the opportunity) to define a recognizable philosophical domain of investigation in relation to the long-standing tradition of research in (mostly psychological) experimental aesthetics. The examples in Meskin *et al.* (2017) and Cova *et al.* (2015) show that this is possible, even though some contribution by philosophers (e.g. Meskin *et al.* 2013 about the mechanism of *mere exposure*) could be equally regarded as works in experimental aesthetics. On one hand, this is not a problem but rather a positive disciplinary intertwining, and an example of 'broad' experimental philosophy of aesthetic phenomena concerning the perceptual, cognitive and affective responses to artworks. Philosophers would here provide theoretical insights and suggest new experimental designs, while psychologist would contribute with rigorous methodological expertise. On the other hand, it would also be interesting to see if it is possible to investigate central notions of philosophical aesthetics (art, imagination, aesthetic emotion, taste, beauty, style, but also image or depiction, creativity, comedy, horror, suspense etc.) in the same manner as we see in other domains of experimental philosophy. This would be the task of a 'narrow' approach focused on testing folk intuition about these notions. But in order to do that, we should probably go back to Fechner's distinction of an aesthetic from 'below,' concerned with psychological and perceptual processes, and an aesthetic from 'above,' concerned with notions pertinent to our aesthetic experience that are codified in our language and culture. The 'below,' *vs* 'above' distinction is not coincidental with the traditional distinction between aesthetics as 'philosophy of art' and aesthetics as 'theory of sensibility': in fact, we could both have investigations of art-related issues from a naturalistic point of view, and explorations of notions concerning our sensorial world from a more theoretical and culturally informed perspective.
- 8 To make this point clear, issues in ethics or action theory could also be investigated from 'below,' examining subjects' reactions to specific scenarios, as the field of neuroethics shows. But moral philosophy and philosophy of action have their own traditional concepts from 'above' (responsibility, agency, intentionality, free will etc.) and the narrow approach of Ex-Phi has extensively investigated their corresponding folk intuitions. Therefore, if we want to maintain a parallel with these cases, a development of a 'narrow' experimental philosophy in aesthetics from 'above' would also be desirable, and its feasibility will be the main question of the next sections.
- 9 This particular development is difficult (but not impossible), and the reason lies in the fact that the successes of experimental philosophy in areas such as ethics, epistemology or action theory rest on two requisites: firstly, the conversion of thought experiments in real experiments; secondly, the consequent heuristic role of folk intuition in debating existing philosophical theories or in the discovery of systematic biases in human judgment. In aesthetics these requisites do not seem to be met.

## **2. Experimental aesthetics and experimental philosophy of aesthetic: the view from 'below'**

10 “Ethics and aesthetics are one” (“Ethik und Aesthetik sind Eins”), wrote Wittgenstein (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.421), being both related to the axiological dimension. But they are not obviously the same, and this becomes particular evident in their relation to experimental philosophy. A trivial difference is of historical nature: while ethics and moral philosophy rely on a strong analytical tradition, many topics in aesthetics are discussed within the so-called continental tradition, less open to a naturalistic approach. This difference, if relevant, reflects a deeper aspect that I would summarize in the following way: ethical concepts, like other notions in epistemology and philosophy of action, often tend to be considered from a general, context- and culture-independent perspective, while aesthetic issues are often rooted in a specific cultural tradition.

11 At the same time, however, aesthetics is strongly dependent on its lower perceptual dimension. This means that we have a more pronounced duplicity between an aesthetic investigation looking for natural invariants and an aesthetic discussion more concerned with the theoretical and historical reconstruction of complex notions from the cultural tradition. Arguably, the same notion can be examined from both perspectives. In fact, we can study phenomena like taste, aesthetic emotions (sublime, disgust, melancholy, uncanny etc.), appreciation, style recognition etc., both from a naturalistic perspective focused on the relevant psychological responses related to them, and also from the perspective of conceptual clarification (mostly in the analytical tradition), and through debates that reconstruct the cultural discourse around these concepts (aesthetics as a kind of *Kulturwissenschaft*).<sup>2</sup>

12 Experimental aesthetics from ‘below’ already have a long tradition that dates back to the very beginning of scientific psychology and Fechner’s psychophysical investigations (*Vorschule der Aesthetik*, 1876). This line of research continued steadily but more or less unnoticed for almost a century (for a review, Valentine 1962; Pickford 1972), and then re-emerged with Daniel Berlyne’s *New experimental aesthetics* in the 70’s (Berlyne 1974). From that moment on, interest in the research community has increased progressively, extending its scope from the study of appreciation of abstract sensory stimuli, to more complex cognitive and affective factors implied in the appreciation of real artworks, artifacts or natural entities (see Leder *et al.* 2004). Neuropsychological approaches have popularized this field, extending the focus to the issue of creativity and to the mechanisms of reception and interpretation in specific genres (visual artworks, music, movies, literature). The recent establishment of a Max Planck Institute dedicated to experimental aesthetics in Frankfurt, Germany, has institutionalized a sector advocating the application of sophisticated psychological and neuroscientific methodologies.

13 Although experimental aesthetics tend to become more and more philosophically savvy and oriented to real artworks, the crucial point here is that it essentially remains rather disconnected from the philosophical debate, as shown by the almost clear cut separation of journals and conferences in each sectors. Moreover, empirical investigation’s main dependent variable (that is, the outcome of experimental manipulation) has mostly been subjects’ appreciation and aesthetic preference. This type of investigation has rarely been at the center of philosophical interest. For example, golden ratio, architectural canons, rules of chromatic harmony have never been considered philosophical topics. Whether there is a preference for certain primary colors, or a preference for smoothly curved rather than jagged lines, or any discussion about the nature of musical harmony for the human ear, these are *a posteriori* issues that never had an impact on philosophical debates. From this perspective, aesthetics is not a subset of philosophy, but is rather a domain intersecting with philosophy. Applied aesthetic in design, composition, fashion, music, or studies in human attractiveness are of philosophical interest only for their general theoretic implications, but have rarely been subject of deeper investigation by philosophers. It is psychological experimental aesthetics that took up the challenge in this field.

14 There are however results of philosophical interest: for example, research on mere exposure (Meskin *et al.* 2013) gets back to Hume’s classical ‘test of time’ argument. Other topics of philosophical interest are, to name a few, the reliability of introspective aesthetic judgment, the role of imponderable context factors in aesthetic evaluation, the

relationship and influence between different sensory modalities, and so on (e.g. Arielli 2012, 2017; Siefkes, Arielli 2015). These examples would belong to a ‘broad’ experimental approach, as defined in the previous section.

15 A further interesting question concerns the possibility of a ‘narrow’ approach in experimental philosophy applied to the topics of aesthetics from ‘below.’ The narrow approach, as has been said, is aimed at studying people’s folk intuition on issues of philosophical relevance. In this case, experimental philosophical aesthetics would investigate everyday intuitions about sensory experience and other psychological phenomena that are relevant to aesthetics. The research tradition of phenomenology of perceptual experiences would be a candidate for this approach. This includes not only the tradition of Gestalt’s psychology, but also all experimental investigation in phenomenology of perception (Michotte 1963, Ihde 1977, Bozzi 2002, Albertazzi 2013). A phenomenological approach to philosophy of perception would include not only the low-level properties of sensory experience (color, shape, illumination, and depth in vision) but also their high-level properties (categorical properties, agential and affective properties, semantic properties, expressivity). The latter aspects would support a so-called ‘rich view’ of perceptual experience that is relevant for aesthetics and could be integrated by method of experimental phenomenology (Nanay 2015; Di Bona forthcoming).

### 3. Thought experiments and the heuristic role of folk intuitions: the view from ‘above’

16 If there is a common feature in most research in (narrow) experimental philosophy to date, this is the widespread use of thought experiments and hypothetical scenarios (‘vignettes’) aimed at operationalizing philosophical concepts and put them to test. New thought experiments could be invented for this purpose, or traditional ones could be transformed into real testable situations. An example are those scenarios and counter-scenarios around the Gettier problem (Gettier 1963). A version of this problem may be: “If John reads the time from a watch without realizing that it’s broken, but that coincidentally shows the correct time, can I properly say that he *knows* the time?” Weinberg *et al.* (2001) come to the conclusion that responses on this kind of problem vary cross-culturally. However, subsequent studies have shown that, with a more careful look, there may actually be a strong inter-cultural consensus on these cases (Machery *et al.* 2015). Another example is the experimental investigations concerning the semantics of proper names, first of all Russell’s descriptivist theory and Kripkes’ s causal theory (Machery *et al.* 2004, Colaço *et al.* 2014). In this case, repeated empirical findings show constant cultural differences both in favor of the Russellian or the Kripkian interpretation of proper names’ meaning. To do this, subjects read a hypothetical scenario where a name that does not actually correspond to the original description of the person is used to refer to someone (e.g., Gödel as “the person who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic” is revealed to be someone who stole someone’s else work): according to Machery’s investigation, answers to the question “Who is the name ‘Gödel’ referring to?” vary among cultures, in particular between western and eastern people (“Gödel still refers to the author of the incompleteness theorems” or “Gödel refers to the imposter that falsely took credit for them”). Other well-known examples handle the intuitive responses of people in situations where one must determine whether an action is to be judged as intentional or not (Knobe 2003), revealing an interesting bias that a rationalist understanding of intention attribution would not foresee. Other studies focused on the intuitions around the relationship between free will and determinism (Nichols and Knobe 2007), or on our perception of the stability of individual identity as a result of change (Tobia 2015).

17 Most of this research is based on the empirical implementation of thought experiments or the formulation of new ones. In these cases, people’s intuition is tested

with two purposes: the first is to show that a philosophical assumption that presupposes an alleged consensus does not correspond to the people's actual naive insights, or that such intuition is subject to cultural, social, individual variations. The second aim is to show that intuition (both naïve or expert) on a certain issue could be influenced by factors that we tend to consider to be irrelevant (e.g., emotion and sympathy in ethical decisions like the 'trolley problem').

18 Looking for folk intuition about philosophical issues should not be understood as a form of philosophy by opinion pools, where average ideas on certain problems replace philosophical insights, but focus on all the occasions in which philosophers resort to allegedly common intuition in their arguments. Experiments attempt to verify all those occurrences in which the philosopher makes statements about how people would or should think ("Usually people would interpret this situation as...", "Most people would say in this case that...", and so on). Empirical verification can point out if these assertions turn out to be based on the philosopher's incorrect assumption of other people's intuition (Dunaway *et al.* 2013; Liao 2016).

19 When we speak about folk intuition, however, it is necessary to distinguish between at least two levels or domains: (1) the domain of *theories* about a certain concept (for instance, intentionality or imagination) and (2) the domain concerning the *use* of this concept in everyday language. In the theory domain, we could find both models by experts or philosophers, and also people's naïve attempts to define what they intend, for instance, with intentionality or imagination. In this case we should talk of 'folk theories' of intentionality or imagination, which in turn may become the object of scientific or philosophical investigation. The domain (2) of the use of concepts is manifested in everyday linguistic practice, but also in texts and in the cultural tradition. The way people use the concept of 'intention' or 'imagination' may not actually correspond to the theories (1) they intuitively formulate on those concepts. We could also add a third basic domain, where all natural mechanisms associated with those phenomena take place, such as the 'real' cognitive processes of imagination or intentional attribution; this domain would be the subject of a 'broad' experimental approach. Even in this case we may have discrepancies between this level and the previous domains: how imagination *really* works could differ from how people use the concept of imagination and how people (expert or naïve) theorize about it.

20 Now, the confusion between (1) the domain of theory and (2), the domain of use, should be avoided, since someone's (expert or not expert) idea of what a concept means could differ from how this person actually uses the very same concept. For example, an intuitive formulation of what it means that someone should be considered 'responsible' for something (that is, a folk theory of responsibility) does not mean that this theory is coherently applied in everyday behavior. For this reason, in experimental philosophy we do not directly ask subject to tell us what they mean by 'responsibility' (which would give us a glimpse of (1), the theory domain), but rather we use hypothetical scenarios (vignettes) in which the subject is asked to make a judgment ("Was that person responsible for this outcome?") revealing aspects of (2), the domain of concept use. This is a further reason for the centrality of scenarios in experimental philosophy that directly derive from the tradition of *Gedankenexperimenten*.

21 It is useful to point out the relationship between the aforementioned three domains. For example: In bioethics it could be important to understand the common attitudes of people about certain themes, such as euthanasia (domain of (2) folk intuition). However, we do not take these attitudes as the basis upon which we build a theory about the right to live vs to die, or develop a normative position (theory domain, (1)). A philosopher, according to his own theorization, can even aspire for a change in the way people decide and reason in this issue. Also the third level of deep, psychological, reactions to this topic could be investigated, but would by no means be the foundation upon which we decide our general normative stance.

22 The fact that lower domains do not determine the higher ones is a feature of normative debates, but it is also relevant for all cases in which we strive to get an agreement on relevant notions like knowledge or intentionality. In some cases, empirical evidence can be used to see how human judgment can be influenced by factors like emotional engagement deviating from our understanding of objective

judgment (e.g. Greene *et al.* 2001). Moreover, psychological and neuroscientific research has shown that we have an innate propensity to see intentionality in phenomena and domains in which this attribution is not warranted: for this reason, we would not take those innate tendencies as building blocks for a definition of intentional action, nor use instinctive reactions of our ‘reptile brain’ to lay the foundations of a theory of responsibility. A well-developed theory of intentional action could take into account folk intuition (domain (2)) and even natural or cognitive reactions (domain (1)), but would not be directly determined by them. Similarly, on one hand, we do not formulate a theory of what “knowing” or “meaning” are drawing from the average folk intuition about these notions. On the other hand, however, observations on folk intuition have the important heuristic function of correcting non-warranted assumptions or in revealing biases and previously ignored influencing factors.

### 3.1 Generalizability and agreement

23 To sum up, we saw that the effectiveness of ‘narrow’ experimental philosophy lies in testing hypothetical scenarios (applied thought experiments) that can give us insights about folk intuition that are then useful to critically question philosophical assumption, or to identify biases or systematic influencing factors in our thinking.

24 More precisely, we see here two essential features that thought experiments and folk intuition need to possess in order to be effective when investigated experimentally: the first is the *generalizability* of the principles underlying hypothetical scenarios and ‘vignettes’ that are used to simulate a situation in which we are asked to express a judgement. In other words, thought experiments are reasoning processes carried out within the context of a well-articulated imaginary scenarios in order to answer a specific question having validity to other (non-imaginary) scenarios by analogy (e.g., the Gettier problem is not about broken watches, but about any other source of information). Generalizability means that a hypothetical scenario must elicit inferences or decisions that could be transposed to any other similar situation. Answers to a specific scenario are assumed to have general implications on the general underlying concept, not just on the specific case of this scenario (a similar case is the English ‘common law’, a non-codified legal system where judgments are established on the basis of previous comparable cases that acquire general validity through analogy to similar cases).

25 A second feature is the possibility of *agreement* concerning diverging folk intuition in cases in which a practical decision needs to be made. The expectation about the possibility of agreement means that, although folk intuitions could differ (there is no presumption that a ‘right’ intuition must be reached), there is a substantial desirability in reaching a consensus when these differences come into conflict over practical issues. For example, there are expectations of agreement when we need to attribute responsibility in ethical cases, or determine if a subject ‘knew’ or was aware of a crucial information in a situation (Pardo 2010), or when we need to decide whether a self-driving car should follow a utilitarian calculation or be non-consequentialist in taking a decision in a situation of danger. The agreement expectation doesn’t mean that a consensus should be met, but that different folk intuitions could be compared and evaluated according to their presuppositions. In all these contexts, the effectiveness of experimental philosophy lies in the possibility of using testable hypothetical scenarios that are generalizable, revealing folk insights about concepts that are comparable and, if contradictions emerge, allowing a negotiation on their interpretation.

## 4. Are there thought experiments in aesthetics?

26 We have shown that it is possible to define both narrow and broad experimental approaches in relation to aesthetics from ‘below’. We get now to this paper’s central issue concerning the possibility of a narrow philosophical experimental approach to

aesthetics from 'above.' We could include in this domain, issues like the definition of art, questions concerning intentionality in authorship, authenticity and, in general, all complex notions concerning aesthetic *concepts* (beauty, elegance, horror etc.). Those are topics investigated both in the tradition of conceptual analysis in analytical philosophy, and in the more historically and culturally oriented contributions of continental philosophy.

27 The narrow approach of experimental philosophy focuses mainly on the investigation of folk intuition around philosophically relevant topics. Moreover, as we pointed out in the last section, this specific approach has mostly developed by testing scenarios constructed from thought experiments and by assuming that they are generalizable in order to be interesting for further theoretical investigation.

28 Arguably, this kind of empirically implemented *Gedankenexperiment* is difficult to apply to aesthetic notions, since scenarios in this case tend to resist generalizations. In fact, a look at the literature in philosophical (analytical) aesthetics reveals a scarcity, if not an absence of thought experiments. This would be a curious absence considering that thought experiments are widely used in theoretical issues concerning judgment and choice (e.g. in ethics, decision or action theory: "What would you say in this case?", "How should we describe this situation?"). According to Sorensen (1998), there are evolutionary reasons behind the effectiveness of thought experiment in these areas, because we grasp very quickly the gist of an as-if scenario, allowing us to manifest deep-rooted attitudes (deciding what is right, what is intentional, what inference must be made etc.). But there is an exception: "This decision-making orientation explains why thought experiments abound in ethics, law, and economics. The explanation is not that these fields involve value judgments; for thought experiments are not nearly as common in aesthetics." (Sorensen 1998: 253). Why not in aesthetics? The author does not clarify this curious absence, but the reason lies in the deep difference between aesthetic choices and classical decision-making scenarios. First of all, an obvious reason lies in the fact that many aesthetic phenomena are not inherently conceptual, they do not need to be based on abstract scenarios but are the result of direct demonstrations. In this sense they belong to the realm of aesthetics from 'below': for example, the Kuleshov effect, namely the interaction between sequential movie shots on the viewer's interpretation, can be shown and investigated by a direct demonstration, not through a verbally conveyed scenario. The same applies to any kind of judgments that are related to aesthetic qualities that we detect by a direct observation of some formal aspects (being harmonious, dark or cute etc.).

29 This does not mean that there aren't any classic thought experiments in the aesthetic tradition that can be converted to experimental tests. An example could be the classic Kennick's thought experiment (1958) about the problem of saving only the artefacts that could count as artworks from a burning warehouse; or Arthur Danto's scenario of an exhibition of perfectly identical 'red square' paintings, each of them coming from different cultural context and having completely different meanings (1981). In a similar fashion to J.L. Borges's tale about *Pierre Menard* (a fictitious author that wrote a novel identical to Cervante's *Don Quixote*, but having different aesthetic value), Danto's example is meant to argue that the material features of artworks are not sufficient to determine meaning and value. His imaginary exhibition shows that a traditional conception of art no longer holds.

30 Now, we could put these thought experiments to the test, as in other cases of verification in experimental philosophy. For instance, Kamber (2011) surveyed peoples' intuition in a scenario similar to Kennick's thought experiment, in order to test the adequacy of existing definitions of art. His results allegedly show that those definitions do not sufficiently follow average folk intuition, no matter if by lay people or experts (see also Pignocchi 2014). A survey like this could simply show a narrow normative attitude by the sample subjects that refuse to consider as art that which is actually accepted as such by today's artworld standard. But this does not compel us to modify the theoretical viewpoint of, say, institutional theories of art (see also Monseré 2015). While it is useful and interesting to investigate the average folk conception about what is considered an artwork, we are not urged as a result to build a more realistic theory from the investigation's outcome. If this were the intention, Kamber's approach would



seem to be dangerously close to a populist way of using the empirical pooling of average view points on this issue. In fact, it is by no means meaningful to compare a sophisticated theory of art, which examines boundary conditions of what could still be considered art, with average intuition.

31 It would be possible to operationalize some other aesthetic questions in testable scenarios, for example examining folk intuition about the role of the author's intentionality in the interpretation and evaluations of his work. Alternatively, we could imagine other thought experiments inspecting folk intuition about the nature or meaning of a depiction/image, or about the conditions by which a reproduction becomes a fake or a copy, and so on.

32 The serious problem here is that all aesthetic scenarios that could be built on these issues are hardly *generalizable*: the distribution of responses in thought experiments that use specific objects (like Danto's 'red square' painting) could vary dramatically if we change the object. Insights on the nature of depiction that emerges using a scenario with a specific image could radically change by changing depiction. Intuition about the importance of authorial intentionality and control in an artwork's evaluations could change depending on whether we are using as an example a painting by Mantegna or by Pollock. That is: conceptual insights may greatly vary depending on the specific case used to invoke them. Scenarios investigating aesthetic problems are therefore far less transportable by analogy and generalization to other cases. As in ethical and epistemological investigations, experiments by means of testable scenarios are conducted with two aims in mind: 1) first, to improve philosophical theorizing; and 2) second, to evaluate the presence of bias in the intuitive evaluation of concepts involved in this scenario (for example, emotional biases in intentionality attribution). But without the generalizability of experimental scenarios, the empirical evidence would be valid only for the specific judgments elicited in those or very similar scenarios.

## 5. Aesthetics and folk intuitions

33 In addition to the problem of generalizability of thought experiments, folk intuition in the context of experimental philosophy exhibits a different role in aesthetics. In areas such as ethics or epistemology, the expectation of *agreement*, as we defined it previously, is based on the fact that a discrepancy would have a significant practical consequence. If the situation requires it, the need for an agreement emerges. Again, aesthetics seems to be excluded from this need. To use Goldman's words (1990):

In moral evaluation and argument we must respond [...] to their repeatable properties. [...] Since vital interests of different persons are affected by moral decisions, it is important how these decisions are arrived at and how disagreements are settled, whether rationally or by force. Aesthetic disagreements do not involve so broad and direct conflicts among important interests. [...] Arguments from analogy are [in aesthetics] irrelevant (Goldman 1990: 726).

34 Another critical point emerges here, involving all research in Ex-Phi: experimental responses to a certain philosophical question are rarely plebiscitary, and often reveal very different attitudes. In the experiments about the semantics of proper names, about 60 per cent of Western subjects inclined to Russell's description theory, and 40 per cent for Kripke's rigid designator's theory, while the distribution of Eastern subjects' responses was almost the exact opposite. This difference has been seen as sufficient to conclude that there is an intercultural difference concerning the predominance of a russellian or kripkian view of proper names, in spite of the fact that in both cases there was a considerably minority with a different view. Further research could possibly explain these different attitudes within groups as linked to other specific factors (cultural level, formation, gender, personality traits etc.). In the case of aesthetics, this problem is more evident, especially if we investigate concepts of aesthetic relevance whose meaning is deeply rooted in a cultural tradition. For example: to investigate what people intuitively intend under the notion of 'sublime', we can get very different answers based on one's own cultural and personal references. Even if we make a

general pooling of different opinions about the notion of sublime, or we alternatively analyze its average concept through large Big Data analysis, or simply look what appears in google images after searching for the word 'sublime': all this would be interesting for a sociological mapping of this notion in different domain, but could not motivate us to look for an agreement on its meaning, nor would it be relevant for a revision of existing philosophical theories about it. In these domains, so to say, we are simply much more tolerant toward divergence.

35 Aesthetics, more than ethics or epistemology, is bound from 'above' by the complex domain of cultural tradition. Ethical or epistemological abstract scenarios and experiments can be built in a culturally neutral environment; concepts like intentionality, responsibility, knowledge etc. can be examined without taking into consideration an historical perspective. Instead, folk intuition about notions such as sublime, ugly, comedy, horror, sentimentality and the like, are not reducible to their average linguistic use, since their evolution is tied to a specific cultural tradition. From this point of view, a researcher in aesthetics is a kind of cultural theorist, and his empirical material is simply the cultural production and the human discourse around it. This makes an experimental approach very difficult, maybe only in the form of a cultural sociology or lexicography analyzing the meaning of those concepts. The risk here is that experimentation in the narrow Ex-Phi sense would be reduced to a descriptive pooling of language uses, without really being able to formulate testable hypotheses.

36 These difficulties, therefore, lie in role of folk intuition in aesthetics: on one hand, divergences in insights are largely accepted, and there is no expectation of agreement in aesthetic matters. This allows for a plurality of views, but at the same time a theoretical synthesis is made very difficult to achieve. On the other hand, many aesthetic notions are grounded in a complex cultural tradition. For example, we could investigate the question of when, according to lay people, an architectural style is perceived as modern (Siefkes and Arielli 2018). Answers to this question may largely vary and at the same time would not affect more sophisticated formulations of the concept of modernity in architectural style theory.

37 As a consequence, cultural influences and levels of education determine different interpretations of aesthetic notions, without one interpretation being dominant over another. Maybe beauty rests in the eye of the beholder, and there is no dispute about that. But also the *notion* of beauty – and of aesthetic phenomena in general – could show themselves in the folk intuition of the beholder in a pluralistic way, without any assumption of homogeneity.

38 This does not exclude a systematic investigation of different views about aesthetic notions. Due to their different cultural underpinnings, the variance of answers (in questions like the nature of art, creativity, the role of emotions in the aesthetic experience and so on) will be probably greater than intuition about intentionality, responsibility or knowledge. Without having any expectation of homogeneity in these answers, we would mostly obtain a descriptive palette of different conception that could not be heuristically used to redefine any higher theoretical model of these phenomena.

39 On the other hand, an investigation about folk intuition of aesthetic phenomena could reveal interesting differences in attitudes: for instance, we could observe cultural groups that consider the artist's intentionality to be a decisive feature of her work in order to be appreciated, and groups that do not share this view. Or we could consider groups of individuals who believe that literature leads primarily to moral education, and others that do not find it relevant. An empirical investigation would look for possible factors at the basis of such differences, such as education, personality traits, taste, ideology, culture, and so on.

## 6. Conclusion

40 In this paper we draw some distinctions that may look artificial. This was necessary in order to define a possible experimental philosophy of aesthetics that would differ in

its scope and focus from the tradition of psychological experimental aesthetics. We distinguish a ‘narrow’ and a ‘broad’ Ex-Phi approach: the former focused on folk intuition, and the latter open to all experimental methods of cognitive sciences. Moreover, we separate, for reason of clarity in the context of this present discussion, between an aesthetics from ‘below’ and from ‘above.’ Accordingly, a broad Ex-Phi of aesthetics (both from below and above) essentially corresponds to the tradition of experimental aesthetics. In this tradition, both perceptual-phenomenological issues and more complex phenomena concerning artworks, specific genres and artistic traditions have been object of naturalistic investigations (e.g. Onians 2008, Gallese and Guerra 2012). Further, we point to the tradition of phenomenology and philosophy of perception, in their experimental or empirically informed varieties, as a field of ‘narrow’ Ex-Phi of aesthetics from ‘below.’ Compared to experimental aesthetics, a narrow Ex-Phi of aesthetics from below would be similar to, for instance, investigations in naive physics (Smith and Casati 1994; Bozzi 2002) compared to physics. I focused particularly on the applicability of ‘narrow’ experimental philosophy to aesthetics issues from ‘above’, since this approach – based on the analysis of folk intuitions – gathered most interest and efforts in other philosophical areas. I argue that this is difficult, since testable hypothetical scenarios are rarely of avail in aesthetics, and because most gathered folk intuition don’t allow for general conclusions.

	Aesthetics from ‘below’	Aesthetics from ‘above’
<i>Narrow</i> Ex-Phi	Experimental phenomenology Folk intuition of (sensorial) experience Empirically informed philosophy of perception	Folk intuition about complex aesthetic notions
<i>Broad</i> Ex-Phi	Experimental aesthetics, cognitive psychology, psychology of perception, neuroaesthetics	

41 The development of an experimental philosophy of aesthetics of this kind seems to be squeezed between two fronts: first, the well-developed research on the perceptual and cognitive processes in aesthetic experience, and second, the idea that many notions in aesthetics are rooted in a cultural tradition and have an historical depth that does not allow for experimental investigation; aesthetics from this point of view is more effective as a type of cultural theory.

42 These conclusions, however, are not intended as limitations, but show instead the complexity and richness of aesthetic issues in relation to the experimental approach of cognitive sciences. These are important innovations that integrate, complete and stimulate philosophical investigations, without being antagonistic to them. Despite the difficulties we saw before, experimental approaches can work together with traditional aesthetics in various ways: tracing strict disciplinary boundaries is not useful, rather it is advisable to support a pluralism of approaches and methodologies. The relevance of ‘armchair’ philosophy is by no means weakened, but instead reinforced, since drawing correct conclusions and theoretical implications from experimental results requires fine-grained analysis and interpretation. Here the philosopher (both the experimental and the armchair variety) could make use of his conceptual and argumentative tools to investigate the theoretical premises of an empirical research, uncover new potential topics of investigation, formulate hypotheses and suggest new experimental design, point out weaknesses or alternatives in the interpretation of data. As a consequence, the experimental researcher could also join forces with the philosopher: philosophy gains by being ‘empirically informed,’ and science becomes ‘philosophically informed.’ Moreover, given aesthetics’ dependence on the historical definition of many of its notions, the philosopher’s role would also consist in trying to fill the gap between naturalistic investigation on one side, and analysis based on the cultural tradition on the other. ‘Intuition-driven romanticism’ won’t go away: in order to build bridges between empirical data and philosophical conclusions, traditional armchair-philosophizing is still required along the way.<sup>3</sup>

---

## Bibliography

- ALBERTAZZI, L., 2013, *Handbook of Experimental Phenomenology: Visual Perception of Shape, Space and Appearance*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell.
- ALEXANDER, J., 2012, *Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- ARIELLI, E., 2012, Contrast and assimilation in aesthetic judgments of visual artworks, "Empirical Studies of the Arts", 30, 1: 59-74.
- ARIELLI, E. 2017, Aesthetic opacity, "Proceeding of the European Society for Aesthetics", 9.
- BERLYNE 1974, *Studies in the New Experimental Aesthetics: Steps Toward an Objective Psychology of Aesthetic Appreciation*, Washington D.C., Hemisphere.
- BOZZI, P., 2002, Fenomenologia sperimentale, in S.C. Masin (ed.), *I fondamenti della fenomenologia sperimentale*, "Teorie e Modelli", 7, 2-3: 13-48.
- CAPPELEN, H., 2012, *Philosophy Without Intuitions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.  
DOI : 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199644865.001.0001
- CHALMERS, D., 2007, *What can experimental philosophy do?*, <http://consc.net/slides/xphi.pdf>.
- COLAÇO, D., Buckwalter, W., Stich, S.P., Machery, E., 2014, *Epistemic intuitions in fake-barn thought experiments*, "Episteme", 2: 199-212.  
DOI : 10.1017/epi.2014.7
- COVA, F., GARCIA, A., LIAO, S., 2015, *Experimental philosophy of aesthetics*, "Philosophy Compass", 10: 927-939.
- DANTO, A.C., 1981, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press.  
DOI : 10.2307/429082
- DEPAUL, M., Ramsey W. (eds) 1998, *Rethinking Intuition: The Psychology of Intuition & Its Role in Philosophical Inquiry*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield.
- DEUTSCH, M., 2009, Experimental philosophy and the theory of reference, "Mind & Language", 24, 4: 445-466.
- DEUTSCH, M., 2010, *Intuitions, counter-examples, and experimental philosophy*, "Review of Philosophy and Psychology", 1, 3: 447-460
- DI BONA, E., 2017, *Towards a rich view of auditory experience*, "Philosophical Studies", 174, 11: 2629-2643.
- DUNAWAY, B., Edmonds, A., Manley, D., 2013, *The folk probably do think what you think they think*, "Australasian Journal of Philosophy", 91: 421-441.  
DOI : 10.1080/00048402.2012.724430
- GALLESE, V., Guerra, M., 2012, *Embodying movies: Embodied simulation and film studies*, "Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image", 3: 183-210.
- GETTIER, E.L., 1963, *Is justified true belief knowledge?*, "Analysis", 23: 121-123.
- GOLDMAN, A.H., 1990, *Aesthetic Versus Moral Evaluations*, "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research", 50, 4: 715-730
- GREENE, J.D., Sommerville, R.B., Nystrom, L.E., Darley, J.M., Cohen, J.D., 2001, *An fMRI investigation of emotional engagement in moral judgment*, "Science", 293: 2105-2108.
- IHDE, D., 1977, *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction*, New York, State University of New York Press.
- KAMBER, R., 2011, *Experimental philosophy of art*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 69, 2: 197-208.
- KAUPPINEN, A., 2007, *The rise and fall of experimental philosophy*, "Philosophical Explorations", 10, 2: 95-118.
- KENNICK, W.E., 1958, *Does traditional aesthetics rest on a mistake?*, "Mind", 67: 317-34.
- KNOBE, J., 2003, *Intentional action and side-effects in ordinary language*, "Analysis", 63: 190-194.
- KNOBE, J., 2004, *What is experimental philosophy?*, "The Philosophers' Magazine", 28: 37-39.
- KNOBE, J., 2007, *Experimental philosophy and philosophical significance*, "Philosophical Explorations", 10: 119-122.
- KNOBE, J., NICHOLS, S., 2008, *Experimental Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.  
DOI : 10.1111/j.1747-9991.2006.00050.x
- KNOBE, J., PRINZ, J., 2008, *Intuitions about consciousness: Experimental studies*, "Phenomenology and Cognitive Science", 7: 67-83.
- LEDER, H., BELKE, B., OEBERST, A., AUGUSTIN, D., 2004, *A model of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgements*, "British Journal of Psychology", 95: 489-508.

- LIAO, S., 2016, *Are philosophers good intuition predictors?*, "Philosophical Psychology", 29, 7: 1004-1014.
- LIAO, S., MCNALLY, L., MESKIN, A., 2016, *Aesthetic adjectives lack uniform behavior*, "Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy", 59, 6: 618-631.
- LIAO, S., STROHMINGER, N., SRIPADA, C.S., 2014, *Empirically investigating imaginative resistance*, "The British Journal of Aesthetics", 54, 3: 339-355.  
DOI : 10.1093/aesthj/ayu027
- MACHERY, E., MALLON, R., NICHOLS, S., STICH, S., 2004. *Semantics, cross-cultural style*, "Cognition", 92, 3: B1-B12.
- MACHERY, E., STICH, S., ROSE, D., CHATTERJEE, A., KARASAWA, K., STRUCHINER, N., SIRKER, S., USUI, N., HASHIMOTO, T., 2015, *Gettier across cultures*, "Noûs", 51, 3: 645-664.
- MESKIN, A., PHELAN, M., MOORE, M., KIERAN, M., 2013, *Mere Exposure to Bad Art*, "British Journal of Aesthetics", 53: 139-164.
- MESKIN, A., ROBSON, J., ICHINO, A., GOFFIN, K., MONSERÉ, A., 2017, *Philosophical aesthetics and cognitive science*, "WIREs Cogn Sci", e1445.
- MICHOTTE, A., 1963, *The Perception of Causality*, London, Methuen.  
DOI : 10.4324/978131519050
- MONSERÉ, A., 2015, *Experimental philosophy and intuitions on what is art and what is not*, "Teorema", 34, 3: 159-175.
- NANAY, B., 2015, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.  
DOI : 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199658442.001.0001
- NICHOLS, S., KNOBE, J., 2007, *Moral responsibility and determinism: The cognitive science of folk intuitions*, "Noûs", 41: 663-685.  
DOI : 10.1111/j.1468-0068.2007.00666.x
- ONIANS, J., 2008, *Neuroarthistory: From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- PARDO, M.S., 2010, *The Gettier problem and legal proof*, "Legal Theory", 16, University of Alabama Public Law Research Paper No. 1596709.
- PICKFORD, R.W., 1972, *Psychology and Visual Aesthetics*, London, Hutchinson Educational.
- PIGNOCCHI, A., 2014, *The intuitive concept of art*, "Philosophical Psychology", 27, 3: 1-20.
- PRINZ, J., 2007, *Empirical Philosophy and Experimental Philosophy*, in Knobe and Nichols 2007: 189-208.
- ROSE, D., DANKS, D., 2013, *In defense of a broad conception of experimental philosophy*, "Metaphilosophy", 44: 512-532.  
DOI : 10.1111/meta.12045
- SIEFKES, M., ARIELLI, E., 2015, *An experimental approach to multimodality: How musical and architectural styles interact in aesthetic perception*, in J. Wildfeuer (ed.), *Building Bridges for Multimodal Research. International Perspectives on Theories and Practices of Multimodal Analysis*, Bern - New York, Lang: 247-265.
- SIEFKES, M., ARIELLI, E., 2018, *The Aesthetics and Multimodality of Style: Experimental research on the edge of theory*, Frankfurt a. M. - New York, Lang.
- SMITH, B., CASATI, R., 1994, *Naïve physics: An essay in ontology*, "Philosophical Psychology", 7: 227-247.
- SORENSEN, R.A., 1998, *Thought Experiments*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.  
DOI : 10.1093/019512913X.001.0001
- STICH, S., 1990, *The Fragmentation of Reason*, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press.
- SYTSMA, J. (ed.), 2014. *Advances in experimental philosophy*, London, Bloomsbury.
- SYTSMA, J., BUCKWALTER, W., 2016, *A Companion to Experimental Philosophy*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- TOBLA, K.P., 2015, *Personal identity and the Phineas Gage effect*, "Analysis", 75, 3: 396-405.
- TORREGROSSA, C., 2017, *A defence of experimental philosophy in aesthetics*, "Inquiry", DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2017.1385527
- VALENTINE, C.W., 1962, *The Experimental Psychology of Beauty*, London, Meuthen.
- WEINBERG, J.M., NICHOLS, S., STICH, S., 2001, *Normativity and epistemic intuitions*, "Philosophical Topics", 29, 1-2: 429-460.
- WILLIAMSON, T., 2008, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell.  
DOI : 10.1002/9780470696675
- WILLIAMSON, T., 2011, *Philosophical expertise and the burden of proof*, "Metaphilosophy", 42: 215-229.  
DOI : 10.1111/j.1467-9973.2011.01685.x

---

## Notes

1 Typically, two branches of experimental philosophy have been distinguished: a positive one, trying to help analytic philosophy with new contribution; and a negative one, seeking to undermine or attack the usual methods of philosophy, showing that these are flawed or mistaken.

2 However, it would be simplistic to view the first approach as *a posteriori* investigation, and the second as *a priori* theorizing: each one has its exempla, in the first case, observations subject to experimental methods, in the second case the archive of cultural production.

3 Chalmers (2007): 43.

---

## References

### *Bibliographical reference*

Emanuele Arielli, « Is beauty in the folk intuition of the beholder? Some thoughts on experimental philosophy and aesthetics », *Rivista di estetica*, 69 | 2018, 21-39.

### *Electronic reference*

Emanuele Arielli, « Is beauty in the folk intuition of the beholder? Some thoughts on experimental philosophy and aesthetics », *Rivista di estetica* [Online], 69 | 2018, Online since 01 March 2019, connection on 04 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/estetica/3661> ; DOI : 10.4000/estetica.3661

---

## About the author

### **Emanuele Arielli**

Università Iuav di Venezia, Dipartimento di Cultura del Progetto, Venezia, [arielli\[at\]juav.it](mailto:arielli[at]juav.it)

### *By this author*

**Sperimentazioni estetiche: sound art e concezioni dell'ascolto sonoro** [Full text]

Published in *Rivista di estetica*, 66 | 2017

---

## Copyright



Rivista di Estetica è distribuita con Licenza Creative Commons Attribuzione - Non commerciale - Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale.