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Eduard Isaac Asser, *Stilleven met Foto's, Lens, Beeld en andere Objecten* [Still Life with Photographs, Lens, Sculpture, and other Objects] 1855. Salted paper print. Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, reproduced with permission: CCO 1.0 Universal.

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#### STILL MOVING

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Here is something puzzling. Still Lifes can be expressive. Expression involves movement. Hence, (some) Still Lifes move. This seems odd. I consider a novel explanation to this 'static-dynamic' puzzle from Mitchell Green (2007). Green defends an analysis of artistic expressivity that is heavily indebted to work on intermodal perception. He says visual stimuli, like colours and shapes, can elicit experienced resemblances to sounds, smells and feelings. This enables viewers to know how an emotion feels by looking at the picture. The hypothesis is intriguing, but I show that his suggestion that we empathize with the pictorial content is implausible and that this exposes a flaw in the way his argument moves from experiential mappings to experiential-affective mappings. Consequently, I register some reservations about the way Green supposes we detect these cross-modal qualities.

### 1 Introduction1

Expressive, emotional or moving qualities are considered a significant source of value for Still Life paintings (Budd 2012; Wollheim 1987). One lauded feature of Zurbarán's Still Life with Pottery Jars (c.1635) is its air of exuberance, Morandi's Pots (c.1946) series are praised for their appearance of serenity, and Van Gogh's Sunflowers (c.1880) for a sense of joyfulness. Accounting for this has generated much philosophical discussion as theorists seek to explain how inanimate paintings of inanimate objects can readily be seen as having emotional (qua psychological) properties like exuberance or joy.<sup>2</sup> The representation of an emotion in a static object, beyond the straightforward depiction of a facial expression, exercises philosophers since it involves representing something dynamic. Emotions may be considered dynamic in several senses of the term: (1) physiologically, that is involving a change in a subject's physiological state and awareness of the same through bodily feeling, (2) psychologically, that is involving changes in the way the subject represents their environment, and (3) temporally, that is involving a subject directing their feelings towards the past (e.g. regret, nostalgia) or the future (e.g. anticipation, fear) as well as the present (e.g. happiness). In addition, emotions are considered dynamic because they come and go and because they unfold through a series of initiating, sustaining and monitoring phases. For these reasons, emotions are considered to be paradigmatically dynamic properties. So how can we see them in static pictures?<sup>3</sup> How might we explain the odd result that static paintings

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank all the participants at the BSA Postgraduate conference 2018 for their feedback on the original paper, the editors of this journal and an anonymous referee for detailed and constructive feedback on previous versions of the manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> This is one influential formulation of the question of expression favoured by Davies (1994) and Budd (2012), but there are others, for instance, Matravers (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Still Life paintings are paradigmatically still and therefore static, even though they afford 'experiences of' that are dynamic. Although a painting may undergo change by fading, crumbling, drying or cracking, these changes do not relate to their representational content, which remains, in some sense, fixed.

depicting still objects are correctly experienced as moving?

In this paper, I consider a novel explanation to this 'static-dynamic' puzzle from Green (2007). Although the theory is intended primarily to explain a difference between a bodily emotional expression and the expressiveness we predicate of insensate landscapes and artefacts, it (1) addresses how static pictures may appear dynamic and (2) has the bonus feature of equipping theorists with a generalisable way of understanding how single medium artworks offer us rich sensory and affective experiences. It potentially offers an exciting new solution to the phenomenon of expression considered more broadly. As per Green's hypothesis, Van Gogh's Still Lifes exploit our proclivity to experience a similarity between certain colours (e.g. yellow) and certain affective states (e.g. exuberance) while Morandi's Still Lifes map the physiological profile of tranquility or peacefulness to the colour of rosy-pink rectangles.<sup>4</sup>

I proceed as follows. In Section Two, I present Green's solution in the light of the static-dynamic puzzle and in Section Three, I discuss the appeal and limitations of his hypothesis. In Section Four, I show that the hypothesis, while exciting and novel, has better outcomes in relation to experiential properties than it has to affective ones.

## 2 Expressiveness as Showing

The Greenian explanation for the puzzle is extrapolated from his broader theory concerning the expressiveness of artworks (incorporating other media, such as pure music). According to his self-titled 'Expressiveness as Showing Theory' (hereafter EST):

EST: It is apt to experience P as possessing affective or experiential quality E just in case P is a potential source of knowledge

<sup>4</sup> There have been a number of psychological investigations into the expressive properties of visual stimuli and Green makes use of several. A broad historical overview is provided in Winner (2019, 60-77).

of E—either by showing how E characteristically appears, how E characteristically behaves, or how E characteristically feels. (Green 2007, 195)

I will pay particular attention to EST's third disjunct: showing how E feels. This promises to do much of the productive work, by elucidating how an observer not only sees that *Sunflowers* depicts sunflowers, but also experiences the pictorial space as being suffused with expressive qualities. It is this layering of depicted and affective objects that will explain just what 'brings the figurative thing up on to the nervous system more violently and more poignantly'.<sup>5</sup>

In order to understand in what way expressive qualities are dynamic, it is useful to be aware of a fundamental distinction in the literature between expression and expressiveness. Expressions of emotion are manifested by psychological beings. Paintings are not psychological beings and so are said to be expressive, rather than expressions, of emotions. This distinction can seem confusing at first. A crude but effective way to grasp the distinction is to say that in expressiveness only the outward characteristics of emotional expressions are manifested. These outward characteristics however are sufficient for enabling suitably attuned viewers to know how anger appears, behaves or feels. In this way, expressive qualities convey 'what it is like' to feel anger, while not conveying anger (Green 2007, 192). Green follows the literature by resisting a conflation between expression and expressiveness. When he talks of expressiveness he is not suggesting there is a transmission of an actual emotion going on.

With this distinction in place, we can now consider Green's hypoth-

<sup>5</sup> Francis Bacon in interview according to Sylvester (1980, 11).

<sup>6</sup> Following James (1884) some theorists prioritize bodily feelings in an account of the emotions, for example Prinz (2004). Others advocate that emotions are cognitive judgements, for example Solomon (1988). An introduction to the debate is found in Price (2015).

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esis. Briefly, he holds that static percepts share qualitative features with dynamic percepts and it is the mappings between the two that account for expressiveness. He begins by citing experiential mappings. Green says, citing Marks (1987) 'intuitively, we think that yellow is more like the sound of a piccolo than it is like the sound of an oboe' (2007, 179). He observes that a static yellow swatch may elicit an experienced resemblance to the dynamic sound of a piccolo. His explanation for this is that their qualitative profiles are congruent. What does Green mean by 'qualitative profile' and 'congruent'? 'Qualitative profile' refers to where a percept will be located along three intersecting spectrums that respectively run from (i) intense-mild to (ii) pleasant-unpleasant, and (iii) dynamic-static (Green 2007, 179).7 Let's say yellow is intense, pleasant and dynamic. In this case, it will be 'profiled' somewhere in the light-pleasant-dynamic quadrant of this qualitative three-space. Piccolo sounds may have the same profile. In this case it will be 'congruent' with yellow (Green 2007, 181). One way to visualize this is to think of threespace as an analogue of Munsell colour space [Fig 1] which represents how colours cluster along three spectrums measuring lightness, intensity and chroma.8 One can imagine three-space will be constituted by colours, sounds, textures, smells and so on clustering in qualitatively similar locations.

<sup>7</sup> The hypothesis should survive a change to the three dimensions mentioned.

<sup>8</sup> This example is mine not Green's.

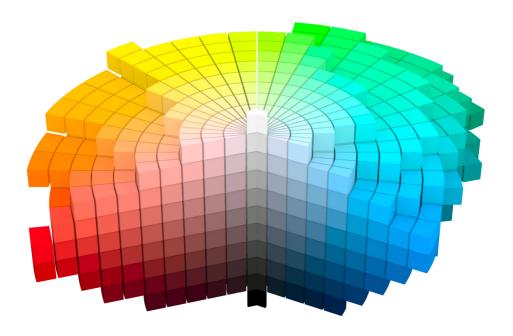


Figure 1 Three-dimensional representation of Munsell colourspace (SharkD, 2015)

So far, we have been told that two experiential states in different sense modalities can elicit an experienced resemblance for perceivers in some qualitative respect. Next, Green suggests that an affective state, an emotion, will map into this three-space. He uses the following example. In the grip of anger, Elizabeth will be given to raising her voice or kicking furniture, revealing that 'anger is intense, slightly unpleasant, and highly dynamic.' (Green 2007, 179) In expressiveness then:

The major triad C–E–G is congruent...with confidence or cheerfulness, for both are intense, pleasant, and relatively static. The color yellow is congruent with exuberance, for both are intense, pleasant, and dynamic. (Green 2007, 183)

In this way, Zurbarán's paintings gain their expressiveness by exploiting a qualitative congruency between the colours, shapes and sensations. Green says that in order to elicit the experienced resemblance the viewer must empathize with the expressive (congruent) content. It is supposed that this mode of attention allows the viewer to appropriately entertain the intersubjective and functionally tractable aspects of the way joyful excitement feels (Green 2007, 188).

In summary, Green holds that an emotion such as anger has a qualitative profile that can be plotted in 'three-space'. This profile can be expressed cross-modally (that is, the same profile can be expressed visually by a colour or shape, or audibly by a sound). In this way, a painting instantiating the colours or shapes that map to anger's qualitative profile will appear to be expressive of anger.

## 3 Discussion

# 3.1 Biological or Conventional Congruency?

At this point it would be reasonable to ask if the idea of qualitative 'three-space' is a prima facie plausible concept. Why believe that while

the senses differ in respect to information processing and in how they present the world around us, there are important and fixed neural communicative channels between them?<sup>9</sup>

Green could block this skeptical worry by citing evidence for the pervasive inter-modality of neural processing and sensory equivalence. According to empirical psychologists the tendency to name a spiky shape "kiki" and a roundish shape "bouba", indicates that our brains systematically connect sounds, spatial movement and shapes at a sub-personal level (Milan et al. 2013). Green's view is that these type of connections are not merely conventional, but that there is something universal or deep-wired at play here. <sup>10</sup> But, one may ask, would a weaker association be problematic for EST? The tendency we display in our colloquial discourse to link upwards scaling sounds, with upward movements and dark to light colour hues is not obviously fixed biologically. At least, it is easy to imagine a culture in which the association was reversed.

I think EST can survive the weaker associative explanation. Given the pervasiveness of empirically noted congruencies, it is reasonable to anticipate that normal intermodal associations, however they develop and despite the absences of any biological imperative, will, once neurally fixed, apply comprehensively. Even though conventional association is weaker than a biological congruence, it is enough to ensure that intersubjective attitudes flourish. If associating percepts, say S1 with S2,

<sup>9</sup> Simner et al. (2005) holds that within any population, standard biases exist in the associations of letters with colours. While grapheme–colour synaesthetes were significantly more consistent over time in their choice of colours, Simner's studies identified notable levels of inter-subject agreement across general populations. From this, he concludes that grapheme–colour synaesthesia, whilst only exhibited by certain individuals, stems in part from mechanisms that are common to us all. Meanwhile Matthen (2015) endorses the view that the senses, while different from one another in terms of information processing, share communicative channels. He notes that speech and flavour in particular are constituted multi-modally. The substitution of one modality in place of another, for instance demonstrating an agent's ability to retrieve visual information from specially arranged tactile stimulation, suggests that we can, in some sense, 'see' haptically.

<sup>10</sup> Green cites Marks (1987).

can become neurally fixed, there is no more reason to deny the efficacy of congruency than there is to deny the efficacy of money or names. This means that a Still Life which exploits neurally fixed associations could elicit a phenomenological mapping of a static percept to dynamic percept.

## 3.2 Fine-grainedness

We are now ready to consider a further criticism from Moore (2010) who puts pressure on Green's theory at the following point. How similar do S1 and S2 have to be to count as instantiating the same place on the grid? For example, what is the minimum level of fine-grainedness that is sufficient for eliciting an experienced resemblance between 'yellow' and 'exuberant'? Set the level too wide and the static percept can be mapped to every location on the grid (every perceptual experience will have some qualitative profile). Set it too narrowly and a percept will only map to itself.

Green would reply, I suspect, that fine-grainedness can be satisfied by ensuring that the terms 'intense' and 'dynamic' pick out the same thing when said of experiences of yellow, trilling piccolos and exuberance. This is an empirical question, not a philosophical one and the philosopher need only acknowledge that qualifying the lexical semantics is important, because EST needs it to be the case that words like 'dynamic' mean roughly the same in all domains - 'colour', 'sounds' and 'introspecting states'. But it does not require the philosopher provide evidence that they do. A Still Life that is made up of percepts that are in the vicinity of intense-pleasant-dynamic qualitative space will elicit experiences that are more like joy than they are like sadness. This explains why my experience of Sunflowers in which I see warm yellows, a patterned texture, round, fleshy forms and dashes of sap green incline me to say the picture is joyful or uplifting or positively charged. It does not require me to provide a fine-grained description of joy, a joyous episode or arouse in me specific feelings of joyousness in order for the experienced resemblance to manifest. This response, should Green choose to exploit it, would also enable him to offer an explanation as to why specific works (that is, works in a specific material mode) are not easily replaced by works in an alternative mode. Since the translation across genres is inexact, an expressive aural work is not replaceable by a visual work without loss. Two such works that both expressed 'joy' or 'anxiety' would offer similar but non-duplicating experiences."

# 3.3. Psycho-Physical Considerations

Here is a second worry from Moore. Even if the link between S1 and S2 is relatively settled inter-subjectively and beyond simple convention in some qualitative respect, is this *all* we need to explain the link? Why deny psycho-physical facts about the external environment, psychological salience or physiological subtleties will impact on the conceptual linkage between sensation and emotion? (Moore 2010, 97) One may ask: is congruency sufficient for temporally static objects to be experienced as instantiating dynamic qualities?

EST endorses sufficiency. Recall, EST says it is apt to experience the painting as exuberant when 'it shows us...how E characteristically feels.' (Green 2007, 195) One can simply look and see that yellow and orange rectangles arranged just so are exuberant (Green 2007, 41).

This inspires me to formulate a further criticism of the view. Let's say we grant Green's claim that yellow has default associations and that these are neurally fixed. Should we not then expect there to be some insistent experience or visualization of sweetness, light joy or the trilling of piccolos (or whatever maps to the yellowy palette)? If so, this expectation is not met by our actual experiences. Despite spending many hours enjoying paintings I struggle to remember an experience of them that was noticeably noisy or tasty. Whatever dynamic properties I may be aware of when attending to *Sunflowers*, an experience of flutes or vanilla

<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

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does not appear to me to be among them. Yet, Green appears to cite an insistent intermodal mapping between yellow-colour: piccolo-sound: vanilla-taste: joy-affect. For this reason, one might ask why the painting of the Sunflowers is taken to represent joy but not the taste of vanilla? Can any putative neurally fixed association be overridden or muted? This question is distinct from questions about whether the mapping display plasticity. For example, that at time 't' yellow maps to a particular taste (lemons), sound (flutes) and mood (joy) for S, but at time 't+1' yellow maps to vanilla, the harp and serenity for S. The question concerns the more local, specific issue of why this colour maps to affect when experienced here and now in this picture. What determines the corresponding sensational partner cued by a particular visual stimulus? One thought is that there is a further pictorial cue that constrains the mapping between select senses, but which has been overlooked in this account.

Green could reply that there is nothing overlooked. Visual stimuli merely have a propensity to trigger these experiences, but no automatic or insistent trigger for them. He may suggest that general consensus concerning the expressivity of an isolated shape, phenome or colour swatch is made more determinate by further cues in the work – for instance, the depictive content. There is a suspicion however that since these further cues can determine whether or not a percept 'fires' or 'triggers' the mapping, they are more fundamental (or prior) to the expressivity.

Green seems to disagree. He thinks that the sensational mappings act 'as a kind of prop on the basis of which to imagine' feeling the appropriate emotion (Green 2007, 190). From this, I take it that he intends the mappings to be basic and to enable a further imaginative enterprise that allows the viewer to represent the dynamic emotional qualities. But it is not clear why these mappings should precede the viewer imagining

<sup>12</sup> Perceptual plasticity is discussed in Bayne (2015).

the emotional qualities. According to standard models of imagining oneself to feel into or along with emotionally resonant objects, things work in the reverse order to the one Green offers us. This makes it unclear why some mappings are represented by the viewer and others are muted in the representation. Since the viewer's imaginative enterprise is informed by the actual mapping (the mapping is the cue to imagine thus), what is the precedent cue that determines the viewer should execute 'this mapping' from the potential set 'all these mappings' in Green's schema? This follows from the earlier comment that if there are no automatic insistent mappings that take place, there is a further respect in which a specific mapping remains unexplained. As things stand, congruency may partly describe *how* Still Lifes come to have dynamic qualities, but not *why* this particular emotion was realised.

Consider, for instance, how Freud's *Girl with White Dog* (c.1951) also uses a yellow palette but is experienced as anxious not joyful. The picture is tense, sad and still. The explanation of this is not going to be satisfied by what Green has told us. The worry is that EST at best identifies a series of specific compositional elements that have led us from static object to dynamic experience, but that this does not give us an account of the kind of causal connections that account for *why* we experienced the painting in this way, to the exclusion of other possible associations and experiences. Why for instance, do I not experience Chardin's paintings as tasting of vanilla, as smelling of rotting fish or as cacophonous? Why is there the connection between this static percept and *this feeling*?

Green could respond by explaining how yellow is experienced as both joyful and anxious in the two paintings by pointing out that colours appear different when embedded in different contexts. A viewer's experience of a colour is sensitive to the colours around it and to the type of light source shining on it. For example, in simultaneous contrast, a single pigment, placed inside different surrounding colours, holding all

<sup>13</sup> See Coplan (2011).

other conditions steady, looks different to us and in metamerism colours 'change' when light sources change (between LED and natural daylight). For this reason, a palette of yellow, orange-yellow and sap green will convey sweetness in one picture, while a palette of yellow-grey and purple-grey will convey sourness in another.

# 3.4 From Experiential to Affective States

I think this throws up a more serious problem for the Greenian. The static-dynamic relation, if it holds at all, is most obviously held here between two experiential states, that is, states associated with our senses. Green needs it to be the case that 'yellowy-orange' is congruent with a sub-species of *affective* states – that is, emotions. These are states that are about something or experienced toward objects. So, *Sunflowers*, if expressive of emotion-like states, may be said to express anticipation (e.g. 'Gaugin is on his way to Arles!'), hope (e.g. 'will he like the paintings?'), or delight (e.g. 'he appreciates the work!'). These states are much more cognitively rich than intensity, pleasantness and so on. How then will EST explain the way we are able to move from congruent experiential states to congruent experiential-emotion states?

Green's answer seems, at first, ingenious. He says the congruency between (static) experiential percepts and (dynamic) affective states is realised by the viewer empathetically attending to the qualitative profile of the perceptual material (2007, 187-192). The viewer elicits an experienced resemblance between static perceptual information and dynamic *affective* states, just as the viewer may experience the mappings between two experiential states by empathising with the qualitative properties.

However, once we start to reflect on the claim that viewers empathise with congruent properties, we see that it is odd. For one thing, emotional qualities are not reducible to their physiological profiles without remainder. An emotion mapped in three-space would appear to lack 'aboutness', or what the feeling aims at, that identifies the state. For this

reason, it is not clear what identifies an emotion from a cluster of possible emotions that share similar physiological traits. How would I be able to distinguish anger from fear using three-space properties? It seems we need some intentional content to get the empathy going. Green argues that the retrieval of dynamic qualities from the static stimulant is part of a cognitive process, in which the viewer comes to know something about E by simulating the appropriate mental states (2007, 187-192). He must think then, that the static-dynamic congruency enables a sharing of emotional states with some degree of accuracy and where the viewer can come to know how some E feels. But what would satisfy 'some degree of accuracy' here?

In addition, it is not clear why empathising is appropriate, or even possible, if levelled against three-space. How does Green make sense of the idea that viewers undergo an experienced resemblance between the perceptible properties of paintings and the feeling of an emotion by 'empathising' with their three-space qualities? According to Green, a necessary condition on empathy is that it is directed at and involves concern for 'another' and involves imagining one's way into another's situation. It therefore involves an observer (e.g. Bonnard), and a target, (e.g. Van Gogh). Green, it seems, thinks that in experiencing Sunflow*ers*, Bonnard will 'call into consciousness [his] experience of  $\varphi$  feeling without actually reliving  $\varphi$ ' (2007, 190). Bonnard in some sense 'reads' the painting, using the yellow and the thick impasto textures to call up the emotion 'joy', a property of subjects like Van Gogh. But per EST, Bonnard's target is three-space and not Van Gogh's mental state. The question can then be asked in this way - is empathy the correct way to make sense of Bonnard's experience if we accept congruency? It seems incoherent to say Bonnard *empathises* his way into three-space (Green 2007, 190). While there is nothing particularly implausible about the perception of an intermodal congruency, nor anything implausible about the suggestion that we empathise with pictorial content, there is something odd about the way Green is fitting these two together. That is, he is not

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fitting them together plausibly. Three-space is a theoretical construct, whereas empathy aims at sentient emoting beings. By his own lights, Green fails to illuminate why empathising will harness the congruency in three-space in the same way our gateway senses supposedly give us experienced resemblances cross-modally.

While I'm aware that empathy is a slippery concept that can be shoehorned into something that either fights Green or helps him out, I struggle to see how Green can respond satisfactorily to this incompatibility. Rather than give up on the idea that there is a seamless congruent relation between affective and experiential states in three-space, he can attempt to the resolve the tension by getting the description of empathy to work. Green's account of empathy aligns with the commonly held view that we imagine our way into the emotional states of other persons, not conceptual constructs. For this reason, it will require significant reconstruction to cohere with congruency. One suggestion is that he simply insists viewers engage in incoherent experiences when eliciting resemblances. Just why the viewer is not aware of the incoherence, misuse of empathy or lack of imaginative targets would have to be spelled out elsewhere. Alternatively, he might say that, qua expressiveness, Still Lifes convey moods not emotions. They may be anxious but they are not sad, exuberant but not excited. As a result, empathy is not warranted and something softer – a form of contagion will elicit the appropriate dynamic 'feel'. What Green cannot do is defend the disjunctive claim 'EST' using the current explanation.

## 4 Conclusion

Green offers an exciting hypothesis about expressiveness which was used to elucidate the static-dynamic puzzle for Still Lifes. An initial discussion exposed a problem with his articulation of the relationship between qualitative properties and empathy. Consequently, the puzzle of expressiveness remains unsolved.

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### Figure credit

Figure 1 SharkD, Three-dimensional representation of Munsell colourspace (Wikimedia Commons, 2015). Reproduced under license: CC BY-SA 3.0