

The Aesthetic and Cognitive Value of Surprise

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ABSTRACT. It is a common experience to be surprised by an artwork. In this paper, I examine how and why this obvious fact matters for philosophical aesthetics. Following recent works in psychology and philosophers such as Davidson or Scheffler, we will see that surprise qualifies as an emotion of a special kind, essentially “cognitive” or “epistemic” in its nature and functioning. After some preliminary considerations, I wish to hold two general claims: the first one will be that surprise is somehow related to aesthetic appreciation, because it is often the ground to judge of a work’s value. The second point will be that a functional analysis of surprise provides support for cognitivist accounts of aesthetics. If this picture is right, surprise would generally play an important part in aesthetic experience and should also be seen as a paradigm to study the cognitive powers of art.

Schiele’s paintings, Proust’s novels, Gaudi’s buildings, and Schönberg’s pieces, beyond being considered great artworks, all have at least one thing in common. They are all very likely to surprise anybody encountering them for the first time. But why is that? Is this phenomenon susceptible to philosophical analysis, and is it of any interest for aesthetics? I will try to show in this paper that the answer to this question is a double yes.

Surprise, I take it, is a common reaction to artworks - although it does not need to be a systematic or even a frequent one. Roughly, we can think of three familiar scenarios: (a) an artwork may be experienced as so provocative, original, complex, or innovative, that surprise is a reaction to the work taken as a whole. Any of the artistic pieces cited above could be associated with this kind of experience. (b) Surprise can also be produced by some definite and distinct part of the artwork in its relation to the whole: thus, a *coup de théâtre* in a narrative or a switch and a mismatch (in rhythm, style, tempo, volume, pitch, etc.) between two parts of a song may produce surprise in varying degrees. (c) Eventually, an artwork may

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be experienced as surprising merely on the grounds of our prior beliefs and expectations, and even if there is nothing very special about it. This commonly happens as, for instance when a supposedly bad movie proves to be entertaining after all, or when a much anticipated novel turns out to be disappointing. It is a difficult matter to clear the relations between these sorts of surprises (and certainly, the picture could be refined) or to account for their variety in nature and degree. My aim here will be less to provide a *qualitative* analysis of surprise in the arts than to account for its *functional* role in aesthetic appreciation and more generally in knowledge. In other words, instead of seeing in how many ways artworks may surprise us, we will have to examine why and how they do so. I wish to defend two claims: the first one will be that surprise is linked to aesthetic appreciation taken in a broad sense, because it provides grounds for determining the aesthetic value of artworks. This does not mean, however, that surprise is a necessary or sufficient condition for aesthetic experience or enlightened judgment; and even less that it should be systematically praised as a proof of aesthetic merit. I merely want to hold that the emotion of surprise has something to do with the value we ascribe to artworks. The second claim is that a philosophical analysis of surprise provides the ground for a *cognitivist* account of aesthetics. According to this view or family of views, one must recognize to artworks the capacity to produce new knowledge and beliefs, or at least to have an impact on the epistemic life of individuals¹. I think an analysis of surprise offers a good argument to prove them right, as will be shown. First, I will try to define surprise more accurately and underline its essential link to belief and other epistemic states. In the second part, I will consider several arguments to show there could be a correlation between the aesthetic value of an artwork and its capacity to surprise us. To finish, I will show why surprise can be seen as a support for aesthetic cognitivism, and consider answer to a few possible objections.

¹ See for instance Beardsmore 1971, Elgin & Goodman 1988, Novitz 1987, Nussbaum 1990, Scheffler 1997, Walton 1990.

1. Defining Surprise

What, exactly, is surprise? It is undoubtedly a kind of *emotion*, consisting in the individual's response to some event experienced as unexpected, puzzling, or extraordinary. Surprise is thus felt as a reaction that one can identify by different *physiological* (eyebrows and jaw movements, dilation of the pupil, muscular contractions) and *psychological* (feeling of shock, puzzlement, fear, joy) signs². This emotion can obviously vary in intensity, going from the lightest puzzlement to the most extreme sort of shock or amazement. Psychologists have also remarked that surprise has no *valence*, which means it can be experienced as pleasant or unpleasant (surely, we can have bad surprises). If surprise has been of interest for philosophers and psychologists, this is also -and especially- because of its relation with other cognitive processes. There is no doubt, indeed, that surprise has some kind of *epistemic grounding*, or, to put it otherwise, that it relies on beliefs and knowledge for its proper functioning. If, as we said, our feeling surprised results from facing something unexpected, this necessarily implies that some prior expectation or belief was there in the first place. This link between surprise and other epistemic states has been made clear by Davidson:

“Suppose I believe there is a coin in my pocket. I empty my pocket and find no coin. I am surprised. Clearly enough I could not be surprised (though I could be startled) if I did not have beliefs in the first place. And perhaps it is equally clear that having a belief, at least one of the sort I have taken for my example, entails the possibility of surprise. If I believe I have a coin in my pocket, something might happen that would change my mind. But surprise involves a further step. It is not enough that I first believe there is a coin in my pocket, and after emptying my pocket I no longer have this belief. Surprise requires that I be aware of a contrast between what I did believe and what I come to believe. Such awareness, however, is a belief about a belief: if I am surprised, then among other things I come to believe my original belief was false. I do not need to insist that every case of surprise involves a belief that a prior belief was

² See Darwin 1872; Bain, Woodworth & Schlosberg, 1954; Izard, Meyer & Niepel, 1994; Schützwohl, 1998, Huron 2008.

false (though I am inclined to think so). What I do want to claim is that one cannot have a general stock of beliefs of the sort necessary for having any beliefs at all without being subject to surprises that involve beliefs about the correctness of one's own beliefs. Surprise about some things is a necessary and sufficient condition of thought in general". [Davidson, 1989: 326]

According to Davidson, surprise can generally be used as a test for ascribing beliefs and expectations to individuals. Indeed, the person surprised to find a coin in her pocket only feels that way because she was thinking something different in the first place (e.g., assuming that the coin was in her wallet, or that she had nothing in her pocket etc.). We could not make sense of this emotion without supposing some kind of *doxastic background*, that is, without the individual having some prior opinion, expectation, or idea³. But Davidson shows something more. Surprise has a deeper cognitive function; insofar its occurrence provokes some kind of realization about one's own beliefs. When my (potentially implicit) expectation to find a coin in my pocket turns out to be frustrated, it becomes all the more obvious that I had such a belief, and it immediately entails a realization about how and how much it differs from what is actually the case. This is why Davidson sees the experience of surprise as entailing: (a) some kind of awareness about one's own beliefs; (b) the realization of an objective state of the world, that is, of what is or is not the case, independently of what we previously held to be true; and (c) some kind of change in beliefs, because I must come to realize that my previous belief was inadequate in order to be surprised. For Davidson, thus, surprise is closely related to other notions such as objective truth, error, and belief. The important point is to see that surprise is an emotion of a special kind, because it is made possible by and related to the individual's epistemic attitudes towards the world. It may therefore be defined as a *cognitive emotion*, to borrow the words of Israel Scheffler (2009).

A distinction, however, needs to be made: surprise is not a reaction to mere *novelty*. Unprecedented phenomena constantly occur without surprising us at all, as, for instance, when one goes to a new city. Certainly

³ As Daniel Dennett puts it, "surprise is only possible when it upsets belief" (Dennett, 2001: 982).

that would not count as a kind of surprising event (unless, for some reason, this situation conflicted with the one's beliefs or expectations). Conversely, one can be surprised by ordinary and familiar facts (seeing a friend in the street, getting six tails in a row on a coin toss, etc.). We see that the only necessary condition in order to be surprised is to experience a *conflict* between a *genuine* belief or anticipation and the current state of the world. We can then propose the following model to account for surprise (following Casati & Pasquinelli 2007):

Strong Expectation View

If I genuinely believe or expect that p , and event F occurs such that $\neg p$ is the case, I am surprised.

If I genuinely believe or expect that $\neg p$, and event F occurs such that p is the case, I am surprised

This picture surely accounts for most of the cases we could think of. It however faces one problem: we can clearly be surprised without having specific expectations or beliefs in the first place. For instance, I could be surprised to receive a gift from a friend while having no prior idea that he was going (or not going) to offer me something – e.g., if it is not my birthday, or Christmas. In a way, genuine surprises even seem to exclude any sort of anticipation. How are we to account for this kind of possibilities? The answer is that the epistemic background necessary for surprise does not always need to be *explicit* or even fully *conscious*: it might involve latent stereotypes, habits, inductive associations, implicit inferences, probability reasoning, etc. If we consider all these things as pertaining to our general system of beliefs S, we can propose a second picture to account for these problematic cases (I still follow Casati & Pasquinelli, though I modify their account):

Weak Expectation View

If, even when I do *not* explicitly expect or believe that p , event F occurs such that $\neg p$ is the case and such that $\neg p$ conflicts with my system of beliefs S, I am surprised.

If, even when I do *not* expect or believe that $\neg p$, event F occurs such that p is the case and such that F conflicts with my general system of beliefs S, I am surprised.

This refined framework accounts for the no-expectation cases of surprise, without postulating countless actual and particular entities or propositions in the individuals' minds that would correspond to what is negated in the surprising experience. If we take it that we have some comprehensive, implicit, and higher-level beliefs, we can thus account for any particular surprising experience: it would be puzzling to see a hobbit pop out in my living room not because I held it to be impossible *for a hobbit to pop out in my living room*, but because I more generally think that nothing appears out of thin air or that fictional characters do not exist. If we accept this "layered" view of cognition, then we can also say that surprise is experienced when a specific situation contradicts a fundamental or common belief. My aim in this first part was to provide a clearer account of the nature and functioning of surprise. We saw that it must be defined as a cognitive emotion, consisting in the reaction to the violation of a genuine or of an implicit belief or expectation. It is now time to see why aesthetic surprises matter.

2. Surprise and Works of Art

As we said, artworks sometimes surprise us. But is there any link between this fact and the merits and qualities we grant them? In other words, is surprise significant for our appreciation of art? I will try to provide three arguments in support of an affirmative answer to this question.

(i) The first point we can think of associates surprise with an artwork's functioning. It seems that surprise is necessary to the correct understanding or proper experience of *some* works. There are certain creations specifically intending to produce this emotion and we would probably fail at grasping these works at their full value if we didn't experience any such feeling. By value, I simply mean the qualitative appreciation we can have of a work, resulting from our perceptual, affective, and cognitive encounter with it. Talk about aesthetic value is certainly controversial, but we can stick to a common usage seeing it as the sum of aesthetic merits or flaws in a work of art.

Surprise, I take it, is essential to our experience of certain particular artworks. A good example would be *Him* by Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan. The work functions as such: one enters a room in which the sculpture

of a kneeling boy, seemingly praying, can be seen from behind. As one moves forward in the room, the face of the child turns out to be that of ... Adolf Hitler's. This is obviously meant to surprise the spectator and defeat his expectations. The work also intends to upset one's common beliefs: the presentation of Hitler as a praying child contradicts our general association of prayer with moral virtue or of Nazism with monstrosity, for instance. I argue that we have here the case of an artwork that relies on surprise for its proper functioning: our experience and judgment would have been altered if the sculpture's front had been seen right from the start, or if one had simply seen its back and moved on to another room. This particular example shows that surprise is central to the functioning of *some* artworks, which means that the latter intend to generate this emotion and that they cannot be experienced in the same way without it.

But couldn't we go further, and say that surprise is necessary for the correct functioning of certain *kinds* of artworks? The point seems obvious in the case of narratives, as long as they involve (dramatic or comical) suspense. Here again, surprise is generally part of the work's proper functioning: a detective novel would lose most of its interest if the identity of the murderer or the outcome of the story was given away right from the start. Even when we know how things will end up (fairy tales, tragedies), we want to see *how* the events are going to take place, that is, have some uncertainties about the development of the narrative⁴. Things should not be transparent-clear right from the start. When a narrative is too obvious, it becomes dull. We want, at some point, to face the unexpected⁵.

The point could also be made in the case of music. Following the seminal intuitions of Meyer (1956), Huron (2006) has laid the stress on certain neurological mechanisms involved in the arousal of surprise and shown that it has an essential relation to other basic emotions (*awe, laugh-*

⁴ Huron suggest something similar: "Suppose you had the opportunity to know in advance all of the future times and places when your most cherished goals or ambitions would be fulfilled. I doubt that many people would want such knowledge. Part of the joy of life is the surprise that accompanies achieving certain wishes. When all of the uncertainty is removed, the capacity for pleasure also seems to be diminished" (Huron, 2006, 39)

⁵ It is worth noting that this idea is not very new: Aristotle says in the *Poetics* that tragedy must produce the *thaumaston* (which means the surprising) by the reversal of the events (*peripeteia*) in order to function properly.

ter, and *frisson*). What matters for us is his idea that music involves certain expectation-fulfilment or anticipation-disappointment patterns, which are biologically grounded but also culturally learnt. It is patent that composers have learnt to play with these entrenched norms in different ways, as Huron remarks:

“There are four basic forms of surprise [...] A *schematic surprise* arises when a commonplace (schematic) event is displaced by an event of lower probability. Musical examples of such surprises include deceptive cadences and chromatic mediant chords. A *dynamic surprise* arises in response to events that have a low probability given the listener’s encounter with previous passages in that same work thus far. Musical examples include rhythmic hemiola, and the “surprise” chord in Haydn’s Surprise Symphony. A *veridical surprise* arises in response to events that have a low probability of occurrence given past experiences with the work. Musical examples of such surprises include performance errors, intentional misquotations (such as Schickel’s thematic joking), and unfamiliar interpretive nuances applied to works that are otherwise highly familiar to a listener. A *conscious surprise* is a rare form of surprise [...] it arises when a knowledgeable listener consciously infers some future event, which then does not take place” (2006: 303).

Huron is proposing what we called a qualitative account of (musical) surprises, and we can see that there are many potential ways for musical works to be surprising. From here, it could certainly be argued that, although music need not necessarily surprise us to be pleasant or valuable, it is essential to its functioning to rely on and sometimes defeat our expectations.

To summarize, entire kinds of artworks rely on the (possible) production of surprise to function properly and to be experienced as they should. We need of course to distinguish the surprise an artwork intends to produce and the one we actually feel. A work may try to be surprising and not succeed (and vice versa). But in any case, it seems clear that surprise plays some role in our experience of the artwork, in the determination of its qualities or interest, that is, in its *value*. The argument is then the following:

- (a) The (possible) experience of surprise is necessary to the correct functioning of some artworks or kinds of artworks.

(b) When they fail to surprise us, these artworks do not function correctly.

(c) Correct functioning is significant to determine an artwork's value

(Conclusion) Surprise is therefore significant to determine some artworks' value.

(ii) I come to my second argument. Is it possible to go further, and to claim that *generally*, the higher our surprise, the more grounds we have to judge of the work's merits and flaws? That is, can we correlate our level of surprise with our ascription of value? This idea is promising. Indeed, we often say of good art that it surprised us one way or another (e.g., in expressing original ideas, using new techniques or styles) and of bad art that it failed to do so, being boring, dull, and ordinary. Masterworks are also generally considered to be the most surprising ones, because they convey something revolutionary, absolutely new, and irremediably rich. What about bad surprises, though? Certainly, some artworks can disappoint us, or shock us in a bad way. Well, even in these cases, surprise still proves to be correlated with a judgment of value. For instance, if I am disappointed in my expectation that a novel is going to be great when I read it, it is still a response to the work, and it is still a ground for judging of its value or its interest. To be struck by a mismatch or an inconsistency is still a relevant response for aesthetic judgment. Avant-garde works, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, often lead to this sort of reactions in the first place ("This is not art!"), where the surprise or shock of the audience was immediately associated with an aesthetic appreciation. Surprise, then, seems to be a basis for many aesthetic judgements. Once more, I do not claim that all artworks have to surprise us to have an aesthetic value, or that a good artwork should be surprising. I simply hold that it seems possible to *generally* correlate the amount of surprise produced by a work with the intensity of our response to it, and thus with our judgments of value. The point could be put as such:

(a) The more an artwork surprises us, the stronger is our reaction to it.

(b) The stronger our reaction is to an artwork, the more ground we have to determine its value (merits and flaws).

(Conclusion) The more an artwork surprises us, the more we can determine its value.

(iii) I come to the last point. There seems to exist a strong link between surprise and creativity. Indeed, we generally consider creative artists to be the ones breaking or renewing the established codes and conventions, proposing something unprecedented, making us think or feel in a new way. The ability to produce surprise, then, could perhaps be seen as a sign of artistic mastery or a criterion for creativity. If this is true, it would provide support for our claim that surprise is significant to determine a work's aesthetic value. According to Margaret A. Boden (2004), there are several ways in which the ability to produce surprise is essentially linked to creativity:

“Creativity is the ability to come up with ideas or artifacts that are new, surprising and valuable [...] An idea may be surprising because it's unfamiliar, or even unlikely [...] This sort of surprise goes against statistics. The second sort of surprise is more interesting. An unexpected idea may 'fit' into a style of thinking that you already had – but you're surprised because you hadn't realized that this particular idea was part of it. Maybe you're even intrigued to find that an idea of this general type fits into the familiar style. And the third sort of surprise is more interesting still: this is the astonishment you feel on encountering an apparently impossible idea. It just couldn't have entered anyone's head, you feel – and yet it did. It may even engender other ideas which, yesterday, you'd have thought equally impossible” (Boden, 2004: 2-3).

For Boden, three kinds of creativity correspond to these three sorts of surprises. *Combinational creativity* consists in the association of familiar ideas or elements in some novel and unfamiliar ways. One can see it at work in successful analogies and metaphors (think of Eluard's verse, “*La terre est bleue comme une orange*”) or in fusions of styles. Secondly, there would be the *exploratory creativity*, in which a familiar “conceptual space” (i.e. a style of thinking or established practice) is used in some unprecedented way. It may consist for instance in the modification of an entrenched artistic tradition (e.g. *Still life with eggplant* by Matisse). This

sort of creativity prompts the reader, spectator, or audience to consider something that could have been thought of within the familiar conceptual space, but with an acuity that brings to light new aspects or consequences. Lastly, *transformational creativity* consists in some extreme modification or replacement of a whole conceptual space, as when Schönberg decided to break the traditional laws of occidental harmony, or when perspective was (re)discovered and theorized in Renaissance Italy. This sort of creativity is obviously the most impressive one, because it leads to completely unexpected works or ideas, such as they could not even have been imagined before. Boden's account could be discussed further. What matters to us is the point that creativity often consists in the ability to generate surprises. This does not imply, once more, that surprise is necessary or sufficient condition for anything: a work may be creative just because it conveys some minor changes that will generate no strong surprise or no surprise at all (one can get this feeling when several works of a painter are exhibited in chronological order, for instance). Surprise may also be provoked by non-creative works. Still, we should grant that generally, creative works do surprise us, somehow. Our argument can then be summarized as follows:

- (a) Creativity often involves the artist's ability to surprise.
- (b) The creativity of an artwork is a ground for determining its aesthetic value.
- (Conclusion) Surprise is significant for determining a work's aesthetic value.

3. Surprise, Artworks, and Cognitivism

I have tried to show that surprise is a ground for our aesthetic judgements, that is, for our appreciation of a work's merits or flaws. We can now come to our second claim, namely, that a philosophical analysis of surprise supports aesthetic cognitivism. What I intend to do now is to show that surprise is not only cognitive in its origins, but fundamentally in its outcome or *consequences*. Aesthetic cognitivism, as we said, is the philosophical view according to which art can produce knowledge or have an impact on our epistemic life. Cynthia Freeland defines it more precisely as the thesis that "(1) Artworks stimulate cognitive activity that may teach us about the

world; (2) The cognitive activity they stimulate is part and parcel of their functioning as artworks. (3) As a result of this stimulation, we learn from artworks: we acquire fresh knowledge, our beliefs are refined, and our understanding is deepened ...” (Freeland 1997: 19). Why would an emotion such as surprise provide support for such a view? The answer, I think, has already been sketched: being the reaction to a conflict between our beliefs and reality, it commands a modification of our thinking in order to adjust with the world’s objective state. If I experience a mismatch between my expectations or beliefs and a current perceptual input (“Wait! Is that a hedgehog on my couch?”), I can try to *verify* whether this is really the case. If, after verification, I come to correct the input (“it was just my cat after all”), the conflict is solved; but if the mismatch persists (“I am sure my cat doesn’t have spikes on his back”), then I am genuinely surprised and I have either to revise my beliefs or to find an explanation to make sense of this event. Generally, when facing something implausible or unexpected, we have two options: we can either decide to accept this new fact and consequently change some of our beliefs; or we can stick to our old ideas and try to find an explanation to deny or account for the occurrence of the surprising event.

Surprise, to sum up, often entails a process of *reflective equilibrium* between the web of our beliefs and experience, in order to end the state of epistemic distress or dissonance caused by the surprising event. In any case, its occurrence tends to initiate some epistemic change. It is worth noting that such a claim is also found and investigated in evolutionary psychology, where one can understand the belief-change induced by surprise as a functional, adaptive mechanism:

“One of the adaptive functions of surprise is exactly this. Belief change in cognitive agents is triggered by very surprising incoming input. The intensity of surprise relative to the incoming input “signals” to the agent that things are not going as expected and that the knowledge of the environment must be reconsidered. Indeed, wrong beliefs generally lead to bad performances and to failure in the intention and goal fulfillment. On the other hand resource bounded cognitive agents do not generally reconsider their beliefs and expectations when the input data are not recognized to be incompatible or implausible with respect to their pre-existent knowledge [...] When

the world flows as expected and we are not aware of the inadequacy of our knowledge of the world, we do not need to criticize and re-consider this knowledge". [Lorini & Castelfranchi, 2006: 19]

If surprise results from a failure to predict and anticipate the actual course of events, it is natural to think that it must provoke a modification of an individual's behaviour and beliefs. But how does all this relate to artworks?

We could argue that many artworks intend to produce such belief revision, by intentionally frustrating our expectations. A good example would be the following: Spanish artist Joan Foncuberta produced a series of photographs called '*Constelaciones*' (1994). In the first place, they seem to be pictures of the sky, evoking the traditional sublime theme of cosmic immensity. During the exhibition, however, some hints are given to suggest that something is not quite right. By the end, the spectator just realizes (or is told) that these pictures are in fact photograms of the artist's wind-screen after he drove several hundred kilometres on the highway. All these stars, comets, planets, and moons, are just insects who met a rather a sad fate. Here the artist makes one looks at insects in a rather novel way, but he also questions the audience about the trust they have in museums and artists (this idea is a constant theme of his work). Here, we can see that surprise provokes a realization (and a possible revision) of some generally held beliefs, say, that "insects are gross", that "artists don't lie"; or that "the beauty of the night sky has something unique about it". The surprise produced by an artwork, as suggested by this example, can be seen as an invitation to review or even to revise our beliefs, be it about art in general or about something else.

Surprise, in the end, proves to be cognitive in its outcome, because it can impact our thinking. When an artwork (or anything else) surprises us, we generally seek for an explanation in order resolve the conflict -even if we could also choose a retreat into terror, denial or indifference. This is why, following the seminal claims of Nelson Goodman (1968), Israel Scheffler has depicted surprise (along with what he calls the "joy of verification") as a driving force for inquiry and further discoveries:

"Surprise may be dissipated and evaporate into lethargy. It may culminate in confusion or panic. It may be swiftly overcome by dogmatism. Or it may be transformed into wonder or curiosity, and so

become an educative occasion. Curiosity replaces the impact of surprise with the demand for explanation; it turns confusion into question. To answer the question is to reconstruct initial beliefs so that they may consistently incorporate what had earlier been unassimilable. It is to provide an improved framework of premises by which the surprising event might have been anticipated and for which parallel events will no longer surprise. The constructive conquest of surprise is registered in the achievement of new explanatory structures, while cognitive application of these structures provokes surprise once more. Surprise is vanquished by theory, and theory is, in turn, overcome by surprise [...] The growth of cognition is thus, in fact, inseparable from the education of the emotions". [Scheffler, 2009: 139]

Scheffler's claim, which we will follow here, is rather moderate: although we cannot claim that all surprises are cognitive or even meaningful, we can hold that they *can* (and often do) have an impact on the epistemic life of the individuals. If we grant this point, and if we recognize that artworks can surprise us, we consequently have to admit that a surprise produced by an artwork may lead us to acquire new beliefs or to revise some prior ones. It entails that aesthetic cognitivism is true. The argument could be sketched as such:

- (a) Surprise only exists relatively to beliefs, expectations, and knowledge.
- (b) Surprise urges for belief-change or belief-justification.
- (c) Artworks can surprise us.
- (Conclusion 1) Artworks can induce belief change or new belief justification.
- (Conclusion 2) Artworks have a cognitive power.
- (Conclusion 3) Aesthetic cognitivism is true.

4. Some Unsurprising Worries

Several general objections could be made to what has been said here. I want to address the most obvious ones:

(i) First of all, one could argue that surprise is too context-sensitive and too loose of a concept to be included in any serious theory. After all, anybody could be surprised by anything, given different situations, and relatively to one's prior expectations or beliefs – with the bizarre consequence that the less you know, the more often you are to be surprised. Moreover, as we noted, a work may want to be surprising without succeeding at it (or vice versa) and it seems possible to enjoy or hate very ordinary art. There would thus seem to be no logical link between the felt surprise and the work's purpose or qualities. Surprise could not indicate anything about a work's value, unless one considers the latter as being also relative to context and individuals.

(ii) We have said that some surprises are aesthetic, while all of them are cognitive in their grounding. This could be challenged, since there seem to be events that would count as surprising without requiring any particular epistemic or intentional background. In a way, the expectation-requirement for surprise leads to the implausible idea that one must be ready to (or have reasons to) be surprised in order to be so. According to Benoist (2013), following Meyer (1956), we should make a distinction between the *unexpected* and the *surprising*. While the first requires some epistemic framework or expectation to arise, the second does not presuppose such a thing. For instance, to be startled by a firecracker that has gone off behind me, or by the loud and sudden cymbal in Haydn's 94 symphony, does not presuppose any expectation or anticipation, but seems just a purely emotional and reflex reaction. Far from being something *unexpected*, the essence of the surprising would amount to what strikes us when we were not expecting *anything* at all. We should thus deny that surprise is (always) necessarily linked to belief or knowledge.

(iii) One could eventually object that the correlation of surprise and aesthetic value does not work, because it seems that some of our judgments take place in the long run, after all the effects of surprise are gone. Psychologists have even shown that people are more likely to enjoy works they are more familiar with, so that presentations in a better-known style or by a better-known artist induce more positive responses (this is the so-called 'mere exposure effect'). Habit, thus, would prove as good a candidate as

novelty in judging of a works' value.

Are these objections definitive? We must concede to (i) that surprise is context-sensitive. Certainly, what surprises one leaves another indifferent, and it is hard to know in advance what will puzzle whom and why. This is the reason why, as said in the introduction, a qualitative theory of surprise seems difficult; it also explains why we cannot say that a work *will be good* because it is surprising, or bad because it is not. However, this context-dependence is not enough to prove that surprise does not play a role in our evaluation of artworks. It merely shows that surprise could be produced by *any* artwork (depending on the contexts and the individuals), but not that it isn't relevant for aesthetic judgments. The apparent consequence that judgments of value would also become relative should not worry us too much: as we said, talk of aesthetic value is itself controversial, but taken in a simple sense as we have proposed (where the value refers to the assumed sum of merits and flaws), its contextuality amounts to the obvious fact that we do not experience and appreciate artworks in the same way, depending on our prior history, expertise, and other idiosyncratic factors. We can therefore say that surprise plays a functional role in the ascription of value without going further in the philosophical minefield of aesthetic values.

As for (ii), whether or not we accept or not the idea of non epistemic surprises is of no impact for our main thesis. That some surprises might be non-cognitive in their origin does not entail that none of them are, as the fact that most surprises are cognitive in their origin does not entail that they will always prove to be so in their outcome (i.e., by systematically inducing significant belief change). The question of non-epistemic surprises is worth exploring, but this task pertains more to a qualitative theory than to the functional account we have tried to sketch here.

To the proponent of (iii), we could say that there need not be any conflict here. We do not require any unique basis for our aesthetic judgments. Familiarity and habit can indeed participate in the evaluation of a work's value. Maybe it even plays a greater role than we think. But this does not entail that surprise plays no part or that it should be overlooked. In fact, it even suggests the contrary, since we saw that surprise presupposes prior habits and beliefs in order to exist. As Huron puts it, "surprise requires

an expected outcome; and an expected outcome requires an internalized norm” (2006: 36). Our aesthetic judgments could thus result from a subtle alchemy between our habits or personal history and the novelty conveyed by the artwork.

We have shown that surprise can play an important part in our aesthetic judgments and experiences. Even if this claim can be challenged, surprise is still of interest for philosophical aesthetics, because it functions as a “cognitive emotion”, impacting the epistemic life of individuals. I have claimed that this provides a strong argument in favor of aesthetic cognitivism. It might be good to finish with a remark. From the obvious fact that distinct individuals have different expectations and beliefs at one time; and that the same individuals have diverse beliefs and expectations at different times; it follows that artworks can produce many kinds of surprises at various occasions. The changing and dynamic nature of our epistemic life explains why a work, even familiar, can still startle or amaze us after some time. We could thus account for the problem of interpretation and also explain what has sometimes been called the irremediably rich, saturated, and complex nature of artworks. A philosophical analysis of surprise is perhaps a path towards these other major issues in aesthetics.

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