

Memories of Art

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Abstract: Although the art-historical context of a work of art is important to our appreciation of it, it is our knowledge of that history that plays causal roles in producing the experience itself. This knowledge is in the form of memories, both semantic memories about the historical circumstances, but also episodic memories concerning our personal connections with an artwork. We also create representations of minds in order to understand the emotions that artworks express.

Bulot & Reber (B&R) have brought several important features of art under the umbrella of their approach, most notably the history of art itself. Their framework has several resources for capturing the appreciation of art and is expandable to take in further aspects as they are understood. In this response, I will make several suggestions toward the improvement and expansion of the theory.

It is odd to think of the viewer as somehow recovering the history of an object from the object itself, as the authors do, except in certain specialized senses. We frequently have knowledge about the art-historical context of a work prior to exposure to it. It is this knowledge that plays important roles in our appreciation of art, rather than the historical events themselves. The history taught to students of art, for example, plays vital causal roles in how they go on to create and perceive artworks. Certain aspects of art's history are exaggerated to make them entertaining and memorable. Many of the most famous stories of artistic creation are at the very least embellished, or even spun from whole cloth, but their purpose is motivational, not merely instructional.

Theory requires both the actual historical context and the remembered historical context. We need to know what the artists of a certain movement thought the history of art was, in order to understand their work. We also need to understand how this knowledge comes into play in creating and understanding art. How exactly is the history of art encoded in the memories of those who know it? How are the right portions of that memory brought up in a given context? How do these memories participate in the creation, augmentation, and continuation of aesthetic experience? We also need to speak of the history of art itself. When mistakes are made about the history of art, we need to have a concept of the actual history in order to make sense of that. We also need it in order to make sense of one account being more correct than another.

Not all of our memories of the history of art are neutrally stored as impersonal semantic memories. Some of them are memories of personal experiences involving the artwork and are stored among our episodic memories. There is need for caution here; several fallacies lurk. In the right context, a blurry memory from having heard a piece of music long ago can be mistaken for an aesthetic

response to it, or both memory and response can happen in a tangled *mélange*. Worse, someone might mistake a positive association with an artwork for a positive aesthetic response to it. A man likes a certain song merely because it was playing when he first danced with his future wife. The positive role of memory here is that it allows us to progressively enrich and mature our aesthetic experience of a work. Lovers of art revisit their favorite works, slowly altering or augmenting their understanding of them each time. We know that memories evolve over time rather than remaining frozen, like videotapes. This evolution can make eyewitness testimony unreliable, but it is welcomed by the art appreciator. Without memory of some sort, our aesthetic taste cannot mature. We cannot move beyond the songs we liked as children. Just as artists move on to new styles, their viewers move with them, partly by having the same sets of experiences with the old style, which prepared them to receive the new style. The accumulation and continued use of art-historical knowledge is a vital part of living a life enhanced by art. In other places, B&R describe something closer to procedural memory, for example where they speak about listeners implicitly learning how to perceive higher-level properties of music, such as the relationship between a theme and its variations, through repeated listening.

Another vital knowledge resource we bring to artworks is our empathic ability, but empathy in a deeper sense than B&R describe. We not only understand intentions behind artworks, but we also create full-blown simulations of human minds in order to understand them. Music expresses emotions, of course, but whose? Perhaps those of a hypothetical persona (Levinson 1996b; Robinson 2005); someone who underwent a series of emotional experiences expressed by the music. We don't merely understand isolated mental states; we employ representations of an entire mind (Hirstein 2010).

The most obvious and strong aesthetic experiences do seem to involve fluency, but this practice is deviated from so frequently that fluency alone is not enough of the story, as B&R seem to recognize. There are several interesting ways in which fluency and disfluency have been combined in single artworks. The blues, for example, can establish a background that is perceived fluently, because it is familiar, repetitive, and so forth, on top of which the instrumentalists, especially the lead guitarist, are free to experiment with disfluencies (within careful limits). Visual art can use pattern to produce fluent intake, which can then form a background for more original motifs. Fluent processing keeps us in routine mode, but no artist wants her viewer receiving her work like this. Artworks entice us to think, to emote, to remember, and the better ones do all three.

In describing the peak shift effect, Ramachandran and I (1999) were pointing to features of the perception of art that cannot be accounted for by an understanding of art history, but which can be accounted for by an understanding of how the brain reacts to artworks. The peak shift effect can help us understand why a given form produced a stronger aesthetic reaction in a case where no amount of knowledge of the history of art could have predicted that, because the explanation required specific knowledge of the human perceptual/cognitive system. Or, to make the point stronger, the explanation might require knowledge of features of the perceptual system that had not previously made themselves evident in the history of art, so that the use of historical knowledge to predict them would be all but impossible.