THE NATURE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND THE ROLE OF THE SCIENCES IN AESTHETIC THEORIZING: REMARKS ON THE WORK OF NANAY AND SMITH

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Bence Nanay, in *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*,[1] and Murray Smith, in *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*,[2] have given us a pair of rich and interesting works about the relationships between aesthetics and the sciences of mind. Nanay's work focuses on perception and attention, while Smith's addresses the relations among experiential, psychological, and neuroscientific understandings of a wide range of aesthetically relevant phenomena, particularly as they occur in film. These books make a valuable contribution to a project that remains fledgling: that of taking seriously the relevance of the sciences to our conceptions and explanations of experiential phenomena in aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

I will focus on a specific issue from each of these works. Nanay offers an account of aesthetic experience that ties it closely to the concepts of focused and distributed attention that are invoked in the sciences of perception. While I agree with Nanay that attention should play a central role in accounts of aesthetic experience, I raise questions about his specific account of the relationship. With Smith, we zoom out to a broader issue, that of the mutual explanatory relationships among phenomenological, functional/cognitive, and neurophysiological observations in our aesthetic theorizing. Smith makes a strong claim that all three of these levels are essential and irreducible, and none is subsidiary to the others. I argue that given the current state of the science, we should not regard neurophysiological observations as being on a par with observations at the other two levels. I also raise some doubts about the prospect of neurophysiological data making an independent contribution to aesthetic theorizing, even once the science is far more advanced.

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1 Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

2 Murray Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

I. NANAY ON AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND AESTHETIC ATTENTION

In *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, Nanay argues that careful attention to perception can help us to make progress on a broad range of questions in aesthetics. One of his central claims relies on a distinction in the psychology of perception between distributed attention and focused attention. If you look directly and intently at one object before you in the room, you are exhibiting focused attention. If you open up the field of your attention to encompass more of the scene before you, your attention is to that extent distributed. You'll notice that you can shift your attention in this way without moving your eyes.[3]

Nanay's claim is that in 'some paradigmatic instances of aesthetic experience, we attend in a distributed and at the same time focused manner: our attention is focused on one perceptual object, but it is distributed among a large number of this object's properties'.[4] He goes on to define 'aesthetic attention' in this very way, as attention that 'is distributed with regards to properties but focused with regards to objects'.[5]

Nanay argues, drawing on the work of Arien Mack,[6] that in our everyday practical activities, our attention tends to be distributed across many objects with limited attention to their particular properties, given our cognitive limitations.[7] When our attention is focused on a particular object for a practical purpose, it tends to be focused on the properties that are relevant to that purpose.[8] Attention that is focused with respect to an object but distributed across many of that object's properties, Nanay suggests, is special: it indicates a curiosity about the object that is not tied to a specific function or purpose, and this is plausibly understood as the disinterested aesthetic attitude that has often been referred to in aesthetic theory.[9] Nanay supports this contention by appeal to studies showing that while untrained people looking at a photograph tend to direct their eyes to a focal subject, art experts distribute their attention rather equally across most regions of the photograph.[10]

I'm sympathetic to the claim that attention to one's perceptual inputs, and the objects that produce them, is central to many forms of aesthetic experience,

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3 Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 21–27. See also Arien Mack, 'Is the Visual World a Grand Illusion? A Response', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 9 (2002): 102–10.

4 Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 13.

5 Ibid., 23.

6 Mack, 'Is the Visual World a Grand Illusion?'

7 Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 23.

8 Ibid., 26.

9 Ibid., 25–26.

10 Stine Vogt and Svein Magnussen, 'Expertise in Pictorial Perception: Eye-Movement Patterns and Visual Memory in Artists and Laymen', *Perception* 36 (2007): 91–100. See also Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 27.

and can be what distinguishes aesthetic from non-aesthetic experience. We take in and even respond behaviourally to many perceptual inputs that we don't particularly attend to, and reactivating our attention to these inputs gives a texture to our experience that might well be described as aesthetic. As I was writing this paragraph, I was sitting outside on my back patio. As I was thinking about how to frame my thoughts, I absently turned my eyes away from the computer and turned my head in the direction of the trees and shrubs surrounding me. I had a visual experience of them, but they were mostly residing in the background of my awareness, as I thought about what to say about aesthetic attention. But then at one moment I changed the tenor of my awareness, focusing directly on what I was seeing. I paid attention to the tangle of leaves and the many colours of green and noted the very slight movement of branches in a subtle breeze. This drew my attention to the sensation of air on my skin, and from there I opened my attention out to other bodily sensations, such as the pressure of my elbow against my hip and the expansion of my torso and shifts in fabric against my skin as I breathed. In attending directly to perceptual information I normally screen out, I had what I would describe as an aesthetic experience of being in that place at that time.[11]

The experience I've described seems to share some features of what Nanay has in mind: my attention is distributed over a number of different properties and, indeed, over properties revealed by different sense modalities. Moreover, the distribution of my attention is not guided by any particular project or aim; the attitude I bring to the situation is one of openness to what is before me and a willingness to savour whatever is presented – where savouring does not necessarily imply enjoyment, but it does imply really tasting as opposed to just absently swallowing.

What my experience does not share with the kind that Nanay describes is focus with respect to objects. It ranges over visible aspects of natural objects and tactile and proprioceptively revealed properties and states of my own body. Moreover, where the attention is distributed, the distribution remains somewhat limited. There are many somatic states of my body, for instance, that do not draw my attention. And there is a further qualitative aspect of my experience that seems relevant to its aesthetic character, yet does not figure in Nanay's account. This is a certain kind of investment I have in the experience: I take an interest in the objects before me and the experience itself, rather than simply allowing my attention to range blankly or blandly over things.

[11] Sherri Irvin, 'The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (January 2008): 29–44.

Now, Nanay does not claim that his account applies to every form or instance of aesthetic experience. Nor need he suggest that his account exhausts every element of aesthetic experience. But when he says that 'aesthetic attention' is precisely the sort of attention that is focused with respect to objects and distributed with respect to properties, I think we can fairly ask why attention that is distributed with respect to both objects and properties is not aesthetic, or is less prone to being aesthetic.

Lest one think my example of aesthetic experience is idiosyncratic, here is a passage from Yi-Fu Tuan about what the appreciator of nature must do:

> He needs to slip into old clothes so that he could feel free to stretch out on the hay beside the brook and bathe in a meld of physical sensations: the smell of the hay and of horse dung; the warmth of the ground, its hard and soft contours; the warmth of the sun tempered by breeze; the tickling of an ant making its way up the calf of his leg; the play of shifting leaf shadows on his face; the sound of water over the pebbles and boulders, the sound of cicadas and distant traffic.[12]

Thus, when it comes to aesthetic experience in natural environments and in everyday life, it seems attention will often range over many objects. Of course, Nanay is well aware of this phenomenon, and he says that when it comes to appreciation of a landscape, 'the "object of attention" is likely to be the entire landscape and not one tree or another'.[13] But I worry that this move may trivialize somewhat the notion of attention that is focused with respect to its object.

When it comes to the distribution of attention across many properties of an object or objects, I wonder whether this is not characteristic of many non-aesthetic experiences. To follow what is happening in a football game, I may attend to many aspects of what is happening on the field: the positions, movements, postures, and facial expressions of many players at once, as they reveal the players' local effectiveness, intentions, and states of health and energy, the teams' underlying strategic aims, and so forth. I may also need to attend to factors like temperature and wind direction. Would shifting to an aesthetic experience of the same event necessarily involve distributing one's attention across even more of the event's properties, or might it rather involve simply attending to different properties, or perhaps even the same properties, but for a different purpose or with a different mindset?

I wonder, then, whether the issue is less the distribution of attention and more the kind of attitude or aim that is guiding this distribution. So, for instance, Robert

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12 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values* (Columbia: University Press, 1990), 92.

13 Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 25.

Stecker talks about attending to 'forms, qualities, or meaningful features of things, […] for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience'.[14] On a view like Stecker's, then, aesthetic experience is a matter less of the focus or distribution of attention and more of *which* properties one attends to and the *aim* with which one attends to them.

To be fair, I must emphasize that Nanay does not claim that what he has called aesthetic attention is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for aesthetic experience. But the considerations I've mentioned may put some pressure on the idea that this pattern of attention, more than others, is distinctively aesthetic.

That said, I do think there is something to the idea that many aesthetic experiences involve the distribution of attention across properties one does not normally attend to in the same combination in non-aesthetic experience. Both Nanay and Smith discuss the role of art and aesthetic experience in defamiliarizing things for us; Smith also mentions that defamiliarization involves reversing the habituation whereby things recede from conscious awareness.[15] Some forms of distributed attention may involve precisely the kind of fresh eye and fresh mind that defamiliarization requires. Nanay's thought-provoking foray into the relationships among attention and aesthetic experience puts philosophers in a good position to examine these issues further.

II. SMITH ON THE ROLE OF NEUROSCIENCE IN AESTHETIC THEORIZING

Nanay's account relies on evidence derived from perceptual science at the functional and cognitive level: he notes, for instance, that art experts tend to visually scan much more of an image than non-experts, who focus mainly on a central theme.[16] Smith, however, argues that neuroscience, too, has an irreducible contribution to make to explanations and theories in aesthetics. In *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, he defends the application to aesthetics of Owen Flanagan's 'triangulation' approach to the problem of consciousness in the philosophy of mind. In Smith's words:

> we have evidence pertaining to our *experience* of mental phenomena, the *information* processed by the mind in relation to particular mental functions, and the physical *realization* of the mental. Having put these varieties of evidence on the table, we can then attempt to 'triangulate' the object of enquiry. Triangulation involves locating or

[14] Robert Stecker, 'Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value', *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006): 4.

[15] Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 205.

[16] Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 27. See also Vogt and Magnussen, 'Expertise in Pictorial Perception'.

> 'fixing' the object in explanatory space by […] projecting lines from each body of evidence, and following them to see where they intersect. Where any two, or all three, forms of evidence mesh in this way, so each of them is corroborated.[17]

Moreover, none of the levels is regarded as primary, and explanations and theories at each level are subject to revision depending on findings at the other two levels. Just as, by referring to evidence at all three levels, we can begin to triangulate to consciousness, whose nature often eludes explanation and even characterization at any particular level, we can do the same with aesthetic experience, which we might regard as a more specific instance of consciousness.[18]

Smith's central aims related to the triangulation approach are twofold: first, to defend the idea that psychology and, especially, neuroscience should be taken seriously by aesthetic theorists who have tended to focus more on the phenomenological; and, second, to defend against the idea that phenomenological inquiry could ever be reduced to psychological and neurophysiological inquiry. He holds, with Flanagan, that each of these three levels of explanation has an ineliminable role to play. 'The three types of evidence at our disposal,' Smith suggests, 'do not exist in a simple hierarchy, but rather in a tail-chasing form of interdependence.'[19]

I am drawn to Smith's naturalistic approach, and I especially like its anti-reductivist flavour. I find both the psychological and the emerging neuroscientific findings about art appreciation fascinating, and I see their interest as strongly tied to the experiential phenomena they may help explain. I want to raise some questions, though, about whether the neuroscientific evidence is really on a par with the other two forms of evidence, as opposed to being subservient to them.

My concerns are tentative, because the issue is confounded by the fact that currently, the neurophysiological findings that are appealed to in these debates tend to be pretty primitive. Someone might perform an fMRI and note that there is a particular pattern of activity in certain regions of the brain, but since our knowledge of the functional correlates of such patterns of activity is severely limited, observing these patterns tends to have limited explanatory value.[20] As Smith notes, neuroscientists sometimes dramatically overinterpret these results.

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17 Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 60.

18 Ibid., 59–60.

19 Ibid., 68.

20 See Maddalena Boccia et al., 'Where Does Brain Neural Activation in Aesthetic Responses to Visual Art Occur? Meta-Analytic Evidence from Neuroimaging Studies', *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 60 (2016): 65–71, for a recent meta-analysis of 47 fMRI studies, finding (somewhat unsurprisingly) that 'aesthetic-related neural responses to art recruit widely distributed networks in both hemispheres'.

Presumably, when neuroscience has advanced much further, we will have a better picture of the functional and experiential correlates of patterns of brain activity, and physiological evidence will play a more robust explanatory role. At present, however, I suggest that the neuroscience, though suggestive and perhaps weakly confirmatory of hypotheses at the functional and experiential levels, is necessarily subservient to them.

To see why, we'll consider an example of Flanagan's that Smith discusses – namely, that of auditory splitting.[21] Splitting is the subject's ability, when presented with a different auditory input in each ear, to attend to one and screen out awareness of the other – or, at least, that is how subjects experience things phenomenologically. They describe having no awareness of processing the information from the channel they are not attending to, but studies show that they do in fact process it; it affects their performance on other tasks.[22] As Smith notes, there are different hypotheses about what is happening. One hypothesis is that the information from the two channels is processed differently by the brain as it initially arrives; another hypothesis is that it is processed similarly at first but is later encoded differently in memory. On the latter hypothesis, subjects' reports that they did not hear the unattended channel reflect the fact that their memory of the information has been suppressed by the time they make the report.

Flanagan suggests that when neurophysiology is more advanced, brain studies may provide support for one or the other hypothesis.[23] If we could identify the brain activity associated with processing for each channel, we could look to see whether the activity is similar or different for the two channels. If it's different, we'd have support for the hypothesis that the initial processing is different; if the activity is similar, we'd have support for the hypothesis that the initial processing is the same but something different happens later.

I'll admit that the findings Flanagan describes would provide some support for the respective hypotheses. But it's important to notice just how weak that support is, and how readily overturned by further information at the functional level. If we find that two different-looking brain processes are happening, this may or may not mean that something different is happening functionally or cognitively. Two brain processes might look different physiologically but support mental processes that are functionally the same. The brain is well known to be plastic,

21 Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 63–69.

22 For a recent study and review of relevant results on priming effects of semantic content presented in the unattended auditory channel, see Jennifer Aydelott, Zahra Jamaluddin, and Stefanie Nixon Pearce, 'Semantic Processing of Unattended Speech in Dichotic Listening', *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 138 (2015): 964–75.

23 Owen Flanagan, *Consciousness Reconsidered* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 11.

such that an injury to one part can result in processes being relocated elsewhere. Perhaps the same process can be run in different locations even without an injury, for instance because it has been squeezed out due to some other task that is happening simultaneously. If the physiological difference isn't connected to any detectable functional/cognitive difference, then it seems to be a mere curiosity, not something that is explanatorily efficacious.

If there is a functional or cognitive difference connected to the physiological difference, on the other hand, it seems that a clever experimenter might be able to test for such a difference directly at the cognitive or functional level. Now, I don't mean to downplay the possibility that neurophysiology would inform the design of such tests, depending on the state of our knowledge about the functional correlates of brain activity. But I do mean to say that if there is no finding of difference at the experiential or functional/cognitive levels, the neurophysiological finding doesn't seem to tell us anything relevant to our understanding of aesthetic experience or artistic technique.

The same goes for a finding that the two auditory channels seem to be processed in the *same* way by the brain. If we see similar patterns of brain activity, it's natural to assume that the same thing is happening at the cognitive/functional level. But this assumption is defeasible: patterns of brain activity that appear similar may nonetheless be associated with quite different cognitive or functional processes, for instance, due to other things going on in the brain at the same time. If we find such cognitive or functional differences, this tells us that our judgement that the two patterns of brain activity were similar was too coarse-grained. Once again, then, observed brain activity is suggestive, but its importance remains to be confirmed at the functional and/or experiential levels.

The same is not true, I suggest, of evidence at the phenomenological and functional/cognitive levels. This is partly due to the nature of the supervenience relation: on the assumption that the phenomenological and the functional /cognitive supervene on the physiological, there can be no differences at the phenomenological and functional/cognitive levels that do not correspond to differences at the physiological base level, whereas the converse does not hold. But more deeply, I would suggest it's due to the fact that when it comes to art and aesthetic experience, the phenomenological is irreducibly not just one of the legitimate targets of our interest, but the primary one. Producing experiences in us that have a certain feel to them is the main business of art.

Of course, verbal descriptions of phenomenological experience can be misleading; they may gloss over subtle differences or fail to represent things that affected experience but were not fully present to consciousness. Smith discusses a number of fascinating examples of filmic techniques that involve suppressing

the audience member's awareness of some aspects of the film that are, in fact, crucial to producing a particular kind of aesthetic effect that does break into awareness: so, for instance, the film-maker may use music or lighting to mark a character with an emotional tone, so that the viewer feels that emotion every time the character is encountered without understanding why. But we do not need to descend to the physiological level to make sense of these cases: as Smith notes, artists know how to manipulate audience attention and exploit unique features of the perceptual system in order to produce distinctive aesthetic effects, and their knowledge is derived not from neurophysiology but from careful observation of how certain kinds of effects captured on film are productive of particular kinds of experience.[24]

I do not mean to dismiss Smith's suggestion that all three levels should be taken seriously. I'm certainly not one of the 'neurosceptics' he discusses. I agree with many of his claims, such as the claim that neuroscience can 'broadly confirm hypotheses derived from everyday experience and folk theory' and contribute to 'the gradual accumulation and correction of detail'.[25] But the suggestion that the three levels exist in 'a tail-chasing form of interdependence'[26] strikes me as premature: the present coarse-grained state of much neuroscientific knowledge doesn't permit it to have a very robust explanatory role. It remains to be seen whether the apparent primacy of the experiential level will recede as the underlying neuroscience becomes more sophisticated.

While I have raised some critical thoughts about specific ideas defended by Nanay and Smith, we must acknowledge just how important their project is and how innovative their specific contributions are. Despite the rapid advances, over the past several decades, in psychological and physiological findings relevant to aesthetics, uptake by philosophers has been sharply limited. The appearance in close succession of two ambitious, book-length defences of empirically informed aesthetics promises to move the field forward significantly.

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[24] For example, Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 66–68.
[25] Ibid., 105.
[26] Ibid., 68.

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