

On *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*\*  
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## Introduction

My aim here is to question some of the details of Nanay's discussion, trying to keep an eye on how apparently small problems might make a big difference to the ambitious aims of his book. I'll focus on his discussion of aesthetically relevant properties and on his theme of how the philosophy of perception can reconfigure debates in aesthetics.

### 1. Aesthetically Relevant Properties and the Fate of Formalism

Nanay recommends that we reframe many debates about aesthetic properties as debates about "aesthetically relevant properties". But I don't think that Nanay has adequately pinned down his new notion, and in any case, insofar as he has pinned it down, I don't think it can do what he wants it to do.

According to Nanay, the aesthetically relevant properties of an object are those such that *attending to them makes an aesthetic difference* (67, 71). For example, if attending to a work's property of being made of a certain material makes an aesthetic difference, then being made of that material will be an aesthetically relevant property of a work.

First, a comment: while it is tempting to think only about which properties OF an artwork are aesthetically relevant, I suspect it is better to think about which properties are aesthetically relevant FOR an artwork. Think about when an artwork essentially involves an illusion, perhaps as when the cut of Lucio Fontana slash painting is backed with dark gauze, creating an inaccurate visual impression of a dark spatial expanse behind the canvas. To appreciate such a work, it might be essential that you attend to a property the illusion gets your perception to *misattribute* to the work (or elsewhere).

Second, Nanay's gloss is only as helpful as the notion of an "aesthetic difference" it uses, but we need a better grip on the latter. Here is Nanay's start:

if attending to a property of a particular changes the *valence* of one's experience of that particular, it is an aesthetically relevant property... if attending to P makes me appreciate my experience more (or less), P is an aesthetically relevant property (72-73).

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\* Thanks to the participants in an APA session on Nanay's book, and especially to Dominic Lopes for organizing it. Thanks also to Susanna Siegel for comments on a previous draft.

I don't think this works. The suggestion certainly doesn't fit with the examples Nanay gives elsewhere:

aesthetically relevant properties may alter our general aesthetic evaluations of the artwork, strengthen or weaken our identification with a fictional character, trigger an aesthetic experience of a Prussian [sic] nature, make us appreciate a narrative twist, and so on (67).

In many of these cases, attending to an aesthetically relevant property needn't go along with a difference in appreciation of our own experience. For example, I might come to identify with a character just a little bit less, or increase my understanding of a narrative a little bit more, without this affecting how much I appreciate my own experience. In such cases, we have aesthetically relevant properties that do not make an aesthetic difference in the suggested sense.

There are also many cases of making an aesthetic difference in Nanay's suggested sense that do not go along with aesthetically relevant properties. Consider how our various pet peeves and pet predilections can affect our engagement with art. For example, when a doting father looks at a painting made by his daughter, and attends to its property of having been made by his daughter, his appreciation of his experience of her work might go up. But this would not be enough to make the property of being made by his daughter an aesthetically relevant property in any useful sense.

We seem to need something quite different from Nanay's current gloss of "aesthetic difference". I leave open how he might proceed.

I'll now assess whether aesthetically relevant properties can play the roles they are meant to play, given the way Nanay has introduced them. According to his chapter 5, we can use them to formulate and adjudicate debates about the range of properties that matter for the evaluation of artworks, for example in the case of formalism. Given the way he has characterized aesthetically relevant properties, I think they cannot play this role.

The core problem comes from the unconstrained way that Nanay has introduced the notion of making an aesthetic difference, allowing our idiosyncrasies to easily make a property aesthetically relevant. For example, if you are a consistent and committed formalist, you might be such that only formal properties make an aesthetic difference for you. But if you are a consistent and committed opponent of formalism, you might be such that not only formal properties make an aesthetic difference for you. It is uncontroversial true that non-formal properties make an aesthetic difference for someone, and so are aesthetically relevant in the suggested sense, but that shouldn't be enough to refute formalism right away. There is room for a substantive debate about whether only formal properties matter for aesthetic evaluation, I just don't see how we can usefully constrain that debate with Nanay's notion of aesthetically relevant properties.

To see the problem in a different context, consider debates about potential interactions between moral appraisal and aesthetic evaluation. For some audiences, attending to Roman Polanski's moral or immoral properties make an enormous difference to the valence of their experiences of his films, and so supply aesthetically relevant properties in spades. But that is not enough to settle the question of whether moral considerations ever matter for aesthetic evaluation.

At a minimum, if Nanay is to reconfigure debates about aesthetic evaluation in terms of aesthetically relevant properties, he presumably should use some normative variant of the notion in terms of what *should* make or *may* make or *appropriately* makes an aesthetic difference. But I am not yet clear on how exactly to reconfigure classic debates in those terms, nor on what we will gain if we do so.

## 2. Aesthetics and Cognitive Penetration

I'll now zoom out to Nanay's overarching theme of interconnections between aesthetics and the philosophy of perception. I'll start with the cognitive penetrability of perception, where your perception is somehow importantly shaped by your expectations or other cognitive states (more soon on exactly how).

According to Nanay, claims about the cognitive penetrability of perception have many ramifications for aesthetics. In particular, he thinks that they destroy a Ruskin-style "myth of the innocent eye" (131-133). I think this more specific claim is importantly wrong.

First, we need to hear more about what sort of cognitive penetrability of perception Nanay needs for his theoretical purposes. He says he can get by with the weak claim that "our visual experience is subject to top-down attentional influences (133)." But I don't think this claim gives us enough to destroy the myth of the innocent eye. To see why, here's Ruskin:

The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye; ... a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour ... without consciousness of what they signify... (1857: 22).

As far as I can tell from this passage, Ruskin could accept that vision can be affected by top-down attentional influence, where non-innocent perception might involve all too much top-down attention. He could also invoke our top-down attention as a means to recover innocent perception. For example, when he discusses looking at grass, and writes that "to [the accomplished artist] it does not seem shade and light, but bluish green barred with gold (1857: 23)", perhaps the artist pulls this off by deliberately attending to patches of color on grass without attending to how the grass is illuminated. So Nanay's minimal construal of the cognitive penetrability of perception needn't conflict with the idea of the innocent eye, in fact our recovery of the innocent eye might require the intervention of our (top-down) attention.

Nanay also claims that the myth of the innocent eye is refuted by a broader range of psychological experiments, according to which a heart-shaped cut-out looks redder because of our prior information about hearts, or a picture of a banana looks yellower because of our prior information about bananas. Here again the idea of the innocent eye does not have to conflict with these experiments, and might even require that perception is cognitively penetrable in the experiments' sense. Theorists like Ruskin could acknowledge the existence of perception that is cognitively infused, thanking Nanay for pointing out some of the ways in which our current perception fails to be innocent. They would then ask us to regain perception that in some way brackets our prior knowledge and expectations. Since any such "innocent perception" can itself be lost, they could even allow that all perception is cognitively penetrable. And since the "innocent" perception recovered is recovered as a result of desire, cognitive effort (and again potentially attention), they might allow an important sense in which the "innocent" perception recovered is itself cognitively shaped. It may or may not be possible to succeed in their project of recovery, but that question is not directly addressed by the experiments mentioned by Nanay, and it is not yet clear how to extrapolate an indirect answer.

I do agree that the cognitive penetrability of perception matters for aesthetics, I actually think that Nanay has overlooked some of its potential implications, and now will examine one of them.

Consider when Nanay addresses puzzling pairs such as Duchamp's *Fountain* and corresponding non-art urinals, or pairs of fakes and corresponding originals, and writes that "as indistinguishable objects [they] share all their observable properties by definition (109)". Or when he discusses Danto's Gallery of Indiscernibles involving many paintings of the same shade and size with different titles, and writes that "while the observable properties of all these artworks are the same, their 'meaning' and aesthetic value can be very different" (120)." On the tempting line of thought Nanay takes up, the puzzling pairs consist of two objects that have the same observable properties, yet differ in their aesthetic properties. The pairs are thereby supposed to serve as counterexamples to the view that sameness of observable properties entails sameness of aesthetic properties.

Once you're on board with the possibility of cognitive penetration, you should be more careful about this line of thought. For example, the cognitive penetrability of perception, and your background knowledge about art, might result in your perceiving *Fountain* as wry, or a version of *The Card Players* as being painted by Cezanne. (This is not to say that cognitive penetration is the only way to end up being able to perceive such properties, just that it is a plausible route to such an outcome). Now the property of being painted by Cezanne would be an observable property, one that fails to be had by any fakes not painted by Cezanne. The puzzling pairs we started out with would fail to have the same observable properties after all, and we would now still have space for the view that any two works with the same observable properties have the same aesthetic properties.

In sum, Nanay is wrong to think that the cognitively penetrability of perception rules out the myth of the innocent eye. But he is absolutely right that it matters for central debates in aesthetics, as it does for the debate about whether aesthetic differences between works could still exist when the works are the same with respect to their observable properties.

I'll now close with a more general observation about Nanay's approach. Throughout the book, he works with the notion of experience, even defining the scope of aesthetics in its terms (6). He also almost never discusses unconscious perception or unconscious attention (although he discusses them extensively in other work). To exaggerate a bit, he could have called his book *Aesthetics as Consciousness Studies* rather than *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*.

Assuming that there are such mental states as unconscious perception and unconscious attention, as is widely maintained in psychology and the philosophy of perception, why not broaden the scope of the discussion to unconscious mental states? What justifies the experience-first approach used in the book? If we are to take the philosophy of perception seriously when doing aesthetics, we should take the possibility of unconscious perception and unconscious attention seriously as well. For example, when we consider whether the observable properties of a work fix its aesthetic properties, we might benefit from considering versions of the thesis that include or exclude unconsciously observable properties of a work. Perhaps the consciously perceivable properties of a work do not always fix its aesthetic properties, but a work's overall perceivable properties do fix its aesthetic properties once we include the work's unconsciously perceivable properties.

When Nanay preaches that aesthetics will benefit from deeper engagement with the philosophy of perception, I applaud. Given his neglect of unconscious perception and attention, I just think that he (and the rest of us) have a lot of work left to do.

## References

- Nanay, B. (2016). *Aesthetics as philosophy of perception*. Oxford University Press.  
Ruskin, J. (1857). *The elements of drawing*. Smith, Elder and Co.