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MASTER AVEC SPÉCIALISATION EN PHILOSOPHIE CONTEMPORAINE  
Mémoire

# **Beauty Is in the Heart of the Beholder: The Affective Experience of Aesthetic Properties**

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# INTRODUCTION

Imagine walking in a garden, and you stop for a moment to look at a rose on the side of the pathway. The rose has a certain appearance to you. First, you are struck by its vibrant peach-colour; you get caught by the delicate shades of pink and orange that alternate on the flower. You also notice the intricate arrangement of its petals, and how it appears to form a crested cup. You find the rose's figure fragrant, especially contrasted with its surroundings, the dark green vines contoured by sharp prickles from which the flower emerges; they look quite gloomy. Whilst you contemplate this contrast, it takes just an instant for the rose's mild scent to capture your attention and bring your focus back to its scent. You realise once more how beautiful the flower is. You finally walk away amazed by what you saw.

What did you actually see? It might be impossible to report the entire picture, but you can try to fragment your experience in terms of the properties it instantiates. *Pink*, *orange* and *dark green* are the most obvious properties to appeal to, the *crested shape* of the flower's corolla is one too. In contrast, the rose's scent is among the properties that we smell, not those that we see. But what about the *vibrancy* of the colours, the *delicacy* of the shades, the *intricacy* and *elegance* of the corolla, the *vividness* of the figure, the *gloominess* of the vines, the *mildness* of the scent, and the *beauty* of the flower?

The latter are called 'aesthetic properties' and they are to what this essay is about. However, we will only be concerned with how we should understand these properties in part; answering the question about their nature will serve only to answer another, yet related, question. This essay's ultimate aim is to understand the specific way in which, as human beings, *we experience and have access to the objects' aesthetic properties*. Rather than focusing on the metaphysics of aesthetic properties, we will try to identify the psychological and cognitive architecture at the foundations of our knowledge of the aesthetic realm. What will be of interest to us is the specific way in which aesthetic properties disclose themselves to us.

That aesthetic properties are somehow experienced is something our ordinary lives flagrantly point out: the elegance of a dress, the splendiddness of a panorama, the exuberance of a performance, the mellowness of a

symphony, the idyllic character of a meadow, the sombreness of a monument, the coolness of a skateboard trick – aren't they all things that first and foremost manifest themselves in experience? But if this is the case, what is the nature of this experience? Is it a kind of perception, an affective experience, or is there rather a cognitive process behind our first-person awareness that is ultimately liable?

One way to tell which kind of mental state might be involved is to identify how we first *access* or *apprehend* these properties. For instance, consider the way in which we standardly apprehend colours, i.e., by perceiving them. When we look at the rose in the garden, we literally *see* that it is peach-coloured, we do not infer that it is such. The apprehension of objects' colours is made in perceptual experience. If we perceive aesthetic properties, we might expect that it happens similarly to the way in which we perceive colours. However, do we apprehend the colours' vibrancy and the shades' delicacy in the same manner? Do we really access the flower's beauty merely by perceiving it?

### **Why Is The Question Important?**

The question is relevant for aesthetics, the philosophy of mind, and epistemology as well. For the former, an answer to the question might provide an important result towards understanding what 'aesthetic' ultimately means. When Alexander Baumgarten first introduced the concept in 1750, he meant to identify with it the study of sense perception, and for this reason he used the Greek word '*aesthemi*'—which translates as 'perception'. The word 'aesthetic' has then lost its original meaning, but it is undeniable that perception and experience continue to hold a strong link with how we interpret the concept. For instance, *Formalism* is a theory of art appreciation according to which an artwork is an artwork in virtue of its *formal properties*, in the sense of being accessible by direct sensation (Bell 1914). But strong criticisms have been addressed against the equivocation of aesthetics with art (Dickie 1964; Carroll 2000). Looking at how we represent the *vibrancy* of the colours or the *delicacy* of the shades might bring us closer to understanding the concept of 'aesthetic' itself.

In the philosophy of mind, the question of which properties can be properly represented in perceptual experience has received increasing attention (cf. Siegel 2006, Bayne 2009). Plausibly, properties that we perceive are colour, shape, timbres, tastes, smells, textures, and spatial location; the question is whether aesthetic properties can be among them. The answer to this is especially important for philosophy of perception, where a major concern is to determine which properties are perceived and which ones are inferred or represented in non-perceptual modalities. Establishing whether aesthetic properties are perceived would provide an important insight into the scope of the representational capacities of perception.

In epistemology, we wonder which states are capable of ultimately justifying our beliefs and judgements. For instance, we are generally tempted to say that perceptual experiences cause and justify our perceptual judgments (Silins 2015); emotions are often thought to cause and justify evaluative judgments in the same vein (Brady 2013). In this occasion, we may imagine that the same logic applies to the relation between an experience of aesthetic properties and the relevant aesthetic judgment. The so-called *Acquaintance Principle* says exactly that: acquaintance with aesthetic objects is a prerequisite for expressing a proper aesthetic judgment (Budd 2003). The plausibility of these claims depends importantly on which state is ultimately identified as properly disclosing aesthetic properties to us. Whether we apprehend these properties by perceiving, sensing, feeling, or inferring will have a significant impact on how we should conceive of the justification of aesthetic judgments.

## **The Plan**

In this essay, I am concerned with the question of how we apprehend the aesthetic properties of objects. The idea is to determine which mental state is involved when we first become aware of these properties. By ‘apprehend’, ‘having access to’, or ‘disclose to us’ I mean the kind of first-person psychological awareness that is involved in our engagement with paradigmatic aesthetic objects—such as artworks, artefacts, natural objects, and environments—that we experience through our senses; thus, I do not

address the question on the alleged aesthetic character of non-perceptual objects such as conceptual art, literature, and mathematical objects.<sup>1</sup>

In the first chapter, I propose three candidates for the mental state that may provide us access to the aesthetic properties of objects. Among these candidates—non-experiential states and processes, perceptual experience, and experience in a non-perceptual modality—I offer reasons to dismiss the first one. Non-experiential states and processes such as beliefs and judgments cannot display the salient phenomenology that we intuitively associate with the awareness of aesthetic properties; hence they are unlikely to be the kind of state that discloses these properties in consciousness. The rest of the chapter is concerned exclusively with the other two candidates that, as type of experiences, are *prima facie* more suited in accounting for the phenomenology of the kind of state in question.

In the second chapter, I develop the Perceptual View, i.e., the view according to which aesthetic properties are perceptually experienced. I start by assessing why philosophers have been inclined to conceive the experience of aesthetic properties as perceptual. Then, I develop the notion of perceptual experience and what perceiving a property consists in, followed immediately by what perceiving an aesthetic property more specifically consists in. Finally, I offer an argument that aims to establish the Perceptual View based on the phenomenal contrast occurring between the overall experience of a cacophonous melody before and after the acquisition of a recognitional capacity for the cacophonous character of music.

In the third chapter, I test whether two alternative explanations for the differences stated in the phenomenal contrast argument are effective. The first concerns an appeal to purely phenomenal differences grounded in attention, whereas the second concerns an appeal to difference in representation of low-level properties of perception. I conclude that, if we understand aesthetic properties as gestalten, they can be featured in the content of one's perceptual

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<sup>1</sup> The so-called *Problem of Non-Perceptual Art* asks whether non-sensory objects such as John Cage's 4'33'', Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, or the *Lindenbaum-Henkin Lemma* can have aesthetic properties (Shelley 2003; Schellekens 2007). The problem associated with this possibility is the intuitive claim that beauty and other aesthetic properties necessarily depends on sensory-perceptual objects. This essay may in part establish whether the latter is true, but I refrain to discuss this complex issue here due to space constraints. I will thus focus exclusively on paradigmatic cases of aesthetic sensory objects, such as visual art and music.

experience. However, I suggest that the latter conception about the nature of aesthetic properties may be false.

In the fourth chapter, I investigate the metaphysics of aesthetic properties to see whether we must consider them as essentially evaluative. Against two common presuppositions on the relationship between their descriptive and evaluative components, I conclude that aesthetic properties are indeed value properties of two general kinds: thin and thick aesthetic values. In contrast, purely descriptive properties are not sufficiently equipped to be considered intrinsically aesthetic, but at most, they might be aesthetically relevant properties, i.e., properties that might contribute to an object's overall aesthetic value without necessarily being aesthetic in a robust sense.

In the fifth chapter, I examine whether perception can represent value properties. I present a few intuitions against the existence of a form of evaluative perception, and then I develop an argument against it based on the conflation of standards of assessment for mental attitudes. In particular, evaluative perception would entail that whenever two incompatible and yet equally appropriate evaluations are present, one of them would necessarily be an illusory experience. Granted the likeliness of genuine aesthetic divergences, it may be better to reject the possibility of evaluative perception, and investigate the nature of a mental state suited for evaluation.

In the sixth and final chapter, I sketch the prospect of an Affective View, i.e., the view according to which our experience of aesthetic properties is an affective state akin to emotions. This position understands the affective experience of aesthetic properties as types of evaluative attitudes, namely, attitudes that are appropriate to have towards an object when this exemplifies a given evaluative property. Ultimately, this view accounts for the apprehension of aesthetic properties, and it guarantees the possibility of genuine aesthetic divergences. As an affective state akin to emotions is the most suited mental state for explaining the phenomenal contrasts discussed throughout the essay, I conclude that the Affective View is likely to be correct.

# 1. SETTING THE QUESTION

Consider again the scenario presented at the beginning of this essay: you are walking in a garden, and you stop to look at a rose. We can think about the three following options for the psychological asset that gives us access to the rose's aesthetic properties:

## Three Options:

- (A) Awareness of aesthetic properties is *entirely a matter of non-experiential states or processes* (e.g., judgment, belief, reasoning).
- (B) Aesthetic properties are *perceptually experienced*.
- (C) Aesthetic properties are *experienced via a non-perceptual modality*.

According to (A), aesthetic properties are not experienced, but access to them is entirely a matter of non-experiential states or processes, typically belief or judgment. If so, there may be a mental attitude, arguably a belief or judgment, that attributes aesthetic properties to objects. To attribute a property to an object is equivalent to saying that an object is represented as having that property. Nonetheless, in this case the type of representation would not be the matter of an experiential state.

According to (B), aesthetic properties are perceptually experienced. This is the most straightforward interpretation of what an experience of aesthetic properties might be. What to perceptually experience a property amounts to depends on which theory of perception we endorse. For instance, for intentionalism, it amounts to perceptually representing that property as instantiated (e.g., perceptually represent that there is something blue before one) (Tye 2000); for naïve realism, it amounts to either perceiving an instance of that property or having an hallucination of an instance of that property (Martin 2004). In this text, I will rely on the analysis offered by intentionalism. Despite the fact that not everyone agrees that perceptual experience is limited to sensory representation, I maintain that if aesthetic properties are perceived, they are represented in one or more of the five canonical sense modalities; this will allow us to distinguish more clearly this case from the next one.



Therefore, the claim that an aesthetic property is perceptually experienced is equivalent to saying that a sensory experience represents an object as having an aesthetic property.

According to (C), aesthetic properties are still experienced, but not via a sensory modality. Hence, the kind of experience involved in this case cannot be reduced to the perceptual kind. This experience might be a kind of affective or conative state—such as emotion, pleasure, or desire—, an imaginative state, or it can be even a *sui generis* kind of experience not reducible to sensory or affective phenomena. How the latter might be characterized depends on the specific account taken into consideration. One example from the literature on evaluative perception—i.e., the experiential representation of evaluative properties (Berqvist & Cowan 2018)—is Robert Audi’s account of moral perception, where there is a *sui generis* mode of representing evaluative properties resulting from the integration of sensory, emotional, and imaginative components (Audi 2013). Another example might be a robust notion of aesthetic experience, i.e., the *sui generis* mental state that represents objects as having aesthetic properties, not reducible to any other experiential modality.

We have thus established the conceptual space for our investigation. However, we can already dismiss option (A). The reason is that the latter does not give justice to the strong intuition that beauty and other aesthetic properties disclose themselves to us in a phenomenologically salient way. When we look at the rose, it does not seem that we merely judge that it is beautiful; it seems as if the rose *looks* beautiful. The rose’s beauty is given to us in experience similarly to how colours and shapes are. In contrast, purely cognitive attitudes such as beliefs and judgments are usually considered as having no or very poor phenomenology.<sup>2</sup> If our awareness of aesthetic properties were indeed a matter of non-experiential states or processes, then it would be very hard to explain their “manifestness”.

However, to deny that we become aware of aesthetic properties through non-experiential states or processes does not mean that we cannot correctly attribute them in this way; it merely amounts to saying that this is not how

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<sup>2</sup> The idea that beliefs and judgments are phenomenologically salient is a controversial idea. Many have argued that there is nothing it is like to have them. See Dennett (1988).

aesthetic properties disclose themselves to us. It may be thought that through belief and judgment, we lack access to the relevant property because we are not in the right relationship with it. The latter may demand, fundamentally, an engagement of an entirely different kind.

Today, it is widely accepted that there is an important difference between merely judging something as beautiful and experiencing it as such. Hopkins captures this idea by distinguishing two kinds of aesthetic attribution: “judging beauty” and “savouring beauty” (Hopkins 1997, 181). *Judging beauty* merely consists in forming a belief that something is beautiful, whereas *savouring beauty* “implies responding to it in a more full-blooded way” (181). With this distinction, it is admitted that we can judge things to be beautiful without savouring their beauty, and allegedly the converse too.

To grasp the difference, consider the following example. Imagine visiting the National Gallery of Art at Washington, D.C., and seeing Henri Matisse’s *Open Window, Collioure* (figure 1). It is the first time that you see the painting, and it strikes you how beautiful it is. The same day, a friend of yours comes to visit you for dinner and asks you why you liked it. You describe to her all the different features that make it so beautiful. In this moment, you are merely believing that the painting is beautiful, but you are not experiencing its aesthetic properties since you are not currently standing in front of it.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, there would be two kinds of aesthetic assessment, two ways to be engaged with aesthetic properties, but only one would be experiential. Merely judging that the painting is beautiful does not require to be engaged with it in a salient way, but simply that you can report a fact. In this case, you attribute beauty to the painting even if you are not sensing it. But it may be argued that this sterile way in which you are engaged with beauty when you judge does not allow you to grasp it in its entirety; a “full-blooded” engagement would be necessary for that property to disclose itself to you. Accordingly, if you had not been engaged with *Open Window, Collioure* as when you looked at it the first time, you would never have had access to its beauty: to actually experience it would be required.

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<sup>3</sup> Obviously, admitted that you are not picturing the painting at the same time of your judgment.



**Figure 1:** Henri Matisse, *Open Window, Collioure*, 1905, oil on canvas, 55.3 × 46 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney, 1998.74.7, url: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.106384.html>. Thanks to National Gallery of Art for the permission to use this image.

Therefore, since non-experiential states and processes lack this important salient component, and since they cannot put us in the appropriate relationship with aesthetic properties for exactly that reason, we may dismiss option (A).<sup>4</sup> Though, these are not conclusive reasons. Introspection is notably an unreliable method, and it can be argued that you become aware of beauty by reflecting on your experience after your visit to the museum. But given that (A) is intuitively unappealing, we may reserve it only as a last resort in case the alternatives fail.

Before discussing the other two options, it must be noted that *savouring* beauty does not seem to correspond to *merely experiencing* beauty either. To see why, let us reconsider the previous example with a different ending.

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<sup>4</sup> This might be understood as identical to the *Acquaintance Principle*, i.e., the principle according to which “aesthetic knowledge must be acquired through first-hand experience of the object knowledge and cannot be transmitted from person to person” (Budd 2003, 386). But this claim is different than the one I am discussing here: the acquaintance principle concerns the justification of aesthetic judgment, while here we are discussing the priority of experience in giving access to objects’ aesthetic properties. It is a further question how these two issues intertwine between each other; as for example, whether access to an aesthetic property in experience provides defeasible reasons for aesthetic judgments. More on this later.

Imagine that not long after the visit, you are hired as guide at the museum, and so you now have the opportunity to look at Matisse's canvas whenever you want. One day you become so used to it that you no longer strongly sense its beauty every time you look at it. One time, a visitor asks you why the painting is so beautiful in your opinion. While you both are looking at it, you describe to her all the features that make it so beautiful, as you did with your friends before. However, you do not *sense* the painting's beauty even if you are actually looking at it. But other times you still look at the painting and you feel again the sensation you felt the first time you saw it. At these moments, we may say that you *savour* its beauty as in the past.

This example is meant to suggest that there might not just be a difference between the purely cognitive representation of an aesthetic property and the experience of it: there might also be a difference between *merely experiencing* beauty and *savouring* it. You can see the painting but not savour its beauty. However, does this mean that you do not experience the beauty as well? Can you see the *Open Window*, Collioure's beauty even if you do not savour it? According to Hopkins, to savour beauty demands more than a mere perceptual state, it demands an engagement of those sensibilities that ground our further responses to it, such as aesthetic appreciation (Hopkins 1997, 81–82). But the question remains: does the experience of an aesthetic property require a deeper engagement of our sensibilities, or can we just perceive it with a “dry eye”?

The challenge at the heart of this essay is to understand how we experience beauty and the other aesthetic properties, what kind of mental state is ultimately responsible for their appearance in consciousness, and if this state essentially involves the mobilisation of our personal sensibilities, or whether dry perception can be sufficient. In the next chapter, we will be confronted with the default position on this issue: the Perceptual View.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Someone might ask which between *judging*, *experiencing*, and *savouring* beauty implies the traditional notion of *aesthetic judgment*. Since a judgment is an attribution of a property *P* to an object *x* of the form “*x* is *P*”, we can suppose that an aesthetic judgment is simply the judgment that attributes aesthetic properties to objects. But this is far from evident. ‘Judgment’ as usually employed in aesthetics is understood differently than in other philosophical disciplines: in the philosophy of mind, a *judgment* is a non-experiential state akin to belief (Crane 2001, 103–104), whereas aestheticians have been inclined to understand it as experiential as well (as Budd 2003). There is in fact a major disagreement about the difference between the notions of aesthetic judgment, aesthetic experience, aesthetic evaluation, and aesthetic appreciation to name a few. In respect of this distinction, I will assume that an *aesthetic judgment* is a non-experiential belief-like state that some object *x* has the aesthetic property *P*.

## 2. THE PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE OF AESTHETIC PROPERTIES

Do we literally *see* the beauty of *Open Window, Collioure*, the majesty of a panorama, or the elegance of a sculpture? Do we hear the smoothness of a tune, and the harshness of rhymes? The Perceptual View answers these questions positively: aesthetic properties are perceived; beauty is in the eye of the beholder.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I will offer an account of this widely accepted view, namely, the idea that aesthetic properties are perceptually experienced. I start by briefly discussing the appeal of a perceptual account of the experience of aesthetic properties and the intuitive relation that aesthetic properties have with perception. Thereafter, I try to do justice to the Perceptual View by developing the notion of perceptual experience of aesthetic properties, starting by clarifying what it means to perceptually experience a property, and then extending it to aesthetic properties. The intermediate conclusion is that, if aesthetic properties are perceptually experienced, they are high-level properties of perception. Finally, I present a contrast argument focusing on the property of *cacophony*. If successful, this argument establishes that cacophony is represented in perceptual experience as a high-level property, and therefore that the Perceptual View is correct.

### 2.1. The Perceptual View

The existence of a connection between perception and aesthetics should not surprise anyone. For instance, our interaction with art mostly consists in experiencing artworks through our senses: we *look* at paintings, we *listen* to symphonies, we *taste* delicacies, we *smell* fragrances, we *touch* haptic art. Our experience with artworks is importantly linked to the way we perceive them, and our engagement with them is grounded in our acquaintance with their qualitative features.

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<sup>6</sup> This claim is not meant to say anything about the realism of aesthetic properties: neither it says that perception is factual, hence that to perceive beauty entails that it is a mind-independent features of the world; nor it says that beauty is instantiated only and only in perceptual experience, hence that it does not exist in the mind-independent reality.

Suppose that you are approaching one of Van Gogh's paintings. It would be very hard to capture the harmony and serenity that spring from his works without looking at the radiant interplay he created with the careful use of yellow and blue shades, a trait that characterises most of his works. Or consider how artists actively change the aesthetic quality of their works by manipulating their perceptible features: the sculptor softens the figure in the marble to make it elegant, the painter darkens the canvas's colours to make it sombre.

Those are all examples suggesting an important connection between art and perception. But this is not just the prerogative of art – we enjoy the same relationship with natural objects. When we look at the vastity of the ocean from above the shore, our perception of its majesty seems to encompass by what we see as its colour and shape: they are all manifested in our experience. But more importantly, we hold the ocean's vastity to be responsible for its majesty; we would not have the same impression if we were looking at a small pond, for example.

None of this would be relevant if there were no relationship between aesthetics and perception. As the aesthetic value of objects depends in part on their qualitative features, it is natural to think that the recognition of the aesthetic properties of objects is intrinsically connected to the way we perceive them. Philosophers have long recognised the importance of this. Here is a classic passage which highlights the relationship between aesthetics and perception:

Aesthetics deals with a kind of perception. People have to see the grace and unity of a work, hear the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, notice the gaudiness of a color scheme, feel the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone. [...] the crucial thing is to *see, hear, or feel*. To suppose that one can make aesthetic judgments without aesthetic perception [...] is to misunderstand aesthetic judgment (Sibley 1965: 137).

Sibley is not alone in this respect. Perception is ordinarily considered the “canonical” route to aesthetic judgments (Robson 2018). Now, what is conveyed through the expression of ‘canonical’ may be interpreted in different ways. For instance, many thought that adequate aesthetic judgment *must* be grounded in the subject's first-hand experience of what is judged. This is sometimes referred to as the *Acquaintance Principle*, i.e., the principle

according to which “aesthetic knowledge must be acquired through first-hand experience of the object knowledge and cannot be transmitted from person to person” (Budd 2003, 386). This is usually considered a truism in aesthetics (Livingston 2003), and it amounts to a normative reason in explaining the connection between perception and aesthetics. Perception would be the only *legitimate* route through which we form aesthetic judgments; aesthetic judgements would be justified only if based on perception, and the corresponding knowledge could not be acquired in other ways. Another, stronger, interpretation which goes back to Kant, says that perception is, *as a matter of fact*, the only way in which we form aesthetic judgments (Kant 1790, 101). This would mean that it is our own psychological constitution which makes the relationship between perception and aesthetics so tight, and the reason for that might be that we access aesthetics properties only through perception. Not surprisingly then, today’s default position in aesthetics and art criticism is that aesthetic properties are primarily perceived.<sup>7</sup>

But what does it mean that aesthetic properties are perceived? Before answering this question, we first need to address a similar yet more fundamental question: what does it mean to perceive a property in the first place? The answer to this question will help us understand more generally the notion of experience, and how it relates to the concept of perception.

## 2.2. To Perceive a Property

What perceptually experiencing a property amounts to depends on the theory we consider. In this essay, I will follow the standard treatment offered by intentionalism.<sup>8</sup> I thus maintain that *to perceptually experience a property* is to perceptually represent some  $x$  as  $P$  where  $x$  identifies an object and  $P$  identifies a property.<sup>9</sup> Notice that, according to intentionalism, in order to

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<sup>7</sup> See notably Sibley (1959, 1965), Levinson (2006a, 2006b), and Stokes (2014, 2018) in this essay.

<sup>8</sup> The characterization of intentionalism offered here is indebted to Dretske (1995), Tye (1995, 2000), Byrne (2001, 2009), Siegel (2006, the entry in 2010), and Fish (2010).

<sup>9</sup> This can be viewed as conceiving perceptual experiences as *propositional attitudes*, i.e., intentional states in which the content is a proposition that gives how the objects of experience are represented to be. Tim Crane (2009) has convincingly argued that the content of perceptual experience is not propositional. For the scope of this essay, it is not imperative to cover this complex issue as far as the content of perceptual experience represents properties. In this essay I will treat the content of perceptual experience as propositional, but the discussion on this essay can be arguably reframed in terms of non-propositional content.

perceptually experience a property, it is not required that the experience is veridical: hallucinations and illusions are fundamentally the same kind of experience.<sup>10</sup>

A perceptual experience is a mental event with a *representational content* that determines how things look to the subject. For instance, when someone sees a beach umbrella in front of her, she visually experiences the beach umbrella as being in a certain way. This “way” in which things have a certain look is captured by the notion of *phenomenal character*—sometimes simply described as the experience’s *phenomenology*. When we say that one’s experience tells one that something is the case, it means that there is something that the experience represents because of its phenomenal character. The phenomenal character of an experience corresponds to the qualitatively subjective character of that experience, sometimes described as “what is like” to have it (Nagel 1974). If two experiences are subjectively distinguishable, it is because they possess different phenomenal characters.

Not every experience is perceptual. Our mental life is traversed by numerous and different kinds of experiences, often all at the same time. We usually entertain simultaneous experiences in some or even all of the five canonical sense modalities, as well as proprioceptive, emotional, and imaginative experiences, just to name a few. To avoid confusion, I will speak of the *overall experience* to identify the sum of every experience that a subject is having at a certain time.

Experiences can be identified, among other things, by their characteristic phenomenology: a visual experience has a visual phenomenal character; an auditory experience has an auditory phenomenal character. Sensory experiences such as visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, and tactile experiences are all kinds of perceptual experiences. However, these do not exhaust the kinds of experiences that human beings can have. Perceptual experiences form a subclass of experiences characterised by a sensory

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<sup>10</sup> This is sometimes referred to as the *Common Kind Principle* (Crane & French 2005; Fish 2010). Moreover, ‘veridical’ is sometimes used to mean that an experience somehow matches the world, but then even hallucinations could be considered “veridical” in this sense, for example, because I can be hallucinating that there is a cow in front of me and, by chance, a cow is really there (Lewis 1980). To avoid counterexamples of this type, I will use ‘veridical’ for denoting cases of *successful perception*, i.e., a perceptual experience of some  $x$  as  $P$  and the obtaining of some other conditions, where the latter conjunct is sufficient for preventing luck from affecting the relation between an experience and its object, e.g., by the obtaining of a causal (Grice 1961) or a counterfactual relation (Lewis 1980).



phenomenology, but other kinds of experiences outside the five canonical sense modalities are possible.<sup>11</sup>

What an experience represents consists in its *content*: through its content, an experience represents—accurately or inaccurately—that something is the case. Roughly, the content of an experience is what is conveyed to the subject through that state. Contents are given by accuracy conditions, i.e., the conditions under which an experience is accurate. For instance, if an experience represents an object as being in a certain way, then the experience is accurate if there is an actual object which is as the experience represents it (Crane 2009, 457). If my visual experience has the content that there is a white square in front of me, then the experience is accurate if it is indeed the case that there is a white square in front of me. This feature is invoked to justify the idea that for a state to be representational, there must exist the possibility that it misrepresents the world. If there were no white square in front of me, my experience would be inaccurate because it would not be sensible to the world in the right way; my experience would be hallucinatory.

One natural claim regarding the nature of accuracy conditions is that they take the following form: they always refer to *objects* and their *properties*. When experiences have contents, they represent that something is the case, and the way they do that is by representing that some things possess some properties, e.g., my experience of the white square represents a certain surface as being white and as being square. It is through the notion of content that a property can be psychologically attributed to objects. In the case of experience, we can hold that “if a subject *S*’s experience has the content that a thing *x* is *F*, then *S*’s experience represents the property of being *F*” (Siegel 2006, 482). It is as such that perceptual experience can represent properties. Therefore, *to perceive a property* consists in the representation of that property in the content of a perceptual experience.

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<sup>11</sup> Note that I maintain that perceptual experiences are exclusively those connected with the five canonical sense modalities. For the scope of this text, this characterization should be fine. However, senses may not be restricted to the five canonicals. Though, how could we identify sensory modalities is a controversial topic. For a collection of papers on this topic, see Macpherson, F. (2011) (ed.), *The Sense: Classical and Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### 2.3. To Perceive an Aesthetic Property

By extension, if aesthetic properties are perceived, then they are part of the content of perceptual experience. Yet, it is not clear if aesthetic properties can be represented in this way.

In recent years, philosophers of perception have passionately discussed the question of what the admissible contents of perceptual experience are.<sup>12</sup> The debate revolves around a fundamental question pertaining to the nature of perceptual experience, namely, what objects and properties can be represented in perceptual experience. The question is not of little significance: identifying the range of admissible contents of perception would provide us with a set of conditions for determining whether aesthetic properties disclose themselves to us in perceptual experience or in other ways. In fact, the same discourse applies to any property that we may believe we perceive. For instance, our knowledge of colours and shapes of what surrounds us comes from perception: it is by visually experiencing these properties that we come to attribute them to objects, by *seeing* them. But what about properties such as *being a beach umbrella* or *being a tiger*? Where does our awareness of them come from? If *being a tiger* is among the admissible contents of perception, then we may be justified in believing that there is a tiger in front of us because we literally *see* that she is there. In the same way, I could know that the painting I am looking at in the museum is beautiful not because I infer that it is, but just because I can literally *see* that it is such.

Today, there are extensive discussions on which properties can be represented in perceptual experience. Roughly, we may identify two sides contending the field in this debate. On the one hand, there are thinkers who defend the idea that the properties represented in perception are just those on a relatively straightforward list: colours, shapes, pitch, timbres, tones, textures, and spatial locations are a few examples. These are called *low-level properties*, and the *Thin View* is the position maintaining that these are the only properties which can be part of the content of perceptual experience; the representation of other properties would be more a matter of post-perceptual

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<sup>12</sup> See notably the collection of papers contained in Hawley & Macpherson (2012).

states, typically judgments and beliefs.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, there are those who argue that the types of properties which can be perceptually represented go way beyond those on the above-mentioned list. *Rich Views* about the content of perceptual experience maintain that we can perceive *high-level properties* alongside the standard low-level properties. Popular suggestions for high-level properties are biological kind properties (e.g., *being a tiger*), artefactual kind properties (e.g., *being a beach umbrella*), semantic properties (e.g., the Italian locution ‘le tigri sono tigrate’ means *tigers are brindled*), causal properties, dispositional properties (e.g. *being edible*), other mental states (e.g., *being joyous*), moral properties (e.g., *being morally wrong*, *being laudable*), and the kind we are interested here: aesthetic properties.<sup>14</sup> The issue is which of these properties can be properly part of the content of perception.

The list of low-level properties is relatively simple to give. It reunites the properties that almost everyone agrees are to be perceived, usually because they correspond to those computed by the sensory early system (Fodor 1983). For example, we may have colour, shapes, and brightness for visual experience; timbre, tones, and volume for auditory experience. In contrast, giving a list of high-level properties is a more difficult task. The fact is that high-level properties are neither obvious nor implausible candidates for properties that we can perceptually experience. Usually, they are more complex properties than the canonical sensory qualities, sometimes related to categorical kinds, but apart from that, there is not much else useful to define them. For both families of properties, we have no rigorous criterion that establishes whether a property is low- or high-level. This has pushed philosophers to proceed on a case-by-case basis, arguing one at a time whether a certain high-level property can be part of the content of perception,<sup>15</sup> and among their suggestions, aesthetic properties have been

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<sup>13</sup> Thin viewers that are worth noting are Tye (1995), Prinz (2005, 2007), and Lyons (2005).

<sup>14</sup> For arguments in favor of the visual representation of these properties, see Siegel (2006) for kind and semantic properties, Siegel (2009) for causal properties, Nanay (2011) for dispositional properties, McDowell (1982) for others’ mental states, Audi (2013) for moral properties, and Stokes (2014, 2018) for aesthetic properties.

<sup>15</sup> This is also the reason why I refer to *Rich View-s* with the plural ‘s’. Rich views are defined in accordance with what properties they admit as possible content of perception, while the *Thin View* is just one, i.e., the position denying that perceptual experience can represent properties other than low-level properties. For a few interesting remarks about the low-/high-level distinction, see Bayne (2009, 388–389).

seen as an especially promising candidate for being a kind of high-level property that features in the content of perception (Stokes 2014, 2018).

## 2.4. The Phenomenal Contrast Argument

How can we argue in favour of the Rich View about aesthetic properties? One strategy consists in establishing that the perceptual representation of aesthetic properties is required to adequately account for the phenomenal character of experience. One widely influential approach for this is the *Phenomenal Contrasts Argument* made popular by Susanna Siegel (2006). This style of argument consists in appealing to introspection in the form of positing a phenomenal contrast between two scenarios: one prior to the acquisition of a certain recognitional capacity for a certain high-level property, the other after developing that capacity.

The original case proposed by Siegel supposes the acquisition of a recognitional capacity. In the first scenario she gives, you have never seen a pine tree before, so that someone must point out to you which are pine trees in a grove of numerous plants of different sorts. In the second scenario, some weeks have passed, and thanks to the training you got, you are now capable of spotting pine trees with ease. The gaining of this recognitional capacity is reflected in a phenomenological difference between the overall experience you had in the first scenario and the one you have now in the second one.

The argument runs by saying that *the best explanation* for the difference in the phenomenology of the two overall experiences is a difference in what is represented at the level of the subject's perceptual experience, that is, a difference in the representation of high-level properties. Intuitively, the overall experience we had when we looked at the pine tree is different from the one we have when we look at it once we have acquired the relative recognitional capacity. This difference is first explained in terms of a difference in the subject's perceptual experience, then in what this experience represents, and finally in which properties figure in its content. The latter difference is supposed to be best explained by the representation of a high-level property that was not represented in the first scenario.

This style of argument can be used in favour of the Rich View about many high-level properties. Siegel's original case focused on whether biological kind properties (*being a pine tree*) can feature in the content of perception. Here I present a contrast argument in favour of the Perceptual View concerning the perceptual representation of *cacophony*, a widely agreed aesthetic property.<sup>16</sup>

Here is my case. Suppose you are not an expert music listener, but, little by little, you start accumulating a discrete baggage of music that you have listened to. You cultivate your taste among different genres, and you are not disdainful to try listening to music outside your comfort zone. Someday, you become a trained listener, acutely perspicacious to the cacophonous (and maybe also of the euphonic) character of certain melodies. Let  $E_1$  be an auditory experience of a cacophonous melody you have before developing this recognitional capacity, and  $E_2$  be the auditory experience of the cacophonous melody you have afterwards.<sup>17</sup> Here is the argument:

**Phenomenal Contrast Argument for *Cacophony*:**

- (1.) The overall phenomenology of which  $E_1$  is a part differs from the overall phenomenology of which  $E_2$  is a part.
- (2.) If the overall phenomenology of which  $E_1$  is a part differs from the overall phenomenology of which  $E_2$  is a part, then there is a phenomenal difference between the (auditory) perceptual experiences  $E_1$  and  $E_2$ .
- (3.) If there is a phenomenal difference between the (auditory) perceptual experiences  $E_1$  and  $E_2$ , then  $E_1$  and  $E_2$  differ in the properties they represent.
- (4.) If  $E_1$  and  $E_2$  differ in the properties they represent, it is that in  $E_2$  you experience the property of *cacophony* but in  $E_1$  you don't.
- (5.) In  $E_2$  you experience the property of *cacophony* but in  $E_1$  you don't.

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<sup>16</sup> Contrast argument for the perception of aesthetic properties have been proposed notably by Stokes (2014, 2018) and Logue (2018). Stokes focused on the property of *being dynamic*, *being serene*, and *being an impressionist gestalt* for paintings, while Logue on the *gracefulness* of ballet's pirouettes.

<sup>17</sup> Under certain metaphysical perspectives, the idea that a melody can be cacophonous as in  $E_1$  is misleading. I think in particular to anti-realist positions about aesthetic properties. I shall leave these issues aside etc.

Premise (0.) is the starting intuition consisting in an appeal to introspect our overall experience of the two scenarios. Premise (1.) claims that the difference between your overall experience is a difference between  $E_1$  and  $E_2$ , and not a difference in another mental state, e.g., a belief, a desire, or an affective state. Premise (2.) claims that the difference between  $E_1$  and  $E_2$  is a difference between the representational properties you experience, and not merely a difference in the non-representational features of experience. Premise (3.) claims that if there is a difference in the properties you experience, it is a difference in which aesthetic properties you experience since, by stipulation, low-level properties are the same between the two experiences (e.g., because you are listening to the same music record). The conclusion (4.) claims that you experience the property of cacophony in  $E_2$  but not in  $E_1$ .

The strategy to establishing whether the argument holds consists in testing if, for every premise except (0.), the explanation given is *the best explanation* for the contrast established in the previous premise. Premise (0.) assumes that there is a difference in overall phenomenology, and premise (1.), for instance, explains it in terms of a difference in the phenomenology of perceptual experiences. Ultimately, phenomenal contrast arguments are built on, first, presenting two scenarios with a different overall phenomenology, and, secondly, arguing that the explanation in terms of perceptual experience of high-level properties is the best explanation for this difference. If we aim to undermine the argument's support to the Rich View, we must provide an alternative explanation for the phenomenal contrast that is at least as parsimonious as the latter (Logue 2018, 46; Stokes 2018, 23).

### 3. ASPECT-SWITCHING, ATTENTION, AND GESTALTEN

In this chapter, I will test whether the contrast argument holds its ground in establishing the Perceptual View, i.e., the Rich View about the perceptual experience of aesthetic properties. I will start by testing whether, for premises (2.) and (3.), the explanation stated is the best explanation among the alternatives. I will start by discussing premise (2.), and test whether a

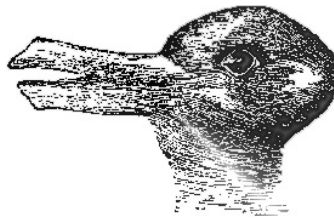
concurrent explanation appealing to a pure phenomenal difference based on shifts in attention poses a threat to the explanation in terms of difference in content. Second, I will discuss premise (3.) against the interpretation that appeals to a difference in low-level representation. In this regard, I will linger a moment to analyse why aesthetic properties are usually considered high-level properties of perception. Finally, I will defend the thesis that, if aesthetic properties are understood as *gestalten*, they are perceptually experienced.

### 3.1. Difference in Phenomenal Character

Arguably, some who has developed a capacity to recognise cacophonic melodies *attends* differently to them. Not by chance, expert musicians are those more attentive to musical nuances: it is not uncommon to see them in concert halls and jazz clubs close their eyes and focus on what they are listening more carefully than the average person. At first glance, what these cases involve is a mobilisation of attention. Another fact that seems to go in the same direction is that people, as they progress with the practice of their instrument, come to experience music differently: they may notice details of which they were not aware before. Plausibly, this is also because they attend to music differently.

Premise (2.) claims that the difference in the phenomenal character of one's perceptual experience is best explained as a difference in the properties it represents, and this is maintained to be the best bet for the difference in phenomenal character. Against this hypothesis, David Chalmers (2004) and Richard Price (2009) have argued that shifts in how one mobilises one's attention can potentially make a difference in the phenomenal character of one's experience, and yet do not make any difference in the contents this experience represents. As Chalmers says, "the most plausible potential cases of phenomenally distinct visual experiences with the same representational content involve differences in attention" (2004, 161). If the attentional mechanism were up to the task of providing a better explanation for the phenomenal difference between  $E_1$  and  $E_2$  than the one in premise (2.), the availability of the latter would be put at stake, thus shifting the burden of proof back to the advocates of the Rich View.

To illustrate the point, it can consider an example of attention shift like the one used to present the phenomenon of *aspect-switching*—Price (2009) notably offers this type of interpretation against the alternative interpretation of premise (2.) offered in the contrast arguments.<sup>18</sup> The core idea of aspect-switching is that the same object can be seen under different aspects. The most common case appeals to ambiguous figures, among which the duck-rabbit picture is probably the most famous. In this picture, the same visual figure can be seen either as a duck or as a rabbit (figure 2).<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 2**

What does the aspect-switch consist of? Is it limited to a change in the phenomenal character, or does it entail equally a shift in which properties are represented? Call the former the *phenomenal interpretation* and the latter the *content interpretation*.

According to the content interpretation, the aspect-switching involves a change in the content of the figure. The phenomenal difference follows from the shift in what is visually represented, so that the aspect-switching is due to a difference between which properties are represented in the experience before and those that are represented after. This corresponds to the explanation given in premise (2.).

According to the phenomenal interpretation, the aspect-switching is not supposed to involve a change in the content of the figure, but only a change in the phenomenal character of the experience. The difference is purely

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<sup>18</sup> His example is wired to the visual modality; I will stick to this sensory modality as well, as visual examples fits better to the written medium (they allow you to test on your own the aspect-switching while you are reading). But the same points can be raised *mutatis mutandis* for the other sensory modalities.

<sup>19</sup> The picture in Figure 1 is from <https://www.illusionsindex.org/i/duck-rabbit>.



phenomenological, no change in the representational properties instantiated occurs. On this regard, shifts in one's own attention has been seen as one compelling mechanism underlying the phenomenal difference. The aspect-switching is thus explained as resulting from a shift in the subject's pattern of attention. Consider the description Price gives for his own shift in pattern of attention:

[w]hen seeing the duck/rabbit as a rabbit, I tend to look at the picture from left to right, and when seeing it as a duck, I tend to look at it from right to left. Also, when seeing it as a rabbit, I attend to the rabbit's mouth and eye together; when I see it as a duck, I attend to the duck's eye and beak together. (Price 2009, 513).

Therefore, for those who appeal to the phenomenal interpretation, any shifts in the subject's attention are thought to provide sufficient ground to make a phenomenal difference all on their own, without making any difference in the property represented, thus offering an alternative explanation that counters premise (2.).

An explanation of this sort goes against both strong intentionalism and the Rich View. *Strong intentionalism* is the view according to which there cannot be any difference in the phenomenal character of a given experience without a corresponding difference in the properties it represents; thus, the phenomenal character of an experience is said to *supervene* on its content.<sup>20</sup> In its simplest form, a set of properties *A* is said to *supervene* on a set of properties *B* if two things cannot differ with respect to their *A*-properties without also differing with respect to their *B*-properties; as the slogan says "there cannot be an *A*-difference without a *B*-difference" (McLaughlin & Bennet 2005). Hence, the phenomenal interpretation denies strong intentionalism since it says that there can be a phenomenological difference without a representational difference; hence, this argument removes support of the Rich View by blocking premise (2.).<sup>21</sup>

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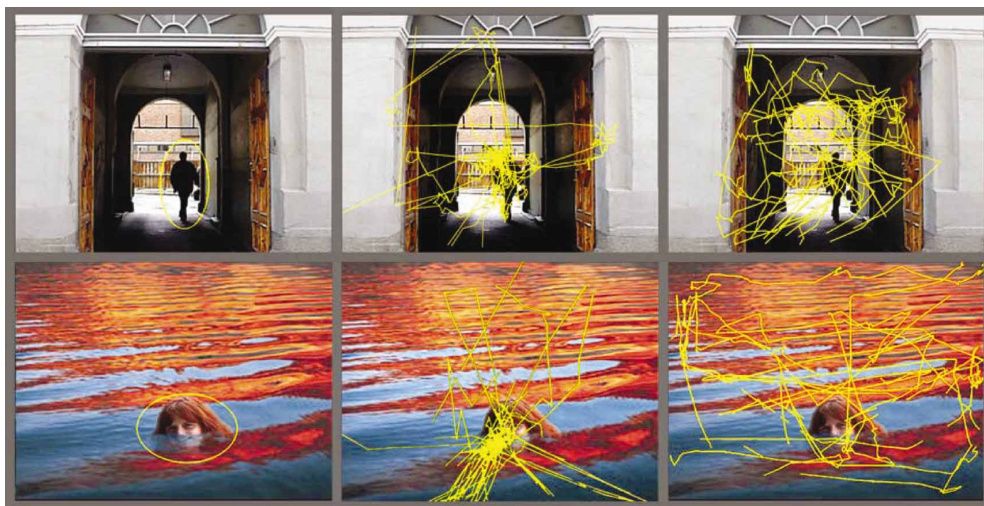
<sup>20</sup> *Strong intentionalism* is not identical to *intentionalism* as presented earlier in this essay, nor the latter is identical to *weak intentionalism*. Strong intentionalism claims that the phenomenal character of an experience supervenes upon its representational content. Conversely, weak intentionalism denies that any changes in the phenomenal character of one's experience is necessarily accompanied by a change in its representational content, or vice versa. Intentionalism as introduced before is neutral on the supervenience claim; it merely says that, for every phenomenal property, there is some representational property such that necessarily, a mental state has that representational property just if it has that phenomenal property (Chalmers 2004, 156).

<sup>21</sup> Notice that if we accept strong intentionalism, premise (2.) follows flawlessly.

However, the problem in appealing to shifts of attention is that they do not necessarily support the phenomenal interpretation of aspect-switching. Despite the initial appeal, it is not straightforward that shifts in one's own attention do not make any representational difference. It may be argued that nonetheless, they involve a change in which properties are represented. Notably, attention is maintained as entailing representational differences when combined with a *post-attentive conception of perceptual content*, i.e., the idea that perceptual content is always determined by the allocation of one's attention (Nanay 2010). The phenomenal interpretation instead endorses a *pre-attentive conception of perceptual content*, such that attention shifts occur within an already given content. Therefore, for proponents of the content interpretation, it is possible to reply that appeal to attention does not necessarily favour the phenomenal interpretation over the content interpretation.

Nevertheless, I want to offer an empirical reason to think that the content of  $E_2$  causally results from the mobilisation of one's attention, so that the difference in phenomenal character will be indeed a difference in representational content. Even if the shifts in *pre-content* attention may explain several nonaesthetic cases, experiences of aesthetic properties might resist this analysis. The reason is that aesthetic expertise may influence the mobilisation of attention by tracking the relevant features necessary for eliciting a certain aesthetic reaction (Nanay 2016, ch. 2). For instance, in the case of the expert musician that focuses on what she is listening to, it is plausible to think that she mobilises her attention to track specific features that the naïve listener tends to omit, e.g., the interplay between tonal and rhythmic phrasing, or the way harmonic tensions are resolved into moments of harmonic rest. In these cases, attention of the musical expert would be driven by the "scanning" of the environment in search of specific properties required to elicit a distinctive aesthetic reaction. As it is often the case, when we recommend a piece of artwork to a friend, we point her towards the features to which she should attend to appreciate it thoroughly; when we explain to the visitor of the NGA why Matisse's canvas is so beautiful, we indicate specific characteristics to which she should attend.

A certain number of empirical studies have shown how the mobilisation of attention between art experts and naïve observers may differ considerably (Vogt & Magnussen 2007). By correlating shifts in attention with saccadic eye movements, the research indicates that the pattern of attention of aesthetically trained people (i.e., people having between 5 and 11 years of art education) and untrained people varies in how it is spatially distributed. When looking at a picture representing a human figure, the eye movements of naïve observers tend to concentrate on the human figure, while the distribution of eye movement of the expert tend to wander to every corner of the picture (figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Examples of eye-movements patterns of naïve observers (central column) and art experts (right column), on two images representing respectively a human figure (left column). Reproduced from Vogt & Magnussen (2007, 97).

A plausible interpretation of these results is that experts scan the picture in search of those properties that they can most likely elicit an aesthetic response from. It seems that the phenomenal difference is accompanied by a representational difference, as the function of the eye movements would hardly be explainable if there were no properties to track. Even though these empirical findings do not establish the hypothesis definitely, they suggest that the kind of shifts in attention involved in the aesthetic cases is likely to entail a change in which properties are represented. Even Price's description of the aspect-switching can be arguably interpreted in the same way: what attention does is make him attend to a compound of properties, such as the rabbit's

mouth and eye, or the duck's beak and eye – his experience does not merely have a different phenomenology.

I conclude that the phenomenal interpretation against premise (2.) of the contrast argument for cacophony unlikely offers a better explanation for the phenomenological difference between the two experiences. For the deniers of the Perceptual View, it may be better to turn their attention to the other premises.

### **3.2. Aesthetic Properties as High-Level Properties of Perception**

Even if we have shown that the phenomenal difference in premise (2.) can be plausibly interpreted as entailing a difference in content between  $E_1$  and  $E_2$ , we still need to discuss whether this difference would be in the representation of aesthetic properties or elsewhere. Premise (3.) of the contrast argument maintains that the best explanation for the difference between the two experiences is that  $E_2$  perceptually represents the aesthetic property cacophony, whereas  $E_1$  does not. But this requires further discussion. After all, if there is a difference in which properties are represented, the straightforward interpretation is that it occurs among the uncontroversial candidates, not among those on trial. The Thin View is the standard. The burden of proof is on the Rich View to motivate why the perceptual representation of aesthetic properties is the best bet on what explains the phenomenal contrast.

If aesthetic properties are perceived, then they are high-level properties, but why? Aesthetic properties are not considered low-level properties because—at least perceptually—something else than the mere representation of low-level properties is required for their experience. As Nick Zangwill says in the opening statement of his book *The Metaphysics of Beauty*:

Beauty does not stand alone. It cannot exist by itself. Things are beautiful because of the way they are in other respects. Beauty is a property that depends on other properties. (Zangwill 2001, 1).

Zangwill is suggesting is that if objects are beautiful, elegant, or graceful, they are so essentially in virtue of other properties. More specifically, we are

used to believing that nothing can be aesthetic irrespective of its non-aesthetic properties. Plausibly, how an object possesses its aesthetic quality depends on how it is composed: the beauty of Matisse's *Open Window, Collioure*, for instance, depends on how its colours and shapes are arranged on the canvas. Had it been composed in any other way, it would arguably not have the same aesthetic quality.

This relationship between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties is usually understood in terms of *supervenience*: aesthetic properties are high-level properties because they supervene on more “qualitatively simple” properties (Sibley 1959; Levinson 1984). For example, the elegance of a painting supervenes on the arrangement of brush strokes and tones; the melodiousness of a musical piece upon the pattern of notes that compose it. In those cases, there cannot be any difference in the objects' elegance and melodiousness without a difference in the pattern of notes or the arrangement of brush strokes and tones. Therefore, since the instantiation of aesthetic properties depends on other properties, supervenience in part explains why they are considered high-order properties of perception.

The question that immediately follows is: upon what exactly do aesthetic properties supervene? A widespread answer says that aesthetic properties supervene on *formal properties*. Classic formalists define formal properties as the intrinsically and visually salient properties of the surfaces of pictures, or more simply, *properties of surfaces*. Clive Bell said that formal properties are “lines and colours combined in a particular way”, or what he called “Significant Forms” (Bell 1913, 5). According to Bell, the only properties admitted as formal would be low-level properties of vision and the relations between them, such as their spatial relations.

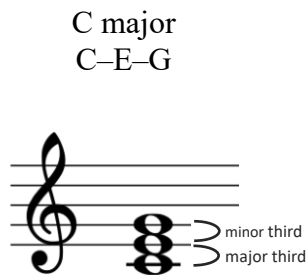
There are two problems with Bell's notion of formal properties in the case of aesthetic objects. First, aesthetic properties of music supervene on auditory properties, such as timbres and music pitches. However, Bell's characterisation cannot take account of how aesthetic properties might supervene on properties represented in non-visual modalities. Second, it seems that aesthetic properties do not supervene *directly* on low-level properties in most cases. If we consider with more attention the previous examples, we may prefer to say that the elegance of Matisse's painting

supervenes *on that specific arrangement* of colours and shapes, not on any arrangement whatsoever. As we said, if the painting's colours and shapes were disposed in any other way on the canvas, they might not elicit the same aesthetic effect. Consequently, we should reject Bell's notion of formal properties because of its failure to acknowledge the possibility for aesthetic properties to supervene on non-visual objects, and to explain how two compositions made of the same low-level properties but arranged differently can elicit different aesthetic responses.

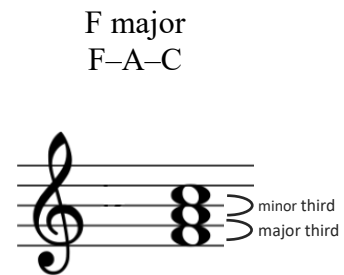
It seems then more likely that the formal properties on which aesthetic qualities supervene are far more numerous than those of the low-level visual type. Nonetheless, the latter are certainly part of the class of formal properties, but they are not the only ones. One way to expand this class is to include *gestalten*—also known as *aspectual shapes* or *plastic volumes*—in its range. Gestalten may be seen as those structures or complex of properties that, when considered as wholes, are more than the sum of all their parts (von Ehrenfels 1890). For instance, a major triad is considered a gestalt in being more than the sum of its parts because it can be transposed into different keys while retaining the fundamental proportions between its tones—e.g., both root position of the chords *C major* and *F major* (respectively, C-E-G and F-A-C) are formed by a major third followed by a minor third (figures 4 and 5). Moreover, notice that gestalten supervene on organised sets of low-level properties. For instance, the C major chord supervenes on the notes C, E and G disposed as C-E-G, since any change in these low-level properties entails a change in which gestalt is instantiated—e.g., if we switch E with E<sup>b</sup>, we have a *C minor* chord.

Accordingly, we could say that the chord's aesthetic properties supervene directly on the chord itself, or more specifically, on the gestalt property *C major* or *F major*; in the case of pictures, we can say that aesthetic properties supervene directly on the property *being a picture*. Furthermore, the gestalten *C major* and *F major* directly supervene on certain low-level properties. This is why we may say instead that a certain aesthetic property *indirectly* supervenes on low-level properties, since it directly supervenes on a gestalt property that, respectively, directly supervenes on certain low-level

properties. The harmoniousness of C major supervenes on the C major chord, that respectively supervenes on the notes C, E, and G.



**Figure 4**



**Figure 5**

Bell’s characterisation of formal properties did not capture why pictures could be considered aesthetical in virtue of being pictures. As Malcolm Budd remarks, “a picture’s value as art is entirely dependent on its being a depiction of a scene that, considered with respect to the disposition of coloured masses in space, constitutes a harmonious or impressive whole”, and as such, we need “to consider the depicted scene only in its spatio-coloured aspect” (Budd 1995, 52). In sum, the class of formal properties is much larger than what Bell thought. Therefore, aesthetic properties are considered high-order properties of perception, as they supervene on the formal properties of objects, i.e., both on low-level basic qualities (e.g., blue or round) and gestalten (e.g., C major).

However, by merely noting that aesthetic properties supervene on formal properties we have not yet established whether they are perceived as well. The problem with supervenience is that it does not specify whether the relevant supervenient properties are represented perceptually or in any other way. At least theoretically, we can perceive each formal property underlying the elegance of a figure—e.g., its pastel colours or its curved shapes—without experiencing elegance *tout court*; we can listen to the entire execution of a line of tones while being “deaf” to its melodious character. The same applies to gestalten: someone may argue that we can see only the set of low-level properties that sustain a certain gestalt, but awareness of the latter would be the matter of a non-experiential state such as belief and judgment (as in option (A) for aesthetic properties). The fact is that supervenience says nothing on whether aesthetic properties or just their base properties are perceived; it does

not say whether the relation between the subvenient and the supervenient properties is realised in perception. Therefore, since the only properties which everyone agrees to be perceived are low-level properties of the type of basic sensory qualities, we must establish first whether gestalten are perceived, and then whether aesthetic properties are as well.

### 3.3. Difference in Representational Content

I will discuss whether the difference between the contents of  $E_1$  and  $E_2$  should be understood as a difference in low- or high-level properties—call the former the *thin interpretation* and the latter the *rich interpretation*. In the first section of this chapter, we discussed the case of aspect-switching involving the ambiguous figure of the duck-rabbit picture; I will stick to this example, as it allows to frame the discussion to come with more ease.

According to the thin interpretation, the aspect-switching does not involve a difference in which high-level properties are represented in the perceptual state: we can explain the difference entirely in terms of low-level representation. For instance, when we look at the duck-rabbit figure and it seems as if it has the shape of a duck, what we *literally see* is just some set of low-level properties—e.g., a finite set of colours, shapes, edges, and so forth. Even if the gestalt property *shape of a duck* supervenes on that specific set of low-level properties, we do not *literally see* it. Rather, I *judge* that the figure has that particular high-level property. The latter is not thought to be perceptually represented; instead, its representation is maintained as being the matter of some post-perceptual processing, such a belief or judgment (Lyons 2005).

Someone may ask how we can switch between the two aspects of the figure. Why do we judge that it has the shape of a duck and not the shape of a rabbit? The advocate of the thin interpretation can answer in two ways. First, she can say that which high-level properties we ultimately attribute to some set of low-level properties depends on our background knowledge. Yet, this in no way enriches our perceptual experience; it just makes us tend toward a certain judgment rather than another. For instance, I may judge that it is the shape of a duck because I have never seen a rabbit before. However, this



explanation will end up facing the same problems we recognised before for option (A), i.e., the claim that awareness of aesthetic properties is *a matter of non-experiential states or processes*. Since it postpones the representation of high-level properties to post-experiential processing, this explanation cannot account for the salient phenomenology that we associate with the way in which we apprehend them.

The second answer may resolve this problem. The advocate of the thin interpretation can say that it is a difference in how one allocates her attention, such that shifts in attention entail a difference in the representation of low-level properties in perceptual experience—in accordance with the post-attentive conception of perceptual content and the content interpretation of aspect-switching. Attention here involves a difference in content indeed, but merely in the representation of low-level properties. What it does is to highlight or “make salient” a subset of low-level properties that is sufficient for sustaining the gestalt *shape of a duck* or, conversely, the gestalt *shape of a rabbit*. For instance, I judge that the picture has the shape of a duck because, among the set of low-level properties to which I attend, the pencil’s stroke of the beak takes some sort of priority over the pencil’s stroke of the mouth; these somehow “emerge” above the others. If I was instead attending to the pencil’s stroke of the mouth, I would more likely judge that the picture has the shape of a rabbit, as these properties were standing out in my experience.

Finally, the thin interpretation blocks premise (3.) by saying that the difference in which properties are perceptually represented in  $E_2$  that were not represented in  $E_1$  is exclusively explained in terms of low-level representation. Therefore, there is no need to postulate the representation of high-level properties; a difference in which set of low-level properties we attend to is enough.

According to the rich interpretation, the aspect-switching must be explained as a difference in high-level representation. In the one case, we literally see the gestalt property *shape of a duck*, and in the other we literally see the gestalt property *shape of a rabbit*. We also see the organised set of low-level properties that sustain these two gestalts, but it is maintained that the instantiation of these high-level properties should not be explained in

post-experiential terms: the two experiences properly differ in which high-level properties they represent.

How we come to see one set of properties or the other can be explained by appeal to several mechanism. The most popular option is to say that the relevant mechanism is a kind of cognitive penetration (Siegel 2012; Stokes 2014, 2018). Put simply, cognitive penetration is the phenomenon in which the content in one's perceptual state is affected or "penetrated" by a post-perceptual cognitive state, such as belief, judgment, imagining, desire, and so forth. Siegel has formalised the phenomenon as follows:

**CP:** If visual experience is cognitively penetrable, then it is nomologically possible for two subjects (or for one subject in different counterfactual circumstances, or at different times) to have visual experiences with different contents while seeing the same distal stimuli under the same external conditions, as a result of differences in other cognitive (including affective) states. (Siegel 2012, 204).

Advocates of cognitive penetration maintain that the perceptual representation of high-level properties requires for the phenomenon to be possible. Otherwise we could not explain how the perceptual representation of properties above the low-level basic qualities might happen; I will discuss later why this is not necessarily the case.

To understand the difference between the thin and the rich interpretation in a different way, consider the supervenience relation sketched before between high- and low-level properties. According to the rich interpretation, the supervenience relation between high- and low-level properties is realised entirely in perceptual experience. The thin interpretation maintains, in contrast, that the supervenience relation does not take place in perceptual experience: since the high-level properties would not be instantiated in perceptual experience, the supervenience relation would be realised non-perceptually. In this case, what is instantiated at the level of perceptual experience would be just a cluster of low-level properties.

Now that we sketched two *prima facie* interpretations of understanding the difference in content between  $E_1$  and  $E_2$ , we may ask against the thin interpretation: what is the reason for holding that we do not ultimately see gestalten? Why would we merely see organised sets of low-level properties and not high-level ways of appearing? What is in fact the difference between

gestalt and an organised set of low-level properties? It seems in fact straightforward that, after all, if we perceive some organised set of low-level properties, we also perceive the corresponding gestalt.<sup>22</sup> Remember that we said that gestalten can be conceived as those structures or complex of properties that, when considered as wholes, are more than the sum of all their parts (von Ehrenfels 1890). But this is incorrect.

In what follows, I wish to argue that gestalten are in fact nothing more than the sum of their parts. The perceptual experience of gestalten is identical to the perceptual experience of an organised set of low-level properties. Changes in the representation of low-level properties entail changes in the representation of gestalten, and *vice versa*.

Consider again the duck-rabbit picture. Suppose I attend to the image of the duck. My perceptual experience  $E_1$  could be characterised as follows: my experience  $E_1$  represents that  $o_1$  is  $A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n$ , and  $D$ , where  $o_1$  is an object,  $A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n$  are an organised set of low-level properties sustaining the gestalt *shape of a duck*, and  $D$  is the gestalt *shape of a duck*.<sup>23</sup> Imagine then that I left the room for a moment and my roommate, unbeknownst to me, erases the pencil's stroke of the beak from the picture. When I come back, my perceptual experience  $E_2$  of what was originally the duck-rabbit picture would likely be as following: my experience  $E_2$  represents that  $o_2$  is  $A_1, A_2, \dots, A_{n-1}$ , where  $o_2$  is an object, and  $A_1, A_2, \dots, A_{n-1}$  are a set of low-level properties. Arguably, I do not see the gestalt *shape of a duck* anymore. This is because  $A_n$ , i.e., the pencil's stroke of the beak, is a necessary property for the instantiation of the organised set of low-level properties  $A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n$ . Without the pencil's stroke of the beak  $A_n$ , the set of low-level properties  $A_1, A_2, \dots, A_{n-1}$  is not the organised set of low-level properties that can sustain the gestalt  $D$ ; it is just a

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<sup>22</sup> Dustin Stokes offers a similar discussion of this point. However, he develops an argument that differs from mine based on discriminatory capacities (Stokes 2018, 28-30). Moreover, he endorses a very different conclusion on the possibility to perceptually represent aesthetic properties; I will present his position on the subject at the end of the chapter.

<sup>23</sup> From now on, I will use the following terms with their respective denotations as presented in this schema:

- a 'set of low-level properties' refers to a finite set of perceptual low-level properties  $P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n$ ;
- an 'organised set of low-level properties' refers to a set of low-level properties  $P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n$  that, in respect to supervenience, sustains a distinctive gestalt  $Q$ ;
- a 'gestalt' refers to a property  $Q$  that, in respect to supervenience, is sustained by an organised set of low-level properties  $P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n$ .

I opted for distinguishing a mere *set* from an *organised set* of low-level properties to emphasise that the former is not in a supervenience relation with a certain high-level gestalt, whereas the latter is. *Nota bene* that every organised set of low-level properties is a set of low-level properties, but not the converse, i.e., not every set of low-level properties is an organised set of low-level properties.

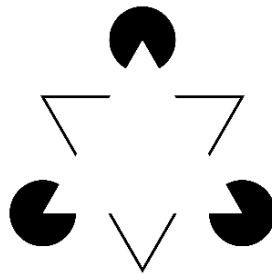
meaningless cluster of low-level properties. The change in which low-level properties are represented has an impact on the representation of gestalten; my perceptual experience does not represent the gestalt *D* anymore.

The perceptual representation of an organised set of low-level properties is necessary for the representation of the corresponding gestalt. Whenever we perceptually experience some organised set of low-level properties, we experience the corresponding gestalt. This is because the experience of some organised set of low-level properties is a condition for the experience of the corresponding gestalt. Therefore, if we perceive some organised set of low-level properties, we perceive the corresponding gestalt. The necessity claim applies in both directions: the perceptual representation of a certain gestalt is necessary for the representation of the corresponding organised set of low-level properties as well. Against this, someone may object that the representation of whatever arrangement of low-level properties does not require the representation of a certain gestalt. For instance, imagine recombining the shapes, lines and edges of the duck gestalt in an arbitrary way: these properties will not give rise to the duck gestalt if they were disposed in any other way. That is correct, but it is not an objection to the necessity claim. The representation of a certain gestalt is necessary for the representation of the relevant *organised set* of low-level properties, not for the representation of each of its elements recombined arbitrarily. A set of low-level properties becomes meaningful only when organised in a certain manner. This is the case because spatial relations are also among the low-level properties required for the instantiation of a certain gestalt. Therefore, since the necessity claim holds in both directions, the perceptual representation of some gestalt is identical to the perceptual representation of the corresponding organised set of low-level properties.

Gestalten are perceptually represented. They are perceptual properties of the type of high-level ways of appearing in respect to supervenience. In conclusion, there is not just a supervenience relation between a gestalt and a certain organised set of low-level properties: their experiences are identical. Perceptually, high-level properties of the type of gestalten are nothing more than an organised set of low-level properties, there is nothing more to the

property *being the shape of a duck* than the organised set of low-level properties that compose it.

The case is particularly evident if we consider the Kanizsa Triangle (figure 6).<sup>24</sup> When we look at it, we do not literally see the white triangle pointing upwards, neither do we see the inverted triangle pointing downwards, nor the black disks. This is because, for each of them, we cannot see all the properties that are included in the organised sets of low-level properties that sustain the corresponding gestalten: for the first triangle, the edges are missing; for the second triangle, part of the three segments are missing; and finally, for each black disk, a section of the disk is missing. In fact, the missing parts are not drawn. According to the supervenience relation between these basic properties and their supervenient shapes, those missing parts were necessary for instantiating the relevant gestalt. The fact is, we can see the shapes they form just if we can see all their organised low-level properties. But that is not the case in the Kanizsa Triangle. Therefore, the shapes of the two triangles and the three disks are not visually represented.<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 6**

### **3.4. Aesthetic Properties as Gestalten**

The significance of gestalten for aesthetics might be even greater than we have acknowledged so far. It is not uncommon for philosophers to argue that

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<sup>24</sup> Figure 6 is from <https://www.illusionsindex.org/i/kanizsa-triangle#>.

<sup>25</sup> At last, someone might reply that, in fact, in the case of the duck-rabbit image we can perceptually experience the duck gestalt without perceptually experience the rabbit gestalt, whilst the two would be necessary instantiated in both experiences. The natural reply to this is that these gestalten are indeed experienced, but we are not necessarily *aware* of them at the same time. They can be perceptually represented *unconsciously* (Chalmers 2004, 159).

the experience of aesthetic properties consists in part or entirely in perceptually representing gestalten. For instance, Dustin Stokes argues that *many* aesthetic properties are perceived because in fact they are nothing more than a certain type of gestalt:

Unlike natural and artefactual kind properties, which on many accounts have a non-perceptible essence or kind-determining underlying structure, many aesthetic properties are exhausted by appearance features. There is nothing to the property of ‘being dynamic’ or ‘being impressionist’ (at least when in the context of aesthetics and artworks) beyond an organization or gestalt of basic features (30). [...] With aesthetic properties like these, to perceptually experience the relevant gestalt just is to perceptually represent that property. (Stokes 2018, 40).

Similarly, Jerrold Levinson argues that “aesthetic properties—or at least many properties usually classified as aesthetic properties—are *higher-order ways of appearing*, dependent in systematically on lower-order ways of appearing, but not conceptually tied to them or deducible from them” (Levinson 2006b, 342). If these authors are right, then at least a certain number of aesthetic properties will be perceptually experienced, represented in any of the five canonical sense modalities, because indeed they will be high-level gestalten. After all, this would respect our intuitions about the way we experience art and the practice of artists themselves: artists assemble and compose with the idea of realising certain “looks” or “appearances” out of their material, “aspects” that are meant to be appreciated through perception. As Alan Goldman says: “[a]rtists will naturally assume that if they want to change the aesthetic properties of a work in progress, then they must alter its physical properties” (Goldman 1995, 39).

In what follows, I will argue that no aesthetic property is a gestalt. Even if it might be the case that gestalten are represented in perceptual experience, I will argue, *pace* Stokes and Levinson, that we cannot perceptually experience aesthetic properties. The error lies in how the latter are understood by these authors. Aesthetic properties are neither perceptual gestalten, nor do they supervene on them. On the contrary, aesthetic properties are essentially evaluative properties, and their evaluative nature makes them unsuited to be represented in perceptual modalities. Values are not among the admissible contents of perceptual experience.

Before continuing, let me sum up briefly what we saw here. What the previous chapter was meant to show is that, if we accept premise (1.), premises (2.) and (3.) can resist concurrent explanations appealing, against the former, to phenomenal differences that do not entail representational differences, and against the latter, to differences in content in terms of exclusively low-level representations. Regarding (2.), the appeal to attention is convincing just if we can provide further reasons to hold a pre-attentive conception of perceptual content, but empirical studies concerning the impact of aesthetic expertise in the allocation of one's attention make this conception doubtful in aesthetic cases. Regarding (3.), an explanation in terms of low-level representations collapses into an explanation in terms of high-level representations when the high-level properties at stake are *gestalten*; we can perceptually represent this class of properties. The problem is that this works only if we conceive of aesthetic properties as *gestalten*.

The essay will continue as follows. In the next chapter, we will dive into the metaphysics of aesthetic properties to assess whether their category can be reduced to the category of *gestalten* properties. *Gestalten* are commonly conceived of as purely descriptive properties (Levinson 2006b). But this conception clashes against the intuition that aesthetic properties, most notably beauty and ugliness, appear to be entirely undescriptive, or, in Sibley's own terms, "non-condition-governed", i.e., the fact that no set of descriptive conditions seems sufficient to capture the extension of an aesthetic term (Sibley 1959, 424). Aesthetic properties should be considered as essentially evaluative. In the fifth chapter we will investigate whether evaluative properties can be represented in perceptual experience. The answer will be negative: value properties are not likely to be perceptually represented, what is at stake is the possibility of genuine aesthetic divergences. This will put serious doubts on the plausibility of premise (1.) of the contrast argument, i.e., that the difference between the two overall experiences is a difference in perceptual experiences. In the final chapter, I will motivate the claim that we have a better explanation of the phenomenal contrast if we grant that the difference lies in the affective state of the subject. This will open the path towards the Affective View, i.e., the view according to which the experience of aesthetic properties is an affective state akin to emotions.

## 4. THE METAPHYSICS OF AESTHETIC PROPERTIES

Aestheticians today deal with several questions about art, fiction, expression, creativity, appreciation, representation, interpretation, and what we might call an aesthetic experience. We commonly think about aesthetics as the branch of philosophy that studies beauty, but beauty is only one of the properties that we call ‘aesthetic’. In the philosophical jargon, beauty commonly refers to just a notable member of this family of properties. Typical examples of aesthetic properties are *gracefulness*, *elegance*, *delicacy*, *loveliness*, *balance*, *harmoniousness*, *unity*, as well as their negative counterparts, such as *ugliness*, *clumsiness*, *hideousness*, or harshness. We may also include properties such as *powerfulness*, *vividness*, *vibrancy*, and *boldness*. Sometimes, we include properties associated with human emotions and moods, such as *sad*, *angry*, *passionate*, *anxious*, or *melancholic*. Others also include properties that must be understood in the context of art history, for example, *original*, *influential*, *classic*, *minimalist*, *baroque*, *impressionist*, although, other philosophers see them more as artistic properties (Dickie 1964, Carroll 2000).

However, first, do these properties have anything in common apart from being somehow discussed in discourses about art? Second, do they deserve the label ‘aesthetic’ only for this reason?

The worry is that they might have nothing significant in common. Philosophers’ suggestions for aesthetic properties are so various that it might sound inconceivable to find agreement, especially because they tend to disagree on which properties should be included in a hypothetical list.<sup>26</sup> But this is not only a matter of opinion. There is a real challenge behind the conceptualisation of *aesthetic* itself: it is very difficult to identify a sufficient criterion for drawing the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties. That puts doubt on the very idea of a defining feature for what makes a property aesthetic in the first place.

Faced with this dubious task, aestheticians have preferred to provide rather a list of paradigmatic aesthetic expressions from the “critical and

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<sup>26</sup> For a survey of what authors consider aesthetic properties to be, see De Clercq 2008.



evaluative discourse about works of art” (Sibley 1959, 422). However, we may wonder whether those terms refer to some substantive properties in the strong sense. After all, terms are linguistic items; but supposedly, if they are meaningful, for every aesthetic term there is an aesthetic property to which that term refers. This suggests a way to start our investigation on aesthetic properties: we can start by considering the terms used in artistic contexts and see whether anything significant lies underneath their use.

In this chapter, I propose an interpretation of what aesthetic properties are. I will try to defend the claim that aesthetic properties are essentially evaluative. In a nutshell, the idea is that the recognition of an aesthetic value is necessary for their identification: purely descriptive properties cannot be considered aesthetic in virtue of lacking this evaluative component. For this reason, aesthetic properties which nonetheless hold a descriptive component should be conceived more as *thick properties*, i.e., the kind of properties which are “a union of fact and value” (Williams 1985, 129). The suggestion for their essentially evaluative nature stems, on the one hand, from the impossibility of detaching an aesthetic property’s evaluative component from its descriptive base without losing its very aesthetic nature, and on the other hand, for the possibility to express divergent aesthetic reactions for the very same set of nonaesthetic properties.

At first glance, the idea that aesthetic properties are necessarily evaluative does not seem controversial. For instance, *beauty* and *ugliness* seem to carry opposite values: when we say that something is beautiful, we likely evaluate it positively in some sense; whereas by saying that something is ugly, we are evaluating it negatively. Nevertheless, some philosophers have insisted that not every aesthetic property is evaluative (Budd 2007; Levinson 2001; Zangwill 2001).

A first reason for doubting about their evaluative nature is that some aesthetic properties can be specified in terms of an entirely value-free description of their formal components. Take *symmetry*: as suggested by mathematics, *symmetry* seems to be a property roughly definable as “invariance under some transformation”. For example, something is *rotationally symmetrical* if it can be rotated around a fixed point without

changing its overall shape. Thus, no evaluation whatsoever is required to correctly attribute this property to an object.

Another reason is that aesthetic properties seem to change their valence depending on the context in which they are evaluated. For example, *sumptuous* bears negative aesthetic value according to a minimalist aesthetics, but positive aesthetic value according to maximalism –i.e., the reactive movement against the principles of minimalism. At first sight, nothing stops us from seeing *beauty* in the same way, especially whenever it is equated to *prettiness*, *symmetry*, or *harmoniousness*.<sup>27</sup> The fact that the aesthetic value of these properties can change depending on the context is often seen as a *prima facie* reason to conclude that they are not necessarily evaluative.

However, in the cases just presented, we might doubt that we are dealing with aesthetic properties after all. *Symmetric* might not be “aesthetic” in the very sense of the term; rather, it is more plausibly seen as a property that is sometimes relevant for aesthetic evaluation. Depending on the context, *symmetric* could promote or decrease an object’s overall aesthetic value, but it would not be properly aesthetic by lacking an intrinsic evaluative component. If this is right and the aesthetic properties’ evaluative component were proved to be essential to the category, properties such as *symmetry* should be considered more as *aesthetically relevant properties*, i.e., properties that can contribute (positive or negatively) to an object’s overall aesthetic value, but they are not aesthetic in the robust sense (Nanay 2016, 71-74). For instance, formal properties of artworks are the most common example of aesthetically relevant properties since we need most of the time to consider these properties to express the appropriate aesthetic reaction. In this way, the connection between aesthetically relevant properties with aesthetic discourses would be maintained, but they would not be considered properly aesthetic properties in virtue of lacking an intrinsic evaluative component.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For this reason, Nick Zangwill proposes two senses for what we commonly refer to as ‘beauty’: one corresponding to aesthetic value or merit in its most general form, what he calls a *verdictive aesthetic properties*, and the other corresponding to what he calls a *substantive aesthetic properties*. The important difference is that the former is the overall evaluation that encompasses any *pro tanto* aesthetic reasons, whereas the second is the evaluation of a single property that may also bring a description in non-evaluative terms. See Zangwill (2001, ch. 1).

<sup>28</sup> For instance, Bence Nanay says that aesthetically relevant properties are those properties that make an aesthetic difference when they are attended: *any* aesthetic difference of whatever kind (Nanay 2016, 71).

## 4.1. The Three-Fold Classification

As it is often the case, a discussion in the tradition of analytic aesthetics starts with Frank Sibley; here, we analyse the classification he gives for aesthetic terms.

It should be noticed that Sibley did not frame his discussion in terms of properties, but rather in terms of “critical and evaluative discourse about works of art” (Sibley 1959, 422). However, as indicated before, we can suppose that Sibley’s classification for aesthetic terms can be translated into a classification for aesthetic properties. Terms are linguistic items, but if we suppose that they are meaningful, it follows that for every aesthetic term there is an aesthetic property to which that term refers. This seemingly is the way in which Sibley’s followers have tried to characterise aesthetic properties as well (Budd 2007, 334-336; Levinson 2006a, 315-320; Zangwill 2001, 15-18).

However, it is not easy to tell whether Sibley’s original project was ultimately about aesthetic properties or rather about the class of *aesthetically relevant properties* (Nanay 2016, 78). There are good reasons to think that Sibley was actually concerned with the latter, notably because he framed his analysis relative to the terms commonly employed in evaluating works of art. *Aesthetically relevant properties* are not “aesthetic” in the metaphysically robust sense of the term; they are only called so because they contribute in some way or another to the aesthetic evaluation of objects such as artworks. These are seemingly what Sibley’s aesthetic terms were meant to denote.

Either way, what is important for us is that philosophers interested in analysing the nature of aesthetic properties have promptly followed Sibley’s original strategy: they started by listing the terms employed in art criticism and tried to build a framework for aesthetic properties on this ground.<sup>29</sup> I will present their conclusions later in this chapter.

Now, let’s have a look at Sibley’s *three-fold classification for aesthetic terms*, and see how it translates into a classification for aesthetic properties.

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<sup>29</sup> One notable exception is Rafael De Clercq (2002). Instead of starting with a list of paradigmatic aesthetic properties, he reverses the strategy by first giving a stipulative definition for aesthetic properties and then arguing whether this definition applies to the properties denoted by paradigmatic aesthetic terms.

### Three-Fold Classification for Aesthetic Terms:

1. *Solely evaluative terms*: “terms the correct application of which to a thing indicates that the thing has some value without it thereby also being asserted that the thing has some particular or specified quality” (Sibley 1974, 91). They are employed to refer to a degree of aesthetic value, positive or negative, or to express the speaker’s attitude toward the object but without, or with almost no, descriptive content whatsoever that may help identify the object to which the value applies. As such, those terms have no defined limits for the range of objects to which they may be applied; their extension is not conceptually settled, they are purely evaluative statements. Examples given by Sibley are ‘beautiful’, ‘ugly’, and ‘lovely’ (93).
2. *Descriptive merit-terms*: terms that “simply name a property, but a property which, *vis-à-vis* some sort of things, happens to constitute a merit in those things” (Sibley 1974, 91). Those terms denote a non-evaluative property of the putative object but without any evaluation on behalf of the speaker: they are thought as purely descriptive statements. Examples given by Sibley are ‘balanced’, ‘unified’, ‘evocative’, ‘vivid’, ‘funny’, ‘witty’, ‘dynamic’, and ‘moving’ (93).
3. *Evaluation-added terms*: “when they are applied to something, not only is a property being attributed to it but an indication is being given that the speaker has a favourable or unfavourable attitude to that property”. (Sibley 1974, 92). This last category reunites the terms used to identify both a descriptive property and a value in the object. Their application implies both a certain description delimiting the range of object that fall on their extension, and the speaker’s evaluation of that particular property. Examples given by Sibley are ‘elegant’, ‘graceful’, ‘handsome’, ‘pretty’, ‘ungainly’, ‘garish’, and ‘hideous’ (93).

Granted that Sibley’s classification is sound, we can translate the classification for aesthetic terms into the following three-fold classification for aesthetic properties:

### Three-Fold Classification for Aesthetic Properties:

1. *Purely evaluative aesthetic properties*
2. *Purely descriptive aesthetic properties*
3. *Impure aesthetic properties*

Is this new classification sound? Can we translate the categories for aesthetic terms into categories for aesthetic properties flawlessly? I believe that we cannot. The conversion from terms to properties reveals an

asymmetry between the paradigmatic linguistic expressions we use in assessing the aesthetic value of artworks and what aesthetic properties truly are. The main consequence is the fall of the category of *purely descriptive aesthetic* properties.

The way I assess this point is by looking at the relationship between the descriptive and the evaluative components of aesthetic properties. Following the initial framework developed by Rafael De Clercq (2002, 2008) for the view shared by Sibley and his followers, I will show that aesthetic properties are essentially evaluative properties of objects that are not exhausted by a merely descriptive characterisation.

I will argue that the evaluative-added model used to analyse impure aesthetic properties is an incorrect representation of the relationship between their descriptive and their evaluative components. In particular, the model grants that the two components can be detached from one another and yet still be considered aesthetic properties on their own. This seems possible because the three-fold characterization admits a category for purely descriptive aesthetic properties. I will show that, first, impure aesthetic properties bear their two constitutive components intrinsically linked in such a way that they cannot be treated independently from one another, and second, that this result suggests that there cannot be purely descriptive aesthetic properties. It follows that if there are no purely descriptive aesthetic properties, then, by contraposition, every aesthetic property is evaluative.

## **4.2. The Received View**

The idea that the classification for aesthetic terms and the classification for aesthetic properties are structurally equivalent is a common assumption. Philosophers who endorse this assumption (e.g., Budd 2007; Levinson 2006a; Zangwill 2001) follow Sibley's lead in several ways, but they all assume the following two claims:

### **The Two Claims of the Received View:**

- (i) There are purely descriptive aesthetic properties.

- (ii) Every impure aesthetic property can be understood on the evaluation-added model.

Call the combination of these two claims the *Received View* about aesthetic properties.<sup>30</sup> However, the problem is that those two assumptions are ungrounded: there are compelling reasons to resist them. Let me briefly comment on those claims in order.

### **Claim (i): Purely Descriptive Aesthetic Properties**

Purely descriptive properties are what is denoted by descriptive merit-terms; claim (i) follows from this assumption. Yet, it might sound odd that Sibley called them ‘merit-terms’, since the notion of *merit* is conceptually connected with evaluation. However, if we consider his idea more carefully, we can see that it follows from the analysis he gave for the concept of aesthetic.

As we said before, his methodology consists in assembling a list of terms typically employed in the discourse and evaluation of works of art, and then isolating the properties these terms denote. The class of properties so gathered is called ‘aesthetic’. Under this interpretation, even purely descriptive properties end up being categorised as aesthetic properties. But even if we would deny that they deserve the appellation of ‘aesthetic’—as I will show—they could be considered pertinent in the context of *aesthetic evaluation*: they can be appealed to as reasons for evaluative judgments. As Sibley says, they are pertinent “*vis-à-vis* some sort of things” (Sibley 1974, 91), and those are our “verdicts about works of art” (88).

The problem is that we have no reason to believe that the properties identified by these terms are aesthetic in a robust sense. If the only criterion to consider some property aesthetic is the fact that it is used in evaluative discourses about art, then our list of aesthetic properties would include even properties that are not aesthetic *per se*, but merely happen to be mentioned in aesthetic evaluation, namely, just *aesthetically relevant properties*. In

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<sup>30</sup> The first to highlight Sibley’s influence on those philosophers’ treatment of aesthetic properties and to offer a systematic analysis of their claims is Rafael De Clercq (2008). The label ‘Received View’ also comes from him.

principle, we should avoid assembling a list for aesthetic properties through such a criterion, because it does not say anything about what distinguishes proper aesthetic properties from whatever happens to satisfy a contingent artistic conception at a certain moment.

For example, imagine the existence of an artistic manifesto called *Blueism* that praises only blue artworks: blue paintings, blue statues, blue photos, and so forth. Blue is a fundamental property for evaluating a *blueist* work of art. However, blue will probably not be the kind of property that we want to include among the aesthetic properties, as most of the time it is not at all relevant for evaluation. It just happens to be relevant for aesthetic evaluation *in certain contexts*; and context-dependency is built into the very concept of aesthetically relevant properties (Nanay 2016, 82).

Moreover, this criterion will automatically consider any base properties on which an aesthetic property may supervene aesthetical as well, simply because they can be mentioned when we indicate what we attribute an aesthetic property to. For instance, when we say that the arrangement of colours of Matisse's *Open Window, Collioure* is beautiful, we do not want to say that the colours or the arrangement are the aesthetic properties: what is fundamentally aesthetic is the property *beauty*, while colour properties are not properly aesthetic, and neither is a certain arrangement.

We want to individuate those properties that are aesthetic, no matter the context. What makes some property *aesthetic* should be a condition that allows to distinguish it from non-aesthetic properties. *Beauty* and *elegance* seem to always carry an aesthetic quality on their own, independently from the context in which they are evaluated. My personal intuition is that what makes them aesthetic is their intrinsic *aesthetic value*. If this is right, aesthetic value could be among the necessary conditions for the identification of aesthetic properties.

In favour of this intuition, consider this question: can we recognise aesthetic properties without expressing any evaluation about their (positive or negative) aesthetic value? When we recognise the colours and shapes of objects, we do not need to express anything about their evaluative status. However, the same does not seem possible for paradigmatic aesthetic properties, e.g., *gracefulness* cannot be experienced without committing

oneself to its aesthetic worth. The Received View rejects the last idea. It maintains that paradigmatic cases of aesthetic properties can be recognised without evaluating them. For instance, Sibley says that:

it can happen that a person can recognize that something is handsome or graceful, and is willing to call it so, without thereby making any positive evaluation or commendation. Such purely descriptive uses seem to me common in describing the particular aesthetic quality an object or an art-work has. (Sibley 1974, 94).

The argument seems to be that we can recognise handsomeness and gracefulness without committing ourselves to praise their aesthetic merit or demerit, i.e., without being forced to recognise their positive or negative contribution to an object's overall aesthetic value.

Contrary to the Received View, the point I want to motivate is that an evaluation will always be involved whenever an aesthetic property is recognised, and that aesthetic properties differ in this respect from ordinary descriptive properties such as *blue* that do not possess this feature. But before proceeding with the explanation, let us take a look at the second claim endorsed by the Received View, as it gives a glimpse of the possible reasons that have pushed philosophers to maintain the existence of purely descriptive aesthetic properties.

### **Claim (ii): the Evaluation-Added Model**

Impure aesthetic properties would be those that are denoted by evaluation-added terms. Yet, we might doubt that these terms deserve a category on their own. This scepticism is addressed by Malcolm Budd when he argues that the third category of terms might be dispensable in principle given the other two (Budd 2007, 335). According to him, when we use an evaluation-added term to make a statement about a certain object, we are in fact saying two things: first, that the relevant object possesses a certain descriptive property, and second, that this property has a certain value. It follows that an evaluation-added term could be considered equivalent to the simultaneous assertion of a descriptive merit-term and a solely evaluative term, namely, the predication of a purely descriptive property and the ascription of a purely evaluative property to it.



According to this model, evaluation-added terms can be considered as similar to *thick concepts* in moral philosophy, that is, concepts which “express a union of fact and value” (Williams 1985, 129), in the sense of stating both a description and an evaluation of what is semantically represented. Consider the adjective ‘garish’, a commonly employed example for an evaluation-added term. It is usually conceived as equivalent to “obtrusively bright” (Budd 2007, 335), a characterisation that reveals its structure of *thick aesthetic concept*: it combines a description of the items which constitute instances of garishness—those which are *brightly coloured*—, and an evaluation of that property—as *obtrusively* so.

Therefore, according to Budd it is not necessary to distinguish a third category for aesthetic terms. An evaluation-added term is nothing more than the simultaneous assertion of a descriptive merit-term and a solely evaluative term: its descriptive component consists in predicating the signified property to an object, whereas its evaluative component ascribes an aesthetic value to that property. In other words, evaluation-added terms are superfluous since we can say the same thing by using just a descriptive merit term in combination with a solely evaluative term.

At the same time, if we did not need a category for evaluation-added terms, we would not need a category for impure aesthetic properties either. The evaluation-added model entails that impure aesthetic properties can be sharply separated into two independent descriptive and evaluative components. What is expressed by an evaluation-added term would not be a *sui generis* aesthetic property—i.e., something which we can presumably characterise also as *simple*, *intrinsic*, *primitive*, *non-relational*, or *non-reducible*—, but rather it consists in a complex condition where a purely descriptive property figures alongside a purely evaluative one (Budd 2007, 336). Thus, there are no metaphysically robust impure aesthetic properties, but just purely descriptive aesthetic properties and purely evaluative aesthetic properties.

A similar point is made by Zangwill (2001, 44). In discussing the possibility of thick aesthetic concepts, he argues that “substantive aesthetic descriptions”—Sibley’s descriptive merit-terms and evaluation-added terms—have no evaluative content whatsoever, rather, they “conversationally”

imply an evaluation: the evaluation is not properly part of the semantic content of those terms, but it is just the case that their use is occasionally accompanied by it.<sup>31</sup> In other terms, the evaluation is not part of the necessary conditions for applying the concept, but it is merely a pragmatic feature surrounding its ordinary application.

‘Daintiness’, ‘dumpiness’, and ‘garishness’ appear to have evaluative content only because of the usual conversational implications which surround the use of these terms. But we can cancel the evaluation without retracting the substantive description. So daintiness, dumpiness, and garishness are not necessarily good or bad in themselves. (Zangwill 2001, 17).

Moreover, another implication of the Received View is that once we detach the evaluative component from the descriptive one, the latter will still be considered an aesthetic property on its own. According to Zangwill, this is an important difference to thick moral concepts for which, once the evaluative element is detached, the remaining descriptive properties are no longer moral (Zangwill 2001, 16).

However, the evaluation-added model is a poor way to understand impure aesthetic properties. It does not recognise the specificity of impure aesthetic properties. Against this model, I want to propose another model that treats impure aesthetic properties as *sui generis* aesthetic properties: call this the *thick descriptions model*. This model maintains that the descriptive and evaluative contents of the evaluation-added terms cannot be separated in two independent components: it treats them as intrinsically linked to one another. That is because, if we try to detach an impure aesthetic property evaluative component from its descriptive base, we lose what made it aesthetic in the first place. The same problem has been noted before by Alan Goldman:

A different question is whether we can always analyze evaluative properties into evaluative and non-evaluative components. Since we have viewed these properties as relations between objective properties and evaluative responses, it might seem that the answer must be affirmative. But I have also point out that many of the higher-level properties of this sort are unspecific of their objective sides. Although it should be possible in principle to analyse specific references to such properties into objective and subjective components, we cannot do so for the properties themselves. (Goldman 1995, 26).

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<sup>31</sup> Zangwill’s idea is in debt of Paul Grice’s view according to which “conversational implications” are “cancellable” because “there is always an *open question* as to whether something with a descriptive aesthetic property is aesthetically good or bad”; moreover, he suggests that the same approach might be recommended for treating thick moral concepts as well (Zangwill 2001, 16-17).

Following this suggestion, I will motivate the thick description model against claim (ii) and the evaluation-added model endorsed by the Received View. As the discussion will show, the case of impure aesthetic properties will provide reasons to suspect that claim (i) is false as well, as it may be held that it reveals the evaluative nature of aesthetic properties.

### **4.3. Evaluative Aesthetic Properties**

I will argue against both claims of the Received View in order to establish that aesthetic properties are essentially evaluative properties. Against (i), it is not the case that there are purely descriptive aesthetic properties. At best, aesthetic properties which bear a descriptive component should be understood more as impure aesthetic properties. Against (ii), the evaluation-added model is unfitted to understand the reference of evaluation-added terms. On the contrary, the thick descriptions model allows to recognise the specificity of impure aesthetic properties, and it maintains that they form a category on their own, not reducible to any other. Let me start with claim (ii).

#### **Against (ii): Thick Aesthetic Properties**

Consider once more the property cacophony, and let us try to analyse it in terms of the evaluation-added model. Budd proposes to consider garishness as equivalent to “obtrusively bright” (Budd 2007, 335); I propose to consider the property cacophony as equivalent to “jarringly sounding”. According to the model, something is cacophonous *just if* it has a certain sound, and this sound bears a negative aesthetic value; these are meant to be necessary and sufficient conditions for what can possess this property. Furthermore, we can suppose that the descriptive component of cacophonous is its sound, while its evaluative component is its jarring character. Finally, according to the model, cacophonous would not be a *sui generis* aesthetic property, rather the complex condition in which a certain descriptive property cooccurs with a negative value (Budd 2007, 335).

Contra Budd, it is rather simplistic to suppose that the property cacophony is merely the combination of a certain auditory property which

elicit a negative thin value. To see this more intuitively, consider any of Charlie Parker's classic bebop tunes, for example *Ornithology*. If you are mostly into classical music, the first time you listen to a performance of *Ornithology* you will likely consider it cacophonous. This is not unsurprising. Indeed, bebop was meant to be a provocative response to the classical canons of popular music; it was not intended to be danced or an easy listening. However, once you get "the bebop sound", it actually starts to feel quite melodious (trust me). You just need to become familiar to its harmonic and rhythmic peculiarities: intricate and asymmetric phrases, chromatic lines, altered chords, syncopated patterns, and dissonant intervals. Even for young jazz musicians, the main challenge associated with learning bebop is to gain confidence with its signature musical vocabulary.<sup>32</sup>

The formal properties of *Ornithology*—i.e., its harmonic and rhythmic properties—remain the same before and after you become accustomed to bebop's musical language. However, it would be very simplistic to assume that the *Ornithology*'s theme was cacophonous just because it elicits a negative thin value: you can recognize a negative thin value to this piece without considering it cacophonous, e.g., because it was ungraceful, chaotic, squeaky, crude, or perhaps (once you become too familiar with bebop's musical nuances) even boring. All this suggests that in order to consider something cacophonous, it is not sufficient to attribute a thin negative value to a certain type of sound.

Budd replies to the last point by insisting that, "with a suitable understanding of the conception of object" that we evaluate, we can specify further the descriptive component of an evaluation-added term so that it is suited to distinguish what is cacophonous from what is ungraceful, chaotic, and so forth, even if they are all negatively evaluated (Budd 2007, 335). Allegedly, we can read Budd as saying that the difference between these properties is not a matter of how we evaluate them, but rather a matter of which *aspect* of the sound they specify. These properties would be different because, in fact,

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<sup>32</sup> Notice that the example I am offering starts from similar bases than those employed in the contrast argument made before. The main difference is in the context surrounding the two scenarios. While in the contrast argument there was a shift from an experience without aesthetic content to an experience representing the aesthetic property of cacophony, here I am proposing a shift from the experience of cacophony to the experience of another aesthetic property, e.g., melodiousness. The important thing is that in both scenarios we need to understand what grounds that shift without any change on the non-aesthetic features instantiated.

they are different gestalten that happen to be all negatively evaluated. This would mean that impure aesthetic properties are just gestalten to which we ascribe a certain thin value, e.g., the aesthetically good or the aesthetically bad.

But we have reasons to resist to his suggestion. The formal properties to which cacophonic, chaotic, and ungraceful refer to are always the same: they are always the same harmonic and rhythmic properties. Contrary to what Budd suggested, it does not seem that what we evaluate differently are different gestalten. Instead, it seems that we evaluate *in different ways* the very same gestalt, even if always negatively. For example, if what we consider cacophonic is a certain chords progression, it does not seem that we evaluate a further aspect of that chord progression: the chord progression is already that aspect.

On the other hand, we can suppose that the evaluative component of cacophony contributes to indicating what may elicit this value. Alike descriptive properties, we may suppose that jarring states some conditions regarding the kind of objects that can bear that property. In other words, jarring implies the category of objects in which it can be recognised, e.g., jarring objects are those that elicit a discordant effect, and respectively cacophonic objects are those that are auditory and jarringly so. According to De Clercq, we can think about the evaluative component of impure aesthetic properties as containing a “descriptive residue”, something that prevents them from reducing to purely evaluative properties (De Clercq 2008, 901).

My point is that there is something more that makes cacophony *qua* cacophony, and it cannot be captured by a mere combination of a value-free formal property to which we ascribe a thin value. Budd’s suggestion was to supplement the descriptive component of cacophony so that it will always be associated with a specific gestalt of the object, thus preserving the evaluation-added model. In contrast, my proposal is to supplement the cacophonic evaluative component so it does not merely specify that something is negatively evaluated, but that it is negatively evaluated *in a certain way*, i.e., irreducibly evaluated *as jarringly sounding*. In other words, cacophony does not elicit a *thin value*—e.g., being aesthetically bad—, rather a *thick value*:

not merely an evaluative charge, but also a certain *way* in which something is evaluative—e.g., as being jarringly sounding.<sup>33</sup>

According to the latter suggestion, impure aesthetic properties such as cacophony do not merely combine a certain set of formal properties of their object—e.g., certain specific sounds—, and an evaluation of them—e.g., as *negative*. Rather, cacophony embeds a certain *way of being evaluative*—as *jarringly sounding*.

Therefore, if what I said is sound, the evaluation-added model fails to state a sufficient condition for being cacophonous. There is no guarantee that we can apply the evaluation-added model to interpret impure aesthetic properties. On the contrary, the latter can be interpreted as irreducible properties that form their own category of aesthetic properties in the vein of *thick aesthetic properties*. Therefore, we can reject claim (ii) of the Received View.

### **Against (i): Aesthetic Properties as Essentially Evaluative**

As we said before, the argument of the Received View for holding (i) seems to be that we can recognise purely descriptive aesthetic properties without committing ourselves to recognising their aesthetic value. As Levinson says:

Evaluative implications, loosely speaking, of terms like ‘gaudy’ [...] can be explicitly cancelled or disavowed, without semantic anomaly. Thus, terms of this sort, despite their air of evaluativity, are such that they can nevertheless be ascribed without strictly entailing anything about the speaker's evaluative attitudes. (Levinson 2001, 317).

Following De Clercq, we can reproach to the Received View that it overlooks the distinction between *having an indetermined evaluative charge* and *having no evaluative charge at all* (De Clercq 2002, 171; 2008, 903). It might be thought that we can attribute aesthetic properties to objects without evaluating them because these can assume a different evaluative charge depending on the context: positive, negative, or neutral. But the fact that their evaluative charge is indetermined does not imply that they cannot be

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<sup>33</sup> We can think of Budd as endorsing the so-called *Separability Thesis* about thick concepts –i.e., the idea that evaluative and descriptive sides of thick concepts are distinct components that can be disentangled from one another–, whereas I am trying to motivate the *Inseparability Thesis* –i.e., the idea that evaluative and descriptive aspects of thick concepts form an irreducible compound that cannot be disentangled into two distinct components. See Väyrynen (2016) for discussion.

evaluative *per se*. As De Clercq put it, “from the fact that [aesthetic properties] are ambivalent, it does not follow that their evaluative significance, however indefinite, is not part of what makes them aesthetic” (De Clercq 2002, 171).

Think about Sibley’s suggestions for purely descriptive aesthetic properties, such as *balance*, *unity*, *vividness*, and *dynamic*. Even if we can evaluate an artwork’s dynamism differently depending on the context—e.g., positively according to Futurism, negatively according to Passéism—there is still an important difference between these properties and paradigmatic non-evaluative properties such as *blue*, *big*, or *in the middle*. I want to argue that this difference consists in the fact that the recognition of an aesthetic property always implies *an evaluation on behalf of the subject according to certain aesthetic standards*.

Recall that, according to the Received View, when we detach the evaluative component of an impure aesthetic property from its descriptive content, the resulting purely descriptive property will be considered an aesthetic property on its own. However, the case of cacophony is revelatory in this regard: when we detach its jarring connotation, what is left is merely some formal property of sound. A sound is just not an aesthetic property, neither a formal property such as the *Ornithology*’s chord progression is an aesthetic property. The descriptive component of an impure aesthetic property would be hardly considered aesthetic on its own.<sup>34</sup> Rather, it is the ascription of an aesthetic value, whatever thick or thin, that makes it aesthetic; it is the value expressed by jarring that makes cacophonous an aesthetic property. We may extend this lesson to the example that Sibley gave for purely aesthetic descriptive properties: if they do not express an aesthetic value, they cannot be aesthetic.

To see why, consider what makes something balanced and not merely symmetric. Arguably, it is the fact that the former expresses an intrinsic aesthetic value, while the latter not. For considering something symmetric is sufficient to describe its formal (or perhaps mathematical) features; no evaluation is required. To recognise an object’s “invariance under some

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<sup>34</sup> Even Budd notes that “the property signified by the predicate of an evaluation-added judgement need not itself be an aesthetic property (as with the bright colouring of ‘garish’)” (Budd 2007, 336). However, my claim is that any property which is not evaluative cannot be aesthetic.

transformation” is already enough for considering it symmetric. For instance, Ferdinand Hodler’s *Lake Thun, Symmetric Reflection* (Figure 7) is indeed *reflectionally symmetric* since the proportions of the left and right halves of the painting mirror one another. But unless we value aesthetically its symmetry, symmetry is not aesthetic *per se*.

On the contrary, for considering an object balanced, it is not sufficient to identify the description of its formal features; some sort of evaluative charge needs to be ascribed to the latter. This sounds right, especially because the formal features of symmetry and balance most of the time overlap. The difference between these two properties may lie elsewhere, not in a description of their formal features. My intuition is that “balanced” expresses an evaluation of what is denoted, while symmetry merely corresponds to a certain description of the object. The ultimate reason why purely descriptive properties, such as an artwork’s formal properties, are not aesthetic is that they will not be aesthetic unless an aesthetic value is ascribed to them according to a certain evaluative context.



**Figure 7:** Ferdinand Hodler, *Lake Thun, Symmetric Reflection*, 1905, oil on canvas, 80.2 × 100 cm, Musée d’art et d’histoire, Geneva, Collection MAH, 1939, url: <https://collections.geneve.ch/ma/oeuvre/le-lac-de-thoune-aux-reflets-symetriques/1939-0033>.

Similarly, consonant and dissonant are not intrinsically evaluative, while harmonious and discordant are. Very roughly, consonant and dissonant can be characterised as objective, physical features of intervals of sounds: consonant intervals are those where the frequency ratios between the oscillation of two sound waves are represented by lower integers (e.g., 1:1 corresponding to the unison, 3:2 corresponding to the perfect fifth), dissonant intervals’ frequency ratios are represented by higher integers (e.g., the tritone is 25:18, the semitone is 16:15). However, they are not intrinsically aesthetic:



it is in musical contexts that they gain an aesthetic value. Within the classical music tradition, the tritone has been for a long time considered a sort of forbidden interval. On the contrary, within the blues and jazz tradition, the tritone is the backbone of the “bluesy sound”, something highly valued in these genres. However, those two are not evaluative for themselves; they become harmonious or discordant depending on how they are evaluated according to a certain set of aesthetic standards.

Therefore, I believe we have compelling reasons to think that aesthetic properties cannot be exhausted by their descriptive component (if present). To recognise a property *qua* aesthetic, it is necessary to recognise its evaluative import: it is a property’s intrinsic aesthetic value that makes it aesthetic. This is made evident by the fact that formal properties can become aesthetic only if we ascribe an aesthetic value to them relative to a certain context of evaluation. But aesthetic properties do not need to be evaluated in respect of a certain context: they are intrinsically aesthetic. At most, it is their positive or negative valence that might be determined by the context. On the contrary, purely descriptive properties such as blue or *being a II-V-I chord progression* can be successfully recognised without having any evaluative response whatsoever. This also explain why we can have different aesthetic assessment of the same formal properties. Moreover, this entails that aesthetic properties do not supervene on formal properties: we can ascribe several aesthetic properties to the very same formal property; there can be a difference in evaluation without a difference in which property is evaluated. If all this is right, then there are no aesthetic properties corresponding to the category of purely descriptive aesthetic properties.<sup>35</sup>

#### **4.4. The New Ontology for Aesthetic Properties**

In the last sections I have discussed why we have enough reasons to reject the Received View about aesthetic properties. This section is dedicated to

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<sup>35</sup> In its paper of 2002, De Clercq shows that aesthetic properties are hardly purely descriptive. Despite not establishing that aesthetic properties are inherently evaluative, he offers several reasons in favour of this idea. Among these, there is the irreducibility of aesthetic properties to non-aesthetic ones that we have motivated here as well; see De Clercq (2002, 172).

sketching the new profile for aesthetic properties that accounts for their evaluative nature. Finally, this will give us the occasion to establish the bases necessary to understand what kind of experience is involved in our access to these properties.

Despite its flaws, the Received View acknowledges that the items that we may put in our bucket differ in how much descriptive or evaluative they are. For instance, *beauty* and *ugliness* are considered as completely unspecific on their descriptive side, while *balance* and *dynamic* are less evaluative and more descriptive (Sibley 1974). However, this view fails in acknowledge the existence of purely descriptive aesthetic properties. According to Levinson, most aesthetic properties are entirely descriptive (Levinson 2001, 317), but in fact it is the converse: all aesthetic properties are evaluative and just a few are descriptive. As we acknowledged in the previous discussion, insofar as a property lacks an evaluative component, it cannot be aesthetic. Thus, we do not count purely descriptive properties such as *blue* and *being a II-V-I chord progression* among the aesthetic properties anymore.

Therefore, our new ontology for aesthetic properties will resemble more the following:

### **The New Ontology for Aesthetic Properties**

1. *Thick aesthetic properties*
2. *Thin aesthetic properties*

As aesthetic properties are equivalent to aesthetic values, we can reduce our classification essentially to two categories: one for purely evaluative properties, the other for evaluative properties that have a descriptive component. Remember also that we discussed how the latter cannot be analysed as complex conditions in which the two components can be disjointed: in fact, a neat separation would entail, on the descriptive side, the loss of what made it aesthetic in the first place, and, on the evaluative side, an unfair equivocation of it with a thin aesthetic value. Therefore, the new classification includes two irreducible categories of aesthetic properties, *thick aesthetic properties* and *thin aesthetic properties*, denoted respectively by Sibley's evaluation-added terms and solely evaluative terms. About the

purely descriptive properties denoted by Sibley's descriptive merit-terms, they are no longer admitted among the aesthetic properties. As we argued, for any property, inasmuch as it lacks an evaluative content, it cannot be considered aesthetic.

Moreover—as we mentioned before—aesthetic properties do not supervene on descriptive properties. As we have acknowledged, there can be an aesthetic difference without the corresponding formal difference. Therefore, aesthetic properties cannot be identical to formal properties as the type of *gestalten*: formal properties are not aesthetic properties inasmuch as they do not elicit aesthetic value. They are never sufficient for instantiating an aesthetic quality. Purely descriptive properties do not exhaust what an aesthetic property is; something more is necessary, and that is an evaluative component.

Nevertheless, this is not a reason to deprive purely descriptive properties of any significance. Purely descriptive properties will continue to cover a fundamental role in the form of base properties for the ascription of thick aesthetic values. As Zangwill notices “[b]eauty cannot float free of the way things are in other respects, and we cannot appreciate beauty except insofar as it is embodied in other respects” (Zangwill 2001, 1). But this time, instead of speaking of supervenience, we may speak of *multiple realisability* of aesthetic properties on formal properties, i.e., that the same aesthetic property can be realised by many sets of non-aesthetic properties (Putnam 1967).

Another kind of relation may be the one between aesthetic properties and aesthetically relevant properties: the latter are those to which we attribute aesthetic properties, but they are not for this reason necessarily aesthetic. For instance, suppose that I find a specific shade of blue especially fragrant. In this case, the property blue will not be the aesthetic property; the aesthetic property is *being fragrant*. Nevertheless, blue is what *exemplifies* that particular aesthetic property. In the same way, the elegance of *Open Window*, *Collioure* is *exemplified* by the arrangement of colours and shapes that Matisse drew in it.

In the case of thick aesthetic properties this relation is even tighter. Contrary to thin aesthetic properties that can be recognised virtually in anything, thick aesthetic properties specify some constraint about the type of

objects that may exemplify these properties. To appreciate what this means, it is best to consider how our previous examples incorporate these constraints. For example, something might be garish only if it is *seen*, and cacophonous only if it is *heard*. That is because garishness can only be exemplified by *bright patterns of colour*, and cacophonous by certain types of *sounds*.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, balance specifies, although poorly, some conditions necessary for its ascription, e.g., the fact that the formal properties that exemplify it are more likely to be symmetrically arranged. In the same vein, harmoniousness and discordance in music may specify that the relevant formal properties are more likely to be consonant or dissonant.

But even if thick aesthetic properties may specify in some way or other the type of object that can be aesthetically evaluated, their descriptive side would never be enough for entailing a certain aesthetic response. For example, a consonant interval does not entail that I will find it harmonious, as a dissonant one will not be necessarily discordant. I may find the arrangement of colours and shapes in Matisse's painting vibrant, while you find it garish. Although, in both cases the aesthetic properties are exemplified by the painting's formal properties, but none of these properties implies that you react in one or another way.

The recognition of these limits in the relation between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic has an important pedigree in aesthetics. Sibley went through this route when he said that "there are no non-aesthetic features which serve as conditions for applying aesthetic terms", they are *non-condition governed* (Sibley 1959, 424). Long before him, Kant also claimed that there is no principle connecting the aesthetic to the non-aesthetic (Kant 1790, 101). Both held that the connection between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic level cannot be inferred; it is not a matter of nomological necessity. Rather, they held that the connection must be "experienced".

The direct follow-up of this idea was the equivocation of *experience* with *perceptual experience*, with the consequence that we already know. It is clear that, with the aim of establishing some kind of principle for our aesthetic judgments, philosophers have been inclined to understand our access to

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<sup>36</sup> At best, we can *metaphorically* attribute thick aesthetic properties to objects that fall on the non-standard sensory modality. See Zangwill (2001, ch. 1) for an analysis of metaphorical aesthetic judgments.

aesthetic properties in some form as perceptual: we have to *see*, *hear*, or somehow *be acquainted* with the base properties before having any insight on the upper level (Budd 2003). Aesthetic properties are fundamentally evaluative properties, but as such, they need a bearer, and perceptual properties are the most obvious candidates. Insofar as we are used to recognising aesthetic values in things with which we are primarily acquainted through perception, it does not come as a surprise that we thought to experience these values in the same way. However, the aim of our detour on the metaphysics of aesthetic properties is to show that this move might be ungrounded.

The reason for doubting that perception may be ultimately responsible for our access to aesthetic properties is that we are not used to thinking about perceptual experience as evaluative. Perceptual experience is deemed to be descriptive in nature; it is simply not equipped to track values. This combined with the lack of rules on how the aesthetic level depends upon the non-aesthetic one is also the reason why philosophers have been inclined to say that apprehension of aesthetic qualities ultimately requires an exercise of “perceptiveness, sensitivity or aesthetic discrimination or appreciation”, what Sibley ultimately called “taste” (Sibley 1959, 421).

But a mere denial of the possibility of perceptually representing evaluative properties begs the question against the Rich View: it is explicitly to prove that certain high-level properties can be featured in the content of perceptual experience that contrast arguments are proposed. A contrast argument tries to show that the representation of a certain property is the best explanation for the difference in the overall experience. In order to reject this explanation, we have to offer an alternative and more theoretically appealing explanation for the contrast between  $E_1$  and  $E_2$ . But we cannot do this based on our preconceptions about what can or cannot be perceptually experienced. We need to assess if perceptual experience can represent evaluative properties independently from our prior beliefs.<sup>37</sup> This is toward what we shall turn now:

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<sup>37</sup> In this regard, Siegel argue that our verdict about which experiences should be considered illusory should be determined on the hypothesis that some property can be part of the content of one’s perceptual experience, not the other way around (Siegel 2006, 483). See also Logue (2013) for discussion of the dialectic of contrast arguments.

we have to offer an explanation that would render unlikely that evaluative properties are represented in perceptual experience.

## **5. EVALUATIVE PERCEPTION**

In this chapter, I will sketch the conclusion of my argument against the Perceptual View. To do that, I will first offer important reasons to doubt that evaluative properties can figure among the admissible contents of perceptual experience. This will force us to dismiss premise (1.) of the contrast argument, i.e., that the difference in overall experience we had between listening to the melody before and after the acquisition of the recognitional capacity for cacophony is a difference in auditory experience. Thereafter, my strategy will consist in defending two claims: in this chapter I will defend the idea that perception is ill-suited to representing aesthetic properties understood as essentially evaluative, while in the next, I will show that differences in the subject's affective states serve as a better explanation for the phenomenal contrast than differences in auditory states. Finally, this will open the gate for the Affective View, i.e., the view according to which, relative to option (C), the experience of aesthetic properties is an affective state akin to emotions.

### **5.1. Perception Is Ill-Suited for Values**

If aesthetic properties are represented in perceptual experience, and aesthetic properties are essentially evaluative properties, then perceptual experience represents evaluative properties. This means that the possibility to perceive aesthetic properties would depend on the possibility of representing evaluative properties in perceptual experience. However, since evaluative properties would also be high-level properties of perception, they could not be represented in perceptual experience unless we show that the relative Rich View is the best explanation for the differences in which properties are perceptually represented. Thus, our discussion on the experience of aesthetic properties will be relevant not just for the availability of a Rich view concerning the perceptual representation of aesthetic properties, but also for

the broader question on the existence and nature of a distinctive form of *evaluative perception*, i.e., the experiential representation of evaluative properties (Berqvist & Cowan 2018).

It is often maintained that the two debates intertwine with each other on the possibility of perceptually experiencing value properties in one or more of the five canonical sense modalities—what Anna Berqvist & Robert Cowan call ‘canonical evaluative perception’ (2018, 5). However, as Berqvist & Cowan point out, even if we are somewhat sympathetic to the arguments in favour of the Rich View, “there remains, *inter alia*, the question of how value properties could be represented in experience”, as “it seems highly implausible that value properties are represented in a similar way to that in which low-level properties like colours and shapes are represented in vision” (Berqvist & Cowan 2018, 8). In the following section, our discussion will address the prospect for the perception of aesthetic properties in this sense, namely, on the possibility of representing evaluative properties in one or more of the five canonical sense modalities.

As we discussed in chapter II., the worry associated with the possibility of perceptually representing any properties outside the low-level ones comes from the way we are accustomed to conceptualising perception. Although there is no *prima facie* criterion for determining whether something can or cannot be perceptually represented, at least pre-theoretically it sounds strange that value properties might be represented similarly to how low-level properties are represented in perception, e.g., as colours and shapes are represented in vision. Compared to high-level properties of other types, the worry here is supposed to operate on a different level: the figuring of values among the admissible content of perception is seen as a sort of “category mistake” (Ryle 1949). The worry is ontological: perception is assumed to be merely descriptive, it “functions to accurately describe or report features of one’s environment” (Stokes 2018, 20), whereas evaluation is prerogative of other mental faculties. In this regard, perception is usually thought to have a “value-neutral content” (Todd 2014, 109). A few elements are usually put forward in favour of this intuition.

The first is something that we mentioned before. There is a widespread agreement on the fact that the properties belonging to the content of

perceptual experience are only those computed by the sensory modules.<sup>38</sup> As Jerry Fodor originally conceived of them, modules are systems dedicated to process information which are *informationally encapsulated*, i.e., they cannot receive outputs from any system that occurs further on the processing line (Fodor 1983). What this means is that perception is a hard-wired system, designed to process just a determined set of stimuli from the environment. If this is right, then no mental processing located further in the sequence of cognitive treatment can impinge on what happens in the earliest steps. For instance, perception would be considered cognitively impenetrable. Accordingly, insofar as evaluation is supposed to be a process located way further on the line, it cannot affect what happens in the sensory early system. Therefore, evaluative properties could not be represented in perception since they could not figure as outputs of any sensory module.

The second element follows directly from the last picture. The modularity of mind may suggest that perception psychologically precedes evaluation, but it is held that the relation of precedence is even more general than that: perception is *causally prior* to evaluation (Prinz 2014, 144). To assess the elegance of a vase, we must first perceive all its formal properties and only afterwards it is possible to evaluate that content. Suppose in contrast that evaluation happens at the same level of perception of what we are evaluating. In this situation, how could two people have different aesthetic appraisals of the same figure?

The third element is that evaluation and perception can be *dissociated*. As we said before, someone might perceive all the formal properties of an object and not have any evaluative response whatsoever. I can look at the rose, perceive all its relevant low-level properties, but remain completely indifferent about its beauty. Recall what Sibley said about the non-condition-governedness of aesthetic concepts: no aesthetic evaluation is entailed by any set of descriptive properties (Sibley 1959, 424). We can evaluate the same

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<sup>38</sup> For example, Michael Tye says that the features instantiated in the *phenomenal content* of perception are “the ones represented in the output representations of the sensory modules” (Tye 1995, 141). In another text, Tye says that high-level properties can nonetheless enter in the content of visual experience in the form of “the representation of object types such as car, ball and telescope” (Tye 2000, 75). This would commit him to a distinction between the perception’s experiential content and phenomenal content. But as Tim Bayne observes, when the high-level theorists claim that the representation of high-level properties can be part of perceptual experience, they mean to equate the experiential content with the phenomenal content (Bayne 2009, 389). Furthermore, notice that if this were not the case, the contrast argument would be blocked at step (2.) where it appeals to intentionalism.



descriptive content differently because there is no strict condition for their application, it seems then more likely that evaluation is *detached* from what it evaluates. In contrast, the perceptual representation of values seems at odds with the possibility of having a different, but equally correct, way to evaluate the same object. In fact, if evaluative properties were perceived, then any perceptual representation of values which does not fit the actual state of the world would be deemed illusory.

The discussion to follow is dedicated to the latter point. I will show that aesthetic properties, conceived as essentially evaluative, cannot be potentially represented in perceptual experience. That is because value properties cannot be part of the content of perception. At most, perception can represent the descriptive side of thick aesthetic properties, but even in this situation, perceptual experience cannot elicit the aesthetic value of what is perceived. The main idea is that, if values were featured in the content of perception, genuine aesthetic divergences would be impossible: any failure to recognise the appropriate aesthetic value of an object relative to a given aesthetic context would imply that the subject's experience is illusory. Given the unlikelihood of this consequence, we should reject the Perceptual View, i.e., the view that aesthetic properties are perceptually experienced.

## **5.2. Genuine Aesthetic Divergences**

Consider once again the properties euphony and cacophony. Allegedly, euphony and cacophony are two contraries, so that the same thing cannot be considered euphonic and cacophonic at the same time in the same respect. Examples of aesthetic contraries are widely available: harmoniousness and discordance, sumptuousness and soberness, elegance and clumsiness, and of course, beauty and ugliness.

Each couple of aesthetic contraries can be formed for many reasons, as the same property can be juxtaposed to more than one property at the time. For instance, sumptuousness and soberness may be considered opposed in the way they evaluate different amounts of things, e.g., a sumptuous feast may correspond with the abundance and variety of preparations served in respect of the initial expectations, whereas a sober meal would identify a humbler

selection of dishes. Nonetheless, the two may be considered contraries in the way they *evaluate opposite things in the same way*; the former expresses a positive evaluation of exaggeration, the other a positive evaluation of parsimony. We may call these *descriptive contraries*, as it is not their evaluative import that grounds their difference, but their descriptive component.

A similar yet different story can be told for the opposition between sumptuousness and lavishness: the former evaluates exaggeration positively, while the latter evaluates it negatively. In this case, we say that the two properties are contraries in their *valence* or *polarity*, i.e., in the way they express a positive or negative value. Hence, we may call these *evaluative contraries* as their difference is grounded in their different polarity.

Both these couples are contraries either in respect of their description, or in respect of their evaluation. These differences might sound quite speculative, and I agree that there might be disagreement on the way these contraries are juxtaposed. Nevertheless, what is important is to acknowledge is that two aesthetic opposites cannot be instantiated by the same object at the same time: there cannot be something which is both sumptuous and sober, or both sumptuous and lavish.

In the case of evaluative opposites, we may consider something as sumptuous according to certain aesthetic standards, while lavish according to others. For instance, Baroque is typically an aesthetic movement that praises sumptuousness in all its forms. On the contrary, Minimalism favours parsimony and austerity, so that what the Baroque movement considers to be positively sumptuous is considered rather lavish for the former. The context we consider plays a role in which aesthetic properties we ascribe to objects. What these contexts of assessment do is to provide a set of conditions or standards that ought to be fulfilled in order for an object to exemplify the relevant aesthetic property, and the content of an evaluation is what is assessed through these conditions. In sum, a context of assessment provides a set of conditions that must be fulfilled by the content of our evaluation.

However, not only contents can be assessed in this way. Attitudes can be assessed as well. An *attitude* is generally conceived as a “stance” that we take towards a specific object or content (Crane 2001, ch. 1). For instance, a belief

is a certain attitude that we take towards the truth of a certain proposition: it is in fact called for this reason a propositional attitude. In believing that the sky is blue, I am committed towards the truth of the proposition ‘the sky is blue’. Moreover, the same attitude can be taken towards two different contents, e.g., Robin may believe that I will finish writing my memoir in time for the deadline or believe that I will not. But we can also maintain different attitudes towards the same content, e.g., I *desire* to finish writing my memoir in time for the deadline, while Robin *believes* that this will be the case. In the same vein, an evaluation can be thought as a specific attitude that ascribes a certain value to a specific content. For instance, emotions can be considered distinctive evaluative attitudes that we assume towards an object or content (Deonna & Teroni 2012): in fearing the possibility of failing my exams, I have an attitude towards the state of affairs where I fail my exams; in being angry at my roommate, I have an attitude towards her.

An evaluative attitude may be said to be *appropriate* or *inappropriate* relative to a specific context of assessment.<sup>39</sup> Possible context of assessment for attitudes might be, for example, moral, prudential, representational, or epistemological. An attitude can be assessed in different ways, relative to which context of assessment is considered. Each context can be seen as stating a set of conditions or standards that ought to be fulfilled for an attitude to be *appropriate* relative to that context. For instance, assessing the representational appropriateness of an experience is equivalent to assessing whether the experience is *accurate* (in the case of perception) or *correct* (in the case of beliefs), i.e., whether its content fits the facts or not—as we also discussed in chapter II.; assessing the epistemological appropriateness of an attitude instead is equivalent to assessing whether that attitude is justified or unjustified. In sum, an attitude is *appropriate* relative to a certain context of assessment just if the set of conditions provided by that context obtain. For example, a perceptual experience is *accurate* just if the accuracy conditions for the representation of its content obtain; similarly, a certain evaluation is appropriate relative to a certain evaluative context just if the evaluative conditions implied by that context obtain.

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<sup>39</sup> For example, see D’Arms & Jacobson (2000) and Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004) for different set of standards according to which we can assess emotions as appropriate or inappropriate.

With this in mind, the problem I want to raise is that the perceptual representation of evaluative properties would inevitably conflate the standards of appropriateness for aesthetic evaluation with the accuracy conditions for its content. That is because two experiences of values can never be incompatible but equally correct according to different standards of evaluation, and at the same time both be accurate; one of them would necessarily be illusory.

The best way to show this is once again with an example. Consider Charlie Parker's *Ornithology*. Suppose I genuinely consider *Ornithology* outstandingly euphonic, and so I tell you that you should absolutely listen to it. So then you follow my suggestion, and you listen to the famous *Dial sessions*' recording of that tune. You find it blatantly cacophonous. Perhaps, the reason for our divergence is due to how we have cultivated our musical tastes through our lives: I am a jazz fanatic while you are a fine connoisseur of classical music. *De gustibus non disputandum est*, we have two incommensurable musical backgrounds; our standards of aesthetic appreciation are completely apart from each other. These incompatible standards of evaluation could be both considered appropriate on their own, e.g., my standards of appreciation follow the canons of jazz, while yours follow the canons of classical music. Both our experiences may be considered correct relative to our own standards of appreciation. However, if euphony and cacophony were perceptually experienced, one of the two experiences would necessarily be illusory.

That is because the set of standards for accuracy is just one: it is the world itself that provides the conditions that ought to be fulfilled for an experience to be accurate. As discussed in chapter II., my perceptual experience of a glass of water in front of me would be accurate just if there is really a glass of water in front of me. However, there is allegedly more than one set of standards for aesthetic evaluations that are equally *appropriate* relative to their own evaluative context, and some of them are incompatible. Norms for aesthetic appreciation may be dictated by our personal tastes. For instance, an aesthetic evaluation of *Ornithology* is appropriate according to my taste if it is experienced as euphonic, while it is appropriate according to your taste if it is experienced as cacophonous. But if these norms were determined by the

world as in the case of the accuracy conditions of perceptual experiences, then genuine aesthetic divergences would be impossible: each correct evaluation needs to be accurate as well.

Consider what would be the consequences on our interaction with art if the standards of aesthetic evaluation and those of accuracy were the same. Any failure to recognise the appropriate aesthetic property would imply that the subject is having an illusory experience, as it represents that something possesses an aesthetic property that it does not really have. Accordingly, since divergences in aesthetic evaluation are more than common, it would mean that most people in the world are mostly misled by their own experiences.

The argument I am offering here resembles Kendall Walton's (1970) classic argument against *formalism*, i.e., the view according to which artworks are to be appreciated and evaluated merely based on their formal properties.<sup>40</sup> Formalists claim that information concerning the creator, the historic context, or the original intention of the artist are not relevant for art appreciation. Against this conception, Walton claims that art-historical facts *do* and *should* influence how we appreciate artworks.<sup>41</sup> His claim is two-folded, as he gave a descriptive and a normative thesis. According to the former, aesthetic properties we *experience*<sup>42</sup> a work as having depends on which category we experience the work as belonging to. When we experience Picasso's *Guernica* as belonging to the category of painting, it will be experienced as "violent, dynamic, vital, disturbing" (Walton 1970, 347). But when experienced as belonging to the category of "guernicas", i.e., artworks with "surfaces with the colors and shapes of Picasso's *Guernica*, but the surfaces are molded to protrude from the wall like relief maps of different kinds of terrain", Picasso's *Guernica* will be rather experienced as "cold, stark, lifeless, or serene and restful, or perhaps bland, dull, boring" (Walton 1970, 347).

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<sup>40</sup> See Bell (1914) for the classical development of formalism, and Zangwill (2001) for a modern and more sophisticated take.

<sup>41</sup> Notice that Walton's claim is both descriptive and a normative, as he said that artworks *can be* experienced as subscribed under a certain category of art, and they *ought* to be evaluated according to the appropriate category of art.

<sup>42</sup> Walton framed his discussion in term of "perception", but we can easily reformulate his argument in term of "experience" as I did here. In this way, the argument will not be committing towards the perceptual view about the experience of aesthetic properties and nonetheless it retains its grain of truth.

If Walton's case is sound, it shows that it is indeed possible to ascribe equally appropriate yet incompatible aesthetic properties to the same object depending on the context of evaluation we consider. But if aesthetic values were represented in perceptual experience, then one of the two perceptual experiences of Picasso's *Guernica* would be illusory, as the conditions of correctness for our evaluations would be fixed by the world itself. Like Walton, we can think that experience of aesthetic values is category-relative, within certain evaluative contexts it is *appropriate* to experience an object as having certain aesthetic properties, and *inappropriate* to experience that object as having other aesthetic properties. This would not be possible if evaluative properties were perceptually represented, since an evaluation must also be veridical to be considered aesthetically appropriate.

### 5.3. Towards the Affective View

Genuine aesthetic divergences are incompatible but equally appropriate evaluations of the same object or content. If we want to guarantee their possibility, we should reject the idea that aesthetic values are represented in perceptual experience. As we said, thin aesthetic properties such as beauty do not state any condition on how the object that exemplifies them should be, while thick aesthetic properties may state those conditions but in a subtle way.<sup>43</sup> This implies that beauty must be apt to be ascribed to objects that could be incompatible in a descriptive sense. However, if beauty were part of the content of one's own perceptual experience, this would not be possible, since the object would always be either *P* or *non-P*. As Stokes says:

If perception is largely descriptive and veridical, then perceiving aesthetic properties would require representing objective features of the world. But this looks incompatible with the subjective variability of aesthetic response. (Stokes 2018, 20).

Given the context-relative conditions to which aesthetic evaluations are subject, it may be more helpful to think of the conditions grounding the experience of aesthetic properties in terms of evaluative appropriateness

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<sup>43</sup> We may consider that even thick aesthetic properties are not so condition-governed as we think. For instance, the usage of the figure of speech *synaesthesia*, i.e., the description of a sensory modality in terms of another (e.g., an exquisite whisper; a harsh colour palette), suggests that the sensory-dependency of certain aesthetic properties, such as garishness and cacophony, may be laxer than previously said.

rather than accuracy. Our discussion suggests that the experience of aesthetic properties should not be just the result of capturing what is in the world, but also a kind of *subjective stance* we assume in regards of the world. What the beholder of *Open Window, Collioure* sees is just an arrangement of colours and shapes; the artwork's aesthetic value is not visually represented. Rather, my claim is that it is the specific evaluative attitude that the beholder takes towards the painting that reveal its beauty.

To attain these results, we must renounce premise (1.) of the contrast argument, i.e., that the difference between your overall experiences should be explained in terms of difference in perceptual experiences. As alternative, I propose to explain this difference in terms of the subject's *affective experience* before and after the acquisition of a recognitional capacity for the melody's cacophony. Call this the *Affective View*, i.e., the experience of aesthetic properties is an affective experience. Affective experiences of the type of emotions are often interpreted as apprehensions of values (Deonna & Teroni 2012; Bayne 2013; Ballard 2020). If this is correct, it is natural to think that the same kind of state supports the experience of aesthetic properties as value properties. In the next chapter I will develop this alternative in such a way to assure the conceptual space for genuine aesthetic divergences. I will conclude my essay by arguing that the proper experience by which we apprehend aesthetic properties is affective in nature. Julien Deonna & Fabrice Teroni have proposed an *attitudinal theory of emotions*, i.e., the theory that conceives emotions as distinctive evaluative attitudes that we take towards objects, and as such, it is appropriate to have these attitudes whenever those objects exemplify a given evaluative property (Deonna & Teroni 2012, ch. 7); I will follow their framework for characterising the affective experience of aesthetic properties. If successful, this kind of experience is able to give us access to value without representing them in its content, hence guaranteeing the possibility of genuine aesthetic divergences.

## 6. THE AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF AESTHETIC PROPERTIES

Recall our discussion in chapter 1. about the possible differences between the attitude of “merely experiencing beauty” and what Hopkins referred to as “savouring beauty”. Considering what we discussed so far, it seems that there is indeed a difference between these two: someone might perceive all the formal properties captured by the descriptive component of an aesthetic property, but nonetheless be “deaf” to its aesthetic character. The reason for this is that perception is not the type of engagement that is sufficient for disclosing the aesthetic properties of objects. At best, perceptual experience may represent those formal properties that exemplify a given aesthetic property, but it cannot represent aesthetic properties understood as essentially evaluative: perceptual experience lacks the evaluative appraisal necessary for disclosing values.

As we said before, aesthetic properties vary in the degree in which they specify constraints on the type of objects that exemplify them. For instance, beauty is understood to be completely unspecific, it never puts conditions on what kind of objects instantiate it; in contrast, garishness and cacophony conserve an important descriptive component as they can be exemplified allegedly only by visual and auditory objects respectively. But the same does not apply to their evaluative component: both thick and thin aesthetic properties always require an evaluative response from the subject. But the question now is, how should we understand the nature of that evaluative response? In this regard, we need to specify the kind of experience that may, on the one hand, represent the formal properties that exemplify a given aesthetic property and, on the other hand, give access to values without representing them. Affective states may be the solution. As Hopkins says:

In perception, there are two ways in which we learn about the world. We often do so simply by using our perceptual powers, by observing. However, we can also learn by responding affectively to what we perceive. I might discover that someone is attractive by finding myself aroused in that person's presence. I might discover that some creature or substance is disgusting by responding to it with disgust. Or I might discover the aesthetic properties of a thing by taking pleasure in it. [...] Thus I discover through feeling that someone is sexy, a creature disgusting, or that a tie and shirt look right together. [...] A property, or at least an aspect, of what I perceive becomes apparent through my responding to it in a certain way. (Hopkins 2010, 101–102).



Affective responses in reaction to what we perceive can provide us with a type of knowledge, and plausibly, the latter can be interpreted as a form of apprehension of values. The disclosing state for aesthetic properties may be an affective experience.

For instance, it is not uncommon to find philosophers saying that emotions should be interpreted as *apprehension of values* (Deonna & Teroni 2012; Bayne 2013; Ballard 2020). A compelling suggestion that goes in this direction may be the affective representation of values outlined by the so-called *perceptual theories of emotions* (de Sousa 1987; Johnston 2001; Tappolet 2016). This approach conceives emotions akin to *perceptions of values*. The motivation behind these theories is the fact that emotions apparently share several important features with ordinary perceptual experience. Among the more prominent, there are their salient phenomenology, the possession of representational content, and their epistemic role according to beliefs (Deonna & Teroni 2012, 67). Values are given in emotional experiences as colours and shapes are given in visual experiences.

However, the problem with these theories is that they fall prey to the same problem faced by the Perceptual View with regards to the possibility of genuine aesthetic divergences. According to these theories, evaluative properties would be represented in the content of one's emotional experience. However, if the approximation of affective representation to perceptual states were too close, these theories would also conflate the experience's accuracy conditions with the standards of aesthetic evaluation.<sup>44</sup> Accuracy conditions for experiences are specified by the world, but standards of aesthetic evaluation are plausibly subjective or context-dependent: they follow either from one's own taste, or from the norms of appreciation dictated by a certain aesthetic conception (e.g., impressionism and minimalism).

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<sup>44</sup> How close the approximation of emotions to perception is depends on the theory considered. For instance, it is common to distinguish between *literal* and *non-literal* version of the perceptual model (Bayne 2013, ch. 2). However, as Deonna & Teroni point out, "[i]f reference to perception is simply meant to draw attention to just one or another feature shared by perceptual and emotional experiences—be it a salient phenomenology, the presence of non-conceptual contents, modularity or near modularity, appearance of truth, or the capacity to justify the relevant judgments non-inferentially or anything else—then it would be better to do without such a misleading reference and simply account for these features of emotions" (Deonna & Teroni 2014, 25).

At the same time, it will not be enough to characterise the relevant affective state as a raw sensation deprived of intentionality, for the same reasons that brought Zangwill to say that “[b]eauty cannot float free of the way that things are in other respects, and we cannot appreciate beauty except insofar as it is embodied in other respects” (Zangwill 2001, 1). The relevant affective experience needs to be *about* things; it needs to be intentional but without directly representing values. In the remainder of this essay, I will specify the mental architecture of this state.

## 6.1. Aesthetic Evaluative Attitudes

I will now sketch the psychological profile for an affective experience of aesthetic properties that, on the one hand, is fundamentally non-perceptual, and on the other hand, grounds our apprehension of values. The profile I will sketch reflects the same architecture of intentionality that has been proposed notably within the so-called *attitudinal theory of emotions* (Deonna & Teroni 2012, ch. 7), i.e., the theory that conceives emotions as distinctive evaluative attitudes we take towards objects. As such, it is appropriate to have these attitudes whenever those objects exemplify a given evaluative property (76). Thus, affective experiences as characterised here are evaluative attitudes akin to emotions. Moreover, insofar as these experiences evaluate what they represent, they can be equated to the notion of aesthetic evaluation and appreciation. Finally, in being the type of experiences that may mobilise our non-perceptual sensibilities, they are especially suitable candidates for what Hopkins calls “savouring”.<sup>45</sup>

The notion of attitude is often considered a taboo in aesthetics. The traditional Kantian notion of aesthetic attitude as a kind of “disinterested attention” (Kant 1790) has been influentially rejected by George Dickie (1964). The core of Dickie’s argument is that all purported examples of

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<sup>45</sup> I prefer to stay neutral on whether the affective appreciation of aesthetic properties is a proper emotional state. For instance, sympathizers of the Affective View have tended to understand aesthetic appreciation more as a type of *pleasure* (Kant 1790; Gorodeisky 2019, 2021). Still, it might be possible to specify the intentionality of this pleasure with the same profile I am proposing here without necessarily being emotional. My aim is limited to sketching the intentionality relation inspired from the attitudinal account of emotions. For these reasons, I will rather call these states ‘affective experiences of aesthetic properties’, ‘aesthetic evaluation’ or ‘aesthetic appreciation’.

disinterested attention are really just examples of inattention. But we do not need to go towards the same route: different aesthetic attitudes do not need to share the same phenomenal character, e.g., as disinterested. We may grant that all the different instances of aesthetic appreciation have their own distinctive phenomenology, and it is in part by their phenomenal component that they ascribe one aesthetic property instead of another to a certain object.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, we may continue to speak about ‘attitudes’ without being worried about Dickie’s rebuttal.

Before proceeding with the main course, let me summarise three *desiderata* that the relevant affective experience should satisfy to be a suitable explanation of the way we apprehend the aesthetic properties of objects.

First, the relevant experience needs to be *about* objects in the world without being about values. An apprehension of values needs to be *about* things since aesthetic properties are exemplified by worldly objects. Hence, the affective experience in question should be able to attribute these properties to objects *correctly* or *incorrectly*. For this reason, the intentionality of the affective experiences should specify a content in light of which it is possible to assess whether it meets the *correctness conditions* for intentional states, i.e., they should have a content which is assessable as fitting the facts or not (Crane 2001, ch. 1). In this regard, the relevant affective experiences might be considered similar to beliefs and perceptual states since each of them have correctness conditions. Nonetheless, affective experiences of this type cannot be reduced to beliefs or perceptual experiences, otherwise we would not be able to satisfy the other two *desiderata*.

Second, the relevant affective experience needs to be *evaluative*: it must be able to ascribe values to objects. The difference to the perceptual accounts we examined so far is that, even if these affective experiences have a representational content, values would unlikely figure in them: the converse implies—as we said before—that it will not be possible to have genuine aesthetic divergences since the standard of aesthetic evaluation would conflate with the standard of correctness for the experience. Therefore, we

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<sup>46</sup> A similar remark has been made by Nanay (2016, 20–21). He points out that Dickie’s unfairly assumes the existence of just one type of attention. However, as Nanay points out, there are numerous ways of attending that we may mention: e.g., overt-covert, endogenous-exogenous, focused-distributed, and so forth.

need to specify a way in which those attitudes can give us access to aesthetic values without representing them in their contents. This will guarantee that affective states cannot be reduced to perceptual experience.

Third, the relevant kind of affective state needs to be phenomenologically salient. As we said, we tend to have the strong impression that beauty and the other aesthetic properties “colour” our lives; they do not merely traverse them. Hence, we should be able to specify a state which possess a phenomenal character that can account for our acquaintance with aesthetic objects: an experience of aesthetic properties is something which “makes some effect to be in” (Nagel 1974). Moreover, they could explain the contrast between the overall experiences we have before and after the acquisition of a recognitional capacity for cacophony—as implied by the fundamental assumption of the contrast argument—only if these affective experiences were recognised as having a distinctive phenomenal character. On the other hand, this will guarantee that affective states cannot be reduced to belief and other non-experiential states.

Now, we have sketched the *desiderata* for a satisfactory account for the affective experience of aesthetic properties. However, before moving on to explain their complex intentionality, we may already show how affective states are naturally prompted to meet the third of these *desiderata*. As we acknowledge throughout this text, the main reason why we dismissed option (A)—i.e., the awareness of aesthetic properties is *entirely a matter of non-experiential states or processes*—is that it is not able to satisfy our expectation in terms of phenomenology. The phenomenal component of emotions is a preponderant characteristic of these states, and the same should work for the affective domain more generally. In this regard, we usually refer to emotions in terms of *feelings*. That is why we also tend to specify their phenomenology in terms of their felt quality, hedonic tone, and bodily sensation (Deonna & Teroni 2012, 1–2). For instance, the hedonic tone of emotions is usually employed for characterising also another important trait of these states: emotions are *valenced* experiences, they are positive or negative (Colombetti 2005, Prinz 2010).

As emotions are states with an important phenomenal character as in the case of perceptual experience, we can plausibly translate these characteristics

to the affective experience of aesthetic properties modelled after emotions. In fact, our experience of beauty seems most of the time considered positive, while the experience of ugliness is usually considered negative. Moreover, aestheticians have long tended to equate aesthetic experiences to a form of pleasure (Kant 1790). With this in mind, we can easily consider the third *desideratum* as satisfied.

## 6.2. The Intentionality of Affective Experiences

Affective experiences have contents, but this does not represent aesthetic properties. According to this account, values are not what is represented by an affective experience. This kind of affective state can stay in intentional relations with values without being *about* values. Instead, an affective experience is thought to be about the actual or potential bearers of the aesthetic properties, what exemplifies them: this is called the experience's *particular object* (Deonna & Teroni 2012, 5). The particular object is what is represented in the content of the experience. In the case of emotions, we may say that we are amazed by *something*, or that we are disgusted about *something*; that “something” is the particular object of these states. In the case of aesthetic properties, the particular object is likely to be a formal property, such as a specific shade of colour or a gestalt, or even a state of affairs, such as *it is raining outside*.<sup>47</sup>

It is maintained that affective experiences inherit their content from a subsidiary mental state, the so-called *cognitive base*: a further mental state that provides its content for evaluation. In fact, emotions are conceived necessarily as relying on other mental states to exhibit intentionality (Deonna & Teroni 2012, 5). In the same vein, affective experiences need to rely on other mental states to aesthetically appreciate something. For instance, in appreciating the beauty of Matisse's canvas, we need to rely on our perception of its colours and shapes. However, the cognitive bases of an affective experience do not need to be perceptual. These states can be judgments, beliefs, memories, imaginative states, emotions or even other

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<sup>47</sup> In fact, we may find beautiful not just properties but also specific situations.

affective experiences. The potential targets of affective states might be objects located in the past or in the future, nearby or far away, whilst perception is limited to objects that are both temporally and spatially present. We may find beautiful an idea, a stroke of brilliance, the Lindenbaum-Henkin Lemma, the structure of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, and so forth.

Therefore, an aesthetic property is not represented in the content of the state, rather it is held to be exemplified by the *attitude* that the subject takes towards that content (Deonna & Teroni 2014, 15). Recall from section 5.2. that we said that an attitude can be interpreted as a “stance” that we can assume towards different contents, and the same content can be targeted by different attitudes. The same idea is applied in the case of emotions: we can assume two different emotional attitudes towards the same content. For instance, in presence of a colourful spider, many people react with screams of terror, while others find them quite interesting. Regarding emotions, the attitude of the former may be called terror, while the latter may be called curiosity. Emotions may be considered distinctive evaluative attitudes that we assume towards a specific content or object (Deonna & Teroni 2014, 15).

What I propose here is to apply this account to the case of aesthetic attitudes. Whenever we ascribe an aesthetic property to an object, we assume a different attitude towards it. For instance, remember that we said that we can consider the same formal properties cacophonous, chaotic, or ungraceful: the idea is that, in each of those cases, we assume a different attitude towards the same formal properties. The only difference is that in the case of aesthetic appreciation, we do not seem to have such rich vocabulary for attitudes. It seems that we have fewer expressions for aesthetic attitudes than for aesthetic terms: wonder, awe, boredom, and disgust are a few examples, but what about the emotion distinctive for the experience of cacophony? However, this is not necessarily a problem.

Terms and expression are tools that we use to categorise reality for our practical purposes. The fact that we do not have a term for a certain affective experience does not mean that there is no such state. This is especially true if we think about values as what is mobilised to “individuate emotional types insofar as they constitute something that is shared by the various objects of a given emotion type” (Deonna & Teroni 2014, 17). The idea is that specific

aesthetic attitudes can be identified with respect to their *formal objects*,<sup>48</sup> i.e., the aesthetic value they ascribe (Deonna & Teroni 2012, 76-77). Values as formal objects may play different roles for affective experience, but most interestingly it individuates the relevant type of attitude at play.<sup>49</sup> For example, a belief's formal object is truth, as to believe a certain proposition is to take it *as* true; anger's formal object may be offensiveness, as to be angry at something is to take it *as* offensive. Accordingly, when we appreciate the beauty of a painting, our aesthetic attitude consists in taking that painting *as* beautiful; when we experience the cacophony of the melody, we take the melody *as* cacophonous.

While the Perceptual View entails that the relevant evaluative property is represented in the state's content, the Affective View based on evaluative attitudes privileges the idea that values are what is exemplified by the state's attitude in the guise of its *formal object*. Even if the painting figures in the content of the affective experience, there is no need for the aesthetic value to be represented. The evaluative attitude we assume towards that content allows us to disclose its beauty without representing it. The formal object of an affective experience is what distinguishes it from categorically different mental states such as perception or belief, but also from other types of affective experience. In such a way, these attitudes are not different based on what they represent, but based on which aesthetic property is their formal object. Despite being difficult to develop in natural language, this approach offers several advantages, as it allows us to explain how the same content can be evaluated differently according to different aesthetic standards: we have different aesthetic appraisal of the same descriptive content depending on which kind of aesthetic evaluative attitude we assume.

In conclusion, we can show that, with the profile of the affective experience of aesthetic properties outlined here, we can also satisfy the two remaining *desiderata*.

With regards to the first *desideratum*, since these affective states have a content that is inherited by their cognitive base, they are easily assessable for *correctness*. Insofar as the particular object exemplifies the aesthetic property

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<sup>48</sup> To not be confused with *formal properties*.

<sup>49</sup> Teroni (2007) offers a thorough discussion on the possible roles that formal objects could play relative to emotions.

specified by the formal object of the attitude, we can say that the attitude is correct. Thus, our aesthetic appreciation of the *Open Window*, Collioure's beauty is correct if the latter is *actually* beautiful; the aesthetic appreciation of a melody's cacophony is correct if the melody is *actually* cacophonous. With the architecture of intentionality that we presented here, the first *desideratum* is met.

However, the 'actually' here stated should not be confused with the one we employ for assessing the accuracy of perceptual states. In case of the latter, the 'actually' refers to the fact that what is represented should match a certain fact in the world. But here the meaning is different. In the case of affective experiences, the 'actually' must be intended as equivalent to 'in accordance with a certain context of aesthetic assessment'. Recall we said that the context of assessment for the accuracy conditions of perceptual states is determined by the world itself; hence, for the same reason, if value were perceived, it would not be possible to have incompatible but equally appropriate aesthetic evaluations. But here the problem does not arise. Since the kind of aesthetic property that an object should exemplify is determined in accordance with a certain aesthetic context, the aesthetic attitude will be considered appropriate or inappropriate relative to that context as well; and not relative to its aptness to match some worldly fact. The architecture of intentionality sketched here guarantees the possibility of genuine aesthetic divergences as far as values are not represented; we can have incompatible but equally appropriate aesthetic evaluations without risking to deem one of the two experiences as illusory. According to the attitudinal theory, "an emotion is an attitude towards an object, an attitude which it is *appropriate to have when the latter exemplifies a given evaluative property*" (Deonna & Teroni 2012, 76, my emphasis). Therefore, there is no risk of conflating the correctness conditions of affective experience with their evaluative appropriateness. For the same reason, we can consider the second *desideratum* satisfied as well.



## CONCLUSION

Beauty, if *felt*, it is a matter of affect. This is the conclusion of our journey. We started with an apparently simple question: “what did we see when we looked at the rose?”. But as soon as we progressed, it became clear that the answer was more complex than what the first glance suggested. In the flux of our consciousness, it is not clear what belongs to what; whether the aesthetic qualities of an object are revealed in our perceptions, sensations, feelings, emotions, or in something else. The goal of this essay was to understand what might be involved in those common situations as when we savour the beauty of a rose, or are disgusted by the cacophony of a jingle. How do we experience their aesthetic properties? How do they disclose themselves in our consciousness? An answer is possible only if we investigate the structure of our minds.

Determining how we access aesthetic properties is only possible by tracing the cognitive architecture that underlies our consciousness. As we saw, squeezed between the salience of experience and the need to depict the intentional relation, we end up concluding that neither purely cognitive processes, nor perceptual experiences are sufficient for revealing the aesthetic nature of these properties. As our metaphysical detour has shown, aesthetic properties could not be understood independently from our evaluative sensibilities: they are evaluative in nature, they cannot be exhausted solely on the base of descriptions. Since no description is sufficient for capturing the nature of an aesthetic property, genuine aesthetic divergences can exist. For grasping the nature of an aesthetic property, we need to engage more profoundly than what perception allows: we need to mobilise our affective sensibilities.

To recall the relevance of this essay for our discipline, important consequences are right behind the corner. For the philosophy of mind, we have shown that it is not necessary to endorse a richer perspective about the nature of perception to explain the experience of certain high-level properties. We can maintain a less-committing notion of perception that does not require the recognition of non-sensory modalities. Affective experiences are sufficient in providing the psychological base for explaining our engagement

with aesthetic properties: we should render unto perception the things that are perception's, and unto affect the things that are affect's.

For epistemology, as far as the affective experience of aesthetic properties here characterised is the locus of evaluation and appreciation of aesthetic objects, we can understand the justificatory relation between experience and aesthetic judgments on the developments made by the philosophy of emotions regarding the epistemology of values. Emotions justify evaluative judgments: we can imagine that the same happens between affective experience of aesthetic properties and aesthetic judgments. At this point, all that is missing is to restate the Acquaintance Principle in terms of affect instead of perception.

But the most important consequence is for aesthetics. If the standard view understands 'aesthetic' as a concept indiscernible from our perceptual faculties, we may reconsider the claim after this work. Aesthetic properties could not be revealed in perception; they are not perceptual properties. They are properties essentially linked to our affects, to our sentiments and emotions. If we want to understand our engagement with these qualities, we have to determine the nature of their distinctive experience. The notion of aesthetic experience and aesthetic attitude are widely neglected by the contemporary debates, but this work suggests that the trend should be reversed. Ultimately, if the points raised throughout this essay are compelling, then a proper aesthetic experience exists. But the latter will not be a matter of our eyes: beauty is in the *heart* of the beholder.

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