

# perceptual ephemera

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## ABSTRACTS

Thomas Crowther, Heythrop College, University of London

### **Seeing Stuff**

It is standard to distinguish between countable particulars, like cats and trees, and non-countable stuff, like gold and water. It is a datum that we are capable of having perceptual experiences as of countable particulars. But do we, or can we, have perceptual experiences as of non-countable stuff? In the first instance, how should we understand the perceptual experience of stuff? And if we do have perceptual experience of stuff, how should we understand its relation to the perceptual experience of countable particulars?

In this paper, I take up these questions, exploiting the idea that as well as space-occupying spatial stuffs, there are time-occupying, temporal stuffs. I try to argue that facts about the temporal structure of perceptual experience discussed in recent work by Matthew Soteriou necessitate that we have visual experience as of temporal stuff. I go on to sketch out a corresponding account of the relation between the visual experience of temporal stuff and the visual experience of temporal particulars. In the final sections of the paper, I briefly defend these suggestions from objections motivated by recent work on processes by Rowland Stout and Helen Steward, and make some comments about the visual experience of space-occupying stuff.

Lieven Decock, VU University Amsterdam

### **Graded objecthood and borderline objects**

Ordinary objects play a basic role in human cognitive capacities. The common psychological notion of objecthood is the 'Spelke-object.' Parts of the visual field are categorized as Spelke-objects if they satisfy the criteria cohesion, boundedness, rigidity and no action at a distance. Although this list spells out necessary and sufficient conditions for objecthood, one would think that falling under the concept OBJECT is a matter of degree. Tables and chairs are canonical objects, a sheet of paper is still uncontroversially an object, soap bubbles and sandcastles are dubious cases, while flashes of lightning or clouds can hardly be called objects. Drawing on earlier work with Igor Douven et al. on metaphysical applications of Gärdenfors's conceptual spaces approach, we provide an account of ephemeral objects. We construe the concept OBJECT as a region in a parameter space determined by parameters such as duration, relative time of coherence, impenetrability, and rigidity. Canonical objects are points belonging to the prototypical region of the concept OBJECT. Ephemeral objects are determinate borderline cases of OBJECT.

Thomas Raleigh, Concordia University

### **On Silhouettes, Surfaces and Sorensen**

Sorensen (2008) argues for the claim that when we see a silhouetted object, we literally see its back-side. In this paper I argue against this “most controversial thesis of the book”, as Sorensen himself characterizes it, and in favour of the more commonsensical thesis that we see the edge or outline of a silhouetted object.

Sorensen’s argument for the “back-side” theory is based on causal considerations – the back-side is alleged to be the part of the object that causes the subject’s perception *in the appropriate way*. Whilst I concede that the back of a silhouetted object plays *some* causal role, I argue that it is not the appropriate role. The part of the object that does play the appropriate causal role is the edge – for this is the part of O that forms a *contrast* with the surrounding light. I provide a general “Parts Perception Principle”, specifying which parts of an object are seen. I show that the principle captures our intuitions concerning normal front-lit cases, even when “deviant” causal chains are involved, and that the principle rules in favour of the edge-theory, as opposed to the back theory, in back-lit conditions.

I go on to consider and counter Sorensen’s arguments (2008, 2011) against the edge theory. I also briefly consider the implications of my position for cases of camouflage and provide some extra problematic cases for Sorensen’s back-side theory.

István Aranyosi, Bilkent University

### **A Mouthful of Content: Perceptual ephemera in oral food processing**

Recent philosophical discussion of perception has been dominated by the topic of vision. This “visuocentrism” partly explains another peculiarity of the literature - its focus on the perception of ordinary objects, or, to use Austin’s formula, medium-sized dry goods, e.g. tomatoes, tables, chairs, pens, etc.. Second, the philosophy of perception has been driven by a sense of urgency, sometimes disconnected from current empirical findings, with respect to first solving some “fundamental problems” (e.g. which philosophical theory of the content of perception is the most plausible one). These are thought not depend on specific sense modalities or types of perceptual objects. The type of perceptual situation I focus on is not extraordinary, either in terms of its objects, as it involves more or less middle-sized dry objects, or in terms of the frequency of its occurrence, as it typically occurs several times a day. Yet it is a case that involves perceptual ephemera. This combination of phenomena (ordinariness and ephemerality) is, however, extraordinary enough for it not having been discussed, to my knowledge, in the philosophical literature on perception. The situation I am talking about is oral food processing, or, less technically, eating (and drinking).

What is perceptually interesting about eating, besides its being highly multi- and cross-modal, is that it is the only ordinary biomechanical process by which we, and other animals, perceive ordinary objects and stuffs by destroying them, by mechanically destructuring and restructuring them, and chemically

attacking them. This is why the perceptual objects of oral food processing are both ordinary and ephemeral. I will focus on various aspects of oral perception of food, trying to highlight several potentially novel ideas that this topic suggests in the context of the philosophy of perception, precisely because of the ephemeral character of its perceptual object.

Matt Nudds, Warwick University

### **Sounds as auditory ephemera**

My focus in this talk is the nature of sounds. I argue that the normal objects of auditory experience are sound-producing events – events that typically involve physical objects or processes – and that we experience these events by experiencing the sounds they produce. This is so because there is no way to individuate sounds other than in terms of sound-producing events. But what, then, are sounds? I argue that although sounds – unlike tastes – are objective, there are problems with simply identifying sounds with any element of the physical process involved in their production and transmission. In the light of these problems, I consider the prospects for a conception of sounds as *ephemeral* objects of experience, and I draw some comparisons between sounds and putative visual ephemeral objects, in particular rainbows and holograms.

Jenny Judge, University of Cambridge

### **Music and the philosophy of perception: could a melody have affordances?**

Much of the philosophy of music describes the musical experience solely in terms of listening. On the contrary, I argue that musical engagement should be understood as multimodal. Furthermore, musical engagement implicates action on a basic level: performance involves the real-time interaction with artifacts, but even so-called ‘passive’ musical engagement has been shown to recruit motor responses in the brain. In light of the multimodal, active nature of musical engagement, I claim that the affordance is an apt conceptual tool for the exploration of the musical experience.

In characterizing the musical affordance, Nussbaum argues that music is experienced as though it were a landscape that had real action potentials. Even though the bodily responses that music elicits are genuine, Nussbaum claims that the musical affordance is best understood as virtual since the musical ‘surface’ is imagined rather than real. I question Nussbaum’s motivations for denying the musical affordance ‘real’ status. If the affordance is to be understood as the basic mechanism by which significance is perceived in the environment, and since perception is understood to involve more than visible, graspable objects, it might be asked why the ‘real’ affordance should not extend to non-canonical sense objects as well as canonical ones. In light of the evidence that musical engagement is participatory, embodied and active, I question whether the objects of musical engagement should be understood as ‘virtual’ or ‘imagined’. I consider whether Nussbaum’s ‘virtual’ affordance stems from a general reluctance in philosophy more broadly to consider the epistemic import of non-canonical sense objects, and the procedural, ‘know-how’ knowledge that such objects often implicate.

Roberto Casati, Institut Nicod, CNRS-EHESS

## **Preference for the Impossible**

Abstract to follow.

John O'Dea, University of Tokyo

## **Art and the Ambiguity in Shadows**

Art is often discussed in the context of the “sensation” of a shadowed white wall. Russell (1912) remarked that typically only “artists and philosophers” tend to be aware that this sensation is actually as of greyness, while Overgaard (2010) suggests that one can see greyness in the shadow by taking the “reflective attitude of a painter”. On the other hand, among those who deny that there is any such grey sensation, both Gibson (1986) and Schwitzgebel (2011) speculate that the root of the mistake is to take the analogy between seeing and painting too literally. I think that art *is* involved in the apparent qualitative similarity between a shadow and a patch of grey, but in a somewhat different way than either Overgaard or Schwitzgebel suggest. I will draw on recent research which suggests that multistable perception (such as happens when looking at a duck/rabbit picture) is part of a general mechanism that allows ‘higher’ cognitive processes input into the disambiguation of perceptual stimuli (Leopold & Logothetis, 1999). I will argue that the shadow on the wall is an ambiguous situation of precisely this sort; though various cues bias us towards seeing it veridically (as a shadow on a white wall), the same mechanisms responsible for perceptual switching in ambiguous images allow us to see it as grey, if briefly, either intentionally or by prompting. The attempt to realistically depict a shadow on a canvas is just such a prompt.

Roy Sorensen, Washington University in St. Louis

## **Spectacular absences**

In **Seeing Dark Things** I argued that absences can be directly perceived – even by cows and mosquito larvae. I partly based this on these absences possessing a characteristic appearance. Shadows look dark. Holes feel gappy. I now wish to argue for the non-epistemic visibility of highly institutional absences. These are perceptible because they are public spectacles. Other absences have a claim to perceptibility because they are spectacles. Tourists flock to see them (especially when they are freshly formed). They take photographs of them. I shall focus on a highly institutional example that arose in the aftermath of the theft of the Mona Lisa from the Louvre in 1911. French theories of absences, Henri Bergson and Jean Paul Sartre, will be applied to case. I will also apply some contemporary perceptual psychology to spectacular absences.

Anna Farennikova, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

## **Experiences of Absence: Ultimate Ephemera**

Intuitively, we often see absences. For example, if someone steals your laptop at a café, you see its absence from your table. However, absence perception presents a paradox. On prevailing models of perception, we see only present objects and scenes (Marr 1982, Gibson 1966, Dretske 1969). So, we cannot literally see something that is not present. This suggests that we never literally perceive absences; instead, we come to believe that something is absent cognitively on the basis of what we perceive. But this cognitive explanation does not do justice to the phenomenology. Many experiences of absence possess immediate, perceptual qualities. One may further argue that the ability to detect certain absences confers strong adaptive advantage and therefore must be as fundamental to humans as seeing positive things.

I argue that we can literally see absences; in addition to representing objects, perception represents absences of objects. I show that the target experiences of absence face a problem different from the one confronting other types of perceptual ephemera such as shadows or holes (Sorensen 2008, Casati and Varzi 1994). Absences of objects, unlike the objects themselves, fail to deliver suitable perceptible features to the senses and are therefore maximally ephemeral. I account for these experiences by presenting a model of seeing absence based on visual expectations and a visual matching process.

The phenomenon of seeing absence can thus serve as an adequacy-test for a theory of perceptual content. If experiences of absence are possible, then we have another reason, following Siegel, to reject the view that perceptual content is restricted to colors and shapes. Furthermore, if the proposed account is correct, then we have grounds for dissociating seeing absence from other imagery-based phenomena termed “perceptual presence-in-absence” (Noë, Macpherson). Finally, the proposed model offers principled grounds for determining whether seeing holes or shadows count as cases when one perceives an absence.

Vasilis Tsompanidis, Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas – UNAM México

## **Perceiving times and *de re* thought.**

I aim to motivate a *de re* account of tensed thought by arguing that times can be *res* of a certain sort and that human beings can perceive them despite their ephemeral nature. I put forth the view that tensed thought is *de re* in respect to a time. Since such thought requires the subject having a particular relation to a *re*, can times be the *res* of *de re* thoughts?

Since times are objective metaphysical entities and referents of noun terms, the question can be answered positively if one can show that we perceive times. There is motivation for thinking that we do: recent empirical science has revealed sub-personal time-keeping mechanisms that are not consciously regulated, exist in lower animals, inform conscious temporal judgments, and often go wrong. In these features they are similar to perceptual mechanisms.

One might object that these structures are not perceptual, because they lack a dedicated sense organ, or because they are widely affected by memory and emotion. None of these objections are conclusive, since these characteristics show up in proprioception and vision. Similar considerations defeat objections from the Philosophy of Time, such as that “we can only perceive present things”.

A more serious objection might arise from the Object Model of Perception requiring the ability *to pick something out* during perception. I reply that we ‘pick out’ times during temporal binding in vision and cross-modal sense integration, when distinct asynchronous percepts are organized by our perceptual system as *happening at the same time*.

I conclude that the person might not identify a time exactly like she identifies a visual source, but since the perceptual system does, this should be enough to ground a possible thought that this flash and this sound are happening now. At a minimum then, this thought can be *de re* in respect to a time.

Philipp Blum, University of Geneva

### **Seeing-as and ephemeral percepta**

Taking recent discussions of the epistemology of evaluative and ‘emotional’ judgments as my starting point, I investigate whether a adverbialist account of seeing-as can assuage some of the metaphysical worries that people have raised about ephemeral or ‘non-canonical’ objects of perception - flames, soap-bubbles, glimmers, highlights, reflections, echoes, shivers, atmospheric phenomena like rainbows and mirages, shadows, after-images, constellations, affordances and values. I argue against Deonna and Teroni (2012) and the orthodoxy in the emotion literature, and in favour of Mulligan (2007 2009), that seeing-as allows us to capture the way evaluative judgments and appropriate emotions are justified by perceptions, characterising both judgments and emotions as reactions to such seeings-as. They are reactions, however, not just to the objects directly perceived, but to these objects-as-exemplifying some property.

In seeings-as, “the third argument of ‘see as’ attributes to a subject a non-conceptual way of seeing what the second argument refers to” (Mulligan 1999: 125): the “as” clause is an adverbial modification of the act of seeing. I defend this construal against the standard anti-adverbialist arguments. Individuating objects of seeing-as as manifestations, I argue, allows for both an ontologically plausible construal of the entities concerned, and for an account of the ‘right’ logical relations among the ways they are seen. By distinguishing between the intentional and representational properties of seeing-as, we can explain why to undergo an emotion is indeed to stand in an intentional relation to value, but the relation is not belief nor does it involve any representation (thought) of value (Mulligan 2007: 209-210).

I then consider applications to other types of perception. Not just seeing-as involving axiological properties, but also other types of perceptions do not represent their correctness conditions, even though they represent (conceptually) their satisfaction conditions. What it means to have correctness conditions is to be governed by certain norms. For perception, e.g., the norm is two-fold: that the world be such how the experience represents it to be, and: that the experience should not occur if the

world is not like this. The perception is under this norm because it is a reason to believe. Because we account for the ephemeral or non-canonical objects in terms of seeing-as, we may characterize them as manifestations, in virtue of the perception of which we perceive the things they are manifestations of, avoiding postulating necessary connections between distinct existences.