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Cynthia Freeland
University of Houston

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Aesthetics and the Senses: Introduction

Cynthia Freeland

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Aesthetics was historically an account of beauty and taste, with a significant focus on the senses, as the origins of the name in the Greek word for sense perception, "*aiesthesis*," would suggest. For philosophers like Kant, critical judgment in aesthetics was complex and involved certain interactions between sense-perception and higher-order mental faculties like imagination and cognition. Such sharp distinctions have undergone major revision in recent years, which have seen publication of significant new books about the senses, including Mohan Matthen's *Seeing, Doing, and Knowing: A Philosophical Theory of Sense Perception* (Oxford, 2007), Casey O'Callaghan's *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory* (Oxford, 2010), Susanna Siegel's *The Contents of Visual Experience* (Oxford, 2011), and Fiona Macpherson's anthology *The Senses: Classic and Contemporary Philosophical Readings,* (Oxford, 2011). Informed by new scientific research, these philosophical studies are re-examining numerous issues, including the number and individuation of human senses; the nature of perceptual experience; the representational character of perceptual objects; the mechanisms that underlie sensation in the brain and body; and the links between perception, cognition, and sensory imagining. Advances of such a significant nature must inevitably affect how we conceptualize art and our interactions with artworks—as both creators and consumers.

Empirical studies are likely to affect the philosophy of art in other ways as well. Aesthetics has traditionally relied upon a somewhat restricted and hierarchical notion of the objects of sensation worthy of respect. If not quite guilty of "visuocentrism" — focusing only on vision — aesthetics has nevertheless consistently focused on "higher arts" such as painting, sculpture, and music, while denigrating the cultural products that address our "lower" senses, ones more typically associated with appetites, such as taste, touch, and smell. Aesthetics has also virtually ignored sensory modalities that are now being given much greater attention, such as kinesthesia and proprioception. Scientists have also found very interesting results in studies of cross-modal sensory effects, indicating the ability of one

Corresponding Author: Cynthia Freeland
University of Houston
email – cfreeland@uh.edu

sensory system or brain region to process the inputs, or in some cases substitute for damaged areas of, another system. This phenomenon is related to synesthesia, the experience some people have that always links certain kinds of sensory phenomena in direct relationship to others — experiencing sounds or letters, for example, as being colored (summarized helpfully in Richard E. Cytowic and David Eagleman's *Wednesday is Indigo Blue: Discovering the Brain of Synesthsia* (2009)).

The call for papers for this issue solicited submissions that would reflect the intersection of recent epistemological and neuroscientific studies with more traditional areas of aesthetics such as the nature of interpretation, definitions of beauty, audience responses to art, and art made in non-traditional media. This resulting issue of *Essays in Philosophy*, happily, features a wide variety of cross-disciplinary work. The art forms mentioned in the discussions vary from installation art to dance, and from musical experimentation and modern literature to film. The subjects covered range from some of the"big questions" such as how to interpret meaning in art (Jennifer McMahon) and the nature of beauty (Owen Ewald and Ursula Krentz) to more specific studies of the interaction among our senses or cross-modal perception (Kathleen Coessens, William P. Seeley, and Mark Paterson). The issue closes with two articles focusing on the artistic medium of film, exploring first (Luis Rocha Antunes) our vestibular responses to film, and second (my own article) how stereoscopic vision is employed and affected in viewing 3D films.. Also included along the way are some brief critical reflections: Cameron Buckner and Justin L. Harmon's responses to McMahon on interpretation, and Christy Mag Uidhir on Seeley's view of expression in art. I next offer a more detailed preview of the volume's articles.

In "The Aesthetics of Perception: Form as a Sign of Intention," Jennifer A. McMahon discusses the nature of aesthetic judgment. Drawing upon recent studies of the nature of perceptual experience, McMahon infers that our aesthetic experience cannot be regarded as somehow "purely" sensuous and without cognitive mediation. Examples of work in new art-forms, even when they seem strange and puzzling, will be "read" by perceivers as, at the very least, intentional — as made by a conscious agent for some purpose. She illustrates this point with examples of work by the artist Daniel von Sturmer, whose installations draw our attention to examples of diverse types of causation — he even calls them "experiments." As we seek meaning in these and other artworks, we often do so by constructing a narrative. McMahon calls this the "principle of intention-in-order." But McMahon recognizes that her outlook poses a challenge in explaining how art can be new or critical. How can art challenge existing conventions if audiences must rely upon some of those same conventions in constructing interpretive narratives? McMahon argues that creativity with a critical edge is possible, even though there is no "raw" perceptual data, by borrowing some theoretical tools from the work of Habermas and Adorno.

The issue includes two critical responses to McMahon's paper. First, Cameron Buckner focuses on her discussion of the cognitive interpretation of "raw" sensory input in his paper "Ordering Our Attributions-of-Order." Buckner draws an insightful comparison between McMahon's example of how we begin constructing narratives to understand von Strumer's installation works and similar narratives that are typically constructed in response to a famous psychological experiement, the Heider-Simmel animation. After watching this brief animation, viewers almost inevitably retell it as a drama involving triangles and circles caught up in a love affair, abduction, and escape. Why is this? Buckner says we are still not sure why we have such tendencies. He points to work by psychologist Eric Charles who has recently called for the development of a "psychophysics" of social cognition.

In the second response to McMahon, "The Sensuous as Source of Demand," Justin L. Harmon focuses less on the human tendency to pursue rich cognitive construals of somewhat minimal data, opting for a more 'bottom-up" perspective. In resolving the tension between real creativity in art and the perceiver's use of pre-existing conceptual schemes, McMahon draws on Adorno and Habermas, who held that "aesthetic form" can be communicated though non-discursive source of intelligibility. Harmon considers it more helpful to use Jacques Rancière's discussion in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2009), which argues that the critical aim of art is a "re-distribution of the sensible." Something mundane and only minimally perceived, like the green color of an avocado's flesh or the sound of a train whistle, can become sensuously significant and help reveal new ways of engaging with the world around us.

The next article in this issue, by Owen Ewald and Ursula Krentz, takes up another major topic in aesthetics, the nature of beauty. In "Beauty and Beholders: Are Past Intuitions Correct?" the authors review how well four important definitions of beauty in Western philosophy hold up in light of recent experimental work in psychology and biology. They survey views supported in combination or part by Plato, Augustine, Hume, and Kant, including accounts that focus on beauty as a relationship among parts, a salient feature in a mass of details, utility, and/or cognitive pleasure. Ewald and Krentz argue that recent psychological experiments tend to confirm aspects of three of these views while leaving the utility account in doubt. Despite some empirical support for the other views, there are problems in confirming them either in studies of infants (the fourth) or of non-western cultures (the second).

The next group of articles move from broad questions about meaning or beauty in art to take up the aesthetic implications of recent research into cross-modal perception. Kathleen Coessens in her article, "Sensory Fluidity: Dialogues of Imagination in Art," addresses the

relation between imagination, perception, memory, and expression. She asks how artists can explore and communicate imagination through a variety of media such as literature and music. Using well-developed examples (a novel by Italo Calvino and avant-garde musical works by Helmut Lachenmann and Gyorgy Kurtag), Coessens develops a notion she calls "sensory fluidity." This is a basic ability, exploited by artists and evoking appropriate responses from audiences, to integrate experiences from different perceptual origins. It employs embodied patterns of memory to move across time periods, and draws upon intersubjective patterns to promote sharing of affective experience.

Some of the same issues treated by Coessens recur in William P. Seeley's article, "Hearing How Smooth It Looks: Selective Attention and Crossmodal Perception in the Arts." Seeley begins with some examples of the ways in which contextual information or trained motor skills can affect people's perception of various visual symbols. We can also perceive emotion in watching a person's gait, or assess qualities like tension in listening to music or watching a ballet. Hence, "there is a very real sense in which an expressive bodily gesture can look like music sounds." To account for this, Seeley presents a model for multisensory integration in our engagement with artworks. A key role is played in such processing by the superior colliculus in the brain. It is part of an attentional network that integrates sensory information, primes perceptual systems, and inhibits distracters. Seeley suggests how his model can explain a range of crossmodal effects in our engagement with pictures, dance, and musical performances.

In his remarks about this article, "Getting Emotional Over Contours: A Response to Seeley," Christy Mag Uidhir raises specific questions about the implications of Seeley's model in accounting for the role of emotions in art, particularly music. Seeley suggests that there is something he calls an "emotional contour" characteristic of an emotion that is potentially realizable across a range of media. Mag Uidhir briefly speculates about the implications of this idea for further enquiry into expression and emotion across the arts — as well as into the nature of the emotions themselves.

Mark Paterson is also interested in cross-modal perception. His article, "Movement for Movement's Sake? On the Relationship between Kinaesthesia and Aesthetics" surveys a vast sweep of historical and contemporary views on the so-called "inner" senses, including in particular kinaesthesia. Paterson's detailed history begins with the treatment of *aisthêsis* in Aristotle and moves from there to later contributions, including 'coanesthesia' in the eighteenth century, the 'muscle sense' (*Muskelsinn*) in the nineteenth century, and 'proprio-ception' (sic) and 'kinesthesia' in the early twentieth century. Paterson also draws upon Herder's treatment of our response to three-dimensional sculpture with a kind of 'inner sense.' His goal is to explain how audiences experience certain felt qualities of movement

during dance performances, with implications for how other art forms such as architecture also can activate non-visual responses, including a haptic sense of engagement with space.

Luis Rocha Antunes article "The Vestibular in Film – Orientation and Balance in Gus Van Sant's Cinema of Walking" is related to Paterson's study in that it too focuses on one of the inner senses, the vestibular — our sense of orientation and balance. Like kinaesthesia, this has not traditionally been included among the classic five senses. Film studies is generally restricted to the role of sound and sight, but Antunes notes there is an emerging *cinema of the senses* which pays broader attention to other sensory systems. His essay investigates our sense of orientation and balance in film by examining key examples he dubs the "cinema of walking" from the oeuvre of filmmaker Gus Van Sant. His films, including *Elephant* and *Gerry*, explore relationships among camera movement, narrative, character identity, and audience emotions in complex ways. Rocha describes the neural and physiological evidence relevant to explaining how images and sounds can provide us with access to the multisensory realm.

In my own article, "On Being Stereoblind in an Era of 3D Films," I consider the aesthetic potentials of 3D films in light of my own inability to perceive stereoscopically due to an eye coordination problem known as strabismus, a failure of fusion of the input from the two eyes by binocular neurons in the brain. Until recently it was held that such fusion must be acquired in childhood or it can never be recovered, but now certain practices of vision therapy allow some strabismics to achieve stereoscopic vision. Interestingly, some 3D effects in the latest sort of 3D films created using alternating polarized projections and lenses *can* be perceived by people like myself. My paper discusses principles of binocular vision and 3D film history. By examining critical discussions of some prominent examaples including *Pina*, *Avatar*, and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, I offer an overview of the aesthetic merits of contemporary 3D films, including several possible accounts of what is meant by the medium's alleged superior "realism." I conclude with some speculation about whether 3D is indeed the medium of all future cinema.