

**Bence Nanay.** *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*. Oxford University Press 2016. 240 pp. \$65.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199658442); \$25.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780198811619).

Bence Nanay's book argues for the provocative and original thesis that aesthetics can and should be informed by the philosophy of perception. The main motivation for Nanay's thesis is that, since aesthetics is concerned with special ways of perceiving the world, the philosophy of perception can assist aestheticians better understand these varieties of perception.

Chapter 1 is primarily concerned with explicating the nature of aesthetics. According to Nanay et al., we should distinguish aesthetics from the philosophy of art. The former involves important, *sui generis* perceptual experiences of the world, whereas the latter involves philosophical treatments of the various arts. Moreover: 'We can experience works of art in a non-aesthetic manner and we can experience objects other than works of art in an aesthetic manner' (19). This distinction supposedly yields fruit by moving us away from the Kantian orientation in aesthetics. According to Nanay, the Kantian account of aesthetic experience 'has acquired a terrible reputation in the last decade.' Unfortunately, there is absolutely no explanation for why the Kantian account has acquired a 'terrible reputation.' Indeed, much can be said in favor of Kant's aesthetics. It seems to me that the burden of explanation and proof lies on Nanay's shoulders here. This part of Nanay's work should have been adequately treated.

In any case the question becomes, What is perception (according to Nanay)? Well, while perception is a multifaceted phenomenon, it basically reduces to the uses of one's *attention*. Attention is both sufficient and necessary for perception—and therefore consciousness; although Nanay is never explicit about this significant corollary.

Chapter 2 is Nanay's account of the perceptual processes underpinning aesthetic experience. Instead of Kant's allegedly unhelpful idea of 'disinterested attention,' Nanay proposes the idea of 'distributed attention.' There is a psychological difference between 'focused attention' and 'distributed attention' with respect to objects and properties. With ordinary attention or perception, one focusses on some of the properties of the object. '[O]ur attention is focused on one perceptual object, but it is distributed among a large number of the object's properties' (13). But with aesthetic experiences our attention is both focused and distributed at the same time. More specifically: '[I]t is focused inasmuch as we are attending to one object only. But it is distributed across the properties of this object' (25; note omitted). A good example of this would be the aesthetic experience of a landscape. We focus our attention on the landscape as a whole. At the same time, our attention to the specific properties of the landscape is distributed. This twofold use of one's attention generates an aesthetic experience of a landscape.

Chapter 3 focuses on the nature of pictures and their relation to aesthetic experience. A pictorial aesthetic experience involves perceiving both the two-dimensional picture surface of a picture and perceiving the three-dimensional depicted object—simultaneously. (Additionally, the depicted object is not really there. We 'imagine' it. This is what differentiates between picture perception and face-to-face perception.) According to Nanay, with a genuine aesthetic experience of a picture, we simultaneously see both the two-dimensional picture surface and the three-dimensional depicted scene (and properties of the three-dimensional scene). But then, how is so-called aesthetic pictorial experience not disjointed? The philosophy of perception supplies an answer. With ordinary pictorial perception, we do not attend to the picture's surface; rather, we attend to the depicted scene. With an aesthetic experience of a picture we do attend to the surface of the picture in a distributed sense. More to the point, we do not stimulatingly attend to the surface of a picture and that which the picture depicts—in the sense of focused attention. Rather, we focus our attention on that which is

depicted while we distribute our attention to the surface of that which is depicted. As an example: '[W]hen we are appreciating Cézanne's landscapes, one thing that enhances our aesthetic appreciation is to see the interrelationship between the three-dimensional depicted ... pine-needles [say] and the two-dimensional single brushstrokes on the canvas' (60). Both ways of attending to a picture is what renders pictorial aesthetic experience possible. More completely: 'In the aesthetic appreciation of pictures, our attention is distributed. But this distributed attention is restricted to properties of the picture surface and properties of the depicted scene' (63).

Chapter 4 discusses what Nanay coins aesthetically *relevant* properties. '[A] property is aesthetically relevant if attending to it makes an aesthetic difference: *any* aesthetic difference: an aesthetic difference of any kind' (71; Nanay's emphasis). What was once ordinary can be aesthetically relevant, and what was once aesthetically relevant can become ordinary. It is all a matter of attention or perception.

Now, since perception itself is either conscious or unconscious, aesthetically relevant properties can be consciously perceived or unconsciously perceived. Chapter 3 dealt with conscious perceptions which are aesthetical perceptions. What about unconscious perceptions and their connection to aesthetic experiences? Well, what can be unconsciously perceived are the quasi-perceptual products of imagination, like beauty. What can also be unconsciously perceived are not even quasi-perceptually represented, e.g., 'Being painted by Cézanne.' Yet both kinds of unconscious perceptions sometimes determine the aesthetic value of a pictorial experience. But how? Well, these unconscious perceptions, which partially determine our aesthetic experience of an artwork, can be accounted for through top-down perceptual processes from cognitive phenomenology. Perception is frequently imbued with conception. Again, the philosophy of perception has much to teach regarding the nature of aesthetic experiences.

In Chapter 5 Nanay partially agrees with the claim: 'the only aesthetically relevant properties of a picture are its formal properties' (92). For Nanay, 'formal properties' are surface properties. Still, the chapter aims to split the difference between formalism and anti-formalism, where anti-formalism is, very roughly, the opposition to formal properties in regard to aesthetic value. Nanay's semi-formalism is the claim that the only aesthetically relevant properties of a picture are not just surface properties but the way those surface properties are represented.

This template can be applied to works of music. A great work of music is aesthetically relevant in virtue of its tone, pitch, timbre—and how these primitives are arranged. Aesthetically complex emotions elicited by Beethoven's 7<sup>th</sup> symphony depend on its intriguing arrangement of its elementals: timbre, pitch and tone.

With Chapter 6, Nanay states that one can safely ignore it, since the chapter presupposes that all works of art are ontologically unique or of their own kind. The chapter aims to explain this purported fact. But one can easily dismiss this claim. For what is the real difference between uniqueness as found in aesthetic experience and uniqueness as found in a moral experience? According to Nanay, moral experience does not incorporate distributed attention. This, however, seems debatable. Also, Nanay claims that aesthetic experiences are cognitively penetrated perceptual experiences, unlike moral experiences. But this too seems unlikely. Thus it appears that the difference is unclear at best. More importantly, however, the entire issue is irrelevant to Nanay's program of showing how helpful the philosophy of perception really is for understanding aesthetic experiences. In which case the reader can skip the chapter.

Chapter 7, 'The History of Vision' develops the assertion that art history is the history of different forms of perception. Now some aspects of perception have a history, whereas others do not. Visual capacities can alter, whereas visual processes are constant. What can change over time is the

ways we attend. Differences in ways of attending lead to different perceptions. And what has changed, according to Nanay, are our capacities for distributed attention.

Consider pre-16<sup>th</sup> century painting. The latter was incapable of representing the perceptual phenomenon of occlusion: '[I]f a table is depicted with lots of food items and utensils, the food items are fully in view: not behind or in front of some other object' (153-154). This changed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. What really altered was one's capacity to *attend* to the perceptual phenomenon of occlusion.

The last chapter discusses aspects of 'non-distributed attention' *vis-à-vis* aesthetic experiences of novels, plays and films. With focused attention, one can identify or engage with a character's actions—typically the protagonist's. Focused attention on the protagonist's actions allows for empathizing with the protagonist in question. This, in turn, makes room for directly perceiving the protagonist's intentions and motivations. And all of this activity allows for the aesthetic experiences we enjoy while engaging with plays, films and novels. This does seem like a decent account of aesthetic experiences from narrative artworks. And the account depends on data from the philosophy of perception.

In conclusion, although there are a few objectionable portions of Nanay's book, his thesis and concomitant notions are very interesting. Furthermore, he makes good use of his entire framework. Focused attention and distributed attention do seem involved in various aspects of aesthetic experiences. It would appear that the philosophy of perception can and should illuminate important features of aesthetic experience. I would recommend this book for both philosophers of perception and aestheticians—which is Nanay's intended audience.

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