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Aesthetic Experience: Pleasure, Meaning, or Both?

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Overview

When researchers study aesthetic experience, what exactly are they measuring? Some studies ask participants how much they *like* a stimulus. Others ask how *beautiful*, *interesting*, or *meaningful* they find it. These questions are often treated as interchangeable measures of “aesthetic preference,” yet they may tap fundamentally different psychological processes.

This symposium brings together researchers from philosophy, neuroscience, computational modeling, and experimental psychology to address a question at the heart of aesthetic cognition: Is aesthetic experience fundamentally about hedonic pleasure, or is it about meaning, insight, and understanding?

This question matters for cognitive science beyond the study of art and beauty. If aesthetic appreciation is essentially explained by hedonic reward, then findings from neuroaesthetics extend what we know about valuation and decision-making more generally. But if aesthetic experience involves distinct meaning-based processes, then it offers a unique window into how the mind integrates perception, emotion, and semantic processing in ways that reward research alone cannot capture. The pleasure-meaning distinction thus connects to core debates in cognitive science: the relationship between affect and cognition, the architecture of reward and valuation systems, and whether “higher” cognitive experiences reduce to more basic processes or constitute something genuinely distinct. Through cross-disciplinary discussion, we aim to bolster translations between core aesthetic questions, cognitive models, and empirical evidence.

The distinction between pleasure and meaning has deep roots in philosophical aesthetics, from Kant’s analysis of disinterested pleasure to Dewey’s emphasis on meaningful engagement with complexity (Dewey, 1934). Neuroscientific research has identified both reward circuitry and default mode network involvement in aesthetic experience (Vessel et al., 2012). Computational models diverge on whether aesthetic preference is best captured by fluency or by optimal complexity (Van Geert & Wagemans, 2020). And experimental psychologists have documented that “liking” and “interest” ratings often dissociate (Graf & Landwehr, 2015). This symposium addresses this fragmentation by organizing four talks around a common question, each from a distinct disciplinary perspective.

Talk 1: The Prospects of Aesthetic Cognitivism

Dr. John Gibson, University of Louisville

Aesthetic cognitivism is a philosophical theory of art that asserts that aesthetic experience consists in a kind of understanding and not—contrary to tradition—a type of pleasure. The theory is thought to face two problems. The first is that it is immensely difficult to test empirically (Currie, 2020). The second is that of explaining exactly how an understanding can be an aesthetic state. I here defend a version of aesthetic cognitivism that argues that the relevant objects of understanding are imagistic meanings that are embodied in artworks and encoded in their formal features. I claim that these meanings are often objects of affective and imaginative immersion, and, as such, bear a kind of pleasure-producing power. I attempt to spell out what this “cognitive pleasure” consists in and how it might be the sort of thing that can be explored in experimental contexts.

Talk 2: Beyond Pleasure: Aesthetic Experience as a Motivator of Action

Dr. Indre Viskontas, University of San Francisco

If aesthetic experiences were purely hedonic, we would expect participants in those experiences to follow standard reward logic—maximizing pleasure while minimizing effort. Yet people endure significant discomfort for aesthetic rewards, and aesthetic encounters can motivate costly real-world action. I present two large-scale field studies examining how aesthetic experiences drive behavior. First, findings from a massive choral celebration in Lithuania show that awe-inducing aesthetic participation correlates with overall well-being and collective self-esteem, despite physically demanding conditions. In addition to self-report survey measures, physiological/biometric markers of the aesthetic experience will also be discussed. Second, work with the Big Picture conservation photography exhibit at the California Academy of Sciences explores whether and how photographs’ aesthetic qualities motivate environmental action. Together, these studies suggest that aesthetic experience involves meaning-based processes—awe, identity, purpose—that can override hedonic costs and catalyze behavior in ways that the pursuit of pure pleasure cannot explain. This functional perspective reframes the pleasure-meaning debate: perhaps what distinguishes aesthetic experience is precisely its capacity to move us to act.

Talk 3: Less is more: Aesthetic liking is inversely related to metabolic expense by the visual system

Dr. Dirk B. Walther, University of Toronto

What makes us like one visual scene or object and dislike another? Many factors have been proposed, but a fundamental candidate is the brain's drive to minimize energy consumption. We test a metabolic account of visual aesthetics in both an in-silico model and human observers. Using a VGG19 network and 4,914 images from BOLD5000, we estimate "metabolic cost" as total activity across layers and compare it to aesthetic ratings. A strong inverse relationship emerges between aesthetic preference and metabolic cost, but only in the network trained for object and scene categorization. We then test the same hypothesis in humans by relating aesthetic liking to functional MRI measures of activity. Again, we find an inverse relationship between metabolic expense and liking in both early visual areas (V1, V4) and highlevel regions (FFA, OPA, PPA). These findings suggest that aesthetic pleasure may act as a homeostatic signal for energy-efficient visual processing.

The metabolic account can help reconcile "pleasure" and "meaning making" views of aesthetics. If lower metabolic cost tracks higher liking, pleasure can be seen as a homeostatic reward signal for efficient neural processing. At the same time, meaningful stimuli are often those the system is most practiced at encoding, which should also reduce metabolic demands. On this view, meaning and pleasure are intertwined: semantic richness and experiential history shape how efficiently stimuli are processed, and aesthetic pleasure signals the successful deployment of a well-organized internal model.

Talk 4: Aesthetics and good Gestalt: How interacting perceptual tendencies can inspire new insights in appreciation

Dr. Eline Van Geert, KU Leuven

From a Gestalt psychological perspective, aesthetic appreciation is closely related to the way we perceive the world around us. Essential is the organizational goodness of our perceptions, which can be strengthened by increasing unity and regularity in the arrangement, but also by increasing the complexity of its components. While some researchers advocate for a direct relation between goodness and aesthetic appreciation, others suggest that an increase in goodness (i.e., experiencing a stronger drive towards good organization) is what enhances appreciation. Although this debate remains unsettled and requires additional empirical research, I argue for a balanced view that encompasses both perspectives. The presentation will explore how a nuanced understanding of the principles underlying perceptual organization can help us better comprehend the principles underlying aesthetic appreciation. This will reveal the multifaceted nature of our aesthetic experiences, incorporating both pleasure and meaning.

Discussion

The symposium concludes with a moderated discussion synthesizing insights across the four talks. Key questions include: Is the pleasure-meaning distinction a true dichotomy, or are they interacting components of a unified response? At what level of analysis is the distinction most useful: conceptual, neural, computational, or behavioral? What are the implications for how we design studies and interpret findings in aesthetic cognition? How might resolving this question inform broader debates about the relationship between affect and cognition, bottom-up and top-down processing, and the reducibility of complex experience to simpler mechanisms? Finally, we will discuss concrete next steps for the field, including measurement standards, cross-disciplinary collaborations, and theoretical integration.

Symposium Participants

Moderators: David G. Kamper (University of California, Los Angeles) and Yoko Urano (University of California, Berkeley)

Speakers:

- Talk 1 (Philosophy): Dr. John Gibson, University of Louisville
- Talk 2 (Neuroaesthetics): Dr. Indre Viskontas, University of San Francisco
- Talk 3 (Computational Modeling): Dr. Dirk B. Walther, University of Toronto
- Talk 4 (Experimental Psychology): Dr. Eline Van Geert, KU Leuven

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