

JOURNAL CLUB**Recent evidence on perception and esthetic appreciation:
The role of value and expertise in canon formation**

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Abstract. On the basis of current evidence derived from neurocognitive research, it is possible to mediate two alternative theories concerning the relationship between perception and esthetic appreciation, in particular by distinguishing between high-quality images and popular.

Keywords: images, (dis)fluency, (un)predictability, appreciation, canon, expertise.

Over the last decade, the neurocognitive sciences have collected interesting experimental data about the relationship among esthetic perception, esthetic quality, and esthetic appreciation. In particular, in this article we will refer to Meskin, Phelan, Moore, and Kieran (2013) and Kidd and Castano (2013).

First, a set of experiments concerning images, and based on eye movements and verbal reactions, suggests that people (both experts and nonexperts) are able to evaluate the esthetic quality of paintings immediately at first glance; that is, with one, or at most a few, fixations of approximately 200 ms to 300 ms, before a focal scrutiny. Participants' evaluations remain fairly consistent across viewing time (Locher, 2011). A recent experiment based on the mere exposure effect corroborates this result. Mere exposure to bad paintings (images of paintings by Thomas Kinkade) makes people like them less. The mean of the overall liking scores for Kinkade paintings was lower for participants who had been exposed to the Kinkade paintings than for participants in the control condition who had not been previously exposed to the paintings. So, unlike the typical mere exposure effect, exposure decreases liking—probably because exposure itself, without intermediate reasoning, is sensitive to esthetic value (Meskin et al., 2013).

Experimental data concerning esthetic pleasure and appreciation are usually explained on the basis of two different theories that seem to contradict each other. The first theory argues that liking and esthetic pleasure are a function of the interpreters' processing dynamics, in particular of the fluency and ease of these processes. Because fluency is associated with progress toward a successful recognition of stimuli, it is positively marked and people very often draw on their subjective experience to make evaluative judgments. In particular, a set of experiments indicates that variables able to influence processing fluency (such as perceptual and semantic priming, stimulus repetition, and prototypicality) increase esthetic appreciation (Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004). The second theory concerning appreciation argues that liking or preference for a stimulus is based upon the arousal potential of that stimulus, that is, how much activation the stimulus produces. The arousal potential is determined by properties such as novelty, incongruity, unpredictability, and surprisingness. On the basis of the principle of habituation (a universal property of nervous tissue), repeated presentations of a given stimulus are accompanied by decreases in physiological reactivity to the stimulus (Martindale, 1990). So, from this perspective, esthetic pleasure is prompted by new, original, unexpected stimuli—more precisely, by an optimal amount of (un)predictability, which allows a resolution to a recognized configuration (Van de Cruys & Wagemans, 2011).

Very important: according to these authors, optimal innovation is a function of both actual stimulus complexity and personal experience with the class of stimuli involved. So, the artistic taste inevitably varies between experts and laymen. In the same vein, there are different sources of fluency and processing facilitation. For this reason, complexity, which decreases perceptual fluency, may sometimes be preferred (in particular by experts) because it increases conceptual fluency, facilitating access to the meaning of the stimulus. At any rate, the first theory and the second one undoubtedly seem to be inconsistent. Even if

we emphasize the differences between experts and nonexperts, the fluency theory stresses the association between appreciation and prediction confirmation; the arousal theory stresses the association between appreciation and the transition from a temporary state of unpredictability to an increased predictability. However, this contradiction is only apparent and it disappears upon closer inspection. In our view, these theories constitute complementary accounts of works of art and the subjective effects they produce on interpreters. The first one explains the kind of appreciation and esthetic pleasure produced by low-quality art, while the second explains the kind of appreciation and esthetic pleasure produced by high-quality art.

From this point of view, recent evidence concerning narratives indicates that the distinction between high-quality art and low-quality art can be empirically supported. Five experiments (with nonexperts) show that reading literary fiction (such as De Lillo) temporarily enhances theory of mind, leading to a better performance in several well-established tests compared with reading popular fiction (such as the best-sellers of Gillian Flynn)—an activity that gives similar results to reading nonfiction and reading nothing (Kidd & Castano, 2013). In line with the authors of these experiments, it is possible to hypothesize that esthetic quality is determined by the different ways in which art involves readers, by guiding and prescribing different processing dynamics. Low-quality fiction typically tends to adopt ordinary templates, characterized by stereotypical and easily predictable patterns, with the goal of triggering intense emotions. The relevant information is familiar, it comes quickly and accurately to mind, and it allows a fast recognition. In contrast, high-quality fiction typically tends to change conventional schemata, frustrating interpreters' expectations, with the goal of stimulating creative thought and disrupting stereotypes, biases, and prejudices. The relevant information is open to more than one interpretation, it enables a network of new and surprising associations and meanings, and it recursively prompts multiple cycles of perception and conceptualization.

Thus, in analogy with this evidence it is possible to extend to perception the hypothesis that low-quality images represent a source of fluency, while high-quality images represent a source of disfluency. Although the limited temporal resolution of neuroimaging makes it very difficult to directly test the link among perception, disfluency, improved performance, and esthetic pleasure (as distinct from emotions prompted by contents), our hypothesis receives relevant conceptual and empirical support from the overall dynamic of canon formation.

Whatever the current canon, low-quality art is always accessible to laymen as popular art, intentionally designed to allow ready accessibility with minimum effort for the largest number of untutored audiences. Like Kinkade's paintings, popular art typically represents familiar contents and evokes intense feelings. During the revolutionary process of canon formation, high-quality works of art present a relevant amount of novelty and expectancy violations. This crucial point has also been recently acknowledged by fluency theorists: disfluency is more appropriate to explain a large part of art history because many artists manipulate the ease of processing of their works in order to prevent automatic identification, direct attention, and promote inferences (Bullot & Reber, 2013). In this innovative period, only experts have the skills and sensitivities needed to cope with disfluency, that is, to grasp and appreciate the new and surprising configurations of high-quality works of art. When innovations tend to become the emergent canonical form, nonexperts can also access high-quality art. The repeated presentation of images realized by professionals makes them very familiar and, without an explicit awareness, teaches nonexperts to like and prefer them (Cutting, 2006). Even if experts and nonexperts share the same canon and appreciate the same works of art, nonetheless their processing dynamics remain very different. Nonexperts base their understanding on what is depicted (the content), while experts use art-specific classifications, related to prototypes of single artists or art schools (Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004). Moreover, compared to nonexperts, experts show attenuated emotional responses even when they perceive and judge negative and disturbing images (Leder, Gerger, Brieber, & Schwarz, 2014).

In sum, current evidence suggests that: (1) esthetic pleasure constitutes a subjective feeling grounded in and caused by the interpreter's processing dynamics; (2) the crucial parameters and variables of the processing dynamics that are able to produce appreciation appear to be opposites: high art stimulates disfluency, low art fluency; and (3) expertise represents the key component to understanding and appreciating disfluency.

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