



# Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception

By Bence Nanay

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## Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception By Bence Nanay

Aesthetics is about some special and unusual ways of experiencing the world. Not just artworks, but also nature and ordinary objects. But then if we apply the remarkably elaborate and sophisticated conceptual apparatus of philosophy of perception to questions in aesthetics, we can make real progress. The aim of this book is to bring the discussion of aesthetics and perception together. Bence Nanay explores how many influential debates in aesthetics look very different, and may be easier to tackle, if we clarify the assumptions they make about perception and about experiences in general.

The focus of *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* is the concept of attention and the ways in which this concept and especially the distinction between distributed and focused attention can help us re-evaluate various key concepts and debates in aesthetics. Sometimes our attention is distributed in an unusual way: we are attending to one perceptual object but our attention is distributed across its various properties. This way of experiencing the world is special and it plays an important role in characterizing a number of phenomena associated with aesthetics. Some of these that the book talks about include picture perception and depiction, aesthetic experiences, formalism, the importance of uniqueness in aesthetics, and the history of vision debate.

But sometimes, in some aesthetic contexts, our attention is not at all distributed, but very much focused. Nanay closes his argument with an analysis of some paradigmatic aesthetic phenomena where our attention is focused: identification and engagement with fictional characters. And the conflict and interplay between distributed and focused attention is an important feature of many artworks.

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#### Review

"the discussions are rich with examples drawn from both 'high art' and 'popular' media, never overused and always on point. This is not to suggest that the discussion is 'overly accessible': it offers high-level discussion of technical issues in philosophical aesthetics and art theory, and no less so of issues in philosophy of and empirical studies on perception. For each separate topic or chapter, prior to offering his own critiques and positive analyses, Nanay offers a clear and engaging background story -- whether it is the conceptual history of formalism, philosophical theories about how we see pictures, or scientific evidence that suggests sensory perception is not functionally isolated from other mental processes. The book both invites and informs." -- *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews Online*

"Nanay's book is a valuable resource for neuroaestheticians, philosophers of art, and art historians. Nanay has gathered a substantial body of evidence not only from empirical research, but from art-historical literature as well. His references include such acclaimed authors as Riegl, Baxandall, Gombrich, and Ruskin--some of the most influential authors in culture-based art history. This makes the book a wide bridge between empirically and classically trained philosophers that is easy to understand. *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* is certainly worth reading, no matter what the reader's background, thanks to Nanay's ability to describe scientific research with quotations from art history texts and translate research-based paradigms into the language of cultural art history and theory." -- *Philosophical Psychology*

#### About the Author

#### Bence Nanay, *Peterhouse, Cambridge*

Bence Nanay is Professor of Philosophy and BOF Research Professor at the University of Antwerp, where he is also co-director of the Centre for Philosophical Psychology and Senior Research Associate at Peterhouse, Cambridge University. He is the author of *Between Perception and Action* (OUP, 2013) and the editor of *Perceiving the World* (OUP, 2010) and of *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Perception* (Routledge, forthcoming). He has published more than 90 articles on various topics mainly in philosophy of mind and in aesthetics. He used to work as a film critic and served on the jury of various major international film festivals.

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