

Experiencing a painting

An interdisciplinary discussion regarding epistemology and experiencing

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Abstract

This article discusses how the relationship between the perceiving and the perceived can be outlined in terms of a current philosophical and neuroscientific understanding. The ambition is to highlight the potential relations between the processes of consciousness and interpretation, particularly regarding the experience of art as *invoking an immediate feeling*. The article takes a philosophical standpoint that is inspired by Edmund Husserl's epistemological discussions regarding intentionality and tries to combine it with a discussion of art as having the potential to invoke a feeling. In other words, the article tries to answer how, if we maintain the philosophical understanding of ourselves as the perceiving entity, art can *invoke an immediate feeling within us*.

Keywords Interpretation, epistemology, neuroscience, art, experience

Introductory remarks

Before we start, it is necessary to account for an assumption made in this article. This article has a phenomenological foundation, yet it also includes scientific results from the field of cognitive neuroscience. Initially, this might appear controversial due to considerable

ontological and epistemological differences between the two scientific fields. In their research, however, it is not uncommon for neuroscientists to apply the phenomenological method (Damasio 2003, Varela et. al. 1999). For the purposes of this article, the ontological and epistemological gap can be considered irrelevant on two accounts. First, cognitive neuroscientific research results are treated as the result of at least two interpretational processes, just as any inclusion of empirical data would be. This means that the neuroscientific research is considered a construction of knowledge, just as it would if it consisted of quotations from a phenomenologically inspired interview. Second, the purpose of this article is an inspirational one. The ambition is not to propose a new and completely finished construction of the process of perception, but instead to progress as far as possible within the framework afforded by the article in showing how perception can be considered. When that process meets the limits set by the framework of the article, the aim is to indicate sites with research potential along the intersection between cognitive neuroscience and phenomenology. The inclusion of cognitive neuroscience primarily rests upon the first argument: in this article, cognitive neuroscience is treated as a set of empirical statements, and is analyzed as such. Furthermore, the inspirational purpose of this article will hopefully allow some experimentation involving the inclusion of other materials. This specific use (and reduction) of neuroscience should not be treated as a generalization about neuroscience, nor as a comment on its validity. It is only a result of the limited scope of this article and the unsolved complexity of the mind-body problem, which will be introduced later in the article.

Perception as a process

In a discussion of the perception and inherent conscious interpretation of a painting, perception might initially be defined as a process. Perception thus becomes something that occurs in time, with a beginning and an end. One of the initial problems of this view is that the beginning of the process can be defined as the moment we first become consciously aware of seeing the painting. There are two problems with such a perspective. First, it disregards the historical development of our memories and our experience which has formed our interpretational position prior to seeing the painting. Second, the requirement to be consciously aware of seeing the painting

neglects the preconscious processes and their influence on the response of the consciousness. In other words, we must somehow experience a painting before we can become consciously aware of it - otherwise it would require that our consciousness can be directed towards external things that our senses could not. In terms of perception as a process, this can be described as the bio-chemical process of light hitting the painting, ricocheting into the eyes of the perceiver and then being transmitted to various neuronal elements of the brain, including the elements required for us to experience consciousness. This account of the process involves a number of assumptions, of which we can briefly discuss two. Firstly, it assumes that the experience of consciousness is located within networks of neurons in the human body, and that such networks are somehow able to constitute what we experience as consciousness. The transformation from neuronal networks to our experience of consciousness involves what is commonly referred to as the mind-body problem, since no explanation has been scientifically accepted yet (Overgaard 2015). Because this problem is still unsolved, it remains a challenge to the potential unification of the two different ontological stances adopted by neuroscience and phenomenology. Secondly, just as in the previous definition of a process, the biochemical process takes place over time. In that case, we can entertain the idea of preconscious processes forming the framework of our conscious experience of the perceived painting if we accept that the preconscious processes have the possibility to form a framework or at least an initial position for our conscious perception. We therefore need to look into what this preconscious process consists of. So far, we have established that the non-conscious process can interpret what is perceived prior to conscious experience.

In every moment of our lives, there are things of which we are not consciously aware. This statement is derived from two observations: first, insofar as it is defined as the direction of attention, consciousness is always directed towards *something*, and that *something* is always experienced as *one thing*, or as *one* experience of something. Second, at any point in time, more than *one thing* is available for consciousness to direct itself at, which means that those things must in some regard be present in the non-conscious part of the perceiver. For example; even if I am staring at something as monotonous as a white wall, I *choose* to look at a certain part of the wall, thus deselect-

ing other parts of the wall. This leads to the conclusion that the non-conscious process has at least two possibilities in interpreting what is perceived. The first interpretation is that the perceived is relevant for the consciousness in some way, and the second is that the perceived is not relevant for the consciousness (as it is the case with the remaining white wall at which I am not looking). If we can accept the assumption that we as humans do not always interpret things as having the same relevance for consciousness, there must be something in the interpretation of the perceiver prior to the perception which constitutes the difference in the interpretation of relevance. In other words, when a group of people see the same painting, the difference in individual interpretations of the painting has to originate from something which is not in the painting itself, but rather within the people who perceive the painting. This leads us to the concept of intentionality and the concepts of noema and noesis (Husserl 1995). Intentionality can be understood as a description of how the individual enters into a dialectical process in the perception of *something*. Intentionality involves the relations between the perceived as it is perceived (noema) and the experience and explication of the internal processes of the perceiver (noesis).

“For every noema there is a noesis; for every noesis there is a noema. On the noematic side is the uncovering and explication, the unfolding and becoming distinct, the clearing of what is actually presented in consciousness. On the noetic side is an explication of the intentional processes themselves. What is meant noematically is continually changing in perception, the something meant is more, more than what is originally meant explicitly. The something meant achieves a synthesis through a continual perceiving of the whole throughout its angular visions and perceptions.” (Husserl in Moustakas 1994, 30)

In Husserl’s view, the dialectical relationship between the perceived and the perceiver is not only a relationship between what is noematically experienced nor what is explicated within noesis; it is a continuing development of synthesis between what is meant explicitly and what *more* is meant. In this article, this understanding of the relationship between the perceived as uniquely tied to the per-

ceiver and the perceiver as conscious and non-conscious is the starting point for further discussions regarding perception.

To understand the potential for interpretation located in the conscious processing of a painting, it is relevant to further elaborate on the preconscious processes, since they form the framework of the conscious interpretation and whether it will take place at all. This brings us to the noematic interpretation of relevance. Here, cognitive neuroscience can provide a potentially relevant elaboration on the interpretation of relevance.

“For example, when the occipital lobe is activated by incoming visual data, there is no perceptual consciousness of the object until the parietal and frontal lobes are active, as shown by Martha Farah (1989), and Posner (1990). Yet Carl Aurell (1989), Sverker Runesen (1985), and McHugh and Bahill (1985) show that the activation of the parietal and frontal lobes is not caused by the activity of the occipital lobe. Instead, what happens is that, prior to occipital processing of the visual stimulus, the very act of paying attention in order to see what is there has already been activated by the midbrain and limbic system, which subserve emotional-motivational activity. Panksepp’s (1998) and Damasio’s (1999) neuropsychological studies strongly suggest that this activity is self-generated and self-energizing, and can be triggered by the stimulus only if the stimulus is already felt as possibly emotionally important for the organism’s purpose” (Ellis 2006, 40)

The occipital lobe is the area of the brain generally associated with the processing of visual data. The parietal and frontal lobes are generally associated with consciousness. Ellis’ initial statement has two consequences. First, visual data is processed prior to a conscious response. This point was also made above in the discussion of perception. Here, the two scientific fields reach the same conclusion. The second point Ellis makes is that the areas associated with consciousness are not activated by the visual data unless the midbrain and limbic system, which are associated with “emotional-motivational activity”, are activated prior to the occipital lobe. Philosophically, this can fairly accurately be interpreted as saying that we are

not conscious of visual stimuli unless they are deemed emotionally relevant for us. All of this assumes that the different ways of scanning the brain for electrical activity resemble the way in which the brain processes information and therefore also what constitutes consciousness (here we are back to the mind-body problem). However, the first point Ellis makes does appear to fit the philosophical discussion. The second point, regarding emotions enabling and directing consciousness constitutes a new detail in regards to how past experiences enable the perception of the present. Both the philosophical and the neuroscientific approach agree that some pre-conscious process decides whether the object is relevant for the conscious or not. The important difference is that cognitive neuroscience regards emotions as the foundation for that interpretational process. Further research regarding the relationship between consciousness and the emotions would be very interesting for ontological discussion in general, but also with regard to assumptions regarding the characteristics of logic as a transcendental system.

Before the epistemological discussions so far can be related to the experience of art invoking a feeling, the latter has to be defined. The traditions and literature addressing the interpretation of art and its relations to emotions is extremely rich. It is far beyond the scope of this article to show its placement within the theoretical field of art. As a result thereof and of the style of this article so far, the aim of this discussion of art as having the potential to invoke a feeling finds its origin in the everyday, lived experience of such an event. The initial definition of art invoking a feeling sounds something like this: It is the becoming aware of an emotion which the individual did not feel was present in the current situation and the process of that feeling being made central to the understanding of the specific situation in which the painting exists. This entails that it is a conscious experience of some feeling invoked by the painting, initially unconsciously. A line of argument could rightfully be that all feelings are immanent and only available to consciousness once they have been formed. In the case of the painting, this must derive from a contextually and culturally developed understanding of the expectations of perceiving colors on a canvas and the sometimes rather significant role and experience of the feeling(s) invoked by the colors and the canvas. Therefore, the understanding of art invoking a feeling does not seem to be principally or theoretically

different from the emotional potential inherent in any situation. However, it is the individual's contextual interpretation of similarities to other situations along with the reference to a clear, relatable experience that allows this discussion of perceiving paintings to be used as an illuminating case for theoretical comments regarding perception. Here, a painting serves as an example of all forms of art, since the level of abstraction in this article precludes highlighting the differences between different forms of art - and such a distinction is beyond the scope and purpose of the present study. The painting has been chosen as an example because it is a common and relatable form of art in which the potential to invoke an emotional relevance is quite clear.

The terms 'context' and 'culture' refer to individual interpretations regarding the concrete and historical context wherein the individual and the painting is situated. Context and culture therefore become part of the interpretation of the painting. Such a contextual and cultural approach has many consequences for perception, and numerous works have been written on that topic. Two obvious references are Immanuel Kant's categories of understanding and Piaget's schemata (Kant 1929, Piaget 1926). Although such a discussion is beyond the scope of this article, a comment is in order. Similarly to the mind-body problem; any discussion about whether schemata and categories stems from a biological or cultural origin has not yet been decisively and unanimously resolved. In this article, however, the elements are considered purely from a cultural standpoint. However, it could be speculated that the answer to the problem might be to abandon the analytical distinction between the cultural and the biological.

In regard to cultural and contextual influences on the perception of art and the idea of art invoking a feeling within us, a painting seems to be an excellent case to illuminate the preconscious interpretation of the perceived as the starting point of perception. The judgement of the relevance and therefore also of the characteristics of *something* (or of art) is the initial framing process for our future possible conscious experience of the initial object. When relevance is founded on emotion, it becomes clear that relevance is a judgement that can only be made if an initial interpretation of the unifying characteristics of that *something* has already been made. In other words, we cannot judge whether something is relevant or not with-

out experiencing some sense of what it is. This process is considered a non-conscious process, and, as such, it is a part of the noematic aspect of intentionality, since the result of the process is the perceived, as it is perceived. This also entails that the idea of art invoking a feeling within us and we have no conscious experience of that feeling being invoked, the preconscious process must have the potential to invoke a feeling. The specific experience of art invoking a feeling within us seems to be a verifying element for the discussions so far, but it also exemplifies the way in which consciousness can presuppose emotions. However, this does not mean that the emotion a painting invokes is the same in every perceiver, since both preconscious and conscious processes remain a construction formed and limited by the experiences which preceded the encounter with the painting.

The notion of noesis can help elaborate the conceptualization of perception. Husserl defined noesis as “*an explication of the intentional processes themselves*”. This indicates that the part of the intentional perception which is based on consciousness only includes the *explication* of the internal processes and therefore not the processes themselves. In other words, we as humans can only experience our thoughts along with all other potential intentional processes after they have occurred. This limitation arises from the fact that perception as a process has to be directed at *something* and that *something* has to be available for our interpretation of relevance (Møller 2015). However, due to the nature of the preconscious process discussed above, we can now state that thoughts or conscious interpretations can only be formed within the framework of the preconscious emotional judgement of the relevance and character of what is perceived. This discussion leads to an understanding of thought and intentional processes as similar to the concept of emotions in regards to how they become available to consciousness as the result of processes and not as processes in themselves. If this understanding is combined with the notion of preconscious processes, it becomes clear that thoughts as well as emotions only occur within the *framework* created by the preconscious processes. In light of the discussion so far, it still seems reasonable to see the individual as the perceiver and interpreting entity. However, it is not reasonable to assume that the interpretational process is guided primarily by consciousness, because the vast majority of intentional processes are

preconscious, and it is these preconscious processes that enable and shape possible conscious interpretations.

Framework as a concept has not been completely defined yet, and from the perspective of this article, it cannot be defined in a way that satisfies a contextual, scientific understanding. Framework as a concept is not derived from what it must be, but from what produces it and from the logical necessity that preconscious processes must have an end, a result, however temporary it might be. As long as framework is considered the result of preconscious processes, however, it must therefore also possess the principal characteristics of the processes which created it. The discussions presented in this article indicate that the concept of framework can be described as *unifying* (since it must interpret elements of the perceived as *something*, and therefore as a coherent element), that it is *contextually and culturally developed* (due to the nature of all experience being created that way), and that it must contain an interpretation of *emotional relevance*. Due to the characteristics of the preconscious process, any analysis of such characteristics shows just as much about how our perception functions as it can show us about how we are limited in our understanding of the world. For example, the necessity of emotional relevance logically indicates that we can never consciously perceive something which is without emotional relevance for us. This can both enlighten our conscious limitations and show how broad a concept *emotional relevance* has to be.

Finally, the concept of framework can be considered a result of the temporary position which the perceiver preconsciously takes to enter into a dialectical conscious process with a painting. Framework can be metaphorically described as the boat we did not get to choose but still have to use when we try to navigate the rough sea of interpretational possibilities afforded by a painting.

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