

The role of focused and distributed attention in aesthetic perceptual experience

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Abstract

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Introduction: This paper tries to explicate a theory to understand the aesthetic properties of pictures based on recent research in philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

Methods: From a philosophical point of view, such a theory could be used for explaining the artistic, semantic, or sociological aspects of the pictures. However, this paper is focused on showing how this theory is used for explaining aesthetic experience in the case of pictures.

Results: After introducing some preliminary conceptions for this debate, the concept of aesthetic attention is explained, and then some rival views for explaining the pictorial perception are assessed and undermined. Then, as one of the essential features of the aesthetic experience, the lack of interest is explicated in terms of the defended theory of pictorial perception. They thoroughly distinguished between two different objects, which are represented in picture perception, viz a two-dimensional surface picture and a three-dimensional depicted object. The study accounts for the relation between these two objects and determines their role in aesthetic experience.

Conclusion: The conclusion is advice, which is based on the defended theory, for non-specialist individuals in the art to put them in a position to understand the aesthetic features of non-realistic pictures as well as possible.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Generally speaking, pictures are among the essential elements for transferring meaning and beauty. The present paper tries to explicate a theory for understanding the perception of pictures based on recent research in the

philosophy of cognitive science and philosophy of mind. From a philosophical point of view, such a theory could be used for explaining the artistic, semantic, or sociological aspects of the pictures. However, this study is focused

on showing how this theory is used for explaining aesthetic experience in the case of pictures.

Methods

This research is mainly based on the study of the original and primary written sources on this issue. Accordingly, this study has tried to obtain some specific results about the phenomenon of distributed attention and the pertinent role of this kind of attention in explaining the aesthetic aspect of perceptual experience through the methods of conceptual analysis and philosophical arguments in the ways, which are usual in contemporary philosophy of mind and cognition in the analytical tradition.

Results

In terms of the things to which one can attend, two kinds of attention can be distinguished from each other. The first is called "attending to object", which means that while perceiving something, one's attention is directed just to an object as a whole and not to any of its properties. The second is called "attending to property" and refers to the kind of attention in which the subject's attention is focused on one of the properties of the relevant object. Each of these two kinds of attention can be itself "focused" or "distributed". In the case of focused attention, one's attention is directed to just one object or one property. In the case of distributed attention, by contrast, one is attending to several objects or several properties at the same time. According to these two distinctions, it can be easily seen that when one perceives something, four different modes of attention will be possible. Among these four modes of attention, the mode in which the attention is focused in respect of objects and distributed in respect of properties has a unique role in explaining the aesthetic experience. This kind of attention is referred to as "aesthetic attention" in this paper. The kind of theory that claims that aesthetic experience can be explained in

terms of the aesthetic attention is usually called "the theory of aesthetic attention". Some experimental studies belonging to the field of cognitive science affirm that during the aesthetic perceptual experience, people usually use their aesthetic attention. It should be noticed that there is at least two other candidate theory for explaining the aesthetic experience. These two theories are usually referred to as "the aesthetic property theory" and "the intrinsic value theory", respectively. There is not enough space here for treating with these theories in detail, and therefore, the author just mentioned a common objection to these theories. The objection is that the aesthetic property theory and the intrinsic value theory cannot explain and accommodate the feature of aesthetic experience, which is called "lack of control". It means that one usually does not have any control over her aesthetic experience, and therefore, cannot manage the situation in the way that the aesthetic experience occurs predictably. Due to the fact that the theory of aesthetic attention is the unique theory that explains this lack of control, this study take it to be the most appropriate theory for explaining the aesthetic perceptual experience.

Nevertheless, the theory of aesthetic attention has another advantage in explaining the relevant properties of the aesthetic perceptual experience of a picture. To understand this advantage, first, it should be noticed that there are two different objects that seem to be represented in a picture. The first object is the two-dimensional object, which is consisted of the surface of the picture and is, therefore, usually called "the surface picture". The second object is the three-dimensional object which is supposed to be represented in the picture and usually is called "the depicted object". One of the essential questions in the philosophy of aesthetic perceptual experience is whether just the surface picture or just the depicted object or both are actually represented in a person's visual experience. The theory that is defended in this paper, is that both the surface

picture and the depicted object are represented in visual perception. However, one can focus her attention on just one of them at a specific time. Thus, at a given time, both objects are experienced, but just one of them is attended.

Conclusion

According to what has been said in the main body of the paper, this study concluded that while perceiving a picture, two different aesthetic experiences may be realized. In the first case, one perceives both two-dimensional surface pictures and three-dimensional depicted object at the same time, but the person attends just the three-dimensional depicted object. In this case, one's attention is focused on the three-dimensional depicted object itself and is distributed toward its properties. This case can be taken as the appropriate model for understanding the conditions for the realization of aesthetic perception in the case of realistic pictures such as photographs and realistic paintings. In the second case, while perceiving two mentioned objects, just the person's two-dimensional surface picture is attended. Here one's attention is focused on the two-dimensional surface picture itself and is distributed in respect of its properties. This case can be an appropriate model for explaining the realization of aesthetic experience in the case of the varieties of kinds of surrealist pictures. Since people are usually more comfortable fo-

cusings their attention on the three-dimensional object and its properties, and therefore, are usually more apt to understand the aesthetic features of realistic pictures. This investigation may help non-specialist individuals in the art to put them in a position to experience the aesthetic features of surrealist pictures as well as possible.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

There are no ethical considerations in the research relevant to this study.

Authors' contributions

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Conflict of interest

This study did not have any conflict of interest.