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Aesthetic Properties: Context Dependent and Perceptual

I cannot thank David Davies, Stacie Friend, and Madeleine Ransom enough for their energetic and insightful wrestlings with the messy innards of “Categories of Art” (CA). Provoked and inspired by their queries and proposals, I sketch how I now prefer to understand crucial aspects of its claims, mostly following the text but filling it out or fixing it where this seems necessary. (I refer to the author of “Categories of Art” as “Walton⁷⁰,” leaving it to metaphysicians to decide how that guy is related to me.)

There are two contrasting themes in CA: Walton⁷⁰ argued that a work’s aesthetic properties depend on its historical context as well as its non-aesthetic properties and that “no examination of the work itself, however thorough, will by itself reveal [its aesthetic] properties” (CA, 363–364). Yet he insisted that aesthetic properties are perceptual and declined to challenge the idea that “paintings and sonatas are to be judged solely on what can be seen or heard in them—when they are perceived correctly” (367). He emphasized the first theme and what later came to be called “contextualism,” countering the “perceptualism” or “empiricism” dominant fifty years ago and the legacy of early twentieth-century formalism. I focus more on the perceptual side of things, correcting for its neglect amidst a resurgent contextualism. (Not enough is being said these days about beauty.) But what is most important is the combining of the two themes. Walton⁷⁰’s main objective, and mine, is to show how the contrasting claims cited above can be true together, and that they are.

I. PERCEPTUALLY DISTINGUISHABLE CATEGORIES

Appreciators perceive works of art in perceptually distinguishable categories, according to Walton⁷⁰, correctly in some categories, incorrectly in others. Works possess the aesthetic properties they are perceived to have when perceived correctly. Notice that what matters for Walton⁷⁰ is which categories works are correctly perceived in, not which ones they belong to. A work might be

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perceived correctly in categories to which it does not belong, or belong to categories it is not correctly perceived in.¹ Its aesthetic properties depend not on what kind of work it is but on how it is correctly perceived, when these come apart.

The notion of perceptual distinguishability and Walton⁷⁰'s restriction of the categories of interest to perceptually distinguishable ones are central to the interpretive worries addressed by all three commentators. The characterization of this notion in CA is seriously imprecise, and Walton⁷⁰ was inexplicit about the reasons for the restriction. Friend and Ransom want to expand the notion beyond what Walton⁷⁰ intended. My conclusions in what follows are roughly in accord with theirs, although I get to them differently. Davies would jettison the restriction, but the result is not entirely different.

A category is perceptually distinguishable, Walton⁷⁰ wrote, if “membership is determined solely by features that can be perceived in a work when it is experienced in the normal manner” (CA, 338–339). His was taken to exclude the categories of etchings, Cézanne’s paintings, and music composed by Brahms, and would seem to exclude the category of paintings understood necessarily to be artifacts or to have been produced with certain intentions or in a certain manner. Let’s call these historical categories, following Ransom (this issue), membership in them depending as it does on circumstances of works’ genesis. The categories of paintings in the style of Cézanne, Brahmsian music, and apparent etchings, were said to qualify as perceptually distinguishable.

Worries emerge immediately. Ransom and Friend both claim that we can perceive membership in some historical categories and propose that some should count as perceptually distinguishable. They may be right, but there are complications. I can recognize Cézanne’s paintings with reasonable reliability when perceiving them “in the normal manner.” I can see that something is a painting just by looking at it, or (with somewhat less assurance) that it is an etching. I can distinguish music composed by Brahms from the music of other composers and from most other sounds, just by listening. These perceptual experiences may be cognitively penetrated or require the perceptual learning that Ransom describes, but they are perceptual nonetheless. Mistakes are possible, of course; I might come across a forgery, or a minimalist “guernica” on loan from MMoA (the Martian Museum of Art), or a natural object that happens to look like an artifact, or computer-generated Brahmsian music. But perception subject to error is perception; we can also be mistaken in recognizing Cézanne-style paintings, Brahmsian music, and apparent etchings.

Should these historical categories count as perceptually distinguishable? Perhaps. They might even satisfy Walton⁷⁰'s definition, as quoted above. But notice that what seems evident is that we can see that a painting was painted by Cézanne, or hear that music was composed by Brahms. What matters on this definition is the possibility of perceiving features or properties themselves, not just perceiving that they obtain.²

To better or more clearly accommodate his examples, Walton⁷⁰ might have characterized perceptually distinguishable categories as categories whose membership is not determined (wholly or partly) by features or circumstances or events that cannot be perceived when the work is experienced in the ordinary way.³ Membership in the category of Cézanne's paintings is determined (partly, if not entirely) by Paul Cézanne's applying paint to canvas. Viewing it "in the normal manner" we do not perceive this activity, although we might see that the canvas was painted by Cézanne. Observing an etching in a museum, we do not observe the complicated process by which its surface was marked, even if we see that it resulted from such a process. There seem to be no such unobserved circumstances that make a picture an apparent etching or in the style of Cézanne, or a piece of music Brahmsian.

Walton⁷⁰ mentioned especially that categories corresponding to aesthetic properties, the category of serene things, for instance, or those of gaudy or graceful things, do not count as perceptually distinguishable. (CA, 339). These also are historical categories, if the argument of CA is right. Historical circumstances, which appreciators do not perceive, help to determine works' membership in them; they help make serene works serene. But his criterion as originally formulated can easily be construed as allowing them. Appreciators perceive the serenity of a serene work; they do not see merely that it is serene. So, membership in the category of serene things "is determined solely by [a feature] that can be perceived in a work when it is experienced in the normal manner"—viz. its serenity. (I am reading "solely" as meaning entirely: a work's serenity is sufficient for its membership in the category of serene things.)

Should we restrict our attention to categories Walton⁷⁰ considered perceptually distinguishable? Or might historical categories function in aesthetic experience and judgement in the ways other categories do? The idea will be that appreciators sometimes perceive works of art in the categories of etchings, Cézanne-painted canvases, or music composed by Brahms, for instance, and that which aesthetic properties a work seems to have sometimes depends partly on which historical categories it is perceived in.

What is it to hear music in the composed-by-Brahms category? That would be to hear a composed-by-Brahms gestalt; hearing that the music was composed by Brahms would not be enough. We might describe the experience as hearing the music's having been composed by Brahms. I think we do enjoy such experiences. But it is unclear how they differ from, for example, hearing the Brahmsian style gestalt, how hearing music as composed-by-Brahms differs from hearing it as Brahmsian, or what difference there is between seeing something as an etching and seeing it as an apparent etching. So, although we need not exclude historical categories like those of etchings and Brahms-composed music, it is not clear that recognizing them will explain much if anything that is not explained by means of categories like apparent etchings and Brahmsian music.⁴

We do need to recognize “aesthetic property” categories, however. To perceive a work in the category of serene things, to perceive the relevant gestalt in it, is simply to perceive its (actual or apparent) serenity, dependent as that may be on perceiving the work in other appropriate categories. There will also be categories constituted partly by aesthetic properties. Indeed, the category of Brahmsian music is probably one. The Brahmsian style consists in part of lush harmonic textures, as well as traditional formal structures, superimposition and alternation of duple and triple meters, and so on (CA 340). The lushness is surely an aesthetic property. Historical circumstances that affect how a musical work is correctly perceived probably help to determine whether it is lush and so whether it is Brahmsian. So this category is an historical one! No doubt many other familiar categories are determined partially by aesthetic properties. To be a minuet is perhaps, in part, to have a lilting melody; scariness may help a film qualify as a horror film; humor may do the same for jokes.⁵ Lilting melodies, scariness, and humor arguably count as aesthetic properties. Think also of the categories of lullabies, and dirges.

What difference might it make whether a work is perceived in, or is correctly perceived in, “aesthetic property” categories like these? Lushness is standard relative to the category of Brahmsian music, counting as it does toward membership in this category; it is variable or contra-standard relative to other categories. A work’s lushness probably affects listeners’ aesthetic experiences differently depending on whether it is standard or variable or contra-standard for them. So, there are likely to be (second-order) aesthetic properties that depend on whether a work’s lushness—or lilting melodies, or humor, or scariness—is standard or variable or contra-standard relative to categories in which it is correctly perceived (compare Zangwill 1999, 614–615, 617).

Let’s resurrect Walton⁷⁰’s original characterization of perceptual distinguishability. Understood in a reasonable way—not exactly as Walton⁷⁰ understood it—we can limit our attention to categories it defines as perceptually distinguishable. We must read “solely” as entirely, so historical categories are not automatically excluded. And we must be sure to distinguish perceiving features from perceiving merely that they obtain. To perceive a work’s membership in a category, to perceive the feature(s) that qualify it as a member (or an apparent member), is what it is to perceive its gestalt, to perceive it in that category. Only categories that are perceptually distinguishable, on this definition, are such that works can be perceived in them (see Friend, this issue).

I am not at all sure that anything much like the above motivated Walton⁷⁰’s original restriction to perceptually distinguishable categories.

II. THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE

“How—if at all—should knowledge of the historical context of a work’s production influence our aesthetic judgments of its properties?” Ransom identifies this as one of two main questions CA addresses. The answer: “such knowledge is not necessary for making aesthetic judgments; perceiving an individual artwork as belonging to a (correct) category of art requires no art-historical knowledge whatsoever” (2020, xxx). She points out, rightly, that CA does not take appreciators’ perceptual experiences to be cognitively penetrated by art-historical knowledge. And drawing inferences about a work’s categories from such knowledge would not be perceiving it in them.

It does not follow that knowledge of a work’s historical context should not ever influence our aesthetic judgments. I may investigate a work’s historical context in order to assure myself that I am perceiving it in the correct categories before judging it to possess the aesthetic properties I perceive it to have (Ransom 2020, xxx). This historical knowledge may affect my perceptual experience, as well as my judgement. I might decide, deliberately, to perceive a work in certain categories (if I am able to) rather than others, thinking that the former are the correct ones. But this is not cognitive penetration. (Compare: Thinking the sandhill crane is over there, I turn to look. My thought affects my perceptual experience but does not penetrate it.)

Nevertheless, we often perceive and judge works of art without making use of, or even bothering to acquire, the art-historical information that bears on which categories they are correctly perceived in, and no doubt, we frequently perceive them correctly and judge them accurately. We just “look and see,” noticing a painting’s serenity or gaudiness; we listen and hear music’s frenzy or its lush harmonic texture. We can be wrong, but when we have no particular reason to doubt the veridicality of our perceptions, we do not bother to check.

Aesthetic perception is no different from perception in general in this respect. We look and see a mountain goat in the distance, without checking on the host of circumstances which, if not the right ones, would mean that our perception is not veridical. Epistemologically, these cases are parallel. But what we might or might not check on in the aesthetics case are circumstances that help to determine what aesthetic properties the work possesses. Lighting conditions, the presence or absence of mirrors, and so on, do not help to make it the case that a mountain goat is or is not there in the distance; the goat does that.

Ransom expands on Walton⁷⁰’s claim that perceiving works in a given set of categories is a skill that must be acquired by training, specifically by being exposed to other works in the relevant categories. The training, “perceptual learning,” effects “an enduring change in the perceptual system,”

she suggests (2020, xxx), rather than giving us factual knowledge that might be used in inferences or might cognitively penetrate our perceptual experiences. I would add that not only do we gain an ability, as Walton⁷⁰ emphasized, we learn how to perceive works in certain categories; the change makes for a tendency to do so automatically, without thinking. Let's say that we acquire a certain perceptual disposition; we come to be disposed to see certain kinds of things in certain categories. To say that what is acquired is an ability, is not quite right. It is not exactly that we are able to see works in a given category should we choose to. We might not know how to choose. What typically happens is that, after the relevant training, we do see the relevant works in the relevant categories, often automatically and without thinking.

III. ARTIFACTS AND FORGERIES

Some “contextualists” think CA does not go far enough in their direction. Davies emphasizes the importance of artifactuality. We perceive a work as a “thing made,” as “issuing from an artist’s agency,” he insists (2020, xxx), and this requires recognizing categories that CA, on one construal, disallows. Others contend that forgeries differ aesthetically from original works of art, even if the two are perceptually indistinguishable, and claim or suggest that CA has trouble accommodating the difference. I agree that works’ artifactuality and their status as forged (or not) both matter aesthetically. But they matter in very different ways.

To account for the importance of artifactuality, Davies holds that works are to be perceived in categories in which being an artifact is a standard property, for example, the category of paintings understood as things painted by someone or the much larger category of artifacts—categories that are not perceptually distinguishable “in the Laetz/Walton sense” (2020, xxx).

I do not rule out perceiving works in such categories. But it is unclear how doing so would differ from perceiving works in the clearly perceptually distinguishable category of things apparently painted by someone, or that of apparent artifacts. Shouldn't this count as perceiving works as “things made”? In any case, standard properties tend to be ignored, taken for granted as it were. What is important is that works’ having apparently been made in a certain manner—laboriously or haphazardly or in haste or with confidence—be variable (or contra-standard) relative to categories in which they are correctly perceived. This they certainly are.⁶

Forgery is different. I think we rarely, if ever, perceive works in categories in which having been forged or apparently having been forged is standard. We do not perceive anything like a forged gestalt. Nor is having apparently been forged variable or contra-standard relative to categories in

which works are correctly perceived. We do not experience a work of art as a “thing forged” or a “thing not forged.” (An unusual exception: Some experts perceive certain paintings as Van Meegeran-forgeries-of-Vermeer.)

There is another way of accounting for aesthetic differences between forgeries and originals. The fact that a work was or was not forged may affect which categories it is correctly perceived in and, as a result, what aesthetic properties it possesses, categories that may be perceptually distinguishable in the strongest sense. More generally, having been produced in a certain manner can affect how a work is correctly perceived, whether or not we perceive its having been or apparently having been produced that way (see CA, 358).⁷

IV. LITERATURE

I am mostly on board with Friend’s (2020) suggestions about how the claims of CA might be extended to literature. We need an analogue of the notion of perceptually distinguishable categories, in whatever sense that is important. But the extension is problematic even apart from this notion. “The aesthetic properties of works of literature are not happily called perceptual,” Walton⁷⁰ observed (CA, 335n5). If they are not perceptual, they will not be perceived in anything like categories, whether “perceptually distinguishable” or not, and which categories a literary work is perceived in will not affect which aesthetic properties one perceives.

I agree that non-inferential experiences of being “struck” by properties of literary works are enough, like seeing or hearing properties of visual and musical works to serve as analogues. A story or poem may seem to readers to be ironic or subtle or rich or awkward or profound or witty or provocative, as a song or painting seems—to strike us as—serene or agitated or gaudy or graceful.

There is also a close enough analogue of perceiving in a category—call it experiencing in a category: experiencing a literary work as a romantic comedy or a lyric poem or a detective story or a nursery rhyme or in the style of Hemingway or Cervantes or Proust. A reader may be under the impression that he or she is reading a romantic comedy or a lyric poem; he or she may think of what he or she is reading as a detective story or as in Hemingway’s style. And features of the text may be standard, variable, or contra-standard relative to categories he or she experiences it in.

But are these experiences non-inferential? Friend observes that “distinguishing most literary genres requires comprehension” (2020, xxx). Does the reader notice relevant features of the work and

figure out (implicitly, if not explicitly) that it is a nursery rhyme or a ghost story (or any way that it possesses the associated “gestalt”)? That would hardly be an analogue of perceiving in a category.

The worry is misplaced. To experience a work in a category, like hearing or seeing in a category, is not, or not merely, to recognize the gestalt of the category. It is not a momentary occurrence, but a continuous state that may last a short or long time. The reader experiences the work as a detective story or in Hemingway’s style when, and as long as, it seems Hemingway-ish or detective story-ish to him or her (see CA, 341). (So, it is misleading to describe experiencing a work in a category as being struck by its membership in the category.) The reader’s impression of the work’s category may have begun with an inference based on features of the work, but he or she probably does not continue drawing the inference. He or she might not even remember the features that convinced him or her that the work is a detective story or in Hemingway’s style or a work of magical realism, or that they did the convincing, as he or she reads on—continuing to think of the work as a detective story or Hemingway-ish or magical realism.

Literature is no different from visual and musical works in this respect. To see or hear a work as surrealist or Brahmsian is not to infer that that is what it is, but one’s seeing or hearing it that way might have begun with such an inference.

Reflecting on Ransom’s, Friend’s, and Davies’s discussions taught me that the innards, the details, of CA are messier than I remember. I hope my sketchy remarks have gone some way toward tidying things up, but lots of loose ends remain, issues left dangling and under rugs. Some require the resolution of ongoing debates about the content of perceptual experiences and how perception and cognition are related, debates that were not very active or very advanced in 1970.⁸

Fortunately, none of this messiness, intriguing and important as it is, seems to me to threaten the main arguments of CA or the general shape of its conclusions. Works of art are rooted firmly and essentially in their particular cultural contexts, in circumstances beyond the perceptual range of appreciators in the gallery or concert hall. Yet their aesthetic properties are there to be perceived and appreciated and valued.

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¹. Walton^{’70s}’s four criteria of correctness are, explicitly, criteria for determining which categories a work is correctly perceived in. There is no good reason to suppose that exactly the same criteria, similarly weighted, govern category membership.

². “I see the serenity of a painting, and hear the coherence of a sonata” (CA 365). The distinction between seeing a work’s serenity and seeing merely that it is serene is desperately in need of explanation—which it will not receive in this essay.

³. Here and elsewhere it is a metaphysical, not epistemological, determination that I have in mind.

⁴. It can be correct to hear a work as composed-by-Brahms even if it was not.

⁵. Or perhaps horror films and jokes appear to “aim at” scariness or humor, the apparent aiming itself being an aesthetic property.

⁶. I have argued, independently of the apparatus of CA, that how a work appears to have come about is often aesthetically important, and that this appearance may depend on what we know about

how it actually came about (Walton 2015, 36–42, 52). Appreciators perceive the appearance, but not the actual process of production.

⁷. Whether a work is a forgery also matters quite apart from any effects on our perceptual experiences. We often value the “authenticity” of originals, for instance. Authenticity will not count as an aesthetic value, however, if we recognize a tight connection between the aesthetic and the perceptual. Some will call it artistic, although I am not sure what that is supposed to mean. But it is a value, however it is classified (see Davies 2003.)

⁸. Walton⁷⁰ was well aware of E. H. Gombrich’s declaration that eyes are never innocent, but the nature of their guilt, as well as its extent, is in dispute now more than ever.

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