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Nanay, Bence. *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*. Oxford University Press, 2016, 192 pp., \$65.00 hardcover.

Are the concepts of contemporary aesthetic theory stale and insufficiently empirical? Bence Nanay certainly thinks so. In this original and ambitious book, he draws on his voluminous scholarship concerning issues in perception and the arts to propose a major overhaul of aesthetics. He begins by distinguishing aesthetics from philosophy of art. Although his focus is on the arts – especially pictures -- he aims to characterize aesthetics without any reference to art. He also rejects definitions of aesthetics in terms of beauty or aesthetic properties. How then is aesthetics to be characterized and connected to art? The connection he proposes travels through the concept of experience to theories of perception. We have many types of experiences of the arts, he says, and some of these are aesthetic experiences. Further, Nanay claims, some aesthetic experiences are at bottom ways of perceiving. The content of this book is about how such aesthetic experiences are explained by a theory of perception.

Nanay attempts to soften the implication of the rather grandiose-sounding title of his book by emphasizing that he is arguing only for the value of exploring aesthetics *as* philosophy of perception; he does not claim that aesthetics is nothing but a branch of philosophy of perception. He promotes this program in a number of ways. One is to suggest that such a research program, if successful, will take aesthetics out of, in his view, its current philosophical isolation, so that “maybe aesthetics can be considered to be more of a core discipline” (p.3). His strategy is to demonstrate the fruitfulness of his approach by showing how it illuminates a number of concepts and debates in recent aesthetics.

The burden of the first two chapters is to develop a framework for investigating issues in aesthetics as perceptual issues. He follows this by two chapters that apply his pivotal concepts – centered on a theory of attention -- to the perception of pictures. He follows this with three chapters that discuss debates in recent philosophy of art concerning: (a) formalism, (b) uniqueness of artworks and (c) the history of vision debate. He concludes with a chapter that applies his ideas about attention to the very different case of identification with a character in fiction.

Nanay bases his account of aesthetics on the notion of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experiences which especially interest him are, he claims, ways of perceiving. However, he does not claim that the domain of aesthetics is exhausted by perceptual experiences: “I am not even saying that all questions of aesthetics can be fruitfully tackled with the help of philosophy of perception. But many, even most, of them can” (p.9).

Unfortunately Nanay does not provide a systematic account of aesthetic experience. Instead he relies on quotes from artists and writers (Proust, Camus, Huxley) describing experiences with which we are supposedly familiar and which we will agree are aesthetic experiences. This from *Swan's Way* gives the flavor: "But even the ugliness of faces . . . seemed something new and uncanny . . ., measurable by aesthetic coordinates alone, in the autonomy of their curves and angles" (p.13) or this from Camus, "a little courtyard with arcades. Red flowers, sunshine and yellow and black bees. . . I want nothing else but this detachment and this closed space – this lucid and patient intensity" (p.14). Intuitively, these are aesthetic experiences. While accepting the Kantian idea of aesthetic experience as free of practical utility, Nanay endorses Hopkins' distinction between savoring beauty and judging beauty. Nanay favors the former, as he aims to treat aesthetics as about experiences rather than judgments. Mention of savoring, however, is a bit misleading as there is little mention of pleasure or of positive or negative evaluations of what is perceived in Nanay's subsequent account of aesthetics as perceptual experience.

Having rejected traditional definitions of aesthetics, Nanay proposes that many aesthetic experiences can be explained in terms of a type (or types) of perceptual attention. To clear the ground for an attention-based account, Nanay confronts Dickie's influential argument that the aesthetic attitude is a 'myth.' Dickie's argument against a special aesthetic attention depended on claiming that there is in fact only one type of attention. But, as Nanay notes, this is simply false: there are a number of ways of (consciously) attending, and these have been widely studied and catalogued by psychological researchers. Nanay's proposed account is based on the distinction between focused and distributed attention. He applies this distinction to both perceptual objects and properties (including relational properties); for example, sorting a pile of socks solely by color would involve attention distributed across many objects but focused on one property, color. Hence, there are four different ways our attention can be exercised depending on whether attention is distributed or focused and whether on objects or properties. He then equates aesthetic attention of the Proustian sort with attention that is focused on one object but distributed across properties. As an example, he suggests that an aesthetic experience of a landscape might be focused on the whole landscape as one object but distributed across various properties: "and among these properties will be relational properties connecting various parts of the landscape" (p.25).

Applied to landscapes this is a puzzling idea: that the properties of objects are attended to (consciously noticed) even though the objects are not themselves attended to, at least not as the individual objects they are. That might work for socks, but not for the many types of object in a landscape. Nanay's account, as we will see, is especially designed to explain the perception of (representational) pictures and sculptures (his ch.3), so one answer to this difficulty is to suggest that the idea here is to treat the experience of a landscape as experience of a two-dimensional picture, what Allen Carlson has called the scenic model of nature appreciation. In that case, the natural objects become elements of an overall picture and the various types of relations contained

in Nanay's account of pictures (see ch.3) can be invoked. To the objection that this is not an adequate model of aesthetic appreciation of a landscape, Nanay can make two replies. First, if his account is correct, this is *an* aesthetic experience, and second, he does not claim that such an experience is the only type of aesthetic experience or that it is the only correct or best way to aesthetically experience any given type of object.

Indeed, "the claim is not that [his account of aesthetic attention] is a necessary condition, let alone sufficient condition for all kinds of aesthetic experience" (pp. 27-28). What he claims is that the account of aesthetic attention as "distributed across properties but focused on one object" (p.26) explains the Proustian kind of aesthetic experience. He further suggests that attention focused with regard to objects (e.g., focused on a painting, sculpture or landscape) but distributed with regard to properties is a plausible updating of the notion of disinterested attention. However, a potential problem for the claim that this type of attention is at least sometimes an *aesthetic* experience is that it could be merely a causal or material basis of an aesthetic experience without being itself an aesthetic experience. Nanay supports the stronger claim by quotes from Robert Musil, Roger Frye and the Russian formalists all of whom describe aesthetic or artistic experience as an unusual sort of attention, which Nanay takes to be distributed attention. Expecting the question, "why we should care about such aesthetic experience?" he answers: "because aesthetic experiences allow us to see and attend to the world differently; in a way that we don't, and couldn't, otherwise" (p.33).

In the thickly referenced Ch. 3, Nanay sorts out the extensive philosophical debate about perception of pictures by noting that both Gombrich and Wollheim slide back and forth between asking how pictures are perceived and asking how pictures are to be aesthetically appreciated. What do we see when we see an object in a picture? At the very least we *see* the picture surface and the depicted object. A widely discussed view, labeled the Twofoldness claim, is that we attend to the surface and the depicted object simultaneously. But a problem for this is that normally "we only attend to the depicted scene, not the picture surface" (p.44). So perhaps this claim is not about the perception but rather the appreciation of pictures as pictures?

Nanay locates three elements of picture perception (not all apply in every case). There are two perceptual states involved in picture perception: the perceptual representation of the two-dimensional picture surface and the perceptual representation of the three-dimensional object the surface encodes. The twofoldness claim for *aesthetic appreciation* is not just that there is a simultaneous representation of both elements but that simultaneous *attention* is devoted to both (we attend to how the marks create the depiction). To this framework he adds a third element: if we recognize the object being depicted, then, he argues, we have a quasi-perceptual representation of that object (i.e., some sort of mental imagery which influences our perceptual experience (p.57)). For instance, in a caricature of Mick Jagger we experience not just a representation of a grotesque Mick but (necessarily) also a quasi-representation (mental image) of Mick: "in order to explain the phenomenology of seeing this picture as a caricature of Mick Jagger, we need to take all three of these . . . states into consideration" (p.57).

Whichever state we attend to “depends on our pictorial interests” (p.58). But to *appreciate* some pictures we need this third fold and to attend to the relation between it and the second fold (the encoded three-dimensional object) “when, for example, we want to assess how good the caricature is (or how naturalistic a picture is)” (p.58). The threefolded framework fits in well with Nanay’s account of aesthetic attention. For example, he calls a ‘design-scene’ property: a “relational property that cannot be fully characterized without reference to both the picture’s surface and to the three-dimensional object visually encoded on the surface” (p.59). Obviously, as Budd notes, the relation between the marks on the surface and what is depicted in them “is the crucial characteristic of pictorial art” (quoted p.60). Nanay takes attention to design-scene properties as exactly fitting his account of aesthetic attention: attention that is focused with regard to objects but distributed with regards to properties (p.61). (The surface and the depicted scene are one sensory object, for Nanay: they occupy the same region of the visual field.) But here he hints at an important admission: “when we appreciate pictures aesthetically, this does not automatically count as aesthetic experience: it is possible that some other necessary conditions are not met” (p.62).

Chapter 4 is about aesthetically relevant properties, and it turns out to be an extended argument that these are not aesthetic properties. In fact, in this provocative chapter Nanay has nothing good to say about the aesthetic properties of contemporary aesthetic theory. He implies that aesthetic properties fail to pass muster for perception theory. He says there is no principled way to answer the question whether aesthetic properties are perceived or inferred (“Do we literally see things as beautiful or as graceful or do we just infer . . . that they are” (p.70). (He assumes that this is a problem about aesthetic properties rather than a difficulty with perception theory.) In contrast, aesthetically-relevant properties are unproblematic: “a property is aesthetically relevant if attending to it makes any . . . aesthetic difference of any kind” (p.71). This has to do with whether attending to the property changes my experience of the object -- not necessarily liking the object more or less, but rather “that attending to [the property] would make me appreciate *my experience* more (or less)” p.73).

Nanay’s rejection of aesthetic properties may surprise those who have taken aesthetic properties to be sufficiently unproblematic as to have featured judgments about them in arguments supporting their ontological accounts (e.g., Danto, Levinson) or their accounts of aesthetic appreciation (e.g., Walton). Nanay takes “the use of aesthetic properties in addressing problems in aesthetics to be a research program and the use of aesthetically relevant properties to be another research program” (p.76). Echoing Lakatos’ approach to evaluating scientific theories, Nanay argues that the aesthetic-properties-based approach to aesthetics is a degenerate research program, whereas the aesthetically-relevant-properties approach is a progressive research program (p.79). One point he makes in support of this claim is that the job of critics is not to point out aesthetic properties but to point out features of the artwork that affect how you experience it. Hence, contrary to widespread philosophical belief, critical discourse doesn’t support the invocation of aesthetic properties.

He also argues that by investigating aesthetically-relevant properties we can ask nuanced questions about how they relate to our perceptual experiences. We can ask, for example, whether a non-perceptually-represented aesthetically-relevant property (e.g., the identity of the artist) changes our perceptual experience. Depending on our views about cognitive penetrability of perception we might think it can change what we see or that it can change our interpretation of what we see (p.89). He claims that “this question about the relation between perception and the domain of aesthetics can only be raised in terms of aesthetically relevant properties not in terms of aesthetic properties” (p.89).

In spite of this criticism, he says that he is “not trying to exorcise aesthetic properties” (p.79). So, perhaps the brief against aesthetic properties is merely that they do not lend themselves to study by philosophy of perception.

Using the explanatory elements thus assembled, Nanay addresses several problems in aesthetic theory: whether formalism is true, what accounts for the intuitive uniqueness of artworks and who is right in the debate over whether vision has a history. As regards formalism he defends an account he labels semi-formalism: “the only aesthetically relevant properties of an artwork are its semi-formal properties” (p.99). Assuming a rough intuitive agreement about what formal properties are (traditionally ‘surface’ properties: e.g., colors, shapes, tones, etc.) he defines semi-formal properties as either those formal (and hence perceptual) properties or properties that depend constitutively on those properties. As an example of how this works, it seems that “depicting a cat” would not be an aesthetically relevant, hence semi-formal, property, but “depicting a cat in foreshortening” or “depicting a cat with strong brushstrokes” would count as semi-formal properties (p.101). Nanay argues that semi-formalism captures formalist intuitions but is superior because not obviously false (unlike some versions of formalism) as it accommodates background information insofar as this affects picture perception. He gives the example of ‘being influenced by Cézanne’: this is a semi-formal property if the brushstrokes are the way they are because of Cézanne’s influence on the painter, otherwise it is not. This fits the distributed attention model because “most semi-formal properties do involve distributed attention – distributed between formal properties and some other properties” (p.103).

This position is attractive because it accommodates the aesthetic relevance of context of all sorts. But conceding so much to contextualism in philosophy of art seems to run counter to the motivating formalist intuition (Beardsley) that the artwork is to be appreciated independently of context, such as the artist’s intentions and the art-historical context. Nanay claims that despite appearances his semi-formalism is non-vacuous. It does have some opponents, namely, Freudians and Marxists who consider social context and/or the artist’s psychology as aesthetically relevant even though they have no connection to the formal properties of the artwork. Semi-formalism would also not support moralizing critics whose aesthetic experiences could be affected by their attitudes toward the artwork’s content.

He follows this with an interesting discussion of the nature of uniqueness in aesthetics (Ch.6). He suggests that the sense of uniqueness that strikes us when we experience artworks has to do with the type of experience he has already highlighted in terms of distributed attention. His thesis is that the aesthetic experiences he earlier highlighted (Proust *et al.*) are similar to the experience of treating an object as unique, as akin to encountering something for the first time.

Ch. 7 returns to the topic of perception with a careful discussion of whether vision has a history (Wölfflin says ‘yes’ – Danto says ‘no’). He usefully transforms the debate into the question of whether (visual) *attention* has a history. He tentatively concludes that people in Western Europe exercised twofold attention when looking at pictures in the second half of the sixteenth century but did not do so a century earlier (p.135).

In his final chapter Nanay pivots 180 degrees to examine focused, as opposed to distributed, attention. His example of focused attention is our engagement (“identification”) with a character, especially one in a movie. He illustrates such focus by contrasting modernist 1960’s movies (Antonioni, Tarkovsky) which are not solely visually focused on the actions of a central character with the claustrophobic attention on a protagonist characteristic of a Hitchcock film. He takes the focus on a character to be a different sort of aesthetic experience. Nanay bases his theory of identification on an account of vicarious experience, which he explains with the example of watching sports. If I see a ball bouncing toward a striker in football as relevant to what the striker can do (kick it at the goal), if, that is, “the content of my experience cannot be fully characterized without reference to the striker’s action,” it is a vicarious experience (p.164). Some vicarious experiences are perceptual, some are emotionally charged (if “the content of our experience cannot be fully characterized without reference to someone else’s emotions,” p. 165). He next points to a problem of epistemic asymmetry between viewer and protagonist in which the viewer has important knowledge the protagonist does not have (“watch out, someone is hiding in the basement!”). Yet this does not block identification with the character, even if we do not sympathize with her. Nanay then argues that none of the widely-discussed theories of identification (“imaging from the inside,” “sympathy,” “direct perception” or “mirror neuron activation”) can explain this phenomenon. But vicarious experience can. In such cases “we experience objects around the protagonists in a vicarious manner, in a way that cannot be fully characterized without the protagonist’s action” (p.178).

It could be charged that Nanay has not really explained vicarious experience but only defined it. Even so, such experience and the related problem of epistemic asymmetry add important pieces to be explained by any robust theory of character engagement.