

A POST-CULTURALIST AESTHETICS? A COMMENTARY ON DAVIS'S 'VISUALITY AND VISION'

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I

'Post-culturalism' names a stance against the reification of culture into a stable explanatory context of artefacts' appearances and meaning.¹ It refuses to be satisfied with the construction of culture as a "head office" which decrees [...] what artefacts will look like.² In art-historical theory, post-culturalism is characterized by two closely related 'post-formalist' tenets: (1) format before form: before asking what meaning an artefact's form 'expresses' or what style it instantiates, one needs to establish what features of the artefact's surface and setting contribute to its salience, or, in other words, with respect to what visual attention is the artefact formatted or situated.³ (2) Pragmatics before semantics: what makes an artefact visually conspicuous in a certain context may remain

This paper builds on the remarks I made at 'Towards a Post-culturalist Art History', a workshop at the Freie Universität Berlin, on 28 April 2016, which focused on the recent theoretical writings of Whitney Davis. I thank the Dahlem Humanities Center for hosting the event and the Dahlem Research School for providing the funding. I also extend my gratitude to Hans Christian Hönes and Gerhard Wolf, who participated in the workshop, and to *Estetika's* co-editor, Tereza Hadravová, for her comments and suggestions. Most importantly, thanks are due to Whitney Davis, whose support and participation were instrumental in bringing both the workshop and this section of *Estetika* into existence. Work on this paper was supported by the German Research Foundation Grant STE 2612/1-1.

¹ As Davis notes, the term (though not the attitude it describes) emerged during our preparatory discussions prior to the Berlin workshop. See Whitney Davis, 'Visuality and Vision: Questions for a Post-culturalist Art History', this issue of *Estetika*, 238.

² Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 216.

³ For various versions of this idea, see George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 41; Meyer Schapiro, 'On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs', *Semiotica* 1 (1969): 223–42; David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 335–36; Wolfram Pichler and Ralph Ubl, *Bildtheorie zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2014), 136–211. The relevant sentiment is captured – here in the context of depiction theory – by Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 166: 'The question of discerning a picture-maker's intentions, then, must be shifted from the spot in which it is commonly asked – the supposed problem of *discerning what the maker's picture means*. It must be refocused on what actually decides that issue, namely, the problem of *discerning what marks the maker effectively intended to preserve* and for what reasons (attending to which aspects of the marks) and purposes (projecting what role these aspects can play).'

invisible until one starts to reconstruct the behavioural patterns it exploits. In different use contexts (sometimes even within the same 'culture'), one and the same artefact can take on different visual aspects.⁴ These two principles – or perhaps tendencies within the same post-formalist impulse – are post-culturalist because they repudiate the 'black box' approach to artistic expression as an emanation of culturally established meaning through naturally visible form.

At first glance, these tenets address the question of reconstructing strategies employed to draw visual attention to artefacts, that is, to make them stand out visually for whatever purpose. What may be less apparent is that they also concern the question of reconstructing the standards of success at capturing visual attention. Embodying a meaning, instantiating a style, or any other way of being visually conspicuous may be comparatively more or less successful; sometimes, the bar is set relatively low or not much is at stake socially in failing to reach it. But as the social stakes increase, the question of comparative success or failure and the corresponding ability to tell the difference gain in importance: the ability to 'see' what makes, say, this warrior shield's pattern more fearsome than others or this king's portrait more regal becomes a crucial skill. Yet this question has not figured prominently in post-formalist writings. The following is a plea for an extension of the post-formalist (and by implication, post-culturalist) inquiry to the question of value.

This reluctance to address the topic of evaluation may be a side-effect of an effort to make a clear distinction between the reconstructive task of post-formalist art history and aesthetic inquiry. David Summers, for example, claims: 'works of art [...] were *not* made for our aesthetic experience [...] at least until it was possible to frame the intention of making "aesthetic" works of art.'⁵ And in his writings on the general theory of visual culture and what he calls a 'historical phenomenology of pictures', Whitney Davis has been consistent in explicitly distancing himself from any involvement in explanations of the status of pictures as objects of aesthetic interest.⁶ Like Summers, Davis sees questions of aesthetics as being relevant only to a particular form of historically developed sensitivity that has informed artistic practice (at least in the 'fine arts') in the West during the last two centuries and has been codified in an 'aesthetic ideology'. For Davis, aesthetic aspectivity – objects demonstrating aesthetic properties – is a form of

⁴ Susan Feagin, 'Paintings and Their Places', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1995): 260–68; Summers, *Real Spaces*, 27; Whitney Davis, 'What Is Post-Formalism? (Or, *Das Sehen an sich hat seine Kunstgeschichte*)', *nonsite.org*, no. 7 (2012), § 5, <http://nonsite.org/article/what-is-post-formalism-or-das-sehen-an-sich-hat-seine-kunstgeschichte>.

⁵ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 59.

⁶ Davis, *General Theory*, 3–5; Whitney Davis, *Visuality and Virtuality: Images and Pictures from Prehistory to Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

visuality, that is, a visual culture, to which one needs to 'succeed' in order to acquire a sensitivity that makes aesthetic aspects perceptible. It then follows that it would be misleading for an art historian to ascribe aesthetic aspectivity to objects intended for other visualities – unless it can be demonstrated that aesthetic sensibilities were developed within them.

Yet in some respects (and, given the subject matter of the discipline of art history, not surprisingly), questions of aesthetics, that is, very roughly speaking, of privileging artefacts for their looks, are never far from Davis's and Summers's concerns. It could be argued with some justification that Summers's ambitious project of a post-formalist world art history aims at developing tools for the reconstruction of historically specific norms for privileging certain looks of artefacts; these norms are embodied in what he calls the spatiotemporal 'second nature' that informs, and is informed by, the production of art objects.⁷ Concerning Davis, one need not look any further than the present essay, where he acknowledges three applications of the term 'aesthetics': as describing proprioception (close to its etymological meaning); as a label for culturally embedded processes of meaningful encounters with works of art (modern aesthetic ideologies); and, finally, as a 'colloquial' term for positive or negative responses to art.⁸ Accordingly, one can be said to be aesthetically experiencing a Mondrian (to stick with Davis's example) as soon as one visually registers its surface; or when one's looking at a Mondrian involves the kind of visual-cultural competence in which the category 'abstract painting by Mondrian' makes sense; or when one responds to the work's merits. Davis allows for all three meanings of the term to capture some features of visually encountering a Mondrian within a visual culture (or visual cultures) where things like Mondrian paintings 'look like art'.

To be sure, Davis's main interest lies in 'aesthetic questions in the ancient etymological sense';⁹ more specifically, in how sensory perception integrates, and gets integrated into, 'successions' to and 'recursions' within and between visual cultures; these cultures, as Davis rightly insists, need not be aesthetic in the second sense, that is, need not be of the kind where a Mondrian is made sense of in virtue of its looking like a work of art. But the relationship between the first two senses of aesthetics (pertaining to sensory awareness and pertaining to ideologies of art) and the third, 'colloquial', seems to me also to repay close scrutiny in a post-culturalist inquiry. After all, works of art like Mondrian paintings do not become conspicuous just because they are integrated into 'networks of

⁷ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 53–55.

⁸ Davis, 'Visuality and Vision', 249–50.

⁹ Davis, *General Theory*, 5; see also his introduction to *Visuality and Virtuality*.

visible and invisible forms of likeness;¹⁰ but also because of their relative success in displaying merited aspects. Works of art are intended to merit a certain response, but for various reasons they may fail even when they are recognized as candidates for appreciation (they are 'boring', 'uninteresting', and so on). They are usually not intended just to attract a specific kind of visual attention, but also to meet or exceed the normative standards inherent to their category – typically in competition with other artefacts in that category.¹¹ A comprehensive grasp of the reasons for an artefact's appearance – tools for which Davis has been developing – must therefore include a consideration of its comparative standing vis-à-vis other artefacts vying for the same kind of visual attention.

This consideration applies in principle to all objects relying for their visual conspicuousness at least in part on attracting attention to their appearance and in turn being assessed on this merit. Notice that at this level of generalization, such a characterization arguably does not rely on the historically developed preconceptions about artistic expression, medium, or purpose which we normally associate with modern Western art culture. The practices that fit the description may not necessarily aim at providing an intrinsically rewarding experience of the appearance of artefacts¹² and can be found outside the 'aesthetic ideologies of modern art' as well. The fear-inducing designs of warriors' shields of the Asmat of Irian Jaya, for example, would pass for products of such practices, insofar as it would make sense in the given visual culture to exercise sensitivity towards the varying degrees of frightfulness of the shields based on their looks.¹³ It may prove difficult and often even impossible to decide whether, when, and for whom an artefact's visual conspicuousness has relied on assessing its appearance. This

¹⁰ Davis, 'Visuality and Vision', 250.

¹¹ On the notion of 'merited response', see John McDowell, 'Values and Secondary Qualities', in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 131–51. For a standard account of categorial anti-formalism, see Kendall Walton, 'Categories of Art', in *Marvellous Images: On Values and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 195–219.

¹² 'Intrinsically rewarding' is the universal characteristic of (good) art according to Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 187.

¹³ Gell uses the example of the richly designed Asmat shields which 'had part in the deadly psychological warfare of headhunting' rather than 'intended to elicit "aesthetic" appreciation' to argue against a 'cross-cultural aesthetics' (*Art and Agency*, ix). Currie objects that the former does not rule out the latter and posits that 'the beauty of the design and execution [of an Asmat shield] add to the sense of confidence and power the piece expresses, and hence contributes to its fearful impression'. But there is a third option: the recognition of the shield's fear-inducing quality requires a normative sensibility that does not lead to any kind of gratification of the senses as Currie seems to imply. See Gregory Currie, 'Art and the Anthropologists', in *Aesthetic Science: Connecting Minds, Brains, and Experience*, ed. Arthur Shimamura and Stephen Palmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 122.

difficulty, however, should be familiar to any bona fide post-culturalist like Davis, for it is just a version of the difficulty that potentially affects any historical research into reasons for the looks of a particular artefact, which tries to scale down to the level of actual beholders' encounters with it.

I have tried to show that a case immune to the misgivings about aesthetic inquiry expressed by Davis and Summers could be built for a post-culturalist reconstruction of evaluative responses to artefacts' appearances, since it would not assume that the range of such responses were somehow linked to the artefacts' potential to provide an intrinsically rewarding gratification of the senses, of the intellect, or of both together.¹⁴ Whether such a broad investigation into the nature of evaluative attitudes towards visually conspicuous artefacts ought to be labelled 'aesthetics' is perhaps less important than the observation that it represents a necessary step towards establishing whether aesthetic appreciation in the more traditional, 'colloquial' sense is aimed at. For a post-culturalist, it cannot be ruled out that the question of what looking at an artefact is "aesthetically" like in the colloquial sense – that is, pleasant, unpleasant, relaxing, boring¹⁵ – shows up as relevant in visual cultures that have not developed anything like modern aesthetic ideologies.

II

Instead of further arguing the case for a post-culturalist aesthetics, I want to point to two recent contributions to the aesthetics of pictorial art, each arguably elaborating philosophically on one of the two post-formalist tenets while explicitly situating themselves close to Davis's brand of post-culturalism: Alva Noë's strange-tools theory and Bence Nanay's 'semi-formalist' account of aesthetic attention.¹⁶ The former develops a philosophical argument for the irreplaceable role of evaluating objects' appearances in the development of any human culture as well as for the essential place of art in it. The latter offers philosophical tools for a fine-grained description of strategies for drawing visual attention.

Noë's strange-tools theory of art provides a speculative genealogy of the emergence of art in human culture.¹⁷ Although the theory covers all major branches of the arts, I will briefly comment only on Noë's treatment of pictorial

¹⁴ This is an assumption built into some of the contributions to the recent revival of philosophical interest in the anthropological grounding of 'art behaviour'. See Currie, 'Art and the Anthropologists', and Davies, *Artful Species*.

¹⁵ Davis, 'Visuality and Vision', 250.

¹⁶ For Noë's remarks on Davis, see Alva Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), 231–32; Nanay lists both Summers's *Real Spaces* and Davis's *General Theory* as compatible with his 'semi-formalism'. See Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 106.

¹⁷ In this sense, he is part of the revival mentioned in note 14.

art on which he exemplifies most vividly the process of 'looping down'. For Noë, experiencing pictures (or pictorial seeing) is what enables us to develop what he calls an aesthetic sense. Seeing the world pictorially means seeing it in a state of detachment, seeing it as composed of objects. Aesthetic sense is based on this kind of detached seeing; it is a contemplative, normative attitude that allows us to evaluate and investigate the world around us. Human beings can assume this attitude towards virtually anything, but they learn it by looking at pictures. The invention of pictures is at the same time a paradigm case of art-making, for it captures its essential feature, that of bringing into focus our habitual means of interacting with the world by making them strange (hence the title of his book, *Strange Tools*). Essential to Noë's account is that art pictures also 'loop down'; they inform pictorial practices that in turn shape our visual experiences; art pictures then challenge these habits of seeing and depicting in a new loop, and so on.¹⁸

Noë's account of looping down bears obvious similarities to Davis's notions of 'succession' and 'recursion', as Noë himself notes.¹⁹ Unlike Davis, however, Noë is writing a theory of art; he identifies a moment in the looping process when a defamiliarizing effect puts picturing (or possibly other) technologies on display. For this reason, he holds that art-making is (or must have been at some point) an essential component of any human culture. At the same time, because pictorial art loops down and influences picture-making and visual attention, for Noë there are in principal no intrinsic symptoms of arthood, since we cannot tell a strange tool (for example, an 'art picture') from a standard one (for example, a picture serving a mere communicative function) unless we grasp what practice it is intended to challenge in the first place.²⁰ It is this element of the strange-tools theory that relates to the 'pragmatics before semantics' tenet of post-formalism: what makes an artefact a successful work of art in a certain context may remain invisible until one starts to reconstruct the behavioural patterns it exploits.

The idea of experiencing art as being parallel to encountering strange objects that one tries to make sense of also makes its way into Bence Nanay's notion of aesthetic attention. The latter is a sub-species of distributed attention unprompted by any pre-determined habit of looking so that one distributes one's attention across the object in order to make sense of it.²¹ In aesthetic appreciation of pictures as pictures, Nanay argues, aesthetic attention is typically distributed in a twofold way between its design and scene properties, that is, between the configuration of the picture's surface and what we see in it.²² In a quasi-Wölfflinian

¹⁸ Noë, *Strange Tools*, 51–57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 231, 235.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

²¹ Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy*, 13–35.

²² *Ibid.*, 59–62.

move, Nanay claims that such an aesthetic attention to design-scene properties has a history that – in Western painting – does not go back further than the mid-sixteenth century. He supports this claim by noting the increased incidence around this time of pictures that rely for their effect on the involvement of twofold attention to design-scene properties (for example, Arcimboldo's portraits/still lifes; the classic 'closed form' paintings of Raphael or Leonardo) and, conversely, by pointing to a conspicuous absence of any reflection of their relevance prior to the sixteenth century.²³ He closes the discussion by suggesting that twofold aesthetic attention to pictures may prove to be a fairly recent phenomenon in the Western history of art appreciation.²⁴

I do not want to go into how convincing Nanay's historical reconstruction of sixteenth-century visual attention is. For the present purposes, it suffices to stress that his decision to address the problem of pictorial art appreciation in terms of visual attention complies with the first tenet of post-formalism, 'format before form'. Instead of discussing the historical shift in taste in terms of a changing preference for stylistic or formal choices where the structure of attentive behaviour ('aesthetic attitude') remains the same and what changes are the preferred values (say, 'closed form' versus 'opened'), Nanay treats the shift as one of adjusting the picture's configuration to the demands of a peculiar visual attention.

III

My selective reading of Noë and Nanay, and the fact that both are referenced in Davis's essay,²⁵ is not meant to suggest that the two tread the same philosophical path (or that their accounts are fully compatible with post-culturalism). For that, the differences are too striking. In fact, the last two possible directions of post-culturalist inquiry Davis lays out at the end of his essay – away and towards visio-centric formalism – inadvertently capture the most relevant difference (at least for a post-culturalist) between the respective philosophical positions. Nanay veers towards what Davis characterizes as 'visio-centric formalism', that is, research into normative stances assumed in response to artworks' visible qualities.²⁶ Davis has a tendency to frame such attitudes as manifestations of social distinction, or as 'ideologies' such as the philistine or the avant-garde, and that is surely a valid approach. But it cannot tell the whole story, for these normative stances are also exercises of taste *within* visual cultures, including those that are not aesthetic

²³ Ibid., 149–56.

²⁴ Ibid., 159.

²⁵ Davis, 'Visuality and Vision', 238, 246.

²⁶ Ibid., 255.

ideologies in Davis's sense: some works fare better, some worse, even though they may vie for the same kind of recognition. Nanay's visio-centric 'semi-formalism', as he calls his position, provides tools for capturing this side of post-culturalist aesthetics.

According to semi-formalism, the necessary condition of aesthetic attention is that it is aimed towards properties of an artefact which are constituted by but not reduced to visually salient surface properties. It follows that there are more ways one can focus or distribute one's attention in relation to the surface properties of an artefact, the twofold design-scene attention that Nanay sees as central to the appreciation of post-fifteenth-century easel painting being just one. The fact that Nanay is deliberately vague about sufficient requirements for an aesthetic experience should actually be counted as a virtue by the post-culturalist since it makes aesthetic semi-formalism potentially applicable outside the Western art context; this possibility is implied in Nanay's admitting that attention to design-scene properties is not the only form that aesthetic attention to pictures needs to assume.²⁷

Noë's strange-tools theory moves in the opposite direction, away from visio-centric formalism. This is largely due to the demanding notion of art Noë defends. Appreciation of an artefact's 'decorative aspects' or 'virtuosity in craftsmanship', for example, is irrelevant to encounters with art proper, in so far as it is not an appreciation of 'the way [these aspects] subvert or undercut or abrogate the authority of what is normally taken for granted'.²⁸ In Noë's eyes, art is strange and difficult, it puzzles us, 'disrupts business as usual and puts the fact that we carry on business as usual on display'.²⁹ Understanding art as such a profoundly philosophical praxis would raise the bar for what deserves the label, but it would also raise the stakes for historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists in pursuit of art practices, many of whom have regarded decorative aspects and displays of craftsmanship as sufficient marks of arthood.

To come back to the fear-inducing Asmat shields, when one applies a rigorous version of Noë's strange-tools theory, it may be next to impossible to determine what kind of subversion (if any) they serve, and it likely won't help us understand why some of the shields' designs are considered more fearsome than others. If what we are after is the reason for artefacts' appearances, studying their formatting and the corresponding visual attention – a topic Noë does not really discuss – may put us on a firmer footing heuristically. This reconstructive work

²⁷ See Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy*, 58–59. Nanay, it has to be said, is not too keen on entertaining the possibility of differences in distributed attention across cultures. See *ibid.*, 158–59.

²⁸ Noë, *Strange Tools*, 104.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.

may in effect help track the shields' visual strangeness, only not necessarily one that issues from the philosophical work they do for their audience: an Asmat shield might draw heightened attention to itself as opposed to other shields not because it is a 'strange tool' in Noë's sense, but simply because it is particularly fearsome.³⁰

IV

Davis suggests that the implications of post-culturalism he draws for art history may not be mutually consistent.³¹ If that were the case with the two tendencies – namely, away and towards visio-centric formalism – a problem would arise for the integrity of post-formalism, which I identified as central to post-culturalist art history and aesthetics. For these two tendencies rely on the two fundamental post-formalist tenets. Are, then, semi-formalist reconstructions of visual attention irreconcilable with anti-formalist reconstructions of an artefact's cultural relevance? The sense of irreconcilability may arise, for example, when the difficulty or strangeness, which Noë makes the distinguishing mark of art, appears to evade any analysis of the strategies of entrapping attention. But that conclusion – as I have suggested – is not inevitable; the possibility of a post-culturalist aesthetic theory that would complement post-culturalist art history remains open. In fact, if I am anywhere near right in my analysis, guarded optimism is appropriate, thanks in no small part to Davis; for it is in conversation with his post-culturalist art history that the two recent philosophical contributions towards such an aesthetics – Noë's and Nanay's – have been advanced.

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³⁰ I develop a version of this argument in more detail in 'Art's Visual Efficacy: The Case of Anthony Forge's *Abelam Corpus*', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* (forthcoming).

³¹ Davis, 'Visuality and Vision', 255.

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