

# **The Limits of Expression: Language, Poetry, Thought**

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I, Patricia Kolaiti, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signature

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## **Abstract**

The following analysis takes as its starting point a divergence in views on what philosophers and linguists call 'effability' or 'expressibility' (the extent to which it is possible, through the use of a public language, to make one's thoughts available to others). While philosophers and linguists (Searle, Katz, Recanati) defend stronger or weaker forms of effability, the 'struggle of the poet to defeat the ineffable' is a recurring motif in most 20<sup>th</sup> century critical thinking. In trying to explain this apparent divergence, I reconsider a wide range of interdisciplinary issues of particular interest to linguists, psychologists, literary theorists and philosophers of art; these include the limits of linguistic expression, the role of perceptual representations in our mental tapestry, the existence or otherwise of a property of literariness or essence of art, the distinctiveness of the poetic/ artistic mind and the nature of aesthetic experience.

In due course, my discussion brings to light a novel account of the possible evolutionary origins of art and sketches an empirically tractable model of aesthetic experience that lend us significant insight on the actual mental goings-on behind the poet's discontent with language. In view of the distinct ways in which, as it will be argued, an artistic mind is creative and the psycho-cognitive particularities of the kind of action art is, the 'struggle of the poet to defeat the ineffable' is soon ranked as a problem of an entirely different order than had been previously thought. The thesis takes the thread from the empirical observation that the limitations of speaking out the contents of the mind are so much more intensely felt in the literary mentality, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of this very mentality, of the kind of action art is and the mind that brings it to light.

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## Prologue

Don't be surprised to see that what purports to be an extensive essay on the question of *effability* or *expressibility* of thought will along the way grapple with issues as wide and diverse as the essence of literature and art, the nature of the 'poetic mind', the content of aesthetic experience, the role of perceptual representations in human mental tapestry and the evolutionary origins of art.

One pretty much knows what to expect from an empirical theorist -say, a cognitive scientist, a theoretical linguist or a philosopher of language- dealing with a question like effability. At present, when theoretical specialisation is a methodological necessity in empirical studies, the 'characteristic mind set of the empirical theorist' - as I will refer to it in the first chapter- is such that she can only achieve relevance by keeping her subject matter relatively restricted and narrow. Certain types of empirical mind will happily invest an entire theoretical life investigating lines of argument that, to a literary-artistic eye, differ from one another by a hair's breadth. The present analysis, however, is at least partly the work of a thinker from the humanities. And it will be pursued at least partly in the literary-artistic way.

An underlying theme throughout the discussion will be the relation between thinking in the humanities and empirical/scientific theorising of the type produced in the cognitive sciences, linguistics and philosophy of language. From the outset, I have consciously tried to develop this thesis within a broader -and, in a sense, political- framework involving not just the content and import of theorising in the humanities *per se*, but also its relationship to and possible interaction with theory articulated within the empirical/ scientific world. Towards the end of this analysis (Chapter 8), I will argue that interdisciplinary exchanges in the Humanities in the last 50 years lack genuine reciprocity. Theorising in the humanities has borrowed extensively from

disciplines such as cognitive psychology, theoretical linguistics and philosophy of mind, but in turn has had little, if any, retroactive effect on any of these disciplines.

The belief that theorising in the humanities is intrinsically incapable of making *truth claims*<sup>1</sup> -the only way in which it could achieve retroactive effects on other disciplines- has become so deeply entrenched in the post-modern literary-artistic mentality that theorists seem to have entirely given up any ambition of actually forming or pursuing such claims. It goes to show how much theorising in the humanities has alienated itself from straightforward reason-preserving thought processes that post-modernism still holds pride of place in many departments and universities around the world. I take it as self-evident that nothing can be a theory of something unless it can make at least one *truth claim* about this something. Thus, theorising in the humanities, like theorising in the cognitive sciences, is committed to the pursuit of truth.

With these broader issues in mind, the question of effability may be seen as more an 'excuse' than a genuine question. Even so, this excuse was not chosen at random. The question of the effability of human thought itself, and the very different perspectives literary and philosophical camps have adopted towards it, seem to offer an excellent vantage point for looking afresh into a diverse range of pervasive literary and art-theoretical questions. How is this theoretical divergence to be explained? Are the different views put forward by literary authors and empirical theorists respectively arbitrary or empirically justified? Could the pessimistic perspectives on language and communication held in the literary world give ground for thinking that the literary

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<sup>1</sup> The testability of the claim, or the way truth is pursued and arrived at, may vary, but the claim should nevertheless be capable of being both intended and recognised as a claim for truth, for it to be relevant to any adequate notion of theory.



mind is different from other minds, or that literature is a distinct kind of object from others?

The aim of this thesis is twofold: my goal is not just to investigate these questions anew, but also to pursue them in adequately theoretical, genuinely interdisciplinary and mutually retroactive terms. In constant dialogue with a range of empirical disciplines, each chapter will lie on the borders of different interdisciplinary exchanges. The thesis is organised as follows: Chapter 1 introduces the debate on effability of thought and the tensions between linguistic optimism and linguistic pessimism; these tensions are then put forth as an excellent starting point for getting a better grip of the nature of literature/ art and the uniqueness of the mind that makes it possible. In Chapter 2, I consider how major 20<sup>th</sup> century developments such as the move from World to Mind, the emergence of so-called ‘cognitivist’, ‘mind-internal’ or ‘psychologistic’ accounts and the subsequent move from Codes to Pragmatics may radically alter perspectives on the issue of effability. Chapter 3 turns to the Mind once again, this time to explore and account for any justification linguistic pessimism may deserve: empirical facts such as the expressive difficulties that seem inexorably tied up with phenomenal -i.e. perceptual as opposed to conceptual- representations force us to accept the relative ineffability of at least some of our thoughts. Chapter 4 discusses whether an essence of literature/ art can still be defended: an essential distinctness of literature/ art would explain why linguistic pessimism is more widespread in the poetic mentality than the generic folk mentality. The chapter gives an overview of the positions of two main intellectual precursors, Jerry Fodor and Arthur Danto. In Chapter 5, I propose a new account of the essence of literature/ art as a case of etiological and more specifically mental/ psycho-cognitive distinctness. The etiological distinctness of literature/ art as an action and the special demands it

imposes on communication provides new grounds for understanding much of the poet's discontent with language. Chapter 6 launches an empirically tractable account of aesthetic experience as a special case of non adaptive sensory response and hints to the possibility much of what a poet refers to as 'agony of expression' to be agony for aesthetic achievement. Chapter 7 takes the thread from where the previous chapter has left to propose an evolutionary scenario on the origins of literature/ art and discuss extensively the locus of aesthetic experience in the kind of action literature/ art is: when a poet refers to the 'inadequacy of language' or speaks of her 'agony of expression', she is producing an impressionistic description of the 'symptoms' with which the particular kind of action literature/ art is presents itself to her experience. This impressionistic report, however, is very far removed from and only minimally captures the intricacy of the actual goings-on in the poet's/ artist's mind. It is only when focusing on the latter that we get an idea of the complex and retroactive psychological and sensory states undercutting linguistic pessimism, never mind the complexity and beauty of the kind of action literature/ art is. Finally, in Chapter 8, I lay out the rationale of this thesis, discussing the possibility of an up-to-date and genuinely interdisciplinary form of literary and art theory.

Having given an overview of the entire thesis, let us briefly go back to some of the interdisciplinary contributions to be attempted along the course of this analysis. Chapter 5 will introduce the notion of a 'poetic thought state', a compound creative mental state of potential interdisciplinary interest to cognitive psychology and creativity-related research. The discussion will also be relevant to ontology/ metaphysics, as I will attempt to outline a novel type of *relational essence* and propose a solution for at least some instances of the problem of *perceptually*

*indiscernible objects* -also known as *twin events*. Artworks and their ‘twins’<sup>2</sup>, I will argue, differ in that they have distinct *psycho-cognitive histories*: the one event is related to a particular type of thought state, while the other isn’t.

In Chapters 3, 6 and 7, my proposals will relate implicitly to current debates in philosophy on the ‘*thesis of non-conceptualism*’ (Tye 2006), while explicitly broadening the machinery of cognitive pragmatics by considering the addition of two theoretical terms (*aesthetic relevance* and *perceptual effect*) to Sperber and Wilson’s ‘Relevance Theory’ (1995). Finally, in Chapters 6 and 7, evolutionary arguments - speculative and preliminary as they may be- on the origins of *aesthetic experience*, and hence the origins of literature and art, will be linked to existing discussions on the evolutionary course of various human capacities and dispositions, and offer a new account<sup>3</sup> of the range of evolutionary processes relevant to the dissemination and propagation of art.

To conclude and get down serious business. My aim in writing this thesis was not only to grapple with the effability of human mental representations, but to show how theory within empirical and semi-empirical domains can not only influence but also be effectively influenced by the study of literature and art.

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. mere Brillo boxes and Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* or a stretch of ordinary language and a stretch of literary language.

<sup>3</sup> The speculations to be put forward in this chapter differ significantly in both their content and rationale from the evolutionary accounts so far proposed in archaeology, evolutionary psychology and the newly emerging trend towards ‘Darwinian criticism’ (e.g. Boyd 1998, Tooby and Cosmides 2001, Zeki 2002, Gottschall and Wilson 2005, Pinker 2007, Dutton 2008).

## Chapter 1

### How much of our mind can we speak out? The question of expressibility.

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*I haven't spoken to anyone for three days. In fact it seemed a good thing to keep silent. After all, words can't express all a person feels; words are inadequate.*

Andrei Tarkovsky, 'Mirror', 1974, A Mosfilm Unit 4 Production

*Dear Everyone,  
Words are inadequate, but I just wanted to thank you all for making my 'last' day both happy and memorable.*

From Neil Smith's e-mail to the UCL students who organised his farewell party

*...it's ripped my heart apart. There are no words really to express it*

Sion Jenkins, describing what the experience of being in prison for 6 years has done to him

*I knew that I would write no books either in English or in Latin in the coming year, the years after that, or in all the years of this life of mine. There is only one reason for this, a strange and embarrassing one; I leave it to your infinite intellectual superiority to give it a place among what to your clear eyes is an orderly array of mental and physical phenomena. It is that the language in which I might have been granted the opportunity not only to write but also to think is not Latin or English, or Italian, or Spanish, but a language of which I know not one word, a language in which mute things speak to me and in which I will perhaps have something to say for myself someday when I am dead and standing before an unknown judge.*

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'The Lord Chandos Letter'

The idea that language falls terribly short when it comes to articulating the rich and disparate contents of the human mental tapestry is not only intuitively appealing but also deeply entrenched within everyday folk thinking. At one time or other in our

lives, we are bound to find ourselves facing up to mental goings-on that words cannot quite capture.

This introspectively well evidenced fact seems to have been woven into the conventions of our daily verbal give and take. It is an accepted convention for a speaker to say something along the lines of ‘You should have seen the look on his face’, which implies that there was a noteworthy facial expression but does not go anywhere near to describing it; circumventions of this sort are never perceived as preventing speakers from being communicatively relevant. It does indeed appear as if some things cannot be conveyed, and as if human public language systems have found and established ways of by-passing existing expressive limitations.

An interesting corollary of this question is, what sort of things are they that cannot be conveyed? Introspective evidence again suggests that some aspects of our private mental lives are more difficult to convey than others. In discussing the poets of the Great War, and especially Robert Graves, Cohen (1999: [online paper]) writes:

The great limitations of language are never more fully realized than in the description of excruciating trauma. It is this sense which is most brutally exposed in the work of the poets of the Great War; their utter incapacity to comprehend the devastation, as well as their further inadequacy in passing on their experience through the simple and capacitating medium of language is the soul of much war poetry. Robert Graves gives voice to this frustration in his poem, ‘Recalling War’, in which he predicts indifference as a result of his generation’s unavoidable inability to capture the absolute destruction of war through literature. ‘Recalling War’ itself is a testament to the fact that prose and imagery, however inspired, are simply incapable of expressing what is essentially expressionless.

It is relatively easy to put into words a thought that crosses your mind, provided that the thought is clearly conceived, but very hard to convey the feeling a certain thought may elicit, quite independently of how ‘clearly’ this feeling is perceived. The reason

for saying ‘quite independently’ rather than just ‘independently’ is the intuitive fact that feelings too can be experienced with greater or lesser clarity. Just as intensely reflecting on a thought allows the thought to become progressively more refined and graspable, so intensely experiencing a feeling allows this feeling to gain greater and greater luminosity. It may be that clarity for thought systems and clarity for perception/sensation systems are rather different things, but the rule seems to apply equally to both: varying degrees of clarity in the way an object is thought about or perceived go hand in hand with varying degrees of expressibility and clarity of expressibility.<sup>4</sup> Sensation systems, and emotion systems, for that matter, appear to evade the resources and expressive repertoire of public human languages in a way not fully applicable to thought systems.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, folk reservations about the expressive capacities of public human languages were brought to the foreground of literary-theoretical discussion, and were fundamental in the deconstructive turn ‘against language’ on the part of avant-garde artists, theorists and movements. ‘The struggle of the poet to defeat the ineffable’ gained unprecedented urgency, and established itself as a telling motif of most 20<sup>th</sup> century critical thinking. This is by no means a contingent fact. The intensity with which the folk discontent with language came to the fore in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century must certainly be linked to the profound effect that emerging psychoanalytic doctrines had on the art world, taking the inward turn towards the artist’s and poet’s private mental life<sup>5</sup> to an entirely new level. Movements like surrealism or vorticism aimed to capture the mechanics of the subconscious, the

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<sup>4</sup> This is something I very often encounter in my poetic endeavours: concentrating mentally on a feeling helps me experience it with clarity, which, in turn, is somehow reflected in the way this feeling or sensation is conveyed through words.

<sup>5</sup> It can be claimed that this inward turn towards one’s own mental life had already begun with the practises of the Romantics in the previous century, although it had occurred for the first time in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, in ancient Greek lyric poetry.

workings of instantaneous perceptual impression and the elusiveness of dreams. This shift from the facts of an outside world to the way this outside world is perceived and responded to by the individual consciousness somehow propelled the avant-garde poet's growing discontent with the expressive powers of language. Language is 'attacked', deconstructed and distorted at all levels -syntagmatic, paradigmatic and phonological; its expressive repertoire stretched to breaking point with an ambiguous 'gesture' that appears to be both a retribution for the limitations it imposes upon the limitless conceptions and perceptions of the mind, and, at the same time, a plea for entirely novel possibilities of expression. The voices that drew attention to our imprisonment in language were particularly intense and abundant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but had not been lacking in the previous century either. In the mid 1800s, the impotence of language was central to the work of Gustavo Bécquer: pondering the 'irrationality of inspiration', Bécquer sees the actualised poem as a pale reflection of what the poet would have wanted to express. Shelley takes pretty much the same line, insisting that 'the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet', while in a sonnet by Mallarmé a swan, in the face of which the poet is symbolized, is trapped in a freezing lake. The water is the swan's element but at the same time, it is this element itself that traps him and pins him down (see Peter La Marque 1999, online paper). Along the same lines, in his paper 'Mary Shelley on the therapeutic value of language' Brewer (1994: 1 [online paper]) sees the inadequacy thesis as an intellectual meeting point between Mary and Percy Shelley. Brewer assumes that many of the pronouncements in Mary Shelley's fiction regarding the effectiveness of language -her concern, for example, on the failure of words to improve the human

condition in her historical novel 'The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck'- are direct influences by Percy's similar declarations:

Mary Shelley's somewhat skeptical attitude toward the power of words was probably influenced by Percy Shelley's views on language. In 'On Life', Percy writes: 'How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being' (475); he goes on to argue that 'the misuse of words and signs' prevents 'the mind' from acting freely (477). His frustration with the inadequacy of language is forcibly expressed in his note to 'On Love': 'These words are inefficient and metaphorical- Most words so-- No help—' (474). Moreover, in 'A Defense of Poetry', Percy Shelley asserts that over time words decline into 'signs for portions or classes of thought [i.e. abstract ideas] instead of pictures of integral thoughts' '-if poets do not intervene to revitalize them, the language becomes dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse' (482). Percy's concern about the inadequacy and abstraction of language is also expressed in his poetry. In 'Prometheus Unbound' Prometheus repudiates his curse on Jupiter, declaring that 'words are quick and vain' (IV.i.303), a sentiment echoed by the Maniac in 'Julian and Maddalo', who exclaims 'How vain / Are words!' (472-473).

However, more interesting than any explicit complaint against language, I think, is the multitude of implicit accusations, the range of major literary works that criticism has identified as 'self-referential' allegories of the limitations and inadequacy of public language. Kafka's *The Trial* could potentially be read as a self-referential allegory of the deceptive and inadequate nature of language. In *The Trial*, the emphasis is on the language's inability to communicate sense and, to some extent, on its occasional pointlessness and meaninglessness. In *L'Innommable*, Beckett undermines grammatical form to produce an allegory of the speaker's sense of imprisonment within an alien and alienating language (Taylor-Batty 2007: 163). Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and its protagonists' failure to communicate explores the idea that words fail to capture even a small part of the depth of human life. Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* may be perceived



as questioning the validity of language as a means of reporting and its potency as a means of expressing, while *Orlando* has been acclaimed by critics as ‘Woolf’s own story of the inadequacy of language to name the *thing itself*’ (Smith 2006: 57).

Quite obviously, developments which are for the most part internal to the literary and art world are responsible for the thesis of the ‘inadequacy’ of language -or *linguistic pessimism*, as I would like to call it- becoming so prominent within the past couple of centuries. But can these developments be held responsible for the apparent pervasiveness in folk thinking of the belief that language is inadequate? This belief seems so strongly evidenced according to universal human intuitions that linguistic pessimism could, perhaps, claim for itself a certain level of justification. I’ll come back to this shortly.

Here, the stronger or weaker forms of linguistic optimism advocated by many pragmatic theorists and philosophers of language in the last three decades provide a notable contrast. When the literary thinker defends the ‘ineffable’ as an empirically uncontroversial fact, the pragmatic theorist’s and philosopher’s unshakable faith in the expressive adequacy of language can only be received with a certain degree of surprise. To summarise what I will call the *thesis of linguistic optimism*, let us turn for a moment to Carston’s (2002: 33) illuminating discussion:

The most general formulation of a principle of effability is along the following lines: ‘each proposition or thought can be expressed by some sentence in any natural language’. Much hangs on what is meant by ‘expressed’ here. In the previous sections, when I have talked of a proposition or thought expressed, I have not assumed this meant that it was ‘encoded’, or fully formulated, by a linguistic expression, quite the contrary in fact. But, as used by Katz (1978, 1981), ‘can be expressed by some sentence’ could seem to mean ‘can be encoded by some sentence’. So there are at least the following two, very different, possible principles to be considered:

**First Principle of Effability:** ‘Each proposition or thought can be expressed (= conveyed) by some utterance of some sentence in any natural language’.

**Second Principle of Effability:** ‘Each proposition or thought can be expressed (= encoded) by some sentence in any natural language’.

The first of the two principles is relatively weak and does not seem to raise too many objections. This is not to say, of course, that any individual speaker should always be able to express verbally any particular thought she has; the claim is more along the lines of any thought being in principle expressible -say, by a more able speaker- in some context. With no given limits on either the richness of available contexts or the ways in which contextual material could be used to enrich encoded material, the first effability principle seems largely uncontroversial. The second principle, on the other hand, is relatively stronger and can be said to give rise at least to the following objection: it has been argued that in our internal language we often fix time and space references in terms of a private logbook and an ego-centered map rather than in terms of some kind of universal co-ordinates (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995: 192). Most kinds of reference to individuals, places or events, it seems, are fixed on the basis of such private time and space co-ordinates, hence making the thoughts that contain them impossible to represent completely and fully encode in natural language. Again few words from Carston (2002: 33):

(...) The force of this point is perhaps most vividly felt by considering thoughts one has about oneself; how I represent myself to myself must inevitably be quite different from the way you or anyone represents me, and so it must be for all of us. The same holds for the way I mentally represent my spatial and temporal location at any given instant, that which I might express by the words ‘here’ and ‘now’; (...) This is a function of the ‘ego-centered map’ referred to in the quote and it extends far beyond these self-references. My mental representation of the woman who is my mother is doubtless a private one, probably not even shared with my siblings. (...) These sorts of differences in representations of an object are not, and cannot be, encoded in natural-language sentences.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Carston goes on to discuss a third effability principle -‘For every statement that can be made using a context-sensitive sentence in a given context, there is an eternal sentence that can be

It follows from this brief discussion that the debate on the effability of human thought is somehow inextricably tied up with another debate, on what is technically known as the *linguistic underdeterminacy thesis*: the thesis that sentence meaning typically underdetermines speaker meaning, or to put it in folk/ pre-theoretical terms, the thesis that speakers typically use sentences to communicate a lot more than the words of these sentences mean in their own right.<sup>7</sup> And, although a distinction between what words mean and what speakers mean in using these words<sup>8</sup> is explicit in Carston's distinction between an 'encodability' version and a 'conveyability' version of the principle of effability, the fact remains that to the eyes of a poet, even the weaker of the two principles seems counter-intuitively strong.

Did the poets get it wrong? Or is it that pragmatic theorists and philosophers are missing the point? If it is true that each proposition or thought can be conveyed by an utterance of some sentence in any natural language, does this mean that linguistic pessimism is an illusion, a figment of the mind, an epiphenomenon? If so, how is the pervasiveness of this illusion in folk intuitions to be explained? And furthermore, how are we to account for the palpable difference in the intensity with which linguistic pessimism is experienced by an ordinary and a poetic mind?

Research in the last 30 years has provided strong evidence that both ordinary and literary language exploit the same pragmatic mechanisms (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995, 2008), depend on the same innate and universal human capacity (the language capacity/ I-Language, Chomsky 1976) and draw on the same abstract/

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used to make the same statement in any context' (2002: 34)-, which is not strictly speaking relevant to our discussion. My aim in this thesis is not so much to assess the debate on effability per se, as to use the divergence in views about effability between literary and philosophical camps as a starting point for reconsidering pertinent literary-theoretical and art-philosophical questions.

<sup>7</sup> In the next chapter, I will explore in some detail how semiotic and pragmatic models of communication offer different perspectives on linguistic optimism and pessimism.

<sup>8</sup> The different perspectives can be described as code-based or semiotic, on the one hand, and pragmatic, on the other.

symbolic system of mental representations (the ‘language of thought’ or ‘mentalese’ Fodor 1983). Given, then, that the formal medium in which poets and ordinary speakers express themselves is the same, one is almost compelled to ask: could there be a non-trivial explanation for why the alleged inadequacy of language is so much more intensely experienced in the poetic mind?

It is not only poets that grapple with language all the time. Philosophers and scientists also grapple with language. If language is after all in some sense and to some extent inadequate, scientists and philosophers should be no less disappointed by the expressive limitations of language given their equal involvement in the act of spelling out the contents of the mind. A plausible line of explanation, then, may concern the nature of what the poet is trying to convey and the ways in which this is significantly different from what the philosopher and scientist is trying to convey. I shall focus on this line of approach in Chapter 3, in my investigation of *phenomena*.

Other lines of investigation are also worth pursuing, each highlighting distinct sets of issues for a philosophy of literature and art. It may be, for instance, that much of the poet’s discontent with language is entirely independent of the mechanics of expression, and results to some extent from the retroactive effects of critical thinking on the way poets/ practising artists assess and evaluate introspective evidence. It is not implausible, for instance, that the emergence and commercial success of semiotics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has led to an over-inflation of linguistic pessimism. Alternatively, the poet’s discontent with language may be independent of the mechanics of expression precisely because expression is not the issue after all. In later chapters, I will offer preliminary arguments against an approach I call *interpretationalism*, and argue that neither expression nor interpretation is as central to the nature of art as has been

previously assumed.<sup>9</sup> Finally, I would like to suggest that, if there is a genuinely significant reason why language seems so inadequate to the poetic mind, it may relate more to particularities of the poetic mind itself, and the specific kind of use to which poets put language: the specific kind of use we refer to as poetry or art.

From this perspective, the divergence in views between literary and philosophical camps on how much of the mind we can actually speak out relates not so much to language as to the mind itself. A mind that responds to the world through its senses, that appreciates the world, or at least some objects in the world, in an aesthetic way, that pulsates from the intensity and richness of its perceptual representations. A mind capable of special forms of creativity, capable not only of thinking about something but also of thinking that it is thinking about something. A mind capable of art.

The debate on effability is an excellent starting point for reconsidering a range of long-standing questions with implications for a range of long-established disciplines (linguistics, literary and art theory, philosophy, psychology etc). I hope that this reconsideration will help to show how the apparently contradictory views of thinkers in the humanities and the cognitive sciences may nevertheless not be mutually exclusive<sup>10</sup>, and may enable us get closer to understanding the special nature of literature/ art and the uniqueness of the mind that creates it.

In the next chapter, I will consider how a major 20<sup>th</sup> century development, which the literary and art-philosophical worlds are only just beginning to discover, may radically alter perspectives on what humans can and cannot communicate. More

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<sup>9</sup> And the same goes for interpretation. In a way, expression and interpretation go hand-in-hand, involving equivalent processes at the production and reception end. However, I will argue later that neither of them should be seen as the focal element in an analysis of the nature of art.

<sup>10</sup> Hopefully, by the end of this analysis you will have seen that this isn't an oxymoron.

specifically, we will look at the move from World to Mind -i.e .the emergence of so-called 'cognitivist', 'mind-internal' or 'psychologistic' accounts- and the subsequent move from Codes to Pragmatics.

## Chapter 2

### Language, World and Mind

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*Two behaviourists meet in the street.*

*The one says to the other:*

*'You're feeling well. How am I?'*

I sit in front of my laptop thinking how this chapter should go. I have a cup of hot coffee in my hand. From time to time I bring the cup to my mouth and take small sips. My coffee is a full-bodied Arabic blend. The white coffee-cup looks yellowish in the deep orange light of the afternoon.

My coffee exists. The coffee-cup exists. The orange light of the afternoon also exists. The most immediate evidence of the existence of an outside world comes from such sense data. Things look a certain way or feel a certain way. Yet it may be that this particular class of data are mere epiphenomena, delusions of the mind. The most powerful evidence of the existence of an outside world is *interpretive convergence*: alongside the amazing multiplicity and diversity of our reactions to the world, we need to acknowledge the equally amazing fact that we would all more or less see a coffee cup next to my laptop, we would all more or less see it looking yellowish in the afternoon light<sup>11</sup>, and we would all more or less find out that it is roughly five past six by glancing at the clock or noticing that *Friends* is on TV.

If we were to track the two or three most influential schools of thought in literary theory during the last century, and if we were to do this in reverse

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<sup>11</sup> Albeit we may have quite different individual representations of, say, the 'yellowness' of the light reflecting on the cup.

chronological order, postmodern criticism would be amongst the first to come to mind. The deconstructive legacy that postmodern criticism bequeathed to contemporary theorising on literature and the arts has affected many innocent victims, from 'truth' to 'text', 'interpretation', 'meaning' and 'language'.

In a sense, postmodern deconstruction can be seen as an extreme form of relativism. It seems that the success of relativistic approaches to sociolinguistics and cultural studies in the 60's and 70's<sup>12</sup> had such an effect on, and were given such importance in, postmodern thinking that their actual theoretical implications were considerably over-stated: inter-individual and cross-cultural relativism was taken as evidence that there is no such property as truth. Here is how the argument goes: inter-individual and cross-cultural relativism, together with variation in *value judgements* - e.g. judgements about beauty- or in acts of interpretation -e.g. various lines of interpretation for the same text or artwork- seems to suggest that there are numerous truths, all of them equally valid and all of them equally impressionistic, subjective and context dependent. Hence, talk about truth as a stable and objective property of some human thoughts is futile. The same rationale seems to have been applied to the deconstruction<sup>13</sup> of 'meaning', 'interpretation' and 'language'. The fact, for instance, that speaker meaning is underdetermined by sentence meaning -a fact acknowledged by contemporary pragmatics as an essential feature of human natural languages (Grice 1967 and 1989, Bach and Harnish 1979, Levinson 1983 and 2000, Davis 1991,

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<sup>12</sup> As for instance in Linguistic Relativism and the so called 'Whorf Hypothesis' .

<sup>13</sup> Here, 'deconstruction' is synonymous with 'destruction'. However, this is not an uncontroversial reaction to postmodern theory or Derrida's system of thought. In her book *The Critical Difference* (1981: 39), Barbara Johnson suggests: 'Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction', however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means 'to undo' -a virtual synonym for 'to deconstruct'. (...) If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another'. In any case, and in order to reach own conclusions, a foundational text for deconstructive criticism is Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976).



Sperber and Wilson 1995, Carston 2002)- was not taken as evidence that humans infer communicators' meanings from clues provided by the utterance and the context, or as a starting point for investigating how the gap between sentence meaning and the variety of potential speaker meanings it may correspond to is bridged, but rather as evidence of the relativistic fluidity of interpretation. Open and uncontrolled, such fluidity makes linguistic communication pointless, removing 'meaning' from meaning.<sup>14</sup>

I won't spend much time on the logical weaknesses of postmodern reasoning. A reader who has followed the present analysis this far will certainly be able to identify without my help many logical inconsistencies in the postmodern theoretical edifice, and find more than enough clues to why certain postmodern endeavours were described by analytic philosophers of the time as 'semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship'.<sup>15</sup> The point that does deserve attention, and may shed some light on the source of some linguistic pessimism, is somewhat different: where do beliefs -whether folk beliefs or academic, literary and art theoretical beliefs- come from? Recently, I gave a talk on truth, scientific method and the explanatory nature of theory in contemporary philosophy of literature and art, trying, amongst other things, to replace deconstructive ideas with arguments in favour of scientific optimism, and to reveal some of the logical weaknesses in postmodern thinking. My audience, instead of devising counterarguments to what I was saying,

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<sup>14</sup> Thirty years later, with all the theoretical advances in domains like pragmatics or cognitive anthropology, and despite the expectation that in the light of these advances, postmodern myths and fallacies of the sort just mentioned would be things of the past, one of the best-selling and most highly praised books in Greece this year contains a series of essays that take the diversity of possible interpretations in literature as proof that there is no such thing as meaning.

<sup>15</sup> Quote taken from the open letter against Derrida (Barry Smith et al. 1992), signed by eighteen philosophy professors of the time, including Quine and Armstrong.

simply kept repeating what they had read in Derrida. I'll stop before this analysis turns into journalism.

The first set of factors underlying linguistic pessimism and the belief that language is inadequate that I would like to consider is epistemological and anthropological. Linguistic pessimism, like some other theoretical stances in the Arts and Humanities, is rooted partly in the observation of reality, and partly in appeals to authority. The issue is anthropological in the sense that it relates to the human propensity to hold what Sperber (1997) calls 'reflective beliefs', half-understood or unsubstantiated beliefs that an individual accepts as true on the grounds that they come from a credible source. The issue is also epistemological in the sense that in constructing theories in the Arts and Humanities, people do not always turn to the World in order to test and assess the credibility of a theory, but rather turn to the theory in the hope of learning what the World is like. If there is a significant generalisation to be made here, it is about the effect of theories on our ability to make something out of the data that come to us from the external world in an 'uncontaminated' way. Instead of making testable claims to be assessed against the available evidence, theories instead turn into contaminating factors distorting and altering an individual's initial response to introspective evidence and data.

Linguistic pessimism, I would like to suggest, could to some extent have arisen as a backward effect of theorising on the way poets and theorists evaluate introspective data. Postmodern deconstruction merely pushed to the extreme ideas that had already become available through the emergence of semiotics -i.e. a code-based model of human communication- and the theoretical dominance of behaviourism in the life sciences for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Let me briefly outline

how these two paradigms may have contributed to the overtly pessimistic way literary individuals have perceived and evaluated language.

With the increasing prestige of cognitive enquiry in the present day, it may be easy to forget that in the first half of the last century, it was considered unscientific to talk directly about the mind. By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the entire philosophical and psychological establishment was dominated by behaviouristic practices and ideas. In my view, behaviourism was not simply a theoretical tendency within the developing field of psychology, but also provided a paradigm with considerable implications for research in philosophy and the humanities. Behaviourism gives investigative priority to the observable. While there is no doubt that behaviour exists, it provides only indirect evidence for the existence of minds. This elusiveness of the Mind in the eyes of behaviourists led to the abandonment of introspection as a source of evidence, and made the results obtained by introspection seem dangerous and unsafe. From a behaviouristic point of view, then, every truth claim made by a theory has to satisfy the demand for observability. Thus, linguistic theory, for instance, could have only two possible levels of analysis: observable linguistic data and linguistic behaviour.

Semiotics as a linguistic theory has its roots in the work of the father of contemporary linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure<sup>16</sup>. Semiotics, or semiology, from the Greek word *semeion* (sign)/ *semeia* (signs), treats natural languages as huge articulated systems of signs/ signals, each of which expresses a corresponding *message* and picks out a corresponding object in the outside world.<sup>17</sup> Thus, semiotics is fundamentally a code-based model of human communication. Words/ signs are taken to encode the messages they are paired with: for instance, the word 'tree' is seen

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<sup>16</sup> Its ancient precursors can be traced as far back as Aristotle and his *De Interpretatione*.

<sup>17</sup> Semiological theory has been applied to a wide range of domains (Fine Art, Cultural Studies, Ethnology and so on) and has been used to discuss anything from the semiology of clothing to the semiology of image.

as encoding the concept *tree*, which picks out an object in the outside world, i.e. a tree.

Semeia are observable entities. Words perceived as semeia are phonologically realised concepts that have become i) observable by encoding themselves into phonetic signals and ii) in principle, fully decodable by allowing a receiver who has a copy of the code to recover the sender's thought in full. The meaning of signs comes from the fact that they pick out an item from another set of similarly observable entities, i.e. real world objects.

Here I would like to draw attention to two relevant implications of the semiotic model. The first is that, if the relationship between words and messages/ thoughts is 1:1, then the relationship between utterances -as combinations of words- and messages/ thoughts is also 1:1. It trivially follows that utterances are seen as typically capable of expressing and capturing a thought in its entirety:

Utterance A  $\Leftrightarrow$  Thought A

One standard definition of a thought is that it consists of a proposition and a propositional attitude -e.g. *believing*, *wondering whether*, *desiring*, etc. On the whole, the philosophers who argue for effability explicitly adopt this narrow 'proposition + attitude' view of thought. Or, to put it another way, most philosophers treat thoughts as purely conceptual. Throughout this analysis, however, we are going to talk about thought in a fuller and broader sense, which partly departs from the standard conceptual approach. We will treat thought as a complex state, a mixture of causally interconnected perceptual and conceptual representations. In this fuller construal, a thought is a mental representation that involves not only a proposition and a

propositional attitude but also a range of idiosyncratic, private, perceptual or emotive properties. From this standpoint, the idea that utterances typically capture a communicator's thoughts in their totality is rather counter-intuitive.<sup>18</sup>

The second implication involves the notion of thought in its narrower construal as a proposition combined with a propositional attitude. Of the two principles of effability discussed by Carston (2002) and quoted in Chapter 1 above, the semiotic model seems to imply the counter-intuitive one. If what sentences do is encode thoughts, then the claim that human thought is expressible through natural language would amount to the claim that each proposition or thought can be expressed (= encoded) by some sentence in any natural language.

Semiotics treats communication as a matter of encoding thoughts into signals and decoding them again at the receiver's end. The code normally used by humans in communication is natural language. So, for natural language to be seen as adequate, it would be necessary that i) sentences capture mental representations in their entirety, so that there is a 1:1 relationship between a sentence and the mental representation it encodes, and that ii) every thought can be expressed (= encoded) by some natural language sentence. The fact that, intuitively, neither condition seems to be fully met was then interpreted not as a defect in the semiotic model itself -which should have led to an immediate reconsideration of main claims of the theory- but as a defect of natural language. Here's what I suspect has happened.

I develop a theory (T) which claims that for an object to function adequately, it must fulfil a certain prototypical goal in a satisfactory manner. In developing my theory (T), though, I make the mistake of treating as the prototypical goal of this object one that is either not appropriate to the object or not fully compatible with the

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<sup>18</sup> In Chapter 3, I shall come back to this point in great detail and discuss its implications for the expressibility of human thought.

actual nature of the object. My theory (T), for example, assumes that a key would function adequately if it could be used in frying eggs. I fail to find any satisfactory way in which a key could be used in frying eggs, and conclude that the key is functionally inadequate in relation to this goal. Having treated the code as central to communication, semiotics created unrealistic expectations about language, which language of course did not fulfil -not because it is inadequate as a means for communicating thought, but because the expectations to be fulfilled were not reasonable in the first place.

Semiotics had, and continues to have, what might be called a meta-theoretic effect on the literary world, 'contaminating' the literary individual's expectations from the code, and turning an otherwise reasonable discontent with language into a wholesale attack on language. In the case of the noetic experiment/ example with the key and my theory's unrealistic expectations about the key, the logical fault is rather obvious. In the case of the semiotic model of communication, spotting the logical error was not so easy. The behaviouristic demand for observability of the object under investigation and the consequent dichotomy of Language and World made the puzzle literally unsolvable. Why? Well, because, as theoretical developments eventually showed, for the logical error to be spotted, a third parameter was needed, and this parameter was neither observable in the behaviouristic sense nor part of the Language-World dichotomy. This intermediate parameter was the Mind.

Thanks to Chomsky and the cognitive revolution, the Mind was finally brought into discussions on language and communication, and showed philosophers a possible way out of the behaviouristic dead-ends. In *New Horizons in the study of Language and Mind* (2000: 4), Chomsky writes:

The cognitive perspective regards behaviour and its products not as the object of inquiry, but as data that may provide evidence about the inner mechanisms of mind and the ways these mechanisms operate in executing actions and interpreting experience. The properties and patterns that were the focus of attention in structural linguistics find their place, but as phenomena to be explained along with innumerable others, in terms of the inner mechanisms that generate expressions. The approach is ‘mentalistic’, but in what should be an uncontroversial sense. It is concerned with ‘mental aspects of the world’, which stand alongside its mechanical, chemical, optical, and other aspects. It undertakes to study a real object in the natural world -the brain, its states, and its functions- and thus to move the study of the mind towards eventual integration with the biological sciences.

The cognitive perspective was an indispensable enabling factor. Reference to the Mind, use of robust introspective evidence and enrichment of the Language/World dichotomy with the intermediate level of humans and their mental representations open the way for pragmatic models of language and communication. Wharton (2003: 219) puts this beautifully:

(...) from Grice’s earliest work through to relevance theory, linguistic communication is an intelligent, intentional, inferential activity. Utterances do not encode the messages speakers want to convey; rather, they are used to provide evidence of intentions, which hearers must infer. Although the extent of the role played by inference in communication is still the subject of much debate (as indeed is the precise nature of what constitutes ‘inference’ itself)<sup>19</sup> most pragmatists now agree that verbal communication is more than a simple coding-decoding process.

It’s worth remembering, however, that it is not just when involved in acts of communication that humans are inclined to attribute mental states to others. The human disposition to attribute mental states is so much a part of our individual (or collective, species-specific) psychological make-up, that -as I know to my cost- it is not something we can choose to do or not to do: it’s something *we just can’t help*, any more than we can help pulling our hand back from a source of extreme heat.

Plainly, other people’s intentions and mental states generally are not objects to be perceived in the world in the same way as are their faces or bodies; they are ‘out there’, but they are invisible. It is hard, however, to even imagine what it would be like not to be able to sense the mental states of others in some way. The world would be such a different, potentially terrifying place.

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<sup>19</sup> See Recanati (2002).

And a final quote, this time from Sperber and Wilson (1995: 7-9) and from the earliest phase of relevance-theoretic pragmatics:

Saussure expected that ‘the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts’. What actually happened was that for the few decades in which structuralist linguistics flourished, the semiotic program was taken seriously and spelled out in more detail. (...) However, no semiotic law of any significance was ever discovered, let alone applied to linguistics. After the publication in 1957 of Noam Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures*, linguistics took a new turn and did undergo remarkable developments; but these owed nothing to semiotics. As the study of language became better understood, its *sui generis* nature became more and more striking. The assumption that all systems of signs should have similar structural properties became more and more untenable. Without this assumption, however, the semiotic programme makes little sense.

(...) It is true that a language is a code which pairs phonetic and semantic representations of sentences. However, there is a gap between the semantic representations of sentences and the thoughts actually communicated by utterances. This gap is filled not by more coding, but by inference.

The pragmatic approach to linguistic communication, and particularly the inferential cognitive-pragmatic model developed within Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) has now shown that linguistic communication is a much more flexible, creative and context-dependent process than code-based approaches predict. It is the semantics – pragmatics distinction, and the resulting gap between sentence meaning and utterance meaning, that should in principle enable a change in perspectives on the expressive capacities of language. Simply put, the semantics – pragmatics distinction captures and aims to explain the empirical fact that in human communication -both linguistic and non-linguistic- a lot more is actually communicated than is coded.

The underdeterminacy relationship between linguistic meaning and communicated meaning is neither occasional nor incidental (Carston 2002: 15-93). Built into the very nature of linguistic communication, the richness of what humans



can contextually infer from the relative poverty of the linguistically encoded evidence they are presented with justifies a more optimistic turn in discussions about what humans can and cannot communicate. At the same time, recent research on word meaning and communication suggests that the underdeterminacy relationship between what is encoded and what is communicated does not apply only at the level of whole utterances, but also at the level of individual words. Aiming to develop explanatory accounts of a cluster of characteristic cases of creative word use, and to address recent experimental evidence that the human mind can form ad hoc concepts in a flexible and context-dependent way (Barsalou 1987, 1992), the developing field of lexical pragmatics shows that the richness and variety of what the human mind can contextually infer from a relatively poor and finite repertoire of linguistically encoded meanings also applies at the level of the word. As Deirdre Wilson suggested in her lectures on lexical pragmatics at UCL in 2005:

(...) words are often used in ways that depart (sometimes a little, sometimes a lot) from their 'literal' meanings, the ones assigned them by the grammar. We invent new words, and people understand us. We blend two words together, and people understand us. We use nouns, adjectives or prepositions as verbs, and people understand us. We borrow words from other languages; we use words approximately, metaphorically or hyperbolically. As children or adults, we pick up the meanings of unfamiliar words without being taught, just by hearing them uttered in context. We see words come into fashion and vanish; we see them acquire new meanings and lose old ones. While sociolinguists, historical linguists, philosophers and psychologists have all been interested in different aspects of these phenomena, it's only in the last five years or so that pragmatists have begun to look systematically at how the semantics/ pragmatics distinction applies at the level of the word, and to talk of a separate domain of 'lexical pragmatics' (see for instance Carston and Uchida 1997, Carston 2002; Blutner 1998, 2002; Sperber & Wilson 1998; Wilson 2003).

Between 2004 and 2006, I had the opportunity to carry out some corpus-based research for a UCL-based lexical pragmatics project led by Deirdre Wilson and Robyn Carston. The aim of the project was to develop a unified theory of lexical

pragmatics that would bring together under a single theoretical account a number of word-related pragmatic phenomena that the existing literature had so far dealt with individually and separately. I will not tire you with the details of my research, which is too specialised for the purposes of the current analysis. I would very much like, though, to quote part of the evidence that my corpus investigation brought to light, since I think it speaks in the most articulate of ways about a plasticity in the human mind, combined with a flexibility, fine-grainedness and sophistication in linguistic communication, that the semiotic legacy has largely bypassed:<sup>20</sup>

A corpus-based investigation of issues in Lexical Pragmatics is in many respects a pilot project. With the interface of Corpus analysis and Pragmatics hugely unexplored, the corpus analyst cannot rely on a given paradigm. An awful lot of strategic planning must be heavily improvised. Or, to put it differently: when we embarked on the corpus-based strand of the project, we didn't have the faintest clue where to start from or what to do next.

In a magical way, however, the data started showing the way themselves. It pretty soon became clear that our investigation is not aiming that much for statistical significance. The 'pragmatics' (in the non-technical sense) of a corpus-based study of lexis (let alone the technical and temporal limitations of the project) do not allow firm statistical generalizations: in the 56million word corpus *The Bank of English* that we are currently using, the word- set 'red eyes', for instance, occurs a mere 29 times. After alternating our search terms into 'eyes + red' or 'red +a number of intervening items+ eyes' etc, we managed to increase this number to 54 occurrences. The same goes for other terms as well. (...) The problem has been squarely epitomized by John Sinclair who acknowledged that with grammatical words occurring in the Bank hundreds of thousands of times and lexical words just a few dozen, statistical generalizations on lexical meaning are relatively hard to obtain.

Yet, the corpus has proved an invaluable source of inspiration, when it comes to highlighting existing hypotheses, testing some of the main assumptions that Lexical Pragmatics (...) has set out to scrutinize and motivating new and worthwhile questions.

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<sup>20</sup> The following passage comes from my talk Kolaiti, P. 2005. *The empty vessel makes the greatest sound: Corpus analysis and lexical pragmatics*, delivered at the 'International Workshop on Word Meaning, Concepts and Communication' at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor Great Park.

(...) We looked at the collocation ‘**red eyes**’ with the aim of testing the hypothesis that the interpretation of ‘red’ is the outcome of a ‘default routine’ which involves a purely semantic rather than creative use, and found tangible evidence of Narrowing as a highly context sensitive and flexible process.

More specifically, in all utterances under investigation, use of the word ‘red’ communicates a slightly more fine tuned concept RED\*, RED\*\* etc (which picks out a particular shade other than focal red) even though the adjective ‘red’ steadily collocates with ‘eyes’. Simultaneously, the same contextual considerations that have an effect on the narrowing of ‘red’ also appear to prompt significant variation in the interpretation of ‘eyes’: the concept EYES is also loosened in different directions and to different extents (as in each example some other distribution is called for other than the entire eye being represented as red). Compare:

(1) *...red eyes denote strain and fatigue.*

Here ‘red’ picks out a reddish, pink shade ranging around the edges of the eye, on the bags under the eye and maybe partially on the cornea too.

(2) *[This flashing light is] to stop you getting red eyes* (in a context about red-eye effect in photographs)

Here ‘red’ picks out a luminous, rusty red ranging over the iris only.

in a context about demons:

(3) *two burning red eyes she recalled...*

Fiery red and luminous. Either both the cornea and the iris consistently red or the iris alone.

and finally used as a metaphor:

(4) *...eyes red with resentment...*

We looked at ‘**raw**’, ‘**painless**’ and ‘**boiling**’ with the aim of testing the view that a continuum between literal and loose uses does exist. Our findings showed that loosening is not epiphenomenal to language use; in fact, in the cases of ‘painless’ and ‘boiling’, loose uses predominate. (...)

Our investigation of ‘**painless**’ was particularly useful evidence of the proximity between literal use and approximation. Cases such as

(5) *I would want something clean and painless: no botch-ups. It would be the doctor or no one.* [in a context about euthanasia]

where the utterance allows either a strict interpretation (the procedure might be literally painless) or an approximate one (a small amount of physical pain might be involved in the procedure, but it would still be insignificant compared to the distress the patient would have to go through if left to die naturally) and either of them indeed seems relevant and \*true enough\*, occupy roughly 14% of all occurrences of ‘painless’, with strictly literal cases occupying roughly 19%. The

significant extent to which approximate interpretations seem as satisfactory as literal ones argues in favour of a noteworthy proximity between literal meaning and approximation.

Our investigation of **'boiling'** fully revealed the form that the continuum of literal and loose uses of the same concept can take. In a total of 323 occurrences, we found 148 cases of literal use:

(6) *Poached eggs come out well in a small dish using boiling water.*

43 cases where either a literal or an approximate interpretation would be true enough:

(7) *Cover the cake with the icing, smoothing with a knife dipped in boiling water.*

2 instances where only an approximate interpretation would be true:

(8) *For sauce, melt chocolate with syrup and water over boiling water, then beat until smooth*

78 cases of metaphor

(9) *...several small boats disappeared in boiling seas.*

4 cases of hyperbole

(10) *Bring some more ice, this whisky is boiling hot*

13 cases of metaphor and hyperbole combined

(11) *This summer is promising to be long and boiling*

and 31 cases of synecdoche

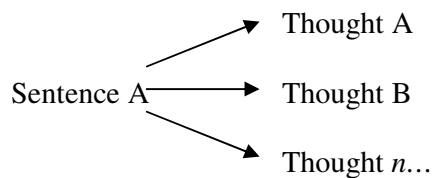
(12) *a. You're changing small things like boiling a kettle...*

In all three searches ('raw', 'painless' and 'boiling') we found ourselves puzzled by the **elusiveness of literal meaning**: we embarked on each search with what we believed at the time were strong intuitions about the literal meaning of the given word-set, but before long, these very intuitions started to tremble under the weight of the extremely diverse, thoroughly context-sensitive and remarkably creative facts of language use.

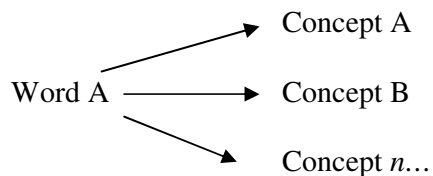
The literary world has been focused on the coded aspects of linguistic communication for too long, and has thus failed to grasp the striking richness and sophistication of what language can be used to communicate. That is not to say that linguistic communication does not also present the mind -either folk or literary- with stifling limitations; the chapters to follow will try to account for some of the legitimate reasons for this dissatisfaction with language, with particular emphasis on the literary mind. Still, things are not remotely as bleak as the semiotic and

behaviouristic legacy has led us to believe. Note, for instance, how the two fundamental conditions for linguistic communication to be regarded as adequate in the semiotic sense (that is, i) sentences should capture mental representations in their entirety, so that there is a 1:1 coding relationship between a sentence and a mental representation, and ii) every thought, in either the narrow sense of a proposition plus a propositional attitude or the broader sense of a mental representation, should be \*encodable\* by some natural language sentence) are being radically altered in the inferential pragmatic model. Moreover, both radical alterations make it possible to take a more optimistic view of the expressive capacities of language:

i) the relationship between sentences and the thoughts they are used to convey is not 1:1, as semiotic accounts assumed, but 1: many. The gap between the two is bridged by a flexible, context-dependent inferential process:



The same goes for words:



This view radically loosens the rigidity of the semiotic model and makes room within a theory of linguistic communication for the plasticity and creativity of the human mind and the richness of its representations.

ii) with the relationship between sentences and thoughts being 1 : many, and with thoughts not being seen as encoded by the sentence itself but as contextually inferred from an utterance of the sentence, it follows that it is not the role of sentences to capture thoughts in their totality. The role of sentences is to provide evidence that a hearer's mind can use as starting point in an inferential process of interpretation (Sperber and Wilson 1995). Transferred to word level, the story goes as follows: words may encode concepts, but they do not necessarily communicate on every occasion of use the concept they encode; rather, they provide flexible access to fine-tuned occasion-specific concepts in a context-sensitive way (Wilson 2003; Wilson and Carston 2007).

The cognitive pragmatic view is again a turn towards a more optimistic position. First, its psychologistic/ mentalistic approach allows us to acknowledge the infinite range and striking wealth of fine-tuned thoughts communicated by use of a finite set of words and sentences. At the same time, it significantly expands the set of thoughts that language can be used to express: there is a much wider set of thoughts that can be inferentially conveyed than can be encoded in language. Or, to put the same point in a different way: along with the set of thoughts that can be expressed by being linguistically encoded, there is a much wider set of thoughts that can be expressed by being inferentially conveyed.

By bringing the Mind into the picture and accounting for introspective/ psychological evidence that is integral to linguistic communication, (cognitive) pragmatics has brought us to the end of this chapter with an air of linguistic optimism.

This optimistic breeze is necessary if this analysis is to be built on a sound underlying structure. It is also necessary because it exposes the epistemic, sociological and therefore in some way institutional origins of linguistic pessimism.

In the next chapter, we shall turn to the Mind once again; this time to explore and account for whatever justification linguistic pessimism may deserve. Only a small amount of linguistic pessimism can be accounted for as a backward effect of semiotic and behaviourist theoretical models on the way poets evaluate introspective data. Empirical facts such as the major role of phenomenal -i.e. perceptual as opposed to conceptual- representations in the human mental tapestry, and the expressive difficulties that seem inextricably bound up with them, force us to acknowledge that linguistic pessimism is to some extent justified, and to accept the relative ineffability - even in the weaker of the two senses discussed above- of at least some of our thoughts. I shall start from an example based on kinaesthetic representations -i.e. representations involving bodily posture and movement- and then generalise the discussion by suggesting that all perceptual/ phenomenal representations, being rich and complex informational states, test our expressive capacities to the limit. Linking the modernist poet's discontent with language to the ineffability of phenomenal states, I argue that such states may be more pervasive than is sometimes thought. In developing these ideas, I consider whether perceptual states are associated only with certain sorts of concepts, distinguish between two different types of phenomenal qualia -one associated with objects, events or states in the world, and the other with words or other linguistic expressions- and, finally, use a list-poem to show that even proper names, whose primary function is referential, can give access to phenomenal states.

## Chapter 3

### The curse of the phenomenal: a case from Kinaesthesia

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#### 3.1. Kinaesthesia: a case study

‘Solo’ is a study in improvised movement danced and choreographed by William Forsythe and celebrated mainly for its idiosyncratic and peculiar gestures.

For the sake of argument, let us consider a slightly odd scenario: imagine that you are given a 5 second sequence from ‘Solo’ and asked to produce as accurate a verbal description as possible of what you see. You are even told that in the room next door a dancer will be listening to what you say and will try to perform the ‘Solo’ sequence on the basis of your description alone. You have no visual contact with the dancer and hence cannot make corrections based on how your instructions are being followed. You need to make your instructions so clear and precise in the first place that the resulting dance sequence is almost identical to the one from ‘Solo’.

If the task doesn’t sound bewildering enough to make you opt out from the start, you are first likely to realise that 5 seconds of real time can accommodate a rather long stream of bodily movement. You might then consider breaking down this stream into individual instances -only to find that describing posture is no easier a task itself. Even the crudest static visual representations are in fact very complex informational states. On the simple business of what it means to see a floor tile as ‘square’<sup>21</sup>, Evans (1985: 392) writes:

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<sup>21</sup> The word ‘square’ is intended here to represent a shape that a subject can identify perceptually without being aware of the geometric definition.



To have the visual experience of four points of light arranged in a square amounts to no more than being in a complex informational state which embodies information about the egocentric location of those lights.

Bodily posture is a complex configuration of many concurrent 'goings on'. Its informational complexity -so simple to perceive and represent visually- is felt more when trying to render it in a conceptual system like language. What in vision is sub-attentively perceived, in language would have to be first brought to attention and consciousness.<sup>22</sup> What in vision is automatically fixed in space through an egocentric map of spatial reference points, in a linguistic description would have to go through a complex process of labelling -where origins/ starting points, references and axes must be explicitly determined. What in vision is instantaneous and concurrent, in a linguistic description would inevitably take sequential form.

So here you are, having to observe the intricate configuration of the many 'goings on' that make up bodily posture, possibly describe each 'going on' individually, show in what way each 'going on' relates to some other 'going on' -e.g. position of the head *in relation to* the torso- and how they all hang together as a whole. And without exaggeration your pains are only just beginning.

You will stumble upon movements or body parts you never realised you don't have vocabulary for. You will quickly write off easily accessible but sketchy descriptions of the sort 'the head leans towards the back' or 'hands and arms face

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<sup>22</sup> As Heil (1991: 10) suggests in passing, while gazing at our surroundings, we are, in some sense, aware of far more than we recognise or bother to identify. Much of what constitutes the mental representation of a perceived object might not be consciously attended. Along the same lines, Crane (1992: 138-139) points out: '(...) there are [also] the states of the so-called "sub-personal" computational systems like the visual system, but whose content is not (...) phenomenologically salient'. Finally, Colin Mc Ginn (1989: 163) labels non-conceptual mental content 'subpersonal content': 'the kind of content routinely attributed by cognitive scientists to information processing systems of which the subject has no awareness' (quoted from Crane 1992).

forward', seeing the indefinite number of ways in which they could be physically realised.

As you stretch your inventiveness to the limit to improvise literal descriptive strategies and show where each body part rests or how it moves in space, you automatically also resort to figurative ways of spelling out what you see. Just like your once-upon-a-time ballet teacher who used to say things like 'Girls! Toes in the pond' instead of attempting a literal description. But you are soon to find that figurative language leads by different means to the same result.

Although figures often come so much more easily to mouth -in our everyday verbal give-and-take we readily prefer them to literal language when it comes to conveying our perceptual experiences<sup>23</sup>- they bring troubles of their own. (For some, the story so far might feel like a journey from the commonplace to the banal, but some things need spelling out for the sake of discussion.)

'Toes in the pond' and other figurative descriptions represent an intelligent move, by an intelligent organism who is thus able to bypass very complex literal alternatives. But while they seem just right for a multitude of communicative occasions, on others -like the odd one we are imagining- they simply do not achieve the desired levels of accuracy. Or when they do, they seem to have done so at the expense of large investments of creativity, time and mental energy.

Also, the very mechanics of figurative language at times makes it an even more dubious solution. Figures rely heavily on existing background experience, entailing -at the least- that for a figurative expression to succeed, interlocutors often

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<sup>23</sup> For instance, we naturally and spontaneously come up with expressions like 'the cash machine spat out the card', whose perceptual force is very difficult to capture in literal terms. Cristina Cacciari in 'Why do we speak metaphorically? Reflections in thought and language' (1998) and Adrian Pilkington in 'Non-lexicalised concepts and degrees of effability: poetic thoughts and the attraction of what is not in the dictionary' (2001) offer an interesting perspective on the interconnections between perceptual states and figurative language.

need a degree of shared background resources that might not be readily available. Ultimately, a representation can be so unusual or idiosyncratic that no matter how much we stretch our creativity and imagination, no matter how thoroughly we sieve our background in search of that valuable piece of relevant information, we still consistently fail to find a satisfactory figurative way of conveying it.

Before the invention of the video camera, modern choreographers had little choice but to resort to an intricate type of notation known as *labanotation*: a stenographic language in which they hoped to code their choreographies and make them available to others. It is astonishing to see that in the formal system of labanotation, a relatively uncomplicated initial position with just a single motor departure from it could easily devour pages and pages of absurdly tortuous description. Such a representation would take roughly the following form:

*Description of:*

*Initial position of the head with regard to vertical and horizontal planes*

*Initial position of upper back, shoulders and chest with regard to vertical and horizontal planes*

*Initial position of lower back with regard to vertical and horizontal planes*

*Initial position of upper and lower arm with regard to vertical and horizontal planes*

*Initial position of hands with regard to vertical and horizontal planes*

*Position of legs and feet with regard to vertical and horizontal planes*

*Relative position of each body member with regard to the rest to compose the overall design of initial body position*

Then a similar set of descriptions would be used for every single departure from the initial position. The more complex the intended design, the more parameters -such as additional spatial reference points- had to be introduced; the parametric system was thus open-ended and could expand *ad infinitum*. Complex movements that involved more than a simple departure from horizontal and vertical planes could not be represented at all without being radically underdetermined by the representation used.

### **3.2. The curse of the phenomenal**

As humans, we have the ability to entertain mentally, recall from memory, track in our immediate physical surroundings or assemble from scratch in imagination the most refined phenomenal representations.<sup>24</sup>

It might be odd to quote a philosopher who contemplates the possible redundancy of the phenomenal altogether, but this following paragraph by John Heil nicely serves my discussion. Heil writes:

Philosophers cut their teeth on talk about perceptual experiences. Seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching things is, we are taught, a matter of our having *experiences* of those things. (...) Experiences are of objects and events, particulars and particular goings-on, not facts. And experiences are, or often are, in some degree, *conscious*.

That we have perceptual experiences with these characteristics is widely assumed, hence rarely defended. The attitude is one inherited from Locke: ‘What [perceptual experience] is every one will know better by reflecting on what he does himself when he sees, hears, feels, etc. than by any discourse of mine. Whoever reflects on what passes in his own mind cannot miss it: and if he does not reflect, all the words in the world cannot make him have any notion of it’. (Locke [1690] 1979, book II, Chapter 8, section 2, p. 143)

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<sup>24</sup> I use the broader term ‘phenomenal’ rather than the narrower ‘perceptual’ to refer not only to states associated with the senses but also to emotions. Strictly speaking, emotions are not perceptual states -with perceptual states defined as states that give information about distal objects; emotions are responses to the world rather than perceptions of it. My use of the term ‘phenomenal’, then, stands for every non-conceptual representation that the human mind can potentially entertain and covers both the categories of ‘perceptual’ and ‘emotional’.

Indeed in considering the matter, one may feel a certain sense of foreboding. Like time, perceptual experience is something we have a grip on so long as we postpone thinking about it. It is only after we trouble to reflect on the topic that it loses its obviousness. (1991: 1)

Or, so long as we postpone talking about it, one could legitimately add.

Our private mental lives are teeming with images, sensations, smells, sounds, textures; and yet for some reason, more often than not, the attempt to communicate even the most elementary of them proves overwhelming. From this standpoint, the ‘discontent with language’ (Waldrop 1971) that characterised most 20<sup>th</sup> century literary theory seems neither unjustified nor absurd. It might not be the case that language<sup>25</sup> is ‘inadequate’ *tout court*. As noted in Chapter 2, such extreme romantic views were largely side-effects of traditional semiotic theory, a pragmatically unsophisticated programme that dominated literary study for much of the last century, and which more or less reduced the richness of linguistic communication to the code alone.

Dismissing language in its entirety is as crude as accepting it in its entirety. As Dan Sperber suggested to me at a recent conference (P.C. July 2005, International Workshop on Word Meaning, Concepts and Communication’, Cumberland Lodge, London’), the amazing fact about language is not what we cannot express by it but what we can, the astonishing range of thoughts that we can make available to others *because* we have language. We wouldn’t want to deny that language performs

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<sup>25</sup> Allow me to speak of ‘language’ here -since this is the term used in traditional literary theory- but use it to denote something much broader than the code alone. In using the term ‘language’, I actually refer to *linguistic communication*, which -taking into account the Relevance-theoretic programme (Sperber and Wilson 1995, Carston 2002)- involves not only a linguistic code but also pervasive and diverse *pragmatic processes*. At the time when traditional literary theory was developing, the discipline of pragmatics hadn’t been invented yet. So, in line with the then dominant semiotic model of communication, literary theorists of the time assumed that language (in the sense of the linguistic code) is all that linguistic communication involves. I am sure that if they were around today, they would also adhere to a pragmatically enriched view of linguistic communication.

exceptionally well in many areas: in simple scene descriptions, for instance, instructions for achieving goals, complex logical arguments and long trains of abstract thought. A 'defence of language' is redundant because language does not need to be defended. But would we want to discount the possibility that in some other areas language doesn't really make the grade? All one has to do is focus on the right set of phenomena and the business of publicly expressing what is privately present in our minds will begin to appear less and less straightforward.

In this sense, representations of bodily posture and movement -let me refer to them from now on as *kinaesthetic* -are not special. They are just one amongst a number of different phenomena whose common thread is that they bring out an incompatibility between our mental lives and our expressive capacities.

In the OED, 'kinaesthesia' is defined as 'the sense of muscular effort that accompanies a voluntary motion of the body'. It is thus standardly understood as the (internal) sense of one's own body's disposition in space. I am not certain about whether 'kinaesthesia' is the most appropriate term for the kind of mental representation I have in mind, but I shall stick with it until I find a more appropriate term. In using the term, I am interested in both the (internal) sense of one's own body's disposition in space and the (external) description of the disposition of someone else's body in space. In the former sense, my understanding of 'kinaesthesia' is very close to what Martin (*Sight and Touch*, in Crane 1992: 201) refers to as body-awareness:

In talking about bodily awareness, or body sense, I mean to group together some of the various ways in which we are aware of our own bodies. At present I am aware of my posture, orientation in space, the position of my limbs; I have some sense of the shape and size of my body, and within and on it I am aware of various goings on - itches, aches, patches of warmth. What is interesting about these kinds of ways of

being aware of oneself as opposed to seeing, hearing or touching oneself is that one is aware of one's body in a way that one is aware of nothing else in the world. One might grandly say that the world of bodily awareness is restricted to one's own body. But there is an important sense for us in which that is false: in our awareness of ourselves we are aware of ourselves as being an object in a world which potentially can contain many other objects. We are aware of ourselves as bounded and limited within a world that extends beyond us.

One's own body is the proper object of such awareness in that anything which one feels in this way is taken to be part of one's body. There is no case, for instance, of feeling someone's legs to be crossed and then determining from how it feels whether the legs are one's own or someone else's. What marks out a felt limb as one's own is not some special quality that it has, but simply that one feels it in this way. Likewise when one feels a bodily sensation to have a location there is no issue over whose body it appears to belong to (see O'Shaughnessy 1980, volume 1, p. 162). Rather in as much as it feels to have a location, it feels to be within one's own body.

Internal and external body-awareness must be somehow interconnected. Our sense of our body's disposition in space can be combined with an imagined visual projection of what our bodily disposition possibly looks like externally. Our external perception of the disposition of someone else's body in space can be combined with an imagined sense of what this disposition would feel like if experienced internally. In other words, we know what it must feel like when we see a body somehow disposed in space and we also know what it must look like when we feel our body somehow disposed in space. Kinaesthesia need not operate only on representations of human bodily movement. We can project our own body awareness upon anything that has a 'body' even in a broad sense: animals, robots, machines. Finally, inclusion of facial expression in kinaesthetic representations seems to me rather important, since the interaction between face and body plays a decisive part in perceiving or rendering expression. Bodily movement underpins facial expression and facial movement underpins bodily expression.

Kinaesthesia is quite widespread in our mental tapestry, often fused with other representations that wouldn't strike us as kinaesthetic in the first place. And it is possible that the particular makeup of kinaesthetic representations -i.e. the articulation

of representations of three dimensional posture and movement of individual body parts, including facial expression- might make it rather easier to pin down and peel apart some of the problems phenomenal states pose for our expressive repertoire. However, one could take as a starting point for reflection any other of the fine range of phenomenal states the mind can be in, as it is a rather generic fact about communication that, when the phenomenal element becomes the focus of attention in a communicative situation, language is bound to stumble.

Perhaps some intuition that our expressive capacities fall terribly short when it comes to linguistically conveying phenomenal states prevents us from stepping into this area in most communicative situations. And this isn't just a question of a certain speaker in a certain context not being able to convey linguistically some phenomenal state, but rather an issue of whether any speaker in any context and at any time would be able to convey this phenomenal state.

The 'no go area' is skilfully bypassed with manoeuvres such as 'I have no words to express how I felt...', 'words cannot describe the experience of...' or 'you should have seen his face when...', where the existence of some noteworthy perceptual state is suggested but we never get to find out how the speaker 'felt', what the 'experience' was like and why all the fuss with that undescribed 'facial expression'.

Mimicry is certainly another manoeuvre that allows one to convey certain types of perceptual states through something akin to direct quotation, while avoiding the hassles of linguistic description. At a recent conference on metaphor, the psychologist Ray Gibbs set out to explain the origin of the idiom 'he kicked the bucket'. The idiom is often seen as deriving from the context of slaughterhouses. Gibbs explains that, as the pigs are dying hanging upside down with their throats slit,



they often kick the bucket that is there to gather their blood. But this verb 'kicks' feels somewhat vague for the purposes of his story -it doesn't capture, for instance, the involuntariness of the movement in question, and Gibbs surely doesn't want us to visualise the pig kicking the bucket as in 'Beckham kicks the ball'. Instead of verbally narrowing the *manner* of the action, Gibbs tilts his head sideways, lifts his right arm with the hand in a released position and mimics the involuntary spasmodic movement of the dying pig.

Our pragmatic ability enables us to readily draw on our *background* and depict an action in the relevant way in our *mentalese*, when interpreting uses of common verbs in different contexts: e.g. 'open the window' vs 'open the mouth' (Searle 1983:145; Sperber and Wilson 1998; Carston 2002: 64-65). Supplying *manner* in this sense does not require explicit linguistic description. The information needed is so generic in human experience that the recipient of these utterances will almost certainly fish out from their background the right way of mentally representing the act of opening.

In other cases, though, it seems more appropriate to provide explicit linguistic clues about the manner of an action. Our background is highly unlikely to contain representations of how dying pigs kick buckets. We may as well prove able to improvise the necessary manner by stitching together fragments of information from various other areas of our existing experience. But if the speaker wants to increase the probability of our representation not going completely astray, it is good to supply further clues.

And of course, manner is not a single-stratum story. In an expression such as 'he opened the window as you open an old wound' there is an evident stratification of manner embedded within manner. (So, he opened the window in the way we open

windows, not mouths. Then, he apparently opened the window in a particular way; the way we open an old wound. And one opens old wounds in the way we open wounds, not windows!) As the stratification increases and manner becomes more particularised, explicit description of some sort seems all the more necessary.

It is noteworthy that when no manoeuvre comes easily to mind and circumstances leave no option but to step into the dreaded zone, we almost always produce descriptions that grossly understate the facts. In a BBC documentary about the 7/7 London bombings, a man recounts the horrific moments after the subway blasts. He recalls how in pitch dark he sensed the body of a woman who had landed on his legs twitching from pain. The twitching goes on for some time and then stops. To his horror, he gathers that the injured woman must have passed away. ‘What was that like?’ the interviewer asks (foolishly). The man looks stunned and stays silent for a few seconds: ‘It was gross’ he mumbles.

### **3.3. More thoughts on the curse**

In the usual affair of human language, a spilt coffee is ‘gross’, the sight of vomiting is ‘gross’ and a woman dying on you is also ‘gross’.

In the last decade, ground breaking theory in the relatively new field of Lexical Pragmatics (Sperber & Wilson 1998, Carston 2002, Wilson 2003, Wilson & Carston 2006, 2007) has put forward compelling arguments that, well... things are not as bad as they appear at first sight. A fundamental assumption in Lexical Pragmatics is that there is a *gap* between the concept a word in the public lexicon *encodes* and the concept this word is used to *communicate* in specific contexts.

In the new light of lexical-pragmatic theory, the relationship between concepts encoded by words and the concepts these words are used to communicate is neither fixed nor inflexible. A word is no more than a clue to the speaker's meaning. Thus, the rigid one-to-one relationship between a signified and a signifier is replaced by the plasticity of a one-to-many relationship between what a word standardly encodes and what the speaker uses it to communicate in specific contexts.

This way, lexical-pragmatic theory accommodates the compelling psycholinguistic evidence that the human mind has the ability to construct concepts on the spot by tracking subtle differences across and within contexts (Barsalou 1987). On hearing an utterance, the mind takes the discourse context and the speaker's intentions into account and each time tailors and slightly fine-tunes *ex impromptu* our mental representation of the category of objects a word is used to pick out. Our mental representation of the category picked out by 'bird' is differently tailored in:

- (1) As I worked in the garden, a *bird* perched on my spade.
- (2) *Birds* wheeled above the waves.
- (3) At Christmas, the *bird* was delicious.<sup>26</sup>

Would you be comfortable with the claim that what the utterer of (3) ate for Christmas is likely to be the same kind of bird that the utterer of (1) saw perching on her spade? Unbeknownst to us, in hearing each of these utterances, our mind has narrowed the category BIRD to something far more specific; it has allowed certain kinds of bird as candidate referents and eliminated others.

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<sup>26</sup> The examples are taken from Deirdre Wilson's lectures on Lexical Pragmatics at UCL.

And if you were hasty enough to think that such ad hoc fine-tunings would not appear if the discourse context remained constant, observe how your interpretation of ‘red’ changes in the following examples that we briefly looked at in the previous chapter, and in which the context for ‘red’ is always ‘eyes’:

- (4) ...*red* eyes denote strain and fatigue.
- (5) This flashing light is to stop you getting *red* eyes in the photos.
- (6) ...two *red* eyes she recalled burning from anger.<sup>27</sup>

How is that relevant to our discussion? Well, since lexical-pragmatic processes allow the same word to recur in different contexts and communicate rather different things, so that in each of our previous examples the word ‘bird’ is used to communicate the slightly different concepts BIRD\*, BIRD\*\*, BIRD\*\*\*, then we could maybe resolve the problem of a spilt coffee being ‘gross’, the sight of vomiting being ‘gross’ and a woman dying on you also being ‘gross’, by suggesting that in each of these cases the word ‘gross’ is differently fine-tuned and is thus used to communicate quite distinct concepts GROSS\*, GROSS\*\*, GROSS\*\*\*.

‘Gross’ might indeed be used to communicate quite different concepts in each case, but the problem still persists: the gap between BIRD (i.e. the concept encoded by ‘bird’) and BIRD\*, or BIRD\*\*, is a gap in a fairly minimal sense. By ‘fairly minimal sense’, I mean that in an utterance of (3) (‘At Christmas, the *bird* was delicious’), the mention of Christmas and of the bird’s being edible and delicious

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<sup>27</sup> A gripping and diverse range of examples of the latter sort have now allowed lexical-pragmatic theory to challenge recent ‘default approaches’ to lexical meaning (Lascarides and Copestake 1998, Levinson 2000: 37-8, 112-34) which claim that the one-to-many relationship between the concept a word standardly encodes and how this concept is eventually narrowed in specific contexts is mediated by sets of *default rules* and passes through default narrowings, which may then be overridden.

provides sufficient evidence to justify the fine tuning of BIRD to BIRD\*, where BIRD\* is the type of bird that we normally find at the Christmas table in the Western world. Similarly, the fine-tuning of GROSS to GROSS\* and GROSS\*\*, where GROSS\* and GROSS\*\* denote the particular ways in which the sight of a spilt coffee or vomiting are unpleasant, is also a move in a fairly minimal sense.<sup>28</sup>

But what context could ever enable a leap from GROSS to the complex emotional, mental and experiential states involved in seeing a woman dying the way this woman was dying? The choice of wording seems so inadequate that no ordinary form of bridging between encoded and communicated concepts can justify it. And if that is so, then the question remains: why is it that, when trying to muse over experiential states, we so often and so easily see our words lose their adequacy?

Philosophy of language and linguistics have always agreed that perceptual *qualia* need special treatment as an exception to the claim that whatever can be thought can be expressed in language, and in the main, the existence of such *qualia* is pretty uncontroversial.<sup>29</sup> (For relevant discussion, see Carston 2002: 32-37, 79-80.)

To start with, one could group the various sub-problems that have been seen as associated with the communication of perceptual experience under a single, superordinate heading. The philosopher Fred Dretske lends us an illuminating metaphor:

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<sup>28</sup> However, Sperber and Wilson would say that, in virtually ANY lexical narrowing or broadening, a degree of weakness in communication is introduced: there's never a guarantee that speaker and hearer will arrive at exactly the same concept, let alone the same implications.

<sup>29</sup> Although there are different views on this too. The philosopher Michael Tye (2006 and the forthcoming paper 'New troubles for the qualia freak'; also in Crane 1992: 158-176), for instance, has produced an array of philosophical arguments against the existence of visual - and, ultimately, all perceptual- qualia.

I will say that a signal (structure, event, state) carries the information that  $s$  is  $F$  in *digital* form if and only if the signal carries no additional information about  $s$ , no information that is not already nested in  $s$ 's being  $F$ . If the signal *does* carry additional information about  $s$ , information that is *not* nested in  $s$ 's being  $F$ , then I shall say that the signal carries this information in analog form. (...)

To illustrate the way this distinction applies, consider the difference between a picture and a statement. Suppose a cup has coffee in it, and we want to communicate this piece of information. If I simply *tell* you, 'The cup has coffee in it' this acoustic signal carries the information that the cup has coffee in it in digital form. No more specific information is supplied about the cup (or the coffee) than that there is some coffee in the cup. You are not told *how much* coffee there is in the cup, how large the cup is, *how dark* the coffee is, what the shape and orientation of the cup are, and so on. If, on the other hand, I photograph the scene and show you the picture, the information that the cup has coffee in it is conveyed in analog form. The picture tells you that there is some coffee in the cup by telling you, roughly, how much coffee is in the cup, the shape, size, and color of the cup, and so on.

I can say that  $A$  and  $B$  are of different size without saying how much they differ in size or which is larger, but I cannot picture  $A$  and  $B$  as being of different size without picturing one of them as larger and indicating, roughly, how much larger it is. (...)

As indicated, a signal carrying information in analog form will always carry some information in digital form. A sentence expressing *all* the information a signal carries will be a sentence expressing the information the signal carries in digital form (since this will be the most specific, most determinate, piece of information the signal carries). This is true of pictures as well as other analog representations. The information a picture carries in digital form can be rendered only by some enormously complex sentence, a sentence that describes every detail of the situation about which the picture carries information. To say that a picture is worth a thousand words is merely to acknowledge that, for most pictures at least, the sentence needed to express all the information contained in the picture would have to be very complex indeed. Most pictures have a wealth of detail, and a degree of specificity, that makes it all but impossible to provide even an approximate *linguistic* rendition of the information the picture carries in digital form. Typically, when we describe the information conveyed by a picture, we are describing the information the picture carries in analog form -abstracting, as it were, from its more concrete embodiment in the picture. (...)

To describe a process in which a piece of information is converted from analog to digital form is to describe a process that necessarily involves the *loss* of information (1999: 137-141).

This passage squarely explains the problems raised by the case-study with which I chose to begin this chapter. It also explains the distress we feel at our failure

to convey our experiences fully when attempting to speak out phenomenal aspects of our thoughts. And strictly speaking, this failure shouldn't be seen as a problem for language, any more than it is seen as a problem for perception.

As the philosopher of language François Recanati suggested at a recent conference ('International Workshop in Lexical Pragmatics, Cumberland Lodge, London, 2005) it is rather a contingent fact that we find it so difficult sometimes to share and convey perceptual experience. If there was, for instance, a device that could allow us to connect our brain with that of a fellow human so that we would be able to 'see' exactly what they 'see' and 'feel' exactly what they 'feel', none of the hassles of perceptual expressibility would arise. The problems begin when we try to translate perceptual representations into a different type of representation -conceptual, that is-, or analogue into digital streams in the Dretsian sense. That is not something we should charge language with or treat as a deficit of language.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, a problem which arises out of the relationship between two systems is no more a problem for the one system *per se* than it is for the other. Hence, instead of accusing language of 'inadequacy', one could as well have accused perception of being inadequate to be put into words. (Let us move on quickly before we sink too deep into such vicious circles.)

### **3.4. The reach of the phenomenal. How far does the curse go?**

In the last decade, the work of Adrian Pilkington (2000, 2001) has brought phenomenal states into focus and led the way in exploring how they might relate not only to questions of *expressibility* but also to questions of what he refers to as 'poetic

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<sup>30</sup> My rough expression of Recanati's proposals.

thought'. The questions Pilkington touches on are of huge importance for poetics and literary theory. They ought therefore to be explored further and pursued in great depth.

In his paper 'Non-lexicalised concepts and degrees of effability: poetic thoughts and the attraction of what is not in the dictionary', Pilkington (2001) seems well aware of the fact that some concepts -and consequently the thoughts that contain them- are relatively ineffable; and he totally hits the nail on the head in arguing that their relative ineffability is the result of their carrying a significant phenomenal freight. The question I want to consider here is about the scope of the phenomenal in our mental tapestry. Is it pervasive throughout our conceptual repertoire, or is it perhaps specific to a certain range of concepts?

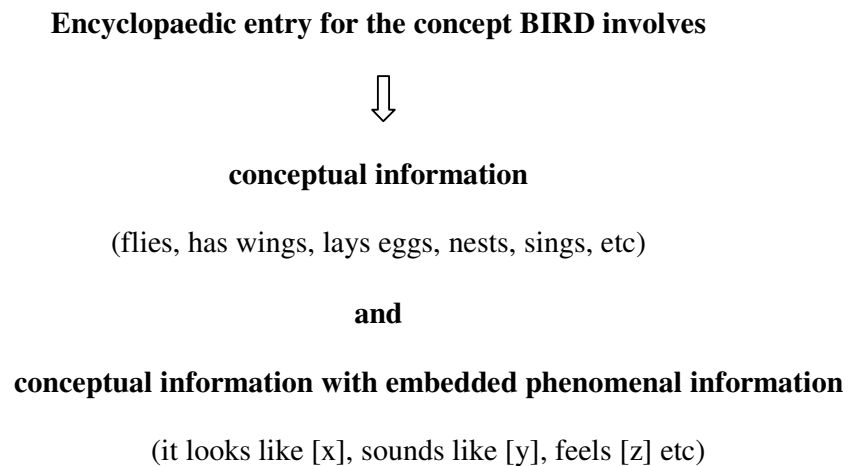
Any thought about any object can involve an element of mode or manner in the way it is mentally represented: not simply 'sad' but sad in a particular manner X, not simply 'flex' but flex in a certain way Y, not merely 'a breeze' but a breeze that feels like this, and so on and so forth. The presence of some mode in a thought about an object may amongst other things indicate that the thought has to varied extents been infused with phenomenal matter. It isn't, strictly speaking, that the narrower concept is necessarily more perceptual than the broader one; it is rather that the layering of many manner descriptions sometimes makes it easier to evoke a perceptual image.

If any thought about any object, if any conceptual representation, can involve modes linked to phenomenal states and other private elements, then treating the phenomenal as associated only with certain types of conceptual representations -e.g. colour terms, terms for shapes, movements, etc- would hugely understate the intensity



and scope of the issue, by mistakenly portraying the expressive problems associated with phenomena as specific and restricted to a limited set of our thoughts.

The idea that some concepts are more closely related to perception has some immediate appeal. BLUE is, of course, immediately linked to perception in a way BIRD isn't. Still, BIRD can at any time be entertained in a private, *de re* modality and our encyclopaedic entry for it is bound to involve a rich cargo of phenomenal information: 'it feels [x]', 'it looks like [y]', 'it gives one an [z] sensation' and the like:



In principle, our encyclopaedic entries for any concept, even abstract ones, can involve a phenomenal component. Abstract concepts, like BEAUTY, for instance, have *concrete instances*, which are causally linked to phenomenal states, which can be remembered and reactivated on future occasions. A concept like ALGORITHM might have been associated with memories of physical environments or occasions on which the object has been encountered and such memories are also bound amongst other things to have phenomenal content.

A more plausible idea might therefore be that having causal or associative links to phenomenal properties is not the privilege only of certain types of concepts, because any concept can potentially evoke perceptual states associated with the object this concept picks out. All conceptual representations -and concepts themselves- may both evoke perceptual representations and be evoked by them.<sup>31</sup>

That is one side of the coin. The other side is the possibility that the phenomenal might in fact be even more widespread than that. Language has a physical, bodily, articulatory dimension. Every sound or word we utter is the product of movement in certain areas -e.g. muscles in the mouth or larynx. Whenever we utter a word, the body experiences rather precise kinaesthetic activity. In parallel, utterances of words also have an auditory and visual dimension. And it is very likely that because of these perceptual aspects of word tokens, we sometimes have the intuition that a certain word ‘feels somehow’ or ‘has a particular texture’ which sets it far apart from other words with similar meaning.

Thus, apart from the phenomena that we associate with concepts or objects *per se*, there are also the phenomena that we associate with the word(s) that express concepts in some natural language. How are the two types of phenomenon interrelated?

When we speak about a certain word, about, say, ‘bird’ in a *metalinguistic* sense, we certainly do not pick out the *set of birds*; and knowledge about the word is not knowledge about the object. We might know in what contexts the word ‘bird’ first

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<sup>31</sup> There are two distinct ways of thinking of these causal links: (a) there are likely to be direct associative links between the concept BIRD and a whole variety of perceptual and emotional states; (b) some of these states may become embedded within propositional representations and go into the encyclopaedic entry for the concept. There are probably many more direct causal links than conceptual/ phenomenal propositions in the encyclopaedic entries for objects, and obviously, not all patterns of activation pass through the encyclopaedic entries; it’s just that for some purposes, e.g. when talking about relevance and contextual implications, we have to assume that some do.

occurred, we might be aware of its etymology, its use in the milieu of a certain literary figure and so on, but none of this amounts to knowing anything about birds. And the converse is also true. The relation between our concept of the word ‘bird’ and our concept BIRD is neither one of identity nor one of containment. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that there should exist separate concepts for words, with their own encyclopaedic entries:

**Encyclopaedic entry for the concept of the word ‘bird’ involves:**



**conceptual information**

(e.g. it occurs in such-and-such literary contexts, it has such-and-such etymological origin, it occurs in poetry as a symbol of the poet herself, etc)

**and**

**conceptual information with embedded phenomenal/ perceptual information**

(looks like [x], feels [y], sounds like [z], etc)

And the relation between our concept for the word ‘bird’ and our concept BIRD must be one of mutual *evocation*, or activation:

Concept BIRD



Concept of the word ‘bird’

As words with no conceptual content can also evoke phenomenal representations, I wouldn’t want to say that phenomenal representations are essentially features of concepts rather than words. It is rather that concepts are associated with words via

their linguistic entries, and words evoke phenomenal representations in their own right -as well as through the concepts they convey.

Before they become associated with any memories or experiences, concepts can activate phenomenal representations because of the sensory particularities of the words that express them in a given language. It is this, no less important, aspect of the phenomenal that Jakobson was essentially referring to in suggesting that the appeal of certain phrases owes a lot to the sound patterns they exploit.<sup>32</sup> It is this aspect of the phenomenal that poets consistently resort to when in the struggle for precision they choose a word not because of what it means, not because of the concepts it is linked to, but because of what the word *per se* ‘feels like’.

### **3.5. The *list-poem*: proper names as ‘phenomena’?**

A major achievement of modernist poetry was to draw attention to the pervasiveness of the phenomenal in our mental fabric and hint at its importance for both literary and everyday linguistic communication.

The modernist poet was not, of course, interested in sketching a theory of concepts. Yet in the broader debate about connotations in relation to inter-personal, inter-textual and intercultural reading, modernists placed huge emphasis on the different phenomenal energies with which a concept can be charged through individual or collective experience.

The so-called *list-poem* -initially invented by Dadaism in an attempt to combat traditionalist and conventionalist views of poetry as a genre defined by the presence of metre and rhyme, or, more outrageously, by the presence of ‘poetic words and

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<sup>32</sup> As noted in Chapter 8, one of the instances Jakobson used was ‘Veni, vidi, vici’.

motifs': daffodils, mists, sunsets, and other ludicrous such- is no more than what the word says: a list of words proclaiming itself as a poem.

In due course, the list-poem technique was taken up by various poets for various purposes. In the 'Journal of an Unseen April' Odysseas Elytis produces a part list-poem which -amongst other things- seems to be commenting on the role phenomenal energies can play in the possibility or impossibility of cross-cultural reading. The middle part of the poem is a list of proper names. Some are names of historical figures and places associated with critical moments in the 3,000 odd years of Greek history. Others are names of everyday people and ordinary places of Elytis' time.

For the non-Greek reader -or more generally the reader who cannot associate the proper names in question with any memories, images, historical knowledge, present and past cultural experience- *Constantine Palaeologus*, the *Hellespont* or *Mastr' Antonis* are mere referring expressions (if they are anything at all). They do no more than pick out persons or places in the actual world.

For the reader who has the precious intra-cultural experience, these same names have an extra function added to the referential one, a phenomenal function. The phenomenal function, the perceptual and emotional involvement, that is, that would potentially characterise the intra-cultural reading, is more likely to be totally absent in the cross-cultural one. An involvement of this sort goes beyond purely conceptual encyclopaedic information or historical awareness; the cross-cultural reader who knows in theory who these persons and places happened to be, still in the main does not have the phenomenal resources for his understanding of these concepts to draw on. And Elytis' poem seems to suggest that engaging emotionally and perceptually in the act of reading relies precisely on such resources.

*'Thursday, 16*

*DRIZZLE MEANS SOMETHING to everyone. To me nothing. I secured the windows and began calling alphabetically: the Angel of Astypalaea; Briseis; Constantine Palaeologus; Crinagoras' servant; Gaugamila; the Hellespont; Homer (with his entire Iliad); Ibycus (impassioned); Issus; Late; the Libation Bearers; Mastr' Antonis; Nicias; Origen; the Pelasgi; Phestos; the Prophet Elijah; Psara; Roxanna; Saint Pelagia's shoal; Sthenelai's; Tatavla; Theodorus the martyr from Mytilene; and Zagoria.*

*I awoke having gone through the history of the Death of History or rather the history of the History of Death (and this is no play on words)' (Elytis 1998: 57).*

A more mundane example that came up in discussing the matter with Deirdre Wilson (P.C. 20.09.05) would be a poem listing the names of famous English cricketers. A poem like that might evoke huge emotions in cricket fans but leave others totally cold. Of course, this doesn't show that the phenomenal isn't expressible at all, but only that it isn't expressible to anyone who hasn't experienced the appropriate emotions, etc. about the appropriate objects. Just as 'red' can't convey a perceptual image to anyone who hasn't experienced it before.

Obviously, the lack of overlap between interactants need not be of a cultural sort. The *heteroglossia* and *dialogical* nature of our societies in the Bakhtinian sense (Holquist 1981) that traditional literary theory and cultural studies so intensely

contemplate -the diversity and multitude of discourses and ideologies which individuals are exposed to through social life- and also the heteroglossia of our minds and experiences makes it relatively easy to ponder and potentially attempt to communicate a state, a viewpoint, a particular perception of the world or of an object that some other individual hasn't experienced. Knowing about something in theory might facilitate communication, but it is unlikely to replace the engagement that the missing experiential state could induce. Through reading, for instance, we know a lot about a lot. I suppose this knowledge, in conjunction with the human ability to empathise, allows us some degree of involvement with affairs and events of which we do not have phenomenal experiences. A list-poem of proper names that employs such references might then be slightly more to one than a meaningless string of referring expressions. And at the same time, it would be slightly less than a corresponding string of proper names that one could associate with rich phenomenal resources. Here are some of mine:

*Constantine Palaeologus*: an image of the pilgrims of 'anastenaria' dancing on burning charcoal and holding icons of the sanctified emperor Constantine the Great

*Gaugamila*: a sculpture of Alexander the Great pictured in a high-school textbook

*The Hellespont*: a certain shot of the Hellespont from the film 'politiki cuisisne'

*Homer*: the first time I was taught Homer at University. My professor reciting the beginning of the 'Odyssey', his voice echoing in the crowded but quiet amphitheatre

*Mastr' Antonis:* (strangely) a man wearing a Greek fisherman's hat

*The Prophet Elijah:* the chapel of the prophet at my birthplace

*Zagoria:* the mountain of Astraka at dawn as I saw it from my hotel room half awake- half asleep.

The phenomenal is not restricted to certain cognitive domains, but is rather widespread and pervasive throughout our mental lives. Thus, the challenges for our communicative abilities seem to reach far beyond the limited repertoire of those concepts tightly associated with perception, and rather involve our entire conceptual repertoire. It should be reasonably uncontroversial that phenomena put our expressive powers to the test. Simple phenomena are in fact complex informational states that even the most elaborate sentence, fleshed out by the most elaborate pragmatics, will always to some degree understate. Thus, when trying to communicate phenomenal states, speakers are, more often than not, likely to see themselves stumble and fall. The same goes for poets. But poets cannot afford this fall. They must get up and keep on trying. And in this sense, the modernist poet's persistence in accusing language of impotence is at least partially justified.

I am entirely convinced, however, that the reasons behind the poet's discontent with language go far beyond the universal relationship between analogue and digital systems, and are linked to some essential distinctness of the poetic mind itself.

The next chapter starts from the assumption that a certain behaviour is an action when it stands in the right causal relation to an internal process, and



particularises it in the following argument: a certain behaviour is art -and the resulting object an artwork- when it stands in the right causal relation to a certain internal, and more specifically, mental/ psycho-cognitive state. I will call the whole complex state a 'poetic thought state'.

Poetic thought states and the essential distinctness of art as an action provide good grounds for expecting linguistic pessimism to be more widespread in the poetic mentality than the generic folk mentality. Much of the poet's discontent with language can therefore be seen as resulting from the special demands that the particular type of creative mental representations (aspectual representations, I will call them) involved in art-specific thought states may impose on communication.

## Chapter 4

### Varieties of essentialism in Art

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#### 4.1. Essentialism and its ethics

Blaming *essentialism* for all the mischief it has been used for in human intellectual, social and ideological history -the repertoire is surprisingly rich and ranges from sexism and its doctrines to racism and its doctrines- is as wise and advisable as blaming the knife for a killing. Essentialism and its ethics are two rather different things. Scepticism about the latter cannot legitimately permit dismissal of the former.

It is accepted practice in philosophy, social science and anthropology to talk about kinds, and the fact that some kinds have an *essence* is fairly uncontroversial. These include *natural kinds*, which exist independently of the human mind, and *nominal kinds*, whose essence we humans invent in the form of a definition. A question that immediately arises is whether *artifacts* -however they are characterised- can also be said to have an essence, and if so, what it is like. Could it be a prototypical shape? Or a prototypical function? Or maybe an essential structure or function? Or, perhaps, none of these.

Apart from conventions of terminology, the borders between artifacts and natural kinds are anything but sharp. *Biological artifacts* (Sperber 2003), which have both a natural and a cultural dimension, are perhaps the prime examples of fuzziness in the borderline between the two categories; as Dan Sperber (2003: 124) has proposed, ‘the notion of an artifact commonly used in social sciences, particularly in archeology and anthropology, is a family resemblance notion, useful for a first-pass description of various objects and for vague characterisation of scholarly, and in particular museographic interests. It should not be taken for granted that this notion

could be defined precisely enough to serve a genuine theoretical purpose'. The following quote from Chomsky (1976: 50-52) is rather revealing about the nature of the long-standing debate over essential properties:

To take another case, Kripke suggests that '(roughly) *being a table* seems to be an essential property of the table' (1972: 351), that is, of a particular thing that is a table. Exactly what weight is being carried by the qualification '(roughly)' is unclear. If we drop the qualification, the proposal can hardly stand. Suppose we discover that the designer of this particular object had intended it to be a hard bed and that it is so used. Surely we would then say that the thing is not a table but a hard bed that looks like a table. But the thing is what it is. Neither a gleam in the eye of the inventor nor general custom can determine its essential properties, though intention and function are relevant to determining what we take an artefact to be. Suppose further that the thing in question is a table nailed to the floor. We would be inclined to say that it would have been the same thing had it not been nailed to the floor, but it could not have been other than a table. Thus it is necessarily a table but only accidentally immovable. Consider now another creature with a different language and a different system of common-sense understanding, in which such categories as movable-immovable are fundamental, but not function and use. These creatures would say that this immovable object would have been a different thing had it not been nailed to the floor, though it could have been other than a table. To them, immovability would appear to be an essential property of the thing, not 'being a table'. If this is so, a property may be essential or not, depending on which creature's judgements prevail.

Chomsky's argument, then, is that essentialist claims may reveal more about the cognitive systems of those who make them than about the essences of the objects described:

We might discover that humans, operating within cognitive capacity, will not develop 'natural' systems of the sort postulated for this hypothetical creature. If true, this would be a discovery about human biology, but I do not see how such biological properties of humans affect the 'essence' of things.

(...) A study of human judgements concerning essential properties may give considerable insight into the cognitive structures that are being employed, and perhaps beyond, into the nature of human cognitive capacity and the range of structures that are naturally constructed by the mind. But such a study can carry us no further than this.

(...) In the Aristotelian framework, there are certain 'generative factors' that enter into the essential constitution of objects; we gain understanding of the nature of an object insofar as we grasp the generative factors which enable it to be what it is -a person, a tiger, a house, or whatever. Constitution and structure, agent responsible for generation within a system of natural law, distinguishing factors for particular species, are among the generative factors. These generative factors are close, it seems, to Kripke's 'essential properties'. Under this formulation, there are essential properties of things because of the way the world is in fact constituted, but we may easily drop the metaphysical assumptions and say that  $x$  is a generative factor of  $y$  under the description  $D$  (or, perhaps, when  $y$  is categorised as a  $C$  within the system of common-sense understanding).

At the same time, though, 'essence' in itself need not be a single, unitary notion applying in the same way to both artifacts and natural kinds, or even to different types of artifacts. In fact, it seems to me much wiser to talk about 'essences' in the plural, acknowledging the many different forms essence may take, each applying to different sets of artifacts -just as it is more appropriate to talk about the 'structures' (rather than the 'structure') of natural kinds, with types of structure ranging from biological to genetic to chemical, etc.

The attribution of essences is an evolved part of human psychology. Our cognitive organisation has an inbuilt propensity not only to track essences and build certain categories of concepts around them, but also to create complex and induced states of essential fuzziness -in, say, effortlessly constructing concepts like BLUISH or CENTAUR.

*Inter alia*, in this chapter and the next I will attempt a defence of essentialism in literature and art. I will propose a possible story about what the essence of art might be, and an alternative account of *literariness* that could potentially answer questions that 20<sup>th</sup> century formalist and structuralist models of literary essence left hopelessly unanswered.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The question of artistic essence is as central to literary theory as it is to the philosophy of art.

#### 4.2. Structural essentialism in literature and the other arts

In Chapter 8, I briefly discussed how the early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde set out on a venture widely known as *the poetics of language*. Defending the view that there is a distinct language of literature, poets and intellectuals of that time treated the literary text as a deviation from the ‘norms’ and ‘canon’ of ordinary language, and assumed that what makes a literary text distinct from an ordinary linguistic object is its linguistic form and structure. Ambitious as it may have been, the project was ill fated. Founded on largely unsubstantiated assumptions and lacking in psychological plausibility, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century *the poetics of language* eventually collapsed under the weight of compelling psycholinguistic, pragmatic and philosophical evidence.

Few nowadays still acknowledge that, although incorrect, the *poetics of language* was a venture of noteworthy intellectual courage. Even fewer realise that this venture was an essentialist project.

To assume that literature is a distinct object because of inherent linguistic properties of the literary text is to assume that literature has an essence. If the *poetics of language* had been correct, it would have shown that what makes a literary object essentially distinct from an ordinary linguistic object is some deviation at the formal and structural level. Generalising this assumption to all art, it would then have been possible to claim that what makes an artistic object essentially distinct from a ‘mere thing’ is a medium-specific deviation at the formal and structural level.

Not only was the poetics of language an essentialist project, it was also an essentialist project of Putnam’s *structural* variety. In Putnam’s metaphysics, the essence of a *natural kind* -the property (*P*) that makes it the natural kind it is- is determined by the kind’s *structure* or *microstructure* (Putnam 1975). When Putnam

walks in a ‘gallery of indiscernibles’, a ‘gallery’ of perceptually indistinguishable natural kinds, he peels them apart on the grounds of structural criteria. Of two superficially indiscernible substances, only one of which is actually water<sup>34</sup>, water is the substance that has the structure H<sub>2</sub>O. Here, ‘structure’ amounts to chemical make-up. Of two superficially indiscernible beings, only one of which is actually human, the human is the one that has the appropriate DNA structure. Here, ‘structure’ takes the form of genetic make-up. It is easy to see how the poetics of language can be accommodated in this framework. For the poetics of language, the distinctness of literature as an object (as opposed to ordinary language) was the result of a differential and deviant *linguistic structure*.

I would be inclined to propose that the last serious attempt in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to defend the *poetics of language* and show the essential distinctness of literature in structural linguistic terms was Jakobson’s notorious ‘Closing statement in linguistic and poetics’ (1958/ 1996). In that paper, Jakobson aims to capture the inherent -and therefore essential- linguistic property that makes literature a distinct object, and thus emerges as an advocate of structural essentialism, whether he is aware of doing so or not. His answer to what this essential -‘inherent’, he calls it- property might be is

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<sup>34</sup> For those acquainted with Putnam, what I am referring to in brief here is the famous ‘Twin Earth problem’ (Putnam 1975: 139-140):

(...) we shall suppose that somewhere in the galaxy there is a planet we shall call Twin Earth. (...) In fact, apart from the differences we shall specify in our science-fiction examples, the reader may suppose that Twin Earth is exactly like Earth. (...) One of the peculiarities of Twin Earth is that the liquid called ‘water’ is not H<sub>2</sub>O but a different liquid whose chemical formula is very long and complicated. I shall abbreviate this chemical formula simply as XYZ. I shall suppose that XYZ is indistinguishable from water at normal temperatures and pressures. In particular, it tastes like water and it quenches thirst like water. Also, I shall suppose that oceans and lakes and seas on Twin Earth contain XYZ and not water, that it rains XYZ on Twin Earth and not water etc.

The relevant metaphysical question in Putnam’s Twin Earth example is what makes Earth water and Twin Earth ‘water’ ontologically/ essentially distinct.

notably his notion of the *poetic function* (1958/ 1996: 17), and ‘poetic function’ is incontestably a structural concept.<sup>35</sup>

While in the case of literature the arguments against structural essentialism came mainly from the outside -as noted above, *the poetics of language* was eventually defeated by compelling psycholinguistic, pragmatic and philosophical evidence-, in visual art, the decisive evidence against essential structure emerged from within the art world itself. Conceptual art and its ready-mades caused visual art to enter the philosophical ‘gallery of indiscernibles’ and created an art-specific variety of *twin event*.<sup>36</sup> Ordinary Brillo boxes and Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, ordinary urinals and Duchamp’s *Urinal* are twin events, physical tokens of the same type. More importantly, ordinary Brillo boxes and Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, ordinary urinals and Duchamp’s *Urinal* are not just perceptually indiscernible objects, but are also, and crucially, structurally indiscernible.

If there was any hope at all for structural essentialism in the first place, conceptual art certainly made it evaporate. If Duchamp’s *Urinal* is a work of art -and there is strong introspective evidence that it is- and given that Duchamp’s *Urinal* has identical structural properties to those of an ordinary urinal, then the essential property that makes a certain object art cannot be down to its structure. The problem provides a useful rule-of-the-thumb for distinguishing a serious intellectual from a run-of-the-mill one: ask them what they take to be the implications of conceptual artworks for an ontology of art. The serious intellectual should recognise that what really follows from conceptual art is that, if there is an essence of art, it is not part of

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<sup>35</sup> As it will be noted in Chapter 8, the *poetic function* is present when both paradigmatic and syntagmatic/ structural selections during utterance/ text production are made on the basis of systematic *structural equivalence*. ‘Structural equivalence’ in turn refers to systematic relations of similarity and dissimilarity at a structural level.

<sup>36</sup> The term ‘twin-event’ is an alternative name for a set of indiscernible objects.

the artwork's structure. The run-of-the-mill one is more likely to suggest that there is no essence of art.

Structural essentialism had been dead in the context of the visual arts long before the death of its literary equivalent (i.e. *the poetics of language*).

#### **4.3. Relational essentialism: Arthur Danto and Jerry Fodor**

More recently, two theorists have put forward notable proposals on the essence of art. The first is Arthur Danto. In 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace' (1981), Danto draws directly on Wittgenstein's proposal to distinguish *behaviour* from *action* in terms of the contexts in which they occur, and suggests that what distinguishes an artwork from a perceptually and structurally indiscernible 'mere thing' is (*historical context*). For Danto, the twin events that concern him (ordinary Brillo boxes and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*) have identical perceptual and structural properties, but are essentially distinct because they clearly have *differential contextual histories*: the artwork, unlike the 'mere thing', is located in an *artworld context* (1981: 142).

Notice that while Danto's agenda is unquestionably essentialist, the version of essentialism he is pursuing is critically different from that pursued within *the poetics of language*: Danto seems to have insightfully weighed the philosophical implications of ready-mades and realised that essentialism of the structural variety -while perhaps adequate for pinning down the essence of natural kinds- is not appropriate to works of art. 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace' thus represents an innovative move away from the problems of structural essentialism, and celebrates an essentialism of a *relational* sort. The property (*P*) that makes an object a work of art is not part of the object's perceptual or structural properties, and is not to be found within the object



itself. It is rather a *relational property* -in Danto's particular case, a relation between the artwork and a certain artworld-specific historical context.

In my view, Danto is right to look for a relational property; but wrong in what he takes this property to be. My own account will be consistent with Danto's to the extent that it also treats (*P*) as a relational property.

The second theorist to seriously tackle essentialism in art is the philosopher of mind Jerry Fodor. As Fodor's 'Déjà vu all over again: how Danto's aesthetics recapitulates the philosophy of mind' (1993) has a more advanced and up-to-date relational story to tell about the essence of art -and is anyway in direct dialectics with Danto-, I will not directly argue against Danto's position at all. I will try and grapple, though, with one or two of Fodor's philosophical arguments about the essential role of intentions in distinguishing artworks from other objects, hoping to show why his account is not satisfactory either.

To say that Danto's and Fodor's frameworks give inadequate accounts of the essence of art is not to say that these frameworks have no place whatsoever in an overall philosophy of art. My proposal does not exclude either Danto's contextual or Fodor's intentional story, but simply assigns them a different locus. Both stories have a lot to say about art as a phenomenon; it is just that none of what they have to say tells the full story about the relational essence of art.

Fodor's story is one of *intentional etiology* (1993: 44). His account, like Danto's, pursues an essentialism of the relational sort, and is strongly related to recent philosophical work on intentionality. Quite unsurprisingly for a theorist who has had a major impact on both cognitive science and philosophy of mind, Fodor argues that (*P*) -the property that makes a work of art the kind of object it is- is a relation between the artwork and a certain type of mental state: in this case, an *intention*.

Just as Danto appeals to Wittgenstein's definition of action in developing his particular relational account, so Fodor appeals to Descartes' definition of action in establishing the particular relationship that he takes to hold between intentions and the essence of a work of art:

A first approximation to the Cartesian story [about action] is this: in the typical case, what makes a motion an action is that it is caused, in the right sort of way, by the agent's intentions. In the typical case, for example, what makes a motion an act of *F*-ing is that it is caused, in the right sort of way, by an intention to *F*. (What makes a rising of an arm an arm raising is that it's caused, in the right sort of way, by an agent's intention that his arm should rise.) (...) Suffice it that the Cartesian story (...) would explain why there can be action twins. Having the causal history it does is itself a relational property of an event, hence it's a property that may distinguish events that are "indistinguishable to all appearances". (...) [T]o come to the point at last, this option also suggests itself in the case of artwork twins. A relatively unilluminating version of the Cartesian story might be that what makes something an artwork is that it was *intended* as an artwork by whoever made it. In which case, it could distinguish between an artwork and a mere thing that the latter but not the former was made with the intention of providing a container for Brillo pads. (...) ..."artwork" is an etiological concept -thereby explaining how there can be artwork twins; and it connects the intentionality of artworks (their aboutness) with the intentionality of mental states. (1993: 44-45).

Fodor admits that 'the Cartesian proposal isn't of much help as it stands':

[I]ntending to make an artwork needs explication in a way that, say, intending one's arm to rise does not. (...) it's a lot less clear what it is that one intends when one intends that something should be an artwork. (1993: 45)

Hence, the goal of his discussion thereafter -and more specifically, his appeal to the notions of *audience* and *object function* (1993: 46)- is to develop the Cartesian proposal and make it more concrete. I will come back to this shortly, after first considering an example.

Little Johnny is sitting next to his mom scribbling on pieces of paper with his coloured pencils. Little Johnny recently heard the word 'masterpiece', and discovered

what it means. In fact, he is just now deciding to draw one. He grabs one of his coloured pencils and clumsily smudges a piece of paper. He then summons his mom and says snootily, 'Mom, look! A masterpiece!' His mom takes the drawing/ smudged paper in her hands and agrees: 'Yes, it's a masterpiece!' Little Johnny is over the moon.

Johnny's behaviour is an action of trying to create a masterpiece in the Cartesian sense, in that it is caused, in the right sort of way, by an intention to create a masterpiece. And we know it's 'the right sort of way' because the action brought about by this intention is an action of trying to create a masterpiece, as opposed to, say, an action of trying to eat an ice-cream. Defenders of the intentional approach may not find this line of argument satisfactory. Indeed, one could propose that you can't rationally form an intention to do something that you know is impossible and creating a masterpiece is impossible for most children. The claim might then be further generalised: if you want your mental state to count as a genuine intention rather than a mere desire or wish, you cannot rationally intend to perform action *A* unless you are capable of performing *A*. I want to propose, however, that intentional objects with *evaluative content* should be excluded from this claim. You cannot intend to create evaluative objects in the way you intend other things. Part of what it means for an object to be evaluative -and both masterpiece and artwork, as I will argue, are objects with an evaluative element- is that an agent cannot intend in the strict sense to bring them about, because she can never assess with complete confidence her ability to bring them about -in the way, let us say, that an agent can assess with confidence the ability to bring about an action like raising one's own arm. An artist may cut his own ear off in despair at the limitations of his abilities, spend a lifetime seeing the creation of art as unachievable, doubt the actual artistic status of his output, and still be said to

have a rational intention to bring about a work of art. The dimension of artworks as objects with an evaluative element allows one to intend to produce an artwork and simultaneously hold the belief that what one intends may not be achievable by him in the given time, with the whole scenario not being a paradox.

So, Johnny's behaviour is clearly an action of trying to create a masterpiece in the Cartesian sense, in that it is caused, in the right sort of way, by an intention to create a masterpiece. Moreover, Johnny's intention to create a masterpiece is recognised as such by his mother. In recognising this intention, his mother interprets his behaviour as an action of trying to create a masterpiece, and happily acknowledges the drawing as a masterpiece, although what she is looking at is a smudge. Is Johnny's smudge a masterpiece?

Having an intention to create a masterpiece may bring about an action of trying to create a masterpiece, but does not necessarily create a masterpiece *per se*. Johnny intends to create a masterpiece, and this intention brings about, in the right sort of way, an action of trying to create a masterpiece. As it happens, though, the output of this action is not a masterpiece but a smudge. Although the smudge was clearly intended as a masterpiece, its *causal/ intentional history* is not in itself sufficient to make it a masterpiece. 'Masterpiece' is an *evaluative concept*. The causal history of an object is sufficient to tell us what the object was intended as, but not what the object actually is. There is a certain sense, as I will argue later, in which 'artwork' is also an evaluative concept. An object may be intended as an artwork, and this intention may even be recognised by an audience; its intentional history, however, is not in itself sufficient to make this object an artwork. Its intentional history tells us whether the object was intended as an artwork, but not whether the object actually is an artwork.

This is a fundamental weakness of the intentional account, which seems to be pervasive throughout discussions on intentionality. I think I could not put it better than Dretske (1988: 64):

Philosophers have long regarded intentionality as a mark of the mental. One important dimension of intentionality is the capacity to misrepresent, the power (in the case of the so-called propositional attitudes) to 'say' or 'mean' that P when P is not the case.

It may be that some actions like raising one's own arm fall under etiological concepts in the intentional sense, although there is a lot of room for debate here too. In fact, it can be argued that even with actions like raising one's own arm, the intention alone of raising one's own arm does not suffice to bring about the intended action: if, for instance the arm in question is stranded, the upper limbs are paralysed, etc. There are thus various other boundary physiological and cognitive conditions that have to be met in order for intentions to bring about even simple, uncomplicated actions like raising an arm; which brings into question whether even these actions fall under etiological concepts in a full-fledged and uncontroversial sense.

In any case, art is not such an action, and all intentional etiology can reveal about an object is whether it was intended as a work of art, whether it was produced by an action of trying to create a work of art, but not whether it actually IS a work of art. An artwork is not constituted by its intentional etiology -by its being intended as an artwork- any more than a masterpiece is. Intentional etiology leaves the question of the essence of art entirely untouched.

Fodor's attempt to clarify his Cartesian story only adds to the problem. First, he introduces a notion of *audience*, which, although not theoretically redundant, does not make any obvious contribution to a discussion on the essence of art:

(...) the intention that a thing be an artwork is in part the intention that the thing have an audience. (...) that's how it can be that [Warhol's] *Brillo Boxes* is an artwork though Brillo boxes aren't. Whereas *Brillo Boxes* is intended to be *shown*, to be *exhibited*, Brillo boxes are intended merely as boxes for Brillo. (1993: 46)

Let's reverse this assumption for a moment. Imagine a scenario where Picasso starts working on *Guernica* with a clear and firm intention that *Guernica* is never to be shown or exhibited. He takes extra care so that no living soul ever lays eyes on it. When the work is at last complete, he sets it on fire and allows it to turn into ash. How are we to explain the strong introspective evidence that, although the *Guernica* of our somewhat odd scenario was neither seen by an actual audience nor intended to be seen by one, in its short life it certainly WAS a work of art? It may be that an appeal to possible or ideal audiences could add something to theoretical explanations of how a certain object is recognised as art, and highlight issues of aesthetic value, cultural purpose and communicative success; but as regards the essence of art, Fodor's notion of *audience* seems totally redundant. It could be argued, of course, that although this hypothetical *Guernica* of our scenario has not been seen by an actual audience, and was not intended to be seen by one, the notion of some *ideal audience* cannot be totally eliminated. At the least, the producer himself *sees* the work while producing it, and thus there is always some feedback between production and response. My concern here is with how far we want to treat this notion of ideal audience as constitutive of the essence of art. My reaction is that *audience* in any sense is irrelevant to issues concerning artistic essence.

Second, Fodor draws on some implicit notion of (practical) function with the aim of distinguishing further between artworks and 'mere aesthetically gratifying objects'. Greek pots: are they artworks or aesthetically gratifying objects? Fodor suggests the latter:

...Greek pots *aren't* artworks because they were intended to put (the Greek equivalent of) Brillo in. (1993: 46)

Despite my sheer admiration for anyone who can come up with such a brilliant conception as 'the Greek equivalent of Brillo', I must admit that Fodor's claim here is also problematic. Is having a practical function enough to stop a perceptually -as I would prefer to call it- gratifying object from also being a work of art?<sup>37</sup> Imagine another odd philosophical case. Da Vinci decides to create the *Mona Lisa* not with the intention of showing or exhibiting it, but with the intention of covering a wall damaged by erosion and mould. Strong introspective evidence again suggests that this practically motivated *Mona Lisa* is, nevertheless, far more than a perceptually gratifying object; that it is, indeed, a work of art. If Greek pots *aren't* artworks -and let me not give a firm response to this as yet- this is certainly not because they were solely intended for the practical purpose of putting (the Greek equivalent of) Brillo in.

As has been pointed out by other theorists, of whom Danto is the most prominent, Fodor's claim that there can be such a thing as an artwork with no aesthetic value whatsoever (1993: 43) is even more problematic. The claim is pretty standard in so-called 'non aesthetic theories of art' (for discussion see Zangwill 2002) but on closer inspection, the line of reasoning that leads Fodor and other defenders of the non aesthetic thesis to this conclusion is slippery and contains a crucial mistake. I will come back to this point later, in discussing my own proposal.

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<sup>37</sup> It's quite standard to think of objects as having several functions. For illuminating discussion, see Dan Sperber's paper 'Seedless grapes' (2003). From this standpoint, it is easy to argue against the standard claim that artworks do not have practical function: if it is acceptable to think of objects as having several functions, then having a practical function does not exclude the possibility of the same object also having an aesthetic function.

Those familiar with Fodor's 'Déjà vu all over again: how Danto's aesthetics recapitulates the philosophy of mind' will find that the framework I'm about to develop has quite a few similarities to Fodor's own. For instance:

1. Like Fodor, I will treat the essential property (*P*) that makes a work of art the kind of object it is as a *relational property*. Moreover, I will treat this property as a relation between artworks and a certain type of mental object/state. However, this type of mental object/ state is not the one Fodor is proposing, i.e. an intention.

2. Like Fodor, I will also adopt the framework of *intentional realism*. There is indeed very good evidence from contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive psychology that we may have been guilty of 'killing the author' a bit too early. Not only do humans entertain mental states such as intentions, desires and beliefs, but the possession and recognition of these states seems to play a pivotal role in human communication and cognition (Searle 1983, Sperber & Wilson 1995, Sperber 2000 etc). Intentional realism, though, should be assigned a very different place from the one Fodor wanted to give it.

3. In line with Fodor's rationale, I will propose what can be described as a *mentalistic/ noetic* view of art. It will concentrate not on sets of objects *per se*, but on mental states and the relation between such states and objects out there in the world.

4. The shift from talking about art as a mere inert object to talking about it in terms of actions is an admirable move on the part of both Danto and Fodor, and one that was long overdue in both literary theory and the philosophy of the arts. Artworks (literary texts, for instance) are *local* facts, art/ literary events are *global*. Artworks are local occurrences within the global phenomenon of an art event, in that the art event



involves a characteristic *action*, which leads to some (occasionally prototype-related) *end-product* (artwork), which is likely to trigger some characteristic *response*. An *action-based* account which gives priority to dynamic events rather than static objects enables us to grasp not only the physicality of the object produced as part of the art event, but also the less 'visible', yet no less real, facts of humans and their representations.

5. My account assumes that a certain *behaviour* is an *action* when it stands in the right causal relation to an internal process, and particularises it in the following argument: a certain behaviour is art -and the resulting object an artwork- when it stands in the right causal relation to a certain internal and, more specifically, mental/ psycho-cognitive process. Following the philosopher Fred Dretske (1988: 17) I assume that an action involves a process of A causing B that begins with A and ends with B. I therefore propose that art is an action-process that begins with internal efferent activities which bring about artistic behaviour and ends in those external manifestations, physical objects/ results of artistic behaviour that are commonly perceived and recognised as artworks.

6. If 'artwork' is an etiological concept -and there is good reason to believe that it is- the etiology involved is not intentional. Hopefully my brief discussion on Johnny's 'masterpiece' and the argument I unfolded there have convinced you that etiology of the intentional variety cannot account for whether an object is an artwork or not. The crucial element in an artwork's causal history is not its intentional history but what I will call its *psycho-cognitive etiology*. Now, because the psycho-cognitive etiology of artworks is in some sense *evaluative*, artworks can be said to be *etiological objects* with an *evaluative element*.

7. Finally, following the example of Danto and Fodor, I will make a genuine effort to ensure that my aesthetics throughout this analysis are informed by recent advances in the study of language, communication and mind. More specifically, my view of human communication and cognition will be in line with and draw on the hypotheses of, Wilson and Sperber's 'RelevanceTheory' framework (1995).

## Chapter 5

### The Poetic Mind

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#### 5.1. From 'Language' to 'Thought'

In Chapter 3, I briefly referred to Adrian Pilkington's book *Poetic Effects* (2000) and paper 'Non-lexicalised concepts and degrees of effability' (2001), in which he introduces his notion of *poetic thought*. My own account owes a great deal to this encounter with Pilkington. The questions Pilkington raises seem to me to point towards something interesting, original and new.

In the last 25 years, since the *poetics of language* received its final and fatal blow through the emergence of cognitive pragmatics, almost everyone in literary studies seems to have realised that a step in a new direction is called for, but no one seems to be sure what this direction might be. The collapse of the *poetics of language* and the structural variety of essentialism it advocated left literary study numb and unable to defend the claim that its object was distinct. The potential consequences of this development for both literary study and the philosophy of the arts are enormous. One immediate consequence would be to turn literary theory into a domain without a proper subject of enquiry. If every aspect of literary art can be as well accounted for in terms of the study of ordinary language -given that ordinary and literary language are not after all essentially distinct- then literary theory runs the risk of becoming a discipline without a domain. What was supposedly its dedicated domain will be increasingly appropriated by disciplines which investigate ordinary discourse, such as linguistics, pragmatics or psychology. Generalise these implications to all theory of art, and it becomes clear why the fall of the poetics of language left literary people in a state of anxiety and confusion. It wasn't just a theoretical framework that was at

stake here, but the whole edifice of literary enquiry and the reasons for its existence. A number of literary figures of that time -particularly stylisticians and text linguists such as Alan Durant and Nigel Fabb- responded vigorously to these developments and defended the dedicated study of literature as a variety of *elaborate discourse* under the heading 'Linguistics of Writing' (1987).

I want to remain optimistic and propose that maybe we have been too hasty in giving up. The collapse of structural essentialism and the fact that we cannot defend the distinctness of literature at a structural (i.e. linguistic) level does not in any way entail that literature is not distinct as an object in any other interesting sense. It only entails that, if the essence of literature is to be found somewhere, this somewhere is definitely not its language. Structural essentialism has collapsed, but an essentialism of some other sort is still an open possibility. Before giving in to the idea that there is no essence of literature, and trying to rescue the proper subject of literary theory by approaching it on similar lines to the language of advertising, maybe we should try and think of levels beyond linguistic structure at which a distinct essence of literature might still be found.

In my view, a poet has a moral obligation to defend the distinctness of her art with every ounce of rationality at her disposal. It is of less importance whether you agree with the account I am about to propose. What really matters is that we investigate new ways of thinking, which offer a possible escape from three decades of dead ends.

The hypothesis I want to investigate is that our early 20<sup>th</sup> century precursors, poets and intellectuals, were mistaken only in that they were looking for the essential property of literature in the wrong place. Their venture was structural, and therefore medium-specific -where the medium for literature is language. Looking for significant

differences at the level of language indeed has some immediate appeal, but it proved entirely misleading in the end. It might be, though, that it is still possible to find an essence of literature as long as we look for it in the right place. And it might be that the place to look for it is not language but *thought*, not media but mental states. After a hundred years or so of poetics of language, it might be that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the century of a *poetics of thought*.

My theoretical affinity with Pilkington does not go much beyond the fact that I will be using a theoretical notion that I also intend to call *poetic thought*. The two notions are fundamentally different, even though they share a name. Allow me here a very brief detour to explain why my proposals are somewhat distant from Pilkington's, although his account too involves the crucial move from media to mental states that I am so interested in.

In discussing the difficulties that perceptual objects -smells, images, sounds, textures, etc- create for the human expressive repertoire and the relative ineffability of some of these objects, Pilkington (2001: 5) proposes the term 'poetic thought' for a type of thought involving such perceptual objects:

[This] kind of thought is very likely the kind of thought that only a poet would attempt to communicate, or could communicate. It is a thought that uses a non-lexicalised concept that has to be partly constructed using some [perceptual] component. The [perceptual] component is typically evoked through the use of figurative language such as metaphor, simile or quasi-simile. Imagine some chickens getting down from their roost. How might the manner of their getting down be described? (...) Here (...) is Robert Gray: 'They jump down stolidly from their roost/ as an old sailor jumps/ With wooden leg'.

It is clear that Pilkington's notion of poetic thought refers to a type of thought that involves what I would call a *proper object*. Proper objects of poetic thoughts, according to Pilkington, are perceptual objects: smells, images, sounds, textures.

What Pilkington seems to be saying is that when a perceptual object is the object of a thought, or at least features in a thought, then this thought is poetic. At the *International Workshop on the Pragmatics of Poetic Communication* in Paris in 2006, Pilkington put forward the idea that involving a perceptual object is a sufficient condition on poetic thoughts, but under pressure of similar criticisms, he eventually revised this view and suggested something entirely different: poetic thought, he said, involves an *affective stance* towards an object. This new approach is still quite problematic. First, it is not clear at all why affective attitudes should be given such special status in literature and art. Second, this framework fails to explain how movements like vorticism, which despised sentimentality and affect and adored formal properties like dynamicity and commotion, can be art. Third and more worryingly, to try and capture the distinctness of the poetic/ artistic mentality in terms of affect is more or less to suggest a poetics of the ‘Romantic novel’ variety.

In any case, as I argued at length in Chapter 3 above, there is good introspective evidence that perceptual states are so pervasive in the human mental tapestry that almost every thought, even a thought about an abstract object, is likely to carry a smaller or greater cargo of perceptual material. If so, then, given Pilkington’s definition, almost every thought is a poetic thought. But then, why call it poetic at all? Why not simply call it a ‘thought’? To the extent that ‘poetic thought’ means thought that involves perceptual material, the notion is theoretically redundant. All thoughts can be shown to involve such material.

To the extent that Pilkington’s notion of ‘poetic thought’ is intended to capture something distinct about the poetic mentality, it is not just redundant but also theoretically quite risky. To say that what is distinct about the poetic mentality is its ability to focus in a certain way on certain types of objects -e.g. phenomenal objects

such as how blades of grass move or how chickens jump- has much in common with pre-20<sup>th</sup> century conventionalist poetics: it assumes that there are proper objects for literature and art. To assume that there are proper objects for literature and art is to assume that there is a set of objects which are more appropriate subjects for literary and artistic contemplation than other objects that do not fall in this set. For pre-20<sup>th</sup> century poetics, the proper objects would be mists, daffodils, sunsets. For Pilkington's poetics, they are blades of grass, chickens jumping and kangaroos eating. Even the addition of 'how' does not improve the picture much. *How* blades of grass move, *how* chickens jump and *how* kangaroos eat grass is still an object *external* to individual consciousness, and therefore a proper object in the conventionalist sense.

It is often said that art can be anything. In some sense, this seems true. In another sense, it seems entirely untrue. For some reason, debate in both the philosophy of art and the theory of literature tends to revolve single-mindedly around two recurring reference points: one is the artwork as a physically tractable and tangible entity, and the other is our *reception* of it. It should be a matter for at least mild amusement that the third part of the triptych that makes up an art event, the *production* part, has merited so little attention.

Martin Heidegger's analysis of the origin of the work of art (1971: 18-76) is a good illustration of what has happened to the study of production in the best existing theoretical scenarios. Here is a relevant extract from Heidegger's work:

Origin here means that from and by which something is what it is and as it is. What something is, as it is, we call its essence or nature. The origin of something is the source of its nature. The question concerning the origin of the work of art asks about the source of its nature. On the usual view, the work arises out of and by means of the activity of the artist. But by what and whence is the artist what he is? By the work? For to say that the work does credit to the master means that it is the work that first lets the artist emerge as a master of his art. The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the

other. Nevertheless, neither is the sole support of the other. In themselves and in their interrelations artist and work *are* each of them by virtue of a third thing which is prior to both, namely that which also gives artist and work of art their names -art. (...) Art is present in the art work. But what and how is a work of art?

What art is should be inferable from the work. What the work of art is we can come to know only from the nature of art. Anyone can easily see that we are moving in a circle. (...) [T]he nature of art can no more be arrived at by a derivation from higher concepts than by a collection of characteristics of actual art works. For such a derivation, too, already has in view the characteristics that must suffice to establish that what we take in advance to be an artwork is one in fact. (...) Thus we are compelled to follow the circle. (1971: 18-19)

On first starting to read this analysis, I was filled with enthusiasm for Heidegger's insightful attempt to bring the artist, and thus the production-related aspects of art, into the ontological discussion. But my enthusiasm soon faded. What happens to the artist in Heidegger's account of the origin of the work of art is exactly what happens to him/ her in the short passage quoted: the artist sooner or later fades out of the picture and the treatment of the ontological question regresses into circularity. I shall disagree with Heidegger. We are not 'compelled to follow this circle'.

Amongst the many reasons why art is not an action like raising one's own arm, the production-specific particularities of art immediately stand out. It seems to me pretty uncontroversial that, while any human being -provided they are not physically or mentally impaired- can raise their own arm, not every fully physically and mentally capable human being can produce *De niemandrose* or *Guernica*. They might produce a poem in the conventional/ sociological sense: something that is intended as a poem, purports to be a poem and is conventionally recognised as a poem; but can they produce a real POEM, a poem in an essential sense? An adequate theory of the essence of art should at least in principle allow us to distinguish not just between artworks and 'mere things', but also between artworks and objects that are



falsely claimed to be artworks (e.g. simulacrums of artworks).<sup>38</sup> If all that is not good enough reason to assume, first, some significant psycho-cognitive distinctness about art as an action, and, second, the possibility that the concept of art has evaluative content, then nothing is.

## 5.2. Poetic thought states

Let us start from the uncontroversial assumption that there exist *objects* and *mental representations of ways of 'seeing'/mentally entertaining* objects. Do not take the notion of *object* too narrowly. Construe it broadly as anything that a mental representation could be about: an existing or fictional concrete 'thing', a state of affairs, a situation, a sensation, a feeling, a psychological, emotional or mental state, or even a tightly interwoven bundle of all these. Do not take *representation* too narrowly either. Think of it not as a mere mental image or conceptual description of an object, but as being in a complex mental state in relation to some object, involving conceptual descriptions, perceptual images and affective attitudes towards it. In this broad sense of the term, even non-representationalist art involves an element of representation, in that some object -e.g. a surface, a material, a volume, a texture or colour etc- is '*seen*'/*mentally apprehended* by the artist in a certain way.<sup>39</sup>

Particularly in art -and for reasons that *inter alia* derive from the pragmatics of artworks as instances of 'weak communication' (for discussion of this term, see Sperber and Wilson 1995: 217-224, 235-237, Sperber and Wilson 2008)- objects are of such complexity and fluidity that it is often almost impossible to entirely grasp and

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<sup>38</sup> Both questions are relevant to the metaphysics of art; the second is also relevant to its ethics.

<sup>39</sup> Minimalist artworks, for instance, may be seen as involving a purely perceptual variety of *representation* in that they involve an object, pre-existing or manufactured by the artist, whose formal, spatial, perceptual, substance-related properties are represented by the artist in some non-trivial way.

pin them down, never mind exhaust them.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the better the artwork, the less likely that its object will ever be exhausted. The fact that such objects are not explicitly tractable within the framework of art does not, however, entail that they are not metaphysically or psychologically real. Both introspective evidence and also the amazing fact of *interpretive convergence* -i.e. the fact that an artwork can cause different recipients to have surprisingly similar perceptual, affective or conceptual responses- suggest that objects of art must exist. So, even when we are utterly unable to explicitly and rationally pin down our intuitions about what is the object of an artwork, or what a representation is a representation of, our analysis need not admit any serious degree of artificiality.

From the indefinite number of lines that hover somewhere at the back of my head, here are a few:

A child squeals as if being slaughtered / or someone is slaughtered and squeals like a child.

(Boukova 2000, *The Boat in the Eye*)

Lemon/ Waxen totem of death/ Luminous lust

(Iliopoulou 2007, *Mister T*)

My heart/ a warm meek mouth/ that your heart's scented caress/ has condemned to survive/ wide open/ stammering/ without lips

(Kotoula 2007, in the anthology *Karaoke Poetry Bar*)

We are in spring already and the flowers/ bloom upon the temples of the dead

(Polenakis 2007, *The blue horses by Franz Mark*)

(...) with all the ways birds have to fly, step after step, towards infinity

(Elytis 1972, *The light-tree and the fourteenth beauty*)

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<sup>40</sup> What is the object of Joel-Peter Witkin's 'Portrait as a vanité'? What is the object of the 'Wasteland'? What mental object can they be taken to represent? How can we ever capture that entirely or exhaust it?

If we want to tell an interesting story about the essence of art, this is a very good place to start. The object of these lines eludes my ability to fully explicate it. At the same time, though, I can intuitively and pre-rationally grasp that there is ‘something’ about the way this object is being mentally apprehended. I can also intuitively and pre-rationally grasp that this ‘something’ is not simply conveyed by the formal properties of these utterances, but is rather inextricably bound up with them.

In talking about birds flying step after step towards infinity, Elytis makes an exciting and unexpected connection. His utterance fluently transforms a vague *gestalt*<sup>41</sup> into structured commotion. It does that with enviable formal simplicity and clarity. There is ‘something’ vigorous and startling and un-trivial in the way Elytis sees and speaks about his object. Moreover, this ‘something’ is not *external* to Elytis’ consciousness. It does not concern *how* birds fly, or even Elytis’ attending to *how* birds fly. If there is a ‘something’ here that is relevant for a philosophy of art, it’s the way in which Elytis ‘*sees*’ the flying of birds. Note that ‘how birds fly’ is an external - real world- object. ‘The way in which one *sees* the flying of birds’ is an internal, mental object.

The way in which Elytis ‘*sees*’ the flying of birds is inexorably tied to the way in which Elytis ‘*speaks*’ about the flying of birds. It would be impossible for Elytis to *speak* of birds ‘flying, step after step, towards infinity’ unless he was in some, even subconscious, sense, able to *see* birds as ‘flying, step after step, towards infinity’. I would also suggest that it is impossible -and I will show later why I think so- for Elytis to be able to *see* birds as ‘flying, step after step, towards infinity’ but not be able to *speak* of birds as ‘flying, step after step, towards infinity’.

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<sup>41</sup> The raw, undifferentiated input to perception.

I would like to propose that there is a special kind of representation involving *a certain way of 'seeing' (objects)*.<sup>42</sup> I am inclined to call it *aspectual representation*<sup>43</sup>, from the meaning of 'aspect' in 'his aspect of the mountain...' -i.e. the impression/ impact the mountain made/ had on him, the way in which he saw/ perceived the mountain, the aspects of the mountain that he attended to, conceived of, came up with.

Aspectual representations are *internal, mental entities*. It is not the external, real-world object of a representation that makes it aspectual but the *way* in which this object is being mentally apprehended; there are no proper objects of aspectual representations. Describing something as an aspectual representation is only relevant as a comment about the *properties* of the representation. There is a lot of room for debate as to what these properties might be, but seeing old objects in novel non-trivial<sup>44</sup> ways seems to be at least one of the overarching relations that holds them together. And seeing old objects in novel non trivial ways is in effect seeing novel, non trivial aspects of objects or novel, non trivial connections amongst objects.

It is likely that this ability is enabled by a whole host of more particular sub-abilities: e.g.

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<sup>42</sup> 'Seeing' here is to be interpreted metaphorically along the lines of to 'mentally grasp' and not just in the strict visual or even perceptual sense.

<sup>43</sup> A couple of weeks prior to submitting this thesis Deirdre Wilson and myself discovered that the term 'aspectual' is already in use by philosophical aesthetics to mean something entirely different to its present use in this analysis. I have decided, however, to stick with this term for now, since I think I have defined very clearly the particular sense in which I use it. This is a matter that will definitely preoccupy my future research work and publications in which 'aspectual' may be substituted by some other new-coined term. I wouldn't want, however, to proceed into this substitution in haste.

<sup>44</sup> *Non-trivialness* can be thought of in relevance-theoretic terms as depending on the relative size and accessibility of the set of *implications* a representation has in an individual's *cognitive environment* at a given time.

to see/ conceive of properties of objects<sup>45</sup>,  
to break down objects into their components,  
to spot underlying or overarching structures of objects and their relations,  
to spot ‘telling details’,  
to be in rich, fine-grained and complex informational states of a perceptual,  
affective or conceptual sort,  
and so on and so forth.

Do not focus on these sub-abilities to the extent of losing sight of what the notion of aspectual representation is crucially about. Being observant in a certain way and attending to the implications of certain things are merely *enabling factors*: one may well be observant and attend to the implications of certain objects without nonetheless seeing/ conceiving non trivial aspects of and connections between these objects -as when one is simply perceptive or pedantic. And entertaining aspectual representations is crucially about seeing/ conceiving non-trivial aspects of and connections between objects; it is -to put it differently- about being *creative* in a certain way. Creativity is not, of course, only relevant to the arts. Science, philosophy, design, business and the management of innovation etc etc rest in one way or other on some ability for creative thinking. At the same time, there is a genuine question about what causes this general ability for creative thinking to take artistic form. Why is it, for instance, that schizophrenia usually translates into artistic creativity rather than big scientific ideas? Why is there such a strong link between Tourette’s Syndrome and musical talent rather than talent for, say, philosophy? Although creativity has been studied in domains such as cognitive psychology and cognitive science, philosophy, artificial

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<sup>45</sup> Just a quick reminder that in the broad construal we have adopted here, the *object* can be of either a perceptual, affective or conceptual nature, or all three interwoven.

intelligence, history of ideas, literary and arts theory, business studies and economics -to mention just a few- and although it seems so easy to grasp intuitively, its understanding is still very much on a speculative level. There isn't at this moment a fully tractable and testable perspective on what exactly creativity is, how it could be measured, why it takes one form rather than another or how exactly it arises.

I want to propose that aspectual representations as a particular type of creative mental representation are a necessary pre-condition for an essentialist notion of art. I want to propose that art is not possible without the ability to entertain aspectual representations in one form or another. If there is a relevant sense in which, as Danto insightfully put it, art is a 'transfiguration of the commonplace', it should be this. Being the product of an *aspectual mind*, arising out of a certain way of being creative -the particular way that brings aspectual representations into being- art in its robust, essentialist sense should always involve a certain way of seeing: seeing old things in new ways, seeing loose, non trivial connections and associations between old objects out there in the world or new-coined objects of our imagination, making visible the invisible, bringing into being something that did not exist before by re-arranging and enriching an existing world of possibilities.

In the last 25 years of cognitive, psycholinguistic, pragmatic and philosophical research, dissimilar and sometimes mutually incompatible theoretical camps have nevertheless been united in emphasising the creativity and flexibility of the human mind. In Sperber and Wilson's Relevance-Theoretic framework or Wilson and Carston's recent work on Lexical Pragmatics, the mind is seen as having a plasticity, flexibility, context-sensitivity, and improvisational range that were inconceivable for theories of communication in the past. However, the notion of creativity involved is creativity in a broad sense: a notion used to disentangle human communication and

cognition from the rigidity of the semiotic model. This is not the sense in which ‘creativity’ is used in my analysis. Our interest here is not in the species-specific, broad creativity that every human mind is capable of. Instead, we are concerned with a notion of creativity that is the property of some minds only, aspectual minds.<sup>46</sup>

Aspectual representations are difficult to arrive at. Not everyone is capable of them. It would be possible to claim that those capable of entertaining aspectual representations meet a pre-condition, a necessary condition, for being poets/artists in an essentialist sense. But then, not everyone who is capable of aspectual representations is a poet/ artist. Some elaboration is clearly called for if we are to understand the precise role of aspectual representations in the problematic of art.

I have always been amazed by the fact that ordinary people who never pursued poetic or artistic careers show a mind-blowing aptitude for arriving at and communicating aspectual representations. Some of the most exciting ‘poetry’ in my life I have come across not in poetry books but in listening to ordinary people talking.<sup>47</sup> Not very long ago, to take one example, Dina Mendonca from Universidade Nova de Lisboa mentioned to me her young son’s manifesto of boredom:

Mom, I’m bored like a tree. I grow and grow and I’m always at the same place.

The little fellow’s thought is mind-blowingly aspectual. From an aesthetic and creative point of view, his utterance has all the aspectual properties of a poem with a

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<sup>46</sup> This species-specific creativity has been celebrated widely in cognitivist approaches in recent years. Mark Turner’s *The Literary Mind* is another prominent example in this tradition. To claim that the human mind is ‘literary’ in the way Turner suggests is to say that the human mind is creative in the broad sense of linguistic and conceptual plasticity that applies across the human species. Here I am interested in a more specialised type of creativity which is the property of certain minds only. We may all necessarily be ‘literary minds’ by virtue of our cognitive make-up, but not all of us are artistic/ ‘poetic minds’ as I will call it. Hence, the model I hope to develop here is intended to pin down a schematic representation of the specific way in which an artistic mind is creative.

<sup>47</sup> This does not corroborate Turner’s generalised creativity view, and it will soon become obvious why.

capital P. Still, this utterance is not a poem. I am also thinking: why is it that something changes if, say, I take these words and quote them verbatim in my next poetry book, in pretty much the same way that a visual artist (Duchamp) ‘quotes’ a ready-made (*Urinal*) in the gallery? Why is it that, in this latter case, the exact same utterance, with exactly the same formal, structural, aesthetic and ultimately aspectual properties, suddenly becomes a poem?<sup>48</sup> Notice too that the child, and not I, is the creator of this utterance. Isn’t it fascinating that when this utterance is put forward by its creator it is not a poem, and when it is put forward by me -even though I am not the creator of this utterance- it is a poem? With young Mendonca’s words having entered for good the ‘gallery of indiscernibles’, let us see where this philosophical problem might take us.

Loose, non-trivial association making is characteristic of both artistic creativity and schizophrenia. The schizophrenic individual is said to be able to conceive non-trivial links and associations amongst objects to the point that in her mind the whole world is eventually somehow connected. The schizophrenic individual is thus as good an instance of the aspectual mind as the artist. It also seems that for some reason, schizophrenia often brings about an insatiable need for what by all appearances looks like ‘artistic’ expression and activity. Where is the dividing line between insanity and art? Is the schizophrenic individual automatically an artist?

There is a crucial element, I think, that distinguishes both Mendonca’s utterance and the schizophrenic’s ‘artistic’ rambling: in either case, the creativity is not conscious/ intentional. Both Mendonca and the schizophrenic individual are *incidental creators, naïve agents*, as I will call them, of aspectual representations. The

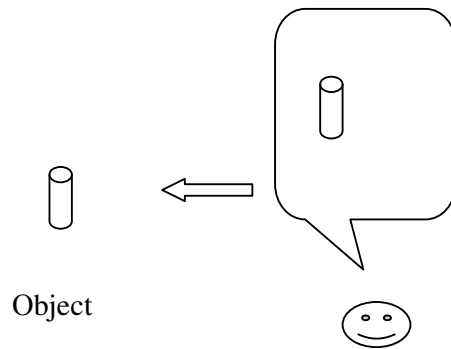
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<sup>48</sup> To remind you of the existing debate, Danto would say, ‘because it is embedded and interpreted within an *artworld context*’, and Fodor would say, ‘because its intentional etiology has changed: in the second case it is *intended* as an artwork’.



output of naïve agency is potentially a raw material for art, but is not art. An aspectual mind in itself, i.e. a mind with the ability to be creative in a certain way, although a *necessary* condition for being a poet/artist in an essentialist sense, is nevertheless not a *sufficient* condition. For the possibility to become actuality, for an agent to be a full-fledged *poetic mind*, she must be able to entertain not merely aspectual representations but full fledged *poetic thoughts*.<sup>49</sup>

Our analysis so far has been looking more or less like this: (schema 1)



Aspectual representation

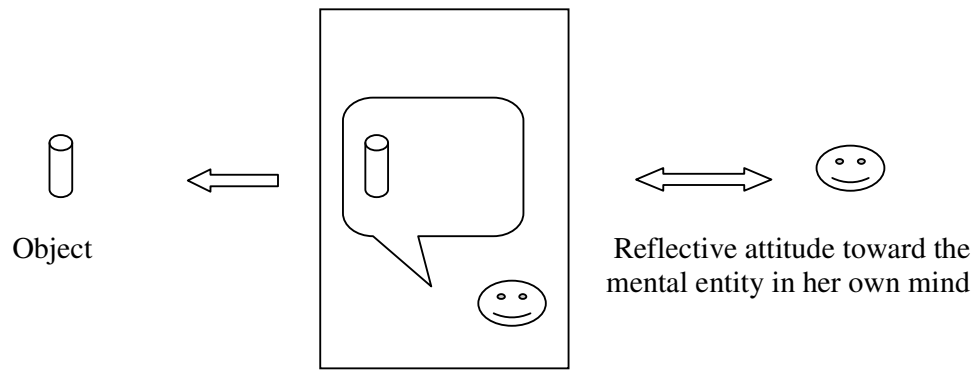
(Novel object/ mental entity in a creator's mind)

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<sup>49</sup> There is nothing about poetic thought that would make it more relevant to poetry than to any other art. Poetic thought could as well be called an 'artistic thought state' or something along these lines. The only reason for calling it 'poetic thought' is that I wanted my account to take the name of my own art.

Let us call this the *pre-artistic condition*.

If we are right to think that naïve agency is the common thread that underlies Mendonca's utterance and the schizophrenic's creations, excluding them from automatically counting as works of art, then the leap from the *pre-artistic* towards the *artistic condition* must involve an element of consciousness, reflection and control. It is important that all three terms are construed rather broadly. I am not suggesting that the agent is at any one time aware of or reflecting upon any one aspectual representation of any one object. All 'consciousness, reflection and control' might mean in this case is *intuitive awareness*. An agent capable of metarepresentational thinking, an agent capable of mentally 'distancing' herself from her own representations by adopting a reflective attitude towards them, is intuitively aware that some of these representations are non-trivial; she is intuitively aware, that is, of the aspectual nature of some of her representations. Our schema now looks more like this:  
(schema 2)



Aspectual representation of the object

(Novel object/ mental entity in a creator's mind)

Is the mental state represented in this diagram a full-fledged *poetic thought*? Well, no. As it stands, our schema is still very vague and undifferentiated. It fails, for instance, to separate poetic thought from other types of creative thinking. Take Newton and the legendary apple. In being intuitively aware of, or ‘thinking’ -in either the attentive or sub-attentive sense of the term- about what he *sees* in the falling of the apple, Newton has a reflective focus on his aspectual representation of the apple’s fall. He is not a naïve agent, but nonetheless, neither his mental state nor its output is in any way artistic. All the current schema captures is the move from a pre-aware to an aware condition.

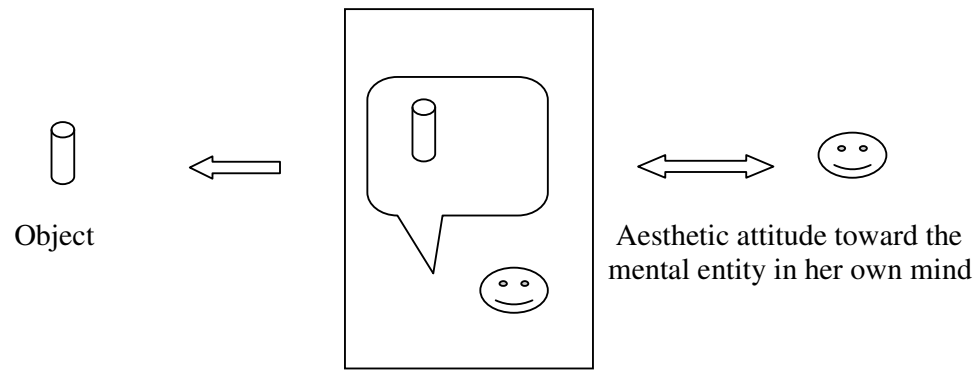
Let’s stay with Newton a bit longer. The apple falls. Newton has an aspectual representation which allows him to *see* the apple’s fall in a non trivial way -connect it with gravitational forces. He also has a reflective attitude towards his aspectual representation, in that he is at least intuitively aware that what he *sees* in the apple’s fall is non trivial. But the mental state he is in cannot be legitimately described as an artistic one. I want to suggest that the reason why Newton’s mental state is creative in the manner of physics rather than the manner of art resides in the particular way in which his reflective attitude is focused on his aspectual representation. More particularly, I want to suggest that Newton is focused on *conceptual* properties and implications of his aspectual representation, and more specifically, conceptual properties and implications that his aspectual representation might have for physics.

Poetic thought is a state in which an agent intuitively aware of the aspectual nature of her representations is steadily focused<sup>50</sup> on these representations as **aesthetic objects**:<sup>51</sup> (schema 3)

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<sup>50</sup> Do not take the notion of aesthetic ‘focus’ on the aspectual representation at face value. It is possible that for an artistic mentality, aspectual representations will always anyway be

## POETIC THOUGHT STATE



Aspectual representation of the object  
(Novel object/ mental entity in a creator's mind)

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entertained as nothing other than aesthetic objects; talking about 'focus' is only schematically relevant.

<sup>51</sup> In Chapters 6 and 7, I consider the content of aesthetic experience in detail, propose a scenario describing its evolutionary descent and discuss at length its relation to perceptual and sensory experience. I will defer more detailed discussion of the aesthetic until then, since the line of argument I am pursuing here should be accessible even to someone with an introspective/ intuitive and pre-theoretical understanding of aesthetic notions.

The idea that full-fledged poetic thoughts involve an *aesthetic attitude* towards one's own aspectual representations has a number of implications for the nature of poetic thought states.

For one thing, poetic thought has an *evaluative* element. It crucially involves intuitive assessment and evaluation of aesthetic aspects of one's own representations. For another thing, to say that poetic thought involves an agent intuitively aware of and steadily focused on her representations in an aesthetic way is to say that full-fledged poetic thought states, unlike other non-artistic creative thought states, arise only at a point when the aspectual representation has -at least to some minimal extent- been entertained in the agent's mind in the particular medium of the agent's art-form.

Some notion of *form* seems theoretically necessary for aesthetic experience and value to obtain. This is not to say that aesthetic value is a property of either forms *per se* or of how forms actualise contents. Aesthetic value is a property of an agent's way of *seeing* forms and how forms actualise contents. Up to the point where an agent is in a mental state in which, say, the concepts TREE, HUMAN, BOREDOM and IMMOBILITY feature interestingly connected in her mind, our agent is only thinking creatively, aspectually (schema 1); and up to the point where she is intuitively aware that the connection is non-trivial, she is a reflective (non-naïve) agent of aspectual representations (schema 2). However, as I have explained, being in this thought state is not as such or as yet being in an *artistic condition*. This is not a poetic thought state. Notice too that the representation our agent has at this point cannot yet be attributed an aesthetic value in any but the very broad, non-technical, sense in which all non-trivial thinking can be said to be 'beautiful' -the sense in which the theory of relativity or the conception of gravity have beauty. For a representation to be susceptible to

aesthetic appreciation in the strong sense that is relevant to a philosophy of art, the representation must have form.

Poetic thought states, then, cannot be *pre-stylistic states* (Enkvist 1964:13): they cannot exist before the representation has been experienced by the poet -at least to a minimal degree- as words in the mind (*phenomenal consciousness*). In the pre-stylistic state, the poet is only thinking creatively/ aspectually. She can have intuitions about the relative non-trivialness of the content of her representation. Her representation is non-trivial from a conceptual point of view. But this is not aesthetically relevant. Only at the point where her representation figures in phenomenal consciousness, the point where words or phrases or longer stretches of language pop up in the mind (e.g. 'I'm a tree', 'I'm bored like a tree') can the poet have an aesthetic attitude towards her representation and intuitions about its relative *aesthetic non-trivialness*. Only at that point can our agent be said to hold full-fledged poetic thoughts.

Poetic thought states are at least to a minimal degree *stylistic* thought states. The feedback relationship between pre-stylistic and stylistic states is obscure, intricate and complex. The same goes for the relationship between intentional states, poetic thoughts and their physical manifestations. In the case of raising one's own arm, we can speak of forming an intention to raise one's own arm, which can be both mentally reflected on and visualised as an act of raising one's own arm, and also physically realised as an action of raising one's own arm. But the action of creating *Guernica* is the physical realisation of which mental representation? Can we legitimately say that such a mental representation could exist -at least in its entirety- prior to *Guernica's* having been created? And if the action of creating *Guernica* was caused and brought to light by a complex intentional state, what was the initial object of this intentional

state? How much of *Guernica* could have been there before the physical process of creating it had begun?

It might be that we can assume a vague and possibly sub-attentive initial conception, a starting point, which, however, bears at least some similarity to the end product that *Guernica* is. Indeed, artistic creation sometimes begins with a rudimentary and elusive mental seed. Then -and quite unsurprisingly for the kind of process it is- it develops in a way and a direction that may have little or even no resemblance to that rudimentary initial conception. On other occasions, the end-product simply causes itself. The agent experiences the artwork as the result of pre-conscious activity, as revelation or enlightenment. She can, and tends to, dispose herself aesthetically towards it, but may not be able to say how and why it was caused, if it was the object of an intention, or what this intention was.

Another good reason for thinking that art is not an action like raising one's own arm is that the complex processes of practical reasoning involved in it, the constant feedback between initial intentional states, mental representations and their physical realisations, are of an intricacy that often makes any attempt to separate them seem inappropriate and artificial. Often, I do not know what it is that I have a poetic thought of. All I know is that I experience phenomenal consciousness and that I can, and tend to, dispose myself aesthetically towards it; often I do not know that I have an aspectual representation until after I have already written about it. No one has spoken more acutely about this experience than Marina Tsvetaeva (2004: 215-222):

(...) often poems give us something that had been hidden. Obscured, even quite stifled, something the person hadn't known was in him, and would never have recognised had it not been for poetry, the poetic gift. Action of forces which are unknown to one's own acts, and which he only becomes conscious of in the instant of action. An almost complete analogy to dreaming.



It is obvious, I hope, that a theory of the artistic condition need not be supplemented with a further notion of ‘dexterity’/ ‘ability to communicate poetic thoughts’. To speak of such an ability as separate from the ability to entertain poetic thoughts in the first place is to assume, falsely, that poetic thoughts can be complete prior to being expressed in a certain medium, or to think about them, falsely, as fully-fledged objects waiting to be put into the right words. To put it another way, it is to assume, that poetic thoughts are pre-stylistic thought states, only ‘cloaked’ with the language of a certain artistic medium in retrospect. I have argued that both assumptions are inadequate.

The reason I am considering this point is that in discussing a very preliminary version of my notion of poetic thought at the 2006 *Workshop on the Pragmatics of Poetic Communication* in Paris, it was suggested to me that some notion of ‘dexterity’ might also be useful for my account. After thinking about it, I have concluded that such a notion is unnecessary. To summarise: if ‘the ability to communicate poetic thoughts’ implies that complete poetic thoughts can exist as pre-stylistic entities -i.e. before being given the form of one art medium or another-, I have suggested that it is entirely irrelevant to art. If ‘the ability to communicate poetic thoughts’ implies a mere *propensity* such that, in one art form or another, poetic thoughts tend to manifest themselves in the particular medium/form of this art, then it might be an interesting addition to an account of how poetic thoughts occur and how art happens.

Do not let the ‘ut pictura poesis’ confuse you. To the extent that a poet ‘holds onto’ a mental image, ‘looks’ at it, ‘scrutinises’ it and ‘rotates’ it in the mind, she is not doing anything significantly different from looking at a real world object. She is still at a stage equivalent to looking at an *external* object. It just happens that this *external* object is in the mind, and is being looked at with the ‘mind’s eye’. At this

stage, our poet does not even have an aspectual representation as yet. She can be legitimately said to have an aspectual representation of this mentally entertained object if she starts *seeing* it in non-trivial ways. She can be legitimately said to have a full-fledged poetic thought when she has become intuitively aware of the non-trivialness of her representation and has a steady aesthetic focus towards it. The very idea of an aesthetic focus, I have argued, suggests that the aspectual representation has already, if only to a minimal degree, manifested itself to the poet in linguistic form. Poetic thoughts cannot be distinguished from 'their expression'. They are one and the same.

To be in a state of entertaining poetic thoughts is to be in the artistic condition. I assume that poetic thoughts are psychologically real, and that the machinery of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1995) could help shed some light on the poetic thought state in explanatory and psychologically realistic terms.

Human cognition, according to Relevance Theory, has tended to evolve in the direction of increasing efficiency, in managing its expenditures of mental effort and making the most productive use of its attentional and other resources. The human cognitive system tends, as Sperber and Wilson put it in their *cognitive principle*, to be naturally 'geared towards the maximisation of *relevance*', where *relevance* is technically defined as a relation between *effort* and *effect* such that the greater the cognitive/ contextual effect of an input -assuming that effort remains constant- the greater its relevance for an individual at a time<sup>52</sup>, and the smaller the effort required- assuming that effects remain constant - the greater its relevance for an individual at a

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<sup>52</sup> *Relevance* is both a classificatory and a comparative concept (1995: 129). In the comparative sense, an organism assesses the relevance of an input intuitively on the basis of expectations about the effects to be achieved and the effort required. In the quantitative sense, relevance might be tractable by, say, counting the number of contextual implications achieved by adding an assumption to a context, and measuring the effort required to derive these contextual implications.

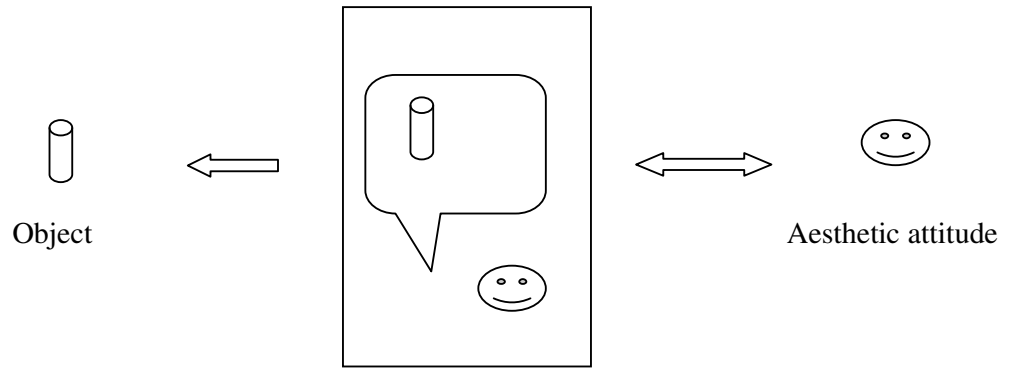
time. The cognitive principle *inter alia* explains how human cognition avoids computational explosion. It explains why it is that our cognitive systems do not attend to every single one of the indefinite number of facts that are ‘manifest’ within our ‘cognitive environment’ (1995: 38-46): that is, the indefinite number of facts that are perceptible in or inferable from our physical and mental surroundings. It also, and more crucially, explains why we attend to the particular facts that we do: for a stimulus to merit the attention of the human cognitive system, it must in some way seem *relevant* to that cognitive system.

Now, whether or not the type of relevance achieved by poetic thought states falls entirely under Sperber and Wilson’s cognitive account, the extent to which such states can be properly described as cognitive, and the precise way this conception of relevance interacts with a parameter so crucial for an adequate notion of the aesthetic, *perception*, are all issues to be tackled in detail in later discussion. Programmatically speaking, I hope to provide some evidence that an adequate empirical and evolutionary model of aesthetic attitude/ experience and the particular kind of object art is might reveal new types of effect, and also distinct ways of achieving relevance. In the next chapter, I will suggest two new terms -*perceptual effect* and *aesthetic relevance*- which are intended to expand the theoretical machinery of Relevance Theory in a new direction, and give concrete evidence of the retroactive effects that literary-artistic thinking may have on theoretical developments in empirical disciplines and the cognitive sciences.

For now, let us say that poetic thought states can be described as characteristic of a distinct *mentality*, of a mind-set for which, *inter alia*, maintaining a steady focus on one’s own aspectual representations as aesthetic objects may achieve considerable relevance. If attending to one’s own aspectual representations did not achieve

considerable relevance for this particular mentality, the cognitive system would automatically divert the attention elsewhere. To be in the artistic condition is thus - amongst other things- to be in a state where masses of implications can be obtained by steadily and persistently attending to a certain type of *mental entity*: to the aesthetic qualities of your way of *seeing* things, the qualities of your aspectual representations as aesthetic objects:

POETIC THOUGHT STATE



Aspectual representation of the object



Relevance yielding process

To forestall possible objections that may arise from a misunderstanding of the nature of poetic thought states and the way they may be entertained on different occasions, or even in different art forms, let me add few clarificatory remarks. It could be argued that the model of poetic thought states I am discussing here seems more relevant to certain art forms -for instance, lyrical poetry- while it is hard to see how other art forms or genres -for instance, epic poetry- could fit into this account. What is aspectual, someone might ask, about a story that is in any case heavily indebted to mythology, and whose content does not for the most part reveal some unusual or creative way of *seeing*? Is there something obviously aspectual in the *Odyssey* or a 19<sup>th</sup> century realistic novel? My answer is, yes.

In my view, these and other similar worries could only arise from a misunderstanding of my account of aspectual representations. Aspectual representations are creative, non-trivial representations of anything at all. They do not have proper objects, and they are only relevant as comments on the PROPERTIES of a representation. Aspectualness relates to WAYS of mentally entertaining contents rather than to contents themselves. The particular way in which a story is told may well be a possible content of an aspectual representation. Thinking that there is nothing obviously aspectual in the *Odyssey* -and hence that it cannot be associated with poetic thought states- can only be seen as a case where ‘aspectual’ has been misinterpreted as applying to content, rather than to ways/ modalities. The aspectualness of the *Odyssey*, a 19<sup>th</sup> century realistic novel, etc resides in the creative, non-trivial way in which the artist ‘sees’ the story he wants to tell. What is mentally represented in an aspectual manner is the way in which such and such a story can be narrated, or the way in which such and such a character can be constructed. Some aspectual representation may involve the way a poet sees the flying of birds, another

the way an author sees character construction. There is no reason why the one should be a more suitable candidate for aspectual representation than the other.

### 5.3. Art as distinct psycho-cognitive etiology

The property (*P*) that makes a work of art the kind of object it is is a relational one. More specifically, it is a relation between an artwork and a certain type of *mental state*. This state is a poetic thought state.

Artworks are, in this sense, *etiological* objects. The property that makes an artwork the kind of object it is is not part of the object's perceptual or structural make-up, but part of its etiology. As suggested by my example of Johnny's 'masterpiece' and the argument I set out there, this etiology is not intentional in Fodor's sense. Intentional etiology, I argued, can account for whether an object was intended as an artwork, whether it resulted from an action of trying to produce an artwork, but not whether it IS an artwork.

What makes a work of art the kind of object it is, and distinguishes it from perceptually and structurally indiscernible 'twin events', is the artwork's *psycho-cognitive etiology*.

Artworks and their 'twins' -mere Brillo boxes and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, young Mendonca's manifesto of boredom and his *manifesto of boredom* when I quote it verbatim in a poetry book- differ in that they have *differential psycho-cognitive histories*: the one is related to poetic thought states, while the other is not. The one is the 'product' of a *poetic mind*, while the other isn't.

To address Fodor's concern about Greek pots, I would be inclined to say that if (conceivably) a Greek pot could be related to a poetic thought state, if it could have the sort of psycho-cognitive history we are interested in here, then this particular

Greek pot would not be a mere functional object; it would not even be a mere perceptually gratifying object: it would be a work of art.<sup>53</sup> It could thus happen that some Greek pots are works of art, while others -possibly the vast majority of them- are simply functional or perceptually gratifying objects. Which category a Greek pot belongs to does not depend on its having a practical or cultural function: if some, or perhaps all, Greek pots *aren't* artworks, it is not 'because they were intended to put (the Greek equivalent of) Brillo in' (Fodor 1993: 46) but because they don't happen to have the psycho-cognitive history, the relational essence, of a work of art.

Now, because, as I suggested earlier, poetic thought states have *evaluative* content -in the sense that they involve a persistent aesthetic attitude towards, and assessment of, some aspectual representation-, artworks can be said to be etiological objects with an *evaluative element*.

It follows from this that there cannot be such a thing as an artwork with no aesthetic value whatsoever. It is impossible for something to be an artwork in an essentialist sense but to be of no aesthetic consequence, precisely because aesthetic considerations are quintessential to an artwork's relational essence: they are indispensable components of the artwork's psycho-cognitive history, essential constituents, that is, of poetic thoughts.

The idea that there can be artworks with no aesthetic value is a commonplace shared by many theorists, including Fodor (1993) and Danto (1981). It is possible, though, that this commonplace is simply a result of misunderstanding the implications of ready-mades -and other 'problematic' instances of artworks- for the notion of the aesthetic. The rationale typically followed by the non aesthetic thesis on art argues

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<sup>53</sup> Kant, for instance, listed gardens as artworks (Freeland 2001: 46), and why not? If a garden is created in such a way as to relate to the specific psycho-cognitive etiology of poetic thoughts, then it is art.



that, since there is nothing about the physical properties of a Brillo box that has aesthetic value, and since a Brillo box may well be put forward as a work of art, it has to be admitted that there can be works of art with no aesthetic value. This and other similar trains of thought are clearly flawed. Although Fodor and Danto -and other advocates of the non aesthetic view- propose a *relational* story about the essence of art, and therefore defend the idea that the property that makes an artwork the kind of object it is, is not part of the object's perceptual or structural make-up, when it comes to talking about aesthetic value, they all of a sudden revert to the artwork's perceptual and structural make-up! Although Fodor and Danto are telling us that the property that makes something an artwork is not to be found in the artwork's physical properties, they then assume that *Brillo Boxes* is of no aesthetic value whatsoever by pointing to the physical properties of this artwork, the physical properties of Brillo boxes.

There is no doubt whatsoever that there is nothing about the physical properties of a Brillo box that has aesthetic value. But if you accept a relational story about the essence of art, you shouldn't necessarily be looking for aesthetic value in the physical properties of Brillo boxes in the first place. You should stick with your relational story and look for aesthetic value in the relational properties of the artwork: Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* is an object with aesthetic value, not because of any of the physical properties of mere Brillo boxes, but because of the relation between *Brillo Boxes* and its psycho-cognitive history -the poetic thought states with which it connects and from which it results. Aesthetic value is not to be found in the physical substance of *Brillo Boxes* but in the relation between *Brillo Boxes* and its psycho-cognitive history.

To the extent that we respond to formal properties of an object *per se*, our response involves perceptual experience of a certain kind, but not aesthetic experience in a sense relevant to the philosophy of art. An object capable of causing nothing but perceptual/ sensory experience is simply a ‘beautiful mere thing’, a perceptually gratifying object but not a work of art as such. In Chapters 6 and 7 I tackle the precise relation between perceptual/ sensory and aesthetic experience, but for now let us just say that for an object to cause aesthetic experience and be more than a ‘beautiful mere thing’, it must also relate to poetic thought states and be endowed with a psycho-cognitive history specific to works of art. Even more interestingly, objects that are endowed with this psycho-cognitive history are aesthetically beautiful even if they do not happen to possess beauty as mere things: it is intriguing that ugly objects like urinals make beautiful artworks like the *Urinal* and some fine distinction between aesthetically and non aesthetically relevant notions of beauty is certainly called for there in.

I would like to suggest that works of art can be divided into two categories on the basis of how they provide evidence of the poetic thought states to which they relate and, therefore, how they provide evidence of their aesthetic value.

First, we can distinguish works of art that provide *strong* evidence of poetic thought states.<sup>54</sup> These are objects that did not exist prior to an agent’s having poetic thoughts. They came into existence as a result of a poetic thought-state, and were *fabricated* as a result of the artist’s steady aesthetic focus on her own aspectual representations. Thus, their aesthetic value is strongly evidenced in their form, which provides the receiver with nuanced clues to the relation of the object to some poetic

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<sup>54</sup> On the notion of *strong* and *weak* evidence and the notion of *manifestness*, see Sperber and Wilson 1995, Chapter 8, section 1.

thought state. This type of artwork does not have ‘twins’, i.e. ‘mere thing’ equivalents.

Second, we can distinguish works of art that provide *weak* evidence of their aesthetic value. These are objects that existed prior to an agent’s relating them to poetic thoughts. They are the so-called ready-mades. This type of artwork has ‘twins’, ‘mere thing’ equivalents. In fact, it was itself a ‘mere thing’ before it was linked by an agent to poetic thought states. Aesthetic value in ready-mades is *weakly evidenced*, in that their form provides the receiver with little or no evidence of the relation of the object to some poetic thought state, and so the assignment of this relation depends heavily on the receiver’s ability to arrive at it inferentially.

The type of relational story about the essence of art that I am proposing here sheds new light on at least one other famous case of indiscernibles: the relation between *art* and *forgery*. In *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman (1976: 100) asks what could be the (aesthetic) difference between a Rembrandt painting and a perfect forgery, assuming that the forgery is indiscernible from the original in every perceptual respect. The problem is interestingly puzzling, but not hard to solve. As Leonard Meyer (1983) and Mark Sagoff (1983) point out -and indeed there is strong introspective evidence for this- for some reason, as soon as the forgery is revealed, our (visual) experience of the original and that of the forgery seem qualitatively different, despite the fact that the two objects are perceptually indistinguishable.<sup>55</sup>

The answer to this problem, in my view, is pretty straightforward. To say that the property (*P*) that makes a work of art the kind of object it is is a relation between the artwork and a type of mental state we called a poetic thought, is to commit oneself

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<sup>55</sup> Meyer’s (1983) attempt to resolve the problem by taking relational factors (i.e. factors beyond the perceptual make-up of the painting) into account seems to me pretty much in the right direction; however, his discussion is entirely pre-theoretical.

to the existence of an essence of art, a relational essence. It follows *inter alia* that there should be an essential difference between an artwork and a forgery: the original artwork and a perfect forgery are two essentially distinct objects, since they have distinct psycho-cognitive histories. Of the two, only the former stands in a direct<sup>56</sup> causal relation to poetic thought states, and thus, only the former has the specific psycho-cognitive history of a work of art. The reason our experiences of original and forgery seem qualitatively different as soon as the forgery is revealed, is that we therefore notionally disentangle (*un-relate*) the forgery from the specific type of psycho-cognitive history that would allow it to be art. A forgery is not the result of poetic thought processes, but the result of an action of copying that makes it exactly the object it is: a forgery.

Meyer and Sagoff's addition of the word 'visual' in front of 'experience' does not change our explanation in any interesting way. Perception does not function independently of conceptual cognition. It is the interaction between perceptual and conceptual cognition that enables a bundle of undifferentiated 2-dimensional projections on the human retina to be conceptualised as this object or that one. It is conceptual cognition -and more specifically the addition to the receiver's cognitive environment of new information about the distinct psycho-cognitive etiologies of the two objects- that makes the one object 'seem' an artwork and the other a forgery. The two objects are differently *conceptualised* and hence, given the feedback between perceptual and conceptual cognition, lived through as if they yielded distinct visual experiences.

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<sup>56</sup> It is important to mention the *direct* nature of the causal relation between the original artwork and its psycho-cognitive history. The forgery too has a causal relationship to the original poetic thought state, though an *indirect* one: it wouldn't exist, if the original thought state hadn't existed.

To commit oneself to a relational essence of art as a case of specific psycho-cognitive etiology makes it possible to draw a further distinction: between *art* and *simulacra of art* or *pretend art*. In our story, intending something as an artwork or wanting it to be recognised as an artwork is not a sufficient condition for this something to BE an artwork. While anything at all can in principle be art, so long as a poetic mind can entangle it with a poetic thought state, not everything actually is art. It might well be an object that purports to be art, is put forward as art but nevertheless IS NOT art.

Similarly, the fact that an audience treats something as an artwork does not necessarily make this something an artwork either. What an audience treats as art is a *sociological* rather than *ontological* matter. It concerns how an object is seen rather than -I'll borrow the expression from Anne Furlong- the 'thingness' of the object. An object may thus BE a work of art but nevertheless not be recognised as such by an audience. Similarly, an object may NOT BE a work of art but nevertheless be treated as art by an audience. How audiences decide whether something is an artwork is not a question of ontology but of *recognition/ categorisation*. It is not a question of what something IS but a question of how human beings identify/ categorise it as the kind of object it is.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> A possible story about how certain artifacts are recognised/ categorised as art -which I stress once again is quite separate from claims about the ontology of the object- may involve a so-called 'prototype detector'. We may treat art as a fuzzy set involving a continuum ranging from more or less prototypical cases to borderline cases -take for instance aphorisms: are they poetry or philosophy?-, and to cases of misrepresentation. It is a fact about human conceptual organisation that the less prototypical an exemplar, the more difficult it is for an individual to categorise it with conviction (Barsalou 1987). The value of this fact for a philosophy of art is twofold: first, it highlights our propensity to form artistic canons: what else is a canon but a relatively stabilised prototypicality scale? Second, it explains why less paradigmatic exemplars -e.g. ready-mades- were at first harder to categorise as art with conviction and became the subject of so much debate.

This confusion between ontology and recognition seems to persist throughout contemporary writings on the philosophy of art. Peter Lamarque (2007: 45), for instance, suggests in passing:

The “being” [of an art object] -the principal condition of its essence- is determined at least in part by the way the object’s identity is conceived [...] it is an object *under a description* (...).<sup>58</sup>

But the way an object is conceptualised/ conceived of is clearly a matter of recognition, and thus quite separate from the ‘being’, the ontology, of the object. To understand how this works, think of the following analogy: until very recently in human history black people were in various social contexts treated and perceived as sub-humans, or even animals. Does the fact that black people were perceived as animals make them animals? Black people were *essentially/ ontologically* human beings then no less than they are now. What the socio-historical context makes black people be perceived as does not affect what black people essentially ARE. The socio-historical context results for one reason or another in black people’s being perceived as animals; however, even while they are being perceived as animals, black people ARE essentially human beings.

Despite appearances, art is not an *unstable* object. The same object can be perceived as art in one period, social framework or artworld context and as non-art in another, but this does not mean that art is unstable as an object, or that ‘art is entirely subjective’. This superficial instability does not have any bearing on what art IS; it only has implications for what art is perceived as. Artworks are part of the human cognitive environment. Just like any other type of input, artistic inputs are thus always automatically perceived, assessed and (sometimes) interpreted within a given *context*.

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<sup>58</sup> My translation from Greek.

We can speak of artworks being perceived differently in different contexts. We can speak of artworks being embedded in one context or the other; but we can never speak of artworks as being context-less. Contexts are made up of externally (perception-driven) or internally (memory-driven) evidenced assumptions (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 38-46, 137-142). The context can be said to change when the salience or accessibility of these assumptions alters, or new assumptions are added and old ones abandoned. The reason my responses to an artwork (*Aphrodite of Melos*) might change when I move through space looking at it from different angles, or when I move through time looking at it from the vantage point of different socio-political and historical frameworks, is not that the artwork itself changes, but that the context in which the artwork is being received - the salience or accessibility of certain assumptions - has altered. Aspects of the *artistic event* have changed, not the artwork per se.

Pinning down essence is not a purely metaphysical matter. The key feature of Putnam's claims about essentialism in nature, for instance, is that an object's essence (biological/ chemical structure, etc.) enables humans to make correct predictions about its behaviour in different circumstances. It is possible that the essence of a work of art yields predictions in similar ways. In any case, our notions of the artistic condition and poetic thought have not fallen like manna from the skies. They bring together into a single framework ideas and intuitions that have been floating around in either literary theory or the philosophy of the arts for the best part of a century. They give a possible insight into what it means for art to be *self-reflexive*. They account for Danto's intuition that some 'transfiguration of the common-place' into the non-trivial is crucial for art. They assign intentional realism a different -non essentialist- part in the ontology of art. They capture ways in which the artistic mentality is distinct from

the ordinary mentality and other (non-artistic) types of creativity, and suggest that the mental objects that are responsible for the distinctness of the artistic condition (poetic thought states) are metaphysically and psychologically real. What this analysis claims seems almost crudely self-explanatory. To slightly rephrase Hesse, one can be a poet, but not become one.<sup>59</sup>

#### **5.4. Implications for linguistic pessimism**

A patient with undiagnosed heart disease sees her doctor and reports as recurring symptoms -amongst others- a biting pain in her chest and a feeling of pressure in her stomach. The patient's account of what she experiences in the form of symptoms is very far removed from any explanatory description of the actual goings on in her body that a medical account would produce. Is the patient wrong? Or is she perhaps lying? From her point of view, her account is as correct and truthful as we can reasonably expect it to be. Her account is not one of actual goings on in her body, but rather, an impressionistic description of the sensory consequences of these goings on, that the patient experiences as such and such symptoms. In other words, the patient does not describe bodily facts in themselves, but rather their, let's say, *phenomenology*; the way in which these facts present themselves to her senses/ experience.

A poetic thought state is an *amalgam*: it is a compound state made up of psychological components that inform and complement and 'feed' each other through complex retroactive relationships. When a poet/ artist reports her agony for expression, she is in fact reporting a symptom. Her report is truthful and correct to the extent that it is only an intuitive and impressionistic description of the

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<sup>59</sup> The claim is not that the ability for poetic thought, and consequently art, is fully innate. The claim is that the ability is not wholly the result of training. Some feedback must be assumed between natural 'learning instincts', or 'maturational paths' which are triggered and further developed by certain types of experience.



phenomenology of the actual goings on in her mind, although it is incorrect and untruthful if taken to be an explanatory description of the actual goings on themselves.

In this chapter, I have tried to argue for the distinctness of the artistic mentality -at least, in terms of its capacity to hold poetic thought states. I take this to mean that, when a poet refers to the 'inadequacy of language' or speaks of her 'agony of expression', she is referring, in the first place, to something far more complex and interesting than when the same statement is made in the idiom of the folk mentality, and in the second place, to something far more complex and interesting than an impressionistic description could ever indicate. The impressionistic description of the 'struggle for expression' intuitively captures part of the phenomenology of poetic thought states -part of the 'symptoms' with which poetic thought states present themselves to the poet's/ artist's experience. However, strictly speaking, it cannot but downplay the actual cognitive goings on, let alone the complex informational relations between them, that bring these symptoms to light.

The next chapter will consider the engineering of at least one of these actual goings on: it will focus on aesthetic experience and discuss the struggle not for 'expression', as it has been commonly thought of, but for aesthetic value.

## Chapter 6

### Is Art a mistake? (Part 1)

#### On the content of aesthetic experience

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##### 6.1. Introduction

Suppose that a strange alien object has landed on earth, an object nothing similar to which has ever been seen before. Suppose that you have been assigned the task of understanding the nature, function and origins of this object and the sort of intelligence that could have created it. I am quite confident that in the solitude of your laboratory one of the first things you would do is carefully observe the object. Then what do you do? Looking at the object as a complete functional whole will not take you very far. It is only a matter of time before you start handling the object, observing its articulation, breaking it down into its components.

To try and tackle the evolutionary origins of art in just one step -a step from environmental pressures to the end product we call 'art' evolving as a direct adaptation to such pressures- is to be in a position as crude as thinking that you can safely hypothesize on the nature, function and origins of the strange alien object by merely looking at it. Let me rephrase. A common mistake in recent evolutionary scenarios on the origins of literature and art is that authors aim to explain the human susceptibility for art without even having bothered to lift the strange object in their hands, let alone observe its articulation into crucial functional components.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> There are interesting exceptions, of course. Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999: 15-51), for instance, seem aware that an understanding of the complex surface structure we call art requires an investigation of the components that build up its deep structure, hence their effort to break it down into an array of neurological correlates.

Another question we might ask ourselves is, why treat art as an adaptation at all? Not many have asked themselves this question, and that is mainly why I find Pinker's (2007: 169-171) attempt to bypass this mistaken view of the evolutionary function of fiction quite interesting. His account is worth quoting:

The throbbing question about fiction from an evolutionary viewpoint is what, if anything, it is for. I believe that most people misunderstand the question, and in *How the Mind Works* I tried to clarify it. Having been embroiled in scores of discussions on the topic since then, I've found that almost everyone connected with the arts (including music, literature, and painting) believes that it is important to show that art is an adaptation, that there is good evidence that art is an adaptation, and that the function of art is some version of bringing the community together. I think all three beliefs are false, and that ultimately they may damage this nascent field. (...) I sense that most people involved with the arts want them to be an adaptation because they feel it would somehow validate or ennoble the arts -perhaps even protect them against budget-conscious politicians seeking to cut them from school curricula. Part of the problem is an ambiguity in the word itself. In the common vernacular, "adaptive" is a good thing; it means "healthy, clever, well-adjusted." In the biologist's technical sense, though, it refers only to a trait that evolved because, compared to alternative versions of the trait, it increased the rate of reproduction of an organism's ancestors. Biological adaptations need not be praiseworthy by human standards. Quite the contrary. As Symons has pointed out, a willingness to commit genocide may very well be an adaptation, whereas the ability to read almost certainly is not. The arts could be evolutionary by-products, and be among the most valuable human activities for all that. To demonstrate that X is an adaptation, one can't simply show that people like doing X, or that good things happen when people do X. (...) Instead, one has to show (...) that X, by its intrinsic design, is capable of causing a reproduction-enhancing outcome in an environment like the one in which humans evolved. (...) Example: Why do people crave sweets? Bad answers: because sweets give people pleasure; because eating sweets makes them feel satisfied; because eating sweets communally (at birthday parties, dates, and so on) brings people together. Better answer: because sugars contain accessible energy (a fact of chemistry), because the fruits of certain plants are rich in sugar (a fact of botany), because primates evolved in ecosystems with fruit-rich plants (a fact of paleoecology). Ergo, a drive to find and consume sweets would have provided an ancestral organism with energy, which is a prerequisite to reproduction. With other putative adaptations, different fields might provide the relevant engineering analysis: robotics for motor control, reproductive biology for sexual drives, Mendelian genetics for kinship emotions, game theory for cooperation and competition. What about the arts? We can immediately see that any supposed function that appeals only to the effects we observe post hoc in people won't cut it. (...) Appealing to this logic, I proposed that many of the arts may have no adaptive function at all. They may be by-products of two other traits: motivational systems that give us pleasure when we experience signals that correlate with adaptive outcomes (safety, sex,

esteem, information-rich environments), and the technological know-how to create purified and concentrated doses of these signals (such as landscape paintings, erotica, or hero stories).

To highlight another crucial set of mental goings on that could be held responsible for what poets and artists experience as a ‘struggle for expression’ –and, hence, a set of mental goings on that are crucially related to linguistic pessimism- we need to understand where art comes from, what kind of action it is and which aspects of it has made it so integral across human cultures. Let us leave Pinker, enter our laboratory and start dismantling our strange alien object into its crucial and telling details.

## **6.2. Aesthetic experience and pleasurable sensory response**

There is one articulatory component that is more revealing about the nature and origins of art than the end product of art itself could ever be. But let’s take things from the beginning.

Let us agree first that there exist *pleasurable sensory experiences*: that is, sensory experiences that elicit rewarding and hence, pleasurable bodily reactions in the organism. The stimulus that triggers the sensory experience and pleasurable reaction can be either external or internal: perceptual processes, it seems, respond not only to objects themselves, but also to mental representations of objects. The fact that mental representations, or in other words *internally caused stimuli*, activate the senses appears relatively uncontroversial; it has been shown, for instance, that auditory perception is activated during silent reading,<sup>61</sup> which suggests that the brain reacts to

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<sup>61</sup> The famous initial studies by Seidenberg 1985 were about the role of phonological processing in reading, but there’s been a lot since on more general auditory perception during reading, and the effect of alphabetic versus non-alphabetic orthographic systems e.g. ‘What

the internal representations of words/ sounds in the mind as if they were proper perceptual input.

To have a pleasurable sensory experience is to be in a certain bodily state. The organism experiences that state without necessarily also representing it mentally as pleasurable, or without evaluating it in any positive way. All that is required is that the organism is simply in a certain bodily state, which is such that it is pleasurable. The organism need not be able to reflect on, let alone name the state. In the first place, humans seem to have many more concepts than words, and many of these concepts will always remain unlexicalised (Sperber and Wilson 1998). In the second place, the state need not be mentally represented at all.<sup>62</sup> Presumably there is indeed an empirical connection between having a pleasurable experience and, say, setting up a goal of bringing it about again, but this does not entail a further connection between having a pleasurable experience and representing it as such. For instance, a simple organism which has an experience with pleasurable effects may simply set up an action plan whose goal is to bring about the repetition of that experience, without ever representing it as 'good' or 'worth having'. It may be that having a goal of bringing the experience about again amounts to representing this future experience positively, but even this latter type of representation is not necessary for an organism to be said to have a pleasurable bodily experience.

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the reader's eye tells the mind's ear: Silent reading activates inner speech', by Abramson and Goldinger (1997).

<sup>62</sup> Tye (2006 and forthcoming) launches a series of arguments against the possibility of non representational phenomenal experience. I hope that the brief train of thought followed above shows that Tye's position is not entirely uncontroversial. My claim here is not that sensory and phenomenal experiences *cannot* be mentally represented but that it is not *necessarily* mentally represented. The debate is more central to the philosophy of mind than aesthetics, and I will not pursue it further. All I want at this point is to explicitly adopt the view that there is a fundamental layer of experience, a sensory layer, which can exist independently of and prior to any kind of mental representation of that state -be it conceptualisation, lexicalisation, ory evaluation.

It is worth noting that there are two possible ways of interpreting the relation between a sensory experience and the pleasure it causes: (a) a pleasurable sensory experience is one that *causes* pleasure; (b) a pleasurable sensory experience is one that *includes* the pleasure it causes -i.e. a complex state with lots of internal causal relations. In talking of pleasurable sensory experience from now on, I will assume that we are referring to (b). In any case, the point to keep in mind from all this is that humans are capable of pleasurable sensory experiences, and may set up action plans for bringing about the repetition of an experience and its pleasurable effects, without ever having mentally represented either the experience itself as pleasurable or the action of bringing it about.

It is fairly uncontroversial that at least two types of pleasurable sensory experiences must have been positively selected in the process of evolution, since they are linked to two fundamentally life preserving activities: food consumption<sup>63</sup> and sexual intercourse. An organism whose senses reward her with pleasure every time she flirts, mates or eats is more likely to actively seek flirting, mating and eating than a similar organism who does not get any feedback/ reward from performing these activities. This type of pleasurable sensory experience is therefore clearly *adaptive*: it is possible that we are hard-wired to be rewarded with pleasurable sensory effects when we interact with a mate, have sex or satisfy hunger, because being so rewarded confers a clear evolutionary advantage in terms of survival and reproductive success.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Or, more plausibly, consumption of food that was beneficial to an organism and capable of providing it with the appropriate nutrients.

<sup>64</sup> I like the way Tye (2006: 16) phrases it:

(... ) nature wired into us (and many other creatures) value-tracking detectors, B detectors, that enable us to track value in a primitive way and thereby to behave in a fashion most conducive to our survival.

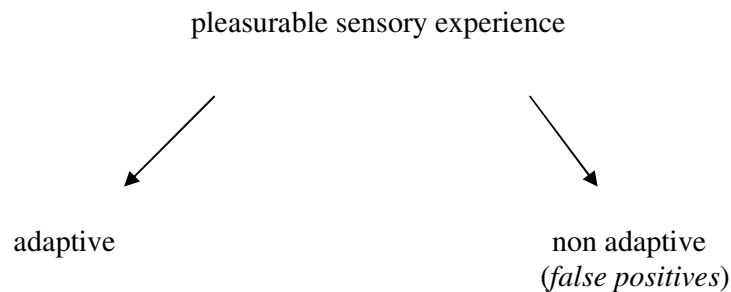
It is not hard to come up with a convincing, if speculative, evolutionary explanation of how this *disposition* (Sperber 1996: 67) for adaptive pleasurable sensory experience might have given rise to a *susceptibility*<sup>65</sup> to types of pleasurable sensory experience that do not have adaptive value (i.e. do not fulfil the evolutionary function for which the disposition was positively selected). To quote Sperber (1996: 67):

Homo sapiens, for instance, has a disposition to eat sweet food. In the natural environment in which the species developed, this was of obvious adaptive value in helping individuals to select the most appropriate nutrients. In the modern environment in which sugar is artificially produced, this brings out a susceptibility to over-consumption of sugar, with all its well-known detrimental effects.

To take a simple example, when sand runs through our fingers, we experience a pleasurable bodily sensation, and indeed, one that we tend to prolong or repeat over time. However, it is unlikely that the human disposition for sensory pleasure was originally selected by evolution to enable us to enjoy such experiences as sand running through our fingers.

It has often been observed that stimuli which do not fall into the proper domain of a trait (i.e. the set of stimuli for which the trait was initially selected) may nevertheless by mistake start activating this trait. When we look at the sky, the face recognition module in our brain may become activated, allowing us to quickly and easily spot face-resembling configurations in the clouds. Although such configurations activate the face recognition module as much as actual faces do, we cannot reasonably assume that the proper functions of this module include spotting

‘faces’ in the sky. These cases are generally referred to as *false positives*<sup>66</sup>, and involve the application of some ability to an extended range of stimuli (the actual domain of the ability) that do not fulfil the function for which this ability was initially selected by evolution (the proper domain of the ability):



According to Tooby and Cosmides (2001: 8), the problem that has persistently bedevilled evolutionary psychologists is that ‘involvement in the imaginative arts appears to be an intrinsically rewarding activity, without apparent utilitarian payoff’. In their paper ‘Does beauty build adapted minds? Toward an evolutionary theory of aesthetics, fiction and the arts’, Tooby and Cosmides (2001: 10-11) comment:

The anomaly posed to evolutionary psychologists by the arts (and pretend play) can now be stated. Our species-typical neural architecture is equipped with motivational and cognitive programs that appear to be specially designed to input fictional experiences and engage in other artistic activities (...). Yet the evolved function or selective benefits that would favour the evolution of such adaptations remains obscure. Natural selection is relentlessly utilitarian according to evolution’s bizarre and narrow standards of utility, and does not construct complex neural machinery unless that machinery promoted, among our ancestors, the genetic propagation of the traits involved. So, why are these neurogenetic programs built in to human nature?

From an evolutionary perspective, acceptable answers are down to three:

1. The human engagement in fictional experience, pretend art and other aesthetic activities are the functional products of adaptations that are designed to produce this engagement [,] therefore (...) [contributing] to the survival and reproduction of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, even though we do not presently know how.

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<sup>66</sup> Many thanks to Deirdre Wilson for turning my attention to false positives.



2. The human engagement in fictional experience, pretend art and other aesthetic activities is an accidental and functionless byproduct -a susceptibility- of adaptations that evolved to serve functions that have nothing to do with the arts *per se*. According to this hypothesis, engagement in the arts is like catching a disease or becoming addicted to drugs. It is not something that humans were designed to do, but something they are vulnerable to. Or as W.H. Auden put it, 'Poetry makes nothing happen'.

3. The psychological basis of these activities is the result of genes that spread by chance during evolution. (We consider the cognitive and motivational features related to aesthetic experience (...) to be too well-organised and reliably developing to be explicable as chance fixation of neural alleles, and will not consider this hypothesis further.)

In this analysis, I will argue that false positive triggers of pleasurable sensory experience provide us with a compelling line of argument in favour of the second hypothesis, the side-effect or by-product hypothesis. It seems to me, though, that there are two questions an evolutionary approach to art would have to answer. The first question is, what made possible the human ability for aesthetic experience, and consequently, the human ability to produce, enjoy and appreciate art? I will argue that the 'false positive' scenario convincingly answers this first question. The second question -which I see as palpably distinct from the first- is, how did this particular human ability eventually give rise to one of the most successful and enduring human cultural achievements? In trying to answer this second question, I will argue that the side-effect hypothesis and the functional hypothesis (i.e. the first hypothesis in the quote from Tooby and Cosmides) are not mutually exclusive. As long as we treat the side-effect hypothesis as designed to explain what made aesthetic experience and art possible for humans, and the functional hypothesis as designed to explain why -unlike with other similar false positives- humans set up action plans for bringing about the repetition of aesthetic experiences on such a scale that art gained its present cultural status, the two hypotheses seem compatible. In line with that, in later sections I will try to suggest a possible set of worthwhile effects that exposure to art and aesthetic

experience can be seen as triggering. This would explain why both human societies and the individual mind have repeatedly returned to the action of art, despite its seemingly non-functional and non-utilitarian nature.<sup>67</sup>

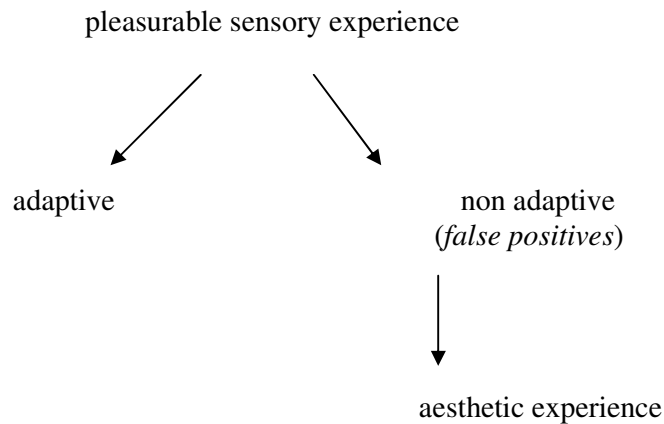
I began this line of argument by saying that there is one articulatory component that is more revealing about the nature and origins of art than the end product of art itself could ever be. This component is aesthetic experience. Since antiquity, the intuition that sensory experience is somehow tightly interwoven into the fabric of art underpins all relevant discussion in aesthetics. The very word ‘aesthetics’, chosen by ancient philosophers to pick out the particular strand of enquiry whose domain was the concept of beauty and the nature of art, originates in the ancient Greek word ‘aestheseis’, meaning ‘the senses’. It is time, I think, to interweave intuition with argument and propose that there can be no adequate discussion of the nature and origins of art without a prior explanatory understanding of the notion ‘aesthetic’. And in turn, there can be no explanatory understanding of the notion ‘aesthetic’ without an adequate discussion of the precise role that perception and the senses play in it.

Aesthetic experience, I want to suggest, is a side-effect or by-product of the disposition for adaptive sensory pleasure. Moreover, it is a side-effect which applies specifically to art. The stimuli that trigger aesthetic experience fall into the actual domain of the human ability for pleasurable sensory experience, but are not part of its proper domain. It follows that aesthetic experience, just like the pleasurable experience of having sand running through one’s fingers, belongs to a range of false

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<sup>67</sup> Incidentally, an artwork may have a utilitarian purpose. In the previous chapter, I argued that the presence or absence of a practical function is not the factor that determines whether or not an object is a work of art.

positives that trigger sensory pleasure without having any positively selected adaptive value.



To make the generic claim that aesthetic experience is a refined case of non adaptive sensory pleasure is to commit oneself to each of the following sub-claims:

- a) that aesthetic experience is non adaptive,
- b) that aesthetic experience is pleasurable, and
- c) that aesthetic experience is a type of sensory experience.

I am committed to all three of them. Claim (a) suggests that aesthetic experience is a side-effect/ by-product of evolution, and therefore indicates an area of overlap between aesthetic experience and other realms of human experience that also happen to be by-products of evolution. Claim (b) suggests that aesthetic experience triggers the reward system of the brain, and therefore indicates an area of overlap between aesthetic experience and other realms of non adaptive human experience that also happen to do the same. Claim (c) suggests that aesthetic experience is primarily a sensory type of experience, and therefore indicates an area of overlap between aesthetic experience and other sensory experiences. Finally, claims (b) and (c) together suggest a possible line of explanation for the strong intuition that aesthetic experience is somehow tightly interconnected with human sexual instincts. According

to this line of argument, aesthetic experience is closely related to the human disposition for sexual pleasure, by virtue of being a non-adaptive variety of precisely such adaptive and positively selected types of pleasurable sensory response. This scenario allows us to account for the strong intuition that there is a significant connection between art and sex, without nevertheless committing ourselves to the claim that art is a direct product of sexual selection.<sup>68</sup>

Having suggested these three ways in which aesthetic experience in my view overlaps with other areas of experience, we now need to find at least one critical cutting point that could set aesthetic experience apart from other, non-aesthetic instances of human sensory pleasure. In simpler terms, we need at least one crucial parameter that would explain the strong introspective evidence that the kind of sensory pleasure we take from, say, a soft breeze is somehow crucially similar to, but at the same time, crucially distinct from the type of sensory pleasure art gives us.

The idea that aesthetic pleasure is of a different order from sexual, gustatory or other generic types of pleasurable sensory response has been around in the philosophy of art for a number of centuries, and there have been various suggestions about what this difference may be due to, or whether it is likely to be identifiable or describable at all. A more recent strand of enquiry concerns the extent to which evolutionary considerations could help to bring such crucial difference to light. Here is a comment from Dutton (2003: section 6):

While evolutionary psychology may have a capacity to shed light on the existence of art and art's persistent qualities, it cannot pretend to explain everything we might want to know about art. In particular, there is an aspect of Kant's aesthetics that ought to be borne in mind when discussing evolutionary

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<sup>68</sup> Miller (2000) and Dutton (2003 and 2008) have been developing a sexual selection account in which art is treated as an indicator of fitness and general intelligence.

psychology in an aesthetic context. Kant distinguished what he called the agreeable from the beautiful. The agreeable are the straightforward subjective sensations of things that we like in direct experience: the taste of sweet, for example, or the colour blue. The pleasurable experience of such sensations, Kant held, contains no intellectual element: it is a brute feeling, often seeming to satisfy a desire (such as hunger), and as such must be carefully distinguished from the experience of the beautiful, in which the imagination combines with rational understanding in the experience of an imaginative object. For Kant, the disinterested experience that characterizes the proper regard for art is cut off from desires -the beautiful object is contemplated or observed, it is not used or consumed. Works of art, especially of fine art, therefore engage the higher faculties, and the pleasures they afford are of a different order than sexual or gustatory sensations of pleasure.

(...) This is not a distinction many evolutionary psychologists have fully appreciated. (...) They leave no room here for any distinctions between pleasures directly implicated in the satisfaction of desires and the contemplative pleasure historically identified as aesthetic and artistic.

(...) This is not to say that even in these areas evolutionary psychology might not have important things to tell us. Our responses to deep and complex works of art layer rich meanings and values that may be difficult to disentangle. (...) Even if it is never able to offer a completely satisfactory general theory of art, evolutionary psychology has the potential to contribute significantly to a philosophical understanding of art and its effects. These contributions are only beginning to be grasped and developed.

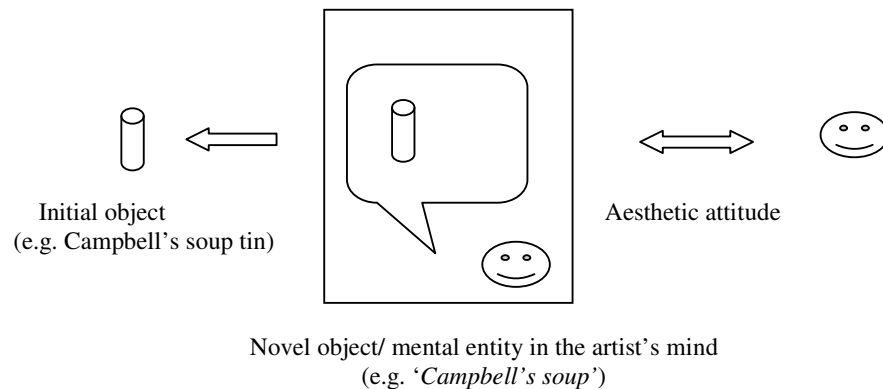
I now want to grapple with this long-standing question and consider in more detail in what respects aesthetic pleasure may be of a different order from other generic types of pleasurable sensory response. I shall then try and link this discussion with the false positive account outlined above.

Pleasurable sensory experience results *directly* from, and is therefore *directly* caused by, interaction with objects: the pleasurable sensation of sand running through my fingers results *directly* from the object 'sand' and my physical interaction with it:

**Object (e.g. sand)  $\longleftrightarrow$  Pleasurable sensory experience**

Aesthetic experience does not work in that way. Aesthetic experience is a more complex type of pleasurable sensory experience, which is specific to art and is linked to the particular kind of object a work of art is.

In the last chapter, I argued that works of art are objects with a distinct psycho-cognitive etiology. They are caused by a complex art-specific type of mental state that I have called a poetic thought state. To give a quick reminder, a poetic thought state is a metarepresentational state that involves a complex and retroactive feedback relationship between an agent -the artist- who has a novel, creative or ‘aspectual’ mental representation of an object and a steady reflective focus of a certain kind towards this representation. I have specifically suggested that the creator’s/ agent’s focus towards her representation is of an aesthetic sort:



Works of art are objects which result from, and are therefore etiologically linked to, this type of mental state. Because of their etiological history, works of art are essentially distinct objects. Aesthetic experience is specific to such objects and such objects alone.

Before seeing what exactly this amounts to, here is another claim that I'd like to commit myself to. In existing philosophical debate, aesthetic value, experience and response are typically discussed in relation to the reception end of art. I want to

turn this theoretical canon upside-down and treat aesthetic experience as no less a quintessential component of artistic production too. Aesthetic experience, I would like to propose, is as central to the production of art as it is to its reception, equally and similarly present in the mechanisms of artistic response and in the mechanisms that make art possible within the individual mind.

The claim has implications of two sorts. It assumes -and there is strong introspective evidence for this- that in creating a work of art, the artist experiences a type of sensory feedback that is essentially the same as the one the audience gets when receiving a work of art. In other words, the first person to take pleasure from an artwork is its producer. If this assertion is justified (and I am personally convinced that it is), it would bring artistic production and reception together under a single mechanism which revolves crucially around a single, common ability for aesthetic response.

In my view, shifting the theoretical focus to the production end of art may prove more illuminating about the nature of aesthetic experience than investigation of the reception end has so far been/ I will therefore look first at aesthetic response as an occurrence within the individual mind, the artist's mind.

Ready-mades have traditionally been treated as raising some of the most puzzling issues in contemporary art, bedeviling philosophers for nearly a century. To my mind, though, this seemingly problematic category of artworks is actually more useful in noetic experiments, and often more illuminating for issues in aesthetic philosophy, than manufactured artworks could ever be.

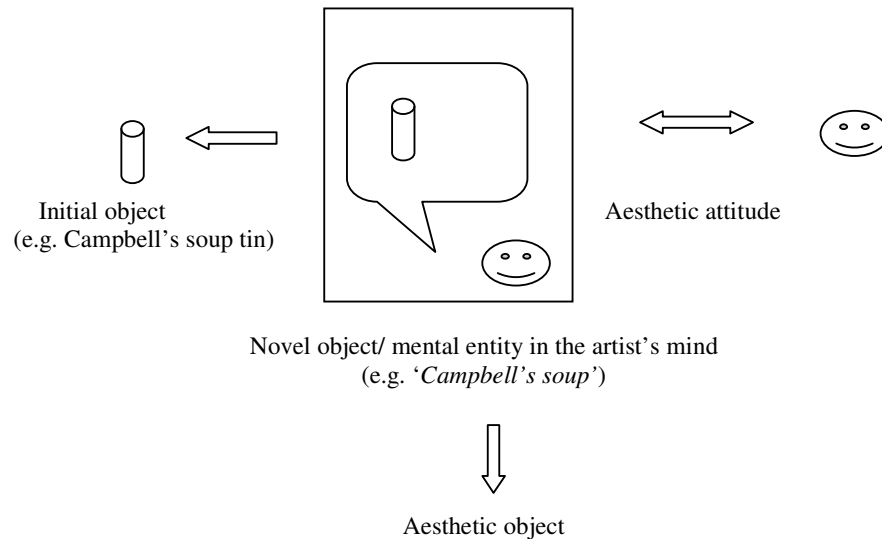
In 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace', Danto (1981) famously asks what makes a ready-made -e.g. a *Campbell's Soup* by Andy Warhol as opposed to a perceptually indistinguishable Campbell's Soup tin on the shelves of a super market-

a work of art. I have already suggested an answer: its psycho-cognitive etiology, of course. Campbell's Soup is an existing object out there in the world. Campbell's Soup is clearly irrelevant to a philosophy of art. An agent -say, Warhol- *sees* this pre-existing object in a certain creative way: he has an aspectual representation of that object. Immediately, and just by virtue of talking about representations, we move from the domain of physical real world objects to a new domain, that of mental entities: the mental entity 'way in which Warhol *sees* the object' is itself a novel object. In Chapter 5, I have suggested that such mental entities may be relevant to a theoretical understanding of human creativity, but are not yet relevant to a philosophy of art. Up to this point, our agent is still in a pre-artistic condition: he is a naïve creator of novel mental objects, capable of creative thinking of a certain kind, but, strictly speaking, not yet capable of art. For the psycho-cognitive state our agent is in to be properly described as an artistic condition, our agent must stop being oblivious of the novel object he has mentally formed, and somehow start steadily responding to this object.

My claim is that the nature of this response is essentially and crucially aesthetic: that what happens there and then in the individual mind is basically the same thing that happens when we stand in front of a painting, read a poem or listen to a string quartet. Our agent has a steady aesthetic attitude towards his own novel and creative mental representation of some initial object, and in my view, to say that an agent has an aesthetic attitude is to say -amongst other things which I will try to tackle later in my discussion- that our agent draws pleasurable sensory experience of a particular kind from steadily focusing on his creative mental representation. By virtue of being embedded in such a psycho-cognitive configuration, and with an



agent's aesthetic focus firmly fixed on them, creative mental representations of this sort become -or at least behave as- aesthetic objects.



The rationale for my approach starts from strong introspective evidence that when I work on a poem, when an idea for a poem pops up in my mind, when I experience words in the mind -a kind of phenomenal consciousness that poets experience in the production phase-, my senses respond to it in exactly the same way as when I read or recollect somebody else's poem. From my 'mind's eye' to the sense of touch to -most important, in my view- my 'mind's ear', my perceptual attention is wholly directed at these novel goings-on inside my mind/ brain rewarding me continuously with sensory pleasure. It seems to me (and this is so far only an intuitive claim) that the type of sensory pleasure I experience is qualitatively the same -i.e. has similar properties linked to the same underlying mechanisms- as the pleasure I instantaneously get from reading Elytis' 'Journal of an unseen April' or looking at Picasso's 'Woman in a red armchair'. I take this as preliminary evidence that on both the production and the reception side of art, we are in fact

dealing with a single, common type of pleasurable sensory experience. It is this particular type of sensory experience that in my view captures better than anything else the so far fluid notion of ‘the aesthetic’.

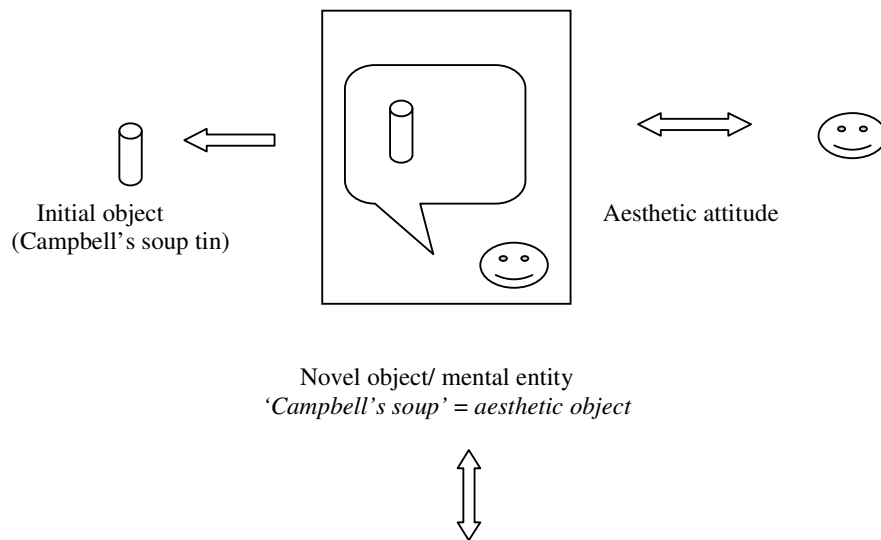
According to this account, aesthetic experience occurs in both production and reception. In production terms, aesthetic experience is a metarepresentational state<sup>69</sup> which takes place more often than not below the level of consciousness, and which *inter alia* involves an agent having a specific type of pleasurable sensory response to a novel, creative mental representation of his own (an aspectual representation). The pleasurable nature of this response is an immediate kind of reward which, at least partially and at a very rudimentary level, explains the agent’s remaining in, enjoying and seeking to find himself again in this particular type of metarepresentational state. Rather fine-grained, complex *practical reasoning relations* (which certainly deserve further investigation) between the novel mental entity and the agent’s aesthetic response to it and continued focus on it result -sometimes progressively, some times instantaneously- in the physically observable object in the outside world we refer to as an ‘artwork’. The physically observable artwork can be seen as a *realisation* of the novel mental entity when it bears at least some minimal resemblance to the mental entity initially conceived.

We could contrast art with the practical reasoning processes involved in theory formation. Theory formation often begins with a mental flash and ends up with a concrete instantiation that bears very little resemblance to the initial idea. The mental flash/ initial novel mental representation is in a sense a place holder for the final

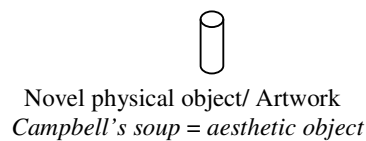
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<sup>69</sup> As mentioned above, the notion of metarepresentation must be taken here in a rather weak sense. The creator has an attitude of a certain kind to a creative mental representation of her own. This attitude need not itself be a representation in the strict sense, need not be properly conceptual or reflective. In the last chapter, I spoke of ‘intuitive awareness’. All that is needed is for the agent/ artist to be intuitively aware of having a creative mental representation. In that case, she can be said to metarepresent this mental representation, but in a very weak sense.

object (theory) which, however, must be somehow minimally related to that initial flash -even by antithesis/ contradiction- for it to be reasonably perceived as a realisation of it. The relation between initial conception and final object should be regarded as interactive, with the initial goal/ intention shifting in the process of instantiation, binding with other goals, being affected by chance or context etc.



Retroactive practical reasoning relations result in a physically observable object in the world:



In reception, the order of events is in some sense reversed, although reception should not in any case be seen as just production in reverse. The sense in which the order of events is 'reversed' is that reception takes as its starting point the end-point of production: the physically observable object in the world, the artwork. However, this raises the question of whether aesthetic experience at the reception end is a response to the artwork, understood as the physical object *per se*. I want to claim that

first appearances are deceptive, and that aesthetic experience<sup>70</sup> is not a response to the artwork as a physical object *per se*, but rather a response to the artwork as a physical manifestation of some novel mental entity.

Thus, when we walk in the Tate Modern section ‘Minimalism’ and are pleasantly caught by the red glow emanating from Donald Judd’s copper box (*Untitled*, 1972),<sup>71</sup> we are only having a pleasurable sensory experience of a generic/non-aesthetic sort. We would find ourselves getting the same pleasurable sensory feedback even if the object in question was, say, a copper water tank in our neighbour’s garden. So long as the water tank had the same configuration of shape, colour, texture, line and dimension, our senses would respond to it in pretty much the same way.<sup>72</sup> The physical nature of artworks suggests that they too, just like any other physical entity in the world, may well cause pleasurable sensory experience of a generic kind. What I am arguing is that works of art can also cause a more refined, *second order* type of pleasurable sensory experience, aesthetic experience, which is specific to them and them alone.

These two layers of experience are not separate from one another: generic pleasurable sensory experiences are put at the service of the aesthetic. In producing a work of art, an artist, sometimes sub-attentively and sometimes consciously, weighs the physical aspects of the resulting object and the way our perception may respond to it. The physical aspects of the artwork are to a greater or lesser degree embedded within some -possibly vague and intuitive- intention of achieving such and such an aesthetic experience. This point applies equally to ready-mades. What physical

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<sup>70</sup> At this point we are focusing on aesthetic experience at the reception end.

<sup>71</sup> The artwork is an open copper tank whose inside has been painted red by the artist.

<sup>72</sup> To keep the line of argument as clear and simple as possible, I deliberately ignore any issues having to do with the location/ installation of an artwork in space. Although they are definitely central to our sensory response to a work of art, it is not necessary to consider them for the present purposes of my discussion. All I want to show here is an interesting distinction between a generic sensory response to some object and an aesthetic response.

aspects of a Campbell's soup tin made it a better candidate for Warhol's conceptual artwork than, say, a tin of Green Giant corn? How do the different physical aspects of Duchamp's *Urinal* -a ready-made porcelain urinal-, as compared with a transparent yellowish urinal made out of resin by another artist, ultimately serve rather distinct aesthetic experiences?

I have already suggested that a pleasurable sensory experience of the generic (non-aesthetic) kind involves an agent and a direct pleasurable sensory response by this agent to some internal or external object: say, a caress or the memory of a caress. It follows from our discussion so far that aesthetic experience is inherently different from generic types of pleasurable sensory response, in that it is not direct. Aesthetic experience is not possible without the *mediation* of some intervening consciousness. It is a sensory response, not to objects *per se* out there in the world, but to the particular way in which objects have been *seen* by an intervening mind -our very own, in the case of production, or somebody else's, in the case of reception. In having an aesthetic experience, we in fact respond to the way something has been *seen*, to evidence about a novel entity formed in an agent's mind.

Thus, aesthetic experience is not a direct response to physical objects in themselves. It is rather a response to a relation between physical objects and mental representations. To have an aesthetic experience is to participate unwittingly in a game of metarepresentation. Pleasurable sensory experience of the generic kind, being a direct response to the physicality of things, does not require a metarepresentational capacity, even in the weakest sense of metarepresentation. Aesthetic experience, on the other hand, would not be possible for a creature that does not have theory of mind, or more specifically, the ability to metarepresent mental states. Such a creature would only respond to works of art incidentally, at the

basic level of generic pleasurable sensory response, when physical aspects of works of art positively caught its perceptual attention. Pre-theoretical intuition strongly suggests that this is nowhere near the way in which human beings respond to and experience artworks.

It follows that merely perceptually gratifying objects<sup>73</sup> cannot cause aesthetic experience. To say that we experience ‘aesthetic pleasure’ in interacting with a merely perceptually gratifying object is, in my view, to use the term ‘aesthetic’ catachrestically: our experience may be both sensory and pleasurable, but it is not strictly speaking aesthetic. Merely perceptually gratifying objects lack the sort of *relational essence*, the specific psycho-cognitive etiology, that makes an object a work of art. This suggests that merely perceptually gratifying objects are experienced in a direct way, just like any other physical object that can incidentally give us sensory pleasure. The way they are experienced is not mediated by an agent’s novel mental object/ way of *seeing* an object, and therefore does not involve metarepresentation. It is the object *per se* that we respond to, not the aspectualness of the object. When a perceptually gratifying object -say, a Greek pot- is for some reason experienced in a mediated way, then this object, as I argued in the last chapter, should have the relational essence, and hence the status, of an artwork.

I now want to suggest that the first step towards a well articulated aesthetics and a comprehensive philosophy of literature is to disregard artistic *canons*. An

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<sup>73</sup> The term ‘merely perceptually gratifying objects’ is the standard way in the philosophy of art to refer to objects that elicit sensory or perceptual pleasure without meriting the status of artworks. However, the notions of ‘sensory’ and ‘perceptual’ are distinct in non-trivial ways. A perceptual process is normally described in cognitive science as one that takes a non-conceptual representation as input and delivers a conceptual representation as output. To describe an experience as perceptual therefore suggests that there are conceptual representations being activated, if not actually accessed. To talk of an experience as sensory, by contrast, seems to allow for the possibility that not much is going on in the way of conceptual activation. For ease of understanding, I have continued to use the term ‘merely perceptually gratifying objects’ but I’d like to note here that I take it to refer to ‘merely *sensorily* gratifying objects’.

aesthetics founded on a canon, be it the western or any other one, is an aesthetics emerging from convention. So long as our theories resort to sociologically driven conceptions and truths by agreement, they will fail to offer an explanatory account of what makes a certain object art. It is of little interest to me whether an *ekfrasis*<sup>74</sup> is conventionally categorised as literature/ art. In essentialist terms, an ekfrasis was no more than an exercise in elaborate discourse, with no causal relation to the genuine poetic thought states that underlie literature/ art. An ekfrasis can cause generic sensory response, but not aesthetic experience. Similarly, I would feel very confident in describing certain instances of design and architecture, in works, say, by Santiago Calatrava or Tadao Ando also as eliciting aesthetic experience, in that they exhibit the etiological properties of poetic thought states.

In the following sections, I shall say a bit more about the metarepresentational nature of aesthetic experience, with a view to showing how artworks make possible a meeting of minds. Let me note in passing that an aesthetic response to the way a certain object has been *seen* by its producer -to evidence about a novel creative entity formed in an agent's mind- need involve neither verbatim reproduction of that entity nor identity of thoughts. It is possible that in the production process, the producer is also doing a little bit of interpretation, switching back and forth between his own viewpoint and that of an -ideal?- audience. Similarly, in the reception process, the receiver/ interpreter is certainly doing part of the production herself, drawing on background assumptions which certainly include assumptions about an existing or hypothetical producer's mental states. Work in pragmatics and cognitive anthropology in the last 20 years, for instance, suggests that transmission of information necessarily involves transformation of information:

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<sup>74</sup> A short-lived genre of late antiquity that involved exhaustive description of important sites, buildings, artworks etc.

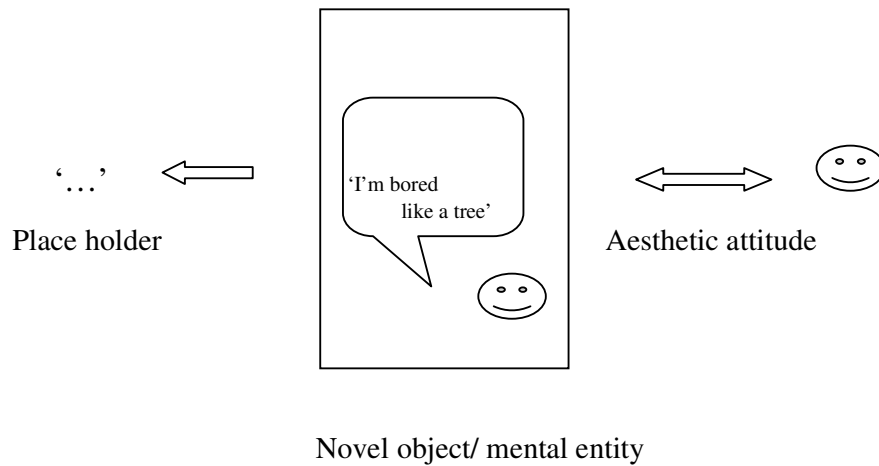
‘recall is not storage in reverse, and comprehension is not expression in reverse’ (Sperber 1996: 31). The mind is not a mere duplication device, and an audience should not be seen as a passive recipient but rather as an active agent, who shares responsibility with the producer by making his own inferences and bringing his own sets of background assumptions to bear in the construction of experience. This may give us some insight into Dewey’s (1935) intuitive claim that:

to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent... Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art.

A final note of clarification. My choice of a ready-made as the starting point for this discussion may have left you with a question mark about how a metarepresentational model of aesthetic experience could apply to works of art that lack an everyday perceptually indiscernible equivalent. However, the story need not be any different. In my view, the case of ready-mades is highly illuminating, precisely because it makes the dichotomy between mere objects, on the one hand, and novel representations/ ways of *seeing* an object, on the other, rather easy to grasp: a tin of Campbell’s Soup and what Warhol *sees* in a tin of Campbell’s Soup are two clearly distinct objects. I would be inclined to say that this dichotomy applies equally to objects that do not have pre-existing everyday equivalents, although it may not be as easy to see. The main difference is that in this second type of case, both the initial object and the novel way of *seeing* that object involve mental representations.

To understand how this works, imagine a place holder ‘...’ for where the initial object was in our previous schema:





This place holder ‘...’ is waiting to be filled with whatever novel representation pops up in the creator’s/ artist’s mind, as distinct from what the agent *sees* in it. A naïve agent of novel representations may experience words in the mind. Remember young Mendonca from our discussion in the last chapter? The boy forms a novel representation, say, ‘I’m bored like a tree’, but does not see anything in it. He simply bypasses it and forgets it. The representation ‘I’m bored like a tree’ in itself, without an agent’s ‘gaze’ towards it, without an agent’s awareness of the ways in which it is novel and creative, is nothing but a mere object, a Campbell’s soup tin on the shelves of a supermarket, completely irrelevant to a discussion on either the nature of creativity or aesthetics. Only in the second part of our schema, where the creator’s mind comes up with a novel mental entity, does the configuration start becoming relevant for an understanding of creativity. In this latter part of the schema, the same initial object ‘I’m bored like a tree’ is *seen* in a certain way; it is experienced by our agent as the novel and creative representation it is. It has thus become the mental product of a non-naïve agent. The third part of the schema is constant for both ready-mades and manufactured artworks: the agent has an *inter alia* pleasurable sensory

response, a response of an aesthetic kind, to what he *sees* in his own creative mental representation ‘I’m bored like a tree’.

### **6.3 Modes of aesthetic experience. A case from attention blindness.**

It is a beautiful day. You sit outside by the sea, feeling something nice for a while, not realising that you feel something nice, that what you feel is because of the breeze, or even that there is a breeze. As a result of the vast capacity of the human mind to process internal and external stimuli that may never be brought to conscious attention, for a while you are experiencing a kind of *attention blindness*: a fact, although highly manifest in your cognitive environment, is only sub-attentively monitored.

The point I’d like to focus on in this particular instance of attention blindness is that, for the shorter or longer period that the breeze remains unavailable to your consciousness, your senses nevertheless respond to it, producing a pleasurable bodily feeling. It can be presumed, then, that, for as long as the source of this pleasurable feeling remains unavailable to cognition, the rewarding sensory feedback the organism is experiencing results from some other type of effect.<sup>75</sup> In discussing the motivations for the *thesis of nonconceptualism*<sup>76</sup>, the philosopher Michael Tye (2006: 12-16) lends us a few more pertinent examples:

I begin with the case of perceptual experiences with an evaluative character. Suppose you are walking towards the Plaza Hotel in New York and just before you get there, you encounter a large quantity of vomit on the side-walk. You are appalled, of course. (...) The vomit smells bad to you. In so doing, it elicits in you an olfactory experience directed on the vomit and its odor. Your experience represents the odor of the vomit as bad. But it does not just represent the odor of the vomit as bad simpliciter. It represents the odor as bad in a certain way,

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<sup>75</sup> Later on, I will introduce the notion of *perceptual effect*, and discuss how conceptualisation may play a part in deepening (pleasurable) sensory experience.

<sup>76</sup> Roughly speaking, the general *nonconceptualist thesis* claims that experience can have nonconceptual content, content that is independent of thoughts. An extreme conceptualist thesis, conversely, would claim that all experiences must activate concepts and/ or sentences in the language of thought.

namely as foul. Your experience, then, has an evaluative content. It represents the vomit and its odor as having a kind of negative value, as being foul.

Must one have the capacity to think a thought into which the concept FOUL enters in order for something to smell foul to one? Surely not. (...) In this connection, it is worth noting that new born babies react to Q-tips dipped in sulphur and held beneath their noses by grimacing and turning away. The obvious explanation for their doing so is that sulphur smells foul to them. But that surely does not require that they already have the concept FOUL. They may well be built so as to acquire the concept FOUL via such encounters, but they do not have the concept the first time something smells foul to them. A plausible hypothesis, then, is that the experience of something's smelling foul has a nonconceptual representational content.

Consider the other side of the coin for a moment. A child as young as two months, upon tasting a little chocolate, typically behaves in a way that signifies that he/she wants more. (...) Why? The answer is that chocolate tastes good. (...) the child's gustatory experience represents a certain taste and the child experiences that taste as good. The taste is experienced as good by the child in that the child undergoes an overall experience which represents the presence of the taste in the mouth and represents it as good. Intuitively, this is not a cognitive response. It does not require its subject to possess evaluative concepts.

Tye then goes on to discuss an important connection between the amygdala and emotional experience. In processing information via subcortical pathways, the amygdala allow for faster transmission than is found in the cerebral hemispheres, within which conceptual thought and decision-making occur. It is this speed of transmission that permits us to begin to respond to dangerous stimuli before we even fully know what the stimulus is, with obvious survival value of course. Imagine a rat that would have to take the time to form a whole sequence of thoughts before acting in the face of a cat about to pounce. Compare this later rat to another one that is wired to feel fear automatically in response to certain large moving shapes. The difference in survival probabilities is tangible. If the experience of fear can occur without its subject possessing the concepts DANGEROUS/ THREATENING etc, then on Tye's version

of nonconceptualism, some emotional experiences should be said to have robustly nonconceptual (evaluative) contents.<sup>77</sup>

Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999: 32) refer to a similar case -a type of face agnosia- in patients with damage in the inferotemporal cortex. This case involves emotional rather than perceptual sub-attentive activation, but provides a relevant example of unconscious mental processes:

(...) the SCR is a direct measure of the amount of limbic (emotional) activation produced by an image. It is a better measure, as it turns out, than simply asking someone how much emotion he feels about what he is looking at, because the verbal response is filtered, edited, and sometimes censored by the conscious mind -so that your answer is a 'contaminated' signal. Indeed there are patients with damage to the inferotemporal cortex who cannot consciously recognise their mother, yet will still register a larger SCR to her face than to unfamiliar people (...).

The idea that it is possible to experience rewarding sensory feedback from sub-attentively monitored or predominantly sensory occurrences without significant engagement of conceptual cognition is plausible. It may be that this is not how we experience sensory responses most of the time. It may also be that sensory inputs, even subconscious ones, automatically trigger some minimal degree of conceptual activity, which may not, however, have enough expected effects to attract and hold the attention. On a spreading activation model, sensory processes give some

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<sup>77</sup> Earlier in my discussion, I have explicitly adopted the view that to have a sensory experience is to be in a certain bodily state, without necessarily having any representation of the state you are in, and without consciously or subconsciously evaluating this state. The view that pleasurable sensory experience by definition involves representing the object in a positive way is one possible engineering solution, but it is not necessary that it's the only one. A child may ingest an object, which gives rise to a taste, which causes an affective reaction, which triggers a heuristic for ingesting similar objects when available. This, however, does not necessarily involve representing the taste as good. As Deirdre Wilson pointed out to me (P.C. 10.04.09), 'this raises interesting issues about the relation of Tye's points to the notion of ad hoc/ non-lexicalised concepts, though. Maybe what Tye has in mind is what we might describe as non-lexicalised propositional states'.

automatic initial degree of activation to conceptual processes, which may nevertheless get extinguished pretty quickly through lack of reward. It could be argued, then, that conceptual cognition is ‘engaged’ in this weak sense by all sensory activity, although it may not reach the level of consciousness. Still, the point I am trying to make remains untouched. With some slight exaggeration, it seems reasonable to assume that there is a pure sensory mode in which sensory inputs can elicit sensory responses which do not involve conceptual activity, at least not in the robust sense of engaging central thought processes and activating conceptual representations/ sentences in our *language of thought*.

#### **Sensory mode**

Unattended pleasurable sensory response

E.g. attention blindness, orgasm etc.

The experience causes sensory pleasure but does not necessarily involve conceptual activity in the robust sense of activating conceptual representations or sentences in our language of thought.

Now I’ll tell you what I’d do if I were ‘Basic Instinct’s’ Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) having fabulous sex with Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone): I’d keep telling myself ‘I’m having sex with Catherine Tramell! I’m having sex with Catherine Tramell! I’m having sex with Catherine Tramell!’. Pleasurable sensory experience can become conceptualised, reflected upon, mentally represented. After feeling something nice for a while without realising that it’s because of the breeze, or even that there is a breeze, a thought may occur to you which brings to conscious attention both the perceptual fact in question and the fact that you are having a sensory response to it: ‘Aahh... the breeze... it’s nice...’.<sup>78</sup> Introspective evidence

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<sup>78</sup> There is a question about how this sentence/ thought comes to conscious attention; whether, as it were, there was no conceptual activation at all before, and the sentence/ thought just pops up, or whether there was a lot of conceptual activity going on under the surface, and attention

suggests that conceptualisation reinforces the pleasure we get from sensory inputs, hence the propensity to repeat to oneself, when hypothetically having sex with Catherine Tramell, that one is having sex with Catherine Tramell. The engagement of central thought processes intensifies pleasurable sensory experience.

#### **Conceptualised or Perceptual mode**

Conceptualised pleasurable sensory response.

The experience has been recognised, mentally represented and become available to consciousness: ‘...the breeze feels nice’. The mode is termed ‘perceptual’ on the ground that perception takes a sensory representation as input and gives a conceptual representation as output. Here, the input gives a significant/ non-minimal degree of activation to conceptual processes, which apparently have enough expected effects to attract and hold the attention.

Finally, needless to say, as soon as the fact that one is having a certain pleasurable sensory response becomes available to consciousness, it can at any point provide input to spontaneous inference processes through which contextual implications (Sperber and Wilson 2008: 23-26; Sperber and Wilson 1995: 152) may potentially be drawn:

#### **Conceptual mode**

Conscious pleasurable sensory experience is properly reflected upon and, like any conceptual representation, gives some initial degree of activation to potential implications.

I will return to these matters later and consider them in the light of the Relevance-theoretic notion of cognitive effect. For now, I will keep the discussion deliberately quite pre-theoretical and just underline a number of significant points. In all three cases, from the one where a certain phenomenon -e.g. the breeze- causes me

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gets automatically allocated to this one when it activates enough expected effects to be the most relevant available input.

a pleasurable feeling that escapes my attention, to one where the same fact becomes available to my consciousness through a simple recognition ‘...the breeze feels nice’, to one where the phenomenon lends itself to proper reflection, the experience I am having -the feeling caused by a nice breeze- is a sensory one. Having a sensory experience should not be taken to exclude the possibility of a parallel engagement of conceptual cognition, and the parallel engagement of conceptual cognition, in turn, does not falsify the claim that the experience in question is sensory.

I now want to apply this claim to aesthetic experience. Seen as a type of pleasurable sensory response, aesthetic experience may also be obtained in these three modes:

<b>Sensory mode of aesthetic experience</b>
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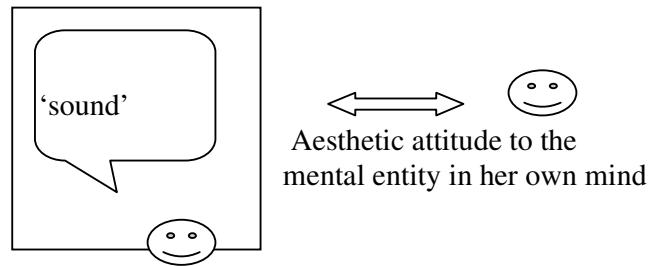
In the sensory mode, on this account, an aesthetic experience would involve sensory pleasure but no conceptual representations or sentences in the language of thought. Music, for instance, can easily be experienced in a way that resembles attention blindness. Think of all the times you have found yourself in a place where there is music playing but, having completely forgotten it is there, you pay little or no attention to it. Your senses, though, respond to it, giving rise to pertinent sensations. You may suddenly find yourself feeling relaxed, or being inexplicably agitated, and only then realise that it is because of the music. On the production side, consider what happens when a composer experiences the musical equivalent of phenomenal consciousness, i.e. when a melody pops up in her mind. We can realistically enough imagine a case where a melody pops up in the mind, but the fact that it has popped up in the mind and that one is having an aesthetic response to it remains unavailable for a shorter or longer period. Note, also, that in the case of music, the novel mental entity

in the composer's mind is in every respect a sensory phenomenon: it is just sound in the mind.

It is a legitimate question whether a response of this purely sensory sort is indeed aesthetic, or whether the idea that aesthetic experience involves a metarepresentational attitude to/ focus on the object suggests that the experience only starts being aesthetic when it has been at least sub-attentively reflected upon. I have already suggested that I take metarepresentation in the rather weak sense of intuitive awareness. In listening and responding to music in an attentionally blind mode, an individual certainly experiences the object perceptually, responding to it as a physical object *per se*. But at the same time, the response must certainly involve an aesthetic component: it is an aesthetic response, albeit a sub-attentive one, in the sense that the sound the individual responds to in an attentionally blind fashion is not a natural sound, but rather the creation, the product of a mind.

On the production side, when a composer has a sub-attentive sensory response to a melody that has popped up in her mind, she is responding to a novel mental entity in pretty much the same way that we respond to music when we have not realised or have completely forgotten it is there. She is attentionally blind to the novel entity in her mind, or to the fact that she is having a sensory response to it, but this should not rule out the assumption that the response nonetheless exists. In both cases, the resulting experience is aesthetic: it is a response to the creation of a mind rather than to the physical properties of an object *per se*. In both cases, aesthetic experience is a predominantly sensory phenomenon.





Novel mental entity in the composer's mind

### **Conceptualised or perceptual mode of aesthetic experience**

In the conceptualised/ perceptual mode, the stimulus of an aesthetic experience has become at least minimally available to consciousness: in reaction to a melody popping up in her mind, the composer has a conscious response 'Hmm, that's nice. I like it'.

### **Conceptual mode of aesthetic experience**

In the conceptual mode, the stimulus is properly reflected upon, allowing for masses of cognitive implications to be potentially drawn from it. The creator focuses on and constantly returns to the novel entity in her mind; this may give rise to complex feedback relations between aesthetic response to one's own novel mental conception and gradual modifications of this conception. In all three cases, the experience is of a sensory sort. Although conceptualisation and conceptual effects are far more involved in the way we respond to works of art than to other perceptual stimuli, the fact remains: aesthetic experience is sensory experience.

In this chapter I have tried to introduce an empirically tractable account of aesthetic experience as a special case of (non adaptive) sensory response. In the next

chapter (*Is art a mistake*, Part 2) I'll take from where we have just left to propose an evolutionary scenario on the origins of literature and art. In discussing extensively the role of aesthetic experience in the kind of action literature/art is, I'll try and gesture to the possibility that much of what a poet refers to as 'agony of expression' is in fact agony for aesthetic achievement.

## Chapter 7

### Is Art a mistake? (Part 2)

#### On the origins of art

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##### 7.1. Perceptually driven actions: art and perceptual effect.

In a discussion on the nature of sensory response, and ultimately on art and the content of aesthetic experience, the relationship between perceptual and conceptual facts is not a question of either-or. Perceptual and conceptual facts are co-present in aesthetic responses, tightly interconnected by complex and interesting retroactive relations. What takes priority over what, though, is a matter whose importance we should not understate. It may seem that I am investing too much in too little -and indeed the point I am deliberating may be subtle -but it is by no means secondary. Pinning down aesthetic experience as a fundamentally sensory fact is a means to an important end: my aim is to construct an argument against *interpretationalism*.

Interpretationalism -which I would regard as one of the five evils of contemporary literary study (along with applicationalism, historicism, overtheorisation and unquestioning acceptance of intellectual authority) has plagued poetics and literary theorising for the best part of a century. The 20<sup>th</sup> century begins with unparalleled enthusiasm, as literary and fine art communities unite forces, and a new era in both the practice and theory of art gets under way. It is a mystery how an adventure that began with the most compelling arguments for a view of art as significant form as opposed to significant content ends with the full weight of theorising -at least on the literary side- falling entirely on meaning and interpretation.

The fact that one of the functions of language is to provide rich, nuanced evidence<sup>79</sup> of the producer's meaning offers one possible explanation for the huge vulnerability that the study of literary art has shown to interpretationalism, as compared with approaches emerging from the study of other artforms. Otherwise broad and diverse domains of enquiry such as poetics are now being progressively narrowed into disciplines whose sole aim is the study of literary interpretation. The view that stylistic choice is ultimately at the service of interpreting is one of the few meeting points between competing trends such as functionalist (e.g. Halliday 1971) and cognitive stylistics (e.g. Clark 2009). And, finally, the claim that the *end* of literary response (in the teleological sense) is interpretation does not appear to strike anyone as odd. Experience and the senses have been discarded. Meaning is all that theory thinks of. Two years ago, I had the honour to meet and discuss with the Greek poet Maria Laina. I will quote her verbatim: 'Poetry is primarily for the ear'. Thank goodness not everyone has lost their mind.

Interpretationalism involves treating the experiential as subordinate to, and ultimately at the service of, the conceptual: to seeing the experiential dimension of art as a means to achieving such and such interpretations. In other words, interpretationalism is based on the assumption that art is conceptually driven, and - with a degree of exaggeration that is in some sense legitimate- that finding the *raison d'être* of a work of art comes down to trying to exhaust the inexhaustible question of what *Campbell's Soup* means. But then again, to deny that art has any conceptual content is way off the mark too. I want to strike a balance between these two

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<sup>79</sup> I will quote Sperber and Wilson (2008: 87):

(...) a language provides an unbounded repertoire of evidence of the speaker's meaning, evidence that can be as nuanced, as complex, as richly structured as the speaker likes. Non-verbal kinds of evidence are much more limited. With language (and only with language) people can communicate about anything they can think about, whether they can point to it or not, imitate it or not, and they can do this with endless refinement.

extremes, and put conceptual and perceptual aspects of art into what seems to me their proper place.

Let us start thinking about this relationship by reflecting on two disorders: one an eating disorder, and the other a sexual disorder. In watching a recent documentary on obesity, I noticed something interesting in the way participants talked about their propensity for 'comfort eating'. It seemed that the source of pleasure in these cases was not the food itself as a material object, nor the perceptual pleasure it yields through its taste, smell and presentation -i.e. the gustatory, visual or olfactory experience it can give rise to. Participants would often eat to the point of being sick: to the point, that is, of not only losing any sense of food-related perceptual pleasure, but of actually experiencing disgust. They seemed to crave not so much the sensory pleasure as the thoughts, memories and associations that food could conjure up in them.

Interestingly, in another documentary I found that a sexual disorder known as 'sex addiction' works in pretty much the same way. On first hearing the term, I had the false impression that 'sex addiction' involves a constant craving for sexual satisfaction and pleasure. Far from it: sexually addicted individuals, usually women, often do not experience any sensory pleasure or satisfaction when having sex, rarely if ever have an orgasm, and frequently fall victim to sexual abuse (including rape), but are nevertheless not in the least discouraged from pursuing their addiction. The reason being that sexually addicted individuals find pleasure in sexual intercourse not as a game of bodies and senses but from the thoughts that the act of having sex conjures up in them: 'He likes me', 'I am beautiful', 'I am not alone', 'Men find me desirable', 'I still have it'.

In both disorders, part of the problem seems to be excessive dependence on a certain activity -eating or sexual intercourse. Another is somehow connected to what I hope you will agree is the odd situation of taking pleasure not from the physical aspects of the activity in question as a sensory type of experience, but from the thoughts, conceptual implications and modifications the activity brings about. What is this intuitive oddity down to?

There are certain types of human action which are generally engaged in with the aim of bringing about pleasure of the senses. When, unusually, these actions are engaged in primarily because of the prospective thoughts/ conceptual implications they may give rise to, the behaviour seems to veer towards deviation or pathology: there must be something terribly wrong with me if what makes sexual intercourse pertinent to me is not so much getting physical pleasure as drawing conclusions. Thinking thoughts and drawing conclusions may be seen as increasing the pertinence of a pleasurable sensory or perceptual experience for an individual, by simultaneously achieving cognitive relevance in the technical sense of Sperber and Wilson (1995: 260-66). However, they cannot be legitimately regarded as either the main element of the experience or the driving force behind the associated action. We can therefore rephrase the introductory line of this paragraph more accurately by saying that there are certain types of human action whose driving force is perceptual pleasure. Humans set up action plans whose goal is to bring about the repetition of that very pleasurable sensory/ perceptual experience. I will refer to such actions/ action plans as *perceptually driven*.

Humans have extremely rich conceptual lives and a noteworthy ability to extend perceptually driven experiences into the realm of the conceptual. We can find ourselves talking about food for hours, comparing recipes and techniques,

commenting on presentation, or exchanging secrets about where to source rare ingredients. Similarly, our sex lives are encircled with an incessant array of sexual fantasies, social taboos, personal inhibitions and rational desires. Still, eating and having sex are both perceptually driven actions. Here is another claim I want to commit myself to: art as an action -i.e. as a complex phenomenon enabled by our disposition for pleasurable sensory experience and consequent susceptibility to aesthetic experience- should also be regarded as perceptually driven.<sup>80</sup>

Let us briefly recapitulate the claims made above, and then consider how the idea of a perceptually driven phenomenon relates to Neuroaesthetics, on the one hand, and the Relevance-theoretic notion of cognitive effect, on the other. We have agreed that the ability for sensory pleasure, which has obvious adaptive value, must have been positively selected in the course of evolution. We then turned our attention to sources of pleasurable sensory experience which could not reasonably have had an evolutionary function (e.g. sand running through one's fingers) and decided that they fall into a category of false positives. Our account then proposes that aesthetic experience is a refined case of non-adaptive pleasurable sensory experience. At some point in evolution, novel mental representations of a certain kind (aspectual representations) joined the wide array of false positive triggers of pleasurable sensory experience. The individual mind would have started responding to such mental representations in a way that closely resembles -but is not identical to- generic pleasurable sensory experience. The crucial difference between this response and generic pleasurable sensory response is that it involved and presupposed metarepresentation in a broad sense. That is, it was not a direct reaction to an object (either external or internal), but a mediated reaction to the way an object was *seen* by

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<sup>80</sup> Yet another interesting relation between art and sex.

some intervening consciousness, to an agent's novel mental representation. This very first mediated/ metarepresentational type of pleasurable sensory response must have been the first ever occurrence of an aesthetic experience. It follows that the first ever occurrence of aesthetic experience was within the individual mind. This in turn would have been the starting point for the first ever process of artistic creation. Complex retroactive relations between the creator's aspectual representations, her aesthetic response to them and their progressive realisation as a physically observable object in the world would have resulted in the first ever occurrence of the entity we call an 'artwork'.

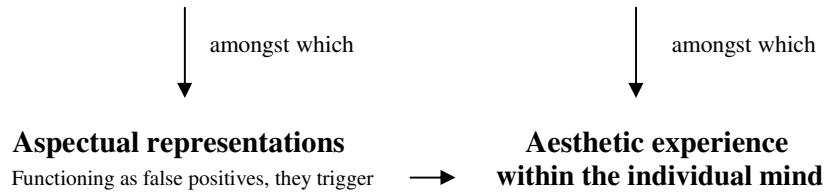
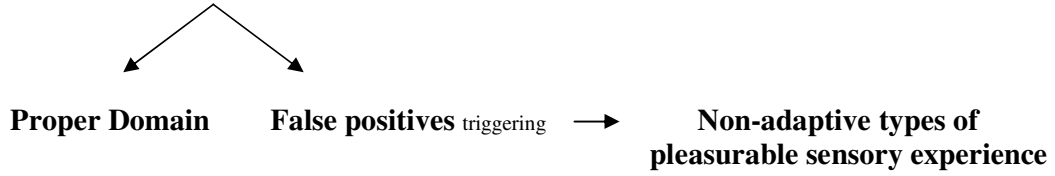
Artworks are public objects, shared public artefacts. They are made available for others to 'view'. As such, we can speculate that they would also have functioned as false positive triggers of pleasurable sensory experience, eliciting aesthetic responses in the first ever audience to encounter a strange object of that sort.<sup>81</sup> Our account thus starts with mental phenomena and ends in the realm of shared public representations, allowing for a series of possible hypotheses about the inter-individual story of art and the *macro-mechanisms* (Sperber 1996: 50) that enabled it to be incorporated into and propagated as part of the process of human cultural transmission. Which aspects of art have a bearing on its selection and propagation as a central part of human public life? What is it, about the particular type of action that art is, that led to artworks being amongst humanity's most successful and enduring cultural representations?

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<sup>81</sup> Aesthetic experience, I have argued, is found in both artistic reception and production.

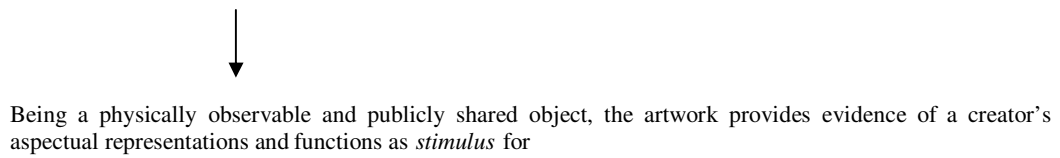


**Adaptive pleasurable sensory experience**



Complex retroactive feedback relationships between someone's own aspectual representations and her aesthetic responses to them result in a physically observable and publicly shared object:

**Artwork**



On the assumption that aesthetic experience is essentially sensory experience, we have seen that art must belong to a category of perceptually driven actions. If we are aiming at an explanatory account of aesthetic experience as an occurrence within the individual mind, we need to pin down what ‘perceptually driven’ amounts to in terms of the organism’s responding to, allocating attention to and returning to a certain phenomenon internal to the information-processing device. If we are aiming at an explanatory account of aesthetic experience as a response to the public stimulus we call an artwork, we need to pin down what ‘perceptually driven’ amounts to in terms of an organism’s responding to, maintaining attention on and repeatedly returning to a public stimulus.

By ‘public stimulus’, I mean a phenomenon external to the information-processing device, which the device processes as input. I take the notion of stimulus in its standard psychological sense, as ‘any modification of the physical environment designed to be perceived’ (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 29). Finally, I assume that within the range of possible modifications of the physical environment that may function as stimuli, there are cognitive modifications, and within the range of possible cognitive modifications, there are positive cognitive modifications which lead to improvements of some sort: that is, to *worthwhile effects* (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 109). The latter effects are mental and experienced by humans.

To start speculating in more concrete terms about a notion of effect appropriate to a philosophy of art, we shall now turn to Neuroaesthetics. Following the tradition of Gestalt psychology of the creative eye (e.g. Arnheim 1974), recent neurobiological accounts of art and the brain deserve their fair share of attention in debates on aesthetics. The prospect of a working interdisciplinary collaboration between neurobiologists and literary/ artistic theorists has considerable potential for

helping us move towards a substantive philosophy of literature and art. Neurobiologists offer us astonishing insight into the perceptual dimension of art, translating vague intuitions into testable empirical claims. Analytically oriented thinkers in the arts and humanities, on the other hand, can help incorporate neurobiological research into an articulated theoretical and philosophical framework, design relevant experiments and evaluate the content and implications of results.

I have already identified a range of areas in which neuroaesthetics would greatly benefit from interdisciplinary research with the arts and humanities. Take for instance the interesting array of experiments conducted by the neurologist Semir Zeki. In their paper 'Neural Correlates of Beauty', Kawabata and Zeki (2004) aim to identify specific types of neuropsychological activity associated with positive or negative aesthetic evaluations of paintings. However, Zeki and Kawabata set out with a rather problematic understanding of aesthetic evaluation in the first place. Subjects view a large number of paintings and are asked to classify them as 'beautiful', 'neutral' or 'ugly'. They then view the paintings again, while being scanned for specific and distinctive visual-brain activity. The design of the experiment skilfully avoids such traps as adopting debatable culture-specific or criticism-created canons/standards of beauty. There is no pre-judgement of which paintings are beautiful or ugly: subjects themselves make the classification depending on individual background and subjective taste, thus allowing for inter-cultural and inter-subjective notions of beauty.

Nonetheless, the experiment still suffers from a serious shortcoming. The notion of beauty appealed to is ambiguous; and one of the two senses is not relevant for aesthetics. The notion of a 'beautiful' painting which is relevant for aesthetics is antonymous to the notion of a 'bad' painting, rather than an 'ugly' painting. To see

this, compare ‘ugly painting’ with ‘ugly poem’. What in the world could an ‘ugly poem’ be? It is only the notion of a ‘bad poem’ that contrasts in any useful sense with ‘beautiful poem’. Peter Joel Witkin’s photographic art often focuses on appalling and disturbing subjects, producing photographs that are atrociously ugly in terms of content, but simultaneously remarkably beautiful as works of art. If I were asked to classify his photographs as either ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’, I would personally have to ask for clarification: I would want to know whether ‘ugly’ is actually intended to mean BAD, and whether my answer will be taken to relate to the particular photograph as content or as work of art. This confusion between beauty of form and beauty of content persists throughout discussions in the philosophy of art (see, for instance, Zangwill 1998, 2002) and Kabawata and Zeki’s experiment runs into it head on. The notion of beauty relevant to aesthetics is formal beauty. In formal terms, ‘beautiful’ can only be contrasted with ‘bad’, not ‘ugly’, and because of this unfortunate detail, Kabawata and Zeki’s experiment as it stands is rather uninformative for a theory of aesthetics.

I began this discussion wanting to bring into focus a very interesting piece of neuroaesthetic research by Ramachandran and Hirstein, ‘The Science of Art’ (1999). The authors summarise their aims in ‘The Science of Art’ as follows:

We present a theory of human artistic experience and the neural mechanisms that mediate it. Any theory of art (or, indeed, any aspect of human nature) has to ideally have three components. A) The logic of art: whether there are universal rules or principles; b) The evolutionary rationale: why did these rules evolve and why do they have the form that they do; c) What is the brain circuitry involved? Our paper begins with a quest for artistic universals and proposes a list of ‘Eight laws of artistic experience’ -a set of heuristics that artists either consciously or unconsciously deploy to optimally titillate the visual areas of the brain. (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999: 15-51)

These ‘eight laws’ are:

1. The 'peak shift effect': 'If a rat is rewarded for discriminating a rectangle from a square, it will respond even more vigorously to a rectangle that is longer and skinnier than the prototype' (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999: 15). Super-stimuli excite form areas in the brain more strongly than normal stimuli; this is the psychological phenomenon from which not only caricatures and cartoons must have sprung but also, in Ramachandran and Hirstein's view, much of art.

2. Perceptual grouping and binding: 'The process of discovering correlations and of "binding" correlated features to create unitary objects or events must be reinforcing for the organism -in order to provide incentive for discovering such correlations (...). Consider the famous hidden face or Dalmatian dog photo [initially seen as a jumble of splotches, once the Dalmatian is seen, its spots are grouped together -a pleasant 'aha!' sensation caused perhaps by activation of the limbic system by temporal lobe cortex].' (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999: 21)

3. The need to isolate a single visual modality before you amplify the signal in that modality. 'Isolating a single area (such as 'form' or 'depth' in the case of caricature or Indian art) allows one to direct attention more effectively to this one source of information. (...) Additional evidence for this view comes from the "savant syndrome" -autistic children who are "retarded" and yet produce beautiful drawings. (...) this is because the fundamental disorder in autism is a distortion of the "salience landscape": they shut out many important sensory channels, thereby allowing them to deploy all their attentional resources on a single channel (...). (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999: 24-25)

4. 'The extraction of features prior to grouping -which involves discarding redundant information and extracting contrast- is also reinforcing. Cells in the retina, lateral geniculate body (a relay station in the brain) and in the visual cortex respond mainly to edges (step changes in luminance) but not to homogeneous surface colours; so a line drawing or cartoon stimulates these cells as effectively as a "half tone" photograph. What is frequently overlooked, though, is that such contrast extractions -as with grouping- may be intrinsically pleasing to the eye (hence the efficacy of line drawings). (...) [But] why should the process be rewarding in itself? We suggest that the answer once again has to do with the allocation of attention. Information (in the Shannon sense) exists mainly in regions of change -e.g. edges- and it makes sense that such regions would, therefore, be more attention grabbing -more "interesting"- than homogeneous areas. So it may not be coincidental that what the cells find interesting is also what the organism as a whole finds interesting, and perhaps in some circumstances "interesting" translates into "pleasing". (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999: 25)

5. Symmetry. 'Symmetry, of course, is also aesthetically pleasing (...). Since most biologically important objects -such as predator, prey or mate- are symmetrical (...) [symmetry may be geared] towards discovering "interesting" object-like entities in the world. Intriguingly, it has recently been shown experimentally that when choosing a mate, animals and humans prefer symmetrical over asymmetrical ones, and evolutionary biologists have argued that this is because parasitic infestation -detrimental to fertility- often produces

lopsided, asymmetrical growth and development'. (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999: 27)

6 & 7. The generic viewpoint and the Bayesian logic of perception. '[Our] visual system abhors interpretations which rely on a unique vantage point (...) it abhors suspicious coincidences. (...) A pleasing effect can be produced by violating this principle rather than adhering to it. For instance, there is a Picasso nude in which the improbability of the arm's outline exactly coinciding with that of the torso grabs the viewer's attention (...). (...) An object discovered after a struggle is more pleasing than one that is instantly obvious (...). (...) perhaps the struggle itself is reinforcing (...).' (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999: 30)

8. The last law concerns art as metaphor. In my view, it is irrelevant to the present analysis and of a different order to the above suggestions; so I will not discuss it here.

I find Ramachandran and Hirstein's perspective very exciting. But does it really offer an explanation of either aesthetic experience or the complex phenomenon we call art? I would be inclined to say it does not. For one thing, not all Ramachandran and Hirstein's laws are equally important. I'll come back to this point later. For another, it seems to me that the most relevant of their laws are about the workings and causes of something quite different, which I will refer to as a *perceptual effect*. For now, let us agree on a preliminary definition of perceptual effect as a *sub-attentively achieved improvement in the mind/ brain's perceptual organisation*.

The main thread running through some of Ramachandran and Hirstein's perceptual principles is sub-attentive improvement of certain functions of the visual mind/ brain which are either evolutionarily significant in themselves (e.g. perceptual grouping and binding), or attached to other evolutionarily significant traits (e.g. symmetry). 'Perceptual grouping and binding,' 'extraction of features prior to grouping' or the 'peak shift effect', for instance, seem to be integral to the perceptual mind/ brain. We can assume that exposure to super-stimuli such as cartoons, caricatures and works of art triggers the reward system, and results in what we impressionistically experience as sensory pleasure, on the grounds that this exposure

somehow contributes to or improves/ reinforces the perceptual mind/ brain's aptitude for such perceptual processes. The improvement may take a number of forms - from effectiveness in allocating attention to the speed with which a process is performed, etc- which it is not relevant to explore in the current analysis. In any case, possible sub-attentive improvement in the functioning of the perceptual mind/ brain cannot in any way be seen as synonymous with or equivalent to aesthetic experience. Ramachandran and Hirstein hold (part of) the key to a question, but is not the question they think it is. If the sub-attentive perceptual improvement scenario is correct, it accounts for the pleasurable nature of some of our sensory experiences, which include aesthetic experiences. It opens up the possibility of unearthing a whole spectrum of processes which make certain objects and experiences *intrinsically pleasing* for the perceptual mind/ brain, and as such, concerns that set of sub-attentive 'goings-on' in the mind that might help explain why humans find aesthetic experiences rewarding enough to be worth attending to and revisiting/ repeating.

As neurobiological research on perception and the brain rapidly grows, in years to come we are likely to be able to consider an enormous array of such sub-attentive modifications, carried out not only by the visual brain but by the perceptual brain in general, and thus isolate specific causes of the pleasurable nature of aesthetic experience in ways broad enough to apply to all forms of human art. Towards the end of their paper, Ramachandran and Hirstein themselves (1999:49) acknowledge that they have only 'identified a small subset of [such] principles. There are undoubtedly many others'. In various lectures, for instance, Dan Sperber has pinpointed the activation of the face-recognition module as a possible sub-attentive pay-off that explains why masks are amongst the types of cultural artefact to occur in most human

cultures. Exploiting modules would be a good way both to attract the attention and to get the input processed at little cost.

Another related line of investigation that I have been considering involves the idea that a decisive set of art-related perceptual effects could be associated with the Mirror Neuron function currently being explored at UCL by Patrick Haggard. The idea here is something along the following lines: having spent a whole evening mentally rehearsing your tennis forehand, the next day in the tennis match you find that your forehand has actually improved. Mirror neuron function has led to improvement in a kinaesthetic area of performance without your engaging in actual bodily activity at all. It is likely that artistic production and reception involve a diverse range of sub-attentive forms of *mental-rehearsal* enabled by the mirror neuron function, thereby improving and reinforcing in critical ways the mirror neuron function itself.<sup>82</sup> In any case, the notion of a perceptual effect provides a promising common ground for neurobiological and aesthetic research, and should be seen as one of the paradigmatic fields of enquiry in which interdisciplinary research could have fruitful implications both empirical and literary/ artistic domains.

Another possible strand of future research might focus on the way in which sets of perceptual principles identified in one artform and mode of perception (e.g. visual art) might translate and apply to other artforms and modes of perception (e.g. dance and kinaesthetic perception); this research could be extended by considering whether, and in what ways, these principles find equivalences in the area of conceptual cognition. In my poems, to give you just one example, I tend to ‘encrypt’

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<sup>82</sup> Could the internal perceptual activity so characteristic of literature -mental imagery/ inner vision, inner hearing, kinaesthetic metaphors, etc- be associated with, and therefore reinforcing of, specific mirror neuron functions? Intuitive reference to mental rehearsal underlies various recent papers on the evolutionary origins of literature (e.g. Boyd 1998, Pinker 2007) and this is certainly a domain of enquiry worth pursuing.



information that the reader can only uncover by ‘binding correlated features to create a unitary object’, to use Ramachandran and Hirstein’s way of putting it. In the poem *Myasthenia Gravis I* (Kolaiti 2007: 29) I write:

Now I must learn from scratch to spell tears  
utter zeta and omega  
and walk in spite of all  
in the upright posture of humans.

Zeta [Z] and omega [Ω] are letters of the Greek alphabet which I have not, however, selected at random. When they are considered separately and independently of each other, the line allows a possible interpretation in which someone is learning again from scratch things as basic as the alphabet of her native language. But the two letters can also be grouped together, in which case the reader will discover that they form a unitary object: the verb ‘ZΩ’ [I live/ I am alive]. The grouping of these initially unrelated features allows a second potential, and deliberately ‘hidden’, interpretation involving learning from scratch what it means to be alive. I take this case as a clear cognitive and literary equivalent of Ramachandran and Hirstein’s principles of a) perceptual binding and grouping and b) object discovery following struggle. Interestingly, the discovery that the two letters can also be grouped together to form a unitary object elicits a pleasing ‘aha!’ sensation, similar to that found in perceptual tests like the ‘hidden-face test’ or ‘the hidden-object test’ mentioned in Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999: 21), although the discovery here concerns not perceptual but encyclopaedic features.

In any case, the point is that if we wanted to pursue an account of artworks as just one among many cases of false positive triggers of pleasurable sensory response, the question we would sooner or later find ourselves grappling with is, why did artworks survive? Why, unlike other related false positives such as sand running

through our fingers, did artworks become the successful cultural artefacts they became? One line of answer must certainly relate to the wide and diverse range of effects that give artworks intrinsic value for the perceptual mind/ brain. The artist, to slightly rephrase Semir Zeki, explores the potential of the perceptual mind/ brain just as the scientist/ neurologist does, though with very different goals. The scientist/ neurologist seeks to understand, while the artist aims at pleasure.

In line with the noetic/ mentalistic approach to art that I have so far taken, I would also like to suggest that an artist's creative mental representations (aspectual representations) should be of as much intrinsic value to the perceptual mind/ brain as artworks themselves. As noted above, the first occurrence of human art was not in the first ever artwork (i.e. the first shared public representation of a certain type), but rather in the first ever aesthetic response to a private creative mental representation (a poetic thought state). The moment a human being became able to respond aesthetically to a creative mental representation that was still the private property of her own mind, the specific kind of action that art is had just occurred.

Before considering why artworks survived as enduring cultural representations across the human species, we should consider why poetic thought states survived as processes internal to the individual mind. What was it about this particular type of mental state that made it worth entertaining, attending to and seeking to revisit? For an artist, being in a poetic thought state, a state of constant aesthetic focus on one's own creative mental representations, is indispensable and intrinsic to her specific mind set. In my own case, to be a poet is, amongst other things, to make huge investments of attention and processing resources in my own aspectual

representations, which for the most part occur as words in the mind.<sup>83</sup> Fragments of phenomenal consciousness, half-forgotten or unfinished poems, flashes of inspiration, self-reflexive beliefs about poetry writing, memorised words or phrases from various communicative situations and registers, mental imagery, fragments of encyclopaedic knowledge and so on and so forth float at any one time in my mind, claim notice and consideration, and yield generous aesthetic payoff. If this payoff were limited, after a certain point my mind/ brain would find poetic thought states irrelevant: my sensory make-up apparently finds sand running through my fingers pleasing, but does not continue this activity or return to it with the regularity and constancy with which it returns to conceiving or elaborating on poems.

Incidental pleasurable sensory responses account for energy allocation only to a certain rather limited degree. It follows that the type of payoff achieved by poetic thought states must differ from those achieved by other false positive triggers of pleasurable sensory responses. Poetic thought states, I want to claim, happened to give rise to nuanced mind/ brain-improving sub-attentive effects. These effects, which I have earlier referred to as perceptual effects, must have encouraged the mind/ brain not only to stay focused on poetic thought states, but also to return to them on a steady and recurring basis. In the previous chapter, I proposed a plausible set of features that might make a certain representation aspectual. Then I traced the connections between this ability and a whole host of more specific sub-abilities: e.g. 'to see/conceive properties of objects, to break down objects into their components, to spot underlying or overarching structures of objects and their relations, to spot 'telling details', to be

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<sup>83</sup> However, other types of creative mental conceptions which do not take the form of aspectual representations are also integral to the production of art, and serve as objects of attentional investment. An artist handles a vast array of considerations in developing her work, from conceptual issues to how she manages and organises her material to issues of installation and presentation, etc. All these considerations are part of the practical reasoning process involved in art formation, and deserve a place in an explanatory model of art as an occurrence internal to the individual mind.

in rich, fine-grained and complex informational states of a perceptual, affective or conceptual sort, and so on'. Most of these properties have direct analogies to some of Ramachandran and Hirstein's (1999) perceptual principles. This may be evidence that aspectual representations are sub-attentively mind/ brain improving, and thus help to explain why they are experienced by the mind/ brain as pleasing. The payoff that made an occurrence internal to the organism (a poetic thought state) worth the organism's allocation of energy also channelled itself into an occurrence external to the organism, the physical artwork that provides evidence of this mental event.

## **7.2. Perceptual effects and cognition**

Sperber and Wilson would say that in order to survive, cultural artefacts have to hold the attention and yield a good payoff for the processing effort required. Up to this point in my analysis, I have been doing my best to construct a notion of aesthetic experience that can stand independently of central thought processes, and a view of art as a perceptually driven action, an action that arose out of, and fundamentally is still geared towards, perceptual varieties of effect. Art is primarily about the senses. The idea has long-standing intellectual precedents,<sup>84</sup> and provides a knock-down argument against interpretationalism.

So far, I have argued that aesthetic experience is a case of non-adaptive pleasurable sensory experience, characterised art as a perceptually driven action, and

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<sup>84</sup> In *But Is It Art*, Tilghman (1984: 123) writes:

When Baumgarten coined the word 'aesthetics' he defined it as the science of perception, a science that was intended to explain our understanding and appreciation of art and poetry. (...) He was right (...) to focus his new discipline upon perception and to seek to find there the key to so much that is important about art. In the same tradition Heinrich Wölfflin described the task of the art historian as reckoning with the stages and development of what he called modes of vision.

discussed its relation to a possible set of neurologically real, mind/ brain-improving effects (perceptual effects). Finally, I have proposed that the range and diversity of perceptual effects associated with art may help to explain how this particular type of human action triumphed both intra-individually and culturally, while other sources of non-adaptive perceptual pleasure never achieved artefactual status, let alone cultural constancy. To fill in the rest of this story, we must start bringing conceptual cognition into the picture. We must look at how the sensory aspects of art interact with human cognitive abilities and the conscious, thinking mind.

Aspectual representations are phenomena. They occur automatically and involuntarily within the individual mind. Artworks are stimuli. A stimulus, as noted above, is a phenomenon designed to be perceived. Artworks inherit from the properties of aspectual representations the capacity to cause the type of effects they cause. I have argued that *perceptual effects* constitute a plausible and neurologically real set of effects for the kind of object a work of art is. As a preliminary definition in the last section, we took a perceptual effect to be a sub-attentive improvement in the mind/ brain's perceptual and neural organisation. In the postface to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Relevance* (1995: 265-6), Sperber and Wilson proposed to distinguish 'cognitive effects', which may or may not be worthwhile, from 'positive cognitive effects', which are cognitive effects worth having. I will distinguish perceptual effects from positive perceptual effects on similar lines; and from now on, when I use the term 'perceptual effect', I will mean 'positive perceptual effect': that is, a worthwhile modification, an improvement.

Perceptual effects thus defined may explain energy allocation to a certain degree. It is plausible to assume that the perceptual mind/ brain finds a phenomenon or stimulus which is capable of yielding perceptual effects rewarding enough to focus

on and return to in a way that distinguishes artistic stimuli from all other false positive triggers of (non-adaptive) perceptual pleasure. I now want to elaborate on what I have previously said, and suggest that perceptual effects do not normally occur without some minimal participation of cognition. It seems counter-intuitive (at least introspectively) to claim that artworks are normally experienced in the attentionally blind mode. I have slightly overemphasized the sensory end of things in order to counterbalance academic approaches which apparently fail to respond to or appreciate art for the kind of object it is: a sensory object.<sup>85</sup>

In the Relevance-theoretic framework underpinning this analysis, any attempt to account for the huge cognitive investments made in either poetic thought states or the reception of artworks solely by reference to perceptual effects would be psychologically unrealistic. Cognitive effects must come into the picture, and somehow combine with perceptual effects to explain energy allocation in psychologically realistic terms. How can this be done while still remaining faithful to the sort of aesthetics pursued throughout this analysis, an aesthetics of art as a perceptually driven action?

If we could maintain the centrality of perceptual effects while allowing for some minimal degree of activity on the cognitive effect side, we could well be looking at a model which is cognitive enough to explain attentional investments in psychologically realistic terms, but also sensory enough to allow for a view of art as a perceptually driven occurrence. A working hypothesis might be to develop a notion of minimal cognitive effect, and argue that perceptual effects automatically activate minimal cognitive effects. In the following paragraphs, I'll try and look in greater

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<sup>85</sup> From a real life encounter: I was no more than seventeen, at an exhibition on the Russian avant-garde in the National Gallery in Athens, when a woman who was decent in every other respect rushed up to a Kandinsky, stuck her nose in it and pompously asked 'and what does this black square mean?'

detail at the precise relationship between minimal and non-minimal types of activation of conceptual cognition in relation to perceptual effects, art and aesthetic experience.

To provide a solid theoretical basis for the notion of minimal activation of conceptual cognition, let us first briefly go through the three types of contextual (cognitive) effect.

In Relevance-theoretic terms, a phenomenon or stimulus can give rise to the following three types of cognitive effect:

a) More or less strongly or weakly evidenced *contextual implications* which result from crucial interaction between new and old information used as premises in a synthetic inference process (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 109),

b) *strengthening* of old assumptions by new information which provides further evidence for it (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 109),

c) *contradiction* of old assumptions by new information which provides evidence against them and may lead to their *abandonment or revision* (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 109)

Could there be more ways of achieving cognitive effects than those so far widely discussed and used in Relevance theory? From the outset, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson have occasionally gestured towards this possibility. For instance, in ‘Truthfulness and relevance’ (2002: section 4), they write:<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> There is also a brief reference to other types of cognitive effect (including reorganisation of knowledge) in *Relevance* (1995: 66).

Here we will consider only one type of cognitive benefit: improvements in knowledge (theoretical or practical). This is plausibly the most important type of cognitive benefit. There may be others: improvements in memory or imagination, for example (although it might be argued that these are benefits only because they contribute indirectly to improvements in knowledge; better memory and imagination lead to better non-demonstrative inference, and therefore to better knowledge). In any case, for our present purposes, there is another important reason for identifying cognitive benefits with improvements in knowledge (...).

I would like to suggest that an aesthetic theory calls for an additional, minimal type of cognitive effect, which is worthwhile enough to the organism to justify the allocation of attention and to allow for the possibility that interaction with artworks over the course of a life-time may lead to cognitive benefits, and minimal enough not to bias aesthetic experience too strongly towards the conceptual end. Such minimality of effect can be said to depend on at least three parameters: a) the effect occurs at a sub-attentive level, b) the effect involves modification of processes rather than of manifest conceptual assumptions and c) the result is not necessarily immediately worthwhile<sup>87</sup> but may lead to *gradual* improvement, i.e. it may improve pertinent processes little by little over a life-time.

A few clarifications are in order. In saying that minimal cognitive effects may lead to gradual rather than immediate improvement, I assume that such effects do not necessarily make the object relevant enough to be worth the individual's attention at the time, but may help it to achieve relevance to the individual over a life-time. Presumably, some objects have effects that make them worth coming back to, and hence, probably worth preserving over a lifetime. These objects could be of any sort – cultural, or even personal, as well as artistic. Note also that to place emphasis on minimal cognitive improvements is not to suggest that the only improvements an

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<sup>87</sup> As Sperber and Wilson have stressed, not just any modification counts as a positive cognitive effect. For something to be regarded as a positive cognitive effect, the result should be an improvement.



artwork can potentially achieve are minimal ones. Verbal art certainly activates conceptual cognition, and raises at least the sort of text-internal expectations of relevance needed for disambiguation, reference resolution, implicatures, etc. But in my view, this is a contingent fact. If aesthetic response to an artwork involves perceptual effects, and an artwork is the kind of object that elicits aesthetic responses, then an object cannot be an artwork and not (at least in principle) elicit perceptual effects. Similarly, if my hypothesis that minimal cognitive effects are automatically activated by perceptual effects is correct, then an object cannot be an artwork and not (at least in principle) elicit minimal cognitive effects. By contrast, an object may well be an artwork and yet not elicit the standard non-minimal types of cognitive effect that make a phenomenon relevant enough to be worth the individual's attention. Art, as an action that crucially involves aesthetic experience, is not *necessarily* related to cognitive effect in Sperber and Wilson's sense, while it certainly seems *necessarily* related to perceptual and minimal cognitive effect.

In this light, I would like to propose the following possible instances of minimal cognitive effect:<sup>88</sup>

a) improvement (immediate or gradual, over a life-time) in the form of *increasing accessibility of assumptions* and *accessibility relations*. The focus here is not on assumptions themselves, but on processes. Perceptual inputs activate and alter the accessibility of conceptual assumptions by making them manifest or more manifest. A possible hypothesis, then, is that certain perceptual aspects of works of art could be super-stimuli that improve accessibility and activation processes.

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<sup>88</sup> There could, of course, be many more; here, I am only giving a starting point for a broader construal of positive cognitive effect.

b) improvement (immediate or gradual, over a life-time) in the form of *altering salience of expectations*. The rationale here is much the same as in (a). We are not interested in the conceptual content of expectations as such, but in the processes that alter activation patterns to make certain expectations more salient as a result of certain perceptual inputs.

c) improvement (immediate or gradual, over a life-time) in the form of *optimising memory organisation and processes of storage and recall*.<sup>89</sup> In *Relevance*, Sperber and Wilson (1995: 150) stress the ‘crucial importance of the organisation of encyclopaedic memory in the pursuit of relevance. In fact, the relation between memory and relevance is so close that relevance theory might well shed new light on the organisation of memory itself’. In *Explaining Culture*, Sperber (1996: 74-75) proposes:

Up to now, I have considered the role only of cognitive processes of formation of concepts and representations. Other cognitive processes, processes of storage and recall in particular (...) are no less essential to the explanation of cultural facts. (...) We can take it for granted that tales, myths and so on are optimal objects for human memory, or else they would have been forgotten. What is it about these narratives that makes them so memorable? What is it about human memory that makes it so good at remembering these tales? (...) In cognitive psychology, (...) there is growing body of research on the structure of narratives and its effect on memory, but little or no advantage is taken of anthropological expertise.

The idea here is that processes of storage and recall are central not only to narratives -though it is easy to see why narratives are perhaps amongst the best exemplars of this type of minimal effect- but to all art. Bridging chunks and motifs occurring either in space (visual arts) or time (say, dance or music), identifying stylistic and thematic influences and other activities so characteristic

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<sup>89</sup> Note here that (a) and (b) are also memory related, since they involve at least some re-ordering of the Background/ the Encyclopaedia.

of art, could be reinforcing of crucial memory-driven chunking or grouping processes.<sup>90</sup>

e) improvement (immediate or gradual, over a life-time) in the form of *detector function*. When we look at a Cycladic idol, this abstracted form is recognised as a MAN; when we look at a jumble of lines and splotches by Picasso, we eventually identify the disorderly concoction of shape and colour as a WOMAN IN A RED CHAIR. The effect again involves processes, improving the brain's ability to detect and identify objects in conceptual terms.

Since at least some of the cognitive and perceptual effects caused by an artwork must have been predicted, and hence intended by the artist in a weaker or stronger sense, effects can be said to elicit a 'meeting of minds', causing creator and audience to converge. This may illuminate my earlier claim that, in having an aesthetic response, an audience actually has a metarepresentational type of response: the audience responds to evidence that enables at least minimal convergence of minds. As already said, this evidence may be stronger or weaker. The stronger the evidence, the smaller the responsibility the audience has to take for the inferences she draws about how a certain object has been *seen* by the artist -about the non-triviality, creativity and aspectualness of the artist's mental representations as evidenced by the artwork. The weaker the evidence, the greater the inferential work to be carried out by the audience, and the greater the audience's responsibility for any conclusions it may draw. Conceptual art is a good example of an artwork that provides very weak

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<sup>90</sup> In response to my suggestions on minimal cognitive effects Deirdre Wilson remarked (P.C. 25.05.08) :

All three types of improvement are on the effort side. Assuming the function of perception, memory organisation, etc is to contribute to knowledge, and assuming the effect is genuinely worthwhile, it should be possible to accommodate them in the existing notion of positive cognitive effect, even though, as you say, the function of art itself may not be to contribute to knowledge.

evidence of an aspectual representation, thus leaving huge responsibility on the audience to decide what conclusions this evidence supports, what is non-trivial in the way the object in question has been seen, and the grounds on which convergence could be made possible. The weakness of the evidence it provides is perhaps the cognitive factor behind Conceptual art and Pop art being received by the general public as more 'difficult'.

Perceptual and conceptual effects are not competing notions. And they are not mutually exclusive. The relation between perceptual and cognitive/ conceptual effects is the same here as elsewhere: processing a perceptual representation provides evidence for -makes manifest or more manifest- a huge array of conceptual assumptions, and can achieve relevance thereby. Or at least, provide evidence that improves conceptual processes, and thus contributes to relevance little by little over a lifetime. With cognitive effect construed in this very broad sense, it could be claimed that it is impossible for a positive perceptual effect to arise without providing input to, and thus giving rise to, at least minimal parallel positive cognitive effects. The definition of (positive) perceptual effect might then be rephrased as: *substantial sub-attentive improvement in the mind/ brain's perceptual organisation, with automatic parallel minimal cognitive improvement.*

### **7.3. On distinctive *teleology*.**

As I have argued above, the accumulating evidence that literature is not a special linguistic object does not entail that literature is not a special object in any other interesting sense. In the previous chapter, I tried to defend the view that art has a distinct essence and show that this may simply be of some other, psychological/ cognitive rather than linguistic/ structural sort. Instead of looking at the end product

(the literary/ artistic object) and its language/ structure, I shifted the focus to the literary/ artistic event and its psycho-cognitive history. The notion of an event offers a suitably global perspective on the phenomenon of art. Literary and artistic events involve an action with a distinctive etiology, which leads to some prototypical end product, which is expected to trigger some characteristic response. The aim of the present analysis was to try and pin down this characteristic response as an aesthetic response.

What does it amount to in practical terms, though, for an event to be geared to triggering some characteristic response? Art and literature, I would suggest, are objects with a characteristic *teleology*.

Mere utterances are objects designed to achieve cognitive effects. Poems, on the other hand, are objects designed to put an audience in a certain aesthetic state. They are there to be experienced aesthetically, and not merely interpreted. If they are interpreted, it is in the course of and for the purpose of being experienced aesthetically. It may happen that mere utterances are so elegantly structured that they put the receiver into a state of aesthetic pleasure. They are still mere utterances, not poems, though, since they are primarily designed for some other purpose than to put an audience into a certain aesthetic state.

There is room for analysis over what 'being designed for' actually amounts to. For an object to have some aesthetic function does not exclude the possibility of its having some other (utilitarian) function too. In the last chapter, I gave the example of Picasso creating *Guernica* to cover a damaged wall. Does the extra utilitarian function of this *Guernica* eliminate the possibility of its having a simultaneous aesthetic function? And conversely, does the aesthetic function of this *Guernica* eliminate the possibility of its having a simultaneous utilitarian function? I think the answer is 'No'.

Perceptual aspects of poetry -and these do not merely involve the physical dimension of the language used, i.e. its phonological and rhythmic aspects, but also the rich phenomenal resources exploited: the inner perception caused by a poem from inner vision to kinaesthesia to tactile or auditory imaging, etc.- contribute to the range of conceptual effects potentially brought into play, and these in turn can have a feedback effect on the perceptual response, strengthening the impact of an aesthetic experience. If we are interested in the utterances used in poems, and the mechanisms by which they achieve their particular cognitive effects, we need a pragmatics. If we are interested in why these utterances are there –in not only the causal but the teleological sense-, we need an aesthetics. The *raison d'être* of the kind of stimulus an artwork is, even a literary work with its conceptually rich linguistic medium, is not simply to achieve cognitive relevance: conceptual effects in art are just part of a bigger picture whose ultimate end is aesthetic experience. Thus, art is an action with a distinctive teleology: an aesthetic teleology.

In my case, to experience the *Victory of Samothrace* aesthetically is to be in the same space with it and let it have a specific impact on me, an impact that results from my responding to the aspectualness of this stimulus and elicits a characteristic set of pleasurable sensory responses. At the same time, the artwork gives rise to a wide array of weak implications: ‘There is a silence in this work’, ‘I can hear the wind in the garments’, etc.<sup>91</sup> These effects have become manifest or more manifest as a result of my sensory experience of the stimulus; they then become inputs to further

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<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, when in Louvre in 2006 and looking at the *Victory*, I caught myself thinking ‘silence’. A few minutes later, a friend approached me and said ‘There is a silence in this work, don’t you think?’. It was an exciting concrete example of the kind of conceptual convergence artworks make possible. The question of whether these conceptual representations are intended by the producer as implicatures or simply drawn by the viewer as implications makes little if any difference. In general, we can assume that some of these effects are intuitively or consciously predicted in the production process. Whether they are actually communicated in the sense of Relevance theory will be discussed briefly in a later section.

processes and feed back in to my sensory experience. Whatever I had been feeling prior to any conceptualisation, conceptualisation makes me feel it in a more refined and sophisticated way. The increased intensity and sophistication of the sensory experience I am having might in turn feed back into the conceptual response and enable me to draw further inferences, which enrich the sensory experience still more. In art, I would argue, it is not that perceptual elements are used as vehicles in the process of arriving at interpretations. It is that both perceptual and conceptual effects are used in arriving at experiences.

The way this retroactive relation between conceptual and perceptual aspects of art is manipulated by the artist might deepen or limit the experience, or determine what realm of art we are in (e.g. representational art, abstract art, conceptual art, etc). Certain genres might veer more towards the perceptual (e.g. Vorticism<sup>92</sup>, abstract painting, Lettrist poetry, etc). Other genres veer more towards the conceptual. Take philosophical poetry, for instance. If a philosophical poem merely achieved a certain range of conceptual effects, we wouldn't be describing it adequately by calling it an artwork: we should simply be calling it philosophy. Suppose, now, that a work of philosophy is so elegantly written and structured that it cause pleasure not only in its content but also in its style and organisation. Plato's philosophical dialogues definitely fall into this category. Does the *incidental* aesthetic pleasure caused by these philosophical texts make them artworks? Although this is obviously a borderline case, in my view, the texts-still do not exhibit either the etiology or the teleology of an artwork. They are objects whose etiological history is that of a work of philosophy. It just happens that this work of philosophy has been structured in such a way that it also causes an aesthetic response. The fact that it can be experienced aesthetically is

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<sup>92</sup> Vorticism emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, envisaged an art purified from meaning and invested on the dynamicity of movement and form.

incidental. Artworks, by contrast, are objects which do not cause aesthetic responses incidentally: they have been designed to cause aesthetic responses, and causing aesthetic responses is their primary function.

If an object merely achieved a certain range of perceptual effects, we wouldn't be describing it inadequately by calling it an artwork. In this case, we would simply be moving from one way of doing art to another: from nuanced, conceptually rich types of art to more formal and perceptually pure types. If an object merely achieved a certain range of cognitive effects<sup>93</sup>, we would be changing *category*. The products of extreme perceptualism may be criticised as one-sided art, but nevertheless, they are art. The products of extreme conceptualism, on the other hand -that is, objects designed primarily to achieve cognitive effects- lack the teleology an object must have to be regarded as art, and should therefore be seen as belonging to a different ontological category.

This claim is not uncontroversial. It has been suggested on the strength of the following two arguments, for instance, that a non aesthetic theory of art is also possible: i) an object can be an artwork and yet have no aesthetic purpose, as in the case of propagandist or religious art; and ii) an object can be an artwork and yet be 'ugly' (for discussion see Zangwill 2002 and 2003). My response is that a non-aesthetic theory of art is **not** possible. I have already addressed (ii) in discussing Kabawata and Zeki's experiment, where I argued that 'ugliness' (along with the sense of 'beautiful' which is the antonym of 'ugly') is not an aesthetically relevant property. In response to (i), I would point out that most discussions along these lines run into something like the following problem. The theorist classifies a certain object as an artwork by appeal to existing *canons* of art, or on the basis of superficial prototypical

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<sup>93</sup> Amongst these we could include the typical examples of propagandistic and religious art.



resemblances to objects we (intuitively, customarily or by tradition) recognise as artworks. In other words, the theorist classifies an object as an artwork without having any adequate general theory of what makes an object an artwork. The object in question is found to have no aesthetic purpose. The theorist then concludes that there exist artworks with no aesthetic purpose, since the object in question is an artwork and yet has no aesthetic purpose. However, the theorist has begun her analysis without an adequate theory of what makes an object an artwork. It is therefore possible that the object in question, the object she took for an artwork, is not an artwork after all -and she cannot tell whether this object is or is not an artwork unless she first comes up with an adequate theory of what makes an object an artwork. It can therefore be argued that all our theorist has managed to show is that an object of which she doesn't know whether it is an artwork or not, an object which may as well not be an artwork, an object she may simply have mistaken for an artwork, has no aesthetic purpose. Lacking an adequate theory of what makes an object an artwork, our theorist cannot say anything significant about whether artworks do or do not have an aesthetic purpose.

In my analysis, by contrast, I have tried to start from a theoretical proposal about what makes an object an artwork. I have not taken for granted a half-understood term 'artwork', but have rather tried to spell out from scratch what an artwork may be and what it is that makes it an essentially distinct object. I have argued, convincingly, I hope, that artworks have distinct etiological history by virtue of being essentially related to a specific type of psycho-cognitive state (a poetic thought state). I have also claimed that there is good introspective evidence that an attitude of an aesthetic sort to the artist's own creative mental representations is integral to poetic thought states. This in turn justifies the claim that an attitude of an aesthetic sort is integral to the

kind of action art is.<sup>94</sup> From this theoretical perspective, the claim that art has some characteristic aesthetic function or purpose seems to me to follow automatically.

I have been arguing that artworks are not objects which are designed to say things, and which happen, in addition, to have such and such perceptual features and achieve such and such perceptual effects. Artworks are objects designed to have such and such perceptual features and achieve such and such perceptual effects so that they will trigger a certain experience in an audience. In the course of that, they may also say things, which feed back into the senses and deepen the aesthetic experience. To give another example of this retroactive feedback relation between perceptual and conceptual states, consider the following analysis by Arnheim (1974: 89):

By connecting two or more spots through similarity, a painter may establish a significant visual movement. El Greco's *Expulsion from the Temple* is painted in drab yellowish and brownish shades. A bright red is reserved for the clothes of Christ and those of one of the money changers, who bends down in the lower left corner of the picture. As the beholder's attention is caught by the central figure of Christ, similarity of colour makes his glance sweep to the left and downward to the second spot. This movement duplicates the stroke of Christ's whip, the path of which is emphasized further by the raised arms of the two interposed figures. Thus the eye truly performs the action that represents the main subject of the picture.

Let us say that perceptual features of this painting -e.g. the mimetic way in which the audience's eye is made to respond- achieve such and such perceptual effects, which elicit a basic layer of aesthetic response. These perceptual features also help to identify/ conceptualise the goings on in the painting in a way that yields a wide array of weak implications that combine to depict a scene, a mood, a theme etc. These implications not only lead to a convergence between the minds of painter and

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<sup>94</sup> Similarly, I have not taken for granted the half understood term 'aesthetic', but rather tried to spell out a complete theoretical analysis of aesthetic response as a metarepresentational type of pleasurable sensory response, and thus go beyond what has been attempted in the past.

audience, but also, and crucially, feed back into the perceptual features of this painting: making it possible, for instance, to conceptualise the mimetic action the audience's eye is made to perform as an action of Christ's whipping, and to intensify the sensory impact and thus the aesthetic experience elicited by this painting.

In Chapter 3, I looked at the extent of the phenomenal in our conceptual lives. Here, there is a sense in which I have started looking at the extent of the conceptual in our phenomenal lives. The relation between experience and meaning becomes interactive and circular: the experiential interacts with the conceptual, so that the experientially enhanced richness of the conceptual can retroactively contribute to further deepening the initial experience. In art, to adapt the famous empiricist doctrine, nothing is in the mind unless it is first in the senses. And nothing that reaches the mind through the senses makes this journey purely for the mind's sake, but travels in order to be eventually channelled back to the source it arose from, the senses. Art sets out from *phenomena*, proceeds to thoughts, but eventually ends again in *phenomena*.

To say that art is an action perceptually driven by design is to in fact to claim that art has aesthetic teleology. This raises the question of whether a stimulus with such teleology could be properly described as an instance of communication. In other words, is it correct to treat art as communication? Or, is communication really what art is?

#### **7.4. Is art ostensive inferential communication?**

Let us start by asking ourselves what sort of stimulus a work of art is. To that end we shall draw again on Sperber and Wilson. In discussing what makes a phenomenon relevant to an individual, Sperber and Wilson (1995: 153) note that:

A stimulus is a phenomenon designed to achieve cognitive effects. Relevance for a stimulus is thus the same as relevance for any other phenomenon (...).

And relevance of a phenomenon is defined as follows:

**Relevance of a phenomenon (classificatory)**

A phenomenon is relevant to an individual if and only if one or more of the assumptions it makes manifest is relevant to him.

**Relevance of a phenomenon (comparative)**

*Extent Condition 1:* a phenomenon is relevant to an individual to the extent that the positive cognitive effects achieved when it is optimally processed are large (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 265-6).

*Extent Condition 2:* a phenomenon is relevant to an individual to the extent that the effort required to process it optimally is small.

The next step is to define a more specific set of stimuli, ostensive stimuli: someone who wants to achieve a specific effect should be expected to try and produce a stimulus which will achieve just the intended effect at either the attentive or the sub-attentive level. When a child wants her parents to see she is distressed, the obvious course might be to cry in a manifestly sincere way, pre-empting the parent's attention and making available and the most relevant assumption that she is distressed. Ostensive stimuli, however, are stimuli used to achieve rather subtler cognitive effects than this. They are used to make an informative intention mutually manifest and to achieve this more refined goal they must satisfy two conditions: a) attract the audience's attention and b) focus it on the communicator's intentions:

Ostensive inferential communication cannot achieve its effect sub-attentively; it necessarily involves the construction of conceptual representations and the mobilisation of central thought processes. (...) The second condition that an ostensive stimulus must meet is to focus the attention of the audience on the communicator's intentions. That is, the assumption that the stimulus is ostensive must be both manifest enough and relevant enough to lead to optimal processing. This condition is generally met by stimuli which both pre-empt the attention and are irrelevant unless treated as ostensive stimuli. This is clearly true of coded signals used in ostensive communication, linguistic utterances in particular,

which unless treated as ostensive stimuli, are mere irrelevant noises or marks on paper. It is also true of non-coded ostensive stimuli.

A non-coded ostensive stimulus may be an ordinary bodily movement, with little intrinsic relevance, made with artificial -and attention arresting- rigidity (...) The best ostensive stimuli are entirely irrelevant unless they are treated as ostensive. Consider a case where an intrinsically highly relevant stimulus is used -or misused- ostensively: say, somebody who is believed to have her arms paralysed mimics the act of driving. Here, the fact that she can move her arms would be so much more relevant than anything she might have wanted to communicate that her informative intention might well go unnoticed. (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 152-153)

Art *is* not yet another case of ostensive inferential communication and artworks *are* not ostensive stimuli, although they may well be *used* to make an informative intention mutually manifest. They can be embedded within an act of ostensive behaviour -e.g. ready-mades- or designed and manufactured in order to carry out an act of ostensive behaviour -e.g. manufactured artworks-, but at the same time these artistic stimuli have:

- a) essentially distinct psycho-cognitive etiology, which sets them ontologically apart from all other non-artistic stimuli, and
- b) characteristic teleology, by which I mean that, as noted above, the function or purpose of an artwork is not simply to achieve cognitive relevance.

The ontological distinctness of artworks suggests that although the discipline of pragmatics can shed considerable light on how communication and a meeting of minds may be achieved through art, art needs a dedicated theoretical discipline, a philosophy of literature and art, to deal with it in its entirety. I have also suggested that artworks are stimuli of intrinsic perceptual pertinence<sup>95</sup> to the organism because of the perceptual effects they achieve. So, even when they are intended to make an

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<sup>95</sup> I am using the word 'pertinence' rather than 'relevance' because the effects alluded to are not robustly conceptual.

informative intention mutually manifest, artworks should be seen as atypical exemplars of ostensive stimuli in that they have intrinsic value, perceptual value. They are pertinent to the organism independently of whether they make any conceptual assumptions manifest or not.

### **7.5. Is art a mistake?**

I shall begin by quoting Tilghman (1994: 123-124):

This concern with the development of visual perception and, by analogy, auditory perception is natural for people such as Wofflin and Morelli who were working in the history of the visual arts of drawing, painting, sculpture, and architecture, but Baumgarten had restricted his concern almost entirely to poetry and it is not at all obvious that beyond a certain point perception has much to do with poetry in any interesting way. (...) If the aesthetic character of poetry is to be one with that of the visual arts, the connection is going to have to be made in more subtle and unexpected ways. I certainly would not argue for any general theory of the aesthetics of poetry and much less for any broader program seeking to bring both poetry and the visual arts under some still wider common theory.

I hope to have argued convincingly that a general theory of aesthetics may after all be possible. An account of aesthetic experience like the one I have pursued here can be applied to every single art form, from music to fiction, and from installation art to the cave paintings of the Neanderthals, thus allowing for a generalised theory of aesthetics and opening the way for a broad theoretical programme that brings together individual art-forms under a common and all-embracing philosophy of art.

A good reason to pursue such a generalised and all-embracing model is that by broadening our hypotheses to encompass all possible artforms, we are less likely to find ourselves being carried away by the mistakes that sometimes emerge when theory and reflection are restricted to the particularities of individual artforms. One

form of art may be susceptible to weaknesses that some other form is immune to. As suggested earlier, the rich conceptual content of language has entrenched interpretationalism far more deeply in the theory of literary art than in the theory of any other artform. Similarly, the emergence of conceptual art made the weaknesses of structural essentialism evident in the fine art camp nearly 60 years before they started coming to the attention of literary theorists.

Is art a mistake? Yes, a beautiful one. Art emerged as the result of an error. Adaptive sensory pleasure started attaching itself to stimuli (false positives) that had not been positively selected by evolution. At some point in the course of evolution, phenomena internal to the human mind (aspectual representations) started behaving like false positives and triggering non-adaptive pleasurable sensory responses. In this, they were both critically similar to, and at the same time critically different from, other false positive triggers of sensory pleasure: similar in that the organism's response is of a sensory nature, and different in that the organism is not responding directly to an object, but to the way an object has been *seen*. The response is thus mediated and in some broad sense metarepresentational. This type of response is what I have called an aesthetic response.

Art started out as an intra-individual adventure, a creative private mental representation within an individual mind. I have argued that this private mental representation must have been favourable to the human mind to a degree that would justify the mind's desire to return to and experience the sensory pleasure triggered by such representations again and again, constantly and repeatedly. The step from private mental representations to the first public artwork was just a matter of when, not whether. What factors lead an individual to express her creative private mental representations (aspectual representations) in the form of a public physically

observable object is for anthropology and cognitive psychology to answer. For the present discussion, the crucial point is that artworks inherited, and continue to inherit, their intrinsic value for the perceptual mind/ brain from the properties of the particular creative mental states to which they are causally related. Artworks, just like the mental states from which they descend, are also objects that trigger this mediated/ metarepresentational type of pleasurable sensory response (aesthetic response). Artworks are etiologically distinct objects with a characteristic teleology. They have an essentially distinct psycho-cognitive history, of which aesthetic experience is a central component, and are associated with specific, and again aesthetic, teleology. For these reasons, artworks can be said to give rise to characteristic, art-specific types of effect and expected relevance. I have suggested that this array of sub-attentive mind/ brain-improving effects and the types of relevance they yield for an organism possibly explain the intra-individual (private) and inter-individual (public) success of art as an enduring human cultural representation.

The evolutionary story I have tried to develop is the story of how a false positive became incredibly successful in taking root within the individual mind and gradually transforming itself into one of the most characteristic human cultural representations. Over the years, the origins of art have been debated from nearly every possible perspective that contemporary anthropological studies have provided for explaining 'how a cultural representation results from mechanisms at work in a given specific situation' (Sperber 1996: 41). Sociological, Structuralist and Functionalist models have dominated discussion in either the theory of literature or the philosophy of art for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but have failed to provide an adequate explanatory account of why human minds exhibit an ability and susceptibility for art, where are



came from, or why it became so important to human social functioning.<sup>96</sup> The new trend of Darwinian criticism, although a valuable move towards exploring the implications of evolutionary theory for a theory of literature/ art, has so far done a better job of explaining why art has the form it does, given the organisation of human cognition, than of making concrete suggestions about how art became possible for the human mind.

That is not to deny the value of trying to explain why art has the particular features it does. In the end, it is almost a truism to say that it is who we are that makes art the kind of object it is, and it is the kind of object art is that makes us who we are.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

I would like to take us back to the noetic experiment in which a patient having a heart attack impressionistically describes his experience as a knife stabbing in his chest, or a frozen muscle in his back, and so on. The patient gives an accurate impressionistic report of his experience. However, his impressionistic description is not an adequate account of the actual goings-on inside his body. In this chapter, I have concentrated on the nature of art as a perceptually driven action and the crucial role that aesthetic experience plays in it. Art is teleologically distinct in that it is an action geared to eliciting aesthetic experience in an audience. I have also tried to show, through a series of examples and noetic experiments, that in the kind of action art is, aesthetic experience is not incidental but primary. Artworks are objects designed to elicit aesthetic experiences. They are designed to give rise to sensory responses and achieve

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<sup>96</sup> Sociological models of art lack psychological realism and have little explanatory value as regards either the micro-mechanisms or the macro-mechanisms of art. Functionalist models, although they themselves lack explanatory value, may nevertheless be an important addition to a cognitive theory of art. In the previous chapter I discussed in some detail the weaknesses of Structuralism in literary theory and the philosophy of art.

perceptual effects. In doing this, they may also incidentally achieve stronger or weaker conceptual effects, but never the other way round. So long as an object is primarily designed to achieve conceptual effects, even if it incidentally happens to cause some perceptual effects too, it is not an artwork.

The teleological distinctness of art has various implications for our discussion of linguistic pessimism and the expressive capacities of language. The first, and most important, is that, since art is an action primarily geared to eliciting aesthetic experience, the poet's impressionistic report of her 'struggle for expression' must certainly involve an element of failure to describe the actual goings on in her mind. Yes, the poet's medium -natural language- happens to be a nuanced, conceptually robust medium. And indeed, literary art is one of the conceptually richest art forms, allowing complex and richly structured meanings to be communicated. But it is still a form of art. And as a form of art, even literature is primarily geared to eliciting aesthetic experiences. I take this as evidence that the part of the poet's discontent with language and her intense preoccupation with 'expression' is connected with her inability to describe the actual goings on inside her mind.

However, I suspect that a good deal of what the poet experiences and impressionistically reports as a 'struggle for expression' is in fact a struggle for aesthetic achievement. The poet works on her aspectual representations, trying to move successfully and satisfactorily from these private mental entities towards the production of a publicly shared object (artwork). Her effort to 'speak the contents of her mind' is then something much broader and more complex than a mere effort to communicate meaning. This publicly shared object must be an adequate physical realisation of the creator's aesthetic response to her own creative mental representations; moreover, it must be realised in such a way as to elicit in an audience

aesthetic experiences of a similar sort. The complex retroactive relationship between the artwork as an aesthetic object which becomes progressively realised through a circular process of being fed by, and then feeding back into, the poet's creative mental representations, is the primary struggle in an artist's creative life. A struggle far more complex, critical and representative of the kind of action art is than any other. The poet is correct in reporting an internal battle for 'expression'; it is just that 'expression' in this case must be interpreted in the broadest sense. Part of linguistic pessimism should then be taken as a truthful impressionistic report of mental goings-on that have not, however, as such been adequately described. For more than a century, both literary and folk theorists have been taking a heart attack for a chest being stabbed by a knife.

## Chapter 8

### Interdisciplinarity: some epistemic concerns on literary and art theory

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*Comedian (shouts): 'The whole world should unite!'*

*Audience (shouts): 'Yees!'*

*Comedian: 'Who against?'*

#### 8.1 Influential statements that do not state what they have been taken to state

Perhaps one of the most widely debated issues in aesthetics is an ontological one (Danto 1981, Tilghman 1984, Fodor 1993, Wittgenstein 2001). Simply expressed, the ontological enquiry in aesthetics asks what makes an object a work of art. In the various sub-domains of aesthetics, one encounters much narrower varieties of this question: literary aesthetics, for instance, asks what makes a *verbal* object a work of art.

The resemblance of this latter question to Jakobson's influential statement on linguistics and poetics is striking. In his seminal 'Closing statement' at the Indiana conference in 1958, Jakobson suggests:

Poetics deals primarily with the question, 'What makes a verbal message a work of art?' (...) [T]he main subject of poetics is the *differentia specifica* of verbal art in relation to other arts and in relation to other kinds of verbal behaviour (...) (1958/ 1996: 10).

I hope you will agree with me that the question Jakobson is raising in this statement is one about the ontology of the literary work of art. And if that is so, his statement seems to be rephrasable as: 'Poetics deals primarily with [a] question [which is central to literary aesthetics]'

Is Jakobson really putting forward the idea that the domain of poetics fully overlaps and should be seen as synonymous with literary aesthetics? Since nothing else in his 'Closing Statement' strongly suggests so, the only other reasonable explanation we are left with is that Jakobson is guilty of a tiny slip in terminology: although in his paper he uses the term 'poetics', what he actually seems to have in mind in using this term would be more adequately described as 'literary aesthetics'.

Let us follow his analysis a bit further. Jakobson (1958/ 1996: 17) assumes that there is an 'indispensable feature inherent in [the language of] every piece of poetry'. This necessary feature is termed the *poetic function* and defined as follows:

The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. (1958/ 1996: 17)

To clarify a little: in structural linguistic terms, the 'axis of selection' involves paradigmatic relations (i.e. relations among intersubstitutable vocabulary items), while the 'axis of combination' involves syntagmatic (i.e. sequential) relations. Ordinarily, if one wants to refer to a child, one selects from a paradigm of semantically similar nouns like 'child', 'kid', 'youngster', 'tot'. In Jakobson's view, this selection is produced on the basis of *equivalence*, or, in other words, on the basis of systematic similarity and dissimilarity at the semantic level (defined in terms of relations such as synonymy and antonymy). The difference between an ordinary linguistic object and an object that fulfils the poetic function -the ultimate manifestation of such an object would, of course, be the poem- is that in the latter, the *combination* of terms into a syntagmatic sequence is also produced on the basis of equivalence. Hence, 'in poetry and to a certain extent in latent manifestations of the poetic function', syllables, phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, even whole sentences,

are all combined on the basis of linguistic similarities and dissimilarities, symmetries and asymmetries:

Without its two dactylic words the combination *innocent bystander* would hardly have become a hackneyed phrase. The symmetry of three disyllabic verbs with an identical initial consonant and identical final vowel added splendour to the laconic victory message of Caesar: *Veni, vidi, vici*.

Jakobson's approach is clearly geared to finding inherent (linguistic) properties that would make it possible to draw an essential distinction between ordinary linguistic objects and linguistic objects that count as art. Would it be a mistake to conclude that what Jakobson is exploring in his 'Closing Statement' is in fact an ontological, literary-aesthetic subject? Jakobson's 'Closing statement', the statement most frequently referred to and quoted in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as illuminating the relation between linguistics and poetics, does not really say much about this relation. Jakobson's paper makes no general proposals about how the then-emerging discipline of linguistics might interweave with poetics/ literary theorising, but is rather focused on something much narrower: Jakobson is a structuralist, and as a structuralist, he assumes that the property that makes a certain object literature/ art is an inherent, structural, and hence linguistic property; he is therefore quite reasonably interested in how the emerging discipline of linguistics could be used to unearth this ontological property.

Jakobson's 'Closing Statement' is without doubt amongst the three most serious attempts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to address the matter of the essence of literature/ art; but still, the point remains: if Jakobson's statement illuminates anything, it is certainly not the relation between linguistics and poetics but that between linguistics and ontology/ aesthetics. The issue here is not in the slightest Jakobson's choice of

terminology. We could overlook the decision by a theorist of his calibre to refer to aesthetics using the more generic term 'poetics'. What is harder to overlook, though, is that for nearly five decades, Jakobson's paper has nevertheless been widely accepted in literary studies as one of the most ambitious statements on linguistics and poetics -despite the fact that in terms of its actual content the paper makes only marginal contributions to anything like the relationship between 'linguistics and poetics' as such-, while hardly ever having been referred to for what it actually is: one of the three most serious existing proposals on the essential distinctness of literature and art.

The way Jakobson's paper has been read and received is partly indicative of what it means to do literary/ art theory in the present day. All it takes is a theorist of a certain -unquestionable- calibre to write an essay on virtually anything, call it, say, 'Closing Statement on Linguistics and Poetics', and then watch it being systematically referred to and quoted for nearly half a century as the most illuminating statement on Linguistics and Poetics. How many of the theorists who quoted and referred to Jakobson's statement actually read it? How many of the theorists who actually read it understood what it is about? How many of the theorists who read the theorists who read and quoted Jakobson's statement without, nevertheless, understanding it suspected that Jakobson was being quoted without having been understood?

The uncritical way a harmless slip in terminology in Jakobson's discipline-shaping statement was taken up and recapitulated for half a century is a rather revealing illustration of the inherited circularities and confusions not only of the best part of contemporary literary study, but of the best part of literary/ artistic enquiry in general. Such inherited confusions vary in their severity and implications. Some, like the one I started this discussion with, emerge from weaknesses in established

practices in the discipline, but do not really have any further serious implications: the fact that Jakobson's statement is about something significantly different from what it has been taken to be about may indicate a worrying lack of critical understanding in contemporary literary theorising, but it is not to blame for this lack of critical understanding having arisen in the first place. Other confusions, like the one I am about to discuss, seem to be having more serious, discipline-shaping effects. My next example comes from the relatively new paradigm of stylistics.

In Jean Jacques Weber's (1996: 3) overview of 'contextualized' stylistics -to choose a random example- stylistic labour is subdivided into 'applied' and 'theoretical'. The so-called 'applied' strand is taken to involve a wide array of applications of stylistics to pedagogical tasks (e.g. foreign-language teaching or reading and writing skills), and all remaining analytical activity is categorised under the cover term 'theoretical'.

It can be shown, however, that what contemporary stylistics treats as a distinction between 'application' and 'theory' can in fact more adequately be described as a distinction between two different types of application: let us call them *first order* and *second order application*.

So-called 'theoretical stylistics' could be more adequately described as a case of first order application, since the standard practice in theoretical stylistics at the moment is to adopt the theoretical vocabulary and machinery of other disciplines such as functional linguistics, cognitive linguistics, etc and then apply them in interpreting a specific literary text or describing a literary genre. Theoretical stylistics does not draw on its interface with other disciplines with a view to enriching its own theoretical repertoire, illuminating old literary-theoretical questions, or, more crucially, bringing about retroactive effects upon the source-theoretical framework by,



say, advancing, modifying or cancelling some of its existing assumptions. Being essentially a form of critical practice theoretical stylistics borrows theory from other domains and uses it to facilitate a process of literary interpretation.

Alongside theoretical stylistics being essentially an applied form of investigative practice, a problem of a different order emerges when theory sometimes happens to be borrowed from other domains without sufficient prior critical assessment. During the discussion at a recent Linguistics and Poetics conference of a paper that investigated metonymic language in Shakespeare, using the cognitive linguistic framework of Panther and Mendoza, I raised the following question: 'Having studied Panther and Mendoza's theory of metonymy closely, I have come to realise that their approach has a very serious defect: their definition of metonymy is so broad that it eventually covers a range of dissimilar phenomena, many of which could be better described as, say, metaphors, narrowings, etc. Your analysis of Shakespeare's metonymic language, hasn't just borrowed Panther and Mendoza's framework but also inherited its problems: for instance, you treat as metonymic a case like 'knife' for 'enemy', which indeed seems to be a metonymy, and simultaneously, a case like 'man' for 'courageous man', which seems, however, more like concept narrowing than metonymy. How would you respond to this criticism?' In response to my question, I got the following answer: 'I treat such cases as metonymies because Panther and Mendoza treat them as metonymies. If Panther and Mendoza's definition of metonymy is problematic, as you suggest, this is something I cannot respond to. I didn't produce this definition, I am only using it to discuss Shakespeare'.

The weak variety of causal/ logical relationship that holds in any case between theory and application in the arts and humanities, makes it possible for ineffective theories to still be effectively applied. Unlike the natural sciences, where efficient

application is directly dependent upon, and hence confirms the adequacy of, the theory -build your dwelling on the wrong sort of mechanics and it will fall on your head- in the arts and humanities, the success of an application is often *unmotivated* by the theory. It is this characteristic of literary/ artistic thinking that allows a somewhat odd collection of applications of theory of all sorts to be successful *qua* applications, although the theories employed are partially or wholly inadequate. The stylistics paper mentioned above, for instance, was a perfectly adequate application of what can be described, though, as an inadequate theory of metonymy.<sup>97</sup>

Nothing that is true of this process in disciplines like theoretical stylistics is not also true of most other multidisciplinary attempts in contemporary literary and art study. Theoretical stylistics is just one amongst various instances in contemporary literary and art study that go to show one and the same thing: theoretical endeavours in either the contemporary literary or art-theoretical world have started employing investigative practices in which the distinction between ‘application’ and ‘theory’ emerges as largely debatable, while theorising in any robust sense of the term is for the most part absent.

## **8.2. Interdisciplinarity and Theory in literature and the other arts**

To attempt to articulate *theory* within literary and arts study in the modern day is in a sense to plead for genuine interdisciplinarity. It has been pointed out repeatedly that literature/ art is not an *autonomous* object; and indeed, any theoretical domain that hopes to take on literature/ art as the global fact it is should not be anything less than an inter-discipline.

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<sup>97</sup> Similar examples can be found across the whole spectrum of recent literary/ art study, with inadequate theories being adequately *applied* to anything from architectural projects to setting up fine art exhibitions.

However, this statement can be interpreted in two different ways. First, the literary/ art event cannot be addressed by one discipline alone without being seriously diminished. A century ago, literary scholars would generally acknowledge the non-autonomous nature of the literary object, but at the same time, they could not be accused of theoretical misconduct for not using interdisciplinary explanatory tools, simply because there weren't any. Today, there is no excuse. Alan Richardson (1998: 39) makes a number of pertinent comments:

Scholars of the future age may well find amusement in the pretensions of one English professor after another to solve the riddles of human agency, subject formation, language acquisition, and consciousness, with little or no awareness of the spectacular developments in psychology, linguistics, philosophy of mind, and neuroscience that form the central story of Anglo-American intellectual life from the 1950s to the present. (...) The cognitive neurosciences have emerged as (...) [the] most exciting and rapidly developing interdisciplinary venture of our era. That this remains news to many working in literature departments has already become something of an embarrassment; it will steadily prove more so.

Second, and more critical, adequate literary/ art theorizing should be expected to have retroactive effects on theories produced in the full range of disciplines -and particularly empirical disciplines- with which it interacts. It is hard to imagine how else it could be. Hard to imagine, for instance, that theorizing within the Philosophy of mind (on the issue of *mental architecture* for example) could have major implications for Pragmatics by raising questions such as 'How does Pragmatics locate within the broader architecture of the mind?', but theorizing within Pragmatics would not have retroactive effects on the Philosophy of mind. The very minute Pragmatics contemplates the 'mental location' of our pragmatic mechanisms, theory within the Philosophy of mind is instantaneously affected. This, if nothing else, is a first-rate example of a genuine interdisciplinary relationship.

Interdisciplinarity, as I use the term here, involves a reciprocal, bi-directional relationship between two disciplines, such that theory and practice in the one discipline can, at least in principle, have a direct bearing on theory and practice in the other, and vice versa.

Lacking a proper theory of its own, literary/ art study has so far been borrowing from anthropology, linguistics, psychology and the many other human-scientific domains that have entered the game of inter-blend in the last fifty years, but without necessarily considering whether it could or should give something back. Many theorists have viewed this uni-directional game as the only realistic possibility for literary/ art study, and dismissed the idea of genuine interdisciplinarity as unattainable, particularly when the other side of the inter-blend involves cognitive domains. In discussing cognitive literary studies, for instance, T. E. Jackson (2002: 177-178) comments:

As far as I can tell, this dialectical relationship (...) cannot be the case with cognitive literary studies because the originating theory cannot, even in principle, be recursively affected by the investigation. An application of that theory to literature may well change something of our understanding of literature, but it is difficult to see how the interpretive practice can possibly change the theory.

Jackson's pessimism is justifiable, and to some extent correct, as long we stay committed to essentially reductionist views of the scope and implications of literary and art study. Note how Jackson explicitly refers to 'our understanding of literature' as 'the interpretive practice'. The equation of 'our understanding of literature' with the act of interpretation has become so deeply entrenched in the contemporary theoretical consciousness that it is drastically reducing the otherwise broad and diverse scope of literary theorizing. As soon as we depart from such reductionist

equations, it will become much easier to see that genuine interdisciplinarity is both possible and necessary for a meaningful and constructive theory of literature and art.<sup>98</sup>

The bi-directionality of the interdisciplinary relation, as I have presented it here, raises two parallel questions. The first is *how pertinent scientific enquiry can be of use to literary/ art studies*. And indeed, most contemporary literary and art paradigms have been drawing on scientific enquiry in one way or another.

The second question arises only on the assumption that literary/ artistic theorizing can retroactively affect theory in other disciplines, and this may explain why, although equally important for any worthwhile notion of interdisciplinarity, it has not received the same amount of attention. This question reverses matters and asks *how (theoretical) literary/ art studies can be of use to pertinent scientific enquiry*. The cognitive neuroscientist Mark Turner (2002: 17-18) proposes one possible line of answer:

Scholars of literature and art are highly attuned to the intricate workings of creativity, invention, language, visual representation, and the construction of meaning. They offer superb and illuminating examples that often make the intricacies of mental operation somewhat easier to see. They have well-trained intuitions about the intricacies of mental and linguistic phenomena, and they have ideas about meaning and form. These intricacies and these ideas have, for the most part, not yet penetrated cognitive neuroscience's field of vision. They are part of what scholars of literature and art have to offer cognitive neuroscience.

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<sup>98</sup> The possibility of interdisciplinarity in theoretical literary/ art study has also raised reservations of a different sort. I suspect that T.E. Jackson echoes such reservations in claiming that: '(...) although (...) theories can of course be disputed, only objections arising either from the same kind of scientific disciplinary practices or from relevant philosophical grounds will have the epistemological weight to affect the theory' (2002: 166). Traditional theorists are concerned that, as soon as literary/ art theorizing starts using investigative methods or addressing questions that will give it the 'epistemological weight to affect theory' in other disciplines, the resulting investigative practice simply will not be literary/ art theorizing any more.

Another line of answer suggests that, while it is one thing to claim that scholars of literature/ art have a lot to offer other disciplines, it is quite another to claim that literature/ art as an investigative object has a lot to offer.<sup>99</sup> So, is there anything about literature/ art -anything beyond their institutional specifics- worthy of singling out and pursuing as the subject matter of a dedicated theoretical discipline?

In recent years, this question has arisen with unprecedented urgency. The emergence of conceptual art, and the use of existing objects (*ready-mades*) as artworks in the fine-art world, made it increasingly clear that the claim that art is formally and structurally distinct can no longer be rationally defended. It was very soon afterwards that linguistics, pragmatics and cognitive science put the particulars of literary language under thorough inspection, only to demolish any remaining hopes of the formal and structural distinctness of literature. The claims of the New Criticism and Formalism with which the 20<sup>th</sup> century began collapsed under the pressure of compelling evidence to the contrary: literature/ art is not a distinct structural or formal object. Yet, in my view a more generic question remained: is literature/ art a distinct object at all? In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I tackled this concern in much detail and sketched possible answers. Here, I will provide a rough outline of how the essential distinctness of literature/ art relates to the types of retroactive effect that literary/ art theorising may have on other disciplines:

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<sup>99</sup> Turner (2002: 17-18) has an interesting comment to make at this level as well:

the theory of blending, interesting to cognitive neuroscientists because conceptual blending has been shown to operate throughout everyday thought, language, and action, arose almost entirely from the study of literary and inventive linguistic expressions.

1) Literary studies in the last fifty years have been dominated by an ‘anti-universal’ stance (see Kiparsky 1987) which denies the innateness of literary language -and indeed of language itself- and instead regards it as a by-product of cultural training. I reject the view of literature/ art as a mere *institutional* fact. As Paul Kiparsky (1987: 195) has eloquently shown, the ability to produce and appreciate literature is *innately determined* and *universal* beyond reasonable doubt. A *universalist* approach to literature assumes that literary language is at least partly a product of our language faculty, and is thus governed by the same rules that govern language itself. It also assumes that despite cultural variation, literary language occurs in more or less the same ‘formats’ across the species, and is an indispensable aspect of our innate pre-disposition to acquire language. The same goes for art in general. Art occurs in more or less the same ‘formats’ across the species, and its emergence should be seen as indispensably connected to the evolution and function of universal intra-individual/ cognitive mechanisms.

2) It took nearly a century to gather the evidence that now forcefully brings into question the doctrine that literary language is the product of a separate capacity, distinct from the capacity for natural language. Four theorists, in particular, can ‘be held responsible’ for the collapse of this doctrine (for similar suggestions, see Kiparsky 1987). The first is undoubtedly Chomsky, whose programme on universal grammar eliminates any possibility of literary language being governed by rules that fall outside the scope of our language faculty. The second is Jerry Fodor (1983), whose work on *mental modularity* suggests that the perception and parsing of literary language employs exactly the same perceptual and parsing devices as non-literary language. The third and fourth are Sperber and Wilson (1995), whose relevance-theoretic pragmatics shows that both literary and non-literary language are understood

by use of the same interpretive strategies, are governed by the same communicative principle and locatable on a single continuum between literal and metaphorical use.

Given the evidence we have available today, it is very easy in a way to dismiss the claim that literature is linguistically distinct as inadequate or simplistic. For the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, though, claims about the uniqueness of literary language were truly revolutionary. Eminent literary figures like Eliot, Pound, Breton, and Blanchot insightfully attacked the then dominant 'poetics of convention' and tried to replace it with an essentialist 'poetics of causation': i.e. a poetics motivated by inherent properties of the literary object rather than by mere institutional and social agreement. It is a contingent fact that they looked in the wrong direction, i.e. that they tried to find these inherent properties in the language of the literary text. Their ultimate aim of producing an essentialist literary theory is still as valid today.

Readopting this aim with the interdisciplinary theoretical means we have available today is bound to radically change our view of the nature of literature and art. In this analysis, for instance, we have already found that there does exist a single and common property of literariness/ essence of art running through all art forms and literary genres, but that it is not of the kind so far envisaged. We have already suspected that the recognition of a certain object as literature/ art depends crucially on our prototype detector and involves some weak sense of metarepresentation. We have managed to peel apart perceptual beauty from aesthetic beauty. We have succeeded in separating the ability to recognise or categorise an object from the essence of the object itself, thereby separating the sociology of art from its ontology/ metaphysics.

3) The evidence accumulating for nearly a century that literature/ art is not distinct at a formal or structural level was indeed compelling, but do not eventually entail that literature/ art is not distinct in any other interesting sense.



4) This distinctness, we have shown, is of a psychological/ cognitive rather than a formal or structural- nature. Instead of looking at the literary/ art object and its 'language', we have shifted the focus to the literary/ art event, the particular kind of action that art is, and its psycho-cognitive structure. The literary text, and generally the work of art, is an end-product. The literary event, on the other hand, offers a more global perspective on the phenomenon of art. Literary and art events involve a characteristic action, which leads to some prototypical end-product, which is expected to trigger some characteristic response.

5) If literature/ art is distinct as an object in at least one interesting sense, then it cannot fall entirely within the scope of some other existing discipline (say, linguistics or pragmatics), and it should be the subject of a dedicated literary/ art-theoretical discipline.

6) Finally, -to return to the question that triggered this whole discussion- if literature/ art is indeed distinct as an object, and I hope I have argued convincingly that we have good reasons to assume that it is, then its investigation should *a priori* be expected to have potential retroactive effects upon other disciplines: being a distinct object amounts to being able to highlight issues and questions in all related disciplines in a way no other object can.

### **8.3. Theory vs pre-theory**

What possible forms may an up-to-date dedicated literary/ art-theoretical discipline take? Some workable varieties of literary/ art theorizing, it seems, are already in place. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century literary scholarship -in the writings of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and the Russian formalists, for instance- set up an ambitious programme addressing

important theoretical questions in philosophically sophisticated ways. Reviving and re-addressing this agenda in the light of the radical advances in the cognitive sciences in the last 30 years is a viable and sensible step.

Now more than ever, the literary theorist and philosopher of the arts has a vast repertoire of sophisticated descriptive and explanatory tools to choose from in tackling questions which are traditionally at the heart of literary/ artistic enquiry, while engaging in a fruitful dialectics with other disciplines. It is in the very nature of the literary/ art event to excite some curiosity about human mental processes or old objects out there in the world that in some way or other relate to the facts of production and reception, or even the fact of just being a work of art. Literary theorists, aesthetic philosophers and practising artists have traditionally contemplated the intricate workings of the subconscious, the nature of creativity, the interplay between language and thought. They have raised questions about the limits of expression, the nature and role of intentions, the machinery of affect. Highly self-reflexive as a process, literature/ art gives rise to empirical intuitions and pre-theoretical ideas about *production*, an aspect of the literary/ art event admittedly neglected by both philosophy and linguistics. Moreover, as an internally caused creative activity, literature/ art raises genuine questions about inspiration, causation, consciousness and free will. Here is an amazing fact that literature does not share with any other non-literary genre: without deliberation, without being able to explain how or why, like a true ‘appearance of the muse’, literature causes itself in a beautiful, mysterious, uniquely human way. These are just a few of the questions about which an updated literary/ art theory should have something to say.

So far, I have been talking about *theory* in an undifferentiated sense. Now, I would like to talk briefly about literary and art *Theory*, and contrast ‘Theory’ with ‘pre-theory’.<sup>100</sup>

Twenty or so years since Sperber and Wilson’s *Relevance* (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995) was first published, one can now clearly see from the viewpoint temporal distance provides that the reluctant reception of the theory in literary departments - even departments that were forward-thinking enough at the time to have studied Gricean Pragmatics - had little to do with the specific suggestions of the theory *per se* and more with the deeply entrenched indisposition of some literary scholars towards the cognitive paradigm.

Nigel Fabb and Alan Durant’s (1987a: 10-13) analysis of how the tensions between *functionalism* and *cognitivism* have haunted contemporary linguistics hits the nail on the head. The story is old and familiar. The aversion to the cognitive paradigm itself has very little to do with the specific proposals of cognitivism *per se*, and more with its departures from and implications for well-established ideas about society, culture, religion, and the human being itself. Kuhn’s (1996: 23) assertion that ‘paradigms gain their status because they are more successful than their competitors in solving a few problems that the group of practitioners has come to recognise as acute’ comes across more as wishful thinking about some ideal world than as a realistic depiction of what leads to fluctuations in the fortunes of theories in the actual scientific world. Chomsky (1976:123-134) presented a more realistic picture by showing how ideological prejudice rather than reason was responsible for the commercial success of the more romantic Empiricism over the more scientifically sound and far better evidenced Nativism.

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<sup>100</sup> For clarity, I will stick with the convention of using a capital ‘T’ when referring to theory in this latter sense.

*Relevance* was a significant epistemic step. Amongst other things, *Relevance* broadened the range of *explanatory mechanisms* available to the humanities, allowing for phenomena to be accounted for in psychologically realistic terms as opposed to being merely described. It replaced pre-theoretical discourse with tractable Theoretical principles, revived long-forgotten questions in a surprisingly wide range of other disciplines and made pragmatics one of the most influential interdisciplinary ventures of our times. Heavily drawing on the paradigm of the natural sciences, *Relevance* attempted a leap from pre-theory to Theory by producing an investigative language compatible with the scientific method.

A Theory compatible with the scientific method may be described as a complex articulated body of thought geared to answering questions or explaining regularities in a given domain. A Theory purports to make true claims, and to make a true claim you have to touch the (real) world. Truth is not a property either of objects or of states of affairs in the world, but a property of thoughts. It involves a particular type of *correspondence* between thoughts entertained as true descriptions of the world and the states of affairs they describe. A Theory is tested by testing its *implications*<sup>101</sup>. Thus, a Theory is a step towards truth -or more simply, a Theory is substantiated- to the extent that its implications are both testable and true:

If the Theory (T) is correct, it should follow that P

Here's some evidence that P

P supports my Theory (T) and suggests that T's claims are possibly correct

Or, on the contrary:

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<sup>101</sup> Van der Henst and Sperber's 'Testing the cognitive and communicative principles of relevance' (2004), discusses in more detail how theories are tested by testing their implications.

If the Theory (T) is correct, it should follow that P

Here's some evidence that P is not the case

P supports a Theory (T2) that is incompatible with my Theory (T) and suggests that T's claims are possibly incorrect.<sup>102</sup>

And, finally, scientific theories are *non-demonstrative*. The truth of their implications is typically not guaranteed by the truth of the premises, but merely made more probable. In this light, a Theory can be seen as a complex body of articulated assertions subject to constant modification and revision. Synchronically and diachronically, a Theory is constantly assessed and modified in the direction of increasing effectiveness and simplicity, i.e. in the direction of maximising the number of true implications (and other cognitive effects) and achieving these effects more elegantly.

I shall leave the discussion of Theory pending for a moment to briefly discuss one other sense in which the contrast between theoretical adequacy and commercial success may also be relevant to the current account. The last 4 chapters of this thesis gesture in the direction of a new, action-based approach to the philosophy of literature and art. But one particular aspect of this model comes with a relatively high risk of attracting negative commercial prejudice. In recent talks, my proposals have often been met with the reasonable response that 'all people are creative, and not just outstanding artists or scientific geniuses'. In the light of at least half a century's scientific developments, I take that to be an obvious truth. From Chomsky's work on the human linguistic capacity to emerging research in new fields such as Lexical Pragmatics, the last century can indeed be uncontroversially regarded as the century

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<sup>102</sup> To adhere to Chomsky's view that facts themselves do not disprove theories; theories disprove other theories.

of 'creativity'. The explosion of cognitivism, amongst other things, underlined and highlighted the plasticity and flexibility of the human mind to the point where 'creativity' has now become a mark of the mental. Thus the claim that all people are creative is obviously true, if 'creative' is taken in this broad, generic sense.

However, as I will argue later on, there may also be other ways of being creative, which are more specialised and distinctive in terms of both their nature and the processes they involve. These latter types of creative thinking can be seen as specific to certain types of action, such as the type of action that Art is. I will claim that not everyone is creative in these specialised ways. On the contrary, this type of creativity seems to be a property only of certain types of mind, and might be more accurately described as an 'inclination' or 'talent'. Even though not all the minds that have this talent go on to pursue literary careers, -indeed, far from it- and even though not everyone in literary history who has pursued such a career necessarily had this talent, the fact remains that this specialised type of creativity is not a property of all human minds. It may be that all human minds possess one specialised type of creativity or other, but not all human minds possess each specialised type of creativity. In a strict interpretation of his famous comment, Picasso was wrong: not every child is born a painter and then grows out of it.

An account like the one I pursue may appear to some to have a rather elitist tinge. It is at odds with the view that democracy and equality presuppose that all people are the same. Certainly, anyone can be trained to create a poem, or more accurately, a convincing simulacrum of a poem. Anyone can be trained to create an object that prototypically resembles a poem, but not everyone should be regarded as capable of producing an actual POEM. Granting Art a certain aetiological/ causal distinctness suggests that humans can be categorised as 'talented' or 'not talented' and

this may be hard to digest.<sup>103</sup> The aim of a theory is neither to relieve nor to flatter, but to tell the truth; and often, the truth is anything but flattering or relieving. Thus the model outlined in this thesis starts off with a significant commercial disadvantage.

Now, back to where we left off. With the notion of what it means to make a Theory having changed for good, the process of updating literary/ art theorising will require a lot more than simply taking literary and art-theoretic questions and pursuing them using interdisciplinary methods. In addition to finding the right questions and exploring their overlap with those of other disciplines, the contemporary theorist will also have to reflect carefully on what would be an adequate way of discussing these questions.

I am not one of those who propose the total elimination of pre-theoretical discourse and its replacement by adequately Theoretical language. Proposals of this sort fail to grasp the importance of the contributions pre-theoretical thinking has made, and must continue to make, to human intellectual development. So I am not suggesting that the way to modernise literary theory by developing a genuinely theoretical strand within poetics is to create a by-product of Relevance Theory (or, indeed, a by-product of any other candidate interdiscipline). Literary theory and philosophy of art are long standing paradigms; they have their own characteristic discourse and their own contributions to make to human thought. The challenge is to let literary theory and philosophy of art be the variety of thinking they are, but also to see how this variety of thinking can be partially modified to produce a more up-to-date and genuinely interdisciplinary theoretical discourse.

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<sup>103</sup> It's pretty standard in cognitive science to distinguish between 'general abilities' (shared by all normal individuals) and 'talents' (which are much less widely distributed). This is another point on which the study of poetic/ artistic abilities could contribute to cognitive science.

I shall return to this point shortly. For now, let me stress that what literary theory and philosophy of art could gain from a collaboration with pragmatics does not stop at purely epistemological rewards. A common thread that runs through most recent work in stylistics, for instance, no matter how diverse the theoretical affiliations of the author, is a universal discontent with the simple, fixed, binary oppositions of the so called 'Bi-planar' or 'Code model of Communication', and a parallel desire to locate stylistic enquiry within pragmatics (Leech, J. 1983, Fabb & Durant 1987b: 229-237, Kiparsky 1987: 185, Fowler 1996: 199-200, Toolan 1996: 121-124). In addition to the text -which has almost monopolised the attention of stylistics in the last fifty years-, readers and their *cognitive environment* must now also be taken into account.

There has never been a literary/ art theory without an underlying theory of cognition and communication. Relevance-theoretic pragmatics provides a good example of what investigative discourse within literary theory and the philosophy of art could in part be like, and an advanced and far reaching theory of communication that both disciplines can certainly do with.<sup>104</sup> In a healthy interdisciplinary dialectics, Relevance theory should also have various rewards to reap from interaction with literary and art-theoretic domains. In the past, some professed advocates of the theory have seemed to suggest that Relevance theory holds all the answers. It doesn't, and the exchanges should go both ways.

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<sup>104</sup> In addition, Relevance-theoretic pragmatics is an exemplary interdisciplinary. Understanding the issues Relevance theory discusses could thus provide the contemporary literary theorist with immediate insights into the questions and advances of the many disciplines with which Relevance theory interacts.



#### **8.4. (Deontic) Epilogue**

Contemporary research in literature and the other arts has managed to incorporate and apply in a variety of ways the theoretical contributions of empirical disciplines, and has also explored new ways in which thinking about literature and the arts can be socially or practically useful. But this should not obscure the lack of genuinely theoretical output, and, more importantly, the lack of retroactive effects on the source disciplines. To return to the main point of this final chapter: genuine theoretical and interdisciplinary practices are a necessary step towards restoring the breadth and ambition of literary and art-theoretical fields. The questions are out there. We just need to rise to the occasion.

#### **8.5. We talk the talk, but can we walk the walk? Or (Actual) epilogue.**

For many decades, in the Arts and Humanities we have been flattering ourselves by euphemistically describing as ‘interdisciplinary’ intellectual outputs that are no more than *multi-disciplinary*: outputs that indeed refer to and are relevant for more than one discipline, but at the same time do not require any essential interaction or merging between the disciplines involved. The multi-disciplinary thinker doesn’t have to make compromises. He speaks the theoretical language he would speak anyway. He uses the established conventions and methods of the paradigm he belongs to. He carefully - though not always deliberately or consciously- avoids any trickling or merging of one paradigm into the other. Although the intellectual calibre of this work is not necessarily questionable, its interdisciplinary status definitely is.

I want to claim that for an interdisciplinary relation to be genuine, at least two conditions would have to be fulfilled. First, there is a condition of *retroactiveness of effects*: intellectual activity in the one discipline should be expected to have

retroactive effects on intellectual activity in the other, and vice versa. Second, there is a condition of *methodological merger*: interdisciplinarity is not simply a matter of sharing topics, but of merging methods and mind-sets. Genuinely interdisciplinary projects can then be nothing less than hybrid projects, organically incorporating varieties of thinking from across the spectrum of the disciplines involved. Anything short of that would be multi-disciplinary but not interdisciplinary.

When it comes more specifically to interactions between literary/ artistic and empirical domains, this raises the question of whether, in the current state of human intellectual affairs, genuine interdisciplinarity is achievable at all. This particular kind of interdisciplinary practice poses specific intellectual challenges and raises a distinct set of practical and theoretical problems: a merger between literary/ artistic and empirical domains requires not only an overlap of disciplines but also, and crucially, a crossing of *paradigms*. Often, when talking about interdisciplinary merger between the empirical and literary/ artistic paradigms, theorists favour the so-called ‘different languages metaphor’; thinkers in these different domains are typically seen as speaking different languages. It is metaphors like this that make hugely intricate problems look like manageable ones.

The difficulties in the relationship between the empirical and literary/ artistic paradigms do not arise simply from the fact that they use distinct theoretical languages. It is more a case of their having diametrically different *characteristic mind-sets*. Moreover, it is at least a genuine possibility that the specific relationship between these two mind-sets is *reversely analogous*, or *competing*: for every literary/ artistic element you add, you lose an empirical one, and for every empirical element you drop, you may gain a literary/ artistic one. If you are really fond of the ‘different languages’ metaphor, then imagine a situation where the more you speak the one

language, the more your aptitude for and performance in the other is severely diminished, and conversely.

The point can be illustrated with an analogy. It was once believed that professional ballet dancers should not cycle regularly.<sup>105</sup> In order to perform, ballet dancers rely on a strong turned-out leg position. Ballet training develops lower body muscle groups in a way that strengthens this position. Cycling, on the other hand, although it builds the same lower body muscle groups as ballet, does it in exactly the opposite -parallel- leg position. The stronger the parallel leg position becomes, the more the turned-out position weakens, and along with it the dancer's ability to perform to standard. In many respects, the relationship between literary/ artistic and empirical mind-sets is like that between turned-out and parallel leg positions, between cycling and ballet. More importantly, the relation between leg position and characteristic activity is neither conventional nor arbitrary: dancers do not walk, stand or train in the turned-out leg position because that's just what they fancy doing. They are *justified* in doing so, because of the nature of their characteristic activity. Her typical mind-set is the literary/ artistic thinker's turned-out leg position: it is crucial in enabling her to perform those intellectual 'steps' that are necessary for her characteristic activity.

To say that empirical and literary/ artistic domains involve *diametrically different characteristic mind-sets in a competing relationship* is to imply that in order to create genuinely interdisciplinary collaborations between them, for every inch of ground gained by the literary/ artistic mind-set, an inch of ground must be given up by the empirical one, and conversely. Unlike the 'different languages' metaphor, where no serious compromises need be made, no paradigm-specific integrity tampered with

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<sup>105</sup> I don't know if sports science has now confirmed or disconfirmed this, but it is a good illustrative example.

and no disciplinary ground negotiated, the actual relationship between literary/ artistic and empirical mind-sets suggests that there are many compromises to be made, a lot of paradigm-specific integrity to be tampered with and much disciplinary ground to be lost.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed two interesting developments that critically relate to our discussion. The first is the breaking away from the Humanities of a set of social and cognitive scientific disciplines like linguistics and psychology. Over the last 40 years, these disciplines have systematically identified themselves with the goals of the Natural Sciences (i.e. the search for empirically testable explanatory principles), and become increasingly independent from the practices of the Arts and Humanities. The second is the expansion of Academia and its growing claim to be the sole arena in which theoretical activity nowadays takes place.

As a result of the first of these developments, it could be argued that the differences between literary/ artistic and empirical domains have now been blown out of proportion. It has become increasingly difficult to negotiate a merger between literary/ artistic and empirical methods in an unbiased and unprejudiced way. As the philosopher Elizabeth Camp very nicely put it in a recent conversation, ‘different paradigms show intolerance towards different types of characteristic *failure*’ (P.C. 21.12.2006). In empirical domains, for instance, failure to be explicit is often considered a serious weakness, while for the literary/ artistic mind-set, thoughts are not always better for being explicit. The role of intuitive half-understood beliefs in literary/ artistic thinking should allow some insight into why vagueness and opaqueness are not necessarily unsettling for a literary/ artistic mind. Literary/ artistic thinkers understand that the types of expression of thought they are keen on are not as

instrumental as those favoured by empirical thinkers, but at the same time appreciate that -perhaps just for this reason- they may yield insights that an explicit discourse would never be able to capture. The literary/ artistic thinker is, and must remain, an intuitive thinker: a thinker who assesses the importance of a thought on an intuitive basis and is confident about the accuracy of her assessment even when she admits that she only half-understands this thought or can only partially explicate it. *Reflective beliefs* (Sperber 1997), it seems, beliefs that involve partially understood thoughts or thoughts that contain a partially understood constituent, play a central part in literary/ artistic thinking, yet in a way crucially different from and far more essential than some empirical thinkers tend to believe.<sup>106</sup> Take this as one amongst many possible indicative examples of why the intellectual output of the literary/ artistic paradigm might well be seen as susceptible to *failure* from a rigorously empirical viewpoint.

The fact that currently Academia has a monopoly on theoretical activity - numerous artists and almost all literary theorists now work there, many journals and publishing houses have strong academic links, their editors are academics, international conferences and other events are attended solely by members of academia, etc- increases the tensions. For one thing, the stereotypes and polarisations

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<sup>106</sup> In discussing reflective beliefs, Sperber (1997: 67) puts the weight on the credibility/ authority of the source of the belief and therefore suggests:

Reasons to hold reflective beliefs are provided by other beliefs that describe the source of the reflective belief as reliable, or that provide explicit arguments in favour of the reflective belief.

I would be inclined to suggest, though, that there should also exist *intuitive reasons* for holding half-understood beliefs: intuitive reasons for holding a half-understood belief should be seen as independent of the credibility/ authority of the source and dependent only on (pre-rational) intuitions about the relative importance of the implications of the thought. Such beliefs are half-understood but not strictly speaking 'reflective'; they are not believed metarepresentationally -because a credible source says so- but intuitively. The pertinent intuitions we might or might not be able to rationalise, but this does not affect the relative importance of the implications of the thought. *Reflective half-understood beliefs* are indeed cases of bad literary/ artistic thinking, but they are not the same as *intuitive half-understood beliefs*.

associated with different domains are now entrenched by being institutionalised within Higher Education settings. Students are often rewarded when they perpetuate them and are not always encouraged to question or look beyond them. They aspire to 'belong' -to a department, a school, a university, a tradition of thought, a discipline, a tradition within a discipline, a paradigm, and so on.

For another thing, the fact that most theoretical activity takes place in what is essentially an educational setting tends to prioritise those varieties of thinking and presentation that are best cut out for educational purposes: varieties of thinking, for instance, that allow monitoring of effort put in, progress, and performance, and modes of presentation that make marking easy. It is this particular variety of thinking and presentation that now puts good literary/ artistic thinking at a disadvantage. Academic settings produce an abundance of run-of-the-mill literary/ artistic pseudo-intellectuals.

Different means to the same end: contemporary literary/ artistic thinking is losing its credibility in the eyes of the empirically oriented thinkers. The likelihood of empirical theorists becoming convinced that they too should give up some ground is therefore radically reduced. I recently took part in a very constructive workshop on the pragmatics of poetic communication, along with a handful of linguists, stylisticians and philosophers. It is interesting that, although the topic of the workshop fell clearly within the Arts and Humanities, two thirds of the papers presented, and almost all subsequent discussion, would have been entirely impenetrable for the average literature person. I was alarmed. Perhaps because the small group of invited scholars had a common background in similar fields, nothing in most of the papers presented suggested that the empirical thinker or the philosopher had gone the extra mile to explicate technical terms, spell out issues more comprehensibly, simplify the intricacy of the analysis, etc., to make her discussion more accessible or interesting to

a less empirically aware audience. At the end of the day, we might reasonably expect the majority of people who would be attracted by a published proceedings with the title 'The pragmatics of poetic communication' to be precisely that: a less empirically aware audience. Even more alarmingly, as I had come across some of the participants before, I happened to know that most of them are very enthusiastic about the prospect of interdisciplinary work between literary/ artistic and empirically oriented thinkers. In some cases, it seems, it just hasn't crossed the mind of empirical theorists that interdisciplinarity may require generous compromises to be made on their part too.

As long as empirically oriented thinkers dig their feet into the sand -no matter how much we fiddle with the practices of the Humanities- genuine interdisciplinarity cannot take off. If literary/ artistic thinkers simply contribute the *topics* and empirical theorists the *method*, we are back to where we started. The resulting type of thinking is multi-disciplinary, not inter-disciplinary, and certainly not interdisciplinary in the genuine and rich sense of a merging of methods and means. More worryingly, if the empirical side are expecting literary/ artistic thinkers to cover all the disciplinary distance, then the result becomes highly problematic in a practical, if not an ethical, sense: you potentially put in jeopardy what the literary/ artistic individual is cut out to do best; you make a dancer cycle excessively.

We cannot afford that. We cannot afford to take first-class literary/ artistic minds and turn them into mediocre empirical thinkers. If that's what the pursuit for interdisciplinarity is likely to lead to in, given the current state of the theoretical world, then maybe it shouldn't be attempted. The fact remains: genuine interdisciplinary collaborations are a methodological *sine qua non* for literary/ artistic and empirical varieties of thinking to go on making crucial contributions to the intellectual world. To enable such collaborations to take place, it is essential that the

empirical world also starts reassessing the 'integrity' of its paradigm. It is time for all of us to wake up to the call. We talk the talk. It's about time to walk the walk.



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