

Jiri Benovsky

# The Limits of Art On Borderline Cases of Artworks and their Aesthetic Properties

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# The Limits of Art

On Borderline Cases of Artworks and their  
Aesthetic Properties

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## About the Author

**Jiri Benovsky** having been struck by Descartes' evil demon thought-experiment, he began to study metaphysics to try to find a proof that the world really exists. He did not find that proof, but at least he found an academic way to live where he can not only go climbing and skiing in the mountains but also spend his days thinking about existence, reality, time, art, as well as the aesthetics of gastronomic meals, rock climbing, or photography. He is the author of several books, including recently: *Eliminativism, objects, and persons. The virtues of non-existence* (Routledge, 2018), *Mind and matter. Panpsychism, dual-aspect monism, and the combination problem* (2018, Springer), and *Meta-metaphysics* (2016, Springer). More information on Benovsky's work can be found online at [www.jiribenovsky.org](http://www.jiribenovsky.org).



# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Different Types of Limits



§1. This book is about exploring interesting borderline cases of art. I'll discuss the cases of gustatory and olfactory artworks (focusing on food), proprioceptive artworks (dance, martial arts, and rock climbing *qua* proprioceptive experiences), intellectual artworks (philosophical and scientific theories), as well as the vague limits between painting and photography. Perhaps you'll find it obvious that some or all of these cases *are* genuine cases of art, and that the claims I will be making are trivial. In that case, I'll be happy to agree and I hope that this book will still be of interest as a fruitful discussion of these cases of artworks and their limits. Perhaps you'll find it obvious that some or all of these cases *are not* genuine cases of art—indeed, all of them, individually, *have* been denied the status of artworks at some point. In that case, I'll be happy to disagree and I'll try to offer reasons to change your mind. My aim in this short book is thus twofold. First, I hope that the discussion of this series of particular claims about these particular cases will be of interest for its own, first-level, sake; and second, from this discussion, a more general picture about the nature of art and about what counts as an artwork will arise. Indeed, the different cases will allow us to consider different types of limits. Some limits will concern our senses (our different perceptual modalities), some will concern vagueness and fuzzy boundaries between different types of works of art, some will concern the amount of human intention and intervention in the process of creation of an artwork, and some will concern the border between art and science. In these various ways, by understanding better such borderline cases, we will—or so I hope—get a better grip on an understanding of the nature of art.

§2. “What is art?” is a very general and cruelly difficult question. Perhaps, it is so cruelly difficult precisely because it is so very general. Indeed, any precise answer, that is, any *definition* of art, or artwork, which would precisely define what counts as art and what does not, is always in principle at great risk of leaving some possibilities out and of being open to possible counter-examples. The notion of art, or artwork, is a vague one but this is not only a problem of vagueness. The difficulty of providing a definition also stems from the fact that art evolves with time, that it is culture-relative, and that we need to *adapt* our understanding of what art is to this

ever-evolving process. A strict definition of what counts as art and what does not is bound to fail at some point. But not having a definition of something does not mean that this something is inexplicable (*contra* Adajian (2018, §1)). Indeed, if we keep in mind the ever-evolving nature of art, we can simply realize that there is no need for a definition (why would it be necessary to have one?) and that we simply should continuously update our understanding of what art is, and allow ourselves to be surprised from time to time when new, challenging forms of art emerge. Any definition that would try, for instance, to identify what is common to all artworks would simply be inadequate, perhaps precisely in the sense—highly relevant to the overall purposes of this book—that it would beg the question against non-standard types of artworks and classify them as not being art. In order to resist such a possibly question-begging stance, we can simply resist the need for a definition.<sup>1</sup> Walton (2007, p. 148) even suggested that the question does not even make much sense: “It is not at all clear that these words—‘What is art?’—express anything like a single question, to which competing answers are given [...] The sheer variety of proposed definitions should give us pause. One cannot help wondering whether there is any sense in which they are attempts to [...] address the same issue”. This does not mean, however, that we should somehow become sceptical about the very notion of art and that we should abandon the very idea of trying to understand what an artwork is. On the contrary, the lack of a precise and fixed definition is all the more reason to try to improve our understanding of the nature of art, while embracing its impermanence and vagueness.

§3. To this end, let me list some points I propose to take on board as working criteria for a discussion about what counts as an artwork and what does not. Keeping in mind what I said above, these do not constitute a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, they are merely indicators or pointers that help us clarify the discussion about the nature of art. I take it that this list is rather standard (although it is, of course, controversial),<sup>2</sup> and I am simply going to use these points as more or less optional guidelines, by examining whether they apply to the various cases I am going to discuss below and whether they are useful or not. As a general rule, I’ll work with the idea that if something does not satisfy all of these points, this is *not* automatically a reason to think that it is not an artwork.

- (1) Artworks possess aesthetic properties
- (2) Artworks are subject to aesthetic judgements
- (3) Artworks have the capacity to trigger aesthetic experiences
- (4) Artworks have the capacity to trigger emotions
- (5) Artworks have the capacity to convey meanings and ideas
- (6) Artworks are challenging (both for the artist and the observer)
- (7) Artworks require skill to be produced

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<sup>1</sup>Adajian (2018) offers an extensive discussion of definitions of art. Discussion concerning the project of defining art can be found, *inter alia*, in Kennick (1958), Stecker (1996, 2005), Weitz (1950), Ziff (1953).

<sup>2</sup>Schrenk (2014) uses a similar list. Compare to Gaut’s (2000, 2005) discussion of art as a cluster concept.

(8) Artworks *qua* objects can have relevant non-aesthetic features and a non-aesthetic function.

(1), (2), (3), and (4) lie at the heart of what I want to take on board as a rough idea of what art is. (Perhaps, (3) and (4) are about the same thing.) In the following chapters, I am going to put these criteria to work, and see what can be learned by applying them to quite non-standard cases.

§4. In addition to these criteria, there are some notions that emerge as being characterizations of works of art that we often appeal to when we talk about art. Let me quickly mention them, since they will also prove to be useful in the discussion of the non-standard cases I am going to focus on in the chapters to come. *Harmony* (and related notions such as symmetry) is perhaps the most often cited. In Western culture at least, the idea of something that is a coherently integrated whole, where proportion, symmetry, and harmony play an important role, is often central to the way we evaluate it as being a (good) piece of art. While Aristotle insisted especially on symmetry, Plato insisted on unity, and the way we evaluate artworks today has inherited and developed both of these criteria, at least when it comes to classical and standard works of art. The notion of *balance* is also often put forward, relatedly to harmony, unity, symmetry, and similar notions. These notions are of course implemented in different ways in different kinds of artworks such as music, sculpture, painting, or architecture, but they seem to provide a relatively common ground to such different types of cases.

The notions of *complexity* and *simplicity* also often play an important role. While being contradictory, they can both be seen as positive features of an artwork and characterize its aesthetic value. A complex work can be intriguing, intricate, and sophisticated; it can be baroquely appealing, and its overall balance will often be emphasized. Simplicity will often be taken to be elegant in a straightforward way—indeed, simplicity and elegance just seem to go together.

*Intensity* is another feature of works of art that often plays a crucial role in their appreciation and evaluation. It can manifest itself in different forms, but perhaps what it relates to on a general level is the traditional idea insisted upon by Burke that beauty causes *passion* in the observer. This lies at the heart of criteria (3) and (4) above, offering a response-dependent understanding of what makes something to be art. As Hume (1740, 299) puts it, beauty “[...] is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul. Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence.” He adds that “beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty” (Hume 1757, 136). This kind of subjectivism is useful to be taken on board; it will, however, need to be weakened and refined (as Hume himself did) in order to account for the fact that more or less objective judgements of the aesthetic value of an artwork can be made—this will be apparent in my discussion of the different types of cases, and I’ll come back to this general issue in due course.

In addition to the criteria (1)–(8), let us then keep in mind: harmony, symmetry, unity, balance, complexity, simplicity, intensity, passion, pleasure; and let us start exploring some non-standard cases of art.

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## Chapter 2

# Extending the Limits I: Non-visual and Non-auditory Artworks



**Abstract** We talk about culinary arts, as we also talk about martial arts. Does this mean that a meal or a *kata* are to be understood as being artworks? In this chapter, I take these and other cases seriously and I claim that they are indeed genuine cases of art, in the same way as paintings, photographs, sculptures, or musical works. My centre of interest concerns non-visual and non-auditory forms of art. Traditionally, visual and auditory arts dominate the debate in aesthetics and philosophy of art, as they dominate the art world in general—our senses of sight and hearing thus dominate our very understanding of what an artwork is. As a consequence, artworks are mostly understood as being public entities, widely shareable in the sense of being available to different spectators/auditors. In this chapter, I explore other senses, which are often neglected; I focus on gastronomic meals as cases of gustatory and olfactory artworks, and on dance, karate, and climbing as cases of proprioceptive artworks. The overall aim of this chapter is thus to extend the limits of what counts as art and what does not. I offer a very inclusive view, and through the discussion of various types of examples, I offer reasons to think that such a view is indeed adequate.

### 2.1 Introduction

§1. To start the discussion, let me indulge in a short biographical narrative and recount an experience I recently had in the restaurant of the famous French chef Marc Veyrat (in his restaurant *La Maison des Bois* in the mountains near Annecy). One of the meals on the menu consists in a small, greenish, olive-shaped and -sized, rather strangely looking ‘thing’ with an irregular surface, which does not look very palatable at all. It is prepared by the chef himself in the middle of the restaurant, for all guests at the same time, and it is ‘cooked’ in liquid nitrogen, piece by piece. When the chef gives it to your hand, it’s very cold, it even burns a little, and it emits strange fumes. Once each guest has been given their own piece, the chef then asks everybody to close their eyes and to put the ‘thing’ in their mouths. Let me try to convey the gustatory and olfactory experience which follows: various textures succeed each other, the ‘thing’ being first solid, and then very suddenly liquid and gas at the same time, where both the liquid and the gas ingredients continue to evolve

and transform, providing various stages of the overall experience. Each stage brings with itself a different taste and a different scent, ranging from wood, lichen, fir tree, pine cone, forest herbs,... to simply fresh air. The succession of the different stages provides an overall experience of smelling and tasting the forest itself—a gustatory and olfactory walk in a forest. And indeed, that's what the chef planned to provide as an experience for the guests, reinforcing the experience by telling a story aloud and by asking his guests to imagine, with their eyes always closed, that they are walking through the forest which is just behind the restaurant and where all the ingredients for this 'meal' have been collected. The succession of different tastes and odours is so skilfully done and planned that the illusion is very strong indeed and the overall experience simply staggering.

§2. We often talk about “culinary arts”, and I am going to defend the view that this is a case where we can take the “arts” label seriously. I am also going to defend the broader view that many meals and drinks, including but not being exhausted by examples of gastronomic *cuisine*, give rise to *olfactory and gustatory artworks*. Perhaps this claim is not actually very controversial and perhaps some might even find it to be rather trivial. But traditionally, visual arts like painting or sculpture, as well as auditory (musical) arts, dominate the debate in aesthetics and philosophy of art, and they of course dominate the art world in general, occupying galleries and museums around the world. In this way, our senses of *sight* and *hearing* often dominate our very understanding of what an artwork is. This is one of the reasons why artworks are mostly understood as being *public* entities—shareable in the sense of being available to different spectators/auditors. (There are of course also other types of public artworks, like novels.) In this chapter, I am going to explore other senses, which are often neglected. I'll discuss the case of *gustatory* and *olfactory* artworks and the case of *proprioceptive* artworks (I'll focus on dance, karate, and rock climbing). The overall aim of this chapter is to push the limits of what counts as art and what does not. I'll offer an inclusive view, and through the discussion of various types of examples in this chapter I'll offer reasons to think that such a view is indeed adequate. (Chap. 3 will then push the limits even further.) Many human activities will thus, in my view, give rise to artworks (or simply *be* artworks)—perhaps much more often than what is usually thought and accepted. To my mind, this is a good thing. I'll defend this general view and I am going to say why such a view does *not* lead to a situation where just 'anything counts' and where the notion of an artwork would become empty of any genuine meaning by being too broad and too inclusive. In this chapter, I'll focus on gustatory and olfactory artworks as well as on proprioceptive artworks; extending the limits concerning our sensory perceptual modalities. In the next chapter, I'll then focus on intellectual artworks; extending the limits to the domain of scientific and philosophical theories.

## 2.2 Gustatory and Olfactory Artworks

§1. To start the discussion about gustatory and olfactory art, two caveats are needed.

First, it is not clear that the two senses, namely taste and smell, are really two. Indeed, it is perhaps more adequate to say that our perceptual system typically integrates information from both of these sensory modalities into a common multi-modal whole. Taste and smell often mingle together to produce an overall experience with these two aspects, which can be distinguished to some extent, but where the resulting whole is as important as their individual contributions.<sup>1</sup> I thus suggest to talk here, for the sake of brevity, about *gustatory* experiences and about *taste*, but when I do so, I intend to fully include olfaction in the story. The sense of touch should also be included in this package, at least partly, since it allows us to feel the textures and the hardness or softness of the objects that we taste, which is highly relevant when it comes to the appreciation of their taste—typically, the way a taste is released and distributed (slowly, suddenly,...) in the mouth depends on the texture (soft, melting, hard, crunchy, ...) of what one is tasting, the texture being also related to the (continuously changing) temperature of the *gustandum*. Thus, many inter-related factors (and at least *three* senses) are involved in what I will often refer to, for the sake of brevity, as *taste* or as a *gustatory* experience.

Second, when it comes to meals, especially gastronomic meals, it is of course true that they are not only objects of gustatory appreciation, but of visual appreciation as well. Indeed, in a way that is perhaps not very controversial, gastronomic meals *qua* visually appreciated objects on a table can be understood as being artworks, in the same sense other visually accessible objects can be such (sculpture is perhaps the closest standard case). This is especially important since we typically first see what we eat before we eat it, which creates an amount of *expectation* from our part, and before we even taste anything we quite naturally imagine what it is going to taste like. This can have a strong influence on our gustatory appreciation, as many experiences involving green-coloured meat, blue-coloured strawberries, etc. have shown. Remember what the chef Marc Veyrat does when he presents his peculiar ‘meal’ to his guests: he asks everybody to close their eyes, and for a very good reason since this piece of food is visually not appealing at all, and since the whole point of the culinary experience is the gustatory aspect of it (again, including olfaction and touch as well). The point is to *focus* on the *gustatory* experience (to this end, it would perhaps be even better not to show the ‘thing’ to his guests at all.) This is of course familiar from blindfolded wine-tasting, and it is also the whole point of some popular restaurants where guests find themselves in a fully dark room and where they are thus deprived of their sense of sight. A trained evaluator of food or wine can often manage to free herself from any unwanted influences of the visual aspects of the object of her evaluation (while they are, often, actually *wanted* and judged to be relevant for the overall appreciation of a meal or a wine), and less-trained evaluators can simply try to do so, in order to isolate the gustatory aspect of their experience.

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<sup>1</sup> See Korsmeyer (1999, p. 79–84).

There are also other kinds of influences, wanted or not, that can have an impact on a gustatory experience. To mention again the case of Marc Veyrat, he not only asks his guests to close their eyes, but he also tells aloud, in the restaurant, a story about a walk in the nearby forest, thus reinforcing the overall experience of “tasting the forest”. Indeed, what he does is that he uses his uncanny meal as an imagination-triggering tool where the object he submits for gustatory appreciation to his guests prescribes imagining a specific narrative, which is then reinforced by the narrative that he explicitly voices aloud (I’ll come back to this in section V below, where I’ll make a comparison with Walton’s similar view about depiction).

§2. With all this in mind, can we say that there are gustatory *artworks*? Roger Scruton (who focuses on wine<sup>2</sup>) denies that there are because “[...] smells cannot be organized as sounds are organized: put them together and they mingle, losing their character [...] they remain free-floating and unrelated, unable to generate expectation, tension, harmony, suspension or release” (Scruton 2009, p. 122). But, we have just seen a striking counter-example to this, namely Marc Veyrat’s peculiar meal. In this case, tastes (and smells and textures) are quite precisely orchestrated and provide an organized succession of individual gustatory experiences which constitute a coherent whole, which is not only surprising but also balanced, harmonious, unified, complex, and which provides intense gustatory pleasure to the appreciator. This is a particularly elaborated case. But even if in a perhaps less strong way, this applies perfectly well to wine as well, and—perhaps even quite trivially—this is also true of many meals, especially (but not only) gastronomic meals. The idea of balance and harmony on the one hand, and surprise on the other hand, and the idea that a meal should be a complex but unified whole which provides intensity and pleasure lies probably at the core of concern of any chef who takes her cooking at heart.<sup>3</sup> We are here in a situation where the various typical features of artworks I mentioned in Chap. 1 (§3–4) are quite clearly found. Such meals (or drinks), *qua* objects of taste, thus exhibit aesthetic properties based on these various features, and they can be evaluated, appreciated and judged to be of aesthetic value by any trained (or even less trained) evaluator. As it is the case with Marc Veyrat’s guests, and as it is the case in many other situations of food tasting, wine tasting, and similar, the gustatorily accessible whole made of smells, textures, and tastes thus provides pleasure (or displeasure) which can be quite intense and trigger an emotional response, thus triggering a typical state in which we find ourselves when we appreciate the beauty of something. Thus, *contra* Scruton, it appears that the criteria (1)–(4) from Chap. 1 (§3) are in many cases of gustatory experiences fully satisfied and that such gustatory objects of appreciation can in this sense very well be understood as objects of aesthetic appreciation, where the successful (sufficiently developed) cases constitute cases of being artworks.

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<sup>2</sup>For a critical discussion and a fully-developed view about wine, see Todd (2010).

<sup>3</sup>“[...] many meals are intended by their cooks to be considered largely in this way—to be savoured, appraised, thought about, discussed—any many eaters consider them in this way. Such meals also serve the functions of relieving hunger and providing nourishment, but they are of a kind which shows that this is not the main point of them.” (Telfer 2008, p. 16).



Criterion (5) (namely, the idea that artworks have the capacity to convey meanings and ideas) is perhaps less present in the case of gustatory artworks than, say, in the case of paintings, but it is present to some extent. As already mentioned, the whole point of the gustatory experience provided by Marc Veyrat is a kind of a gustatory walk in the forest, which conveys something like the concept of a *Shinrin-yoku* (森林浴—a ‘forest bath’), which is all about the idea of connecting us to nature, to the forest, and which allows us to reflect on our often too urban lifestyles. Most meals do not have such a precise meaning, and perhaps many meals do not provide any clear meaning at all. This does not constitute an objection to the idea that there are gustatory artworks. First, because criterion (5) is not a necessary condition for being an artwork, it is simply something that many artworks provide. Second, because even if the idea conveyed by a gustatory artwork is merely a less sophisticated idea of harmony, balance, and pleasure, it is enough for us to aesthetically appreciate it. And third, the gustatory experience can trigger our imagination in such a way that as a reaction to it we can provide a further meaning—for instance, when tasting an exotic meal, the idea of where the ingredients come from, both culturally and geographically speaking, can arise.

Criterion (6) is about the idea that artworks are/should be challenging. This can be understood in many ways, and it is of course usually meant to apply to standard arts like music or painting. But one simple way in which it can be applied to the case of gustatory artworks is that discovering new tastes or new combinations of tastes can be challenging both in an immediate and intrinsic way, simply as a new gustatory sensation (where its various features such as balance, harmony, complexity, etc. play an important role), and also as a basis for cultural comparison and debate (which relates (6) to (5))—a sharp, strong and stinky *Bleu d’Auvergne* cheese is quite typical of one cultural background; earthy and musky *Fenugreek* spices are typical of another; *umami* (うま味—‘pleasant savoury taste’) is typical of yet another, and so on. It is common nowadays, at least in developed countries around the world, to have easy access to any type of food and tastes, so we are not any more so easily surprised and challenged, but the first time we taste something new, or when we taste a new combination of tastes, we do (at least sometimes) have a challenging gustatory experience. When it comes to very sophisticated gastronomic meals, wines, or whiskeys, the whole point is sometimes (not always) to provide a novel, surprising and challenging experience to the appreciator.

Concerning (7) and (8), quite trivially, it is the case that food, again especially when it comes to elaborated meals, as well as wine or whiskey, requires tremendous skill to be produced (this is (7)), and that it is of course highly relevant also as a non-aesthetic object and has a non-aesthetic function—we do need to eat to stay alive, after all (this is (8)). Focusing on the gustatory (and olfactory) aspect of food, since this is the issue here, tastes and smells are of paramount importance when it comes to spot unhealthy or rotten food, for instance.

§3. Quite clearly, what precedes indicates that we may consider gustatory artworks as being genuine artworks indeed. There is of course the question about what kind of food provides a gustatory experience which counts as an artwork and which does not. The taste of a quickly, unskilfully, and badly made burger would hardly be such that

it would give rise to a gustatory artwork. But this does not provide an objection to the claim that at least some gustatory experiences are artworks. The various features we have seen above, namely harmony, unity, balance, complexity, simplicity, intensity, passion, or pleasure, will be found in some gustatory experiences and not in others. The same is true of any other type of art—my 6-years-old son’s drawings and Dalí’s paintings do not exhibit the same amount of potential for being artworks either (which does not imply that a child’s drawing *cannot* be an artwork). In section IV below, I’ll come back to this general issue when I’ll examine the claim that ‘not anything counts’ (that not everything turns out automatically to count as art in my rather inclusive view), and also that not everybody’s taste provides a good ground for evaluation.

Before we get there, let us turn our attention, in the next section, to another type of non-visual and non-auditory artworks.

### 2.3 Proprioceptive Artworks

§1. Proprioception is an inner sense—the inner perception which provides us with information about the position, the posture, and movements of our body. While writing this book on my computer in my office, I am sitting on a chair and I know, via proprioception, where my legs are and in what position they are, without having to look at them. I don’t always (actually, almost never, in this situation) *think* about the position or movements of my legs while I am writing this book, but the information is readily and immediately available.

I’ll take here on board the idea that proprioception is a kind of perception (see O’Shaughnessy 1998; Fridland 2011; for a critical discussion see Gallagher 2003). The sense of sight and the sense of hearing give us the possibility of visual and auditory perception, and the sense of proprioception gives us the possibility of an inner perception of our bodies. It is a controversial matter to determine whether proprioception is a distinct sensory modality from the sense of touch or if both of these senses are somehow variants of one and the same perceptual modality. O’Shaughnessy (1998) argues that they are two distinct perceptual faculties, while Massin and Monnoyer (2003) defend the view that proprioception and touch are one and the same sensory modality. For my current purposes, it is not necessary to make a choice between these two options—the important thing here is that proprioception can be reasonably understood as a kind of perception. We have seen in the case of gustatory experiences that they actually involve not only taste but also olfaction and touch, constituting a complex multi-modal whole. Perhaps a similar claim can be made here: we can reasonably say that proprioception, even under the view according to which it is a distinct sensory modality from the sense of touch, is often supplemented and accompanied by the sense of touch. Plausibly, I know where my legs are and in what position they are not only via pure proprioception but also via the sensation of how they touch the floor and the chair on which I am sitting. Indeed, our body always encounters some kind of *resistance* from the external world, often sensed by touch,

which provides information about its posture, position, and movement. So, either the sense of touch and the sense of proprioception are one and the same thing, or they are two different sensory modalities but they often combine into a complex whole which provides us with the relevant information. Both options are compatible with what I am going to say below about proprioceptive experiences and proprioceptive artworks, and for the sake of brevity (as in the case of gustatory artworks) and I am only going to use the label “proprioception”, while keeping in mind that touch plays a role as well.

§2. I am going to talk about three types of activities: dance, martial arts (especially *kata*), and climbing, but of course my purpose is not (only) to make a specific claim about these three activities, but to argue for the general claim that there are proprioceptive experiences which ‘count’ as artworks. [Other sport activities or even any other activities engaging in the relevant way with one own’s body could provide other examples (Kilian Jornet, a Spanish professional runner and ski mountaineer, explicitly claims that running races are artworks.<sup>4</sup>)] Before we start, two caveats are needed.

First (as we have also seen in the case of gustatory experiences), dance, karate, or climbing not only provide proprioceptive experiences, on which I’ll focus here, but they also provide visually accessible objects/events of perception for viewers who can appreciate a ballet, a *kata*, or a climber’s ascent from the third-person perspective. The case of dance is perhaps the most obviously and standardly such that it gives rise to a visually accessible artwork. The same can be said about *kata* (which are indeed very similar to choreographed dances), and perhaps more controversially about a climber’s movements while climbing a route, but I am not going to discuss any of these cases since they are (when/if they are) cases of *visual* artworks. My focus will be on proprioception.

It is true that dancers watch themselves in mirrors, and so do martial arts practitioners, in order to improve and adjust their movements. Climbers, especially professional climbers, use video recordings to watch themselves climb and to analyse their movements from the (public) third-person perspective. Adam Ondra, arguably the best climber alive (who climbed in 2017 the world’s first 5.15d/9c route *Silence* in Norway—the most difficult route in the world) uses motion capture technology—in the same way the movie character Gollum was created, Ondra climbs with a number of sensors on his body, and this then allows him to watch a computer generated 3D model of himself climbing, and to analyse his movements in fine detail (see Bocek et al. 2018). But skilled dancers, karateka, as well as climbers rely most of all on proprioception to know whether a movement or a posture is correct or not. Mirrors, video recordings, and computer models can help, but a good practitioner will only use them as additional, secondary tools. The experienced practitioner will mostly appeal to her proprioceptive experience to adjust her movements/posture and improve her skills. (This is less true in the case of novices, who first have to learn before being able to rely on their proprioceptive experiences.) This is why (again, similarly to

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<sup>4</sup>Kilian Jornet, “*Run or Die: The Inspirational Memoir of the World’s Greatest Ultra-Runner*”, VeloPress.

what we have seen in the case of gustatory experiences), in a way that goes in the other direction than the use of mirrors or recordings, advanced practitioners would sometimes train blindfolded, in order to rely *only* on proprioception and touch to do what they are doing. (This is more common in martial arts, but some climbers also do train blindfolded in the secure environment of an indoor climbing wall.) Depriving themselves of the sense of vision, which is so crucially important that it tends to occupy the largest part of their normal conscious experience, they can then focus better on the properly proprioceptive experience and learn how to better exploit it. Marc Veyrat asks his guests to taste his meal blindfolded to highlight the gustatory experience, and the idea is here the same when it comes to proprioception.<sup>5</sup>

In short, in the case of dance, *kata*, or climbing, we have a *public* performance, visually accessible by viewers from the third-person perspective, but there also is a *private* proprioceptive experience of the dancer, karateka, or climber; an experience which is only accessible to the one who is doing the performance. The view I want to defend concerns the *latter*, and I will claim that it can give rise to proprioceptive artworks.

A second introductory point to keep in mind concerns the fact that, as O'Shaughnessy (1998, §1) puts it, “[proprioception] takes a back seat in consciousness almost all the time”. This is true: as mentioned before, most of the time, I am not actively proprioceiving the position of my legs while I am writing this book. Thus, a first requirement for there to be a proprioceptive artwork is that the relevant proprioceptive experience must (of course) be conscious and must (importantly) be focused on. This is why dance, *kata*, and climbing are such useful and good examples—indeed, practitioners of these activities are typically invited, by the very nature of what they are doing (at least, if they are doing it right), to focus on their proprioceptive experience. They need to pay attention to their proprioception. This is what O'Shaughnessy (1998, §2.a.1) refers to as “introspective proprioception”, where our bodily position, posture, and movement are the focal point of our attention. Some sport activities are about being quick and about reacting and executing movements in such a quick way that they need to be almost automatic. While such ‘automated’ movements can also sometimes be found in martial arts, dance, or climbing, more often than not practitioners of these activities have the luxury of taking their time to consciously and in a very focused way execute their movements. Climbers often pause between movements and think about the next hard movement before going for it, this is fully part of what climbing is about. Thus, they focus on the contraction of their muscles, on the very precise way their body is positioned at the moment and they very carefully imagine what the next movement must be and in what position

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<sup>5</sup>I am not going to explore here the possibility that sexual activity can also provide proprioceptive experiences that could be artworks. But I do not see, *prima facie*, a principled obstacle to such a claim. Note that a blindfolded sexual experience (or an experience taking place in a fully dark environment) is appreciated by some practitioners, precisely in order to allow proprioception and touch to play the central role in their experience, without the influence of visual elements. Note what Schrenk (2014, p. 112) says about *sex-work*: “Would, for example, a sex-worker’s performance on one’s body, where intense proprioception is secured, be art? [...] If however, such meaning can be given to the sexual acts [...] there is probably no reason why sex-work could not become an art”.

their body will be after that next movement, before they actually do it—the harder the route, the more this is the case. Perhaps climbing is one of the best examples of this, and perhaps even more so than *kata* or choreographed dances where a larger amount of automatic execution is often required, in order to guarantee speed and fluidity. As it happens, climbers tend to focus and to consciously pay attention to their movements at all times (except if the route is easy and does not require to focus so much). This is also due to the fact that dancers and karateka often repeat the very same sequences of movements—involved in the same *kata* or the same dance—while climbers, once they successfully climbed a given route, typically move on to try another one and as a consequence they cannot ‘automatically’ repeat the same (sequences of) learned and repeatedly practiced movements (‘speed climbing’ is an infamous counter-example—often discarded by rock climbers as not really being proper climbing at all, partly precisely for the reasons I just mentioned). *Paying attention* is important, otherwise the aesthetic experience of one’s proprioceptive experience is lost. The same is true in the case of gustatory experiences as well: even the very best of gastronomic meals can fail to give rise to a gustatory artwork if it is quickly eaten while watching TV and if the one who eats it simply does not pay attention to what it tastes like.

§3. One of the very best climbers alive, Chris Sharma, says that climbing is like dance on the rock: “Climbing is an artistic, creative thing.[...] Climbing is a full-body sport from your fingers to your toes, but at the same time, it’s like a dance on the rock. It’s about being strong and fit but also graceful and elegant and efficient on the rock.[...] It’s not just about being super strong.”<sup>6</sup> For Sharma, as a skilled practitioner, as well as for most rock climbers, it is just obvious that climbing is not only about strength but—very importantly—about elegance and beauty. Adam Ondra’s climbing training for the next Olympic Games in Tokyo 2020 does actually involve *ballet dancing*—precisely and explicitly to work on the elegance of his body movements.<sup>7</sup> This is why I am going to focus on rock climbing as being a good example of an activity which can give rise to proprioceptive artworks. But I do not mean to claim that there is something special about climbing here. Schrenk (2014) explores this claim in detail when it comes to martial arts, and I’ll mention some useful points of comparison below. Barbara Montero argues for the possibility of proprioceptive artworks when it comes to dance: “proprioception is an aesthetic sense and [...] one can make aesthetic judgements based on proprioceptive experience.[...] One can deem a certain movement beautiful based on one’s proprioceptive experience of the movement.[...] athletes, models, and perhaps even those with natural grace, may sense the beauty of their movements proprioceptively but the proprioceptive aesthetic sensibility of the dancer is perhaps the most pronounced.” (Montero 2006, p. 231). This is one of the reasons why, according to Montero, the best evaluators of the aesthetic properties of a dance are people who are dancers themselves and who can imaginatively ‘share’ the proprioceptive experience of the one who is dancing. In my view, Montero is basically right except perhaps for the very last point in the citation

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<sup>6</sup>Interview by Morty Ain for ‘ESPN, The Magazine’, July 2013.

<sup>7</sup>See Ondra’s Youtube video: <https://youtu.be/0KfE2ONpO20>.

above, since in my view the aesthetic sensibility of climbers or karateka is also very high. Sharma says that climbing is like dance on the rock, and it is easy to see how *kata* are similar to choreographed dances—in this way, we find similar elements and similar types of proprioceptive experiences in all of these three activities. Relevantly to the purposes of the discussion here, all three activities exhibit the aspects and features that are significant for the claim that there can be proprioceptive artworks. Let us, then, focus on climbing in some more detail.

§4. As an outsider to the world of rock climbing, one might think that climbing is about getting to the top of a mountain or a rock wall. Perhaps this is so because there is some amount of vagueness surrounding alpinism, Himalayan expeditions, and rock climbing—and because, after all, these all often involve *climbing mountains* where a successful practitioner *does* often get to the top of some summit. I am going to leave alpinism and mountain climbing aside, and only focus on what is often referred to as “rock climbing” or “sport climbing”. Rock climbing is not so much about getting to the top of something, it is about *sequences of perfect movements*. Take a common situation: a rock climber tries for the first time a route and finds it utterly impossible to climb. Perhaps, she manages to climb some sections, but as a whole the route appears to be too difficult. She just does not *see* what to do in order to connect the dots and make a successful ascent without falling or stopping. Sometimes, a particular movement just requires more strength than what she has. But often, the failure or success is not just a matter of sheer strength. Even a climber strong enough to climb a given route might be puzzled by it at first. Indeed, climbing routes are *puzzles*—for the body and for the mind. As Nguyen (2017) puts it, climbing is a “hyper-intellectual” sport. In order to successfully complete a given route, one needs to ‘solve’ it—and, importantly, one needs to solve it with one’s own body as well as one’s imagination. A climber needs to try, again and again, in order to feel and find the precise position of all<sup>8</sup> parts of her body, her body weight distribution, the parsimoniously applied amount of required strength (while keeping strength for the remaining part of the route), as well as the order in which the holds need to be grasped in a very precise and carefully balanced manner. Once such a sequence of subtle and refined movements is found, all there is to do is to execute it; but this is the less interesting part of the job and it is—usually—less difficult than the process that lead to the personal discovery of *how* the route should be climbed. In many climbers’ experience, once the puzzle has been solved, the route that seemed impossible at first becomes actually rather easy to climb—sometimes, it is surprising how something impossible becomes so easy to do. Thus, rock climbing is all about finding a harmony between oneself and the route. Once this harmony is found, as Nguyen (2017) nicely says, “you dance your way up that wall”. Indeed, this is the very point of rock climbing—again, it’s not about getting to the top of a mountain or a wall, and not just because there are usually much easier ways to get to the top anyway, but importantly because a climber typically does not want to complete a

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<sup>8</sup>Including even the head. Adam Ondra is known to have a long neck, which allows him to use the weight of his head to counterbalance the weight of other parts of his body, when he climbs particularly difficult routes.

route and arrive to the top just by applying brute strength, but rather by finding the best, most elegant, and most economical way to execute the required sequence of movements to finish the route in a ‘clean’ and balanced way.

Thus, as a *proprioceptive* affair, rock climbing is full of aesthetic experiences. We find here, quite obviously and strongly, all of the common features of aesthetic experiences mentioned earlier such as harmony, symmetry, unity, passion, pleasure, balance, intensity, complexity, simplicity, and elegance. A climber’s movement can be awkward and can only succeed by applying sheer strength, but as I emphasized above, a climber will not be happy with such a success—she’ll be after a movement that *feels right*: grace must combine with power to provide a feeling of a precise and economical movement, executed with simplicity and elegance. Such a movement is often both simple and incredibly complex: it is simple because it proprioceptively feels so once it is mastered and gracefully, fluidly performed; and it is complex because it often involves many micro-movements and individual position adjustments of all parts of the climber’s body, in very much detail. This is why it can take a long time before a climber ‘solves’ a particular section of a difficult route, since it requires many, many attempts.<sup>9</sup>

This kind of activity requires the practitioner to focus in a very strong way on her proprioceptive experience—otherwise, quite simply, it will just not work. Many climbers report that while they climb they manage to be incredibly intensely focused just on what they are doing and proprioceiving.<sup>10</sup> As Nguyen (2017) puts it: “Some of the most focused and attentive I’ve ever been in my life is on a hard climb—mind zeroed in on tiny ripples in the rock for my feet, exactly the angle of my ankle, whether I’m holding the most grippy part of the rock with my hand, the exact level of force I need to push with on my foot as I slide over to the next hold.” This is, indeed, the perfect case of what O’Shaughnessy (1998, §2.a.1) refers to as “introspective proprioception”. In a very focused way, climbers are then conscious of their own movements, as well as the posture and position of their body, in great detail and in a very demanding way, and the aesthetic experience they are having then arises from their proprioceptive experience. A climber’s movements (and complex sequences of movements) just *have to be* balanced, harmonious, unified, simple and complex, economical and gracefully fluid—otherwise, she will just not succeed to complete a difficult route. Thus, the very nature of rock climbing is such that, when done in a correct way, it actually *forces* the practitioners to have a proprioceptive aesthetic experience. This is then where the intense pleasure and passion of most climbers comes from.

§5. Let us now consider the list of criteria we have seen in Chap. 1 (§3–4) for something to be an artwork, and let us see how they apply to proprioceptive experiences such as those we can find in rock climbing, martial arts, and dance. We

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<sup>9</sup>Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson’s first ascent of the most difficult multi-pitch route in the world “Dawn Wall” (5.14d/9a, 32 pitches, El Capitan, Yosemite) provides an excellent illustration of this. (See the documentary film “Dawn Wall” (2017) about this ascent).

<sup>10</sup>Alex Honnold’s free solo (i.e. without a rope) ascent of “Freerider” (5.12d/7c, 900m, El Capitan, Yosemite, 6/3/2017) is a staggering example of focusing capability. (See the documentary film “Free solo” (2018) about this ascent).



have already seen that, *qua* proprioceptive experiences, climbs possess many of the standard features artworks typically have. We have seen that the very nature of rock climbing is such that it actually forces the practitioner to focus on her proprioceptive experience and that it also forces her—if she wants to successfully climb a difficult route—to have aesthetic experiences. Indeed, the proprioceptive aesthetic experience—in short, the elegance of a movement—will help the climber to climb better. Points (1) and (3) are thus quite obviously satisfied, as is point (4)—indeed, the emotional response to the experience of oneself climbing is often strong, both when things work in the perfect and elegant way they should, where the sheer joy of feeling oneself climbing fluidly and well is significant, as well as when, exasperatingly, things do not work. Many climbers would shout aloud in strong frustration when they fall, especially if they do not understand what it is exactly that they are doing wrong—that is, in a situation in which they did not yet solve the puzzle of a given route. Adam Ondra is quite known to shout very loudly when he falls, using some very strong language (fortunately, to be understood only by the Czechs).

(1), (3) and (4) are also commonplace in the case of martial arts and in the case of dance. Proprioceptive experiences of *kata* and of dance also importantly involve movements that aim at being balanced, harmonious, unified, both simple and complex, as well as economical and gracefully fluid. It is also true, in both of these cases, that the very nature of these activities is such that it requires the practitioner to focus on her proprioceptive experience, and that this aesthetic proprioceptive experience is a good guide to doing things right. When it comes to martial arts, Schrenk (2014, p. 112) makes a comparison with ‘standard’ visual and auditory arts and he even claims that the former probably satisfy criterion (4) better than the latter: “While many auditory and visual arts affect the intellect more than the emotions (or, at least, emotions only mediated through the intellect), a proprioceptive art would be directly in touch with one’s feelings.” Indeed, when immersed in a proprioceptive experience, one does feel very strongly and immediately her own body and the emotions associated with what is going on.

Of course, not only do climbers, karateka, or dancers have aesthetic proprioceptive experiences and strong emotions associated with them, but they also, often and passionately, talk about them, articulating *aesthetic judgements* about what they are doing. When it comes to climbing movements, the word “elegant” is perhaps the most often pronounced, as well as the word “beautiful”. Adam Ondra comments on his climbing of “Robin Ud” (9b/5.15b): “The beauty of movement is very important for me. Very often I can find it on some rocks that a lot of people would think of as very crappy. But the beauty of movement is there [...]”<sup>11</sup> As we have seen above, these are not metaphorical uses of this vocabulary; rather, the fact that aesthetic judgements about a climb are so natural and so common points to the fact that they are indeed understood as such by skilled practitioners. (Remember Sharma’s explicit claim above that “climbing is an artistic, creative thing”.) Thus, point (2) in the list of criteria from Chap. 1 is also satisfied, and of course not only when it comes to climbing but when it comes to dance and *kata* as well.

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<sup>11</sup> Adam Ondra’s first ascent of “Robin Ud”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbK4MqpFsVc>.



Point (5) is perhaps less clear-cut. Do climbs, *kata*, or dances, *qua* proprioceptive experiences, have the capacity to convey meanings and ideas? We must be careful here not to mix up ideas and meanings that can be conveyed by the activity as such, and the ideas and meanings that can be conveyed by the activity as a proprioceptive experience. Indeed, it is uncontroversial that climbing involves many values and ideas—perhaps, to cite only one, a sense of trust and friendship, since a climber’s life quite literally depends on the skills of the other climber who is belaying her. In the case of karate, many of the values associated with it even lie quite outside the scope of the activity as a combat technique—indeed, “karate” means “empty hand” (空手) and is often supplemented by “dō” (道) which means “path” or “way”; the idea being here that karate-dō is not merely a fighting system but that it also is a spiritual system: the way of the empty hand. But such ideas and meanings are not directly linked to the *proprioceptive* experience of climbing or of performing a *kata*. Rather, they are overall ideas concerning these activities. Ideas and meanings exhibited by the proprioceptive experiences of climbers, karateka, or dancers are linked to the feelings of one’s own body. They can involve ideas of health, fitness, ‘feeling good in one’s body’, harmony between one’s body and one’s mind, and they can perhaps convey values such as perseverance and effort, since when a practitioner succeeds in performing a perfect sequence of graceful and powerful movements, all the hard training suddenly comes together and makes sense. Most of all, the ideas involved in such proprioceptive experiences are, more directly, the ideas of balance, harmony, unity, elegance, simplicity, and efficiency.

Point (8) is about the fact that artworks can also be objects which have relevant non-aesthetic features and a non-aesthetic function. Here again, we must be careful to distinguish between such features that climbing, karate, or dance possess as human activities and the features they possess *qua* proprioceptive experiences. Indeed, karate is a fighting technique, whose practical use is one of the very reasons for its existence, while climbing does of course have the practical use to, say, get to the top of a mountain. Both disciplines, and of course dance as well, can also be appreciated as sport activities, improving one’s health and fitness. But again, this is not related directly to the *proprioceptive* experience had by the practitioners. The practical usefulness of the proprioceptive experience is something we have already seen above: it helps the practitioners to climb, dance, or perform a *kata* better. The proprioceptive experience is indeed one of the best guides to performing the perfect movement and sequences of movements. As already noted, this is particularly interesting since it is the aesthetic aspect of the proprioceptive experience—the elegance, balance, harmony, unity, etc. of the movements—that helps the practitioner to improve her skills. This, then, also relates to point (7), namely the idea that artworks require skill to be produced, which is here quite obviously the case, since in order to be able to have a proprioceptive experience which exhibits the aesthetic features of beauty, elegance, harmony, etc., long and hard training is required. The challenging aspect (point (6)) of such aesthetic proprioceptive experiences lies then in the fact that they encourage and stimulate the practitioner—the artist—to do better and better. Indeed, these experiences are such that they provide the standard by which success or failure are measured, where here again it is their aesthetic properties that allow one to say whether one has succeeded or

not—a climber, a karateka, or a dancer would not be entirely happy with a sequence of movements which would look right from the third-person point of view (and which would, say, successfully get her to the top of a mountain) but which would not ‘feel right’ and graceful/elegant from the introspectively proprioceptive private first-person point of view.

## 2.4 Training, Skill, and Evaluation

§1. Let us quickly sum up where we are. I have started in Chap. 1 by listing some criteria for something to be an artwork, while pointing to the fact that they do not constitute necessary and sufficient conditions and that they do not provide a strict definition of what an artwork is. Both when it comes to gustatory experiences and to proprioceptive experiences, I have then provided study cases which satisfy these criteria. As a consequence, we can then rather safely conclude that they qualify as being artworks.

§2. In this sense, I thus offer here a very inclusive view about what counts as art and what does not (in Chap. 3, I’ll extend it even further). I take this to be a welcome output—the good news that we can produce and enjoy art more broadly than what one would perhaps have thought. But this does not mean that ‘anything goes’, that anything is an artwork; let us now consider some constraints as to what counts as an artwork as well as constraints concerning the evaluation of artworks.

When it comes to martial arts, Schrenk (2014, p. 108) puts the point nicely: “If you ‘play’ your body well, like a musician plays a sonata on her instrument, you have ‘harmonious’ proprioceptions. Many factors, including precision, speed, the appropriate kinetics and mental and physical fortitude have to be in proper control: not any performance will lead to something aesthetic and it takes the practitioner a long stony way under the austere guidance of their master to learn the right movements with the correct intrinsic dynamics. Yet, again, just as a violinist hears when his performance is right the martial artist will, with enough practice, herself feel when her movements are correct. As with sonatas, it is then that proprioceptive pleasure is greatest.” Schrenk is right, as we have also already seen in III.§5 above with respect to criterion (7), concerning climbing, karate, and dance. Schrenk’s formulation—‘playing one’s body’—nicely sums up the idea that exactly as it takes time and effort to master a musical instrument, it takes time and effort to master one’s own body to be able to produce movements that are both efficient and graceful—and it is only then that an appropriately aesthetic proprioceptive experience can take place, giving rise to a proprioceptive artwork.

The same is true when it comes to gustatory artworks. Marc Veyrat’s peculiar meal is an example of tremendous skill and a result of great effort and training. A lot of things need to come together and need to be done well in order to provide such a gustatory experience to the guests of his restaurant. This is, of course, true of many well-done and carefully prepared meals, gastronomic or not. More often than not, the greater the skill and effort, the better and stronger the aesthetic gustatory experience.

Granted, there are exceptions and interesting borderline cases. This is one of the reasons why I suggested in Chap. 1 that there can be nothing like a strict definition of what counts as art and what does not. Indeed, it is sometimes the very point of an artwork to question where the limits of art lie—and to explicitly cross them. Well-known, now standard, cases include Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades, which are ordinary objects put on display, such as his “Fountain” (1917). Another striking well-known example is John Cage’s composition “4’33” (1952) which consists of three movements:

First movement—silence (00:00—00:30).

Second movement—silence (00:31—02:53).

Third movement—silence (02:54—04:33).

Are there similar cases when it comes to gustatory and proprioceptive artworks? Could there be a *kata* where the karateka would simply stand still for, say, 4 min and 33 s? On the one hand, we could think that such a performance would hardly count as a karate performance at all, since the point of a *kata* is to be an imaginary combat—a combat against imaginary opponents. Not moving at all might not be the best fighting technique to overcome attacking adversaries. On the other hand, such a performance might actually provide a valuable proprioceptive (and introspective) experience, as many meditation techniques have shown (Zazen is a well-known example). This proprioceptive experience might then exhibit aesthetic features and might be subject to aesthetic appreciation, and thus count as an artwork, even if perhaps only in the way in which a borderline case might count as such. When listening to his “4’33”, Cage wants us to pay attention to the silence, *and* to the noises there always are—silence is actually, under normal conditions, never complete. The same could be said of the karateka who is standing still—concentrating on her stillness, she might notice all of the unavoidable, small and usually imperceptible movements of her body.

When it comes to borderline examples of gastronomic meals, Marc Veyrat provides, here again, a striking example: another of his meals on the menu consists in an empty plate. It’s quite a puzzling situation for a guest to be presented with a small, white, simple, empty plate. Marc Veyrat then sits down at the table with the guest and tells her a story about how, when he was young, in order to have less work and save water when doing the dishes, in his family they would use plates from both sides—first, the regular side for the main meal, and then they would return the plate and use its bottom to eat desert. After telling this story, he then returns the empty plate, and the guest discovers that in the small hollow space on the bottom of the plate is a skilfully integrated *crème brûlée*. Thus, in the end, the plate is not empty after all, and so the situation is here not directly comparable to Cage’s “4’33”. But at first, during the first stage of the process, the guest does have a type of a gustatory experience ‘of nothing’, given the empty plate and given the fact that she is at first led to believe that there is nothing more to it than just the empty plate. This might then be understood as an equivalently borderline experience to the listening to Cage’s composition. One might understand the absence of a gustatory experience as a gustatory experience of an absence—indeed, after having tasted and eaten a dozen spectacular gastronomic meals, the guest is suddenly presented with only the taste of his own empty mouth, which *does* have a taste that we usually do not notice, and

Veyrat's empty plate might precisely provide us with an experience where we focus on it (similarly as Cage's composition makes the listener focus on the silence, which is usually never entirely devoid of any sound either).

Such cases explore the limits of what can be acceptable as being an artwork or not, but the point is not different, as we have seen, in cases of gustatory or proprioceptive artworks and cases of more standard (although borderline) visual or auditory artworks. In my view, there is no strong reason to exclude such cases (Duchamp's "Fountain", Cage's "4'33", Veyrat's empty plate, a karateka's performance of standing still); they can count as being interesting borderline cases of (visual, auditory, gustatory, proprioceptive) art. But the main point I would like to emphasize is that they all fall or stand together: if, say, we accept Cage's composition as being an auditory artwork, we should then accept all the other cases, and vice versa.

§3. To conclude this section, some remarks concerning the evaluation of artworks is in order. To start, it is important to keep in mind that the evaluator's competence and skill play an important role. Indeed, exactly as not any proprioceptive or gustatory experience is an artwork, not everybody is a good evaluator of such pieces of art. This is why the aesthetic judgements involved in criterion (2) from Chap. 1 must always be judgements of *skilled and experienced practitioners*. When it comes to climbing, this is utterly obvious: in order to be able to see the beauty, elegance, grace, fluidity, and efficiency of one's movements while having the proprioceptive experience of climbing, one needs to have enough experience to be able to compare this experience to previous experiences and one—quite straightforwardly—needs to be skilled and strong enough to be able to perform the movements in the first place. Easy climbing routes usually do not require any particularly elegant movements; beginner's routes would be no harder than climbing a somewhat complicated ladder. The more technical a route gets, the more it will require movements that are precise, and that need to be elegantly and harmoniously combined to produce sequences of movements such that the climber will be able to successfully climb the given route. In short, a novice will simply not be able to execute the movements that are required to provide a sufficiently complex and rich proprioceptive experience to give rise to a proprioceptive artwork. The very same is true when it comes to martial arts, and dance as well. Of course, in some situations, some amount of elegance and proprioceptive beauty can be achieved without too much skill, but usually it will be true that the more a practitioner is skilled the more she will be able to create a proprioceptive experience that will be an artwork—in virtue of exhibiting harmony, symmetry, unity, balance, complexity, simplicity, intensity, passion, pleasure. Thus, criterion (2) from Chap. 1 is perhaps even more important when it comes to proprioceptive artworks than when it comes to visual and auditory artworks, which are more easily accessible to an unexperienced spectator. Indeed, in the case of proprioceptive artworks, the spectator also needs to be the artist, which means that the spectator needs to be skilled enough not only to appreciate the work of art, but also to create it. (I'll say more about the private aspect of such artworks in the next section below.)

In addition to her skill and experience, the evaluator's *aesthetic taste* also plays an important role. In the case of climbing, a skilled climber will often have a preference

for some *types* of routes, requiring some types of movements. Some climbers will prefer strongly overhanging cliffs requiring a lot of work with the managing of one's own strength (economy and fluidity are here crucially important), as well as a number of acrobatic moves where one sometimes needs to place one's feet higher than one's hands, etc. Other climbers will prefer vertical routes with very tiny holds, where the key notions will be precision and balance. In the evaluation of the aesthetic proprioceptive experience, a climber's capacity and personal taste will thus play a central role when she'll make an aesthetic judgement about a route. But the notion of taste here is not just one of a mere liking. As Sibley puts it: "When I speak of taste [...], I shall not be dealing with questions which center upon expressions like 'a matter of taste' (meaning, roughly, a matter of personal preference or liking). It is with an ability to notice or discern things that I am concerned." (Sibley 1959, p. 423; see also Telfer 2008, p. 13) This is quite clear in the case of gustatory artworks, where experts would often evaluate a meal positively even when it does not fit their own personal preferences. Such 'taste' is indeed trainable and more objective than a simple liking. An expert will learn to distinguish different flavours, fragrances, and so on. Experts—both when it comes to gustatory experiences as well when it comes to proprioceptive experiences—will also often share standards by which they can evaluate the *gustandum* or the proprioceptive experience. The capacity to discern beauty of such trained and experienced experts will thus be higher than the capacity of a novice, whose taste will be closer to a mere liking. This, of course, echoes Hume's (1757) claim that not everybody's taste counts and that not everybody can play the role of a good art critic. Not surprisingly, experienced karateka, experienced climbers, and good chefs will thus often agree on the aesthetic properties of a proprioceptive/gustatory experience, and will evaluate the resulting proprioceptive/gustatory artworks accordingly. Of course, such artworks are private and cannot be shared directly; as a consequence, they cannot be evaluated directly by more than one evaluator. But this does not mean that any comparison is impossible, it only means that the evaluators must keep in mind the private aspect of such pieces of art, and use indirect means to compare their respective experiences—quite simply, by talking about them.

## 2.5 'Private Versus Public'—Some Remarks

§1. Excluding gustatory and proprioceptive experiences such as those we have seen above as being artworks on the ground that they are accessible only to the one and only subject who has them—that is, that they are private rather than public—would be question-begging. Indeed, it is often distinguished between on the one hand an artwork and on the other hand the experience that an artwork triggers (see the rather standard criterion (3) on the list in Chap. 1), but here, in the case of proprioceptive and gustatory artworks, the private experience *is* the artwork itself, making this case special in this sense. But even if this does not prevent such experiences to be artworks, their privateness is quite a striking feature, as opposed to more standard, public,

visual or auditory artworks, which invites now some remarks on the ‘private/public’ distinction.

§2. From the experiential proprioceptive/gustatory point of view, two subjects can have the same type of experience but never, of course, the same token. Two karateka can perform the same *kata*, two climbers can climb the same route, two dancers can perform the same choreographed dance, and two guests at Marc Veyrat’s restaurant can taste the same meals. But of course, the private aspect of such experiences is central to them, as Barbara Montero clearly puts it when it comes to dance: “It is not merely that the proprioceptive experience seems private since, arguably, there is a sense in which all experience is private. Rather, it is that the object of experience appears to be private: the object of visual experience, a painting, can be experienced visually by many observers, while the object of proprioceptive experience, one’s own body, can be proprioceived only by oneself” (Montero 2006, p. 234). When it comes to climbing, Karlsen (2010) rightly remarks that the appreciation of the public performance—watching a climber’s performance—is not sufficient in order to be able to appreciate the aesthetic aspect of climbing. We need to “include the experiential aspect of a climb” (Karlsen 2010, p. 221), since “a route being at the limit of one’s skills is a criterion that [...] is valid for most climbers” (p. 222). The experiential, private aspect of proprioceptive experiences is thus central to their aesthetic appreciation. This is less the case when it comes to gustatory experiences, since the same bit of food can be consumed by several subjects who can then have the same (or a very similar) experience, at least to some extent, limited by the size/quantity available of the given piece of food. While you cannot proprioceive my body, I can taste a bit of your dinner. The privateness aspect of proprioceptive experiences is thus special and stronger than in the case of gustatory experiences. However, the extent to which gustatory experiences can be similar and shared is very limited when compared to experiences of visual and auditory art, where a great—perhaps in principle unlimited—number of observers can have access to the very same artwork.

We might thus suggest that visual and auditory works of art dominate our normal understanding of what art is precisely because they have a public character—thus, they are more easily shareable and more easily accessible (since, as noted above, the spectator does not need to be the artist). As Monroe (2009, p. 134–135) rightly emphasizes, artworks such as paintings and sculptures also are permanent objects, as opposed to performance arts and, relevantly to our discussion, to proprioceptive or gustatory experiences, and this is one more reason for the former to dominate a standard understanding of what art is, since they are thus easily accessible to many observers. Monroe mentions Hegel as defending what he refers to as the ‘Consumption Exclusion Thesis’, namely the idea that the fact that food is consumed/destroyed while being appreciated does not allow for its possibility to count as an artwork. Proprioceptive and gustatory *experiences* are even more impermanent and private than that. But, precisely because they are private, proprioceptive and gustatory artworks might provide a *stronger* aesthetic experience. As Schrenk points out, “while a well conducted performance of a *hyong* or *kata* is a pleasure to watch, it is an even greater joy to perform it oneself”, and he adds that, for this reason, in order to enjoy an even stronger experience “sometimes *hyongs* are a blindfolded exercise

where the practitioner has to rely entirely on proprioception” (Schrenk 2014, p. 108). Perhaps the point here can be put as the idea that in the case of private artworks, the aesthetic experience is more *immediate*, and that it is thus related more directly to our emotions and feelings, which are central to aesthetic experience (see criterion (4) from Chap. 1). Indeed, as already mentioned above, the subjective perspective is here more important than the objective perspective, and the privateness of the experience is often put forward as being decisively important: “As it turns out, it’s not that interesting to watch somebody climb [The Angler—a climbing route in Joe’s Valley].[On a technical route with tiny holds], to somebody watching from outside, it looks... like nothing. Even for an experienced climber, it’s pretty boring to watch somebody else climb [The Angler].[...] In this particular climb, all those fascinating internal movements are invisible to the external eye. The aesthetics of movement, here, are for the climber alone” (Nguyen 2017). Thus, on the one hand, private artworks have the ‘drawback’ of not being shareable as easily as visual and auditory public artworks, but on the other hand, precisely because of this aspect, they provide special, and perhaps stronger, aesthetic experiences.

§3. In the case of private artworks, there is a lot of inter-subjective variance and instability, since, strictly speaking, any given private work of art is unique. But even private artworks often have *publicly accessible recipes*. This is quite literally the case when it comes to gustatory artworks, where a recipe would provide the means to create a meal which can then provide a given gustatory experience. The situation is very much the same when it comes to a *kata* or a choreographed dance, which are *repeatable* in the sense that the practitioner follows a precise recipe, as well as often the guidance of a more experienced practitioner. (Literally, “kata” means “form” (形)). In the case of climbing, route setters prepare the conditions in which a climber can then enjoy such and such an aesthetic experience. This is not very different from the case of music where—often—a score provides the recipe for a given auditory work of art.

There are then two ways to publicly share private artworks: first, by following the same recipes, and second by inter-subjectively sharing the private aesthetic experiences by describing them verbally. Perhaps, there is a third way. Montero (2006) argues that an observer can genuinely *proprioceive* the aesthetic features of the movements of someone else (she bases her argument on the way ‘mirror neurons’ work). Perhaps we can say that there are forms of imaginative empathy where in an indirect and fictional but genuine way an observer can put herself in the situation of the one whom she is observing and—at least in a limited way—imaginatively share her proprioceptive experience. While one cannot feel what it is like to be in a qualitative mental state of somebody else, one can sometimes in a very relevant way empathize and get a good grip on the ‘what-it-is-like’ qualitative aspects of the experience of the other. We cannot share qualia directly, but we can use empathy and imagination to share them indirectly, even though only in a limited way of course. Climbers can often be seen watching other climbers going through a particularly interesting and hard section of a route and, while standing below and simply watching, they would mimic the movements of the one who is climbing, thus ‘sharing’ her own experience.

*Kata*, climbing routes, and choreographed dances prescribe specific movements and specific proprioceptive experiences. Meals prescribe specific gustatory experiences. In this way, someone can prepare the conditions under which someone else will enjoy a private artwork. In the case of gustatory artworks, the role of the appreciator is rather passive, while in the case of proprioceptive artworks the role of the appreciator is often very much active. We might then suggest that in the case of proprioceptive art, the artist is to be identified with the spectator, while in the case of gustatory art, the artist can be identified with the one who prepared the conditions for a gustatory artwork to arise—say, the chef (who *can*, of course, be the very same person).

Kendall Walton famously argued for the view that paintings are such that they prescribe specific imaginings (see Walton 1990). He insists on the imaginative faculties of the spectator. In Walton's view, pictures depict by being props in games of make-believe. To understand his point, consider games that children play—in a game, an object can represent another object (say, a cardboard big box can represent a car). In the world of the game, the box represents a car, not just because of its very vague resemblance with something that a child can sit in, but mostly because one has simply decided in an imaginary way that it does represent a car. When it comes to depiction and pictures, Walton then appeals to the notion of 'seeing-in' and he argues that there is an experience made of two elements: perception and imagination, which are mixed together in a phenomenologically complex whole. In Walton's view, imagination permeates the perception of the picture, and this is how we see a given painting as a marked surface, while at the same time we *see in* the painting whatever the painting depicts. Perceiving and imagining thus are part of a single experience of 'imagining-seeing'.<sup>12</sup>

Imagination also plays a role in the appreciation of some gustatory and proprioceptive artworks. Remember how Marc Veyrat uses his meal as a means to prescribe a specific imagining about a walk in the forest. *Kata*, being imaginary combats involving imaginary adversaries, also quite clearly prescribe very specific imaginings, strongly and explicitly related to the movements the karateka is performing. The prescription is public, while the artwork is private.

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<sup>12</sup>In Benovsky (2016), I argue that photographs also are narrative *imagination-triggering* media.



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# Chapter 3

## Extending the Limits II: Intellectual Artworks



**Abstract** In this chapter, I defend the view that scientific and philosophical theories genuinely (as opposed to metaphorically) possess aesthetic properties and that they are genuine cases of artworks. In order to do so, I argue against the sensory dependence thesis according to which aesthetic properties necessarily depend on sensory properties. The case of intellectual artworks such as theories, as well as other cases of works of art like novels, show us that there is no such dependence, and we can then extend our understanding of what counts as art to such types of objects.

### 3.1 Aesthetic Properties, Sensory Dependence, and the Case of Theories

§1. The main aim of this chapter is to discuss the case of scientific and philosophical theories and to argue that they are genuine cases of what I'll refer to as "intellectual artworks". "Conceptual artworks" would have been a more appropriate label, but since the term "conceptual art" is widely used to talk about something else, I'll use "intellectual artworks" to avoid confusion. My main examples will be mathematical, physical, and metaphysical theories, but I see no obstacle to extend what I will say to other types of theories as well.

Adajian (2018, §1) classifies theories and mathematical proofs as having aesthetic properties but not as being artworks—similarly to natural entities such as sunsets, landscapes, or flowers. Perhaps the idea here is that theories are not human-made, but that they exist out there and are discovered/appreciated by us. I adopt a different view according to which theories are products of the intellectual activity of conscious beings (mostly, in the sense of being theoretical *models* (see Paul 2012; Benovsky 2016, Part I).<sup>1</sup> The notion of being human-made thus plays a role here; we will see that the idea that theories are created is important, and we will also see in Chap. 4

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<sup>1</sup>In "*Meta-metaphysics*" (2016, Springer), I have already defended the view that theories possess aesthetic properties and that these are crucial when it comes to their evaluation. In that book, my overall focus was on how this justifies an anti-realist stance when it comes to the nature of metaphysics. I shall not insist on this point here, but it is useful to keep it in mind. Here, I provide

the importance of human intervention in the case of artworks in other cases (namely, painting and photography).

§2. The case of intellectual artworks is not only interesting for its own sake and as a further extension of the limits concerning what counts as art and what does not, but also as an interesting contribution to the debate about the claim that aesthetic properties necessarily depend on sensory properties. This latter claim will thus be the starting point for my discussion here. In Chap. 2, I argued for an extension of the limits of art in order to fully include artworks based in perceptual modalities such as touch, olfaction, taste and proprioception, in addition to the more standard auditory and visual perceptual modalities. In this Chapter, I'll start by raising the question whether our senses do always have to play a role or not. In his excellent book *The metaphysics of beauty*<sup>2</sup> Nick Zangwill presents an elaborated argument against physicalist aesthetic realism which is based, *inter alia*, precisely on the premise that aesthetic properties *do* metaphysically necessarily depend on sensory properties (Zangwill 2001; Chaps. 8 and 11 and also Zangwill 1998). Even though I share the argument's conclusion, I will argue here that this premise is false, and so the argument does not go through. This has a consequence not only for us who want to reject physicalist aesthetic realism. The idea behind this premise actually plays an important role in Zangwill's own overall view as well: he defends a version of the view that aesthetic properties are response-dependent, and that "the responses that aesthetic properties depend on are [...] sensory responses" (Zangwill 2001, p. 200). Here again, even if at the end of the day I would also like to embrace a response-dependence view of aesthetic properties, I think that the aesthetic/sensory dependence claim is incorrect, and so it cannot be used in the defence or in the formulation of this view. So it is in a spirit of tough love that I will argue here against the aesthetic/sensory dependence claim. In order to do so, as mentioned above, I will focus on counter-examples to this claim such as the beauty of theories, proofs, and theorems. In short, I will defend the claim that theories—and the like—do possess genuine aesthetic properties, where these do not depend on any sensory properties.

§3. Here is how Zangwill formulates the aesthetic/sensory dependence thesis: "I shall defend a *weak dependence* thesis: Aesthetic properties depend in part on sensory properties, such as colors and sounds. Just as something has moral properties only if it has mental properties, so, according to the weak dependence thesis, aesthetic properties are properties that something has only if it has sensory properties. [...] The thesis is not the *strong* thesis that the aesthetic properties of a thing depend *only* on its sensory properties. The thesis is that sensory properties are *necessary* for aesthetic properties, not that they are sufficient. [...] [W]ithout sensory properties, there would be no aesthetic properties." (Zangwill 2001, p. 127).

Put in these terms, what I will argue for is that sensory properties are *neither sufficient nor necessary* for aesthetic properties. In order to better understand Zangwill's claim, let us illustrate it by what he says about the beauty of literature. There is, of

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a different defence with a different focus. There is some overlap between this chapter here and the last chapter of the earlier book.

<sup>2</sup>Zangwill, N. (2001). *The metaphysics of beauty*. Cornell University Press.

course, “the music of words” of a poem or a novel, and these are sensory properties of a literary work. But one could claim that these are not the relevant properties. Rather, it can be thought, the *semantic* properties of a literary work are those that matter—this is the *content* of the work. If this is so, since these semantic properties are not sensory properties, literature is a counter-example to the aesthetic/sensory dependence thesis. Zangwill replies that while of course there can be great value in the semantic content of a literary work, it is not an *aesthetic* value. Not every value of a novel or a poem is an aesthetic value. As he says, a novel can be clever, inspiring, or moving, via its semantic content, but these are other than aesthetic values. If a novel has *aesthetic* properties at all, Zangwill claims, they “derive from the particular choice of words, because of the way they sound” (Zangwill 2001, p. 137). Zangwill makes here a distinction between *aesthetic* value and *artistic* value: originality, for instance, is said to be an artistic value, but not an aesthetic one (see Zangwill 2001, p. 108)—in general, artistic value is a broader category, including aesthetic value as one of its components (see Zangwill 1998, p. 74–75, 2001, p. 11;58;137).

The case of literary works is highly relevant. Firstly, it is very useful in order to get a better understanding of what the aesthetic/sensory dependence claim amounts to—we can really see it at work here. Secondly, and importantly, the treatment Zangwill provides of this case can be doubted for the same reasons we will have to doubt the case of theories and the like. The reason why I will focus on theories rather than novels lies in the fact that counter-examples such as a metaphysical theory or a mathematical proof cannot be said to possess anything like a “music of words”. Their formulation is often very “non-musical”, often formal, and there is nothing like the particular choice of words that can play any significant role here “because of the way they sound”. Thus, they are sharper counter-examples than novels: in the case of novels, it is always possible, for the defender of the aesthetic/sensory dependence thesis, to claim that their beauty comes from the “music of words”, while this strategy is just not available in the case of theories, theorems, or proofs. The defender of the dependence thesis has then only one option available to her—namely, to claim that such objects are not (and cannot be) beautiful at all, that they do not (and cannot) possess aesthetic properties at all. Since there is nothing relevantly sensory in the way such objects are experienced/grasped by us, unlike in the case of novels, theories then either cannot possess aesthetic properties at all and do not constitute a counter-example to the aesthetic/sensory dependence thesis, or they can and the thesis is false.

As we will see, there are reasons to think that theories, theorems, and proofs *do* possess genuinely aesthetic properties. If this is true, and if as a consequence the aesthetic/sensory dependence thesis fails, then since it has to be abandoned anyway, it could/should perhaps also be abandoned in the case of novels, which would allow us to accept that semantic content of a literary work can exhibit genuinely aesthetic properties as well.

### 3.2 The Beauty of Theories

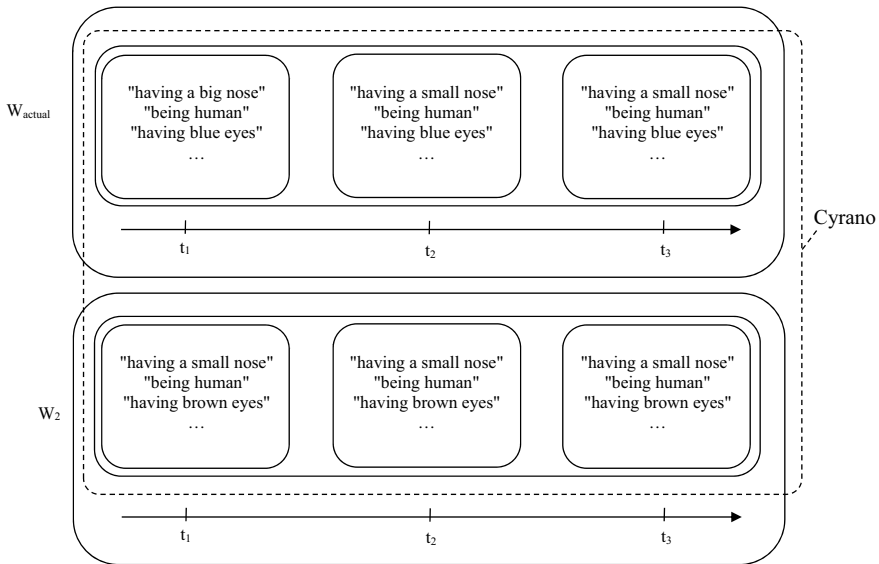
§1. The reason I will offer to think that theories, theorems, proofs, or particular steps in proofs<sup>3</sup> (for the sake of brevity, I'll often just say "theories") can possess genuine aesthetic properties is simple: they have all the typical features that objects that we typically claim to possess aesthetic properties have. The strategy is here similar to the strategy I used in Chap. 2 to claim that gustatory and proprioceptive experiences are genuine cases of artworks. For now, I focus on the claim that theories possess aesthetic properties and I am not (yet) claiming that theories are artworks—I'll do so in due course below. Theories can exhibit features such as *unity*, *simplicity*, *harmony*, and *symmetry* (as we shall see shortly), they have the capacity to cause passion (or other responses), they are "fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul" (as Hume 1975, p. 299) puts it). Importantly, they are often *said* and *judged* to be beautiful (or not). Quine (1948, p. 22) is among the most famous examples: "Wyman's overpopulated universe is in many ways unlovely. It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes [...]". Quine is far from being alone in attributing aesthetic properties to theories. Almost every conference or academic workshop contains such examples, where a theory, a theorem, or a philosophical argument is labelled as being beautiful or elegant (or not). This is no mere loose speaking during a talk, one finds such attributions of aesthetic properties to theories seriously expressed in published work. Here are two examples, one from physics: "The foundations of the [general relativity] theory are, I believe, stronger than what one could get simply from the support of experimental evidence. The real foundations come from the great beauty of the theory.[...] It is the essential beauty of the theory which I feel is the real reason for believing in it" (Dirac 1980, p. 10), and one from metaphysics: "It is easy to feel [...] an intellectual joy in contemplating a theory so elegant and beautiful as four-dimensionalism, and it is tempting to accept the theory simply on this basis, utilizing arguments to rationalize more than justify" (Sider 2001, p. 74). The list of examples could go on and on.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, such statements of course do not constitute any kind of proof of the fact that theories and the like do possess genuinely aesthetic properties, but on the other hand such explicit statements by serious practitioners seem at the very least to indicate that there is nothing wrong with the idea that they might.

§2. To have an example in mind, consider the *bundle-bundle-bundle theory* (for a detailed discussion of this view, see Benovsky 2006). I mention it here because I think that it nicely illustrates the first point stated above, namely the idea that theories (but also theorems, proofs, and the like) can exhibit features such as symmetry, harmony, and unity. Let us focus on its structure. According to the bundle-bundle-bundle theory, (i) ordinary material objects are bundles of properties (this is the first level of bundling), (ii) ordinary objects persist through time by having temporal parts, which means in this case that they are temporally extended bundles of the bundles that are the temporal parts (this is the second level of bundling), and (iii) ordinary

<sup>3</sup>Rota (1997) takes such steps to be the best examples of mathematical beauty.

<sup>4</sup>Derkse (1992) and McAllister (1999) feature a number of relevant quotes and references.

objects have their modal properties in a way similar in which they have temporary properties, that is, by having modal parts—in short, by being bundles of all of their modal counterparts (this is the third level of bundling). One may like this view or one may dislike it for many different theoretical reasons, but I think that it is undeniable that the theory’s structure possesses a kind of elegant symmetry, unity, and harmony that makes it very beautiful, where these features lie in the fact that it appeals to the same notion of bundling to solve three different issues in the same way. It provides the same solution to three different puzzles: the problem of the nature of material objects, the problem of their persistence through time, and the problem of *de re* modality. One can then see this theory as being an abstract structure that is balanced, symmetrical, and harmonious, and that has a kind of unity that lies in the fact that the same notion is being used in different places to solve different problems. Here is an illustration of what this abstract structure could look like when schematically represented (on this figure, a person named “Cyrano” has, in the actual world, a big nose at  $t_1$ , but he then undergoes plastic surgery and has a small nose at  $t_2$  and  $t_3$ ; in another possible world, Cyrano has a small nose all along).



§3. In addition to the fact that theories can possess features such as symmetry, harmony, and unity, and to the fact that they are often *judged* to be beautiful, it is also the case when it comes to theories that, as in the case of typical works of art such as paintings or symphonies, their aesthetic properties can be said to be grounded<sup>5</sup> in their non-aesthetic properties such as (i) internal consistency, (ii) explanatory power, (iii) simplicity, (iv) parsimony, (v) preservation of our intuitions, or (vi) compatibility

<sup>5</sup>Grounding captures better what we want to say here than *supervenience*. See Benovsky (2012) for a detailed defense of this claim.

with other (philosophical and/or scientific) theories, to cite only the most common ones. To compare theories to paintings, for instance, such properties are akin to colour distribution on a canvas, the thickness and quality of the paint, the way it was placed on the canvas using brushes in such-and-such a way, and so on. These non-aesthetic features of theories are subject to controversies, they are weighted, evaluated, and attributed (or not) to the theories at hand, exactly as we can evaluate and appreciate non-aesthetic features of paintings and symphonies—precisely in order to attribute *aesthetic* properties to them.

§4. Such attributions of aesthetic properties to theories (and the like) are also, exactly as in the case of ‘typical’ works of art, context-dependent. Most artworks such as paintings or novels get a part of their aesthetic value from the context in which they were created. The first cubist paintings have great value precisely because they were the *first*. Milan Kundera’s novels written before 1989 get a part of their beauty from the political and historical context in which they were written. Of course, these are controversial claims in the eyes of the friend of the aesthetic/sensory dependence thesis, since she could argue that these values are not *aesthetic* values. But this is not really the point I want to focus on here and now—I am not arguing for or against the claim of context-dependence (even though I am strongly sympathetic to it). The point here is that in both cases—that is, whether one accepts the context-dependence claim or not—one can hold the same claim when it comes to theories. The context-dependence idea, if one accepts it, is simply that not only intrinsic properties of an object are relevant. Of course, they are—colours and shapes are central when it comes to paintings, for instance. But these are not the only relevant non-aesthetic properties of an object in which its aesthetic properties are grounded. Some extrinsic relational properties also need to be taken into account. Arguably, the context of creation of an artwork plays this role (see, *inter alia*, Walton 1970),<sup>6</sup> or Levinson (1984, p. 93–94). Imagine two indistinguishable paintings that are qualitatively indiscernible—they are exact duplicates that consist of the same arrangements of paint. The idea here is then that they could still have different aesthetic properties depending, say, on the time at which they were created.

Again, the role context plays in the having of aesthetic properties is of course controversial, but were it to be accepted in the way suggested above, the same idea could then be applied to the case of theories, perhaps even more obviously. Regarding scientific or philosophical theories, the context in which they were created matters greatly, the relevant context being the state of scientific or philosophical knowledge at the time of the formulation of the theory. Ptolemy’s theory of the movement of planets was, at its time of creation, a tremendous achievement in systematic thought and careful observation. In this context, given the state of astronomical knowledge in the second century, there is no doubt that Ptolemy’s epicyclic model was highly beautiful and elegant (to anticipate the conclusion that theories do possess aesthetic

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<sup>6</sup>Walton makes a distinction between *narrow* and *broad* non-aesthetic properties of objects, in which its aesthetic properties are grounded. The narrow properties are the intrinsic ones, like colors and shapes, and the broad properties are the relational ones, like, precisely, the context in which an object was created.

properties), and had great value. Not so much today, if evaluated from today's standards: there are now simpler, more efficient views with greater explanatory power, greater compatibility with other scientific theories, etc. (remember the incomplete list of the (i)–(vi) non-aesthetic properties in §3 above that theories possess and in which their aesthetic properties—if they have any—are grounded). The (rather trivial, I take it) point is: exactly as in the case of standard works of art, when it comes to evaluation of theories, context of creation can matter.

In this way, the suggestion here amounts to a 'broadening' of the grounding/supervenience base. This then solves a problem raised by Scruton (1974, p. 36), who criticizes the aesthetic supervenience thesis when he says that "different emergent 'properties' can depend on precisely the same set of 'first order' properties". What he has in mind here is that one and the same work of art can be context-dependently characterised as sad or as joyful, without contradiction. (For a discussion of this, see for instance Pettit 1987; Zangwill 1994; and MacKinnon 2001). We can now respond to this objection simply by pointing out that, once we include the context of production (*and* the context of evaluation—see more on 'taste' below) in the grounding base, it is *not* the case that 'different emergent properties could arise from the same base'.

Concerning theories, the kind of relevant context is the state of philosophical and scientific knowledge at the time of the formulation of the theory. Ptolemy's theory is a good illustrative case, as is for instance Thales' materialist conception of the world, based on the idea of water as the central element out of which all other existing material entities are somehow construed: such a view, evaluated in the light of today's scientific and philosophical knowledge, is certainly false and it is not very satisfactory with respect to several of the non-aesthetic evaluative criteria (i)–(vi) in §3 above. Does this mean that Thales' view cannot be said to be beautiful? It does not, for the reason mentioned above: the context of origin of this theory is to be taken into account when evaluating the theory's beauty. When we say that aesthetic properties of theories are grounded in their non-aesthetic properties, the grounding base has to be broadened to include their context of origin as well as the other non-aesthetic features—and, from the point of view of scientific and philosophical knowledge in the sixth century B.C., Thales' theory represents quite an achievement, in terms of systematization and philosophical reflection.

§5. There is a consequence of this approach which is welcome in the case of artworks such as paintings, but which might be distinctly undesirable in the case of metaphysical theories: Ptolemy's and Thales' views (and, of course, many an ancient, medieval, and modern view) could very well emerge from the evaluative procedure as being judged just as beautiful as the best scientific and metaphysical theories we have today. This state of affairs is acceptable in the case of, say, paintings since there is no good reason for claiming that today's paintings are in any principled way superior to older ones, but it is an unacceptable result in the case of scientific and philosophical theories, because it does not do justice to the progress of scientific and philosophical knowledge. Indeed, we want to be able to say that even if it is not always the case, generally speaking, our theories become better—more beautiful—over time (recall Sider's and Dirac's quotes; indeed, all this becomes crucially important if one takes



the *beauty* of a theory to drive one's choice in deciding which particular theory is supposed to be the *best*—in Benovsky (2016, Part II) I discuss this in detail). But it seems that, if aesthetic properties are grounded not only in their intrinsic non-aesthetic features but also in a wider base that includes the context of origin, it could perhaps even be possible to judge Thales' view as better (because more beautiful) than some of the most elaborate theories we have today.

But there is an easy remedy to this problem. For, unlike paintings or other art forms, science and metaphysics exhibit one important feature: their knowledge accumulates over time. Another way of bringing out this point is to say that the contemporary context of creation of scientific and metaphysical theories does, in a certain sense, include all past contexts, since it includes all the successful discoveries of the past. This is why the contemporary context is to be privileged over any other past contexts, and, consequently, contemporary theories can be said to be better than past ones (if they are beautiful enough) and claims about the progress of knowledge in science and philosophy can be secured.

This being said, the general idea I wish to put forward here still *is* analogous to the case of artworks like paintings. Its core claim is simply this: since the context of origin is part of the base in which aesthetic properties of theories are grounded, the context of contemporary theories is *richer* than the context of 'older' theories. Suppose I see a painting in the museum which I intuitively like and find beautiful without however knowing anything about its context of creation. Suppose further that a museum guide comes along and provides me with interesting background information about the relevant context, for instance, that the painting was created in the Czech Republic in the seventies and that it has a particular political significance as a metaphorically veiled rejection of the communist regime at the time. After I have been given this information, I might find the painting even *more* beautiful than before. Suppose the guide goes on to tell me about the painter's life and reveals to me even more about the context of the painting's creation, for instance, that the painting also offers a metaphorical reference to the day when the painter lost his child—I might again find the painting now *even more* beautiful. In short, what I want to express here is the general thought that, the richer the context, the (potentially) more beautiful the painting will be to the beholder. What is more, as we have seen, it seems that this applies even more clearly in the case of scientific and philosophical theories.

§6. In Chap. 2, section IV, we have seen how important it is that the evaluator of proprioceptive and gustatory artworks (as well as any artworks in general) should be a skilled expert in the given field. We have also seen how the individual taste of the evaluator matters. The former point is perhaps even more (and more obviously) the case when it comes to intellectual artworks. But let us first focus on the taste of the evaluator. Indeed, one can argue that not only, as we have already seen above, the context of creation of an object has to be included in the basis in which its aesthetic properties are grounded, but that the taste of the evaluator has to be included as well. As before (see Chap. 2, IV), the notion of 'taste' is here a rather technical one, and does not amount to a mere the-first-thing-which-comes-in-my-mind liking. Rather, the taste that matters here is a capacity of a trained evaluator to discern the aesthetic properties

of objects.<sup>7</sup> Thus, taste is understood here as a rather sophisticated capacity, which is in line with what Hume thought when he said that not everybody's taste counts<sup>8</sup> (in short, that not everybody is a good critic of art). As above in the case of the role context plays, when it comes to taste as I shortly described it here, its role is controversial. But here again, what matters mostly for my argument is that *if* one thinks that taste does play such a role, it can then very well play this role in the situation in which we find ourselves when it comes to theories, proofs, arguments, or theorems—it is actually more than obvious that only a trained specialist can discern and weight the non-aesthetic properties of such objects, and only such a competent evaluator can then use his taste to make a claim about their beauty (think of Quine's 'desert landscapes'). But not only this, since being an expert is not the same thing as having taste. Being an expert is here a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one. (To have an example in mind, perhaps the kind of "incredulous stare" that is many colleagues' reaction to David Lewis' modal realism is an expression of the idea that while Lewis is a great expert, he has poor taste.) Thus, perhaps even more clearly than in the case of works of art such as paintings, novels, symphonies, or in the case of proprioceptive and gustatory artworks, it is true to say that in the case of theories and the like only attributions of aesthetic properties by trained, qualified, and competent specialists, who have a "good sense" as Hume puts it,<sup>9</sup> count. These attributions and judgments are then part of what aesthetic properties of such objects can be grounded in—they can enrich, together with context (see above), the basis in which aesthetic properties are grounded. In short, only a trained and perceptive philosopher or scientist will be able to notice and appreciate a theory's beauty, and her taste and judgement is crucially relevant to any attribution of aesthetic properties. There are two options here. First, one can include taste directly in the grounding base, which makes the aesthetic properties of theories response-dependent (that is, no appreciators, no aesthetic properties); or second, one can include taste only as a condition for the recognition of aesthetic properties. While I have sympathies with the first option, my main point does not depend on it: one can recognize the utmost importance of the role taste plays in the attribution of aesthetic properties to theories even under the second reading.

### 3.3 Theories as Artworks

§1. In the preceding section, we have seen that theories, theorems, proofs, and the like behave a lot like typical works of art such as paintings, symphonies, or novels (as well as less standard artworks like proprioceptive and gustatory artworks). First,

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<sup>7</sup>Remember what Sibley (1959, p. 423) rightly remarks: "When I speak of taste [...], I shall not be dealing with questions which center upon expressions like 'a matter of taste' (meaning, roughly, a matter of personal preference or liking). It is with an ability to notice or discern things that I am concerned."

<sup>8</sup>Hume (1985, p. 240–241) also adds that such qualified judges also have to be *practiced* in the attribution of aesthetic properties, have to have a "good sense", and have to be *intellectually honest*.

<sup>9</sup>See Footnote 8.

as we have seen, they can exhibit features such as unity, simplicity, harmony, and symmetry. Second, they can cause appropriate responses (emotional or other) in their evaluators. Third, they are often said and judged to possess aesthetic properties by competent scientists and philosophers. Fourth, they possess relevant non-aesthetic features in which the having of aesthetic properties can be grounded. Fifth, the context of their creation matters, as well as the taste of competent evaluators.

Thus, I submit, there is no doubt that theories and the like have all it takes to be able to have aesthetic properties. There just is no reason to think the opposite. In the relevant sense, they behave exactly like other objects which possess aesthetic properties do. The only reason to resist the idea that they can genuinely instantiate aesthetic properties would be to say that they violate the aesthetic/sensory dependence thesis, but that would be question-begging.

It is now a short step to take in order to claim that theories not only possess aesthetic properties but that they are artworks. To repeat, they exhibit features standardly shared by works of art such as harmony, unity, balance, intensity, and complexity. With no doubt, they give rise to passion and pleasure. They behave like artworks and are often treated as such by skilled and serious practitioners. Remember our (non-necessary, but still highly relevant) criteria from Chap. 1:

- (1) Artworks possess aesthetic properties
- (2) Artworks are subject to aesthetic judgements
- (3) Artworks have the capacity to trigger aesthetic experiences
- (4) Artworks have the capacity to trigger emotions
- (5) Artworks have the capacity to convey meanings and ideas
- (6) Artworks are challenging (both for the artist and the observer)
- (7) Artworks require skill to be produced
- (8) Artworks *qua* objects can have relevant non-aesthetic features and a non-aesthetic function.

(1), (2), (3), (4) and (8) have already been established by the discussion above in this Chapter. (5), (6) and (7) are just utterly obvious in the case of intellectual artworks such as theories, proofs, theorems and the like. In the same manner as in the case of proprioceptive and gustatory artworks from Chap. 2, I thus submit here that there is no reason to deny that there are intellectual artworks such as scientific and philosophical theories.

§2. Zangwill himself rejects any attributions of aesthetic properties to theories or theorems (which would then deprive them of the possibility of being artworks) because he takes such attributions to be merely *metaphorical*. Again, a comparison with what he says about novels is useful: “Contents have purely structural properties. The *Odyssey*, for example, has a harmoniously proportioned overall construction.[...] It might be suggested that we can appreciate such structures in themselves, in the way that we appreciate the temporal structure of a piece of music or the visual structure of an abstract pattern.[But w]hen we value structural properties of content, it is because of its role in the presentation of a story which has an independent moral,

political, religious, or emotional appeal. So if we use words like “beautiful” and “elegant” to describe properties of a plot, *that use is metaphorical.*” (Zangwill 2001, p. 139–140), my italics) He then mentions the case of theories and asks: “But why should we agree that the properties we appreciate here are *aesthetic* ones? There are *intellectual* pleasures, of course, but that should not encourage us to deem these pleasures *aesthetic* pleasures.” (Zangwill 2001, p. 140) Thus, he accepts that theories or theorems are often said and judged to possess aesthetic properties by competent scientists and philosophers, but he claims that such attributions and judgments of aesthetic properties are merely metaphorical. The reason he provides to think that this is so is that such theoretical objects have a *purpose*. Theories, theorems, and proofs are here to accomplish something, they are created to do some scientific work. They are not, as I understand Zangwill, created to be beautiful, they are created with something completely different in mind—perhaps something like scientific truth. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that this is so.<sup>10</sup> But why does having a purpose prevent anything from being able to possess aesthetic properties? Should we perhaps be tempted to accept the general idea that artworks always lack functionality (“*l’art pour l’art*”) and that, therefore, theories cannot be artworks? Look again at (5) above and also especially at (8)—these are part of a normal understanding of what counts as being a work of art. We have also seen these criteria at work in the case of proprioceptive artworks (martial arts have the purpose of defending oneself, rock climbing has, or at least can have, the purpose to get to a summit of a mountain, and so on) as well as in the case of gustatory artworks (food provides nourishment). Perhaps you could say that my own strategy is here question-begging and that I am making things too easy for myself by including (8) in the list of criteria for what counts as an artwork. So, let me just try to say that (8) is simply highly plausible. Many traditional craftsman’s tools are built for a reason and with a purpose, but many of them are genuinely beautiful works of art themselves. Having a purpose *does not prevent* anything from being beautiful—and why would it then prevent something from being an artwork? Indeed, having a purpose and fulfilling it in an efficient and elegant way *can itself be beautiful*—a craftsman’s tool’s simplicity and elegant efficiency is something to be aesthetically appreciated. The same, I submit, is true of theories—the way they do their work, the simplicity and parsimony, say, with which they are able to explain some complex phenomena, is exactly what one can find genuinely beautiful about them. And, precisely because of the way they accomplish their purpose, they certainly are “fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul”, as Hume<sup>11</sup> puts it. Why deny then theories and the like the status of an artwork? As we have seen, they exhibit all of the typical features standard works of art possess—and the fact that they do indeed have a practical purpose does seem to be simply irrelevant to invalidate the claim that they can be artworks themselves. Is it question-begging to say that saying otherwise would be question-begging? I hope to have conveyed a high plausibility to the claim that it is not.

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<sup>10</sup>In Benovsky (2016) I offer reasons to doubt that, but I shall not press this point here.

<sup>11</sup>Hume (1975, p. 299).

§3. To come back to the claim that attributions of aesthetic properties to theories are *metaphorical*, Zangwill says, when it comes to scientific theories, that a theory couldn't be said to be beautiful if it did not explain the data. This is why he says that we only metaphorically say that it is beautiful while what we are doing is just to appreciate that it explains a lot of data in an efficient way. One way to resist this claim is to remember the case of Ptolemy. When evaluated from today's point of view, his theory of the motion of planets certainly does not explain the data and certainly is not very efficient. But it still can, I submit, be found beautiful. It has a beautiful structure, it has an elegant and sophisticated way of accomplishing its task, it aims at simplicity and harmony—in short, it has many of the non-aesthetic features in which aesthetic properties can be grounded. Take another example, a contemporary one: very few philosophers accept that David Lewis's modal realism is true and that it really works as an acceptable metaphysics of modality. But this does not take away the theory's beauty and elegance, probably grounded in its simplicity, straightforwardness, and boldness. If you have a certain taste (qualitative rather than quantitative) for desert landscapes, you'll be struck by the theory's beauty in a very clear way.

So, why to insist that attributions of aesthetic properties to theories and the like are merely metaphorical? Again, one could think so precisely because it would be at tension with the aesthetic/sensory dependence principle, but that *would* be, quite clearly, question-begging. In Zangwill's own terminology, one could perhaps want to say that that theories and the like merely have *artistic* value, but not *aesthetic* value, but there does not seem to be a (non-question-begging) reason for such a claim—there just does not seem to be a reason to discard the aesthetic properties of such theoretical objects as being genuinely aesthetic. When we appreciate, say, a structure of a theory (or a novel, for that matter), we are not just appreciating the role it plays in how the theory manages to explain the data in order to get to a scientific or philosophical truth (or the role it plays in the story which has an independent moral, political, religious, or other appeal). We can appreciate it for itself, for how elegantly structured it is, for how nicely it makes things fit together, or for the baroque complexity it can have (if you have a taste for the baroque rather than for desert landscapes).

§4. Thus, I submit that (a) scientific and philosophical theories, theorems, proofs and similar can possess genuinely aesthetic properties, and that (b) given the relevant ways in which they are similar to other kinds of works of art, it is at the very least highly plausible to say that they count as artworks themselves. They have all it takes. How do we come to the conclusion that paintings, say, can have aesthetic properties and that they are artworks? *First*, they have non-aesthetic properties in which their aesthetic properties can be grounded (such-and-such a distribution of paint on a canvas, for instance), and these can be discussed from many points of view, their merits can be weighted and debated, and so on. Thus, paintings can exhibit symmetry, harmony, unity, as well as many other non-aesthetic relevant features. *Second*, they can produce relevant responses in their spectators. These can be emotional, intellectual, or other—and by all means they are “fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul”. *Third*, they are often said and judged to possess aesthetic properties by competent judges. *Fourth*, the context of their creation matters. *Fifth*, the taste of the competent evaluator matters. These—and as we have seen other—are the criteria

that make us say that paintings can have aesthetic properties and that they are works of art. And, as we have seen, theories and the like do satisfy all of these criteria as well. This is why I think we should say that they can possess genuinely aesthetic properties and that they are genuine cases of intellectual artworks.

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## Chapter 4

# Limits and Their Vagueness: The Case of Paintings and Photographs



**Abstract** This Chapter explores limits between different kinds of works of art, with a focus on painting and photography. I discuss the nature of photography in detail, as well as several borderline cases of photographs, and I argue for the claim that there is an irremediably vague boundary between photographs and (digital) paintings—as opposed to a sharp limit between two different types of images.

### 4.1 On Photographs and Other Images

§1. Chapters 2 and 3 were about extending the limits of what counts as art. The discussion there was centrally focused on the role our different perceptual modalities play. *En passant*, in Chap. 2, I also shortly discussed two famous borderline cases or artworks, namely, Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades and John Cage’s composition “4’33”. In this Chapter, I want to explore another type of limits, namely limits there are between different kinds of works of art. My focus will be painting and photography. In fact, photographs have been *denied* the status of artworks, and I will have something to say about (that is, against) such a view. Thus, I will be interested in the differences between hand-made paintings and photographs, while having in mind that the general context of this discussion can be seen as a contribution to the debate about whether photographs are artworks or not—as opposed to paintings. Indeed, even to articulate this question, one needs to be able to make a distinction between photographs and non-photographs. Kendall Walton thinks that “There is a sharp break, a difference of kind, between painting and photography” (Walton 1984, p. 252). I will argue for the opposite claim: the boundary between photographs and other types of pictures such as paintings is an irreducibly vague one. Furthermore, as we shall see, the differences between photographs and paintings are such that nothing prevents photographs from being artworks.

In a sense, this Chapter is then about what counts as a photograph and what does not. One way in which this question arises stems from new technologies that keep changing our way of producing photographs, such as digital photography, which not only has now widely replaced traditional film photography but also challenges the very limits of what we count as a photograph. I shall discuss below at some length

different aspects of digital photography, and I will also discuss the case of Light Field cameras (Plenoptic cameras)—indeed, the photographs produced by a Light Field camera can be re-focused *after* the photograph has been taken, which harbours many interesting consequences with regard to the resulting image and the way we interact with it.

But of course, the initial question also arises in the case of traditional film photography as well as ‘traditional’ digital photography. The question amounts to asking about what the essential features of photographs are—in short, what their nature is. To answer this question, I shall examine in what follows some ‘borderline cases’ of photography, thus trying to determine the ‘limits’ of what counts as a photograph and what does not. In the process, several discriminating criteria and essential features of photographs will be established.

§2. Before venturing into the discussion of the vague and controversial limits of borderline cases of photographs, let us agree on two *uncontroversial* paradigmatic cases of two kinds of images which definitely *do* count as photographs (all photographs used in this book can be found in colour and higher resolution here: <https://www.jiribenovsky.org/thelimitsofart>):



**Photo 1** Film photography





**Photo 2** Digital photography

The first photograph was made using a traditional film technology (a film camera, an enlarger, a developer, a stop bath, a fixer, ...) and then scanned in order to be reprinted here for the purposes of this book, while the second was taken with a digital camera and (post)processed accordingly (using software, a computer screen, ...) before being reprinted here.

While there are many significant differences between the two photographs and between the ways they have been created, one thing, I hope, is quite clear: both of these images are photographs. One who would deny this would be implausibly denying the obvious. Any claim, I submit without argument, that would deny that one or both of these images are photographs would exhibit a conception of photography far too restricted and constrained to be true to any artistic, philosophical, or common sense notion of photography. (I shall discuss Roger Scruton's notion of "ideal photography" in II.§1 below.)

Thus, my first (and I hope entirely trivial) claim about the nature of photographs is that both traditional film-made photographs and digital photographs are photographs; more precisely, that no particular process of production (digital, chemical, or other) is such that it is *the* only way of producing photographs. That is, photographs are not in general *essentially* produced in a *particular* way.

The way digital photographs are produced actually mirrors the way traditional film photographs are made.

Fig. 4.1 Film photography

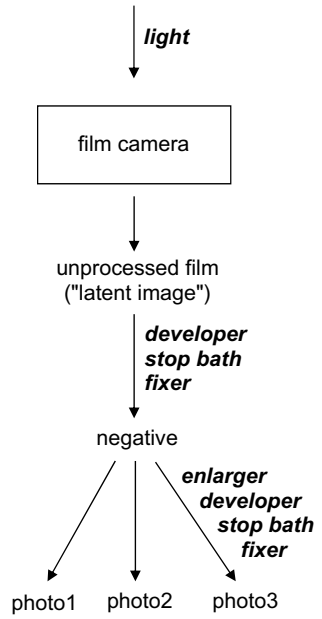
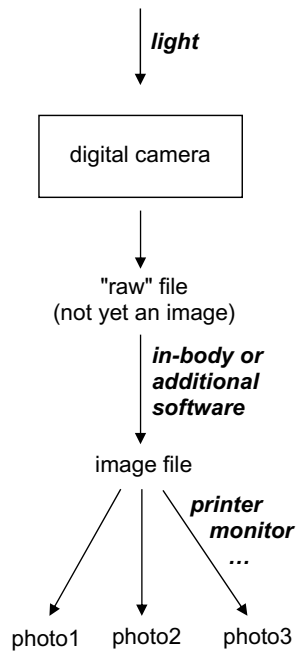


Fig. 4.2 Digital photography



A photograph is a result of a whole process of production, with intermediate stages, and while the nature of these stages is different in traditional photography and digital photography, the overall principles are very similar with stages that play the same (or very similar) role, in a different way. Now, one significant (practical) difference between the two processes of production is the easiness with which digital photographs can be altered by using appropriate software, at early stages of production (before the photograph is created) and/or later in post-processing. Photo 2 above, for instance, has been digitally manipulated during the process of production, both when developing the RAW file and when adjusting the image file in order to produce the final result—light has been improved, skin defects removed, eyes brightened, and so on (follow the permalink mentioned above for a high resolution colour image). But if the image has been “tampered with”, one could ask (and one often does ask), does it still count as a *photograph*? Are digitally modified photographic images still photographs, or are they some sort of ‘digital pictures based on a photograph’, or not even that?

In the next section, I shall defend the claim that not only such digital pictures are photographs, but that digital manipulation is in fact a *necessary* step in the process of production of digital photographs.

## 4.2 Digital Manipulation

§1. Digital manipulation is an essential and necessary feature of the process of production of digital photographs—very much in the same sense in which chemical manipulation is essential and necessary to traditional film photography. Rejecting these claims would lead one to an implausibly strong conception of photography, where virtually nothing would count as a photograph. Roger Scruton seems to make such a strong claim when he says that “*actual* photography is the result of the attempt to pollute the *ideal* of [the photographer’s] craft with the aims and methods of painting” (Scruton 1981, p. 578). As far as I understand his claim, Scruton means to say that we have a notion of what an ideal photograph would/should be (namely, an image created in a purely mechanical and causally closed manner, where no chemical or digital or other human manipulation would play any part (more on this below)), but that actual photography does not fit this standard and consequently actual photographs are not really photographs.

Perhaps it is a terminological issue to decide whether actual photographs can be properly called photographs or not, but perhaps it is an issue concerning the very plausibility and relevance of Scruton’s claim—indeed, when talking about “ideal” photographs, he just seems to be talking about something entirely different than what most of us take to be photographs. For myself, I have to say I am interested in actual photographs, and not in some non-existent (in fact, *impossible*, as we shall now see) ideal type of images. *Photographs* as we know them are definitely not “ideal” in

Scruton's sense (on *this* point, of course, Scruton is right). Look again at Figs. 4.1 and 4.2, and examine closely the way any photograph is produced. Let us focus on the case of digital photography. First, light goes through a lens and hits a sensor; this gives rise to a RAW file which is a recording of the way photons hit the photodetectors constituting the sensor's surface.<sup>1</sup> The RAW file is not yet a photograph—it needs to be interpreted/converted in order to become an image, that is, an image we can see anything on (or in). In the case of an automatic point-and-shoot digital camera, this step is usually done by a piece of software built-in the camera which has been programmed in a certain way in order to convert the RAW file into an image file that can then be printed or viewed on a computer monitor. In the case of more sophisticated cameras (typically, DSLRs), this automatic treatment of RAW files can be deactivated and can be postponed—one can copy the RAW file on a computer and only then manually convert the RAW file into an image file.

Once we keep in mind the way digital photographs are produced, it then becomes simply obvious that digital manipulation is an unavoidable, necessary, and essential step in their process of production. Without digital manipulation, there would simply *be* no photographs. Photons hitting the camera's sensor produce electrical inputs, which *have* to be "tampered with" in order to produce any picture at all. An important point to note here is that these digital manipulation steps are *not* purely mechanical and purely causal conversions of electrical inputs into image files; rather, they are steps *where decisions have to be taken*—at the very least, these include decisions about exposure, brightness, contrast, and white balance. As we have seen, these decisions can either be taken by the photographer who manually works on her RAW files, or they can be automatized, which means that they are taken not by the photographer herself but by the team of engineers who programmed the camera's built-in software. But one way or another, we easily see here that the steps that lead to a creation of a digital photograph include, as a matter of necessity, digital manipulation where decisions have to be taken. This is of course not the end of the story, but at least a first rough version of the claim I want to defend is established: in principle, not only digitally manipulated pictures count as photographs, but digital manipulation is in fact a *necessary* step in the process of production of digital photographs.

This situation is entirely similar to the case of traditional film photography, where some of the steps in the process of production include necessary chemical and other manipulation (when using a developer, a stop bath, a fixer, and an enlarger), where human intervention is as essential as it is in the case of digital photography (decisions are taken about exposure, brightness, contrast, colour, and other in a way which is technologically different from digital photography but in principle very similar). There is, however, a significant difference between digital photography and traditional film photography, which I already mentioned above but which requires a more detailed discussion: the *easiness* with which digital photographs can be digitally altered and variously manipulated (either manually, or in an automatized way, or both). As we have seen above, digital manipulation which includes a photographer's

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<sup>1</sup>This is of course only a very simplified explanation.

intentional decisions is by necessity part of a process of production of any photograph. But the way this is done, and the amount and type of these manipulations makes a crucial difference. In the next section I shall focus on this issue.

§2. To start with, there is a general claim I want to make: there is no principled reason to “privilege” digital manipulations done using a software that is *built in* a camera’s body to digital manipulations done using a software installed *on a computer*—it would simply be entirely arbitrary to do so. A digital camera’s body is equipped with a processor and a piece of software that manipulates RAW files in order to produce image files, either in a fully automatized way where all decisions have been taken by somebody else than the photographer herself, or in a more or less manual way, where the photographer herself can program the settings of her camera’s software to adjust the way RAW files will be converted into image files—typically, these settings include at the very least exposure, brightness, contrast, saturation, and white balance (but they can also include much more striking adjustments, for instance in order to produce a photograph with a sepia effect, directly from the RAW file). The claim I want to make now is that there is *no principled difference* between this way of digitally manipulating one’s photographs using the built-in software, and taking the RAW file out of the camera, copying it on a computer, and doing these adjustments later on a computer. (Note that even in this way of doing things, it is still open whether these manipulations are done manually, by the photographer herself, or automatically, by the programmers of the software installed on the computer.) A *consequence* of this claim, which I wish to fully endorse, is that a photographic system, that is, the device that is used to produce photographs, is not only composed of a camera and of components which are spatially located inside the camera’s body; rather, it is a whole composed of many different components which can, of course, all be spatially located inside a camera’s body, but there is no reason why they would have to be so. Indeed, in the case mentioned above, the photographic system is composed of a lens, a body, a processor, and a software (I am simplifying here, of course) where some of these components are located inside the camera’s body and other are located inside a computer. Thus the various components of a photographic system can be spatially scattered, as well as, obviously, temporally scattered (since it can be a long time after a RAW file has been created that it is converted into an image file). None of this, I believe, is very controversial and unfamiliar to the traditional film photographer. On the contrary, traditional photographic systems using film are almost never entirely located inside a camera’s body (with the notable exception of Polaroid cameras and similar): a dark room with all of its components is necessary to produce a photograph.

To sum up my starting points: as a matter of necessity, digital photographs are always digitally manipulated, either by the photographer herself or by somebody else; these manipulations require intentional decisions; and they can be implemented using tools located inside a camera’s body or using a computer. This now connects with one of our initial questions, since we see here that there is no reason *in principle* to reject digitally modified photographs *as being photographs*, including photographs that have been “tampered with” on a computer. But not only is this not the end of the story, it’s actually here that things start to get messy and conceptually difficult.

### 4.3 Vague Limits

§1. Indeed, given all we have seen until now, it will then be very difficult to find clear criteria for discriminating digital manipulations (retouches) that will be allowed to be part of a process of production of photographs and those that will not—any such attempts take the risk of raising worries of arbitrariness. One may be tempted to adopt two extreme attitudes to ‘solve’ this problem. Firstly, one could want to claim that *no* retouches are acceptable, but this would be simply false, since as we have seen a minimal amount of digital manipulation is necessary in order to produce any photograph at all. One then may wish to adopt the opposite stance and claim that *any* kind or amount of retouching is to be accepted. As a principled solution to avoid the arbitrariness worry, this will of course do, but such an attitude seems to strain the limits of credibility: think, for instance, of a photograph of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, but where the RAW file has been digitally altered so much that the resulting image is just a flat vivid green surface—it would seem difficult, to say the least, to count such an image as a photograph of the Eiffel Tower, or indeed as a photograph at all.

§2. The problem here is a problem of vagueness: there *is* a limit to the type and amount of retouches that a digital photograph can be altered with while still remaining a photograph, but it is a vague, under-determined, and indeterminate one. What we know here, following my considerations in the preceding sections, is that the question is *not whether* digital manipulation is acceptable; rather the question is about *how much* of it can be accepted. Thus, we understand here the nature of this limit, but it is not an easy task to determinately say which it is.

It might help to consider some examples of borderline cases of digital images which lie at the very limit between photographs and something else (as before, high resolution colour versions can be found here: [https://www.jiribenovsky.org/thelimits ofart](https://www.jiribenovsky.org/thelimitsofart)).



Image 3



**Image 4**



**Image 5**



**Image 6**

As a first gut reaction, one might be tempted to *disqualify* Images 4, 5, and 6 as being photographs, since they are clearly composed of *several* more-or-less continuous and more-or-less digitally manipulated pictures, but clearly *accept* Image 3 as being a photograph since it is ‘just’ one simple image of a landscape. If this is an intuition one has, it then tells us something interesting which puts us on the right track towards understanding somewhat better where the limit between photographs and non-photographs lies, since in fact Image 3 has been produced by using *several* photographs as well (*more*, actually, than in the case of Images 4, 5, and 6). Here is a screen capture of a production stage of Image 3:





Image 7

The interesting thing to note about the above-mentioned intuition is that, often, if one has it, then one accepts Image 3 as being a photograph only until one learns about the way it was produced (see Image 7). What is at stake here is to decide whether the reason to accept (or not) digital pictures such as Images 3, 4, 5, and 6 as being photographs lies in *what we see in the resulting image* (which is something we *see*) or rather in *the way the image was produced* (which is something we *believe/know*).

If one were to take the latter option, one might want to claim that *none* of the Images above counts as *a photograph* since, somewhat trivially, there are *several* photographs there, and not one. If, on the other hand, one prefers the first option, then one might want to follow the above-mentioned intuition and claim that Image 3 is a photograph, while, say, Image 6 clearly is not, but one may have doubts about Images 4 and 5 since, while these images have been created in Photoshop by a superposition of several different photographs, such a type of images can also be obtained in traditional film photography by using a multiple exposure technique—this where the “other option” sneaks in again. What the instability of this kind of intuitions shows is that our concept of what counts as a photograph is such that it is a result of *both* considerations about what we *see* (on the resulting image) and what we *believe* (about the way it was created).

§3. This, of course, does not help us to ‘solve’ the vagueness problem by identifying a clear limit between photographs and non-photographs, but, I want to submit, it helps us to understand its nature. (Note that our puzzle behaves here as most puzzles concerning genuine cases of vagueness do: typically, they do *not* have such a kind of ‘solution’; for instance, there just is no way to determine precisely, without arbitrariness, a limit between “being bald” and “not being bald”, or between “being a heap” and “not being a heap”—even epistemicist accounts of vagueness which claim that

there *is* such a precise limit take it to be unknowable.<sup>2</sup>) In order to deepen our understanding of the nature of this limit, I shall focus below on the case of photographs produced by Light Field cameras, which is such that it creates photographs which can be re-focused *after* they have been taken. But before I do so, a detour is necessary in order to grasp another essential feature of the nature of photographs—this will be the job of the Sect. 4.4

#### 4.4 The Process of Production and Necessary Decisions

§1. Let us examine the process of production of photographs from a different angle. As already mentioned, it has been widely argued that the process of production is the core of the nature of photographs (both digital and traditional), and that it sets photographs apart from other types of images, like paintings, because photographs are the only images produced in a way which is purely mechanical, causally closed, and which does not include human intervention. Thus, Bazin (1960, p. 7) famously claims photography to be “[...] a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part” and adds that “For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man.” Hopkins (2012) defends, in his own (different) way, a similar claim as well: “[...] photography, in contrast [with hand-made pictures], involves a causal chain free from the influence of people’s beliefs and experiences [...]” Similar claims have also, for very different reasons, been endorsed by Roger Scruton (see Scruton 1981) and Kendall Walton (whose motivation was to defend his famous transparency thesis about photographs: “Objects cause their photographs and the visual experiences of viewers mechanically; so we see the objects through the photographs. By contrast, objects cause paintings not mechanically but in a more ‘human’ way, a way involving the artist; so we don’t see through paintings”) (Walton 1984, p. 261).

There are many important, interesting, and true claims in the neighbourhood of these quotations, and many of them I do share with their authors (for instance, Walton’s transparency thesis strikes me as correct, for independent reasons). But we have already seen that taken at face value these claims about the allegedly purely mechanical way in which photographs are produced without human intervention are simply false, because at least some human decisions are necessary parts of the process of production of photographs (both digital and traditional). I shall now focus on another type of such decisions, which will make salient another important and essential feature of the nature of photographs.

§2. The kind of intentional decisions we have seen until now included only decisions that take place at ‘later’ stages of the process of production—that is, *after* the shutter has been pressed. But there are crucial decisions that a photographer has to

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<sup>2</sup>Williamson (1994) contains probably the most famous and influential epistemicist account. My own version of an epistemicist view is to be found in Benovsky (2011b).

take *before* pressing the shutter as well, including at least aperture, shutter speed, and focal length, but typically also framing (composition), focus, white balance, and other. All of these, or at the very least the first three, are decisions which *have* to be taken, since no photograph can be made without specifying these settings. As before, they can be taken either by the photographer herself, or—in the case of an automatic camera—by somebody else who programmed the camera’s built-in software (which happens even in the peculiar case where a camera unintentionally “takes a photograph” itself when, say, it falls on the floor and the shutter is thus accidentally pressed—I shall not focus on this type of cases in what follows, but at least in the case of digital cameras, decisions taken by the programmers do play here their role in the same way they do when a Sunday snapshotter takes a picture in the camera’s automatic mode). Now, an important feature of this type of decision I want to emphasize is that they appeal to tools that a skilled photographer can use to *guide and direct the attention of the spectator* of her photograph, in order to convey a message, a thought, an idea. Elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> I discuss this way the photographer interacts with her audience in detail; here it will be sufficient to take one quick example to illustrate my point. Consider aperture: all things being equal, the wider the aperture, the shallower the depth of field. Thus decisions about the aperture setting will have an effect on the depth of field which in turn will have an effect of what is sharp and what is blurred on the resulting photograph. This is one of the central tools that a photographer has at her disposal to convey a message with her photograph—in short, by making some elements on her picture to be sharper than their environment, she can tell the spectators of her photograph: “Look here, this is what I wanted to show you, this is important”. What the photographer does here is that she exploits the natural tendency of our perceptual system to be attracted by what is sharp rather than by what is blurred, and she can thus ‘force’ the look of the spectator of her image to focus on some elements of her photograph rather than on others—and use this technique to ‘tell a story’ with her photograph, rather than ‘only’ depict the world in a sort of ‘documentary’ way. Here is an example of a mistake I once made that illustrates the point: when climbing the Matterhorn with a mountain guide, he asked me when we reached the summit to take a nice portrait photograph of him standing on the top, that he wished to use for his Curriculum Vitae and his advertisement brochures. I took the photograph using a telephoto lens (320 mm) at f/2.8 (wide aperture), which resulted in a portrait of his face with a nicely blurred background—the kind of photograph that valorises the person’s face, by making it stand out from its environment and by attracting the attention of the spectator’s look to it (see the “attention management” technique above), thus making it a central element of the kind of visual message the photograph conveys. The mistake, of course, was that on such a type of photograph, with such a shallow depth of field, one could not see in the resulting image that we were at 4’478 m above sea level on a famous summit in the Alps—the photograph could have been taken more or less anywhere with the same result, it was not even obvious that we were in the mountains at all! The choice of a wide aperture was thus here totally inappropriate since it ‘masked’ the kind of message the photograph was

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<sup>3</sup>Benovsky (2012).

supposed to convey, namely, a picture of a mountain guide high in the mountains on a famous summit. Luckily, the guide immediately spotted the mistake and we were able to correct it, by taking another photograph using a  $f/6.3$  aperture (i.e. a wider depth of field, resulting in a less blurred background). What this mistake and the way it was corrected shows is how a photographer can convey one type of message (“look, here is a beautiful face!”) rather than another (“look, here is a face of a person in such-and-such an environment!”) using different aperture settings. Again, I have over-simplified the whole chain of reasoning here (see Benovsky 2012 for a detailed account) but it should be sufficient to appreciate the point(s) I want to make: as a matter of necessity, there are human decisions that must be taken in order to produce a photograph concerning at the very least aperture, shutter speed, and focal length; these decisions allow the photographer to manipulate and manage the attention of the spectator by exploiting our natural perceptual tendencies, which in turn allows her to ‘tell a story’ with her photograph and to convey a message in a very clear (non-metaphorical) sense. These decisions being necessary (since no photograph can be made without taking them), not only we see here again that the claim about a ‘purely mechanical’ way photographs are allegedly produced ‘without human intervention’ is false, but we also learn about another essential feature of photographs: they are ways for the photographer to control the attention of the spectator and to convey a message. In short, photographs not only have depictive powers but narrative powers as well.

(In the case of a Sunday snapshotter, who does not take decisions about aperture herself, she still takes crucial and story-telling decisions when she frames, composes, and focuses her photograph in one way rather than another, namely at least the decisions about the relative size and position of the main subject as compared to its environment, thus again making it more salient and more important (or not—depending on the kind of message she wishes to convey with her photograph)).

§3. Light Field cameras exhibit a technology which challenges deeply the way photographers work, and which constitutes a fascinating borderline case of an image which is such that it is unclear whether it is a photograph or not. (For an example of images produced by a Light Field Camera (LFC) follow the link here: <https://www.jjribenovsky.org/thelimitsofart>).

As you can see, for obvious reasons, it is not possible, as in the case of my other examples reprinted above, to produce a *print* of a LFC-image since, contrary to all types of photographs we are accustomed to, it is a ‘moving picture’—more precisely, *it is not a static image*. Indeed, LFC-images are such that they can be refocused *after* they have been taken; moreover, they can be refocused *by the spectator* of the image, and *not by the photographer*.

All this, I submit, makes LFC-images *not* photographs at all. Let me elaborate. We have seen in the preceding section how a photographer can use the tools at her disposal to guide and control the look of the spectator of her photograph and convey a message. With a LFC, this is not possible anymore: the resulting images are such that it is not possible for the photographer to control what is sharp and what is blurred on the photograph, it is not possible to control where the spectator will focus her attention, and thus LFCs deprive the photographer of her best and strongest tool for

communicating with her audience—it deprives photographs of their narrative powers. Thus, LFC-images lack one essential features photographs have. Photographs are essentially static images, and since LFC-images are not, they must be something else than photographs. But they are not like cinema either, interestingly, for the very same reason: as Carroll (2008, chap. 5) has shown, the motion picture maker does a job which is similar to the photographer’s in the sense that she controls and guides the attention of the spectator of her movie, typically, by taking decisions about depth of field, about the order in which one sees things, about for how long one sees them, about the relative size (scale) of the main subject, and so on. Cinema thus shares with photography this essential feature: they are both ways for an artist to ‘force’ her audience to perceive the world which is depicted in a way she wants to show it (and this is how both cinema and photography have narrative powers). LFC-images are very different in this respect, since they are dynamic ‘unsettled’ images which are at least partly (but importantly!) under the control of the spectator, and not of the artist. LFC-images are thus not photographs, they are not cinema, they are digital *sculptures*. Indeed, the way the artist interacts here with her audience is very similar to the way a sculptor does. When observing a sculpture, one can focus on different parts of it in one’s own way, in one’s own order, and for as long as one wishes—a sculpture, contrary to a photograph, does not ‘force’ one’s look to focus on some parts of it rather than others. One can choose the angle from which one looks at a sculpture. The way a spectator interacts with a sculpture thus gives rise to a *dynamic* experience of it. LFC-images thus lie outside the vague boundaries of what counts as a photograph and what does not.

## 4.5 Photographs, Paintings, Vagueness

§1. In the preceding sections, we have seen various ways in which the process of production of photographs contains essential steps that characterize the nature of photography—which can help us to decide what counts as a photograph and what does not. *Inter alia*, I have offered reasons to reject the view that this process is such that photographs are produced in a ‘purely mechanical’ way, by showing how human intervention is an essential part of the process. But there is one very good motivation behind the ‘mechanicist claim’, one which I think is important to preserve, in order to have a good grasp on what counts as a photograph and what does not, namely, the claim that a photograph is *always* a photograph of *something that exists* (which makes it a different type of picture, in principle, than a painting). To my mind, this is correct. But there is a threat of losing this claim, if one believes, as I do and as I have argued above, that digital manipulation and digital retouches should be accepted as parts of a normal process of production of photographs, and consequently that sometimes even heavily retouched images should still count as photographs—there is the risk that such a picture does not depict anything existing any more.

§2. There are two claims I made that can help to avoid this unwelcome result. Firstly, and very importantly, while it is true that photographs depict always something existing, they always do so not in some sort of ‘ideally objective’ and purely causal way but rather they show us the world *in a way the photographer wants us to see it*. This, as we have seen, applies to photography in general, and not only to digitally manipulated photographs; just think of all the types of necessary human interventions that are part of the process of production of a photograph (necessary digital manipulations, and the photographer’s necessary decisions). As a consequence, a photograph depicts always *that* something exists, but not necessarily (never, actually) *how* it is. A photograph that has been digitally manipulated can thus still count as a photograph, and still be an image that depicts something that exists, while depicting it in a way which is different from the way it is. (Again, this claim applies to photography in general, and not only to the case of digital manipulation.)

Secondly, I have insisted on the inescapable vagueness of the limit between what counts as a photograph and what does not. I have also insisted on the fact that we cannot determine, once and for all, where this limit lies—such is its vague nature. But the claim cherished by the friends of the mechanist thesis, which I share, gives us a little more grasp on the whereabouts of this limit: once the resulting image does not depict anything existing anymore, it ceases to be a photograph. This criterion thus gives us one way of specifying the ‘upper boundary’ of the fuzzy and vague zone containing borderline cases of photographs. Thus, *very* heavily digitally retouched photographs do not count; rather, they become digital paintings. The limit between (digital) paintings and photographs is a vague one.

§3. In this Chapter, I tried to make some progress concerning the issue about what counts as a photograph and what does not, with the purpose of finding some essential features of photography in the process of doing so. Among the essential features of photographs I raised the following: they always depict something that exists, but not always how it is; both what we see in the resulting image and the way the image was produced count in determining whether it is a photograph or not; the process of production is not purely mechanical and causally closed, on the contrary, it involves many steps where human decisions have to be taken; they are static images which have ‘narrative powers’, that is, which the photographer can use to control and guide the attention of the spectator; digital photographs are photographs, and digital manipulation is perfectly acceptable as a part of a normal process of their production, at least to some extent; importantly, the limit between what counts as a photograph and what does not is irreducibly vague. Without discussing it here, I also quickly mentioned Walton’s transparency claim which I think is correct (even if not always for Walton’s reasons; see Benovsky 2011a). To be sure, the photograph has not yet disclosed all its secrets, and, as future technologies will arrive and incessantly change the ways it can be produced and manipulated, many new and interesting insights lie ahead, modifying our understanding of what the limits between photographs and (digital) paintings are.

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