Why We Shouldn't Give up on Aesthetic Experience

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The idea of 'aesthetic experience' has recently become the subject of empirically informed philosophical theories. In his two recent books, *Adieu à l'Esthétique* and *L'Expérience Esthétique*, Jean-Marie Schaeffer relies on psychology, theories of attention and cognitive science to illuminate philosophical thinking on aesthetic experience. While empirical psychology is central to understanding aesthetic experience, there are reasons to believe that we need not bid adieu to the idea just yet. Indeed, the tragic overtones of bidding adieu to aesthetic experience might remind us of Nietzsche regretfully bidding adieu to God, encouraging us to find our place in a stark reality brought about by science and the full affirmation of, and responsibility for, our lives. By this I do not mean that aesthetic experience is akin to religious experience, although it might be for some, but that there is a secular case for aesthetic experience that transcends scientific demonstration. The transcendental case for aesthetic experience "is not such as to need substantiation" as Ronald Hepburn thought, but helps us locate our place among things and brings us closer to an understanding of ourselves among those things. This sort of view seeks verification according to a complex of perspective, emotion, evaluation, unity, perception, to borrow some of Hepburn's terms, that evade the very scientific underpinnings of empirical psychology. I thus caution not doing away with aesthetic experience as Schaeffer suggests.

Introduction

Must we bid adieu to aesthetics? Many would intuitively answer no. The richness of our daily experience is often at least partly tinged, if not permeated with, aesthetic qualities. Despite attempts to brush it aside, especially in relation to art, the idea of aesthetic experience has not gone away. In part, this is because we ordinarily think of aesthetics as being imbued in our experiences of objects and environments that are not ordinarily thought to be part of the artworld. It is also widely thought to be central to the quality of our experiences and to the quality of our lives.

We might therefore wonder about Jean-Marie Schaeffer's provocatively titled *Adieu à l'esthétique*, especially since it was followed by *L'Expérience*

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esthétique a few years later.[1] In these, Schaeffer offers a corrective to the notion that we should do away with aesthetic psychology, as advocated by George Dickie. However, he also rejects Kantian and post-Kantian, transcendental aesthetic experience, his reason for bidding adieu to the aesthetic. Instead, and in wishing to get rid of the "ghost" that carries "sensible knowledge"[2], Schaeffer argues for an empirical approach to aesthetic psychology, and that we had better understand the anthropological origins and sub-personal processes that constitute or guide aesthetic attention and intentionality.

It would be an injustice to Schaeffer if one thought that he did not lament letting go of the transcendental aesthetic, or to not appreciate the finesse with which he approaches the aesthetic object, just as it is a misunderstanding to suggest that Nietzsche celebrated the death of God by dancing on his grave. Despite his empirical view, I am not sure that Schaeffer would share Paul Churchland's view, as cited in Curie's book on 'Aesthetics and Cognitive Science' that "we would not be observing the sky reddening at sunset", but "the wavelength distribution of incoming solar radiation shift towards the longer wavelengths".[3]

Still, I defend the view that aesthetic experience, that is to say, the transcendental aesthetic, has a role to play in bringing us to a closer understanding of ourselves and our place in the world: there is a secular case for aesthetic experience that transcends scientific demonstration. My view is that contingent, coincidental, scientific truth does not necessarily support or undermine our intuitions or beliefs about our aesthetic experiences. That is to say that ordinary interest in aesthetic experience is about what Gregory Curie has termed the "*personal*", "process of ascribing content-bearing states" rather than the "*subpersonal*", "as when theorists of vision speak of the information carried by the visual system that may be unavailable to the subject herself".[4] From another perspective, Ronald Hepburn writes:

> Claims about the world, again, stand in need of verification or falsification, to establish their *bona fides* or their falsity. But our appreciation, and even our serious criticism, of works of art do not characteristically involve such external testing of their truth-value. The truth of claims incorporated in works of art is not such as to need substantiation.[5]

Whatever the truth claims of science, and I do not deny their import, a central feature of aesthetic experience is what they are like when we have them. I thus caution doing away with aesthetic experience, as Schaeffer suggests, in preference for verification according to an open-ended complex of perspective, emotion, evaluation, unity and perception.

What is Aesthetic Experience?

The question 'What is aesthetic experience?' has an enduring legacy, one that persists in soliciting disagreement and that more recently has involved

cross-fertilization with empirical psychology, as in the case of Schaeffer's writing. I will therefore gloss the two versions of aesthetic experience under consideration here. The two versions include Schaeffer's and a revised understanding of aesthetic experience according to Kant. Schaeffer's explanation of aesthetic experience is mostly about what happens at the sub-personal level, in which the speed and fluency with which we process an object gives way to feelings of sustained and rewarding pleasure and in which top-down processes engage with bottom-up perceptual stimuli.

According to Kant, aesthetic experience is based on the feeling of pleasure associated with our appropriately attending to objects in the sense that it is disinterested: it is not dependent on desire and it is not guided by mere sensual experience, contextual or practical morality. I re-interpret Kant according to a whole formalist account that does not do away with subjective idiosyncrasy and that allows me to defend the Romantic concept of the aesthetic that Schaeffer bids adieu to.

Naturalistic Explanations: Schaeffer's Sub-personalism

In his book *Adieu à l'esthétique*, Schaeffer carefully situates a naturalistic explanation of aesthetic experience by contrasting it with what he takes to be the historical precedence of Romanticism, which finds its origins in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. The latter is a manifestation of ontological dualism that, if adhered to, signals a kind of nostalgia for a lost paradise and hope for a coming renaissance.[6] According to him, we must give up the idea that philosophy provides the foundations for understanding aesthetic experience. Rather, the foundations of aesthetic theory are to be found at the sub-personal level, in scientific results. Schaeffer's theory of aesthetic experience is rooted in the science of perception, attention and cognitive psychology.[7] More specifically, he makes a plea for aesthetic experience by appealing to aesthetic attention as a distinctive form of attention.

Along these lines we ought to better understand the psychological and biological elements that explain the interrelations between different levels of complexity that characterize human beings.[8] In *L'Expérience Esthétique*, he provides an explanatory framework for historical and cultural variations as well as the subjectivism of aesthetic experience based on empirical research that combines sub-personal processes with lived, first personal experience. His project is to provide an approach to aesthetics that is not determined by ontological or metaphysical matters so much as bringing into perspective scientific knowledge provided by the empirical psychology that underlie a cognitivist, attention-centered approach to aesthetic experience.

Furthermore, he sees the conditions laid out by Kantian disinterestedness as removing subjective idiosyncrasy and functional approaches to artefacts that exist in most historical and contemporary cultures. Instead, Schaeffer's conditions include a form of attentional experience that finds its source in

basic phenomenological experience, to which hedonic pleasure or displeasure and emotional response are bound. The hedonic condition is a process of evaluation of the aesthetic characteristics internal to attentive engagement, while emotions are the result of judgments issued from aesthetic attention. This in turn endorses a more general form of subjectivity where aesthetic truth stems from aesthetic beliefs grounded in empirical results.

Schaeffer takes aesthetic attention to be distinctive due to cognitive processing that is attention-driven and top-down, which combines with the bottom-up, merely stimulus-driven attention of ordinary experience.[9] Aesthetic experience is thus both top-down and bottom up. It is 'polyphonic'[10] in the sense that the object's aesthetic qualities combine with top-down values involving intricate interrelations among the values of all the object's individual elements.

Schaeffer circumscribes the issue of aesthetic criteria (their epistemic status, whether they may be "subjective" or "objective"), by articulating the aesthetic appreciation loop that takes place between aesthetic attention and what he calls the "hedonic calculator".[11] The "hedonic calculator" is another term for "appreciation", but not appreciation in the sense of a final, critical judgment, but the "online" process. The role of the object's properties is of no interest: we perceive an object in the narrow sense of mere perception (its arrival on the retina in the case of a visual object) in the aesthetic and non-aesthetic case.

Of interest is the attentional difference, whether there exists a difference in the attentional properties that differentiates experiences of pleasure and displeasure. Despite his rejection of Kant's disinterestedness, Schaeffer takes his contemporary account to be a fruition of Kant's own view that positive aesthetic appreciation is caused by the harmonic interaction of our cognitive faculties: the spontaneous, generic, harmonious, interaction between our sensibility and understanding. Schaeffer thus turns to the idea of "processing fluency" in Rolf Reber et al., the fluency with which our faculties process aesthetic information.

Process fluency occurs through a form of attention is "self-teleological" and "self-sustaining" where the identification of the aesthetic object is the beginning of the sharpening of a description we may provide and perceptual learning.[12] The hedonic component of aesthetic experience is measured by our ability to process, through attention, the qualities of the aesthetic object rather than having any particular focus on the object itself. Aesthetic evaluation is metarepresentational and the fluency with which it is processed is the hedonic valence.

Therefore, "aesthetic experience is a function of the perceiver's processing dynamics: The more fluently the perceiver can process an object, the more positive is his or her aesthetic response."[13] The idea is that "objects differ in the fluency with which they can be processed,[…], processing fluency is itself hedonically marked and high fluency is subjectively experienced as positive,

as indicated by psychophysiological findings, […], processing fluency feeds into judgements of aesthetic appreciation because people draw on their subjective experience in making evaluative judgments, unless the informational value of the experience is called into question, [… and] the impact of fluency is moderated by expectations and attributions."[14]

Schaeffer considers two objections to his view. The first is that this may be thought to be counter-intuitive to social scientists, art historians and theorists, since it does not account for those aesthetic experiences that are not straightforwardly fluent in the way stipulated by Reber et al.: one might think of the distorting features of Modernist or Cubist paintings or music lacking in harmonic structures, such as atonal music. Schaeffer therefore allows for the idea of disfluency in cases where artistic strategy is to manipulate fluency processes or when processing an artwork requires more work, such as when a work's complexity exceeds the subject's exposure level either to that particular artwork or to art in general. This takes into consideration feelings of boredom, curiosity and wonder one might have in relation to an aesthetic object.

The second objection is a worry about his account of aesthetic attention being a form of idealism that disregards the object itself, therefore compromising its contribution to the experience. Another way of putting this is that an attention-based approach to aesthetic experience may fail to explain the relation to the object itself. Indeed, Schaeffer addresses this point by suggesting that it is based on a misunderstanding: an argument demonstrating the subjective expression of an aesthetic judgement does not imply that it is not related to its object, but rather that attention to it provides the source of pleasure or displeasure. The object-to-subject causal relation can only be established once cognitive attention is focused on the object such that it is the source of pleasure or displeasure.

Missing in Schaeffer's account, however, is just what causal or other relation between the object and the subject is established in aesthetic experience given attentional engagement with: what it is about the object itself that invites aesthetic attention. One might boldly hypothesize that the existence of distinctly aesthetic properties. Indeed, many have done just that, a philosophical discussion that has ended in a stalemate.[15] Time and space prevent a recapitulation of the debate about aesthetic properties here, but the stalemate is thought to be remedied by appealing to the philosophy of perception informed by empirical psychology.

Schaeffer's view is undoubtedly rich. His polyphonic approach combines bottom-up perception and top-down processing that occurs through self-sustaining attention that is ultimately pleasurable. We might indeed think that he replaces Kant's disinterestedness with sub-personal processes, which might in turn deflate both the importance of the object (even if Kant is indifferent to the object's existence in the end) and the complex of perspective,

emotion, evaluation, unity and perception that take place at the personal level. In the end, our interest in the aesthetic is our personal relation to external objects, what they tell us about ourselves and our place in the world. It is precisely this version of the aesthetic that I would hesitate to bid adieu to.

Making it Personal: Properties, Imagination and Disinterestedness

First, while we might not have access to a verifiable account of independently existent aesthetic properties and objects, postulating them allows for the openness that one might think is otherwise desirable in aesthetic experience. Both the scientific hypothesizing about aesthetic experience and empirically testing those hypotheses remain within the bounds of subjective experience. It is unclear that truth claims about aesthetic experiences are in need of scientifically demonstrable substantiation, since we are both interested in the content of experience, including what seems to be an objective aesthetic force in the phenomenology of the experience. Even just the possibility of aesthetic properties is an invitation to engage with the aesthetic object, what it is about *that* object that solicits aesthetic attention and experience. One might go the way of Frank Sibley, who avoided metaphysical issues, but who nevertheless thought that distinguishing between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic solicits, in some cases, concepts that are "mixed": there are perceptual aesthetic features and there are perceptual non-aesthetic features.[16]

Aesthetic properties are perceptual in that they are sensible, related to taste, about the discernment of aesthetic qualities in things, the ability to recognize aesthetic merit and make judgments of aesthetic worth. They involve looking to see whether "things have aesthetic properties about which correct or mistaken judgements can be made and defended" and whether "it is possible to defend, as beyond question, various general principles of *evaluation,* for example that if something is graceful it has, pro tanto, and barring special explanation, some aesthetic merit".[17] Aesthetic discernment, discerning between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, ought not to be prescribed by criteria, which might also include the criteria exercised in empirically substantiated theories. Rather, discernment occurs through sensibility and the careful application of aesthetic concepts and terms. One might wonder why Schaeffer shies away from Kant's disinterestedness given that his account of attention being motivated by pleasure perpetuation echoes Kant's own pleasure-based account of beauty.

As we saw above, Schaeffer sees the conditions laid out by Kantian disinterestedness as removing subjective idiosyncrasy and functional approaches to artefacts that exist in most historical and contemporary cultures. This claim has been one of the enduring, standard, objections to Kant together with what is often perceived as the overly narrow formalism that is its purported outcome. One might think it overly convenient to think that Kant, who at very least contributed to the subjective turn of the eighteenth century,

removed subjective idiosyncrasy in order to arrive at a stark formalism often associated with his aesthetics. A more generous interpretation would be to suggest that Kant was looking to isolate what is universally distinctive about the aesthetic in experience.

I have in mind Rachel Zuckert's approach that reconceptualizes disinterestedness according to what she calls "whole formalism".[18] Formalism along Zuckert's lines arises out of disinterestedness, according to which mere sense (or agreeableness) and moral (or practical, even contextual) goodness and badness do not guide the experience. More specifically, whole formalism is the view that it is a threefold disjunctive state which brings together the object's form, our sensual experience of it, through which we come into contact with the object as well as the concepts which may come into play in our imaginative engagement with the aesthetic object. Where mere formalism, the stark account of formalism usually associated with Kant, does not admit of sense and morality, whole formalism does, but *ex post facto*.

One way of fleshing out this version of formalism would be that it results from attending to the object perceived without settling one way or the other on what we know about it, the categories – scientific or otherwise that might direct it – with an awareness that how we perceive it might not be definitive, by being open to what the object offers in perception, its form, and engaging the imagination in multiple ways. Disinterestedness may be seen as a means to balance aesthetic experience such that the object's features are as little distorted by subjective interests, or that formalism leads merely to "how things really are" [19] in a descriptive sense.

However, this does not disallow the application of non-intellectual aspects of the mind in our grasping the object. Indeed, Brady's characterization of the role of the imagination, the various modes with which it might be exercised – the exploratory, projective, ampliative and revelatory imagination[20] – go some way to balancing the object-subject relation. The exploratory imagination in particular has a distinctive role to play in the various modes of perception:

> Here, imagination explores the forms of the object as we perceptually attend to it, and imagination's discoveries can, in turn, enrich and alter our perception of the object. Whilst perception does much of the work in simply grasping the object and cordoning it off in our perceptual field, it is imagination that reaches beyond this in a free contemplation of the object. In this way exploratory imagination helps the percipient to make an initial discovery of aesthetic qualities.[21]

The exploratory imagination may just be a form of sensory imagining that we linger, delight or take pleasure in.

This may not fully, or logically, demonstrate the existence of mind-independent aesthetic properties or objects, but it does endorse an object-centered account of experience that indicates the possibility that at least some aesthetic properties feature in aesthetic experience. This more nuanced

approach allows for the object to be made central to experience with the possibility of integrating the wider mental, epistemic and cultural phenomena that come to be associated with it.

Disinterestedness has to do with the openness with which we engage with aesthetic objects in themselves in addition to their particular instantiation in our representations of them, rather than discouraging a lack of personal, idiosyncratic, moral, utilitarian or otherwise. Kantian disinterestedness is supposed to be about making the object of aesthetic experience central to that experience, rather than experience being guided by what is going on with the subject.

The openness and non-conditioned governedness of beauty serve as a reminder that even if we can't define beauty, or our experience of beauty, there are possibilities other than those we might attribute to the object given our motivational profile or the fluency of processing. As mentioned above, Sibley reminded us of the importance of looking, of determining the extent to which at least some aesthetic concepts may be thought to be descriptive or quasi-descriptive or purely evaluative.[22] In her writings on the imagination, Brady writes about the exploratory imagination, the importance of a kind of perceptual imagination also reminiscent of Ronald Hepburn's and John Dewey's, who warn against shoe-horning aesthetic experience into deterministic definitions, whether of empirical psychology or criteria-ridden theories.

Indeed, Dewey writes that the imagination contributes to aesthetic experience such that "experience [is] freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience; freed, that is, from factors that subordinate an experience as it is directly had to something beyond itself".[23] Aesthetic experience involves perceptual immersion, in which the imagination is part of conscious experience, a gateway through which meanings find their way into present, immediate, direct interaction with an object or environment.

This freedom of imagination in aesthetic experience speaks to a "truth-to" conveying the "*what it is like to* undergo some human possibility of experience", rather than a "truth about" scientific claims about the world that "stand in need of verification or falsification".[24] Hepburn holds that the imagination's actively connecting diverse separated natural forms in which we relate object with object, structure with structure, searching out analogies between features of otherwise very remote phenomena, like the veins on a maple leaf resembling the veins on one's hand: "To be imaginatively alert to such common structures has an obvious unifying, integrating effect – enhancing the sense that we are dealing with a single nature, intelligible in its forms." [25] The aesthetic thus gives us "intimate access to perspectives, ways of seeing and feeling the world, the complexes of emotions, evaluations, distinctive perceptions, which, in a unity, make up a mode or moment of experience, so characterized".[26]

Conclusion

Schaeffer is right to feel a sense of loss in bidding adieu to the aesthetic, just as Nietzsche lamented the death of God. Only the open-ended, unconstrained, self-sustaining perpetuation of pleasure that characterizes aesthetic experience in relation to aesthetic properties and objects and in all its multitudinous possible forms, need not leave. In fact, aesthetic experience evades scientific framework that undermine the experience of properties and objects it seeks to explain. In answer to our opening question, I would not be so hasty to bid adieu to the aesthetic; if only because there is more to sunsets than wavelengths of distribution and solar radiation.

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Notes

[1] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Adieu à l'esthétique*, (Paris: Editions Mimesis/l'Esprit des Signes, 2016); Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'expérience esthétique,* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

[2] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Adieu à l'esthétique*, (Paris: Editions Mimesis/l'Esprit des Signes, 2016), 43.

[3] Gregory Currie, "Aesthetics and Cognitive Science" in Jerrold Levinson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 708.

[4] Ibid. 707.

[5] Ronald W. Hepburn, "Art, Truth and Subjectivity" in *The Journal of Philosophy of Education,* Vol. 24 (2) 1990, 186.

[6] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Adieu à l'esthétique*, (Paris: Editions Mimesis/l'Esprit des Signes, 2016), 17.

[7] Others include Nanay, Dokic

[8] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Adieu à l'esthétique*, (Paris: Editions Mimesis/l'Esprit des Signes, 2016), 20-21.

[9] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'expérience esthétique*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 76.

[10] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'expérience esthétique,* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 90.

[11] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'expérience esthétique*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 210-221.

[12] Rolf Reber, Norbert Schwarz and Piotr Wilkielman, "Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure: Is Beauty in the Perceiver's Processing Experience?", *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8:4 (2004), 364-382.

[13] Rolf Reber, Norbert Schwarz and Piotr Wilkielman, "Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure: Is Beauty in the Perceiver's Processing Experience?", *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8:4 (2004), 364.

[14] Rolf Reber, Norbert Schwarz and Piotr Wilkielman, "Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure: Is Beauty in the Perceiver's Processing Experience?", *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8:4 (2004), 366.

[15] Alan H. Goldman, "Aesthetic Qualities and Aesthetic Value", *The Journal of Philosophy* 87:1 (1990): 23-37, "Realism About Aesthetic Properties", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51:1 (1993): 31-37, "Reply to Gould and Levinson on Aesthetic Realism", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52:3 (1994), 354-356; Carol Gould, "The Reality of Aesthetic Properties: a Response to Goldman", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52:3 (1994), 349-351; Jerrold Levinson, "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility" in *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays after Sibley,* Emily Brady and Jerrold Levinson (eds) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), "Aesthetic Supervenience", *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1984), 93-110, "Being Realistic About Aesthetic Properties", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52:3 (1994), 351-354, "What Are Aesthetic Properties?", *Contemplating Art*, Jerrold Levinson (ed) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 336-351; Derek Matravers and Jerrold Levinson, "Aesthetic Properties", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 79 (2005), 191-227.

[16] Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic", *The Philosophical Review* 74(2) (1965), 135-159. Reprinted in *Approach to Aesthetics*, Betty Redfern, John Benson, Jeremy Roxbee Cox (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[17] Frank Sibley, "About Taste" in *Approach to Aesthetics*, Betty Redfern, John Benson, Jeremy Roxbee Cox (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 52.

[18] Rachel Zuckert, "The Purposiveness of Form: A Reading of Kant's Aesthetic Formalism", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44:4 (2006), 599-622.

[19] Ronald Hepburn, "Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Experience of Nature" in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts, 1993), 65-72.

[20] Emily Brady, "Imagination and the Experience of Nature", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56:2 (1998), 143-147. See also Anthony Savile, *Aesthetic Reconstructions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[21] Emily Brady, "Imagination and the Experience of Nature", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56:2 (1998), 143.

[22] Frank Sibley, "Seeking, Scrutinizing and Seeing", *Mind* 64:256 (1955), 455-478; "Aesthetic Concepts", *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-23.

[23] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1934), 274.

[24] Ronald W. Hepburn, "Art, Truth and Subjectivity" in *The Journal of Philosophy of Education,* Vol. 24 (2) 1990, 186.

[25] Emily Brady, "Imagination and the Experience of Nature", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56:2 (1998), 139-147, especially 143; John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1934), 272; Ronald Hepburn, "Nature in the Light of Art" in *Wonder and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984); "Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature", *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts,* Kemal and Gaskell (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge Studies and the Arts, 1993), 65-80, especially 75-76.

[26] Ronald W. Hepburn, "Art, Truth and Subjectivity" in *The Journal of Philosophy of Education,* Vol. 24 (2) 1990, 186.