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THE “HOW” AND “WHAT” OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE. SOME REFLECTIONS BASED ON NOË’S *STRANGE TOOLS*. ART AND HUMAN NATURE

abstract

Being a book on art and its nature, Strange Tools deals with aesthetic experience as a crucial object of inquiry. Indeed, it offers several interesting insights into what aesthetic experience is and how we should (or should not) account for it. However, some aspects of Noë’s analysis raise questions, both about the act and about the object of aesthetic experience itself. In this paper, I will discuss these issues highlighting a potential conflict in the author’s analysis of aesthetic experience and providing some hints about the objective correlate of such an experience.

keywords

aesthetic experience, enactive perception, tertiary qualities

1. Introduction

Strange Tools by Alva Noë is a book on art and artistic practice. However, since the topic is framed within a more general theory of human practices and (aesthetic) experience, it is also a book on perception, the human mind, and our nature as embodied beings who are embedded in a social and technological world.

Starting from some of the main theses and implications of this book, in this paper I would like to focus on two different aspects of the same topic, i.e. aesthetic experience.

Indeed, being a book on art and its nature, *Strange Tools* has to deal with aesthetic experience as a crucial object of inquiry: it therefore offers several interesting insights into what aesthetic experience is and how we should (or should not) account for it (Noë, 2015, pp. 51-54, 120-133). However, in my view, some points of Noë’s analysis seem to require further exploration and development – both *a parte subjecti* (i.e. the analysis of the *act* of aesthetic experience) and *a parte objecti* (i.e. the analysis of the *object* of aesthetic experience).

Regarding the former aspect, in the target book, Noë seems to present aesthetic experience against the background of a general enactive approach to perception, according to which perception is an *active* exploration of the surrounding world (Noë and O’Regan, 2001, p. 940). On the other hand, he presents aesthetic seeing as a kind of *contemplative* and *detached* seeing (Noë, 2015, pp. 51-52). The specific ways in which these two different conceptualizations can be held together and harmonized is not completely focused on by the author but it will turn out to be a crucial point to investigate further.

Regarding the second aspect, my thesis will be that Noë’s analysis of the proper object of aesthetic experience fails to consider some crucial features of such object. To be sure, Noë focuses on a specific kind of aesthetic object, i.e. works of art, describing how they should be accounted for and why they particularly matter to us. However, it seems reasonable to admit that there could be aesthetic objects that are not works of art, or, in other terms, that we can have an aesthetic experience of objects that are not works of art. In our everyday life, in fact, a poem or a piece of choreography may be experienced aesthetically as a natural landscape or the atmosphere of a city can. What – if anything – do these experiences have in common, so that we can call all of them “aesthetic experiences”? Moreover, more importantly, is there something that we detect in objects of experience that allows us to speak of various different *aesthetic objects* – some of which are works of art?

Noë’s position on this point seems to be compatible with the idea that the peculiarity of aesthetic experience can be explained just by the specific – contemplative and detached – attitude that characterizes it. Such an attitude leads us to see objects in themselves, their

shape and color and size as neutral and pure, free of their everyday practical meanings. I will try to argue that this characterization of the objective correlate of aesthetic experience overlooks some of the specific features of everyday objects that can be crucially detected in aesthetic experiences themselves.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is twofold: to highlight some gaps in Noë's analysis of aesthetic experience *a parte subjecti*, and to provide some hints about the objective correlate of this kind of experience for a more inclusive and multifaceted account *a parte objecti*.

Before embarking on a critical analysis of Noë's theory, it is worth summarizing some of the main tenets of this proposal, in order to better understand the background of the specific theses I will highlight and discuss.

As we said at the beginning, *Strange Tools* is a book on art and artistic practice, but it also outlines a more general theory of human practices and (aesthetic) experience, perception and the human mind, as well as our nature as embodied beings.

In his book, Noë starts by stressing how our lives are characterized by several organized activities, from breastfeeding to talking, from dancing to driving. Such activities shape us, our way of thinking and acting: in other words, we get organized by means of them. According to the author, organized activities are primitive and natural;¹ they are ways of paying attention, looking, listening, doing, undergoing; they exhibit a structure in time; they are emergent and not deliberately controlled by any individual; they have a social, biological or personal function, and they are (at least potentially) pleasurable (Noë, 2015, pp. 3-10).

But there is another group of activities that are quite different from the ones just described. If dancing is an organized activity, choreography is not. Choreography is not dancing: choreography puts dance on the stage, it focuses and acts on it to show what dancing can be and how it can be worked on and *re-organized*. In this sense, if dancing is an organized activity, choreography is a *re-organizational* one. Indeed, according to Noë, we can think of there being two levels of activities (Noë, 2015, pp. 11-28). Level 1 is that of organized activities (e.g. talking, moving, dancing, singing). Level 2 is the level on which "the nature of the organization at the lower level gets put on display and investigated" (Noë, 2015, p. 29): in this sense, Level-2-activities *re-organize* the lower-level ones. Among such Level-2-activities we can find choreography, as well as art and, interestingly, philosophy.

Coming to the main topic of the book then, art is not technology and artistic practice is not a technical activity (Noë, 2015, pp. 29-48). Activities such as dancing, singing, making pictures or sculptures are organized activities that may require very specific skills but are not artistic practices in themselves – let us think, for example, of children's dancing, our singing to ourselves, or our making non-professional photos at a birthday party among friends. However, such activities can be *re-organized*, that is they can be put on the stage and investigated as a means of investigating ourselves and our nature as technological beings. Art puts our practices on display and shows how new and unfamiliar they can be. In this sense, works of art are *strange tools*: if technical activities produce different kinds of tools aiming at serving several different ends, art does not serve any particular purpose. It investigates what our Level-1-activities produce (e.g. songs, pictures, utensils, dance movements, and so on) and tries to make us see them under a new light: in this sense, when they become works of art, objects lose their practical utility. They do not serve a particular purpose and so they appear *strange* (Noë, 2015, pp. 49-71).

2. An Overview on *Strange Tools*

¹ Noë underlines that "natural" is not to be intended in opposition to "learned" or "technological". The idea is that natural organized activities are those activities that, even if learned against the background of new settings and technologies, once acquired, can be carried on in a smooth and natural way. See Noë (2015), p. 7.

Philosophy is a Level-2-activity too. Like art, philosophy investigates the mode of our organization and the way we are embedded in different organized activities. More particularly, it is the re-organizational practice that investigates and puts on display Level-1-cognitive undertakings such as reasoning, argument, belief formation, the work of science, and so on (Noë, 2015, p. 29). This characterization of philosophy leads Noë to maintain that “art is a philosophical practice and philosophy an aesthetic one” (Noë, 2015, p. 134).

Noë’s book is engaging and provoking. As this brief overview shows, it proposes a broad theory of human practices that tries to make sense not just of all different artistic productions but also of other human activities, such as philosophical work. Moreover, it frames the overall analysis of art in a specific theory of mind that criticizes the neuro-(aesthetic) approach and has its background in the enactive theory of perception and cognition that the author had proposed in previous works (Noë, 2004, 2009). The result is a broad overview that spans from a theory of art, to a theory of human practices, to a theory of mind, in a very captivating way. However, far from being interested in (and capable of) discussing all the themes and research lines Noë has proposed in this book, as I said in the introduction I will concentrate on some specific theoretical issues his analysis of aesthetic experience raises, both *a parte subjecti* and *a parte objecti*.

3. *A Parte Subjecti* Analysis: How to Conceive Aesthetic Experience?

One of the major targets of criticism in Noë’s theory is the neuro-aesthetic account of artworks and how they are experienced (Noë, 2015, pp. 120-133).

As for aesthetic experience in particular, the author maintains that even though it could be fruitful to know what happens in our brains while having such experiences, this does not tell us anything about what aesthetic experiences (not to mention works of art) are. Indeed, while every experience does elicit some particular events in the brain, this does not necessarily mean that the experience itself is reducible (both ontologically and epistemologically) to those events (Noë, 2015, pp. 130-131). Against this background, Noë criticizes the neuro-aesthetic approach as unable to account for the complex nature of the aesthetic attitude. Aesthetic experience, in fact, is not a finite and well-circumscribed reaction in the brain that can be measured and captured, at a given point in time, by means of neuroimaging methods. On the contrary, it is a *temporally extended* and multimodal engagement and exploration of the artistic work that can be transformed over time as long as the subject engages with the object and reflects upon it (Noë, 2015, pp. 120-133). Indeed, according to Noë, aesthetic responses are not fixed data points. They are more like the outcomes of an ongoing interaction with the object (or the work of art), which can be continuously shaped and informed by many different factors, such as what friends or critics tell us about that work, what we are interested in or focusing on, and so on. In Noë’s words:

A striking feature of aesthetic responses [...] is that they are cognitive achievements, comparable, if not identical, to getting a joke. [...] Aesthetic responses, then, are not symptoms or reactions or stable quantities. They are actions. They are modes of participation. They are moments of conversation (Noë, 2015, pp. 132-133).

This account of aesthetic experience seems to find its theoretical background in Noë’s theory of perception in general. Indeed, as the author himself says, no kinds of perceptual experiences are events «set off as a result of the bombardment of the nervous system from the outside» (Noë, 2015, p. 124). Rather, perceptual experiences are patterns of active interaction between the living being and its world.

As should be clear, therefore, Noë rejects the idea of *aesthetic* experiences as reactions in the brain in the same way as he rejects the idea that *perceptual* experiences are that kind of

reaction. He suggests, on the contrary, that both perception and aesthetic experiences are occurrences of active engagement with the world.

However, what does this actually mean? How does Noë argue for this theoretical position? As I mentioned before, this idea finds its basis in the author's enactive account of perception, so that we can say that Noë develops his account of aesthetic experience against the background of that theoretical proposal. Therefore, in order to understand better Noë's account of aesthetic experience, as well as his criticism to the neuro-aesthetic approach, it is useful to introduce some crucial tenets of the enactive approach.

The enactive approach to (visual) perception has been developed principally by Noë (2004, 2009), also in collaboration with the psychologist Kevin O'Regan (Myin & O'Regan, 2009; Noë & O'Regan, 2001).

One of the main tenets on which this theory is grounded is that having visual experiences does not mean holding a particular representation of the world. Seeing does not arise from having detailed internal representations of the way the world is. On the contrary, it is a way of interacting with the world. It is an activity of the organism that perceives – that is, a “mode of exploration of the world” (Noë & O'Regan, 2001, p. 940).

To explain their position, Noë (2004) and Myin and O'Regan (2009) start with the description of most of our daily visual experiences. When we look at the world around us in the best conditions possible, the objects we see seem to be in sharp focus and high-resolution. We seem to have perceptual access to a spatially and temporarily continuous world, where all things are more or less equally detailed (Myin & O'Regan, 2009, pp. 186-187; Noë, 2004, pp. 35-36).

However, things are not as simple as they might seem in the beginning. Let us consider, for instance, this written page. At first glance, we would say that it is uniformly written, and that it appears in our visual experience as uniformly detailed. However, if we fix our gaze, we will easily notice that we are not able to read many other words around the ones we are actually fixating. This is true even though it seems to us that there are some other distinguishable, readable and detailed words on the page. The same holds for colors. Even though we would say that all objects in our visual field are colored, we are not really able to say which color the things in the periphery of our visual field are. We can only distinguish colors when things move to the center of our visual field.

How can we account for this apparent paradox – that is, the fact that it seems to us that all things in our visual field are equally detailed, while we have a sharply focused and high-resolution visual experience just of the objects in the center of the visual field itself?

According to Noë, we can experience the world around us as detailed and high resolution not because all details are visually detected in a single fixation, but because those details that are not actually seen are nevertheless experienced as *perceptually* (or *virtually*) *present*. When we stare at this written page, for instance, we cannot actually read (and see) all words simultaneously, nonetheless we have a *perceptual sense of the presence* of the now-unreadable words. This perceptual sense makes us have the experience of a uniformly written and detailed page (Noë, 2004, pp. 60-65).

Now, the interesting point for our purposes is that, according to Noë, unseen details can be perceptually present because they are *accessible through movement*. The world is made perceptually available for us thanks to our ability of looking around. Indeed, we can move our eyes or our body and we can gain access to the world in its richness. In this sense, according to the proponents of the enactive theory of perception, the world appears to be detailed not because we can see all the details in a single fixation, but because we find them “whenever we look for them” (Myin & O'Regan, 2009, p. 187). The details in the visual field are *accessible* – that is, they are reachable and explorable thanks to our ability to move. This is the reason why we have a sense of the presence of the world as complete and high-resolution even though we

cannot really see every single detail in each visual fixation.

In this sense, perception depends on my implicit understanding of the way I can access the world by movement. Let us think, for instance, of our perceptual experience of a cat that sits motionless behind a picket fence (Noë, 2004, p. 60). According to Noë, we *do* have a sense of presence of the whole cat – even though we can actually see only those cat-parts that are not occluded by the picket fence – because we implicitly understand that, by moving our eyes, head, or body, we can bring into view those parts of the cat that are now hidden. Those parts of the cat’s body, therefore, are *perceptually present* as *accessible by movement* (Noë, 2004, p. 64). In this framework, seeing is conceived as an exploratory activity (Noë & O’Regan, 2001, pp. 939-940). The perceiver has the ability to move around in her environment and has an implicit understanding of how the world changes while she moves. According to the proponents of the enactive theory of perception, it is partly thanks to these abilities that the perceiver can have the visual experiences she has. Our visual experiences are therefore the result of an exploratory activity that, obviously, depends importantly on our embodied nature and our kinetic and practical abilities.

This theoretical background gives us some clues to interpreting Noë’s thesis according to which, like perception in general, aesthetic experience too is not a finite and well-circumscribed reaction in the brain, but rather an ongoing interaction with the object (Noë, 2015, pp. 132-133). The idea seems to be that aesthetic experience, like perception, is a multimodal (sensory but also thoughtful) and temporally extended way of *exploring* and investigating the object (e.g. the work of art). In this sense, it cannot be reduced to a kind of instantaneous and fully detailed snapshot of aesthetic objects, just as visual experience cannot be reduced to a high-resolution snapshot of the visual field.

However, the enactive account of visual perception stresses also the *active* nature of the interaction with the objects of perception. I can see the whole cat behind the picket fence – or the entire visual scene as uniformly detailed – because the unseen details are available thanks to my ability to move. I can move around the visual objects, actively exploring all their profiles and then acquiring a visual image of the objects themselves as three-dimensional things. Movement and actions have a crucial role here.

However, what are the characteristics of aesthetic exploration? In what specific sense is aesthetic experience enactive? How much is it based on movement and active engagement? Noë seems not to focus explicitly on these issues in his book, preferring to present aesthetic experience against the background of an enactive theory of perception rather than proposing an enactive theory of aesthetic experience itself (personal communication). However, disentangling these issues can turn out to be crucial in light of the way Noë himself keeps describing the aesthetic experience. Indeed, the author compares and contrasts aesthetic seeing with what he calls “seeing in the wild” (Noë, 2015, pp. 51-56). Seeing in the wild is «active, embedded, subordinate to task, an openness to our world rather than [...] a state of reflection on or contemplation of the world» (Noë, 2015, pp. 51). This is the way in which we are usually directed towards the world in our everyday life: when we drive, prepare dinner or clean our apartment we see the world as the correlate of our practical goals, embedded as we are in the given situation. On the contrary, according to Noë, aesthetic seeing is contemplative and detached, and the world opens up as a set of objects that are there just to be seen. Aesthetic seeing, then, requires the ability to «disengage with the world thoughtfully, or to reflect on the world around [...] as if the world were a picture to be inspected» (Noë, 2015, p. 55). Aesthetic experience, in other words, is a kind of disengaged way of thinking about the world or contemplating it.

However, how can this characterization of aesthetic seeing be compatible with Noë’s account of aesthetic perception against the background of a general enactive theory of perception,

which has in the *active engagement* with the world one of its hallmarks? How should we conceive the aesthetic ongoing interaction with objects in order for it to be not at odds with the contemplative, detached and *disengaged* character of aesthetic experience itself?

It seems there are ways in which these two aspects of Noë's characterization of aesthetic experience may be compatible. However, in his book, Noë does not seem to focus on this aspect, leaving a possible issue of his account unresolved.

Moreover, a more developed characterization of the main traits of aesthetic experience as an ongoing interaction and exploration would be crucial. How should we consider such an engagement with respect to the different kinds of objects we can experience aesthetically? Let us think, for instance, of Noë's description of Richard Serra's sculptures (Noë, 2015, pp. 77-79, 85). More than sculptures, these works are *cityscapes* that the observer needs to enter and actively explore in order to really appreciate them. In this case, the aesthetic experience could be described very well by an enactive account. Yet, what about the enactment of a musical piece or a painting, for instance? Could this be of the same kind as the one we perform with Serra's sculptures? If not, what kind of active engagement would it be? Noë does not explicitly focus on these issues: he deals with different works of art, such as sculptures, paintings and musical pieces, but he does not give us a systematic account of the different features that aesthetic active engagement should have in these different cases.

In conclusion, therefore, my hypothesis is that Noë's reading of aesthetic experience against the background of an enactive theory of perception – which is an interesting and potentially very fruitful position – could be more convincing if it explicitly tackled the issues raised here, since they seem to be crucial for an account of the nature of aesthetic experience itself.

In the previous paragraph, I tried to show that some points in Noë's analysis of aesthetic experience need to be specified further in order for us to better understand the nature and the main features of the subjective *act* involved (*a parte subjecti* analysis). However, what about the analysis of the *object* of aesthetic experience (*a parte objecti* analysis)?

As I mentioned in the introduction, my thesis is that in Noë's book the analysis of the proper object of aesthetic experience fails to consider some crucial features of such object.

To be sure, Noë mainly focuses on a specific kind of aesthetic objects, i.e. works of art.

However, as the author himself admits, the aesthetic sense is not just an *art* sense (Noë, 2015, p. 56). We can experience aesthetically a natural landscape, the atmosphere of a city, the interior design of an apartment, and so on. Potentially, every object can be experienced aesthetically.

In this sense, Noë's analysis does not seem to be committed to a too narrow account of the objects of aesthetic experience. However, the crucial point that has to be addressed is whether there are some peculiar aspects that we detect in the objects of perception when we are aesthetically oriented towards them. In other terms, the point is whether there is a specific objective correlate of the aesthetic attitude that is experienced in aesthetic perception as different, for instance, from general perceptual experience.

In Noë's theory, such an objective correlate seems to be the object *in itself*. Noë maintains that the peculiarity of aesthetic experience is the specific – contemplative and detached – attitude that characterizes it. Indeed, differently from non-human animals, human beings can and do often assume the aesthetic (thoughtful, reflective, and disengaged) attitude towards the world around them (Noë, 2015, pp. 52-57). Such an attitude seems to have its correlate in the *pure* and *neutral* object, free of its everyday practical meanings. In this way, pure shapes, colors and sizes are there just to be seen and inspected (Noë, 2015, pp. 52-53).

My hypothesis, however, is that such a characterization of the objective correlate of aesthetic experience overlooks some of the specific features to be found in everyday objects that can be

4. A *Parte Objecti* Analysis: What Kind of Correlate for Aesthetic Experience?

detected as being crucial in aesthetic experiences themselves. Let us clarify this point. Experiencing the world aesthetically means also *being affected* by it, in a positive or negative way. We can be attracted or disgusted by the objects around us. We can be struck by the dreamy gracefulness of the *Clair de lune* of Debussy’s *Suite Bergamasque*, as well as by the elegance and delicacy of the movements of a dancer. On the other hand, we can be disgusted by an abandoned and polluted natural landscape or by the violence and aggressiveness of the behavior of a man against a woman. What is that strikes us affectively in these objects? Is it just the pitch and loudness of the notes in Debussy’s music or the directions in space of the movements of the dancer or of the man against the woman? Is it just the colors of the natural landscape? My hypothesis is that it is not the case that the primary or secondary qualities of the objects of our world affect us in aesthetic experience. It is not the shape, the color, or the size *per se* that strike us. Rather, it is their qualities of being *elegant*, or *graceful*, *aggressive* or *violent*. What kind of qualities are these?

The phenomenological and Gestalt traditions called them “tertiary qualities”, to recall the classical distinction between primary and secondary qualities that, as is widely known, has characterized philosophical thought from the beginning and has been stressed by many authors – from Democritus to Galileo to John Locke (Bozzi, 1990). Differently from primary qualities – that pertain to the domain of measureable quantities such as weight and size – and secondary qualities – that pertain to the domain of sensible features such as odours and colours – tertiary qualities appear as the multitude of *expressive*, *aesthetic* qualities that objects may reveal to us. The *brightness* of a shade of red, the *gloominess* of black, the *solemnity* of a public and institutional ceremony, the *melancholy* of a sunset. All of these qualities can affect us, positively or negatively. This is the reason why they have been also labelled the “attractive” and “repulsive” features of the objects in the world around us (Lewin 1935).² If aesthetic experience also means being affected by the seen objects (both sensibly and intellectually), and if aesthetic responses can be characterized as a kind of “visual evaluation” or “judgements”, as Noë himself maintains (Noë, 2015, p. 55, 132), then expressive qualities seem to be an adequate correlate of aesthetic experience itself. They are exactly those valuable – positive or negative – features that the objects of our world show and that can affect us because of their power to attract or repel.

In his book, Noë seems to overlook these specific features of the objective correlate of aesthetic perception. Yet, it would have been particularly crucial to consider them also to avoid reducing aesthetic experience merely to a kind of intellectual and detached contemplation. In fact, aesthetic experience can be said to be different, for instance, from scientific observation or meditative contemplation of the world exactly because it is evaluative and because it involves *affective* responses to the objects in the world. In my view, this is possible because aesthetic seeing detects the sensible, attractive or repulsive, features of our world. An account that does not deal with these qualities, therefore, risks ignoring a crucial aspect of the objective correlate of aesthetic seeing itself.

Moreover, a (phenomenological or Gestalt-based) theory of *expressive qualities* actually seems to be compatible with Noë’s account of aesthetic seeing and perceptual experience in general. Indeed, Noë maintains that, in perception, we do not just detect colors, shapes, or sounds. We do perceive meanings. We do perceive *affordances*, for instance, in the Gibsonian sense (Gibson

² Kurt Lewin used the term “Aufforderungscharakter” to refer to the positive and negative valences that characterize the objects in the environment and that orient our behavior. See Lewin, K. (1935). Based on this term, James J. Gibson coined the term “affordance”, which is very well-known today in the debate about the philosophy and psychology of perception, and about the relation between perception and action (Gibson 1979).

1979) – that is, we perceive the practical opportunities and obstacles the environment offers to us. Likewise, in music perception we do not perceive mere sounds, but sounds as the outcome of the musicians' gestures and actions; just as, in listening to a conversation, we perceive words as meaningful and expressive of one's thoughts (Noë, 2015, pp. 182-190). In Noë's account, therefore, meanings seem to be what is primarily given in perception. In the phenomenological and Gestalt-based account of expressive qualities (Bozzi, 1990; Scheler, 1923; Köhler, 1938; Ingarden, 1931; Arnheim, 1954), such qualities are described exactly as the primary datum of perception, not just as a set of features subsequently projected on the neutral object of perception. Indeed, expressive qualities can be perceived before – sometimes even without – the recognition of the elements that contribute to their emergence. As Max Scheler says, for instance

I can tell from the expressive “look” of a person whether he is well or ill disposed towards me, long before I can tell what colour or size his eyes may be (Scheler, 1923, p. 244).

In the same way, when staring at a fireplace we perceive the flowing movement of the fire and the brightness of the colors before or without necessarily focusing on the different shades of red or on the geometrical shapes and the speed of the flames (Arnheim, 1954, pp. 369-375). Likewise, we can perceive the solemnity of a ceremony or the joyful atmosphere of a party long before focusing on the interior design of the place or on the objects' colors.

After having been perceived, expressive qualities can then guide us in analyzing the structural elements from which they have emerged. According to Mikel Dufrenne (1953), for instance, the analysis of the aspects contributing to expressiveness can actually be done only *after* the expressive quality itself has been perceptually grasped. We need, for instance, to experience the *vigor* of César Franck's *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* in order to recognize that it (partly) depends on the development of the themes, on rhythm and on the final modulation from the minor to the major scale. Similarly, we first recognize the *mysterious grace* of Debussy's *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair* and then we attribute it to the uncertainty of the rhythm and the instability of the tonality (Dufrenne, 1953, p. 441).

These remarks also allow us to highlight another crucial aspect of the phenomenological and Gestalt-theory's analysis of expressive qualities. Such qualities are not projected on objects by the subject who perceives them, but emerge in the objects themselves on the basis of the elements such objects are composed of, and the way in which these elements are structured. Authors such as Moritz Geiger or, more recently, Paolo Bozzi harshly criticized, for instance, the thesis according to which expressive qualities are just affective features projected on objects on the basis of the affective responses of the subject involved (Geiger, 1910, 1911; Bozzi, 1990). Criticizing this idea, indeed, Bozzi (1990) noticed that our affective responses to the objects around us are not necessarily akin to the expressive quality we recognize in the objects themselves. If Anne is sad and not well-disposed and she goes to a cheerful and joyful party, she can be perfectly able to recognize the happy atmosphere of the party without being infected by it in any way; on the contrary, she could be much more bothered and annoyed because of it (Bozzi, 1990, pp. 103-104). In the same way, the brutality of a murder can evoke as many different responses as the different individuals taking a position on it – it can evoke revenge, for example, or forgiveness, or it can also remain completely ignored by some. Yet, the brutal character of the murder or the cheerful and happy atmosphere of the party still remain there, in the objects themselves; they just evoke different affective responses in different people.³

3 Songhorian and I previously discussed these examples in Songhorian, S., Forlè, F. (2015).

Expressive qualities, therefore, seem to emerge from objects themselves, based on how these objects are structured. This position tries to recognize what Pinotti called “the object’s rights” (Pinotti, 2005, pp. 15-20) – that is, the fact that objects have to present certain distinct features rather than others in order to have specific expressive and aesthetic qualities. In this sense, not any color can be gloomy, just as not any atmosphere can be joyful and cheerful. There are some objective aspects that cannot be easily drowned out by subjective projections.

Gibson said something similar about *affordances*. Affordances are the opportunities and the obstacles that the environment offers to the animal (Gibson, 1979, p. 127). They depend both on the features of the objects and on those of the animal involved – for instance, a little hole in the wall can afford hiding for a butterfly, but not for an elephant.

However, this does not mean that affordances are not in the objects themselves, or that they change according to the animal’s need. Affordances are what the environment offers to the animal, regardless of the fact that the animal notices or exploits them or not. Underlining this crucial aspect, Gibson says that “[t]he object offers what it does because it is what it is” (Gibson, 1979, p. 139).

Gibsonian affordances can be recognized as a subset of tertiary qualities: they are valuable aspects of the world, either positive (opportunities) or negative (obstacles), which can attract or repulse us. In addition, they are qualities of the objects themselves, not just projections of our subjective needs or acts.

As this brief presentation tries to show, tertiary qualities are much more widespread than it is usually thought. Some of them emerge particularly in aesthetic experience, making the latter not just a detached and contemplative seeing but also an affectively-connoted and evaluative experience. Recognizing Gibsonian affordances as part of the objective correlate of perception, Noë’s position does not seem to be incompatible with a phenomenological and Gestalt-based account of expressive, tertiary qualities. The hypothesis of this paper is that Noë’s account of aesthetic experience and its objective correlate could actually benefit from bringing tertiary qualities into the picture.

5. Conclusion

Strange Tools is a very provoking and ambitious work. It presents an overall theory that, because of its strong as well as original theses on the one hand, and its debatable passages on the other, may be a promising candidate for opening a new field of discussion at the interface between aesthetics, the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of action.

What I have stressed in this paper, however, is the need to specify some aspects of aesthetic experience, both *a parte subjecti* and *a parte objecti*. On the one hand, I highlighted a potential conflict between Noë’s reading of aesthetic experience against the background of an enactive theory of perception and the aesthetic detached and contemplative attitude. On the other hand, I have suggested how the features of the objective correlate of aesthetic seeing may be specified, trying to find a way to account for the affective and evaluative character of aesthetic experience itself. My thesis is that specifying aesthetic seeing on both the issues I raised here may be useful for Noë’s account, also in providing a wider background for one of the main topics of his book, i.e. the aesthetic experience of those peculiar objects that are works of art.

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