



# Aesthetic Experience as Interaction

**ABSTRACT:** *The aim of this article is to argue that what is distinctive about aesthetic experiences has to do with what we do – not with our perception or evaluation, but with our action and, more precisely, with our interaction with whatever we are aesthetically engaging with. This view goes against the mainstream inasmuch as aesthetic engagement is widely held to be special precisely because it is detached from the sphere of the practical. I argue that taking the interactive nature of aesthetic experiences seriously can help us to understand some of the most important features of aesthetic experiences and the role they play in our life: their normativity, their crucial role in the ways in which the aesthetic domain looms large in our self-image and in the social dimension of aesthetic engagement.*

**KEYWORDS:** Aesthetic experience, intentional action, interaction

## Introduction

What is the difference between aesthetic experiences and nonaesthetic ones? What makes an aesthetic experience aesthetic? These have been among the most important questions in aesthetics and they have been passionately debated. My aim is to argue for an approach to answering this question that has not been sufficiently explored in the literature. The difference between aesthetic experiences and nonaesthetic ones has to do with the nature of the intentional actions involved. More precisely, a specific type of open-ended intentional activity is essential for understanding aesthetic experiences.

There are three major approaches to characterizing aesthetic experience. One can deny that this is a valid or relevant category at all (Dickie 1964). One can point to perceptual differences between aesthetic and nonaesthetic experiences (maybe in terms of the perceptually attributed properties (Carroll 2001, 2006) or maybe in terms of the nature of perceptual attention involved (Vivas 1959; Nanay 2016, 2018a, 2018b). And one can point to evaluative differences between them (Levinson 2013; Iseminger 2006).

I will explore a fourth, seemingly surprising strategy, namely, that what is distinctive about aesthetic experiences has to do with what we do—not with our perception or

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evaluation, but with our action and, more precisely, with our interaction with whatever we are aesthetically engaging with. I call this a seemingly surprising strategy because the aesthetic domain has been traditionally characterized as one that is cut off from our actions.

The argument proceeds in two steps. First, I argue that intentional actions play a crucial role in aesthetic engagement, and then I zero in on the kind of action that plays the most important role in aesthetic contexts and argue that it is a form of interaction. Finally, I draw some consequences for aesthetic normativity, for the relation between the aesthetic domain and the self as well as for the social aspects of aesthetic engagement.

Two points of clarification. First, I will use the terms *aesthetic experience* and *aesthetic engagement* interchangeably in what follows. I would be happy to concede that not all engagements count as experience and that not all experiences count as engagement, but given that the point of this article is to show that aesthetic experience is an active process—a form of engagement—I will use these two terms interchangeably.

Second, I should clarify before we start that this is not an article that aims to give necessary and sufficient conditions for what constitutes an aesthetic experience. My aim, rather, is to shift the inquiry about the nature and importance of aesthetic experience from the perceptual and evaluative domain to a direction that takes the role of action and interaction in aesthetic experience seriously.

## 1. Aesthetic Actions

Here is a very basic question about aesthetic experiences: what do we do when we engage aesthetically? There are three types of answers to this question.

First, we can say that when we engage aesthetically, we do nothing. After all, aesthetic engagement is supposed to be special precisely because it is detached from the sphere of the practical (Bullough 1912; Stolnitz 1960). This Kantian emphasis on detached or disinterested experiences could lead one to deny that we do anything at all when we are engaging aesthetically. We might, of course, need to turn the pages when reading, but these actions are not part of (and in fact can distract from) the aesthetic engagement.

The second possible answer is that when we engage aesthetically, we perform nonintentional actions. In the philosophy of action, a distinction is made between intentional and nonintentional actions (Searle 1983; Mele 1992; Nanay 2014). To simplify, intentional actions are actions we perform deliberately, as a result of some form of planning. They are actions we are trying to perform, caused and motivated by a ‘prior intention’ (Searle 1983: 45). We have some sort of plan or prior intention that exists before the action is performed, count to three and do it. Nonintentional actions are not like that. These are still goal-directed actions but they are not actions we are *trying* to perform. We just perform them (without trying to do so).

Suddenly standing up and starting to pace around in the office while grading is a nonintentional action, for example. We just do it. No plan, prior intention or trying is involved. Here is an evocative example of nonintentional action by William James: ‘Whilst talking I become conscious of a pin on the floor, or of some dust on my sleeve.

Without interrupting the conversation, I brush away the dust or pick up the pin. I make no express resolve, but the mere perception of the object and the fleeting notion of the act seem of themselves to bring the latter about' (James 1890: 2:522).

The suggestion, then, would be that we do perform nonintentional actions when engaging aesthetically, but we do not perform intentional actions. It is undeniable that when watching a movie, we move our eyes around the screen, looking toward the left when the villain appears there, looking toward the right when something noteworthy is happening on that part of the screen. We may also blink, cry, laugh, gasp, maybe even scream, depending on the movie. These are all nonintentional actions. So, at a minimum, we can say that while engaging aesthetically, we do perform some actions, albeit nonintentional ones.

I want to go further and argue for a more controversial claim, namely, that we do perform intentional actions while engaging aesthetically and that these actions are an extremely important part of aesthetic engagement. So, the claim is that while engaging aesthetically, we don't just do things, we are actively trying to do things. I call these intentional actions that play a crucial role in our aesthetic experience *aesthetic actions*.

Note that aesthetic actions, as I define them, should not be confused with what Dominic Lopes (2018: 55) calls 'aesthetic acts'. Aesthetic acts are done for aesthetic reasons, which are defined as the attribution of aesthetic value to something. In my account, the order of explanation is reversed: it is not that aesthetic acts are explained by a preexisting aesthetic mental state. Rather, it is the aesthetic mental state—the aesthetic experience—that is explained by the aesthetic action. It may be more obvious but still worth emphasizing that aesthetic actions, as I define them, are very different from the intentional actions that have to do with the creation of aesthetic objects (see Anscomb 2021 on the latter).

This aspect of aesthetic experiences contrasts with some other experiences, such as the experience of red. In order to have an experience of the color red, we do not need to try to do anything. We can, but we don't need to. Whenever there is a patch of red paint in front of our eyes (under normal illumination), we do have the experience of the color red. No need to do, let alone try to do, anything. A patch of red paint in front of our eyes (under normal illumination) *guarantees* the experience of the color red. In contrast, aesthetic experiences are never guaranteed.

In this respect, aesthetic experiences are more like emotional experiences. As the rich literature on emotion regulation shows (for summaries, see Sheppes et al. 2011; Blanke et al. 2020), we very often do perform intentional actions when having an emotional experience. In many cases, this involves trying not to have the emotional experience we are having (when, for example, someone is trying to convince themselves that they should not feel guilty), but it can also take the form of trying to feel the emotion more. If you are at a funeral of a person you deeply cared about, for example, but for some reason, you don't find yourself sad enough, you might try to feel more appropriately sad. Or, at your wedding, you may not feel as happy as you thought you would, and you may try to feel happier. The literature on religious experiences also shows that people often try hard to have deeper, more authentic religious experiences, say, when taking holy communion (James 1902; Luhrmann 2020).

To put it very simply, the experience of the color red takes no effort. Emotional experiences (and religious experiences) often do take significant effort. And I will argue that aesthetic experiences often also take significant effort.

## 2. The Scope of the Argument

In the vast majority of cases, aesthetic engagement minimally entails that you perform at least the basic intentional action of keeping your attention on the object you are engaging with. Regardless of how absorbing the film, painting, or gourmet food is, our attention tends to wander. And in order to keep engaging with the object, you need to pull your attention back to it. This is an intentional action: something you do and something you do deliberately. You are trying to keep engaging and that is why you are pulling your attention back.

Again, this is a very minimal sense in which intentional actions are involved in aesthetic engagement. This may not be a necessary feature of all aesthetic engagement because no such action would be involved as long as this engagement is short enough. Nonetheless, it is a crucial feature of the vast majority of aesthetic experiences.

But intentional actions can play an even more important role in aesthetic engagement and the best way to see this is to examine those cases where aesthetic experience goes wrong.

It happens surprisingly often that we want to have an aesthetic experience, but, for some reason, it is just not happening (Nanay 2016, 2019). You are sitting in front of your favorite painting, sitting on the very same bench where you have had amazing aesthetic experiences before, but it is just not there this time. Or you are listening to a song you love and you know you always have strong experiences when listening to it. But this time, it isn't doing anything for you.

These failed aesthetic experiences can happen for a variety of reasons. Maybe you're distracted or preoccupied with something else. Or maybe you're just sleepy. Either way, whenever this happens, we don't just give up and go home or switch off the music. We try hard to get into the mood. We make an effort to have this aesthetic experience.

Nothing I have said implies that effortful intentional action is a strictly necessary feature of aesthetic engagement. Sometimes aesthetic experiences really do just happen to us. They crash over our head like waves. They sweep us away. In those instances, no effortful intentional action is needed.

But experiences of this kind are few and far between. And even when they do happen, they may be difficult to maintain. In fact, at some point they fade, and then we do need to resort to our effortful intentional action to keep on having these experiences. And, as we have seen in the case of failed aesthetic experiences above, next time you are looking at the same object or listen to the same song that has swept you away, it may not do anything for you, and you again need to rely on your effortful intentional actions to get the aesthetic experience you had the first time.

In other words, the scope of my claim about the involvement of intentional actions in aesthetic engagement should not be taken to be universal, but this should not distract from the centrality of intentional actions in aesthetic

experiences. I will argue that this intentional action is in fact a form of interaction. But first, I need to address a worry about this line of argument. Granted, an intentional action may be required to put us in a frame of mind that allows us to have an aesthetic experience. But one may worry that the intentional action is not constitutive of the aesthetic experience itself. It is, rather, just a precondition of having an aesthetic experience. So, these intentional actions do not tell us anything interesting about the aesthetic experience itself. I think this is an important worry, and I come back to it in Section 4.

The final point I want to make here is that understanding the role of intentional actions in aesthetic experience can also help us to understand how aesthetic taste develops. How do we acquire our, say, musical taste? There are empirical reasons to think that even the mere exposure to a certain kind of music (or any other sensory stimulus) changes our taste (roughly, the more often you encounter a certain kind of stimulus, the more likely it is that you like it; see Zajonc 1968, 2001; see also Cutting 2007; Meskin et al. 2013; Nanay 2017 for mere exposure effect in the aesthetic domain specifically). But this is clearly not the whole story. More often our exposure to, say, music, is not mere exposure.

This is especially true during our formative years (both in childhood and in our teenage years), when we are often actively trying to get into certain kind of music (and other artforms). For some reason or other, we believe that this piece of music is great. Maybe someone whose opinion we trust said so. Maybe we know and love other pieces by the same musician. In this case, we make a real effort to have the kind of aesthetic experience we think we should have.

So, our exposure to music or other artforms is rarely mere exposure. It happens in a context where I have at least a general idea about what kind of experience I should be having—or at least whether I am supposed to have a positive or a negative experience. And I try (and often try hard) to have that kind of experience. This is true of kids going to the museum for the first time, and it is also true of teenagers at their first rock concert. The acquisition of our musical taste (and taste in other art domains) is based on effortful attempts.

### 3. From Aesthetic Action to Aesthetic Interaction

The account I outlined is not entirely without precedents. In fact, one of the most important figures of twentieth-century aesthetics, Nelson Goodman, wrote the following in *Languages of Art*: ‘The aesthetic “attitude” is restless, searching, testing—is less attitude than action: creation and re-creation’ (Goodman [1968] 1976: 242).

This may seem like a very similar view to the one I have argued for here. The emphasis on restless, searching, testing action is especially close to my emphasis on an intentional action (and one that does not have a very specific goal, see below). But in *Of Minds and Other Matters*, where Goodman he aims to clarify the somewhat cryptic remark I quoted above, he writes the following: ‘Coming to understand a painting or a symphony in an unfamiliar style, to recognize the work of an artist or school, to see or hear in new ways, is as cognitive an achievement as learning to read or write or add’ (Goodman 1987: 146–47).

Here Goodman makes it clear that the kind of action that engaging with works of art entail is, for him, a form of highly intellectual interpretative action (see also Gorodeisky 2022 for a similar approach). In contrast, the kind of action the importance of which I argue for in understanding aesthetic engagement amounts to very simple perceptual actions like shifting one's attention from one feature of the painting in front of you to another.

Aesthetic actions are mainly, but not exclusively, mental actions, for example, shifting one's attention. They can also be overt actions, accompanied by bodily movement, for example, when one is moving closer to a painting to check some detail from close up and then moving further away again to take in the whole composition. But more needs to be said about the nature of the actions involved in aesthetic engagement.

I want to make a very general distinction between two kinds of action: trophy actions and process actions (a distinction reminiscent of, but not identical to, the one discussed in Vendler 1957; Mourelatos 1978). This distinction applies to all kinds of actions—not just ones in the aesthetic domain.

Some actions only make sense if they reach an endpoint or a goal. They are done in order to achieve something. Like moving to a new apartment; taking college entrance exams; or achieving some concrete hallmark of excellence, like running a marathon in under four hours. These tasks need to be completed. If you don't achieve the end result, you have wasted your time. These are trophy activities. Winning an Olympic gold medal is a peak trophy activity—the winner gets an actual trophy. But the trophy is often not made of gold. It might not even be an actual object but may be something you can pontificate about on Facebook. Call actions of this kind *trophy actions*.

Not all actions are like this. We don't do everything for the trophy. Some things you can do just a little bit. They make sense even if you don't complete them. They are not done to achieve a goal. Like walking along the beach, reading about something interesting, or just running but not to beat the stopwatch. These are process actions.

On which side of this distinction do aesthetic actions fall? I want to point out that they are neither trophy actions nor process actions. Aesthetic action is a special third kind of action.

It may be tempting to think that aesthetic actions are process actions. After all, just like walking along the beach, they are open-ended actions and no goal needs to be reached in order for them to be rewarding. You can do them just a little bit or you can do them for as long as you feel like it—they could go on indefinitely. It is, in fact, an often-emphasized aspect of our aesthetic engagement that it disrupts our hectic schedules, it makes time stop. The action involved in aesthetic engagement is like process action in all these respects. But it is very much unlike process actions in that we are actively trying to achieve a goal.

The action involved in aesthetic engagement is like a trophy action inasmuch as it is aimed at achieving a goal. But it is very unlike a trophy action in that we don't really know what the goal is. And even if we don't hit our goal, the action may still have been extremely rewarding.

Our action when engaging aesthetically could be described as something like an oscillation between a trophy action and a process action. We go back and forth

between trying hard to achieve some kind of experience and just enjoying the ride. This means that aesthetic engagement is neither process action nor trophy action. It is a third, special kind of action.

Another way of appreciating how special aesthetic actions are is to relate it to another distinction about two different ways in which our goal-directed actions can unfold. In most of what we do, the means serve the end. I need to bake bread, so I put the flour in a bowl, add water, add salt. This is standard means-ends reasoning, without which we would achieve nothing. And this goes for everything we do, whether it is something our job demands of us or something that we genuinely enjoy. We may not enjoy the means, but if the end is something we want, we just need to do it.

This is one way of proceeding: the end is fixed, and you adjust the means to this end. But here is another one: choose the end that fits the means you enjoy. If you like kneading dough, you could find yourself an excuse to bake bread. It is not the end that justifies the means. The means justifies the end (for a related distinction in the aesthetic context, see Nguyen 2019; Van der Berg 2019)

Which of these two ways in which goal-directed actions can unfold characterizes aesthetic engagement? I want to argue that it's neither. It does not have a *means-to-an-end* structure: there is no fixed goal that we adjust the means to, in part because the goal changes constantly as a result of the success or failure of our aesthetic engagement. But it does not have an *ends-to-a-mean* structure either, as it is not the case that we just choose the end to justify the means we enjoy most. The end—achieving aesthetic experience—is a much more central part of this process.

In other words, the action involved in aesthetic engagement is a sui generis third category. And, as with the trophy and process actions, our action when engaging aesthetically could be described as something like an oscillation between the means-to-an-end structure and the ends-to-a-mean structure. In the case of aesthetic engagement, we fix the end tentatively; then we choose the means to achieve this end; then, on the basis of how we find these means, we adjust the end; and on the basis of *that* we adjust the means; and so on, back and forth. This means that aesthetic engagement is a genuine interaction between you and the object.

In the previous section, I drew an analogy between aesthetic engagement and emotional engagement. In both cases we very often make a conscious effort to try to have a certain kind of experience. This analogy is helpful, but it is also slightly misleading without acknowledging a crucial disanalogy between these two kinds of cases.

This difference is not about the specificity of the goal. In the case of emotion regulation, we may or may not have a clear idea about what kind of experience we are trying to have. Ditto for aesthetic actions (see Nehamas 2007). When we are trying to have an aesthetic experience, we don't have a very clear idea what experience we are after. We do have a vague idea—a positive experience, presumably. But this can be extremely vague. When we are looking at a painting, we could try all kinds of things in order to have an aesthetic experience, we just don't know what it is that we need to do. Attend to the vertical lines? Attend to the horizontals? To the imperfect symmetry? We keep on trying various (mental) actions, hoping that one of them will transform our experience into an aesthetic

experience. And, of course, in some cases of aesthetic engagements (and in some cases of emotion regulation as well), we can have very specific goals in mind. Again, the disanalogy between aesthetic engagement and emotion regulation is not about the specificity of goals.

The disanalogy between emotion regulation and aesthetic actions is that in aesthetic actions, we constantly change the goal we are trying to achieve. In emotion regulation, I may not have a very clear idea of the goal, that is, the emotional state I am trying to achieve. But I am not shifting the goalposts. In the case of aesthetic experience, depending on what works and what doesn't in my attempts to have an aesthetic experience, the goal of my aesthetic action can change significantly. And this is a genuine feature of a specific kind of actions: interactions.

#### 4. Aesthetic Interaction

Few of our experiences are two-way interactions. When you have a toothache, there is not much of an interaction. No back and forth. No intentional action is needed to feel your toothache. The same holds for the experience of the color red. If you put a red piece of paper in front of my eyes, no special effort is needed for me to experience red. These are one-way experiences.

But aesthetic experiences are two-way interactions, in the sense that you are trying various ways of getting closer to the aesthetic object, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding. You feel the pull of the aesthetic object and you try to follow it, but this doesn't always succeed.

And two-way interactions play a special role in our life. Dancing is a two-way interaction, as is conversation, friendship, love. Aesthetic experience, at least in this respect of being an interaction, is closer to dancing, friendship, or love than to the experience of toothache or the experience of red (for the analogy between love and aesthetic engagement, see Moran 2012; Riggle 2015). When dancing, we adjust to our partner, then they adjust to you, you react, they react, and so on, indefinitely. The same goes for aesthetic engagement.

And this is the point where I can put a lingering worry from Section 1 to rest. There, I raised the potential objection that aesthetic actions do not tell us anything interesting about aesthetic experiences because they merely constitute the precondition of having an aesthetic experience. We can now see that while this may be so in the case of actions, it is not so with interactions. When it comes to interactions, interaction itself is constituted by the sequence of my acting, waiting for a reaction, adjusting, waiting for a reaction again, and so on. In other words, what we do is not merely the preparation for having the aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is an event unfolding in time and part of what constitutes this event is the back and forth between adjusting what we do and waiting for how this influences our experience.

A word of caution. Aesthetic actions work the way interactions do. Does this mean that they are actual interactions? No. The work of art we are experiencing does nothing. It is just there, hanging on the wall. So strictly speaking, aesthetic interactions are not actual interactions as one of the interacting parties does



nothing. But they are something like as-if interactions: when we have an aesthetic experience, we interact with the object in a way we would interact in an actual genuine interaction. Crucially, we experience as-if interactions with artworks the way we experience genuine interactions. They feel like genuine interactions.

These aesthetic actions feel like interactions because of the uncertainty of the response from the artworks. In genuine interactions, we don't fully know how the object or person we are interacting with will react to what we do. So we cannot be sure about what is going to happen: there is always a degree of uncertainty. And the same is true about the kind of as-if interactions that characterize aesthetic actions: we don't fully know what kind of experience our aesthetic actions give rise to: we get a similar degree of uncertainty here as well, but without the other relatum of the interaction doing anything. The success of aesthetic actions is not fully up to us, in the same way as the success of genuine interactions is not fully up to us.

And this feature of aesthetic interactions—the uncertainty of the response from the artworks, also explains a widely celebrated concept in contemporary aesthetics, that of aesthetic normativity (Kubala 2021; Lopes 2018; Cross 2022). There are many forms and varieties of aesthetic normativity, but I want to focus on an important distinction concerning the source of aesthetic normativity. There are two options here. The first one is that there are observer-independent normative properties out there in the world and they explain aesthetic normativity. Some may have qualms about the metaphysical picture such explanation would entail. The second option is that there are no observer-independent normative properties out there in the world, but aesthetic normativity can be explained in terms of the way our mind works. If we consider aesthetic experiences to be interactions, then we get a straightforward explanation of the second kind. If the success of aesthetic actions is not fully up to us, then, in some sense, it is the other relatum of the interaction that dictates my experience. And this provides us with a sense of normativity in an aesthetic context that is relatively harmless (in the sense that it does not presuppose a metaphysical picture with observer-independent normative properties).

I have been emphasizing that aesthetic engagement is something we do. But this claim does not entail that all the work is done by us when we engage aesthetically. As we have seen in the case of trying in vain to have an aesthetic experience that is just not happening, when it comes to aesthetics, we do not have full control. It is not fully up to us. It takes two to tango.

Much has been said about how aesthetic engagement has a special importance for the self—for who we take ourselves to be (Riggle 2016). It matters to us personally. The interactive nature of aesthetic engagement may help us to understand why this is so. The constant back and forth of genuine two-way interactions reveal as much about ourselves as about the object or person we are interacting with. Again, the clearest case of this is provided by those occasions where this interaction breaks down.

In these cases, we tend to blame ourselves (Moran 2012). It is because of our own shortcomings that the aesthetic experience didn't happen. The painting is the same as before. But we are not doing what we should be doing and that is why the aesthetic experience is not happening. And on these occasions, it is even more salient how we

tend to try harder to make sure that the aesthetic experience does happen in the end. This is not dissimilar to what happens when our interaction with someone else (be that dancing, friendship, or love) goes wrong.

Conversely, when an interaction goes well, this can create a special bond. This is true of dancing, friendship, and love, but it is also true of aesthetic engagement. Interactions like friendship or love play an important role in how we define ourselves. And the explanation of why aesthetic engagement matters to us personally would be premised on the same feature: the genuine two-way interaction.

Aesthetic engagement is often (although not always) a form of social engagement (Lopes 2018; Riggie 2022; Polite 2019). Aesthetic engagement often happens in the company of our friends or sometimes in a crowd with people we don't know. And aesthetic experiences can bring us closer to each other. Listening to the same music can be a binding experience as long as you both have the same kind of experience. And nothing can be as alienating as having radically different aesthetic experiences when listening to the same music or watching the same film.

If aesthetic experience is a form of interaction, then sharing an aesthetic experience is also a form of interaction, not between two things (me and the artwork), but rather between three things (me, you, and the artwork). It is a form of triangulation. And the importance of shared aesthetic experiences for us is exactly what we should expect if we take seriously the idea that aesthetic experience is something we do. If aesthetic experience is something we do, then shared aesthetic experience is something we do together. It is a joint achievement (Lopes et al. 2022). And just as joint achievements can feel like a very strong bond between two people, the same is true of shared aesthetic experiences. We care about shared aesthetic experiences at least partly because they strengthen the bond between us. It is the real social glue.

## 5. Conclusion: Against Aesthetic Universalism

Some kinds of experiences don't just happen to us. We very often work hard to have experiences of a certain kind. When we go to a gourmet restaurant, we spend quite a bit of energy on savoring the food we eat. At wine tasting events, we try hard to appreciate the flavors. And we spend much of our teenage years trying to really get the music we are listening to. An important aspect of understanding aesthetic experience is to understand what we do when we are trying to have it.

I argued that taking the active, or, more exactly, interactive, nature of aesthetic experiences seriously can help us to understand some of the most important features of aesthetic experiences and the role they play in our life: their normativity, their crucial role in the ways in which the aesthetic domain looms large in our self-image, and in the social dimension of aesthetic engagement. As the conclusion of this article, I argue for another important implication of this view, this time concerning aesthetic universalism, the view that aesthetic experience is a cultural universal.

Once it was widely accepted that aesthetics as a discipline is about universal claims: it examines ways of engaging with artworks and other aesthetic objects that are independent of the cultural background of the subject. In fact, art

historians often accuse aestheticians of this form of cultural universalism (see, for example, Davis 2011). And this universalism of aesthetics is even more heavily emphasized by the recently fashionable neuroscientifically tainted aesthetic research, which often aims to find the neural correlates of various forms of aesthetic appreciation in a way that does not depend on the cultural background of the subjects (see, for example, Zeki 1998, 2000; Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999).

More recently, it has been argued that we have strong reasons why we cannot just assume that artifacts are experienced everywhere and in every historical era the way they are experienced here and now (for summaries, see Lopes et al. [forthcoming](#); Nanay [forthcoming a](#), [forthcoming b](#)). My claim is that if we take the role of achievement in aesthetic experiences seriously, we have even more reasons to resist aesthetic universalism than we already do. We already have solid reasons to reject aesthetic universalism on the basis of the empirical sciences of the mind and especially the findings about the well-documented top-down influences on perception (Teufel and Nanay 2017). What we know and believe influences already the earliest stages of visual processing. And given that we know and believe different things depending on what culture and what time period we grew up in, our perception will also be different depending on what culture and what time period we grew up in.

These reasons for resisting aesthetic universalism are very general reasons that have to do with how perception works. But now we are in the position to give another, maybe even stronger, argument against aesthetic universalism, and one that is specific to the aesthetic domain.

Your technique for trying to have aesthetic experiences may be very different from mine. Aesthetic engagement involves performing various intentional actions and we learn from an early age how to perform these actions and which action is to be performed under what circumstances. We observe our parents, caregivers, and peers trying to have aesthetic experiences, and we then imitate them in order to achieve the same. But very often our patterns of trying to achieve aesthetic experiences derives directly from something we read or hear (maybe a film review).

This is another reason aesthetic experiences vary wildly depending on our personal and cultural background. Just what kind of aesthetic experience you have depends on how you are trying to achieve it. And this depends on the techniques you learn throughout your life.

In short, universalism is not an option: my aesthetic engagement with an artifact might be very different from the aesthetic engagement the artist or the intended audience had. When I am looking at an artifact that was created long ago or far away from where I grew up, I cannot assume that the aesthetic engagement I have now is the kind of aesthetic engagement that the artifact was intended for.

We learn from an early age how to perform these aesthetic actions and which action is to be performed under what circumstances. Your technique for trying to have aesthetic experience may be very different from mine. This is an important reason aesthetic experiences vary wildly depending on our personal and cultural background. Just what kind of aesthetic experience you have depends on how you are trying to achieve it. And this depends on the techniques you learn throughout

your life. If we take the active, and interactive, nature of aesthetic experiences seriously, aesthetic universalism is not a viable option.

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