Book Reviews

AESTHETICS: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION. By Bence Nanay. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 144 pp.

With hundreds of titles in Oxford's *Very Short Introduction* series, including volumes covering most of the branches of philosophy, one may wonder why it took so long to get one in aesthetics. Those studying aesthetics may not be surprised, but Bence Nanay's *Aesthetics: A Very Short Introduction* is a welcome addition.

Aesthetics has become too frequently discussed in the context of art, to the point where any distinction between philosophy of art and aesthetics seems almost superficial. Nanay addresses right away this common conflation by stating directly that aesthetics is not the same thing as philosophy of art. "If an experience is worth having for you, it thereby becomes a potential subject of aesthetics" (3). This claim, in a way, sets the stage for the rest of the book. While many of our aesthetic experiences involve art, it is important to realize, as Nanay notes, "Aesthetics is everywhere" (2). Aesthetics is the study of the experiences that are evoked by objects, which include artworks but also goes beyond art.

What does it mean for an experience to be considered an 'aesthetic' one? In Chapter Two, "Sex, Drugs, and Rock 'n' Roll," Nanay cautions that we cannot be too inclusive, which would potentially render the term aesthetics as almost meaningless. But where is the line drawn? Nanay describes and dismisses as insufficient four accounts of aesthetics that have been popular and influential: beauty, pleasure, emotion, and 'valuing for its own sake.' While I won't recount all of Nanay's explanations and criticisms here, he concludes the chapter by claiming that all of these different accounts point to one thing: "what is special about aesthetics is the way we exercise our attention in aesthetic experiences" (20-21).

To begin his discussion about attention, Nanay employs as an example the painting *The Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. When you look at this painting for the first time, you are drawn to the foreground, depicting a man with a cart and beast. Then, your eyes may move from the landscape to the seascape. Eventually, if you are concerned with titles of artworks, you may wonder about Icarus. You will notice two legs (barely noticeable) sticking out of the water on the right side of the work. Clearly, these legs belong to Icarus. And now that your attention has found these legs, you cannot unsee them and will be drawn to them. Nanay believes that your experience is now very different from the time before you attended to these legs. Seeing Icarus's legs now brings the pieces of this picture together. In other words, when your attention changes, then your experience will also change.

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Attention, however, has its limits. People cannot attend to many things all at once, so they have to make choices. After detailing some different ways of attending, Nanay illustrates with a James Bond scene. Imagine that James Bond discovers a bomb that he must defuse. He's not exactly familiar with this kind of bomb, so he's looking all around to find the specific wire to cut. So, he is attending to many features of the bomb, but he has a specific goal in sight. When having an aesthetic experience, the opposite happens. We are attending to the various features of the object and looking all around it (just like James Bond), but the difference is that we are not looking for anything specific. We have no clear goal in mind. "Our attention is free and open-ended" (34). This kind of attending suggests that aesthetic experience is the result of an action, and as such, it can take time. But, as Nanay is quick to point out, attention is not likely the definitive condition of an aesthetic experience. It is just that during an aesthetic experience we attend to the object and also to the quality of the experience (and the relation between the two). This, in part, is what makes these experiences personally significant to the beholder, and perhaps, engrains it in our memory.

The next two chapters (Four and Five) concern the relationship between aesthetics and the self and others. One of the more interesting historical ideas that Nanay wants to overcome is that aesthetics is about making judgments. He argues that the rewarding aspect is not forming a judgment, but rather "the temporal unfolding of our experiences in aesthetic contexts" (46). The move toward global aesthetics helps advance this claim, as most non-Western theories do not emphasize judgment. While it is clear that people will have disagreements (ands strong opinions) about objects, aesthetics is not about regulating or enforcing. In other words, aesthetics is not primarily a normative discipline. Disagreements and agreements will happen, and, while there isn't a right or wrong, there can be accurate and inaccurate experiences. And this is why critics, for instance, are so valuable as they help direct our attention to aspects of artworks that might otherwise be overlooked. Nanay concludes by warning against an anything-goes approach to aesthetics, and that it must be tempered with an aesthetic humility.

This book contributes to a recent and positive trend in the field to make a sharper distinction between aesthetics and philosophy of art. However, despite emphasizing this distinction, this book still seems to lean too heavily on examples taken from art. The main ideas might have been demonstrated in a stronger way had there been more examples—there were a few—of attending aesthetically in other specifically non-art contexts. But a major strength of this volume is the blending of philosophical insights with research in the science of perception and with non-Western aesthetic ideas. Bence Nanay's *Aesthetics: A Very Short Introduction* is a good and insightful read for scholars and non-specialists alike.

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