

## IMPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS IN WEED'S REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS OF NEUROAESTHETICS

---

VLASTIMIL ZUSKA

In the stimulating article 'Looking for Beauty in the Brain' (*Estetika* XLV, 2008, No. 1, pp. 5–23), Ethan Weed considers contemporary approaches and methods in the neurosciences, which examine aesthetic experience. As the subject of his examination he selected three different perspectives on aesthetic experience, or three methods of searching for a correlation of states of the brain and aesthetic experience. He explicitly states that he will simultaneously engage with the implicit or hidden assumptions of these approaches, which he does in a scholarly manner. First of all it is necessary to assess the persuasive substantiation of the limits of the neuroaesthetic approach and the rationalization of frequently excessive expectations in connection with these studies, which evidently also cover the fulfilment of the dream of experimental aesthetics since the end of the nineteenth century – the anchoring of a humanities discipline in 'hard science'. The only embryonic cluster of cognitive neurosciences, neurophilosophy, and further disciplines, which we may, together with the author, term neuroaesthetics, is distinguished by its emphatic focus on the 'neuro-' and by the limited amount of attention it pays to aesthetics, traditional or contemporary. This emphasis is partially employed also by Weed himself, and the result is a range of implicit and frequently contentious assumptions relating to the second half of the combined term 'aesthetics'. I shall now consider in detail the most serious of these.

The author refers to Martin Skov, asserting: '[A]n aesthetic experience cannot be explained by a description of the aesthetic object alone. The aesthetic experience of an object involves an interaction between the object and a human mind' (p. 5). This is certainly not a new observation in the history of aesthetics, and it suffices to mention Kant, Czech and French structuralism, Stephen C. Pepper, phenomenological aesthetics (Roman Ingarden, Nicolai Hartmann, and Moritz Geiger) or semiotics for example. Strictly speaking (Weed does not take this step), the aesthetic object is then a construct of the mind, the result of the aforementioned interaction, and the object, which enters into this interaction at the outset, is thus *not* an aesthetic object but a mere component thereof, a point of departure, a sign-carrier or basis. By the same token any perceptual object is also the result of interaction, and if we are to speak of a description of the object, then we should have in mind what we are actually

describing. At the same time the flow-chart, from Skov, of the process of aesthetic experience *form* → *cognition* → *effect* implicitly assumes the analogy of the human cognitive act with John von Neumann's serial computer architecture. If we are to compare the work of the human brain with a computer, then a parallel 'architecture' of processing<sup>1</sup> would be more appropriate; the aesthetic experience begins with the very inception of the constitution of the aesthetic object and not with the conclusion (effect) of the entire process. The author asserts that 'aesthetic experience is based on perception' (p. 6), which we may accept for the sake of argument provided that we ignore *belles-lettres*. In the case of literature and the aesthetic experience of a literary work, our perception renders to us not only graphemes and phonemes but also further layers of meanings, layers of the actual aesthetic object, which go beyond the level of perception. In general, although aesthetic experience is based on perception, it is not limited to perception. The question Weed poses about the sort of element or value marker that the brain adds to ordinary perception during aesthetic experience betrays the implicit assumption of a serial process of aesthetic experience or a situating of the aesthetic experience at the conclusion of the process of ordinary perception. This 'extra element' need not, however, be a mere appendix, a final addition, but the 'otherness' or difference of the aesthetic experience in contrast with ordinary perception may reside in a different, otherwise accented and implemented constitution, a synthesis, a linkage of elements, which in addition always implies a sense of partial entities leading up to a final entity. As Gilles Deleuze states in an interview in *Cahiers du cinéma*: 'A work of art is a new syntax, one that is much more important than vocabulary, and excavates a foreign language in language. Syntax in cinema amounts to the linkages and relinkages of images'.<sup>2</sup> New syntax, new or specific linkages not only in cinema, begin from the very outset of the aesthetic experience, not as a final addition. I am not asserting here that Weed is defending the opinion that I am criticizing, but his text implies or may imply this.

A key problem and pitfall of neuroaesthetic experiments, as Weed demonstrates, is the 'linking problem', that is, the relationship between that which researchers would like to measure, or what they believe they are measuring, and that which they are measuring in reality. In this part of the article, its most valuable focal point, the author justifiably draws attention to the only indirect approach to

<sup>1</sup> Compare, for example, Churchland, Paul M. (1996). *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

<sup>2</sup> Deleuze, Gilles (2000). 'The Brain Is the Screen. An Interview with Gilles Deleuze.' In Gregory Flaxman (ed.), *The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema* (pp. 365–74). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 370.

states of the brain, and in the fundamental relation between a brain state and a correlate of the content of consciousness he emphasizes the time limits of visual methods, that is to say, their inability to represent rapid changes. In this sense the term 'brain state' may be somewhat misleading, because in reality this always concerns a stratified process (not only in aesthetic experience, but also in all cognitive processes, perception, and so forth), the higher, that is, complex, synthesizing levels or emergent factors of which, go beyond the limits of relatively crude visual methods.

In an analysis of the approach of Hideaki Kawabata and Semir Zeki (p. 8), the factor of introspection first appears, with the fairly unimpeachable assertion that 'we all have introspective access to our own consciousness'. Further in the text, however, we find a misleading identification of introspection and phenomenological reflection, in which the concept of introspection implies precisely this conception, against which the 'father' of transcendental phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, contrastingly delineated phenomenological reflection. As Lyotard summarizes it (*La Phénoménologie*, Ch. 2, Sec. 2), the notion that sense of content of consciousness is immediately apparent and tangible as such, that is, the psychological conception of introspection, has been refuted by psychology itself. In these comments it is not possible fully to explain this fundamental difference, including a retention of the original perception or experience in retention, but the implicit identification of introspection with reflection weakens Weed's argument also in the third observed approach (Blood and Zattore), which connects introspection with objective measurement.

A further, fundamental problem of what is actually measured is the brevity of the stimuli in the first and second approaches. In Kawabata and Zeki's experiment the probands have less than one second for an 'aesthetic evaluation' of an image. During such a short time they are unable to develop an aesthetic experience, only a predominantly physiological precursor, an elementary pleasure rather than a Kantian, reflected pleasure. The examiners thus do not measure a 'healthily born' aesthetic experience, but only its 'abortion'. In the second approach (Ramachandran and Hirstein) this again concerns a physiological level of experience, a 'subconscious limbic response', which forms at most one of the layers – namely, the least individualized, of the aesthetic experience. The recurring question therefore remains as to whether the observed methods measure or find a correlate of aesthetic experience or trace a mere physiological pleasure. This difference is not, however, considered in Weed's approach, despite being an 'evergreen' of aesthetics from Kant to Burke, Santayana, Bullough, Heidegger, Sartre, Lind, and many others. Weed sensibly notes the potential problem of introspection (even if he actually has in mind

phenomenological reflection), namely, how observation influences experience, but his formulation, 'we have seen that the neurophenomenological method [...] in fact removes the experience further from the "natural" sort of experience we would ideally like to measure' (p. 21), implies a conception of aesthetic experience as 'natural' and in this sense non-reflected. As I have indicated, Kant's reflected pleasure and Santayana's 'objectified pleasure', like many conceptions of the aesthetic object constituted by reflecting consciousness, demonstrate that a full aesthetic experience is not a natural experience in the aforementioned sense and in the natural world. A reflecting aesthetic experience is then not 'natural', because, in addition, the experience itself transforms the object of attention, since the consciousness of the Self shifts from the periphery to the centre and becomes a component of the aesthetic object. (Recall the interaction mentioned at the beginning of this article as well as Weed's). This therefore increases the seriousness of the question about what is actually measured by these approaches.<sup>3</sup>

The last implicit assumptions that Weed skirts are the concept of aesthetic attitude (which is particularly controversial in analytic aesthetics) and, more generally, the psychological concept of attitude. He states, for example, that context or experimental background has its neural correlate. He speaks of a 'general mental state', of determining the readiness of subjects for perception of autostereograms, and explains, in reference to Lutz et al, the highly variable brain response to identical stimulation of the fluctuation of 'mental background'. The author himself implicitly notes that attitudes have neural correlates in brain states through the finding of specific frontal activity (that is, activity in the frontal cortex) preceding the introduction of the stimulus (autostereogram), which is practically a definition of attitude (in Jerome Seymour Bruner, for example). I believe that the consideration of attitude as an implicit factor in the analyzed approaches would contribute to the validity of the results, in the same way that an awareness of one's own 'prejudices' (the slight 'deconstruction' of one's own text) would further enhance the quality of one's otherwise valuable article.

Vlastimil Zuska, Charles University, Czech Republic  
vlastimil.zuska@ff.cuni.cz

<sup>3</sup> Ford, Jason, & Smith, David Woodruff (2006). 'Consciousness, Self, and Attention.' In Uriah Kriegel & Kenneth Williford (eds), *Self-Representational Approaches to Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 353–78.