Aesthetic Judging as Interface: Getting to Know What You Experience

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One of the aims of aesthetics is to understand aesthetic experience, that of our own and that of others. Yet, the underlying question of how we can get information about other people's aesthetic experiences has not been granted enough attention. This article contributes to bridging this gap. The main argument is that by resorting to aesthetic judging, we can obtain information about other people's aesthetic experiences without sharing them. Put differently, this article outlines how aesthetic judging works as an interface. Aesthetic judging allows us to approximate the aesthetic experiences of others. This happens in at least three ways proposed and analyzed here: "aesthetic participation", "distanced aesthetic empathy", and "affective appropriation". | *Keywords: Aesthetic Experience, Aesthetic Judging, Empathy, Information, Interface, Representation*

1. Introduction

Aesthetics is often divided into different approaches, such as phenomenological, analytic, and empirical aesthetics.[1] Typical ways of posing research questions within these approaches imply different, yet not necessarily conflicting foci: In phenomenological aesthetics, the emphasis is on subjective aesthetic experience as a form of mood, while analytic aestheticians focuse on aesthetic judgments and their justification. Empirical aestheticians, in turn, study aesthetic experiences by measuring test subjects' reactions to sensory stimuli. These approaches are based on differing starting points. At the same time, they all are employed to reveal information about what can be seen as aesthetic processing by using aesthetic experience (that of our own or that of others) as data.[2] Yet, it

1 These are only examples rather than a complete list or comprehensive characterization of the state of aesthetics. We are excluding, for example, Kantian aesthetics from this list, because the scope of this study is to seek and build some overlap between phenomenological, analytic, and empirical aesthetics.

2 The concept of data appears throughout this article. Despite the computational connotations readily attributed to it, we take it in a wider sense, as employed also by Luciano

is unclear how we can obtain information about the aesthetic experiences of others.[3]

So, our overarching research question is: how can I get to know what you experience without sharing the experience? We illuminate ways in which parts of the experiences of others can be accessed and used in making approximations or estimations that, in turn, inform us about the experience in question more fully. There are multiple ways in which the approximation can be formed. Consequently, different ways employ different aspects of experience. We stipulate three of these ways without claiming that this is an exhaustive list.

Although the experience itself is not shared between "you" and "me", we claim that the processes of judging are similar. We use the term "judging" to refer to the process of forming aesthetic judgments and "judgment" to refer to its end product (which is also included in "judging"). Therefore, both processes (labeled here as "aesthetic judging I" for the first-person and "aesthetic judging II" for the third-person perspective) are touched upon. However, our focus is on the latter.[4] For now, we leave it open, if aesthetic judging II is the only way to collect information about aesthetic experiences of others.

This article relies on a specific use of terminology that is not shared by all scholars. Therefore, in section two, we look at the difference between "aesthetic experience" and "aesthetic judging" as understood here, and in section three, we clarify the concept of "interface" and how it can be used to describe the relation between the two. With this knowledge, we then explore how aesthetic judging works as an interface in sections four and five. The answer to our research question is that I can get information about your experience via aesthetic judging in at least three ways. All of them employ empathy, an often used but not collectively defined concept in aesthetics.[5]

Our contribution is to clarify the field by introducing a division into three types of empathy and describing how they can be used to create meaningful content in each case. The results are the following: First, we suggest using the concept of "aesthetic participation" representing the assumption that you have

Floridi (2011, p. 85): a datum means any interpreted difference without stating how it is or should be drawn. This core meaning underlies but is not restricted to the computational notion. Rather, it provides a general structural prerequisite for any kind of meaning to emerge and "stick to" in the process of interpretation.

3 The same holds also in cognitive science – largely, due to problems with using verbal descriptions as a way of accessing the subjective experience of other people. At the moment, there is no comprehensive understanding of how subjective experience relates to behavior and neuronal space. (Tallon-Baudry, 2022)

4 We think that for example Carlos Vara Sánchez (2022) models how aesthetic judging works for the experiencer (aesthetic judgment I) in a way that is compatible with our thoughts although he speaks about aesthetic experience and, more importantly, unlike us, opposes representationalism. Vara Sánchez identifies two processes of attunement, both of which, we hold, are realized via mindreading: 1) noticing the possibility of creative aesthetic value formation by recognizing a situation that relates to the conception of self, and 2) further exploring this as a cognitive loop (Vara Sánchez, 2022, p. 329–331). Vara Sánchez is also compatible with our view that aesthetic judging links to aesthetic experience in a manner that will potentially alter experience continuing after it although he speaks about "pre-reflective aesthetic rhythm" whereas we would use the term "aesthetic experience" (Vara Sánchez, 2022, p. 333).

5 However, this article does not directly build on any existing debate in aesthetics or philosophy of literature, where issues concerning empathy have been dealt with.

a representation (of your experience). Second, the concept of "distanced aesthetic empathy" denotes me representing the process with which you represented (your experience). Third, the concept of "affective appropriation" means, we suggest, that I represent the subjective or implicit justification of your representation (of your experience).

The large-scale contribution of our paper is also threefold. Firstly, it helps to understand the relationship between aesthetic experience and aesthetic judging. Secondly, it demonstrates that overcoming the traditional divide between phenomenological and analytic aesthetics is fruitful by bringing together the concepts of "atmosphere" and "aesthetic judging". Thirdly, it clarifies the link between epistemology – or more specifically, the concept of information – and aesthetics.

2. Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Judging

"Aesthetic experience" is one of the core concepts both in philosophical and empirical aesthetics. It is also our starting point. We draw the heuristic difference between experiencing and judging on ontology: subjective lived experience is different from a conception of it or measurable individual reaction(s) associated with it. I can *be* in the experience or *have* an experience, but by judging I would *form* or *indicate* a judgment based on it. Thus, we pin this distinction to abstract conceptualization rather than, for example, to the use of language or certain linguistic categories, degree of awareness, or either the speed or order of processing. If this is taken as one plausible way to draw the distinction, we are able to show that the epistemic function or value of aesthetic judging is getting information about aesthetic experience. Here, aesthetic judging would only make sense if there was an aesthetic experience, but this does not mean that aesthetic judging would be automatically more mindful – just like operating other conceptual interfaces does not need to be more deliberate or reflective than the input concepts themselves:

> The imaginative work we do when we use the desktop interface is part of backstage cognition, invisible to us and taken for granted [...] the activity of manipulating it [the interface] can be done only in the blend and would make no sense if the blend were not hooked up to the inputs [existing domains of knowledge – in our cases such as conception of self, lower aesthetic features like brightness or blueness, our own and other people's previous aesthetic judgments, life experiences, symmetry, emotions, language, etc.]. (Fauconnier & Turner 2002, p. 23)

Our premise is that the way cognitive processing happens cannot be experienced first-hand; we do not feel *how* it happens.[6] What we mean when

[6] There is a major controversy about this point between some enactivists and representationalists. If we could get direct (i.e. not mediated by the interface) information about aesthetic experience via affect, it would not be useful to assume an interface of aesthetic judging I. However, it is not clear to us how affectiveness would undermine our point: since cognition is always affective (we do not disagree with this and therefore, cannot position ourselves as if we were opposing enactivist thinking in aesthetics), it is not possible to switch to an affective state that would show us our own intentions and outcomes of action when we are not aware of them (see Carruthers 2013). If one accepts that there are cases where we do not have direct access to our own minds, it would be more parsimonious to assume that in those cases where we are correct about our minds, the interface is working accurately rather than that it was a case of a totally different type of cognition that is just not employed in the other cases. At the end of the day, this is an empirical question and it has

we talk about experience are second-order interpretations as the output of the process (Fields and Levin, 2020, p. 14). Thus, theoretically or conceptually rather than empirically speaking, aesthetic judging and aesthetic experiencing function on different but consistent levels. In practice, however – and this is important – aesthetic experience and aesthetic judging come hand in hand, since all conceptualization and communication (including conscious introspective reflection) of experience requires some abstraction, bringing in an element of judging. (For levels of abstraction, see Floridi, 2011, pp. 52, 69.) By adopting the concept of "interface" we can describe how aesthetic judging can provide information about aesthetic experience when they operate on different levels of abstraction.

Without going into the philosophical question of whether we should assume one experience type called "aesthetic" or several different kinds of aesthetic experiences, we include any subjectively meaningful sensuous undergoing, not only the most, or in some specific sense saturated, moving, or transformative ones. Hence, we can include empirical aesthetics research – cross-cultural or lab-based – as a contribution to understanding aesthetic experience. We hold that the experience is a relation rather than in the subject's attitude or in the object's form. Used in this wide sense, aesthetic experience may take place in contexts related to art but also the everyday: when I am reading my new favorite novel, suddenly smelling a trace of a familiar perfume, choosing to paint my nails and picking a color, sending a friend an encouraging text message, or taking the longer route to the metro station in order to enjoy the scenery.

Aestheticians use descriptions of experience as data. We learn about someone's experience of a place, an artwork, or any other encounter we do not have access to by listening, smelling, touching, and so on. We can make surveys of aesthetic preferences, or measure someone's bodily reactions to sensory stimuli that we think can be present in aesthetic experience. We may empathize with the contents of descriptions, they may remind us of a similar event in our own lives, or they can even produce similar feelings in us. Yet, these are different experiences; we were not in the original experience although we might think we understand it. So, how does the information provided by these two experiences, that of yours and that of mine, differ?

Within the phenomenological tradition, experience can be construed as a relation to which both the subject and object belong; they act simultaneously as constitutive parts.[7] Although Gernot Böhme prefers the term "atmosphere" as the explanandum over "aesthetic experience", he refers to the act of embodied relating. This is arguably too wide a definition for aesthetic experience because it encompasses any sort of perceptual activity. So, the Böhmean conception of aesthetic experience needs to be narrowed in one way or another.

more to do with aesthetic judging I than II. For us here, it is sufficient to note that we do not get direct information about the mind of another person although we may have accurate knowledge about it.

7 There have been several philosophers arguing for the relationality of aesthetic experience across various trends in aesthetics, John Dewey (2005) being an example from the pragmatist tradition.

We hold that if aesthetic experience is linked to aesthetic judging – inferring aesthetic features that indicate aesthetic value (abstracting aesthetically relevant data from the rest) – the conception becomes a little more restricted. This move requires giving up Böhme's inherent distaste for information processing and analytic aesthetics but still allows aesthetic judgments to be approached as embodied and present in all kinds of (multi)sensory encounters from the mundane to elevated. Still, some aspects of Böhme's description of atmosphere can be used here as a description of aesthetic experience:

> Atmospheres are neither something objective, that is, qualities possessed by things, and yet they are something thing-like, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through qualities[…]Nor are atmospheres something subjective, for example, determinations of a psychic state. And yet they are subject-like, belong to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings and this sensing is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space. (Böhme, 2016, p. 19)

As a loop-like hermeneutic reality of the experiencer, or aesthetic subject, this relation holds an element of being aware of oneself in it, without excluding that this awareness may be "intuitive" and processed fast, without one being able to track it:

> Atmosphere is the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver, insofar as in sensing the atmosphere s/he is bodily present in a certain way. (Böhme, 2016, p. 20)

We want to investigate what this vague yet explicitly fixed "certain way" of sensing actually means in different cases of aesthetic relations.

Let us start from Böhme's theoretical home, phenomenological aesthetics. There, sharing experience intersubjectively is a common idea. A requirement for sharing an experience is the ability to recognize both ourselves and others as subjects (Zahavi, 2015, p. 86). This skill can be employed 1) to understand from the outside what the other person is going through, 2) to get a similar experience ourselves via contagion without much awareness that the other person is having it too, and 3) to share an experience: being aware of the same emotional situation including both subjects in it reciprocally (see Zahavi, 2015 for a comparison of the three). Here, we are concerned with the prerequisite of sharing an experience: recognizing the other person as a subject having an aesthetic experience. This is a close relative of recognizing oneself as an aesthetic perceiver, or in other words, being able to have a Böhmean aesthetic reality. So, recognizing the other person as an aesthetic subject and recognizing oneself as an aesthetic subject belong together. In this article, we will show ways to move between them.

One can never be quite sure if similar sounding (have you ever been in an open space like desert or sea or top of a fell and felt deep solitude in your smallness yet being one with the universe?) or even similar looking experiences ("we both gasped for air when seeing that circus performance") are the same. How can we know what the other person means when we hear about their experience or what they go through when we see them gasping?

What is at stake here is the conception that reasoning – with varying degrees from fast intuitive reactions to painstaking philosophical contemplation – has *direct* access to aesthetic experience and can produce empirical data about the experience itself. We claim that we can access some of the data constituting the experience and that we can produce interpretations about the experience.

In other words, when we start to think or talk about our experience, we are no longer in the experience per se but depending on the viewpoint, either adding something, taking something away, or simply altering it. Experiencing and judging may happen (almost) simultaneously and be impossible to separate from each other, but it is one thing to experience something and another to convey its meaning – even when measuring skin conductance or neural activation, we are not measuring the experience per se, but something else that merely conveys data related to the experience. As such, aesthetic experiencing and aesthetic judging are different things. This would be so even if it was impossible to experience aesthetically without an element of evaluation, or to form an aesthetic judgment without aesthetic experience.

However, this does not mean that one is more deliberate than another – with aesthetic experience being always less and aesthetic judging always more conscious, or aesthetic experience implicit and aesthetic judging explicit. We hold that aesthetic experience and aesthetic judging can come together because judging does not need to be linguistic. If it did, they could more easily be treated independently of each other. Perhaps even most aesthetic judging happens at the conceptual level but without linguistic formulations: I may feel strikingly at ease with a person but not be able to put into words why I immediately sense this kind of atmosphere, or I may struggle to convey exactly what I feel when listening to a great song.

Formulated from the viewpoint of empirical aesthetics, we can extract information about the (assumed) aesthetic experience, but we are not constructing the experience itself for the observer. There is something in between the experience and the information we get from it. We can get empirical, indirect, and partial information about it, but only via judging, never the experience directly.

Note that we leave questions about normativity aside. Our scope is not what kind of aesthetic judgments are normatively correct but what kind of information we get, when they are subjectively justified, or in other words, when the subject has already selected them as meaningful from the variety of potential judgments. We are not interested in whether there are objective or at least detachable aesthetic value categories that can be separated from the subjective experience because the difference between aesthetic experience and aesthetic judging is an ontological and conceptual division.

The stipulative definition for "aesthetic judging" is thus that it is an act of the experiencer that is observable to an outsider – it is a process by which we can recognize either ourselves or someone else as having an aesthetic experience. In other words, forming aesthetic judgments indicates that someone is experiencing something aesthetically, because one way or another, aesthetic

judging requires the experience as its intentional object. Aesthetic judging, no matter how insignificant, such as a sigh, lowering of the heart rate, or a private thought, is a representation where aesthetic experience works as an input. In other words, we do not wish to contest the diversity of immediate bodily reactions present at aesthetic judging. The point is rather that these reactions are abstracted on the basis of the environmental stimuli.[8] Let us clarify the relationship between aesthetic experiencing and aesthetic judging by contrasting analytic aesthetics with phenomenological aesthetics.

One may think that aesthetics and philosophy of information make an odd couple. Böhme (2016) famously thinks that perceptual atmosphere should not be studied in collaboration with information processing. He (2016, pp. 22–23) traces this stand to the embodiment of aesthetic experience:

> The concept of perception is liberated from its reduction to information processing, provision of data or (re)cognition of a situation. Perception includes the affective impact of the observed, the "reality of images", corporeality. Perception is basically the manner in which one is bodily present for something or someone or one's bodily state in an environment.

In contrast, we argue that the collaboration of aesthetics and philosophy of information is profitable for aesthetics. We cannot do away with the concept of judgment because judging is our channel to the aesthetic experience of other people.

We suggest that "aesthetic judging" should be understood more broadly than Böhme does. Here, it is active aesthetic appreciation (including aesthetic disapproval as the opposite of appreciation is not disapproval but disregard). Like atmosphere, judging is relational – rather than a property of the object or subject – and yet materially embodied. It is a necessary middle piece to experience (of atmosphere) that is not reducible to the conditions of justifying a judgment linguistically. Via this concept, phenomenological and analytic aesthetics can come to a fruitful exchange. Additionally, the connection between aesthetics and philosophy of information emerges. In sum, Böhme discards information processing too quickly. Compared to Böhme, we provide a more constructive approach.

Böhme wants to stay within the perceptual experience. Approaching aesthetics from the viewpoint of judging, we nevertheless consider ourselves furthering Böhme's aims. Just like atmosphere for Böhme, for us aesthetic judging is relational – rather than a property of the object or subject – and yet materially embodied. Unlike aesthetic experience, however, it is both quantitatively and qualitatively researchable directly.

In general, defining aesthetic experience as different from unaesthetic experience and defining aesthetic judging as different from unaesthetic judging fall beyond the scope of this article. Rather than providing definitions for "aesthetic experience" and "aesthetic judging", our aim is to define some of the preconditions for appropriate definitions. Thus, the reader is free to pick

[8] If one does not accept the idea of Bayesian predictive processing, one could deny this description. There are several approaches into predictive processing, but since our focus is not aesthetic judging I, we do not go into them here.

their own approach: In terms of experience, one can either 1) think that aesthetic experience can, depending on the context, locate somewhere in the continuum of the heightened, distinctive, and special or mundane, routine, and unobtrusive or 2) think that aesthetic experience is "imaginative, inspired, or vigorous" regardless of whether it is the experience of the ordinary everyday routine or the experience of a unique event (for a fairly recent discussion of aesthetic restrictivism and expansivism, see for example Puolakka 2018). In terms of judging, one can also choose if one wants to operate with judgments 1) based on pleasure or the lack of it or 2) more fine-grained aesthetic categories such as elegant, sublime, and kitsch. The definitions of aesthetic experience and aesthetic judging – or at least the ones presented here – do not change the mechanics of their relation.

3. Interface

In short, aesthetic judging as an interface bridges the aesthetic experience on one end to the information gained from it on the other. This bridging succeeds when there is a specific systemic process. It takes experiential data as input, processes it in a way that provides new meaning (e.g. through abstraction and interpretation of features of the data), and outputs an informational end product. This end product contains a representation and evaluative assessment of the features deemed relevant by the functionality of the process. Notably, what is *not* required to be able to gain the informational end product is full access to the original experiential data and the (sub-)processes undergone within the process of judging. In fact, where this access is lacking, the end product may be our primary resource for inferring what went on in the original experience and its processing.

For a more robust understanding, let us briefly look into the notion of interface in general, and how aesthetic judging fits the functionality expected from "an interface". After this, in sections four and five, we will take steps toward answering what kind of mechanisms and functionality in human cognition may be capable of inducing aesthetic judging.

As a concept, interface is interdisciplinary, hailing from *systems thinking*, a particular way of making sense of the world.[9] Systems thinking looks at the world in terms of wholes and their relations, forming systems. This seems to be in alignment with the 'common sense' way humans intuitively perceive and make sense of the world; we identify individual wholes (e.g. objects) that relate to and affect each other in various ways. However, considering things as

[9] The conception of interface has been adopted and built upon in many different fields of study. It is best established within computer science, where interfaces are found in many forms, serving multiple purposes – for example, user interfaces (UI) between humans and machines, application programming interfaces (API) between computer programs, and interfaces between classes (functional parts) of a computer program in object-oriented programming languages. Other examples include such diverse fields as physics (boundaries between different materials like an oil film on water, or different states, phases, of the same material like ice and water), biology (cell walls and membranes, neural interfaces, biosensing…), economics (business interoperability, customer interfaces, interfaces between economy and politics, economy and the environment…), logistics (supply chains, transportation and storing of information and material goods involving multiple systems…), political and social sciences (studying the diffusion of new technology or cultural practices between interfacing social groups) and communication studies (coordination and communication between different work groups working on the same project).

'wholes' still includes the possibility of them being divisible into smaller parts (i.e. systemically related components) or themselves functioning as subsystems in a larger systemic whole.

Most generally, *interface* can be defined as an (inter)connecting boundary between two (or more) systems or system components (including subsystems). Fundamentally, interface is a relational concept – it functions as a mediary between two systems, at the same time separating and facilitating connections between them. Defining 'interface' as a 'boundary' captures two important aspects of its meaning: *relationality* and *separation*. Boundaries exist *between* systems, not fully part of either one but acting as limits for both. As Branden Hookway (2014, pp. 13–14) points out, one crucial difference between a related notion of 'surface' and 'interface' is relationality: whereas 'surface' is part of or a property of a single whole, 'interface' is or results from a relation between two wholes.[10]

The third crucial aspect, *(inter)connection*, is sometimes erroneously understood as interaction (i.e. by Hookway, 2014, p. 16). While the most salient examples of everyday interfaces (such as user interfaces of computers) indeed are interactive, it is not a necessary feature for interfaces in general. An interface is interactive if it allows the connected systems to affect each other, modellable as both providing inputs to and receiving outputs from each other. However, it is quite trivial to exemplify also one-way affecting through an interface. Think for example of traffic lights for a normal "user". The red, yellow, and green lights convey instructions to affect our behavior in traffic. But no matter what we do while waiting for the green, it will not affect the changing of the light. Yet, even when affecting happens one-way only, for the output of a system to function as meaningful input (and not mere noise) for another system there is a certain compatibility at stake – a structural dependence going both ways. In our traffic lights example, the "user" needs to understand the structure and meaning of the lights *and* the lights must be working properly for the "user's" behavior to be correctly affected. In this sense, the connection in one-way examples is still 'inter-', and we add the prefix in brackets.

For our argument, one-way affecting is an important feature. While some views of aesthetic experience and judging might allow interactivity (in the above sense) between the two in first-person cases (judging I), it is highly implausible that the third-person judging (II) could directly affect the original experience. Becoming informed of third-person judgments may influence first-person experiences (and judging) in the future, but this is due to a feedback loop that goes beyond simply interfacing with an aesthetic experience. Additionally, feedback loops may also affect how the original experience is represented and judged (interfaced with) in the future but not the original experience itself. The experience after becoming aware of or attuned with

[10] Hookway (2014, pp. 13–14) talks about properties of objects and relations between subjects and objects. To avoid the additional connotational baggage the subject/object distinction bears, we have translated his point in terms of more neutral and general 'wholes'.

aesthetic judgment II about the original experience is not the same as the experience judging II was based on.[11]

Here, we are interested in *information flow*. How and what kind of information can be gained from (other people's) aesthetic experience?[12] How does that information relate to and depend on the experience? We argue that given its successful application to analogous problems in other fields, it would turn out fruitful to consider these questions in terms of interfacing information systems. Here, we begin on the functional level – what kind of functionality should be expected of an interface mediating the experiential information from others, given what (we think) we know of our own aesthetic experience and judgments and the experience of others in general?

It is debatable whether we have full access even to the information present in our own experience, and definitely not to that of others. Thus, the interface should be expected to provide only partial access, resulting in an abstraction of experiential data. Here, following Luciano Floridi (2011, pp. 46–79), by 'abstraction' we mean a collection of observable features, abstracting away data irrelevant to them. The same underlying data can be abstracted in various ways, and Floridi (2011, pp. 54–58) shows how different levels of abstraction pertaining to the same data can be related to each other and switched in between. Floridian abstractions contain an inherent goal-orientedness in requiring an interpretation of the observable features and their relations, while also allowing flexibility in moving between and modifying abstractions for new purposes.

Floridi (2011, p. 52) already remarks upon the comparison between abstractions and interfaces. Indeed, abstractions in this sense serve a very similar purpose to interfaces in computer science: providing information processing economy by abstracting away superfluous data (for the task at hand) while building modularity and organizing dependencies between collections of data. However, if one agrees that aesthetic value is not inherent in an object or event itself but results in relation to it, aesthetic value is something that is added in the process, not abstracted. This is why we prefer the term 'interface' in this context: interfaces allow additive transformations of data as long as they are nomic in nature, i.e. given the same data and level of abstraction the end result remains consistent.[13] Interfaces can also be systems in their own right (e.g. computer user interfaces), with their own internal systemic processes usually required for additive transformations. Given all this, the interface with the aesthetic experience is also a prime candidate for accommodating aesthetic evaluation.

11 Thus, we do not oppose the attunement and unfolding of experiences of for example performers and audiences as Shaun Gallagher 2021 describes. Having said this, it is unclear to us how this process could be explained without relying on representationality, or operating aesthetic judging as interface.

12 Given the reasonable assumption that there is a connection between information and knowledge one might also say that this leads us to gain knowledge. However, exploring the connection between information and knowledge goes beyond the scope of this paper.

13 I.e. isomorphism between data and abstract features is preserved even when something is added to the abstraction. It's unclear whether Floridi (2011, pp. 46–79) would technically allow this within his framework (within interpretations of features) but given the connotations of 'abstraction' we prefer our terminology.

The process(es) of aesthetic judging fits all the features of an interface sketched above. Granted that aesthetic experience and the information we can get from it are systemically different – by accessibility if nothing else; a point emphasized when considering information in the third person (judging II) – judging is what lies in between. Judging happens in relation to experience and produces information from it, thus forming a bridging connection between the two. Aesthetic judging contains both an abstracting and an evaluating aspect simultaneously – abstracting because judging what is aesthetically relevant in perception requires an element of top-down processing, and evaluating because an interpretation of aesthetic value is produced. Abstraction is an inherent feature of interfaces, and evaluation goes beyond "mere" abstracting but is allowed by interfacing. The end product is an informational representation of aesthetic experience combined with its aesthetic evaluation. This combination can be thought of as aesthetic judgment.

4. Aesthetic Judging Working as Interface

Rather than what aesthetic judging is, this article deals with how it works. In the most general terms, when making aesthetic judgments, we are relying on our experience but also expertise and expectations. We are more or less intuitively evaluating different possible judgments we could make as we go. In other words, we are engaged in metacognitive – second-order – intuitive reasoning about aesthetic value.[14] Next, we clarify what this tells about aesthetic judging as a cognitive process, and how it relates to the mechanics of an interface.

Aesthetic judging is goal-oriented in the sense that it has a function: inferring aesthetic value. Stating this does not require taking a stance on the experience or psychological motives of the subject but on the function of aesthetic judging itself. The point of aesthetic judging is to position oneself in relation to the world one is perceiving, and this relating manifests itself as what can be seen as observing aesthetic value, such as beauty, ugliness, everydayness, enchantment, and so on.

More specifically, Aenne Brielmann and Peter Dayan (2022) argue that aesthetic value (in the narrow sense, encompassing only either positive or negative aesthetic appraisal) can be inferred via at least two routes: 1) when the experience is pleasurable because it is easy to process – in other words, when the bottom-up signals match our top-down expectations concerning the experience or the object, or 2) when we feel that the experience has altered our top-down expectations so that what was described in 1) is more likely to take place in the future – in other words, we have been engaged in learning. We will use this description here, because it posits a cognitive model of the mechanism of aesthetic judging, and thus can be operationalized as a depiction of the representationality of aesthetic judging at work. When it comes to the conception of mechanism, we draw on information processing,

[14] This holds regardless of whether one thinks we gain understanding or just mere pleasure in the process.

but will not go into the question of neural correlation. Mechanisms are here seen as functional wholes for an organism: "…mental mechanisms are ones that can be investigated taking a physical stance (examining neural structures and their operations) but also, distinctively and crucially, taking an information-processing stance." (Bechtel, 2008, pp. 23.)

In a nutshell, aesthetic judging I is a type of inference that produces information to the subject about themselves. However, our research question was about the process by which *others* can obtain information about subjective experience. Yet, the setup is similar. In both cases, the aim is that the information gathered about the experience would – to different degrees – align with the information the subject collects from their own experience (judgment I). Hence, this article builds on the promising concept of mindreading making its way, with solid empirical support, from psychology and cognitive science to aesthetics (see for example McCallum, Mitchell, and Scott-Phillips, 2020; Consoli, 2022).[15] Obtaining information about someone else's aesthetic experience via their aesthetic judgment (I), we are mindreading.

Mindreading, as a cognitive capacity, is fallible. It does not mean literally seeing into or experiencing someone's mind "like an open book", nor is it necessarily deliberate or linguistic. Although the term 'reading' in mindreading is misleading in this sense, we think it is more descriptive than the often used alternatives 'folk theory', 'theory of mind', and 'mentalizing'. Even when mindreading is directed towards oneself, it does not mean the mind – in how it is functioning – would be revealed to us once and for all. Taking art as an example, mindreading does not mean that the audience would reconstruct for themselves what the artist felt or thought when making the piece or getting an idea for it, nor that the artist at work would try to construct what the audience will feel or think. Rather, it points to being aware, to some extent, of our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs as well as the fact that others, too, have thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Mindreading is a necessary element of exploring meanings, and thus, at the center of representational aesthetic judging.[16] To refer back to Brielmann and Dayan's formulation, it is needed in 1) mediating our expectations and sensory data as well as 2) marking the learning process.

15 In the representationalist framework, mindreading and empathy are overlapping concepts. Although there is no single and unambiguous definition for empathy, it can be understood as mindreading with a focus on reading affective – valenced – states in particular (Søvsø and Burckhardt, 2021, p. 3). We prefer to use the wider concept of "mindreading", because it may be easier to translate to be directed towards oneself and not only others (especially in the case of judgment I) than referring to empathy. In the enactivist framework, however, empathy often refers to interactive attunement, not mindreading and representationality (see for example Gallagher, 2020, pp. 175–184). In this spirit, Dan Zahavi (2017, pp. 41–42) would like to replace mindreading with empathy having a stronger connotation to embodiment and claims that "[o]n the phenomenological reading, empathy doesn't involve sharing, but nor is it merely just any kind of mindreading. Empathy is rather a form of 'expressive understanding' that requires bodily proximity, and which allows for a distinct experiential grasp of and access to the other's psychological life." We do not mind the label, be it "empathy" or "mindreading" since in our reading, both can be seen as constitutively embodied and including environmental processes. In other words, we fail to grasp how inference on one hand and dynamic coordination, interaction, or attunement on the other would necessarily have to be in conflict when talking about aesthetic judging that in our view, belongs to metacognition rather than basic cognition.

16 Representationality can be understood in terms of intentionality in one sense of the word, namely that intention is a relation of reference. Mental states can thus be said to be intentional if they are taken to be about something external to them (Pitt, 2020). This means

Due to the central role of mindreading in forming personal aesthetic judgments, we can draw an analog for Kendall Walton's idea of representations. According to Walton, rather than experiencing an artwork, we are experiencing ourselves reacting to it: immersive art functions so that we represent ourselves feeling different feelings, and distancing art as well as abstract art function so that we represent those representations that the works evoke in us (Walton, 1990, pp. 242, 275, 277–280). For him, this is imitation, mimesis, or make-believe, but in our terminology, this could also be understood as mindreading, because it requires being aware that mind is at work, that the object of representation (oneself being moved or imaginatively inspired) exists. Otherwise, it would not be possible to construct the second-order representation of oneself in the first place – one would not be able to represent oneself *as* oneself *for* oneself to appropriate Walton (1990, pp. 242–243).[17]

When (mind)reading someone's experience, we suggest, we are reading it analogically to the way we would be reading an artwork à la Walton. The premise is that there are two processes: the aesthetic experience of the subject (analogical to the Waltonian first-order inference: feeling or representation the work inspires in us) and the knowledge about it the observer has to form for themselves (analogical to the Waltonian "fictional truth" – metarepresentation, namely, the representation of the feeling or representation the work evokes in us). Information about the experience is thus the observer's representation of the experience.[18]

The proposition that aesthetic judging, and with it, the meanings of experience, are representational is backed up by empirical evidence.[19] First, the same objects and emotions (such as disgust) seem to provoke different

that representations have a function, not that the subject would have "some goals in mind" or a deliberate intention or interpretation. Representationality refers to how the subject's ability to function (as a mechanism consisting of interlinked mechanisms and with relation to other mechanisms consisted similarly) and have aesthetic experiences that feel imminent, immersive, and immediate is possible. Aesthetic judgment is a relational process producing the value rather than calculating it. Thus, intentionality links to subjective justification rather than propositional truth conditions. Having said this, the end product of aesthetic judging (aesthetic judgment in the sense used in analytic Aesthetics) can be examined alethically – this is just not our focus in this article.

17 Culmination of this line of thinking emphasizing mindreading as a key metacognitive activity in aesthetics is that art's function can be seen as creating self-consciousness and aiding in the development of the mindreading ability (see Gianluca Consoli 2014, p. 50).

18 In his later work, Walton distinguishes two types of empathy: "empathy in the primary sense" meaning I empathize with you using my own real or imagined current mental states as a measure, and "sort-of empathy" meaning I empathize with you using my memories of the implications of my past mental states as a measure (Walton, 2015, p. 14). In practice, Walton creates, as do we in the text at hand, aesthetic equivalents for the common concepts of affective empathy and cognitive empathy. Since we are not examining imagination, fiction, or art in particular, our take is geared toward understanding how exactly meaning emerges in aesthetic empathy rather than understanding what behaviors feed it. Walton does not answer what kind of knowledge phenomenal concepts provide about the experience of the other person. When it comes to this question, Walton only states that it is enough that the phenomenal concept is the same – or shared – and that empathy produces a type of propositional knowledge that does not have to be verbalizable: for instance, we may not have a word for some specific color (Walton, 2015, p. 7).

19 Enactivists often position themselves as explicitly anti-representationalist. We are not for this dichotomy, because we think that it is most helpful to understand aesthetic judging being embodied, enactive, embedded, and extended (for virtual representations, see Noë 2004).

aesthetic judgments depending on what kind of expectational framework they have been experienced in, for example, whether they have been experienced as art or documentation (Wagner et al., 2014). Second, there is some evidence that experts and non-experts judge the same artworks differently, relying on differently constructed ways of making the judgment (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015, p. 176; Verpooten and Dewitte, 2017). All this suggests that aesthetic judging is representational: it works as an interface, providing access to experience but is not the same as experience per se. It only allows approximating experience. Namely, by analyzing aesthetic judging, we cannot determine whether the aesthetic experience of different people varied, but we can show that at least the processing of the experience most likely did. Had it not varied, the same input would have produced the same output in all cases.

Our point is that when we try to get information about the experience, we are not in it ourselves but need to use heuristic tools (interfaces) that we can directly observe. In what follows, we show how such a tool can work. One could now point out that we *do* know directly what we feel. For example, we are aware that we are sad (even if we cannot pin it down to anything that has happened to us). Similarly, we may also empathize with others by affectively tuning in with their mood, we can be cheerful and suddenly feel reserved as we step into a space shared with people who are (even without us knowing) having a conflict with each other. Yet, we claim, there is no need to assume that aesthetic judging was different from the rest of cognition – especially if one accepts that affective and bodily states inevitably play into how people interpret their own thoughts (see Carruthers 2013 arguing for that self-knowledge is interpreted and footnote 6 in this article).

5. Aesthetic Empathy

When I try to understand what you experience, as I am investigating signals you give about it, I need to grasp that the experience is meaningful to you: you have a reason to evaluate the atmosphere a certain way even if I did not know what the reason was. The information gained through aesthetic judging is treated so that it is justified for the subject and as if it was subjectively justified for the observer. Hence, aesthetic judging II relies on empathy. Although aesthetic judging II is an interface to the subject's experience, the observer is on the other side with their own experience, using it to guide them in approximating the subject's experience, or in other words, in operating the interface.

To understand what kind of information can be obtained from aesthetic judging via empathy, we need to clarify what we mean by obtaining information, creating meaning, or understanding in this context. Aesthetic experience is meaningful, and aesthetic judging carries meaning as it conveys this. Meaning, in turn, is on a case-by-case basis risen relation to the non-meaningful (for an evolutionary approach to perceiving meaning, see Fields and Levin, 2020). So, what do we consider relevant when we consider the aesthetic judgments of others? Below is our preliminary suggestion for three different ways that the interface of aesthetic judging works. They all have the

same function – getting information about the aesthetic experience (analogical to inferring aesthetic value via judging I) – but the particular features they take into account differ.

We use the three-class system as a heuristic tool. It is loosely based on the following ones of Heather Battaly's (2011) categories in this order: "empathy as sharing by multiple means", "empathy as knowing by multiple means", and "empathy as sharing and knowing". Put differently, the list goes: emotional contagion and perspective-taking that we label "aesthetic participation", accurately detecting the presence of a mental state that we call "distanced aesthetic empathy", and trying out the other person's mental state that we label "affective appropriation".

When starting to differentiate types of empathy, there is no unified system of classification. Hence, the classes can also be divided differently and seen as overlapping rather than exclusive. Their function here is to provide a means to clarify ways in which the interface that is aesthetic judging works when it grants access to other people's aesthetic experience. The clarification operates at a general level. Other ways of describing the cognitive process could include more sophisticated divisions, all the way down to neural processing.

We do not want to imply that the classification into types presented here aligns with approaches of aesthetics, either. Although we find it plausible that different types could have different importance for phenomenological, analytic, and empirical aesthetics, we leave it as a topic for further study. Respectively, we do not provide an answer for when aesthetic judging is reliable. We wish to only point out that aesthetic judging, understood as an interface operated with empathy, can be seen as a fallible method used in both research and everyday life. This goes to highlight that although empathy as understanding perhaps better fits the tone of phenomenological aesthetics and empathy as explanandum the tone of analytic and empirical aesthetics, their methods may not be as far apart as one could initially think. We argue that the answer to the question "how can I know what you experience?" can be approached in terms of aesthetic judging, which is traditionally neglected in phenomenological aesthetics. If the analytic conception of aesthetic judging is tweaked to better fit describing the subject-experience relation, we hold that one can gain new knowledge about how to get information about aesthetic experience.

Aesthetic participation (I perceive some aesthetic value)

I can feel that you feel. Its aesthetic equivalent is that I detect the presence of aesthetic value where you do too. In other words, we may discuss our aesthetic experiences although we cannot be sure that we are talking about the same thing. We may even assume that we most probably do not have a similar experience. Hence, we do not perceive the *same* aesthetic value.

Participation, here, refers to that aesthetic judging forms and takes place in a social context, broadly construed. Aesthetic judging is shaped by the overall constraints and possibilities of human embodied cognition as well as

a continuum of intergenerational inheritance of what has been aesthetically judged, how, and where. For example, we can see traces of aesthetic experience in Pleistocene artifacts, such as rock paintings, but be confident that we most likely do not experience them similarly to the people who made them. We can fathom that other people may have aesthetic experiences different from mine; someone else may see aesthetic value that I cannot.

Meaning arises when we can nevertheless form an aesthetic relation.[20] Exchange between different aesthetic environments is considered meaningful. I know (partly) what you experience by representing the assumption that you have a representation (of your experience).

Distanced aesthetic empathy (I do not perceive aesthetic value but understand it is perceived by others)

I may imagine how you feel. Its aesthetic equivalent is that I can detect for example your enchantedness without being in a similar state myself right now. Distanced aesthetic empathy is, in a way, a less affective state than the others. However, it requires that we know in first-person, even if only vaguely, what it is to experience aesthetically (without necessarily being in an aesthetic experience at the moment, when operating the interface of distanced aesthetic empathy). The other has perceived something like the aesthetic value they are now evaluating aesthetically, but their own experience is on one side of the interface and the experience of our experiencer on the other.

We are engaged in distanced aesthetic empathy when we accurately detect the presence of an aesthetic judgment. Reading *A Farewell to Arms* left me cold, and persuasion and reasoning about the merits of Hemingway's literary expression – that I do feel I can nevertheless detect as lower-level aesthetic features – and trying to be aesthetically open-minded has so far not turned my head.[21] Still, when I listen to other readers analyze the book, I understand that they have not been left cold aesthetically. I can understand that an encounter with at least somewhat similar surroundings that I did not see aesthetic value in has caused different inference in others (*Nobel tai ei mitään: Jakso 3: Ernest Hemingway (1954) by Vehka Kurjenmiekka and Rasmus Tillander, 2022*).

So, observing your verbal and bodily reactions (judgment I), I may form a conception (judgment II) on if you experience for example a song as touching, bad, calming, or invigorating. These observations form an understanding of how the experience takes place. It may result in forming other kinds of relations later on. It does not explain what you experience but it has meaning when the judgment II represents the process with which you have inferred the judgment I. This is an extremely ambitious aim considering interface does not grant direct access. Hence, keeping in mind that

[20] In other words, meaning arises when we can communicate with each other in the Deweyan sense, not by announcing but by forming a relation (Dewey, 2005, pp. 253, 281–282).

[21] Calling some aesthetic features "lower" refers to the order of inference considering at what stage of aesthetic judging they appear in each case. However, we are not saying that there are at maximum two orders of inference in aesthetic judging. Perceiving the aesthetic value of mathematics could be an example of very layered aesthetic judging, as in order to hold that a theorem is beautiful, it may require for example holding individual lemmas beautiful, which may require holding individual axioms beautiful.

mindreading is fallible, the process per se with which the judgment I has been inferred is seen as meaningful. I know (partly) what you experience by representing the process with which you represented (your experience).

Affective appropriation (I perceive the same aesthetic value)

I may feel how I think you are feeling. Its aesthetic equivalent is that I think I have experienced something like you have and can relate to your experience although it is not mine.

By observing your judgment I and constructing judgment II, I may construct a representation of a similar experience as you are having. Used in this way, the aesthetic interface allows aesthetic judgments to affect aesthetic experience through a feedback loop. Let us assume that I feel disgusted when I see a lappet-faced vulture, avoid going through the housing area built in the 1970s if I can avoid it, hold that coffee tastes bad, or always turn the radio off when they play Stravinsky. These examples are indications that I attach negative aesthetic value to the objects in question. If I am accustomed to judging very different objects positively, aesthetically appreciating for example, atonal music, the lappet-faced vulture, concrete architecture, or nuances of coffee might require me first perceive them as if they were beautiful or nuanced. Think about any development or personal change of heart that did not require any other justification or persuasion than understanding that things could be different (often resulting from verbal interactions or observing those): that it is possible to hold something beautiful that I previously thought was not beautiful. Perhaps I even witnessed someone else making this judgment very different to mine.[22] First, I realize that a different aesthetic judgment is possible, for example, that a vulture can be seen as beautiful, and then I imitate it as if to try it out – finally, through my own experience, the subjective justification of a new aesthetic judgment I may also take place.

Meaning forms when I reach subjective justification or understanding about your experience – just like you had to have a subjective justification for your judgment I. So, reaching subjective justification, drawing aesthetic value, in itself is considered meaningful (as opposed to aesthetic value per se as was the case with aesthetic participation). I know (partly) what you experience by representing the subjective or implicit justification of your representation (of your experience).

The difference between aesthetic judging I and II

To sum up, meaning-making via "aesthetic participation" does not require me to detect the aesthetic value similarly to you, but only to detect the presence of aesthetic value. Your judgment I and my judgment II do not need to match. "Distanced aesthetic empathy" requires a more specific (assumed) match

[22] In the case of aesthetic akrasia, guilty pleasures, both judgments are subjectively justified; the metacognitive representation of a justified aesthetic judgment is never ultimate, "a thing itself". For aesthetic akrasia, see Marín (2022), who argues that aesthetic liking and judging can contradict but that aesthetic subjects should aim away from such a state if we want to be rational. We hold that there can be degrees of certainty in aesthetic judging and that it is an act of abstraction including an element of underdetermination. Therefore, a person can have akratic aesthetic judgments without it requiring a gap between intuitive liking judgment and rational judging judgment.

between your judgment I and my judgment II. Unlike aesthetic participation, it does not require me to detect any aesthetic value (however, it requires that I am acquainted with the concept in other contexts, that I have detected aesthetic value before). Distanced aesthetic empathy refers to how conclusive the knowledge acquired through it is. It is not merely detecting the presence of aesthetic judging, as was the case with aesthetic participation. "Affective appropriation" is a combination of both previous ways. There is a specific match between your judgment I and my judgment II, and the match manifests itself affectively, through what can be called subjective justification or inferring aesthetic value.

We were not looking at how you make aesthetic judgments (I) but how someone else can collect information about your aesthetic experience. In other words, the other person needs to by mindreading infer, represent, an aesthetic judgment (II) that is an interface to your aesthetic experience. This mechanism can be employed in at least three cases that align with three types of empathy. So, whereas in the case of judging I, one positions oneself in relation to one's own aesthetic experience, in the case of judging II, one positions oneself in relation to someone else's aesthetic experience. The processes are thus analogical: one shifts the focus from reading one's own mind to reading those of others.

Judging II is different from judging I. Aesthetic judgment I and aesthetic experience form a coevolutionary loop: what kind of judgment I is possible depends on experience shaped by reflection and so on; they form each other's selection environments, so to speak. Aesthetic judgment II and aesthetic judgment I are not in this kind of two-way interaction (although aesthetic judgment II may lead to a new aesthetic judgment I by the observer, and even by the original subject of aesthetic judgment I). Rather, aesthetic judgment II as a representation intends to make aesthetic experience familiar not to the experiencer herself but to another person. It does not (necessarily) alter her aesthetic experience, but it does have partial access to judgment I. Aesthetic judging II and I are thus considered two separate interfaces here.

An interface generates plasticity as the same experience affords several interfaces. This is so because aesthetic judgment is an abstraction and therefore, empirically underdetermined. Although the representation of judgment I that is produced in forming judgment II is not stagnant and most likely not identical to judgment I, it produces information only to the observer (whereas judgment I produces information only to the experiencer). Judgment II can then turn (be extrapolated) into the observer's subjective aesthetic experience. This induces aesthetic judging I in the observer that is ontologically different from the original judging I by the original experiencer. Judging II thus is a link to someone else's aesthetic experience. It is operated by the observer as a way for the observer to put their conception of self in relation to the initial loop of aesthetic experience of the other person. This relationing is continuous because there is no absolute way of knowing or final stage of familiarizing oneself with the aesthetic experience of the other person (as this would mean de facto becoming the other person and seizing to be oneself, giving up one's own embodied mind).

6. Conclusion

We identified a gap in aesthetics: an articulation of how aesthetic judging accesses aesthetic experience is needed. We bridged the gap by applying the concept of "interface" to aesthetic empathy. We described how it may function in different ways when "I" draw information about "your" aesthetic experience via a process that is analogical to forming aesthetic judgments about my own experience but that does not include us interactively sharing the experience at the same time and place. These ways are:

Aesthetic participation – I detect aesthetic value where you do, but not necessarily in the same way (I may think your experience might be significantly different from mine)

Distanced aesthetic empathy – I think you detect aesthetic value where I might not

Affective appropriation – I detect aesthetic value the same way as I think you do

We pointed to overcoming what is in our opinion an artificial division between phenomenological and analytic aesthetics by combining the Böhmean atmosphere (rather than linguistic aesthetic judgment) with the traditionally analytic view on the representational nature of aesthetic judging. We do not suggest getting rid of research done within either of the approaches. Rather, we hold that these fields should be in a fluid exchange in studying cognitive processing (including emotions) related to aesthetic phenomena. Further exchange among the fields is long overdue considering the already achieved – and counting – great degree of specialization within both.[23]

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