

# *Actively restructuring our models through aesthetic experience: revisiting the adverbialist approach through Predictive Processing Theory*

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims at describing aesthetic experience based on its cognitive structure. In contrast with the so-called “content-oriented approach”, we defend a “broad” structuralist account of aesthetic experience, particularly drawing on the Adverbialist Model and reframing it within the context of an embodied version of Predictive Processing Theory. We describe here the paradigmatic features of aesthetic experience, that we mainly identify in a particular “cognitive restructuring” mechanism, corresponding to an updating of internal world models, which unfolds under a disinterested motivation profile, correlating with peculiar metacognitive feelings. This approach avoids some relevant objections faced by content-oriented definitions of aesthetic experience and enhances the explanatory power of structuralist views, specifically by accounting for the feeling of learning, the particular attentional profile of our aesthetic experiences, and the pleasure that accompanies ambivalent (both positive and negative-valenced) aesthetic experiences, as in the paradoxical case of the tragic.

## 1. *Introduction*

Aesthetic experience is torn between two mutually exclusive definitions. Some aim to define it in relation to its content (content-oriented approach); others, on the contrary, in relation to its structure (structure-oriented approach). In our contribution, we will argue for a “broad” structuralist approach, drawing particularly on the Adverbialist Model of aesthetic experience and reframing it in the context of the Predictive Processing Theory. Our account will specifically advocate for a cognitive restructuring underlying our aesthetic experiences and will have the benefit of avoiding some objections that content-view definitions face, as well as enhancing the explanatory power of structuralist views. Section 2 will describe the content-related approach and point to some of its shortcomings. For present purposes, we will address the core proposals of this approach, based on one of its main proponents, namely Noël

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Carroll. Section 3 contrasts the content-oriented view of aesthetic experience with structuralist models, particularly advocating for the adverbialist account. We propose to integrate into this model, which emphasizes the characteristic balance between fluency and disfluency of subpersonal cognitive functions, the Predictive Processing Theory of Mind, revisited in an embodied framework. This entanglement will enable us to more fully explain the kind of cognitive processes and affective states correlating with aesthetic experience, emphasizing the central role of the cognitive restructuring mechanism underlying it. Section 4 discusses the “disinterested” profile which is characteristic of aesthetic experiences. It also explores how our model explains the nature of attention in aesthetic experience, the paradox of the tragic, and the paradigmatic active feature of aesthetic experience. Finally, we will face in section 5 some objections that could be addressed to our view as well as some explanatory advantages of our conception.

## 2. *The content-oriented theory and its controversial shortcomings*

In his paper “Art and the Domain of the Aesthetic”, Noël Carroll accounts for aesthetic experience (AE) by referring to *what it is an experience of* rather than in terms of its internal structure. That is, he defines AE by listing several pre-theoretically paradigmatic instances of its content, thus in the framework of what we may call the “content view” of AE. Specifically, he refers to the formal structure of an artwork, to its design, to its aesthetic expressive qualities, and to how those properties “emerge from what are called the base properties of an artwork” (Carroll 2000, p. 207). Carroll draws the content-related approach against the background of the “attitude-oriented” view, thus putting pressure on those who claim that the mark of AE is a *sui generis* attitude instantiated toward an artwork or a natural object. To some authors, as Carroll correctly points out, AE has to be described as a specific type of subjective response, which is namely featured by disinterestedness and sympathetic attention (Stolnitz 1960, p. 32-42) and is also object-directed (Beardsley 1982, p. 288). Content-view advocates cast fundamental doubts, particularly, on the first of these possible aspects of AE.

To Carroll, the claim that one experiences and values an artwork – or any aesthetic object – disinterestedly is at least hard to credit. To begin with, aesthetic appreciation is to him a human capacity that provides significant evolutionary advantages, for it might correspond to the ability to detect regular patterns in

general experiential content. Since this capacity provides us with prediction skills in coping with the world (Carroll 2000, p. 198), it appears fundamentally counterintuitive that we experience objects aesthetically in a disinterested way. Moreover, we expect art or any other aesthetic object, in general, to make us “see”, “perceive”, or “feel” something *meaningful* (Carroll 2000, p. 201). Once again, this experiential motivation is far from being disinterested. Thus, to content-oriented view defenders, the disinterestedness argument can gain no purchase, at least in this narrow version. These objections ground Carroll’s suggestion that the sufficient condition of AE relies rather on its content.

Even though Carroll conceives aesthetic properties as response-dependent (Carroll 2000, p. 208), his content-related view of aesthetic properties (AP) ends up leading to a counterintuitive universalism of aesthetic evaluations. In Carroll’s view, when it comes to art, AE corresponds to the act of “attending with understanding” the formal, design, and expressive qualities of the artwork (Carroll 2000, p. 204). The author proposes a thought experiment to support this argument. Think about two subjects being in the same perceptive mental states about the same qualities of an artwork. According to Carroll, even if they attend to the relevant aesthetic properties with opposite motivations, the two subjects would undergo the same experience of the artwork, namely an aesthetic experience of it (Carroll 2002; 2005). Whether the first is scrutinizing the artwork with the practical interest of selling it and the other contemplates it without any further purpose than to do so, during a leisure visit to a museum, does not make a difference, not even at a phenomenological level.

Several worries can be raised against Carroll’s argument. We will focus here on what we take to be its main weakness. The flaw of this account of AE lies not so much in negating a phenomenal difference between the two experiences figured in the thought experiment, even though that point is also problematic (Levinson 2016, p. 9-10). Nor do we want to point to the controversial applicability of this model to natural phenomena. Rather, the weakness of Carroll’s argument resides in how he conceives the act of attending a work of art aesthetically. Carroll states that “The formal, aesthetic, and expressive dimensions of artworks are each in turn elements in the way in which the artwork is embodied or presented. Artworks have points or purposes: to advance a theme or a point of view, or simply to elicit a state, such as tranquility. The form of the work and the qualities with which it is invested are the means by which the purposes of the work are realized. In this regard, aesthetic expe-

periences involve focusing on the ‘how of the work’’. (Carroll 2012, p. 174). However, note that the perception of aesthetic qualities of an artwork may be the content of other types of experiences (on this point see also Schaeffer 1996, p. 134-135; Levinson 2016, p. 6-7), e.g. of an epistemic experience or a strictly practical relationship with the object (as in the case of the art seller). It thus seems more appealing to say that what makes the perception of an artwork truly aesthetic is rather the fact that it integrates with a “personal” reaction. It is the direct experience of what the work evokes *in us* that leads us to appreciate the aesthetic properties of the work. That appreciation does not merely depend on the spectator’s knowledge about the artwork itself or about the author’s intentions, though these surely intervene during an aesthetic experience. A subject in front of a work of art could legitimately recognise that ‘the author had the intention of expressing that emotion’, that the work considered has ‘the purpose of expressing that emotion’, but nevertheless not aesthetically value it. She could appreciate it artistically without attending it in the manner we intuitively characterize as aesthetic, which involves, as we may explain accurately in what follows, more complex cognitive and phenomenal reactions. These are reflected by the personal experience of an aesthetically valuable object as something “worthwhile”, “improving”, “insightful” (King 2022), “rewarding”, and not only, let’s say, artistically remarkable (for similar arguments, see Levinson 2016, p. 9, who speaks about “endorsed satisfaction”).

Furthermore, and more importantly, if Carroll was right, aesthetic agreement about the same artwork among different subjects would be ideally achievable. In a content-view putative scenario, subjects would have to attend with the same level of understanding the same aesthetic properties to put an end to their disputes about the aesthetic value of the same artwork, independently of their personal dispositions or cognitive differences. This does not seem to correspond to how things go in the real world: even art critics who agree on the *artistic* value of an artwork can disagree on the *aesthetic* value they personally attribute to it.

This implausible universalism of aesthetic appreciation leads us to argue that a structure-oriented approach might be more appealing than the content-oriented view when it comes to characterizing AE. A plausible account of AE may accommodate the fact that we do dispute aesthetic values of objects and that we do not reach any consensus on that by merely referring to perceivable, either expressive or artist-intention-related (in the case of an artwork) properties of the relevant object. A structure-oriented account might fit this

requirement. It may also more easily elucidate core characteristics of AE, above all its positive character, and the importance we attribute to it. We will thus focus on those in the following. In line with some recent contributions we advocate for a “fresh start” (Nanay 2016) in aesthetics, zooming on the *structure* rather than on the content of AE to unveil its unique features but also its continuity with the ordinary, cognitive, and affective way humans cope with the external environment (Dewey 1934/2005).

### 3. Applying Predictive Processing Theory to an adverbialist model of aesthetic experience: the need for a cognitive restructuring

We have seen so far that a “content-oriented view” of AE, that aligns the latter with the perception of particular content, is not without problems. Instead, we maintain that a conception or at least a description of aesthetics that is based on the *structure*<sup>1</sup> of the experience would hold more explanatory power.

#### 3.1 Adverbialism, fluency, and disfluency

In contrast to the content-oriented view of AE, which, as mentioned above, relies on the properties of the objects on which AE is supposedly built, structuralist models refer to the “internal aspects” of AE (Peacocke, 2023). We put under the “structuralist” label both the *Attitudinal* and the *Adverbialist* models of AE. On the one hand, the Attitudinal Models describe AE in terms of a particular intentional attitude, intended either as a reaction toward an aesthetically valuable object (Kriegel 2023), or as a *sui generis* attitude, as in the classical version of attitudinalism supported by Stolnitz (1960, 1961). On the other hand, the Adverbialist Model defines AE as a set of intentional attitudes that are not essentially aesthetic *per se*, but whose combination gives rise to an AE or, more precisely, to an apprehension of the world *aesthetically* (Dokic, 2016; Koblizek, 2023). The Adverbialist Model, drawing from psychological and empirical research, represents a recent departure from traditio-

<sup>1</sup> Some critical readings have pointed to the limits of the structure-oriented view of AE by referring to its incapacity to identify the unicity, that is, the “signature” that makes aesthetic different from other kinds of experience (Vernazzani 2021). In a nutshell, according to this view, a structure-oriented account works only in conjunction with a content-oriented account. However, this argument can be rejected based on the same criticism of the implicit universalism of content view we mentioned above. Even though we share Vernazzani’s concern regarding the signature of AE, we will thus suggest in the following a way to overcome that shortcoming in a different way and to originally enhance the structuralist approach to AE

nal perceptual and attitudinal models of aesthetic experience. We will consider the adverbialist characterization here. Indeed, in line with Goldman (2013), we advocate for a ‘broad view’ of AE, which the adverbialist view accommodates better than the attitudinal one, given that the latter describes the aesthetic experience in terms of one single attitude, whereas the adverbialist admits that AE is a combination of different attitudes. More precisely, drawing on J. Dewey’s footsteps in his characterization of AE (Dewey 1934/2005), Goldman rightly posits that AE certainly involves the exercise of our perception, but also emotional and cognitive elements (Goldman 2013, p. 326). Within the framework of adverbialism, we aim here to specifically describe the precise cognitive process underlying AE. In line with some recent works in psychology, we propose to reframe the adverbialist conception of AE in light of the Predictive Processing Theory, while maintaining a situated and embodied approach to cognition.

The Adverbialist Model as described by Dokic (2016) investigates the processes of fluent and disfluent information processing underlying AE.<sup>2</sup> Concretely, it seems that à minima every AE implies a form of information processing. The cognitive psychology research conducted by Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman (1998, 2003), highlights the significance of processing fluency, which is the ease with which we process information. This phenomenon also applies to aesthetic experiences. Specifically, since it can translate into the epistemic or metacognitive feeling of “familiarity” with the given object (Dokic 2016), the ease in information processing would help explain some of our aesthetic behaviors, such as enjoying music from genres we are already familiar with or appreciating a type of dance we already know.

However, while fluent processing can correlate with pleasure (Schwarz 2018) and explain certain aesthetic behaviors, it cannot be taken as the sole factor underlying aesthetic experiences. Indeed, it should be noted that the relationship between pleasure and fluency holds only up to a certain threshold, as excessive familiarity can lead to boredom or even irritation (Bornstein, Kale, & Cornell 1990). Therefore, Dokic (2016) claims that at least some minimal disfluency is also necessary to describe AE. What is crucial in sustaining aesthetic contemplation (see also Berlyne 1974; Schaeffer 2015) is thus the balance between fluency and disfluency, which prevents that experience from becoming monotonous or, on the contrary, overwhelming.

<sup>2</sup> For another account of aesthetic experience that highlights the role of fluency and disfluency, see also Schaeffer 2015.

In the end, adverbialists have it that AE consists of “non-intentional ways of organizing or combining various non-aesthetic attitudes, including epistemic feelings or emotions having to do with familiarity and novelty” that metacognitively track our information processing (Dokic 2016, p. 85). We will soon examine the subpersonal mechanisms these metacognitive feelings reflect.

### *3.2 The Predictive Processing Theory*

Beyond the Processing Fluency Theory, which the Adverbialist Model explores to construct its model of aesthetic experience, another approach that focuses on information processing at different levels is the Predictive Processing Theory of Mind (PPT). PPT can be seen as a promising psychological, cognitive, and neuroscientific framework that could be useful for understanding the cognitive aspects of AE.

According to the core insight of PPT, the brain could be conceived as a machine continuously making predictions about sensory data and cognitive processes. Specifically, advocates of PPT suggest that our brain is a hierarchical cognitive operator. At the lowest level of that prediction engine, we find first-level mental processes responsible for processing sensory data. At the highest level, we instead locate mental processes such as perception, action, and general high-level cognitive mechanisms underlying our behavior. Following this model, each level of the machine is supposed to track and make predictions about the lower mental layer. In turn, mental processes unfolding at a lower level can validate or disconfirm upper-level predictions, in a continuous “feedback loop” (Velasco & Loev 2024). In layman terms, we may say that according to PPT, the way we experience the world consists of a continuous interplay of expectations based on sub-personal predictions and confirmations or disconfirmation (prediction errors) of these expectations. In the case a prediction error occurs, a subsequent readjustment of previous world predictive patterns unfolds. Since expectations are always made based on previous experience, the ultimate long-term scope of our cognitive system is to minimize prediction errors at any cognitive level.

A promising aspect of PPT is that it can successfully set different cognitive models under a common framework (Kirchoff 2018) while at the same time holding the capacity to accommodate the outcomes of numerous empirical studies on multiple mental processes. That advantage is particularly evident when it comes to the currently open questions about metacognitive feelings. Feelings are



conscious positive or negative-valenced affective states constantly accompanying our world experience. Metacognitive feelings are the species of feelings related to metacognition (De Sousa 2009), which is the mental mechanism of monitoring subjective cognitive activity (thinking, understanding, remembering, perceiving, decision-making, etc.). One instance of this type of metacognitive feeling is, as previously seen, the feeling of familiarity or novelty, produced by the ease or difficulty of processing information. Among others, one of the possible functions of metacognitive feelings is to enable us to cope with the uncertainty and opacity of mental processes (Proust 2015). Besides their function, a worth considering issue about metacognitive feelings is from what they proximally stem, that is, what lets them emerge as phenomenal (positive or negative) properties of cognitive activity. An interesting suggestion is that they would depend on the fluency or disfluency of cognitive information processing. Positive-valenced metacognitive feelings would reflect the ease of the unfolding of a mental process and, conversely, negative evaluations of a non-fluent cognitive activity would emerge as negative-valenced metacognitive feelings (Velasco & Loev 2024).

In short, the theoretical advantage of PPT is that it enables us to explain why fluency reflects on the phenomenal level in positive metacognitive feelings, for within that framework fluency would correspond to a positive assessment of the accuracy of a given prediction. PPT can thus be a fruitful model for accurately understanding AE, since the latter, as it has been suggested by Dokic (2016), corresponds to the metacognitive feelings reflecting a certain balance between fluency and disfluency of subpersonal (perceptual and affective) mechanisms.

### 3.3 *The Aesthetic “Cognitive Restructuring”*

In line with some recent work conducted by psychologists regarding the explanatory power of PPT when it comes to describing AE<sup>3</sup> (Van de Cruys et al., 2022, Frascaroli et al. 2023), our central aim is to argue that AE involves the occurrence of a cognitive “prediction

<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that we mobilize the PPT, it's important to note that we don't blindly adhere to a conception of the PPT as an alternative or reductive model to adopt to account for the human mind itself. Indeed, PPT has been mobilized to account for a consequent set of faculties (memory, imagination, among others). However, these approaches still present certain shortcomings (Rescorla, 2017). As far as aesthetic experience is concerned, we believe that PTT remains a valid tool for describing it and detailing its underlying mechanisms. So, without blindly defending the PPT or even reducing aesthetic experience – in its phenomenal character in particular – to the PPT, we still believe that it enables us to support our apprehension of the objects of our aesthetic experience in terms of the expectations we have of them.



error.” As seen through the Adverbialist Model, when it comes to AE, the subject deals with an item that does not fully fit her expectations: the stimulus needs to strike a balance between being fluent enough to prevent overwhelming the subject, yet disfluent enough to avoid becoming monotonous or “boring” in a non-relevant manner. Otherwise, the subject would show no interest in keeping exploring the object. This dynamic interaction between fluency and disfluency is pivotal in making aesthetic experiences rewarding.

Our contribution to this discussion relies on the introduction of *cognitive restructuring* as a process that resolves the tension between fluency and disfluency. We characterize that process as an updating of subjective cognitive models, that we take as mental frames and related expectations guiding the subject’s coping with the world. We further suggest that what leads to a reorganization of these cognitive models is the occurrence of a prediction error triggered by a minimal level of disfluency leading the subject to update her mental patterns. Given that there is a minimal sense of disfluency, which can be taken as the phenomenological affective state tracking a potential prediction error, it could be argued that, during an AE, a “prediction error” thus occurs, which motivates the reconstruction of the previous unsuccessful predictive models. It is precisely this cognitive restructuring that transforms the prediction error into a “learning” experience, fostering the sense of discovery, and improvement often associated with AE. Cognitive restructuring would be the mechanism that makes AE not only rewarding but also worthwhile and meaningful, as it enables the subject to integrate new perceptual and cognitive insights. The feeling of learning from AE, or the commonsense belief that art is somehow fulfilling would stem from this cognitive mechanism.

While AE clearly involves cognitive<sup>4</sup> mechanisms and meta-cognitive feelings, it is important to emphasize that this does not render the experience purely intellectual. Instead, cognitive restructuring is to be seen as the construction of new patterns and thought models that directly or indirectly result from the cognitive and affective interaction of an embodied subject with her environment. These processes unfold over time, and it is shaped by the subject’s personal history, embodied experiences, and social context, making AE a deeply situated phenomenon. In other terms,

<sup>4</sup> Our proposal is based on a broad conception of ‘cognitive’, including not only the function of intellect, or in other terms not only what Kant would have called “understanding”, but also beliefs, and knowledge (which constitute our cognitive background). We conceive all these cognitive functions as accompanied by affective states, which play an important role in the exercise of our imagination, memory, and other faculties.

we conceive cognitive restructuring as a form of accommodation,<sup>5</sup> in Piaget’s sense of an activity by which an organism or a system is modified or transformed in order to adjust to an environment or an object (Piaget 1974).

Jean Piaget’s concept of accommodation involves adjusting or creating new cognitive schemas to integrate new information that doesn’t fit existing knowledge, contrasting with assimilation, where new information is incorporated into existing schemas without alteration. This process is crucial for cognitive development and adaptation, including in responses to aesthetic experiences. We propose to reframe such cognitive reconfiguration within the context of PPT. In our view, accommodation can be taken as the act of elaborating new predictions. Combining PPT and Piaget’s idea of accommodation may be insightful due to PPT’s power in explaining in more fine-grained detail the *evolutionary function* of the accommodation itself. Following PPT, not only does the organism construct the meaning of present experience but she also assesses the predictive efficacy of her meaning-making in view of future experiences. On the other hand, the notion of accommodation allows us to explicitly stress the historical, understood as personal, social, and embodied aspects of prediction, which are particularly relevant in the case of aesthetic experience as we intend it.

One might object that PPT is based on a strict representationalist view of cognition at odds with the Piagetian conception of accommodation we refer to, that namely emphasizes the situated relationship between an organism and its environment. However, promising contemporary research suggests an integration of PPT and embodied mind theories<sup>6</sup> (Kirchoff 2018; Miller & Clark 2018). Our account is in line with these attempts. Aesthetic experience, as we take it, would be a key test-bed for investigating the legitimacy of this research, since on the one hand there is broad consensus that experience is highly dependent on subjective conditions, and, on the other hand, as we suggest, it is successfully describable as the result of a prediction error.

In sum, the novelty of our proposal lies in the emphasis on *cognitive restructuring* as a process resulting from the tension between fluency and disfluency of subpersonal cognitive mechanisms, ulti-

<sup>5</sup> McReynolds 1971 used the term “cognitive structuring” to refer to the (piagetian) process of “assimilation”, by which new information fits with the existing mental schemata or models, as Van de Cruys et al. (2022) notice. We delve into the notion of cognitive restructuring to talk about the phenomena of “acomodation”.

<sup>6</sup> Embodied cognition theories claim that cognition is not merely a brain-bound activity but is deeply shaped by the subject’s interaction with her physical, social, and cultural environment (cf. Clark 1997; Varela et al. 1991).

mately making AE both rewarding and meaningful. PPT's strength in explaining AE stems from its ability to navigate between fluency-driven pleasure and the novelty generated by disfluency. While avoiding some of the shortcomings of the content-oriented view we pointed to above, our approach aligns with content-view defenders' reasonable claim that what we expect from art is to be somehow meaningful and "improving". Ultimately, "art's reorganizing power" (Noe 2023) would come from its particular ability to allow for the cognitive restructuring underlying aesthetic experiences.

#### *4. The need for the disinterested profile and its consequences regarding aesthetic experience*

It is worth noting that, in any case, the "cognitive restructuring" needs to occur under particular circumstances. As already noted by Dokic (2016), the right balance between fluency and disfluency needs to happen under a particular "motivational profile" (Dokic 2016, p. 74-76), as the metacognitive feelings of familiarity and novelty need to be further circumscribed. The question arises as to whether, despite the criticisms noticed by Carroll and other authors skeptical about the notion of "disinterestedness", a revisited notion of "disinterestedness" cannot nonetheless be guaranteed under an adverbialist conception. Since "to be disinterested" is not to be "uninterested", an enlightened conception of aesthetic disinterestedness can still hold (see, for instance, Brady 1998). It could find its roots in what Levinson (2016) calls interest "for its own sake". We need to guarantee that there is still an interest in the object at stake during AE – it would be incongruent to claim otherwise – but disinterest is defined positively as interest for the sake of the experience itself.

One might perceive a tension between the aesthetic experience being "for its own sake" and its potential to lead to epistemic gains or understanding something new. This tension dissolves when one acknowledges the difference between the motivational profile underlying the experience and the possible functionality that such experience might have evolved to bear. While the engagement with the object is driven by a disinterested motivation – experiencing the object "for its own sake" – the cognitive restructuring that occurs can still yield epistemic gains without compromising the intrinsic value of the experience (for similar arguments, see Schaeffer 2015 or Cochrane 2023). Thus, cognitive restructuring can happen under a disinterested approach.

AE, thus, needs to guarantee the clause of “disinterestedness”, understood under an active conception that includes the phenomenal character of valuing the object itself. This final clause would be compatible and even explain other characteristics of AE. We will focus here on (1) the way our attention is exercised; (2) the paradox of the tragic; and (3) the inherently active profile of aesthetic experience.

(1) The conception of aesthetic experience under PPT, as leading to a cognitive restructuring under the particular motivational profile, would help explain the type of attention at stake underlying our aesthetic experiences. First, a particular exercise of attention can correlate with the process of optimizing our predictions (Feldman & Friston, 2010; Hohwy, 2012, in Velasco & Loev 2024, p. 6). Second, our conception of aesthetic experience through the lens of the disinterested profile would be able to explain another structural model of aesthetic experience understood in terms of its attention. Importantly, Nanay (2016) asserts that AE is characterized by attention that focuses on an object while being distributed across its properties. This is especially relevant in experiences like observing a landscape, a painting, or a piece of music, where perception is concentrated on the whole object while acknowledging its various constitutive elements. In this sense, the attention is distributed and therefore “overinvested”, as Schaeffer (2015) notices. This phenomenon could be explained by the disinterested profile sustaining the cognitive restructuring. Indeed, the need for accommodation in our AE does not seem to respond to any pragmatic goal, but is sought “for its own sake”. In this sense, our attention can focus on as many properties of the object as possible, making sense of all of them holistically.

(2) Moreover, as our model focuses not only on the structure of aesthetic experience but also on the metacognitive feelings involved, it can elucidate why pleasure can be derived from representational content that is otherwise valued negatively. The approach presented above suggests that the pleasure of an AE stems from the overarching satisfaction of understanding or grasping something new, regardless of the content’s inherent negativity. Such a model accounts for the paradox of the tragic (see, e.g. Schaeffer 2015), where individuals find enjoyment in tragic or distressing artworks because their cognitive engagement leads to a moment of understanding something new. Our approach allows us to explain how aesthetic experiences transcend mere content to offer profound cognitive rewards, thereby enriching our understanding of the world.

(3) Finally, AE, far from being a mere passive contemplation, is

an active behavior that necessitates cognitive restructuring to create new meaning. This active engagement involves not only physical presence but also perceptual, cognitive, and emotional involvement with the object, which is somewhat challenging, even at lower levels. AE requires the integration of whatever is perceived into one's cognitive background, and even reevaluating and recombining the latter to allow the AE to emerge. Even though AE occurs under a "disinterested profile", this disinterest signifies engaging with the object "for its own sake", under a highly active mode of contemplation. The aesthetic object prompts a kind of engagement that, while disinterested in pragmatic outcomes, is rich with cognitive activity. Thus, AE, detailed under PPT terms, unveils its active and situated character, involving a dynamic interplay between the object and the subject's physical and cognitive activity.

##### 5. *Advantages and answers to objections*

Let us wrap things up. Through this article, we have drawn a structuralist and specifically adverbialist conception of AE taking into account both the cognitive and affective sides of this latter. Our approach reframes the Adverbialist Model, understood through the prism of the fluency and disfluency of information processing and the specific disinterested "motivational profile" (Dokic, 2016), in the context of PPT. Combining PPT with the adverbialist approach has the advantage of more fully accounting for the anticipatory mechanisms at play in the metacognitive appreciation of an aesthetic object. Although we take cognitive restructuring as a crucial aspect when it comes to AE, we are not defending here an intellectualist conception of aesthetics, since we intend cognition as always already entangled with affective states and shaped by the environment the subject as a whole organism is originally related to.

We believe that, *prima facie*, this model can be applied to multiple AE such as listening to music, literature, and cinema, but also to ordinary AE, and experiences of natural objects. The relative specificity of each remains to be determined, and the model undoubtedly needs to be tested on particular cases. Anyway, before future investigations, it is important to preliminarily clear the field from some objections that could weaken our general model. The main objection to our view could refer to a radical form of subjectivism we might be supporting here. Are we implicitly suggesting that, since AE reflects personal metacognitive feelings, any kind of objectivism is banned when it comes to aesthetic appreciation?

We do not believe so. A form of objectivism is still provided by our account: to our view, the objective side of AE would stem from the situated relationship between a subject  $x$  and an item  $y$ . This relationship would provide some justification for the fact that  $x$  experiences  $y$  as an aesthetic item, at least in terms of fluency/disfluency processing. Furthermore, insofar as the subject can provide reasons for her aesthetic appreciation of the object, based on her mental and embodied state, the AE she is undergoing is *ipso facto* “objectively” reasonable and thus understandable to other people. Those reasons, while sometimes personal, can in principle be communicated to others and might (or not) resonate with them. In this scenario, agreement would not be necessarily reached as in the content-view scenario, thus better accommodating common sense intuitions about aesthetic appreciation. Still, this sharing of reasons could potentially lead others to a new cognitive restructuring of their own experience through a different approach to the stimulus.

Let us now address a last potential concern about our approach. Given that our conception lies highly on cognitive and epistemic grounds, it might seem at odds with the phenomenology of more ordinary experiences such as, for instance, the experience of a beautiful sunset, or of other ordinary objects. One might argue that it is not obvious how these experiences would involve a cognitive restructuring. First, note that, according to our view, it is *de iure* possible for any object to be an aesthetic object. Indeed, if the object *is* aesthetic, it is only because it is the object of an AE. Second, and more fundamentally, if there is an absence of AE in front of a given object, this is attributed to the deficiency of basic meaning-making. Thus, if there is an AE in front of a sunset, it is because there is, at least in a minimal sense, some degree of accommodation. Drawing from the idea that AE are inherently situated (Brady 1998), whether intentionally sought or stumbled upon unexpectedly, every AE, even those seemingly purely perceptual, is intricately connected to a specific context and a bodily-sentient organism, thus infused with past encounters and engaged in sense-making with new information, regardless of the nature of the object<sup>7</sup>. In the case of the appreciation of the sunset, one appreciates its fleeting nature or finds a particular resonance in colors reminiscent of a cherished childhood landscape, among others, which lead to the previously described necessary “cognitive restructuring.” After all, even a garbage plastic bag can give place to an AE (as in the

<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that the properties of the object do not have a role in the aesthetic experience; once again, the aesthetic experience unfolds in the relationship between the object *and* the subject

well-known scene of *American Beauty*),<sup>8</sup> as long as it elicits some new meaning-making.

Though the reasons behind cognitive restructuring might be highly personal, an aesthetic experience (AE) remains justifiable by applying to the situated relationship between the subject undergoing it and the object the experience is about, as previously stated.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, our account has the benefit of avoiding some of the objections that the content-oriented view has to face. It also presents the advantage of providing an accurate account of AE, explaining why it presents itself with a particular attentional overinvested profile. Furthermore, this model makes sense of the pleasure derived from this type of experience, even when this is paradoxical. That pleasure would indeed depend, particularly, on having “learned” something new, in the sense of actualizing prior models. Moreover, our view helps understand and unveil the dynamic character of AE while accepting its intra- and inter-personal differences. Finally, given the fundamentally epistemic character of AE that emerges, further research needs to be done in terms of curiosity and understanding, both highly present in learning and aesthetic contexts.

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<sup>8</sup>Our approach is prima facie compatible with the hypothesis that even abstract ideas and intellectual pursuits (Schellekens 2022) can be objects of aesthetic experience since to our account aesthetic experience is defined not based on the perception of a material object, but rather referring to the way we perceive, and in particular by the interplay of fluency and disfluency of our expectations in experiencing disinterestedly a phenomenon. Furthermore, applying our view to intellectual objects would not be inconsistent with the embodied framework we situate our account in. No inconsistency would arise insofar as we take intellectual objects themselves as originally resulting from the cognitive function of an embodied mind.



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