
Joint aesthetic attention

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Résumé

We look at and appreciate paintings together at the gallery; we feel like one with the crowd enjoying our favourite band’s concert; we are awestruck by a beautiful landscape while looking at it with our loved ones. Enjoying the aesthetic properties of objects together with others is a ubiquitous kind of joint activity. But if, as one tradition holds, aesthetic experiences are private, how does this happen? In this paper, I introduce and analyse the notion of joint aesthetic attention. I start with a minimal definition of aesthetic attention as object-oriented for its own sake. Then, armed with this definition, I consider how different accounts of aesthetic experience can address which, if any, aesthetic properties are shared between us when we are jointly experiencing an artwork, a performance, or a landscape. Different theories of aesthetic experience agree that many aesthetic properties are response-dependent: properties like beauty or sadness constitutively depend on a subject having a particular response to the object. How can we both attend to something dependent on individual responses? I address this challenge within a structuralist framework of aesthetic experience. I argue that joint aesthetic attention has a dual coordinative profile: co-attenders coordinate (1) their perceptual attention to the object, but also coordinate (2) the specific ways they attend to it, i.e., their hedonic, affective, or evaluative responses. To accommodate this specific kind of aesthetic coordination, I propose a probabilistic view of joint attention, whereby co-attenders generate estimates of each other’s aesthetic responses. I contrast aesthetic coordination with closely related phenomena, including shared and collective emotions, highlighting how the attentional structure of joint aesthetic experiences differs from these. Finally, I consider an open question of this proposal, regarding extensions from joint to collective aesthetic experiences.

Mots-Clés: joint attention, joint perception, aesthetic attention, aesthetic experience

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