

Review of the book *New Directions in Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*.

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Abstract:

Reviews the book, *New Directions in Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* edited by Paul Locher, Colin Martindale, and Leonid Dorfman (see record 2006-03935-000). This book's 16 chapters reveal the broad themes of modern research on creativity and the arts. First, it's clear that researchers draw their inspiration from mainstream cognitive psychology. Second, this book reveals a growing interest in the nature of aesthetic expertise. Finally, this book reflects the segregation of the study of creativity from the study of art and aesthetics. Interest in creativity and the arts is high, and the field is clearly flourishing. Forecasting new directions is always speculative--who knows from where the next great idea will appear?--but researchers can use this fine book to make some good guesses.

Keywords: book reviews | aesthetics | creativity | arts | cognitive psychology

Article:

New Directions in Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts, edited by Paul Locher, Colin Martindale, and Leonid Dorfman (2006), has evaded the “handbook curse” that afflicts most edited books these days. Rather than compile reviews of the field's greatest hits, the editors have developed an intriguing collection of papers about understudied areas and fertile hypotheses. Although a few of the chapters review established programs of research, most of the chapters present the reader with open doors. Researchers new to the field will find a lot of food for thought and fodder for research; researchers weary from years of data collection will enjoy the chance to reflect on where the field is moving.

This book's 16 chapters reveal the broad themes of modern research on creativity and the arts. First, it's clear that researchers draw their inspiration from mainstream cognitive psychology. Many of the chapters describe successful applications of cognitive principles, such as cognitive aspects of aesthetic preference (Cutting), pictorial balance (Locher), music understanding (Deliège), and skill transfer (Winner et al.). Other chapters point to unmined terrain—such as the perception of streaming images (Hochberg & Brooks), the processing of literary texts (Miall), and the nature of aesthetic expertise (Smith & Smith)—and advocate for the usefulness of

cognitive tools. And some chapters indicate a need to move away from cognitive psychology and to explore culture (Washburn), development (Russ), and personality (Machotka).

Second, this book reveals a growing interest in the nature of aesthetic expertise. The most direct example is Smith and Smith's chapter—they propose a concept called *aesthetic fluency*, essentially one's level of expertise in the arts, and they describe a new method of assessing fluency. Other chapters touch upon whether experts and novices differ in the perception and experience of visual art (Cupchik; Locher), music (Deliège), and literature (Miall); how artistic competence transfers to other skills (Winner et al.); and how highly creative and less creative people make different decisions (Sternberg). The interest in expertise is mostly tacit, however, and the field ought to pursue research on the growth and consequences of aesthetic skill. The study of art and aesthetics could learn some tricks from the study of creativity, which examines “everyday creativity” alongside eminent creativity (Simonton, 2003). We can illuminate the inner architecture of aesthetics by examining how experts and novices are similar and different.

Finally, this book reflects the segregation of the study of creativity from the study of art and aesthetics. The areas are integrated culturally and socially—Division 10 of APA lacks the demilitarized zone separating cultural and physical anthropologists, for example—but they're not integrated theoretically. The chapters on creativity in this book—two broad systems-models (Dorfman; Sternberg), an archival study of cinematic creativity (Simonton), and an exploration of creativity and design (Overbeeke & Forlizzi)—are detached from the rest, and the chapters on art and aesthetics generally have little to say about creativity. An intriguing exception is Machotka's chapter, which explores how viewers discern an artist's personality through stylistic aspects of his or her art. Researchers should try to close the circle of creativity and aesthetics, of creating and participating. For example, how do creative writers use feedback from colleagues, readers, and “inner audiences” to craft their work? How do writers, who both create and consume words, use their experiences of others' writing to guide their own work?

I would add a couple of new directions to the many fertile ideas suggested by this book. First, the psychology of aesthetics should look beyond the prototypical arts. Most of the typical Westerner's encounters with aesthetic intent come from designed objects—a graceful faucet, an elegant lounge chair, a knock-off Alvar Aalto stool sold at a big-box retailer—not from museum exhibitions. The psychology of art and aesthetics, however, knows nearly nothing about interior architecture and industrial design. Designed objects provide an interesting context for studying classic problems, such as the roles of novelty and prototypicality in aesthetic preference (e.g., Hekkert, Snelders, & van Wieringen, 2003). And, as Overbeeke and Forlizzi's chapter points out, understanding how people relate to designed objects can close the circle between creativity and aesthetics: it can illuminate how a designer's intentions are enacted in the experience of the user.

Second, we're a long way from understanding cultural aspects of aesthetics and creativity. As Washburn's chapter reminds us, the meaning of “art” shifts across cultures, and, I would add,

across social classes within a culture. Her research shows that some cultures give aesthetic meaning to cultural rituals, social relationships, and natural events. The study of creativity should pay more attention to folk art and outsider art; the study of art and aesthetics should examine people's mental models of “art” and take seriously their experience of pop music (Gabrielsson), natural scenes, TV shows, and summer blockbusters (Simonton). Despite the different cultural meanings of art, the inner architecture of aesthetic experience may be the same. The appraisals that make a painting interesting, for example, should be the same appraisals that make rickety barns, modern chairs, and reality TV shows interesting (Silvia, 2005).

Modern research is part of a “newer experimental aesthetics,” a renewal and expansion of the new experimental aesthetics of the 1970s (Berlyne, 1974). Interest in creativity and the arts is high, and the field is clearly flourishing. Forecasting new directions is always speculative—who knows from where the next great idea will appear?—but researchers can use this fine book to make some good guesses.

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