

AESTHETIC EMPATHY

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It. *Empatia estetica*; Fr. *Empathie esthétique*; Germ. *Ästhetische Einfühlung*, *Ästhetische Empathie*; Sp. *Empatía estética*. The concept of “aesthetic empathy” refers to the ability to experience and understand aesthetic phenomena through engagement with and exposure to artistic creations. This process involves empathically positioning oneself within the perspective of the artist or the artwork itself, and attempting to understand the intentions and emotions conveyed. Research on aesthetic empathy focuses on the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that are activated during art appreciation, and how these experiences shape our interpretations of the content we observe. Cognitively, aesthetic empathy requires the ability to decode the artist’s intentions and the latent meaning of the artwork. Emotionally, it involves the ability to engage with and respond to the emotions evoked by the artwork.

ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT

The concept of empathy, a translation of the German expression *Einfühlung*, literally “feeling within”, has its origins in 19th century German philosophical thought. The term was first introduced in 1873 by Robert Vischer in his essay *Über das optische Formgefühl: Ein Beitrag zur Ästhetik* (1873), to describe the emotional response an observer experiences when confronted with a work of art. In Robert Vischer’s aesthetic theory, the concept of *Einfühlung* involves a bilateral interaction between the individual and the perceived object, placing the former at the centre of aesthetic discourse. Extending on Wilhelm Wundt’s kinaesthetic concept (1874), Vischer attributes the origin of various emotional responses to artistic stimuli to a process of fusion between the physical response (e.g., pleasant or unpleasant eye movements) and the subjective process of imagination. This fusion gradually integrates with the object, leading to the perception of emotion in the object itself. In his reinterpretation of Vischer’s aesthetic concept of *Einfühlung*, Theodor Lipps (1903), a proponent of logical psychologism alongside Franz Brentano, includes two innate psychological instincts: projection and motor mimesis. This leads to a theory of internal imitation in which kinaesthetic sensations and emotions caused by an object are projected onto the object itself. Lipps conceptualises empathy as an imitative impulse with an emotional component, characterised by “internal participation” in the experiences of others. There is complete identification between the empathic self and

the object of empathy. Parallel to the German debate, reflections on the emotional connection between the viewer and the work of art also developed in France. French philosophers of the 19th century (see Jouffroy 1840) explored similar themes, examining the dynamics between the individual and the artistic experience. These French contributions, while not directly referring to the German concept of *Einfühlung*, highlight the cross-cutting interest in empathy and emotional response to art in different philosophical traditions.

This cross-cutting nature of the concept of empathy is also suggested by the fact that it is possible to distinguish between aesthetic and interpersonal "empathy" in English, just as it is possible to distinguish between aesthetic and interpersonal *Einfühlung* in German, suggesting a common psychological mechanism that underlies both aesthetic and interpersonal "empathy". This broader understanding of the concept, which now extends beyond its initial focus on emotional responses to art to include a wider range of empathic experiences.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Contemporary aesthetic debate has identified empathy as a key element, extending beyond the mere interpretation of an artist's intentions to include a deep understanding of the intrinsic meaning of the artwork. This expanded understanding of empathy relies on a view of aesthetic experience that goes beyond simple, detached observation and evolves into an active emotional engagement that fosters a deeper, more personal understanding of art. The field of neuroaesthetics has made significant contributions in this regard, in particular highlighting the essential role of the mirror neuron system in facilitating the empathic experience of art. These mirror mechanisms are thought to be crucial in enabling us to "feel" art empathically, establishing a direct connection between the viewer and the artwork. Research led by scientists such as D. Freedberg and V. Gallese (2007) has shown that exposure to art activates brain regions associated with the simulation of actions, bodily attitudes, and emotional responses, highlighting a natural link between art and empathy. In addition to the contributions of neuroaesthetics, Dan Zahavi's work offers a phenomenological perspective on empathy, suggesting that empathic experience in art involves not only neural mechanisms but also deep intersubjective understanding (Zahavi 2011). He also aims to elucidate how specific aesthetic attributes, such as colour and composition, elicit neural and emotional responses, while also considering how familiarity with an artistic style or cultural context might modulate these responses. In addition, the performing arts, including music, dance and theatre, provide fertile ground for the study of empathy. Here, empathy may be directed towards the artistic performance itself, the performers, or both, with improvisation being a prime example where empathy allows the audience to tune into the emotions and intentions of the performers in real time. This empathic connection not only increases the emotional depth of the experience for the audience, but can also influence the direction of the performance, creating a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between performer and audience (Bertinetto 2016). Similarly, in the visual arts, literature and film, aesthetic empathy is thought to enhance our artistic experience by enabling deep emotional connections with the artwork. Research in this area is further enriched by the exploration of

empathy in various art forms by several contemporary theorists and artists (Gallese 2001; Freedberg, Gallese 2007; Nussbaum 1992; Robinson 2005; Zinck, Newen 2008). Modern artists themselves often aim to evoke emotional experiences in viewers through visual and conceptual elements, while contemporary aesthetic theorists explore the implications of empathy for the interpretation and appreciation of art. The current debate about the nature of aesthetic empathy, whether seen as a primarily cognitive phenomenon focused on deciphering the artist's intentions and the meaning of the work, or as encompassing emotional aspects where the emotional response to art is integral to the aesthetic experience, is in sum lively.

In addition, the role of cultural and personal context in aesthetic empathy has been a point of contention. While some argue for the universality of aesthetic empathy, others emphasise how cultural differences and personal experiences significantly shape our ability to empathise with a work of art. In social psychology, figures such as Jamie L. Goldenberg and Tom Pyszczynski (2015) have used aesthetic empathy to explore how individuals are influenced by narratives and representations of other cultures or life experiences. This form of empathy involves a deep emotional engagement with the artwork, facilitating a connection with the artist's intention and an appreciation of the artwork's aesthetic qualities.

Neuroaesthetics also explores the neural underpinnings of aesthetic experience through scientific methods such as brain imaging (Freedberg, Gallese 2007; Ishizu, Zeki 2011). Advances in techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG) have greatly advanced this field. Researchers are attempting to determine which brain regions are activated when viewing or interacting with art and how these neural activations correlate with the aesthetic experience, revealing that viewing art activates brain areas associated with emotional processing and social cognition, suggesting a direct link between art and empathy.

In summary, the contemporary debate on empathy within aesthetics is dynamic and encompasses a range of issues, from the cognitive and emotional dimensions of aesthetic empathy to its significance in cultural and social contexts. The interdisciplinary approach of neuroaesthetics, coupled with the study of empathy in different art forms, continues to provide fresh perspectives and insights, enriching our discourse on art and its capacity to forge emotional connections with the world around us.

The concept of aesthetic empathy is also constantly evolving, adaptively reshaping itself in response to emerging art forms and innovative technologies on the global stage. A central aspect of this discourse is understanding the dynamic engagement enabled by art, and how it can be amplified and modulated through interactions with digital technologies (Rokeby 1995; Grau 2003; Langer 1953). While the historical foundations of aesthetic empathy continue to inform contemporary discourse, the emergence and proliferation of digital technologies in the 21st century has greatly expanded the scope for its study and application. In the modern arena of digital art and immersive realities, scholars such as Carles Sora-Domenjó (2022), Jeremy Bailenson (2018), Janet Murray (2017) and Oliver Grau (2004) have led the way in exploring the mechanisms by which these technologies evoke and shape emotional responses. Their research suggests that the immersive worlds enabled by virtual reality and digital art provide a rich environment for exploring and applying aesthetic empathy. This suggests a significant potential for new technologies to expand the understanding and experience of aesthetic empathy. Philosophers in this field

argue that the immersive and interactive experiences offered by digital art and virtual reality can deepen aesthetic empathy. At the same time, Berys Gaut (1999) suggests that empathy is a fundamental element in appreciating art that expresses experiences distant from our own. This view is not without controversy. Critics such as Amy Coplan (2011) argue that empathy can actually limit our appreciation of art by focusing too much on our emotional responses rather than on a deeper understanding of the artwork itself. This debate highlights the complexity and enduring importance of aesthetic empathy in contemporary philosophical discourse. Its continued relevance reflects the robustness of this theoretical construct and its adaptability to the challenges posed by technological and artistic advances. The dynamic evolution of the concept of aesthetic empathy in response to technological and artistic advances opens up new perspectives on how technology can not only transform but also profoundly enrich our artistic experience. This evolution is set within a broader context of interaction between art, technology and human perception, where emerging digital and immersive art forms are redefining the boundaries of aesthetic experience. Technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Mixed Reality (MR) offer innovative ways of experiencing art by merging elements of the physical world with digital ones: they not only expand the visual field, but also enrich the emotional and cognitive experience, facilitating a synergy between the viewer, the artwork and the environment. This has significant implications not only for arts education, but also for fields such as psychology and therapy, where aesthetic empathy can be used as a tool to promote emotional well-being and social understanding. These new perspectives challenge our traditional understandings of empathy, perception and aesthetic experience, heralding a future in which art and technology seem to converge in increasingly innovative and engaging ways.

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