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Carbon, Claus-Christian

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## Reviews

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**Feeling beauty: The neuroscience of aesthetic experience** by G G Starr; MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 272 pages, \$25.00 cloth (£17.95) ISBN 9780262019316

I liked the general idea of the book, I liked the broad range of phenomena of aesthetic experiences described, but concurrently I was a little disappointed by the exclusion of relevant sources of the research field of empirical aesthetics. From my perspective, Gabrielle Starr was a bit too selective in her literature research.

What had I expected from the book to start with? To understand how ‘beauty feels’ is probably one of the most thrilling endeavors for any person who is interested in or does research on beauty, and it is a specific challenge for neuroscientific research that Starr wanted to target in the main. Consequently, a title such as *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience* promises a lot, especially the subtitle. Fulfilling this promise is a quite challenging task, notably in view of the fact that the book is very compact, consisting of three relatively neatly organized chapters (with only 149 pages of body text).

Starr’s main line of argument is that understanding neural underpinnings of aesthetic experience can help us to redefine and rethink the whole conceptions of aesthetics and the arts. First of all, an important fallacy, often drawn in aesthetics research, should be mentioned in this regard: feeling beauty is but one of the multiple kinds of aesthetic experience, and quite often it is not the most prominent or most important one. Asked to describe their reaction to artworks, people might indeed frequently use the word ‘beauty’ (Augustin, Wagemans, & Carbon, 2012; Jacobsen, Buchta, Köhler, & Schröger, 2004), but not for all domains of aesthetics and the arts, and not when it comes down to deeply explaining the full range of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience elicited by works of modern art, for instance, might not even involve the dimension ‘feeling’ or the concept of ‘beauty’, so that seeking for insights into aesthetic processes by exclusively referring to the concept of beauty might fall short or be misleading. Still, to analyze beauty in the realm of the arts is plausible and worthwhile, because undoubtedly, “beauty matters in life and in art, but also ... in the architecture of the brain itself” (preface, page xi).

Starr begins with a very readable introduction where she briefly states her major aims and her line of arguments. In the paragraph “Pleasure and emotion” she emphasizes that aesthetic experience is dynamic and individual, two important considerations often neglected in recent research where the perspective on aesthetics is limited to mere static phenomena (see, for details on this debate, Carbon, 2012); and data are mostly presented as averaged responses, making it impossible to understand the idiosyncrasy of aesthetic experience. In “Imagination and imagery” Starr then touches on the debate of imagery and its potential impact on pleasure—from my view, this debate is highly interesting, but sadly treated only superficially here. For this specific book, as a whole, it would definitely have been more beneficial to focus and elaborate more strongly on other topics such as the neuroscientific circuits that process specific aspects of aesthetic material. In the paragraph “Toward a neuroaesthetic model” a series of relevant and interesting issues are raised, but the paragraph’s aim to develop a neuroaesthetic model seems much too ambitious; moreover, the considerations lack important models that do already exist (eg Carbon & Jakesch, 2013; Cela-Conde et al., 2013; Chatterjee, 2011a; Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004; Palmer & Griscom, 2013; Palmer & Schloss, 2010a, 2010b).

In her first chapter “Seen and heard: a model for the sister arts” Starr follows a fruitful and differentiated approach. She makes clear that subjective variations of aesthetic experiences are fundamental and can be revealed in three dimensions: (1) variety of aesthetic objects, (2) variety of emotions associated with aesthetic experience, and (3) variety of possibilities to process such emotions. This idea alone makes clear why aesthetic research is such a “coming of age story” (Chatterjee, 2011b), spectacularly extending its meaning for psychological research (and associated fields) over the last few years: explaining aesthetic experience asks for the investigation of the complex interplay between cognitive and affective sciences with a variety of material and in a multimodal and multimethodological fashion. Starr explains in a simple, straightforward way why aesthetic experience might be rewarding

and why it is subjective (eg due to mood, expertise, personal associations, cultural constraints, expectations, dynamics). Although her ideas and explanations are clear, I was surprised to find that Starr doesn't mention essential literature from research addressing important variables for modulating aesthetic experience—for example, mood (Leder et al., 2004), expertise (Hekkert & van Wieringen, 1996), elaboration (Carbon & Leder, 2005), situation (Carbon, Faerber, Gerger, Forster, & Leder, 2013), dynamics (Cutting, DeLong, & Brunick, 2011), insights (Muth & Carbon, 2013), or *Zeitgeist* (Martindale, 1990). In the end, although the first chapter is an inspiring one, the interested reader is informed too selectively about very specific and singular research made by the author herself—this might also be the reason for the not fully defined direction of the chapter that oscillates between general philosophical ideas and specific neuroscientific results.

Chapter 2 (“Aesthetics beyond the mind’s eye: imagery and the sister arts”) relies mainly on considerations concerning the phenomenon of imagery—indeed, an appealing and important issue to be addressed in aesthetic research, but within the given frame of the book obviously just too ambitious. Here, I would have found a focus on aesthetic phenomena of imagery favorable. Instead, Starr takes the time to shortly introduce the reader into the complex debate between Zenon Pylyshyn (eg Pylyshyn, 2003) and Stephen Kosslyn (eg Kosslyn, Ganis, & Thompson, 2003).

When the author is explicitly referring to “dynamic aesthetics” in chapter 3, it would have helped to take essential research papers on the highly dynamic nature of aesthetic experiences into consideration—first of all, findings from cognitive sciences, but also from neuroscience (eg Augustin, Defranceschi, Fuchs, Carbon, & Hutzler, 2011). Particularly, information on dynamics based on elaboration of aesthetic material would have strengthened the chapter. Still, chapter 3 comes back to the essential point of aesthetic experience that some people don't see things “as you or as I do” (page 149), because “Aesthetics is all about newly created and reconfigured value”—for this final statement already I like the book very much and forget some of my earlier criticism, because it might explain the essential difference between art and kitsch: while we have to dispute, reconfigure, and rethink about objects of art, there is no dispute, but just agreement, between individuals and determinacy in kitsch (see also Pepperell, 2011).

In sum, my overall experience with this book is mixed. However, it has definitely inspired me and was, in most places, written in an entertaining and appealing style, which made it pleasurable to read (this pleasure was lessened by only the referencing system with citing literature as numbers to be looked up at the end of the book). The high-quality color depictions in the middle of the book are definitely a further plus. Moreover, Starr made it possible to find further, and valuable, information on the references used by providing a complete appendix (‘notes’) with them. This makes the book very handy also for people who want to get more information on the given sources without the need for inconveniently retrieving the full texts of the original sources.

Claus-Christian Carbon

Department of General Psychology and Methodology, University of Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany;  
e-mail: ccc@experimental-psychology.com

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