



Aesthetic Perception: An Epistemic Approach

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Abstract

This study seeks to explore the epistemological dimensions of aesthetics Perception, particularly in relation to the general structure of human thought. The discussion begins with examining the archaeology of knowledge and the origins of cultural-historical analysis of ideas, as articulated by Michel Foucault. It then addresses the general epistemological framework of aesthetics, including its interpretive horizons, which require realignment and reconstruction with the reality of reception and the contemporary modes of aesthetic appreciation. Through the interdisciplinary analysis we try to understand the principle states that aesthetic perception can be interpreted through aesthetic attitude. The study concludes by examining the phenomenon of the Grotesque, its aesthetic limitations, and the potential of analyzing it from an aesthetic cultural perspective.

Keywords: Culture; criticism; aesthetics; interpretation, ideas; Perception; the grotesque

First – On the Archaeology of Knowledge (Man’s Perception of Existence):

Archaeology, or the Archaeology of Knowledge as a cultural term, is the epistemic study of human cultural history. French philosopher and political activist Michel Foucault borrowed it from Emmanuel Kant. Notably, in his earlier and later works, especially after he delved deeper in his archaeology of knowledge, Foucault emphasizes that power necessitates a novel relationship with knowledge. In his book *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Foucault posits that the modern discourse entails the dissolution of the initial or provisional order of knowledge acquisition “Mathesis” (or establishing systemic relationships between words and things), in an attempt to align between underrepresented powers, historical circumstances, and life in general.¹

¹ S. During (2019). Al-Jinālūjiyā, al-sulṭah wa-fi’l al-kitāba [Genealogy, power, and the act of writing]. (Abdallah Teama, Trans.). *Fuṣūl*, (105), p. 27. Egyptian General Book Organization; See also: S. During (2005). *Foucault and literature: Towards a genealogy of writing* (p. 198+). Routledge.



In *The Order of Things*, Foucault puts forward a statement cited by many that describes man, or the image of the self that possesses itself in humanistic discourse, as a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea, soon to be erased by the tide. This disintegration is understood as the outcome of a broad cultural shift where the humanities have come to accept that man is nothing but a composite image of knowledge discourse (particularly in the nineteenth century). It is no longer possible to defend such illusions in an era that witnessed the rise of structural anthropology as well as the linguistic turn that occurred in a multitude of knowledge branches, in addition to the loss of all faith in history as a universal foundation for the process of human understanding and its purpose. Both Nietzsche and de Saussure were primary instigators for this shift, which transcends previous metaphysical certainties;² de Saussure established a comprehensive universal theory on language and discursive formations which prohibits the individual subject from being the origin or the center of meaning. As for Nietzsche, he formulated expressions of criticism that question philosophy systems, beginning from Plato to Hegel, as systems that define truth as a means of shedding light on human self-knowledge clearly and distinctively.³

Through his work on archaeology, Foucault argues that cultural analysis should not operate on two intertwined and contradictory levels in the modern era, such as being empirical and transcendental or being concerned with facts pertaining to theories that regulate them, while these theories cannot explain those facts. He also maintains that cultural analysis should neither deal with phenomena linked to unknown forces that cannot bring them to existence, nor be connected to texts with their interpretations that present them objectively.

On the one hand, archaeology is concerned with the analysis of the deep and deeper layers that constitute a given phenomenon; it delves into researching the early impressions of knowledge, or more accurately, it explores the depths of the aesthetics of the mind's representation of the world, thus creating new subjects that replace the isolated epistemological approach. On the other hand, genealogy critically examines, analyzes, and reviews the development of ideas, concepts, and discourses for a given phenomenon in an epistemological and deconstructive synchronous manner. Thus, genealogy builds upon archaeology, according to Foucault's perspective and the historical view he adopts. Every structure encompasses a set of knowledges, methodologies, and hypotheses relevant to a specific historical period, and it is also a product of that period, which means that no specific historical period can be connected

² For details, see H. Bābā'ī, & R. Kharāsānī (Eds.). (2014). *Al-Ḥaḍārah wa-l-ḥadāthah fī al-fīkr al-'arabī al-mu'āshir* [Civilization and Modernity in Contemporary Arabic Thoughts] (1st ed., p. 56+). Ḥadārah Center for the Development of Islamic Thought.

³ For more details, see C. Norris. (2013). Nīṭshah, Frūyid, Līfīnās: 'An akhlāqīyyāt al-tafkīk [Nietzsche, Freud, Levinas: On the ethics of deconstruction]. In Ḥ. Nāyil (Ed. & Trans.), *Madākhil ilā al-Tafkīk. Jāk Dirīdā, Būl dī Mān, wa-Ākharūn* (p. 113+). Egyptian General Book Organization



to a former one, and there is an epistemological gap between them. As for the hermeneutic historical reading, it is based on continuity, hence the disjunction between those two approaches, archeological genealogy and hermeneutics⁴, in analysis.

Second – The Cultural Approach to Epistemological Aesthetics Perception:

In the mid-1960s, Theodor Adorno published his book *Prisms*, the first of four books he wrote on cultural criticism and society. Adorno argues that the term ‘cultural criticism’ itself entails a fundamental problem. He attributes his doubts about the term to the characteristics of the German linguistic context; the German term ‘*kulturkritik*’ carries within it echoes of the values of bureaucrats or the values of the ‘nonpolitical man’ which Thomas Mann described in his 1916 article⁵ and which was the core of a selection of his cultural and political essays (1915-1918) that later appeared in his book *Betrachtungen eines unpolitischen* [Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man].

Apart from the precursors and circumstances which the concept of cultural criticism (the general concept) stemmed from, it developed into a methodology utilized via its tools and procedures in interdisciplinary scientific analysis, to the extent that it has become essential in contemporary critical linguistics, and aesthetics criticism (the specific concept). It is known that semiotician Gunther Kress, structural linguist Roger Fowler, literary critic Robert Hodge, and philosopher and politician Tony Trew concluded their book *Language and control* (1979) with an article titled “Critical Linguistics” where they presented the study of this branch of linguistics and its relationship with social discourse, along with an explanation of its conceptual tools and procedural steps, for the purpose of studying human discourse—generally—through critical linguistics⁶.

By utilizing this, it is possible to analyze the general discourse of the different narratives and literature with diverse rhetorical styles through uncovering the coded ideology within, such as the study of representation, i.e., the way in which a discourse presents the events, participants, specific opinions, and so forth.

The methodology of **cultural criticism** in its ontological dimension establishes a strong affinity between the linguistic structure of any human discourse and the social structure which produced this very same discourse. A writer’s turn from English to his/her local language, for example, in alignment with concepts such as ‘colonial abjection’ among others, evidences how

⁴ Simon During, A. Teama, p. 53.

⁵ Thomas Mann: *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1956). For more, see Richard Wolin, (2016). *Maqūlāt al-naqd al-thaqāfi: Madrasat Fūrānkfurt, al-wujūdīyah, mā ba’d al-bunyawīyah* [The terms of cultural criticism: The Frankfurt School, existentialism, poststructuralism] (M. ‘Anānī, Trans.; 1st ed). National Translation Center.

⁶ R. Fowler, (1991). *Language in the news: discourse and ideology in the press* (p. 5). Routledge.



this shift entails **an aesthetic structural code** that is embodied in the used constructions even without the conscious choice of the writer. This is because the specialized cognitive processes underlying this shift in writing style operate outside the writer's immediate consciousness.⁷ This is actually what Foucault understood in his endeavor to interrogate and piece together the 'unsaid,' and revive the discourse of the marginalized, the isolated and the ostracized in society. In this endeavor, Foucault relied on the distinct conceptual reworkings of the radically transformative German philosopher Nietzsche, particularly the important issues the latter raised in *The Genealogy of Morals*.⁸

Here one may also explore how language use (as employed by any given writers) functions within the overarching system—either by preserving the existing structure or by instigating its transformation—through the interplay of aesthetic reception and the mental hermeneutics of the world.

In this context, one cannot overlook the substantial contribution made by the contemporary German philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas (1929–), one of the leading philosophers of the Frankfurt school of critical theory, through what he proposed, for example, in one of his most renowned works that is widely discussed in Western academic circles, namely: *Discourse Ethics and the Question of Truth*. His stature, along with that of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, and Michel Foucault, was early recognized in 1980s as evidenced by the publication of the anthology *Cultural Analysis* (1984), which touches on some of the foundational issues surrounding cognitive sociology, cultural criticism, identity, and human identity among many else. This cannot be separated from Habermas' central project *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* [Theory of Communicative Action], published in two substantial volumes in 1981—recently translated into Arabic by Fathi Al-Maskini and released in 2020. This book, in particular, offers frameworks for interpretation, analysis, and critique that, in my view, are highly relevant to the various fields in the humanities and the aesthetics of hermeneutics and understanding.⁹

The transition between Foucault, Habermas, and finally Michel de Certeau—particularly in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Mohammed Shawqi Al-Zein—opens significant avenues for comparative analysis across various discourses compared

⁷ In 1954, Pierre Guiraud proposed a scale through which the degree of deviation could be measured. He reached the conclusion that unusually frequent words in the work of a certain writer (*key words*) can be enumerated based on an assessment of the objective frequency patterns used among other contemporary writers. The difficulty in this standardized attempt is clearly obvious, because expression in every writer's style takes a special direction of which s/he may not be aware of. Riffaterre, M. (1993). *Ma'āyir taḥlīl al-ustūb* [Essais de Stylistique Structurale] (H. Lahmidani, Trans., p. 36+). Manshūrāt Dirāsāt Sāl, 1st ed.

⁸ Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.

⁹ For more, see: Sa'd Allāh, M. S. (2013). *Madkhal ilā nazāriyyat al-naqd al-ma'rīfī al-mu'āṣir* [Introduction to the theory of contemporary epistemic criticism]. 'Ālam al-Kutub al-Ḥadīth.



with relying on the technicalities of a specific methodology as many tend to do. In relation to exile and colonialism—for example, one encounters the concept of polemology (*la polémologie*) which was originally coined by the French sociologist Gaston Bouthoul (1896–1980) in 1942. *Polemology* is strongly present in a dual structure comprising conflict and discourse (**a discourse on conflict**), a concept investigated by de Certeau among others. This can be set in contradistinction to irenology (*Irénologie*), or peace studies, a concept introduced by the Norwegian political scientist Johan Galtung (b. 1930) in addition to many others.¹⁰ This concept, among many others, can be meaningfully employed to crystallize alternative theoretical foundations for comparative epistemic literary analysis.

Third – Aesthetic Perception in its Full Epistemic Context:

In **aesthetics**,¹¹ conventional theories that do not begin by raising the question “**what is the aesthetic experience**” emerged to look at the signification of the term “aesthetic” in the given qualities and the characteristics possessed by some objects through which they become beautiful in contrast to some other objects that lack this denotation. These theories, consequently, undertake the task of rigorously delineating these characteristics accurately and exactly. When they identify these marked characteristics, these theories become responsible for the constitution of the aesthetic field in the aesthetic cognitive experience.¹²

Stolnitz argues that the abovementioned both restricts and limits the interpretation of the value of art and beauty by its relatively divisive characteristics. This is because there is a vast diversity of artistic works and a multitude of existents that vary in shape and type. Central to defining the whatness of the aesthetic, the property of **harmony**, as an example, has yielded distinctive interpretations by thinkers across the years. In general, harmony characterizes artistic works that people within a given historical epoch or civilization find them to be evocative of wonder. Despite this, this property is presented as the commonality that brings all aesthetic subjects together, leading to the exclusion of any object that lacks this property from the aesthetic field. One, hence, evidently encounters objects that have perceptual value, but they lack the properties of what used to define the aesthetic. As a consequence, one can conclude that the original interpretation of the **aesthetic value** was more limited and narrower that it should have been.¹³

¹⁰ Mukendji Mbandakulu, M. F. (2017). *Polémologie et irénologie: Une question philosophique des relations humaines et internationales* (1st ed., pp. 12–14). L'Harmattan.

¹¹ The term “aesthetics” was first coined by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762), who was a disciple of the renowned German scholar and philosopher Leibniz, when he published his book *Aesthetica* in 1750

¹² Stolnitz, J. (2007). *Aesthetics and philosophy of art criticism: A Critical introduction* [al-Naqd al-Fanni, dirasah jama‘aliyyah] (F. Zekria, Trans.; 1st ed., p. 49). Dar al-Wafā’ for Printing and Publishing.

¹³ *Aesthetics and philosophy of art*, p. 50.



From this standpoint, Stolnitz asserts that the **aesthetic** is the perception of a given subject or object purely for the experience of perceiving it only, allowing objects whichever humans have found worthy of contemplation to be admitted within the domain of aesthetic study. These subjects/objects encompass art of various types, epochs, and styles besides the wide array of subjects/objects and natural scenery. Art, for Stolnitz and his followers, exists for the sole purpose of pleasure, because its value inheres in it and it does not generally serve any religious, moral, or social objectives¹⁴.

The most recognized articulation of the above is the flourishing of “Art for Art’s Sake” movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. The existence of this movement underlined **pure aesthetic perception** to art as the only way to approach it.¹⁵

Contending with one particular type of human experience must accurately correspond to the realities of this experience and precisely describe the way we perceive literature, music, photography, painting among others. This, in turn, aid the activity of interpreting the **value of the experience**.

Aesthetic perception can be interpreted through the **aesthetic attitude**¹⁶. In reality, the stance one takes determines how one perceives the world. This attitude itself functions as a way of directing or regulating our perception; we can never see or hear everything in our environment without discrimination. Rather, we focus on somethings while apprehending others in our environment vaguely or hardly at all. **Perception** is, hence, **selective**—it picks up certain characteristics from the surrounding environment, disregarding other ones. Once this is established, the outdated view that humans are merely passive recipients of external stimuli becomes clear. As a matter of fact, our purposes at the moment of perception shape what we opt to apprehend, since our actions are actually goal-oriented. In pursuit of these goals, an organism carefully observes its environment to recognize what may facilitate or hinder the intended outcome. Accordingly, when individuals maintain varying purposes, they apprehend the world in different ways—what one individual emphasizes, another totally overlooks. For example, a forest ranger, responsible for monitoring its premises, notices subtle signs and landmarks that an aimless wandered would most likely miss. Underlying all of this, language guides the brain automatically in all its stages from interpretation, perception, understanding to reception.

¹⁴ Stolnitz. (2007). Ibid. P 30.

¹⁵ *Aesthetics and philosophy of art*, p. 32. For more details, see Teama, A. (2021). *Antrübūlūjiyā al-thaqāfah, al-insān-al-'irfān-al-lisān* [cultural Anthropology: Man, Cognition, and Linguistics]. Dār al-Nābigha, chap. 1. Pp 33-48.

¹⁶ Adorno, T. W. (1967). *Prisms* (S. Weber, Trans.). MIT Press.



The attitude adopted by individuals directs attention to goal-oriented purposes, giving patterns to behavior that prime it to certain responses. This attitude prepares individuals to respond to what is being perceived, as the mind eliminates any types of distraction or stimuli that divert perception from its fundamental function related to the immediate purpose in the domain of human experience. This process is a significant aesthetic foundation among hundreds of other factors, making up the **system of human cognition**—both at the level of the mind and within the social sphere.¹⁷ The aesthetic dimensions of everyone's culture, each community's culture, and each society's culture are ultimately constituted by the aforementioned dynamic.

The issue lies in the fact that the **aesthetic attitude** is not typically the one people adopt in life; few possess such an attitude. The vast majority are mentally aligned with what is termed the **practical perception** attitude. In short, everything an ordinary, sane person does in real life involves reading the *labels* on surrounding objects to understand how to act toward them, without concern for anything else. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the world around us, we hardly see the things themselves. Stolnitz, hence, asserts that **sensory perception** (the initial stage in the cognitive system) is often **practical**, except in some instances where attention is directed toward certain things merely for enjoyment (hearing, touching, or seeing). This is the **aesthetic attitude** in perception,¹⁸ which is associated with culture in its broader sense. This unique aesthetic attitude can even occur during moments of practical perception—within the fleeting glances we occasionally cast toward our surroundings as an escape from the monotony of things and the tedium of tasks. Take, for example, driving your car on a wide, spacious road at just 50 km/h to calmly contemplate the natural scenery around you. The **aesthetic attitude is a profoundly philosophical and cultural disposition**¹⁹.

Fourth – “The Grotesque” and the Relativity of Aesthetic Perception:

There is near consensus regarding the **dictionary meaning** of the term (**grotesque**). For example, in *Mawrid Dictionary* the **entry for grotesque** is defined as an ornamental art characterized by strange, or imaginary, human and animal forms—usually harmonized with designs resembling plant leaves—and it refers to something bizarre in a hideous or comical manner. It is fantastically strange, repulsive in a hideously discordant way, marked by an allusion to ugliness, and contrary to everything natural, expected, or typical. The term is derived from the word “grotto,” meaning cave, cavern, or a natural or artificial grotto. In its **Italian origins**, the word goes back to the **mural paintings** uncovered by archaeological excavations

¹⁷ For more details, Teama, A. (2019). *Al-Binā` al-dhihnī li-al-mafāhīm: Baḥṭh fī takāmul` ulūm al-lisān wa-ālīyāt al-`irfān* [The Mental Structure of Concepts: A Study in the Complementarity of Linguistics and the Mechanisms of Cognition]. Dar Konoz al-Marefa, chap. 2.

¹⁸ For more details and discussions, see *Aesthetics and philosophy*, p. 54+.

¹⁹ Stolnitz, J. (2007). *Aesthetics and philosophy of art criticism*. Ibid. Pp 32-33.



in Rome around the year 1500 AD. As for the **ugliness** associated with the translation of the word, linguistically it comes from the Italian term that means “caves”.²⁰

The grotesque transcends the realm of individual human existence and primitive condition, because relationships between societies—even ancient ones—begin once mutual understanding and respect are established among them. In the broader cultural framework, the grotesque has evolved from a mere formal concept into a concept of culture and acquaintance among communities; those images that once functioned as talismans, as well as those strange letters and schematic drawings, are no longer in a **ritualistic state** but rather represent a **cultural cognitive state**.

In stating that the concept of the (grotesque) carries an **aesthetic dimension**, it is governed by logic—and perhaps its essence is determined by a duality of **logic and emotion**. It is a condition that is situated within a **hermeneutic framework** and the elicitation of visions to assess what **human thought** has achieved across all its creative forms. This thought manifests itself in poetry, in prose, and in theater—through both text and performance. Theatrical presentation itself expresses an **embodied state** that forces the audience to grapple with the (grotesque) in a profound attempt to grasp it, as it explodes with aesthetic potentialities, rendering both the text and the theatrical performance in a dialectical state that requires the mind’s mechanisms to be engaged for understanding and interpretation.²¹

Critics have noted that Bakhtin may have retreated into the realm of ridicule and mockery when he discusses the (grotesque) in terms of form and appearance. The French critic Michel Corvin explains this issue in his commentary on Bakhtin’s grotesque: “...Throughout history, it has been tied to the carnival—that fleeting moment when the people temporarily free themselves from authority, shedding societal constraints and pressures...”.²² However, here the grotesque is a temporary state that follows the end of this carnival farce, and it is not to be taken seriously. He clarifies that the carnival is not much different from **festive ritual**; both are

²⁰ The grotesque was famous in Italian murals, known as the art of embodying the deformed; its traces have been found on the walls of caves and grottoes, and it was characterized by **marvelous qualities**—**through** its depiction of animals with botanical forms and human faces portrayed in a way that does not conform to reality. For more details, please refer to the important book: Ovid. (1997). *Metamorphoses* (T. ‘Ukāsha², Trans.). Egyptian General Book Organization. (4th ed.).

²¹ Teama, A. (2022). “Al-Taṣawwūrāt al-jamālīyah wa-thaqāfat talaqqī al-funūn: Dirāsah fī ‘abqariyat al-fikr al-insānī” [Aesthetic conceptions and the culture of art reception: A study in the genius of human thought]. *Fikr al-Thaqāfiyah*, (33), p. 60.

²² Jabbārī, Ş. al-D. (2010). *Balāghat al-gurūṭīsq* [The rhetoric of the grotesque]. Dār al-Nāyā li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr.

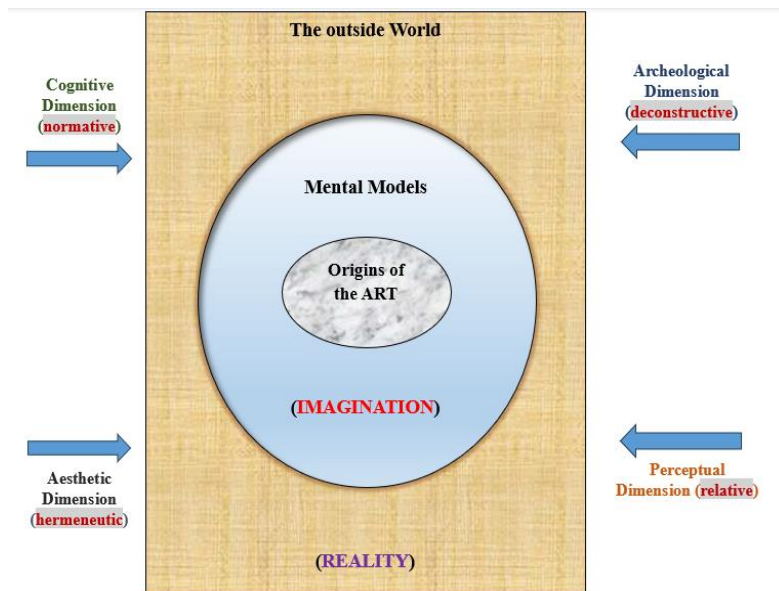


stereotypical conditions, whether they are sacred or merely intended for amusement and entertainment.²³

In his famed voluminous dictionary *Tahdhīb al-Lugha*, Abū Manṣūr al-Azharī explored the concept of **ugliness**, defining it as the opposite and antithesis of beauty. In contemporary epistemic criticism, the concept of **aesthetic ugliness** strikes a similar vein by emphasizing that the ugly is capable of becoming beautiful through artistic treatment that dives into it and unleashes energies for contemplating it (perception reshaping). It is important to apprehend that our ugliness, regardless of what it is, conceals some beauty, as aestheticians believe. Language, in addition, controls the mosaic of understanding and aesthetic hermeneutics, possessing the ability to change any aesthetic attitude with ease—across all levels: visual, auditory, and within the broader sphere of sensing, feeling, and sentiment, in all their tributaries and outcomes.

The concept of the grotesque has been incorporated into aesthetic classifications, harboring a philosophical dimension; it sets in juxtaposition to traditional culture, becoming an articulation of the intended correlation between opposing or contradictory objects.²⁴

Fifth – Framework of “Aesthetic Perception”:



²³ See for more details on the cultural anthropological analysis of similar issues: Louis Wesseleng’s analysis of the novel “*Between the Acts*” by Virginia Woolf, in chapter four of Teama’s *Antrūbūlūjiyā al-thaqāfah*. Pp 261-283.

²⁴ Compare this with the case of **avant-garde modernist writings**, such as the Da Da movement and Cubism in art as seen in Picasso, etc. For additional details on this, see chapter one of Teama’s *Antrūbūlūjiyā al-thaqāfah*. Pp 55-73.



Aesthetic perception is shaped by a number of important factors, as illustrated in the figure and as we analyzed in detail in the previous sections of the study. Archaeology acts as a deconstructive factor of the external world (reality as it is), transforming the components of the world into parts that the mind can deal with (the world of imagination). These parts are transformed into new components, which are re-crystallized to become part of the mental models under the control of human Cognition. While perception is relative and partial, Cognition is comprehensive, holistic, and normative, controlling the aesthetic interpretation of everything that comes to our mind.

Through this complicated mission of the mind, any artistic source that we want the mind to accept or analyze through the process of perception cannot be interpreted outside the circle of archaeological deconstruction, passing through the relativity of perception (as we mentioned in the grotesque model), then through the explanation of elements by a cognitive analysis and classification²⁵, that is subject to the standards of experience and criticism, which are derived from the cultural environment and controlled by language and the mental lexical reservoir.

As for the physical aspect that the brain performs in order to establish the acceptability or refusal of the artistic element, this is a matter that requires expanding the study at the level of neuro-analysis in order to clarify the neural semantic networks responsible for Aesthetic deconstruction and interpretation. We believe that There must be a tangible tissue centers within the brain that deals with this process. But we suppose that the spiritual, non-material aspect has the greatest share of this grand process— the process of aesthetically rebuilding the world and creating parallel mental universes that control the human sense, gusto susceptibility to many of the subjects, knowledge, and arts we receive over times.

Findings and Recommendations

- Aesthetic perception is an important means of understanding what might be termed the neuroaesthetic taste of art at the material level.
- Aesthetic inquiry demonstrates that everything ugly is capable of becoming beautiful in the mental experience of reception.
- Within the overall epistemic framework, every construct that comprises a set of knowledge, methods, and hypotheses specific to a given historical phase is also an outcome of that phase.

²⁵ For more elaborations see: Tudor Balinisteanu, Kerry Priest (Eds) (2024). *Neuroaesthetics, A Methods-Based Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan. Pp 156-158.



- The structures of texts within various discourses carry a **structural aesthetic code** that can be deciphered and understood by deconstructing the mechanisms of reception.
- **The aesthetic** is the perception of a given object purely for the sake of its perception, so that the artistic experience can be analyzed impartially.
- The aesthetic attitude is, par excellence, a philosophical and cultural position.
- In subsequent studies, we hope to expand our analysis to examine the neuroaesthetics closely ties to human perceptions of the acceptability of instantiations of existence.

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