Ergo AN OPEN ACCESS JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

Aesthetic Communication

JEREMY PAGE
The Queen's College, University of Oxford

Can testimony provide reasons to believe some proposition about an artwork's aesthetic character? Can testimony bring an agent into a position where they can issue an aesthetic judgement about that artwork? What is the epistemic value of aesthetic communication? These questions have received sustained philosophical attention. More fundamental questions about aesthetic communication have meanwhile been neglected. These latter questions concern the nature of aesthetic communication, the criteria that determine when aesthetic communication is successful, and the frequency of communicative success in aesthetic communication. The neglect of these questions is a serious oversight, not least because they bear directly on each of the other questions listed. This paper's focus is the more fundamental set of questions. I argue for a restricted form of communicative pessimism. Discerning aesthetic communication about an artwork typically fails unless its recipient is both acquainted with that artwork and able to coordinate with the speaker on an aesthetic understanding of it. I arrive at this conclusion by challenging the standard conception of the nature of aesthetic communication that the literature presupposes, as well as an accompanying criterion of communicative success. I introduce an alternative view. In closing I relate my discussion to the former set of questions.

Introduction

There are many questions relating to aesthetic communication that are of philosophical interest. One set of questions concerns what aesthetic communication can transmit. The two main questions here are as follows:

> **The testimonial question:** can aesthetic testimony of the form 'O possesses (aesthetic property) *g*' provide reasons to believe that 'O possesses *g*'?

Contact: Jeremy Page <jeremypage1989@gmail.com>

https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.8577

> **The justification question:** can a testimonial assertion regarding O, or a description of its non-aesthetic properties, enable a recipient to grasp the reasons why O possesses *g* and enable the recipient to themselves issue an aesthetic judgement that "O possesses *g*'?

Another related but separate set of questions concerns the central value, or values, of aesthetic communication. Of particular interest is the epistemic value question.

> **The epistemic value question:** what is the epistemic value of aesthetic communication?

In other words: What can we learn through aesthetic communication?

I do not tackle any of these questions directly in this paper. I instead explore a more fundamental set of questions about aesthetic communication. These questions concern what constitutes success in aesthetic communication and how often aesthetic communication is successful. I organize the paper around the latter question. Here is a very rough formulation of it:

> **The question of communicative difficulty:** Is success in aesthetic communication more difficult to achieve than success in standard forms of communication?[1]

Communicative pessimists answer that success in aesthetic communication is more difficult to achieve than success in other, more "standard," forms of communication.[2] They endeavour to explain why this is the case. Communicative optimists deny that aesthetic communication faces any specific difficulties.

I argue that success in one central form of aesthetic communication is very difficult to achieve unless all discussants are acquainted with the artwork and coordinate on an aesthetic understanding of that object (at least to some extent). I label the central form of aesthetic communication that is my focus "discerning aesthetic communication." It targets the distinctive aesthetic character and value of a particular artwork. I label the view I arrive at "restricted communicative

1. This question is addressed by Tanner (2003). Robson (2018) discusses Tanner's pessimism about the frequency of communicative success in the aesthetic domain in some detail. There are classic discussions of the related but separate question of whether communication about the precise nature of determinate non-aesthetic features of objects can be successful in the absence of acquaintance (e.g., Sibley 1965; 1974; see Livingston 2003 for insightful discussion). Isenberg's classic paper "Critical Communication" (1949) is also relevant, as will be explored below. Isenberg's focus is primarily on the justification question, however.

2. "Standard" forms of communication being those that proceed unproblematically, that are routinely successful, and in relation to which there is little motivation to adopt a pessimistic position.

pessimism." Defending it requires defending a particular view of what constitutes communicative success in discerning aesthetic communication.

The question of communicative difficulty bears on each of the questions listed above. If a radical form of communicative pessimism is true, for example, and aesthetic communication is never successful, then this gives us good reason for also being pessimistic in relation to the testimonial question, the justification question and about the epistemic value of aesthetic communication more generally. If, conversely, some form of communicative optimism is true, then this bolsters the case for optimism in relation to each of these questions.

I refer back to the testimonial question and the epistemic value question in the final section of this paper after having achieved some clarity on the question of communicative difficulty and on the nature of aesthetic communication more generally. I do not tackle the justification question in this paper.[3] In relation to the testimonial question, I indicate how restricted communicative pessimism provides support for a restricted form of testimonial pessimism. In relation to the epistemic value question my discussion suggests that the most substantial epistemic values of discerning aesthetic communication are the sharing of aesthetic understanding between speaker and recipient as well as the recipient's gain in aesthetic understanding. This picture is more optimistic about what we can learn through aesthetic communication than Isenberg's standard and seminal account of aesthetic communication (Isenberg 1949: 336; see also Sibley 1965). I tie my discussion back to Isenberg's paper when concluding.

Section one introduces generalized forms of communicative pessimism and optimism and considers possible arguments in their favour. Both of these positions and the arguments offered in their favour are crude because they generalize from what is true about one form of aesthetic communication to conclusions about aesthetic communication more generally. In §2 I motivate the view that discerning aesthetic communication is a central form of aesthetic communication and a worthy object of study. I also begin to motivate the view that it faces significant and idiosyncratic difficulties.

In §3 I then explore a pessimist argument for restricted communicative pessimism that employs what I will call the "standard" criterion of communicative success. In §4 I introduce reasons for being dissatisfied with this argument and with the standard criterion of communicative success. I set out an alternative argument and an alternative criterion of communication success. In §§5–6 I then summarize the fruits of my discussion by mapping my picture of how discerning aesthetic communication proceeds and succeeds onto an actual instance of discerning aesthetic communication and by referring back to the questions stated at the outset.

3. Though see fn. 30 for some remarks on what my discussion suggests about the justification of discerning aesthetic judgements.

1. Generalized Pessimism and Generalized Optimism about Aesthetic Communication

Michael Tanner signals his commitment to an extreme form of communicative pessimism by stating that aesthetic judgements "must be based on first-hand experience of their objects … because one is not capable of understanding the meanings of the terms which designate the properties without the experience" (Tanner 2003: 33). I shall call the view implied by Tanner's statement "generalized communicative pessimism." It is the view that we cannot understand what an interlocutor means when they linguistically express an aesthetic judgement or state an aesthetic belief unless we have experienced the artwork their utterance targets. Tanner's primary focus is on verdictive judgements of aesthetic value (e.g. "*Succession* is a great work of art"). In this paper I wish to bracket all issues having to do with the evaluative nature of (some) aesthetic judgements and focus on utterances, beliefs and judgements that target the aesthetic character of artworks. I will assume throughout that these judgements have substantive descriptive content.[4]

Generalized communicative pessimism applies to all aesthetic communication and not just some specific form of it. It involves a commitment to the acquaintance principle.[5] That is, the principle that aesthetic judgements must be based on first-hand acquaintance[6] with the artwork they target (Wollheim 1980: 234).

One way that generalized communicative pessimism may be defended is through the assertion that there is a tight connection between the meaning of the terms that are employed to designate the aesthetic character of an artwork and the way aesthetic properties show up in our experience of an artwork. Let us call this popular train of thought the "standard view." The following set of background assumptions are associated with standard view and may, at first blush, seem to provide the basis for a defence of Tanner's extreme view. Aesthetic properties are higher-order appearance properties of some kind (Levinson 2007).[7] For an object to have an aesthetic property is for it to appear to us in some particular

4. I will assume throughout that artworks have a stable aesthetic character and that the content of utterances that attribute aesthetic properties to artworks is straightforwardly factive. That is to say, I will ignore the question of whether there might be some sense in which multiple and incompatible ways of describing an artwork's aesthetic character might all be true.

5. Tanner (2003: 33) carefully qualifies the form of acquaintance principle that he takes his remarks to commit him to.

6. I will assume throughout that one can be "acquainted" with an artwork in the relevant sense if one has access to an adequate surrogate for it; a quality reproduction of a painting, for example. It is notoriously difficult to specify what constitutes an adequate surrogate (Livingston 2003), but I bracket that issue here.

7. See also Briesen (2020; n.d.) who sets out a well-developed account of aesthetic properties as dispositional properties of objects.

way when we experience it. The aesthetic property of gracefulness, for example, is associated with a particular "graceful" way of appearing. What "O is graceful" predicates of O is that it has this graceful way of appearing.

This standard background picture of the nature of aesthetic properties and aesthetic property attributions can form the basis of an argument that there is a significant connection between acquaintance and communicative success in the aesthetic domain. I will call this argument the "simple argument."

1. Agents can only understand the meaning of (aesthetic) property-attributing utterances of the form "O is *g*" if they have an adequate conception of what these utterances predicate of O.
2. Agents can only have an adequate conception of what (aesthetic) property-attributing utterances predicate of their objects if they have experienced the "way of appearing" associated with the aesthetic property that is attributed.
3. So, agents who have not experienced the "way of appearing" associated with some (aesthetic) property *g* cannot understand what a property-attributing utterance of the form "O is *g*" means.

Implicit in the simple argument is a simplistic conception of communicative success in aesthetics that is popular and that I will label the "standard" criterion of communicative success. On this view, communication is only successful when an agent is able to successfully match the term used to designate an aesthetic property in an utterance with an (antecedent or occurrent) experience of the way of appearing distinctive of that aesthetic property.

The simple argument does not prove generalized communicative pessimism. The scope of generalized communicative pessimism is general. It covers all utterances in the aesthetic domain. It is the view that agents unacquainted with an *artwork* cannot understand the meaning of utterances attributing an aesthetic property to that artwork. The argument above does not provide support for a claim of this scope. It only provides support for the less controversial claim that agents unacquainted with an *aesthetic property* cannot understand utterances attributing that property to an artwork.[8]

The claim of the simple argument is that if an agent has not been acquainted with an aesthetic property, they will not have an adequate conception of the nature of the property. This in turn means that they will not have the ability to understand utterances attributing the property. This does not support generalized communicative pessimism because agents can be acquainted with an aesthetic property without being acquainted with the artwork that an interlocutor

8. Malcolm Budd (2003) makes a somewhat similar point.

attributes this property to. The argument therefore leaves open the possibility that there are cases where communication can be successful even when a hearer is not acquainted with the artwork an aesthetic property is attributed to.

The simple argument not only fails to support generalized communicative pessimism but also arguably fails to provide any kind of support for any form of communicative pessimism. This is because it fails to identify any reason why aesthetic communication in particular is more difficult and less likely to succeed than other forms of communication. The nub of the argument is that if an agent does not have an adequate conception of an aesthetic property *g*, then that agent will be unable to understand the meaning of utterances attributing *g*. This claim is true generally, however, and not only in the aesthetic domain.[9] It does not signal anything special about communication in the aesthetic domain.

The simple argument implies a commitment to the view that what is special about the aesthetic domain is the close relation between aesthetic properties and the phenomenal character of experiences. This is the basis for premise (2) that acquiring an adequate conception of an aesthetic property requires one to have experienced the way of appearing associated with that property. This observation does not signal anything special about aesthetic communication either, however. Colour properties also bear a close relation to the phenomenal character of experiences, after all.[10] If premise (2) is true in relation to aesthetic properties and aesthetic communication, then it is also true in relation to colour properties and colour communication.[11] Again, nothing special about aesthetic communication has been shown and no reason for accepting communicative pessimism has been given.

Emboldened by the failure of arguments like the simple argument, optimists have argued that the set of standard background assumptions listed above in fact support generalized communicative optimism. Optimists are keen to point out that arguments like that offered above provide us with no reason for doubting (and every reason for accepting) that communicative exchanges involving judgements like "the symphony was graceful" or "the dancer's armography was graceful" will be successful so long as the hearer has an adequate conception of the aesthetic property attributed (i.e. "gracefulness").[12] Some optimists generalize from this claim to generalized communicative optimism, the view that aesthetic communication faces no particular or significant difficulty. This generalizing move is philosophically unsatisfactory because it moves from a truth

9. I assume that this claim is true. Its truth or falsity is immaterial to the point I am making.

10. Primary quality colour theorists may play down the closeness of the relation, but this detail need not distract us here.

11. Jon Robson makes a parallel point (2018: 660)

12. Jon Robson (2018), for example, employs a version of this background picture as the basis for his arguments against generalized communicative pessimism. Robson adopts the position I am here labelling "generalized communicative optimism."

about the ease of mundane and generic aesthetic communication to a claim that all aesthetic communication is easy. Several forms of aesthetic communication are radically different from mundane and generic aesthetic communication. We cannot infer any conclusions about these forms of aesthetic communication from what is true about mundane and generic aesthetic communication. In the next section I identify one kind of aesthetic communication that is radically different from mundane and generic aesthetic communication: "discerning aesthetic communication." I motivate the idea that it is a central and significant form of aesthetic communication and then begin to make the case that it faces particular and significant difficulties.

2. Discerning Aesthetic Communication

Generic aesthetic communication involves the attribution of widely instantiated aesthetic properties to artworks. The generic judgements that "the ballet dancer's performance was graceful" and that "the symphony was graceful" are of this type, for example. Both categorize their objects as having the same widely instantiated aesthetic property, i.e. gracefulness. The forms of aesthetic communication that we cherish—art critical communication and the nuanced conversations we enjoy with our friends, for example—have aspirations that extend beyond the attribution of widely instantiated aesthetic properties. These forms of communication typically target very specific aspects of artworks, in one way or another. I will focus on one such form of aesthetic communication in this paper: "discerning aesthetic communication."

Discerning aesthetic communication involves an attempt to specify the distinctive aesthetic character of an artwork. One way that discerning aesthetic communication proceeds[13] is through the issuing of aesthetic judgements that target aesthetic properties that are idiosyncratic to the artwork in question and indicative of its wider aesthetic character.[14] Let us call these judgements "discerning aesthetic judgements." I will focus on this particular form of discerning aesthetic communication from hereon in. Amateurs and critics sometimes communicate discerning aesthetic judgements in individual statements but more commonly do so in longer-form utterances like conversations or art critical pieces.

13. There may well be other forms of discerning aesthetic communication. If there are, then they will likely encounter problems similar to those that I identify in relation to the communication of discerning aesthetic judgements.

14. As stated above, I focus on judgements of aesthetic character to sidestep separate issues about the evaluative nature of thinly evaluative or "verdictive" judgements. Evaluative aesthetic judgements can also be generic or discerning. I take what I will show to be true about the difficulty of communicating discerning character judgements to also be true about discerning evaluative judgements, though I won't argue for that claim here.

There are good reasons for thinking that discerning aesthetic communication is an important object of study. Chief among these is how it relates to a central epistemic demand in the aesthetic domain.

2.1 An Epistemic Demand in Aesthetics

Artworks of significant aesthetic value place a demand on us to develop sensitivity to and an understanding[15] of their distinctive aesthetic character and value. Let us call this demand the "discernment demand." Discerning aesthetic communication is a significant form of aesthetic communication because engaging in it helps us crystallize, express and share our understanding of the distinctive aesthetic character and value of artworks of significant aesthetic value. It therefore helps us and others meet the discernment demand.

I will assume throughout that the discernment demand does obtain. I will not say anything about the strength of the discernment demand and I concede that the strength of various moral demands is greater. The phenomenology of our encounters with artworks of significant aesthetic value suggests that the discernment demand does obtain. If we sit through a performance of *Hamlet* and merely enjoy it as we would any other play with a tragic ending, then we feel ourselves to have fallen short. The same is true if we rest content with the generic judgement that Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (1648) is balanced, but do not attempt to get clear about its distinctive aesthetic character. It is plausible that the felt inadequacy of these and many other of our encounters with artworks of significant aesthetic value is due to our acknowledgement that we have failed to meet the discernment demand. That is to say, that it is due to our acknowledgement that we have failed to develop sensitivity to and an understanding of the distinctive aesthetic character of these artworks.

15. By "understanding" I mean to pick out an agent's ability to make sense of an artwork and, for example, appreciate how its parts fit together in an organic whole. This form of understanding is different from "understanding why" or "justificatory understanding." I stress this point because the tendency of philosophers discussing aesthetic communication, testimony and the acquaintance principle has been to emphasize the importance of a demand that agents grasp for themselves the reasons why an artwork is, for example, beautiful or graceful (see, for example, Sauchelli 2024.; Hopkins 2011; Hills 2022; Hazlett 2025; cf. Page 2022). This tendency has led to an overestimation of the importance of the justification question. It is unclear why agents would be under some domain-specific pressure to develop justificatory understanding (or "understanding why") in the aesthetic domain, as it is often claimed or assumed that they are. It is perfectly natural, conversely, to posit a domain-specific demand that agents should develop the capacity to make sense of and be sensitive to the distinctive aesthetic character and value of objects of significant aesthetic value. These objects demand our attention in virtue of being aesthetically valuable in the distinctive way that they are, after all, and the primary reason objects of aesthetic value generate is a reason to appreciate them as the individuals that they are.

Meeting the discernment demand is one of the tasks of appreciators but also of art critics. In this vein Stuart Hampshire asserts that critics are "required" to "see the object exactly as it is […] [not] as one of a [general] kind, but [as] individual and unrepeatable" (Hampshire 1979: 165). This involves getting to grips with the artwork's distinctive aesthetic character and value, rather than merely judging it to possess some widely instantiated aesthetic property. Isenberg (1949: 334) similarly points out the "absurdity" of attending to and judging artworks in relation to whether they possess widely instantiated properties or meet antecedently available criteria. The absurdity, that is, "of presuming to judge a work of art, the very excuse for whose existence lies in its difference from everything that has gone before, by its degree of resemblance to something that has gone before" (334).

One communicative task of criticism in particular, and of appreciators more generally, is to communicate about the distinctive aesthetic character and value of artworks of significant aesthetic value. This is not the only task of art criticism, to be sure, but it is a common and central one and it is strange that it has not received more philosophical attention. Art criticism is, in part, a formalized edifice of discerning aesthetic judgements. The demand that art critics succeed in specifying and communicating about the distinctive aesthetic character and value of artworks is also baked into our standards for assessing works of criticism. If a critic rests content with a generic aesthetic judgement, they will be recognized to have fallen short in relation to this task and to have failed a part of their critical mission. They will also fall short if they offer only lazy comparisons or clichés in a way that limits the incisiveness and specificity of their prose to genericity.

As amateurs (i.e. non-critics) we engage in many more generic aesthetic conversations than discerning aesthetic conversations. We regularly discuss whether we liked a movie, for example, for the purpose of seeing whether we share the same general taste as someone else or in order to recommend that they go and see it. We also regularly employ clumsy comparisons between artworks and ascribe widely shared aesthetic properties to artworks for similar reasons. The aesthetic conversations that we cherish and learn the most from, however, are almost always discerning. The rich conversations we have at our book club or in the bar after the movie, for example, are typically discerning (or, at least, have pretensions to be). In these conversations we strive to specify with precision the distinctive aesthetic character of an artwork. For amateurs this process is sometimes successful in achieving this aim and sometimes fails. It can fail for several reasons. It can fail because we fail to capture what is aesthetically distinctive about a work, because we realize that there isn't in actual fact anything notable and aesthetically distinctive to capture, or because in spite of our capturing what is aesthetically distinctive about a work our interlocutor fails to grasp what we are saying in a suitably nuanced manner, for example. Amateur conver-

sations often drift between the discerning and the generic. They sometimes have a confusing mixture of generic and discerning aims. I will focus on discerning aesthetic communication in art criticism from hereon in. This is because art critical communication is a more manageable object of study. Its aims and norms are more regimented and easier to identify and describe than amateur conversations. My choice to focus on art critical communication does not affect the fact that I take what I argue about discerning art critical communication to apply to amateur discerning aesthetic communication also.

Discerning aesthetic communication is a worthy object of study then. In what follows I will analyse the following example of a discerning aesthetic judgement and consider the difficulties involved in understanding it. It is paraphrased from T. J. Clark's account of Nicholas Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (1648) in his book *The Sight of Death* (2006).

> [Statement:] The balance which pervades the painting's aesthetic character is centred in the depiction of the woman on the path. The beckoning lightness of her illuminated figure enables the painting's accommodation of Nature's darkness, as manifested in the snake's devouring of the dead man. (Clark 2006: 217)

Clark's judgement is typical in that it targets a particular kind of property. Let us label the specific property that Clark's judgement targets "snake-balance." Let us label the kind of property that Clark's judgement targets an "idiosyncratic character property." The first step to understanding the nature of discerning aesthetic communication and the difficulties that it faces is understanding the nature of idiosyncratic character properties.

2.2 Idiosyncratic Character Properties

Idiosyncratic character properties are properties that are idiosyncratic to a particular artwork and indicative of that artwork's distinctive aesthetic character. They are finely individuated and are only possessed by a single artwork, in contrast to the widely instantiated properties that generic judgements target. To attribute a property like snake-balance to an artwork may often imply that the painting also possesses a widely instantiated aesthetic property (in this case the property of being aesthetically balanced). The entailment does not go the other way. That an artwork is balanced does not entail that it possesses snake-balance.

Aestheticians have often used the determinable/determinate distinction to mark out something like this distinction (see Sibley 1974). I do not do this for several reasons. One reason is that the determinable/determinate distinc-

tion puts us in mind of a particular relation between two properties, whereas I want to describe the nature of the type of property I have in mind more fully.[16] Another reason is that the relation it marks is relative rather than absolute. To say that a property is a determinate of a determinable is only to state something about its relation to the determinable. The determinate property may still be widely instantiated, relatively coarsely individuated and itself determinable in relation to other properties.

A third reason is that it is not necessarily the case that idiosyncratic character properties are determinates of determinables. Nor is it always helpful to think of them in this way. Clark's statement does happen to use the easily recognizable aesthetic term "balance" and it seems that the property he has in mind is a determinate form of aesthetic balance. However, aesthetic and critical judgements often do not employ any easily recognizable aesthetic term or pick out determinate instantiations of determinable properties (Sibley 1965: 135). Idiosyncratic character properties are distinctive partly because they are idiosyncratic to the artwork that possesses them. They are possessed only by that artwork.

Not all properties that are finely individuated and idiosyncratic are what I am labelling "idiosyncratic character properties," however. The property "having a bottom left corner that bears the unique colour blue1234" is finely individuated and idiosyncratic but not (or not necessarily) indicative of an artwork's wider aesthetic character in the relevant way.

Another feature of idiosyncratic character properties is that they are attributable to the work considered as a whole rather than to a part of it. It is standardly the case that the complex of properties that are responsible for an artwork's idiosyncratic character properties are distributed over its different physical parts and over various other aspects of it. In this way the snake-balance of the Poussin painting is a function of the nature of its parts and its other aspects and the relations between these parts and aspects. The painting's composition is one aspect and so are facts about the shading and the hue of various parts of the painting. So also are facts about how these parts and aspects relate to each other and to the painting's theme. The way the painting establishes and deals with its theme is another aspect, as are the symbols and connotations distributed throughout it, pertinent aspects of its genesis and its place in art history, and so on. This underlying complex of properties and relations bear two significant relations to idiosyncratic character properties.

The first is that of being metaphysically responsible for the artwork bearing the relevant idiosyncratic character property. Frank Sibley famously claims that we lack the descriptive power to specify in language the precise nature of

16. It may be the case that there are absolutely determinate properties (see Johnson 1921) and that idiosyncratic character properties could be cashed out partly in these terms, but I do not pursue that avenue here.

the properties that are responsible for an artwork having the aesthetic character that it has. He calls these properties "merit-responsible" properties (Sibley 1974: 94–98). He explains that it is not simply an object's possession of some "determinable" property (having a curved line, for example) that is responsible for the object having a merit-constitutive property (e.g. for its being graceful), but rather its possession of a line of the specific determinate form of curvature that it has. Language, he thinks, cannot communicate the nature of the determinate form of curvature.[17]

This relation between merit-responsible properties and idiosyncratic character properties is not relevant to our discussion. This relation is of interest to Sibley because he is primarily interested in the justification question. The question of whether agents can be justified in judging that a work has a merit-constituting property (e.g. gracefulness) solely on the basis of a description of its merit-responsible properties (i.e. without having been acquainted with the artwork). In the cases Sibley discusses he deals with examples of merit-constituting properties that are coarsely individuated and widely instantiated. Our focus, by contrast, is solely on whether communication about a subset of what Sibley calls "merit-constituting" properties (i.e., idiosyncratic character properties) can ever be successful.

The second significant relation between "merit-responsible" properties and idiosyncratic character properties, and the relation that is of interest to us, is therefore of a different kind altogether. Merit-responsible properties are not only metaphysically responsible for an artwork's possession of its idiosyncratic character properties, they also partly determine the precise nature of its idiosyncratic character properties. This is why they are of interest to us in this paper. Poussin's *Landscape with a Snake* has the particular form of balance it does, for example, because it is a balance between particular parts, aspects and thematic features of the painting. Idiosyncratic character properties are largely a function of the relations between the different parts, aspects and thematic features of an artwork. This is why idiosyncratic character properties are themselves indicative of the painting's wider aesthetic character. The snake-balance of the Poussin painting is a function of how the figures depicted, the shadings used and the theme of the painting relate to each other. In order to understand the property of snake-balance one must have an understanding of these other features of the painting and of how they combine to give the painting the aesthetic character that it has.

The foregoing discussion provides us with a working conception of the idiosyncratic character properties that are the focus of discerning aesthetic judgements. The abstract description I have offered of these properties should not

17. This seems to be his view, at least (Sibley 1965; 1974). Paisley Livingston offers a detailed reading of how Sibley sometimes seems to assert this claim and sometimes seems hesitant about it (Livingston 2003).

estrange us from them. These are the properties that we focus on and spend time discussing because they are central to an artwork's aesthetic character. We aim to get clear about them because doing so is a way of making sense of the artwork as a whole and of its distinctive aesthetic character and value.

The communicative optimist claims that there is no communicative difficulty particular to aesthetic communication. There are good reasons for thinking that there are difficulties attaching to discerning aesthetic communication. I will offer the standard account of these difficulties in the next section and my own account in §4.

Discerning aesthetic communication is a form of nuanced and highly specific communication. Nuanced and highly specific forms of communication in other domains may encounter difficulties that are somewhat similar to those that discerning aesthetic communication does. Things are nonetheless different in the aesthetic domain because the discernment demand means that discerning aesthetic communication is central to the aesthetic domain in a way that it is not to other standard domains.[18]

The arguments I advance in §§3–4 vindicate restricted communicative pessimism. The thesis that discerning aesthetic communication typically fails unless both conversational partners are (or have been) acquainted with the artwork. In §§3–4 I therefore consider whether or not discerning aesthetic communication can be successful when the recipient is not (and has not been) acquainted with the artwork. This focus is somewhat artificial because discerning aesthetic communication typically involves both conversational partners being acquainted with the artwork, for reasons that will become clear. I set out an account of how discerning aesthetic communication proceeds when both conversational partners are acquainted with the artwork in §5.

3. A Second Simple Argument for Communicative Pessimism

The description of idiosyncratic character properties offered above opens the door to another argument for a restricted form of communicative pessimism.

1. Agents can only understand the meaning of (aesthetic) property-attributing utterances of the form "O is *g*" if they have an adequate conception of what these utterances predicate of O.
2. Agents can only have an adequate conception of what (aesthetic) property-attributing utterances predicate of their objects if they have experienced

18. Paisley Livingston (2003: 276) and Jon Robson (2018: 663) briefly note that aesthetic communication might sometimes fail when its focus is on aesthetic properties that are idiosyncratic to an artwork. They downplay, and fail to grasp, the significance of this fact.

the "way of appearing" associated with the aesthetic property that is attributed.

3. Discerning aesthetic utterances attribute idiosyncratic character properties to artworks.
4. Idiosyncratic character properties are only possessed by a single artwork.
5. So, it is only possible to experience the "way of appearing" distinctive of idiosyncratic character properties by experiencing the artwork that a critic's utterance attributes this property to. (from 4)
6. So, an agent cannot have an adequate conception of an idiosyncratic character property without having experienced the artwork it is attributed to. (from 2, 3, 5)
7. So, agents who have not experienced the artwork that possesses an idiosyncratic character property cannot understand discerning aesthetic utterances that attribute that property to that artwork. (from 1, 6)

If we accept that the premises of this second simple argument are true, then it supports a restricted form of communicative pessimism. It shows that communicative exchanges of discerning aesthetic judgements fail unless the recipient has been acquainted with the artwork the judgement targets.

This new argument for a restricted form of communicative pessimism is still relatively simple. I will not analyse it further here. I am more interested in the fact that it pairs naturally with an overly simplistic view of how discerning aesthetic communication typically proceeds (when it is successful) and of what successful discerning communication looks like. These views have become the standard way of thinking about how discerning aesthetic communication proceeds. I am interested in these implicitly adopted views because the widespread acceptance of them distorts our understanding of how discerning aesthetic communication actually proceeds and of what successful discerning aesthetic communication actually looks like.

The standard view understands matters as follows. Discerning aesthetic communication involves the recipient being acquainted with the artwork in question, as is necessary for discerning aesthetic communication to be successful. The communicative exchange then proceeds by the critic giving the recipient a set of instructions for how to direct their perceptual attention to the artwork that enables the recipient to perceive the distinctive property that the critic intends to pick out. An early expression of this "instructivist" view of aesthetic communication was put forward by Arnold Isenberg (1949: 336).

Isenberg asserts that it is common for critics to target a kind of property that is finely individuated and "no idea of which is transmitted to us by his language" (Isenberg 1949: 336). Isenberg believes that language cannot enable the audience to get this property in mind and he therefore insists that discerning communica-

tion must reach its goal of "transmitt[ing]" a "mental content" "from one person to another" by bringing the audience to perceive the property in question instead. Aesthetic communication is conceived as a "communication of the senses" that results in a "sameness of vision" being achieved when it is successful (336). This is why Isenberg thinks that audiences must be acquainted with the artwork in question if communication is to stand any chance of success. The critic's primary (and perhaps sole) communicative task is offering 'directions for perceiving' to their audience so that they can experience the property first-hand (336).

Language is employed to this end by the critic, according to Isenberg. The critic's use of language "narrows down the field of possible visual orientations and guides us in the discrimination of details" (Isenberg 1949: 336). It can also rule out various possibilities. The critic Ludwig Goldscheider focuses attention on a "wavelike contour" in *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586) for example. By using this label to refer to the property Goldscheider "excludes a great many things" (335). If the property we are being trained to see is a "wavelike contour" then it is not "a color, it is not a mass, it is not a straight line" (335). The critic's language alone can do nothing more positive than this in order to specify the nature of the property, however. This is the reason why Isenberg's focus is on the instructive function of the critic's language instead.

The standard view holds that communication is successful when this instructive process brings the audience to experience the property for themselves. The audience will then be able to understand the critic's property-attributing utterance as they will have access to the way of appearing distinctive of the property attributed and thus will have an adequate conception of the property and of what is predicated of the object.[19]

4. An Alternative Approach to Aesthetic Communication

4.1 The Shortcomings of the Standard View

The argument rehearsed in the previous section is valid and there are some good reasons for thinking that its premises are true. The standard view of the nature of discerning aesthetic communication and of communicative success are nonetheless overly simplistic. There are several reasons for thinking this and these reasons motivate the development of an alternative account that captures the complexities of aesthetic communication and communicative success.

The first shortcoming of the standard view is that it reduces the communicative task of the critic to the provision of instructions for how their audi-

19. I talk here of "the standard view" generally and not of Isenberg in particular as it is unclear exactly what conception of communicative success he is working with.

ence should perceive an artwork. Criticism does often provide such instructions. However, the standard view radically underplays and risks completely ignoring the fact that criticism also regularly undertakes the task of specifying the distinctive aesthetic character and value of artworks. Clark, for example, undertakes this task in his statement (and the passages surrounding it) when he describes the idiosyncratic character property of snake-balance. He does not merely assert that the artwork has a given property and instruct readers on how to perceive it. He takes pains to try to characterize the nature of this property in his critical piece. He does this because characterizing the nature of this property is a means of characterizing the aesthetic character and value of the work.

This shortcoming of the standard view is significant because it is often difficult or even impossible to communicate the distinctive and idiosyncratic character of an artwork merely via directing an audience's perceptual attention. Consider the property of snake-balance, for example. The provision of instructions for how one should perceptually attend to the perceptible surface of the painting will not enable one to adequately grasp the distinctive and rich form of balance the painting possesses.[20] Much more is needed in order to do that, along with some conception of how the work's features fit together compositionally and thematically.

Critics will often share their wider interpretation and understanding of the work in order to help their audience get the idiosyncratic character property in mind. The sharing of this wider understanding of the painting is not reducible to an instruction on how the work should be perceived or experienced.[21] The critic shares their aesthetic understanding because their task is to specify and characterize the distinctive aesthetic character of the artwork and communicating their wider understanding of the work and the nature of the idiosyncratic character property is a method of doing this.[22]

20. The kinds of "instructions" Isenberg has in mind may extend beyond literal perceptual instructions. There may well be a way of arguing that Isenberg's account is of a similar "spirit" to that which I will go on to give. I am not primarily concerned with Isenberg exegesis in this paper, so I do not explore this possibility. His discussion of Goldscheider's piece on *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586) suggests that he really does take the direction of something like visual perception to be central, however. I am concerned with how Isenberg has shaped subsequent literature on aesthetic communication and the shortcomings I associate with "the standard view" in this passage are indicative of how his influence has played out.

21. Many commentators, Isenberg amongst them, intend the term 'perception' to apply to something broader than sensory perception in this context. I take the points I make to be true and pertinent even when 'perception' is given a technical meaning, so long as this technical meaning does not transform 'perception' into something radically different from any other form of perception.

22. None of this is to deny that perceptual instructions pertaining to the spatial patterns and patterns of light and shade used in the painting, for example, could prompt an audience to see that the painting possesses the widely instantiated property of being balanced, of course. This property is neither idiosyncratic to the work nor indicative of its distinctive aesthetic character, however.

One reason why proponents of the standard view might underplay these aspects of discerning aesthetic communication, and the critical task of specification, is that they are sceptical about whether the kinds of properties it picks out can be expressed in language at all. Isenberg (1949: 336) and Sibley (1965; 1974) can be read as being in sympathy with this kind of scepticism.[23] If this scepticism were well founded it would vindicate (restricted) communicative pessimism. The fact that critics like Clark attempt to specify the nature of idiosyncratic character properties in language seems to suggest that such specification is possible, however. As does the fact that we as readers take for granted that excellent critical pieces succeed in this aim. The alternative approach that I will put forward defends restricted communicative pessimism not by acquiescing in the sceptical claim rehearsed above, but by instead claiming that though the relevant properties can be specified in language it is nevertheless typically very difficult to understand a critic's specification of them unless we are acquainted with the artwork in question.[24] I offer support for this view throughout the paper, but especially in §5 where I demonstrate that Clark succeeds in specifying the nature of snake-balance and where I explain how we come to understand his statement when we are acquainted with the work.

Another shortcoming of the standard view is that it associates communicative success with a reader undergoing an experience of the way of appearing distinctive of a property and associating this way of appearing with the property-attributing utterance. This underestimates and misrepresents what is required of the reader if they are to understand precisely what the critic intends to communicate in a discerning aesthetic utterance.

To understand the critic's utterance with sufficient nuance the reader must make a careful effort to understand the critic's wider understanding of the work and use this wider understanding in order to adopt the critic's perspective on the work. It is from this vantage point that the critic makes their utterance and it is from this vantage point that it must be understood. Communicative success does not just involve directing one's perceptual attention so that one can experience a way of appearing, then. It involves coordinating with the critic in their

---

The fact that it may be successfully communicated about through the direction of perception is therefore orthogonal to the question of when and how discerning aesthetic communication can be successful.

23. Isenberg asserts, for example, that discerning aesthetic communication targets a kind of property "no idea of which is transmitted to us by [the critic's] language" (1949: 336). The suggestion seems to be that no idea of the property is transmitted to us because it is impossible or, at least, very difficult for language to express the property. As mentioned in fn. 17, it is unclear whether or not Sibley is ultimately in sympathy with the sceptical view (see) Livingston (2003).

24. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me to be more precise on the difference between the two views.

perspective on the work, being sensitive to how they understand the work and from that vantage point attempting to grasp exactly what they are predicating of the work. It is true that this process typically involves (and indeed requires) that the reader be acquainted with the artwork in question. The standard view underestimates what else is required of the reader.

In summary, the alternative approach that I will defend captures the features and complexities of discerning aesthetic communication described above. It departs from the standard view in understanding critics to express idiosyncratic properties in language rather than thinking of their words as simply directions for perceiving such properties or as labels for them. The alternative approach takes the reader to be involved in an active process of attempting to understand a critic's specification of the nature of such properties. This process involves careful attention to the language the critic uses to describe the work, careful attention to the critic's wider understanding of the work, and an experience of the work against the background of these things. Communicative success is not simply a matter of a reader matching a label such as "snake-balance" to the phenomenal character of an experience that the critics words prompts them to undergo. It is, instead, a matter of undertaking difficult interpretative work.

4.2 An Alternative Model of Communicative Success

We can begin to make progress in understanding the way that discerning aesthetic communication proceeds, and the standards that govern whether it has been successful, by adapting Ray Buchanan's account of how communication proceeds, succeeds and fails to the aesthetic case. Communication is successful, on Buchanan's view, when a hearer entertains a proposition that is relevantly similar to the proposition the speaker intended to communicate (Buchanan 2010: 359). To demand that the speaker and hearer entertain exactly the same proposition is to place the bar for communicative success too high. Buchanan offers a more liberal view on which the speaker's utterance is associated with a "restricted proposition-type" and communication is successful when a hearer entertains "some one or more propositions which are of the restricted proposition-type" (Buchanan 2010: 359). In standard cases the nature of the restricted proposition-type that the speaker utters is determined by the language the speaker uses, the relevant conventional meanings, the context in which the utterance is made and the interests governing the communicative exchange. Buchanan acknowledges that it is not uncommon that hearers need to do some work in order to understand an utterance. He focuses on occasions when this happens in casual elliptical conversations, but a similar situation occurs in relation to aesthetic communication.

The work a hearer has to do in casual conversations is that of "fill[ing] in the details" of the speaker's utterance "in some or other suitable way" (359). In standard cases hearers are adept at doing this. Consider the statement 'every beer is in the bucket' uttered at a party, for example. If an audience understood the utterance as meaning that every beer in the world was in the bucket, then communication would have failed. The statement is automatically processed by hearers as having a more restricted scope, however. Hearers intuitively understand that the scope of 'every' is determined by the context in which the statement is uttered and the purpose of the communicative exchange (e.g. to instruct guests on where to look for beer at the party and to provide them with a way of telling when the supply of beer has been exhausted). A variety of ways of cashing the statement out successfully instantiate the relevant proposition-type and constitute communicative success. Audiences can successfully understand the statement in each of the following ways, for example, 'every beer [for the party / for our guests / in the apartment] is in the bucket.'

4.3 The Difficulty of Aesthetic Communication

Recipients of discerning aesthetic communication are in a somewhat similar but markedly more difficult situation when confronted with statements like Clark's. The situation is exacerbated when they have neither seen nor developed an understanding of the artwork in question. There are at least three features of these kinds of communicative exchange that are responsible for its difficulty.

4.3.1 The Interests Governing Communication

The first feature relates to the interests governing communication. Standards of communicative success are relative to the interests governing communication (Fricker 2012: 65). Communication in the beer case is easy because the interests governing communication are relatively easy to satisfy. The opposite is true with discerning aesthetic communication. Discerning aesthetic communication involves an intention to communicate about the distinctive aesthetic character of artworks of significant aesthetic value. A reader's understanding of the meaning of a critic's utterance will only count as successful relative to these interests if it captures something that would be distinctive about the artwork in question. Statements like Clark's are the result of a lot of appreciative and linguistic effort. Clark intends to communicate something very specific and communication is only successful when a reader is able to understand the utterance with a

sufficient degree of nuance. Communication can fail because the reader is not able to understand a critical utterance with a sufficient degree of nuance. Communication can also fail because a reader makes an attempt to understand a critical utterance with a sufficient degree of nuance but in so doing makes a mistake and fails to entertain a proposition that is close enough to what the critic intended to communicate.

The view that the interests governing communication make communicative success difficult in this way is compatible with the common sense view that the reader can unproblematically glean certain things from a critic's utterance, even when discerning communication fails. Unacquainted readers of Clark will be able to have in mind that the painting possesses the widely instantiated aesthetic property of balance, for example. They will also be able to grasp that he believes the painting to have the widely instantiated aesthetic property of balance and form a *de re* belief that "*Landscape with a Snake* is balanced." They will also be able to form the following belief de dicto "*Landscape with a Snake* has the property that goes under the name 'snake-balance.'" They will not be able to have the property "snake-balance" in mind, nor form a *de re* belief that the painting possesses this property, however.

4.3.2 The Creative Use of Language

A second difficulty with discerning aesthetic communication is the way agents engaging in it employ language. In the beer case hearers will have an antecedent grasp of the terms used in the speaker's utterance. The only communicative issue is how to understand the scope of 'every.' The same is not true with aesthetic communication like that which Clark attempts. Familiar terms are used in Clark's statement but they are employed in suggestive, figurative and metaphorical ways. The precise meaning that the terms are intended to convey is thus difficult to grasp. The difficulty for the reader here is exacerbated by the interests governing discerning aesthetic communication mentioned above. That is to say, by the fact that the language is used creatively but to the end of communicating something very precise. The reader must come to understand the critic's utterance with a sufficient level of nuance and precision if communication is to be successful relative to the interests governing it.

4.3.3 The Context of the Critic's Aesthetic Understanding

A third difficulty results from the fact that the critics' statement and their creative use of language is advanced within the context of their broader under-

standing of the artwork in question (and must be understood in this context), as mentioned above. For readers who encounter Clark's statement in isolation from the wider understanding of the painting that he shares, it will typically be very difficult, if not impossible, to understand the statement with the relevant level of precision.

4.3.4 Restricted Communicative Pessimism

Readers who are unacquainted with an artwork and ignorant of a critic's wider aesthetic understanding of it are therefore in a bad position to understand that critic's statements about the artwork. The natural reaction of an agent in this situation will typically be to recognize that what the critic intends to communicate has a level of specificity and precision which they cannot do justice to. This reaction is a tacit acknowledgement that any attempt at discerning aesthetic communication from this position would likely fail (relative to the interests of discerning aesthetic communication).

If an agent in this position nonetheless attempts to grasp what, for example, Clark means on the basis of his statement, then they will immediately be faced with a set of questions that they are not in a suitable epistemic position to answer. How, exactly, are dark and light balanced in the painting? Is it a matter of shade? Does lightness erase or compensate for the darkness? Does the figure's presence allow lightness and darkness to be held in equilibrium? Does the figure draw darkness into an eco-system with lightness in which they can co-exist? What does it mean for the woman to have a "beckoning" lightness? And so on. The agent will not be able to answer questions like these with any confidence and as these questions (and many others) must be answered precisely if we are to understand what Clark means, our attempt to grasp what Clark intends to communicate would likely fail.[25]

The difficulties with discerning aesthetic communication listed above therefore give us strong reason to think that a restricted form of communicative pessimism is true. Discerning aesthetic communication typically fails when recipients are not acquainted with the artwork and do not have an adequate aesthetic understanding of it. This form of restricted communicative pessimism is not general like generalized communicative pessimism; it applies only to one form of aesthetic communication. Neither is it exceptionless like generalized communicative pessimism (and like most defences of the acquaintance

25. Andrew Peet similarly observes that there are cases of low stakes elliptical communication that "run the risk of leaving open interpretations [of their meaning] which are false, or not known [by the speaker] to be true" (Peet 2016: 403). The same is true of art critical statements encountered in isolation.

principle). It is the view that discerning aesthetic communication *typically* fails in the circumstances described. It leaves open the possibility that an agent may successfully speculate about precisely what Clark means to say, for example, and (against the odds) arrive at an understanding that is suitably similar to what Clark meant to say and suitably precise (i.e. arrive at a proposition that instantiates the relevant proposition-type). In that case, discerning aesthetic communication will have succeeded.

5. Successful Discerning Communication

We can better understand the alternative approach sketched in the previous section by more fully setting out its account of how discerning aesthetic communication typically proceeds and how it can be successful. This will allow us to apply it to the questions concerning aesthetic communication that we began with, in §6.

Discerning aesthetic communication typically involves the recipient being acquainted with the artwork. In this vein Aaron Ridley notes that it is "a hallmark of responsible criticism that it more or less explicitly demands that its descriptions be compared with the direct data of acquaintance" (Ridley 1996: 415; see also Isenberg 1949: 336; Mothersill 1961). Restricted communicative pessimism explains why this is a hallmark of responsible criticism. Discerning aesthetic communication requires recipients to be acquainted with the artwork because otherwise it (typically) fails. The alternative approach identifies another feature of discerning aesthetic communication that is fundamental to its chances of success.

The other feature is that discerning aesthetic communication requires the critic to share their wider aesthetic understanding of the work and requires the recipient to adopt the critic's perspective on the work (to some extent, at least). Walking through how these features of discerning aesthetic communication facilitate communicative success will be helpful.

5.1 The Communication of Aesthetic Understanding

Consider how Clark shares his aesthetic understanding and contextualizes his statement about *Landscape with a Snake*. Clark's case is indicative of how this element of critical communication proceeds. Clark frames the painting as a response to a question that he sees it as a pictorial reflection on. The "question *Landscape with a Snake* poses is this, simply: How much of death or terror can nature contain and still be posited as a value—as a world that human beings reach for, steady-

ing themselves" (Clark 2006: 174). The "painting's achievement," Clark asserts elsewhere, is "that actually it manages to establish a plain way out of fear and monstrosity without that coming across as consoling (as religion, or therapy, or even philosophy as normally understood" (Clark 2006: 162).

This framing of the work's theme immediately provides us with some resources for narrowing down the relevant form of balance. It is in part a balance between the lightness and darkness of nature. The painting's mode of presenting the lightness and darkness of nature accommodates both elements. The painting does not attempt to compensate for nature's darkness by offering salvation from it. It does not establish anything like a harmony between these elements either, nor does it treat the tension as simple or binary. Clark offers further clarifications on the way that the painting treats this theme and on how various symbols and figures relate to the theme and to each other in light of the theme.

This allows us as readers to begin making sense of how the painting's composition relates to its theme. The literal light and shade mentioned in the statement embody the themes of light and darkness. Something referred to as a "beckoning lightness" is associated with a woman at the centre of the painting and is playing against the literal and thematic darkness of a snake consuming a corpse in a corner of the painting. With the relevant theme in mind, we can infer that whatever the exact role the beckoning lightness of the woman plays in the painting is, it is not offering some ethereal or Madonna-like compensation for Nature's darkness. We can also infer that the woman's lightness and the darkness of the snake scene are key to the painting's balance. The painting's balance is bound up with lightness and dark, both thematically and in terms of shade and composition.

Clark's communication of his broader aesthetic understanding of the painting enables us to edge towards an understanding of precisely what he predicates of the painting by attributing the property of snake-balance to it. Though Clark's sharing of his wider aesthetic understanding is helpful, it is still the case that we as readers would be limited to a superficial understanding of his judgement if we were not also acquainted with the artwork.[26,27]

---

26. It is an open question precisely how often the sharing of aesthetic understanding alone (i.e. without this sharing being accompanied by acquaintance with the artwork) will enable successful aesthetic communication about idiosyncratic character properties. I assume that this will happen only rarely, but don't provide any argument for this besides my discussion of the example drawn from Clark. It may happen more frequently when the idiosyncratic character property under discussion is possessed by a mediocre and simplistic artwork. If this is the case, then it will not greatly affect the significance of my argument. What we are primarily interested in is the nature and success conditions of discerning aesthetic communication about artworks of significant aesthetic value after all, rather than discerning aesthetic communication about mediocre and simplistic artworks.

27. We sometimes engage in discerning aesthetic conversations where a speaker is telling us about objects they have seen but that are now lost and that we therefore cannot be acquainted with. If these conversations are doomed to failure on my view, then how can I explain why we engage

5.2 Acquaintance and Critical Communication

To illustrate the importance of acquaintance and precisely how it facilitates the success of discerning aesthetic communication consider how being exposed to the painting Clark targets (or the reproduction below, rather) transforms our understanding of his statement.

Nicholas Poussin, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, 1648. Oil on canvas. © *The National Gallery*, London. Permissions granted.

in them? There are several things to say here. Firstly, I do not claim that all such conversations are necessarily doomed to failure. The claim I make is that they typically fail unless the recipient has acquaintance with the object (see previous footnote). If the conversations are very careful, the speaker clear and skilful, and the recipient equipped with relevant background knowledge and attentive, then it is possible that they may succeed. The second thing to say is that given the advent of photography there are relatively few examples where someone living could discuss some object that they had been acquainted with and that we lacked any decent form of proximate or surrogate acquaintance with. Our natural inclination is to reach for such proximal acquaintance when it is available. When we draw on proximal acquaintance in trying to make sense of the words of our interlocutor, it typically helps us to achieve a more nuanced understanding of their statements and makes communicative success a very real possibility. Finally, note that it is perfectly natural for us to aim at discerning aesthetic communication even when we are aware it may well fail. Even if there were no photographical evidence of pre-WW2 Dresden, for example, a grandfather may still seek to specify the precise nature of the city's beauty to their granddaughter in the hope that even if she will not be able to understand precisely what he is saying about its distinctive aesthetic character, she will still be able to grasp some substantial if generic understanding of the city's beauty. Generic understanding is not always trivial. Through careful comparisons with other built environments, with particular cities, and with related architectural styles, for example, the granddaughter may be able to glean a workable if relatively vague grasp of the aesthetic character of the city as it was before its destruction. This is reason enough for attempting to engage in discerning aesthetic communication even when we are aware it may well fail. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me to clarify this point.

With the painting in front of us we are now in a better position to understand the precise nature of Clark's statement. We can understand how the woman serves as a centre of gravity in the painting and that Clark was partly gesturing to this fact. She is hit by a light-source coming from the top left. She gestures to the running man who is the empathetic focus of the painting. Her outstretched arm and his (and the motion of the rowers in the lake behind) draw him towards her and keep him connected to the light. At the same time, the man's gaze is held captive by the dark scene in the bottom left corner where the snake devours the dead man. The running man is suspended between darkness and light and the woman's beckoning to him holds this tension of the painting in balance. It is in these ways that darkness is thematically acknowledged and accommodated without it either being overwhelming or being compensated for. It is in these ways that the painting has the particular thematic and compositional balance that it has.

This characterization of the painting's balance tallies with Clark's statement:

> [Statement:] The balance which pervades the painting's aesthetic character is centred in the depiction of the woman on the path. The beckoning lightness of her illuminated figure enables the painting's accommodation of Nature's darkness, as manifested in the snake's devouring of the dead man. (Clark 2006: 217)

The fact that we have been able to paraphrase, elaborate on and contextualize what he said in a way that is consonant with his words, and his broader understanding, is evidence that we have grasped what he intended to communicate.

Readers who successfully understand Clark's statement and his wider specification of the property of snake-balance in this way, simultaneously have their aesthetic understanding of the painting nuanced in the process. They are then in a position to judge that Clark has succeeded not only in getting us to experience the work as possessing the property of snake-balance but in specifying the nature of this property in his critical piece. This suggests that properties like snake-balance can be expressed in language—contra the scepticism associated with Isenberg and Sibley in §4—even if they cannot typically be understood by readers unless they are acquainted with the artwork in the way described above.

The fact that we have been able to paraphrase, elaborate on and contextualize what Clark said is not only evidence of communicative success. It is part of the process of, and is partly constitutive of, communicative success, on the alternative approach to aesthetic communication that I am advancing.

This is a demanding picture of communicative success, but it is in keeping with the nature and purpose of discerning aesthetic communication. Given the nature of the idiosyncratic character properties that discerning aesthetic communication targets, it is natural to think that an agent would need to have the ability

to coordinate with the critic on an aesthetic understanding of the artwork in order to understand their critical statement. The broader character of a painting—the complex of properties and relations that a critic's aesthetic understanding makes sense of—is what determinates the precise nature of an artwork's idiosyncratic character property (or properties), after all. A reader must be able to share a critic's aesthetic understanding of the broader character of a work, at least to some extent, if they are to successfully get the right idiosyncratic character property in mind. Snake-balance, for example, is a function of the relations between various contrasts and tensions in *Landscape with a Snake*. Grasping what snake-balance is requires grasping the nature of these various contrasts and tensions in the right way.

The capacity to experience the work from the vantage point of the critic's aesthetic understanding is also necessary in order grasp exactly what a critic's figurative uses of language mean (phrases like the "beckoning lightness of her illuminate figure," for example) and what they are intended to indicate about the relevant property. The ability to accurately paraphrase the critic's statement(s) is rightly associated with communicative success because it is a demonstration of the fact that creative uses of language have been successfully and precisely decoded.

On Buchanan's view communicative success in standard (non-aesthetic) cases is a matter of entertaining a proposition that is relevantly similar to what the speaker intended to communicate. The nature of what discerning aesthetic conversations communicate and the fact that the critic's utterances must be understood in the context of their broader understanding of the painting means that more is required of the audience in the aesthetic case. Success in discerning aesthetic communication requires that the reader coordinate with the critic on an aesthetic understanding of the artwork, experience the work as possessing the relevant property and have the capacity to paraphrase the critic's statement(s) accurately and precisely.[28] When the reader has these capacities they will overcome the three difficulties with discerning aesthetic communication listed in §4 and communication will be successful.

28. I have focused on interpretation, utterance understanding and communicative success in relation to discerning aesthetic communication in this paper. I have used Buchanan's view of communicative success in ordinary communication to introduce my position, as it is familiar and intuitive (to many people, at least). I have argued that successfully understanding a speaker's discerning aesthetic utterance is difficult. It requires something that we could reasonably describe as achieving an objectual understanding of the speaker's utterance through interpretation. We could think that this is what we must aim at in discerning aesthetic communication because it is the route to ensuring that we entertain a proposition that is relevantly similar to what the speaker intended to communicate (as Buchanan would assert). An alternative way of understanding matters is remove this final Buchanian step and to think that what discerning aesthetic communication ultimately aims at is an objectual understanding of the speaker's utterance. I am inclined to think that this is a better way of understanding interpretation, utterance understanding and communicative success in relation to discerning aesthetic communication. I am also sympathetic to the view that this is a better way of understanding communication more generally. See Peet (MS) for an ambitious account of interpretation, utterance understanding, and communicative success along these lines.

6. Questions of Aesthetic Communication

6.1 The Testimonial Question

The testimonial question asks whether aesthetic testimony can provide reasons to believe. The pessimistic answer to this question is "unavailability pessimism" (Hopkins 2011). It is the view that testimonial reasons to believe are not provided by aesthetic testimony. It asserts an asymmetry between how testimony functions in the aesthetic domain and how it functions in other standard domains (where testimony does provide reasons to believe).

Unavailability pessimism was at one point considered the "orthodox" position in the debate (Meskin 2004: 72), but has rapidly declined in popularity. This decline can be traced, in part, to theorists switching the focus of their inquiry to testimonial exchanges of generic aesthetic beliefs and judgements. Theorists have seen little reason to deny that generic utterances by expert practitioners—"the flower arrangement is beautiful" or "the architectural design is elegant," for example—can provide testimonial reasons for belief in aesthetics as they do in other domains.

The argument of this paper provides a way of defending a restricted form of unavailability pessimism. Communicative failure blocks any potential provision of testimonial reasons to believe. Restricted communicative pessimism therefore implies a restricted form of testimonial pessimism. Discerning aesthetic communication cannot typically provide testimonial reasons to believe the content of discerning aesthetic judgements because it typically fails. This does not change the fact that generic communication can provide us with testimonial reasons for generic beliefs. Reasons for beliefs about which exhibition or film is worth seeing can be provided, for example, as can beliefs about whether a piece of furniture is elegant or a novel moving, and so on.[29]

There is a sense in which discerning aesthetic communication can also sometimes provide testimonial reasons to believe. Discerning aesthetic communication can sometimes succeed, after all, as demonstrated in the previous section. This removes the communicative barrier to the provision of testimonial reasons.

29. I focus solely on unavailability pessimism about discerning aesthetic communication in this paper. The question unavailability pessimism answers is whether testimonial reasons for belief are available in the aesthetic domain (and when and how they become available). This question is separate from the question of whether, when, and to what extent it is appropriate to make use of the information made available through aesthetic testimony when it is successfully made available (and when aesthetic testimony provides reasons for believing it). This is the question that unusability pessimism answers. Unusability pessimism says that it is (sometimes) inappropriate to make use of aesthetic testimony (in some ways), even when such testimony provides reasons for believing the information it communicates. Unusability pessimists disagree about why using aesthetic testimony is (sometimes) inappropriate and about exactly what uses aesthetic testimony are inappropriate (see, e.g., Hopkins 2011; Riggle 2015; Robson 2015; Ransom 2019; Bräuer 2023).

This only typically happens when communicative exchanges approximate the communicative structure of art criticism, however. Communication succeeds in these cases partly because the recipient is brought into a position where they experience for themselves the property the critic attributes to the artwork. It is true that there is a sense in which testimonial reasons to believe are provided in these cases. However, in these cases the testimonial reasons are always trumped by another form of evidence. This is because the circumstances that their provision depends upon involve the recipient having access to a more direct form of evidence for the aesthetic belief in question. That is, the evidence that their experience of the work as possessing the property constitutes.[30]

In addition to establishing that a restricted form of unavailability pessimism is true, the more striking upshot of our discussion is that the testimonial question is largely irrelevant in relation to discerning aesthetic communication. What discerning aesthetic communication attempts to communicate is not something that can be communicated in a standard testimonial exchange. It requires a particular communicative structure to be in place and significant effort to be made on behalf of the critic and the reader. The chief outcome of this communicative process, when it is successful, is not the provision of testimonial reasons for a belief. It is, rather, what the recipient has learned for themselves about the artwork with the help of the critic. It is the gain in the reader's aesthetic understanding of the artwork and in their capacity to experience it appropriately and with sensitivity to its distinctive aesthetic character and value.

30. In this paper I have focused on fundamental questions about the nature of aesthetic communication, as well as on the testimonial question and the epistemic value question, rather than the justification question. This is partly because it seems to me that aestheticians have been too focused on justification and have ignored other important questions because of this and partly because it would take more space than I have here to answer the justification question effectively. It is also partly because I believe most excellent works of criticism and most rich aesthetic conversations are primarily geared towards specifying the aesthetic character of artworks and sharing and inculcating aesthetic understanding rather than "proving" an aesthetic judgement. Indeed, it seems to me that the paradigmatic form of proof or demonstration is an outcome of the communicative process described in §5 (without being its main aim). Through this process the recipient comes to aesthetically understand the artwork as the critic does and experience the work as having the aesthetic character the critic asserts that it has. If all goes well, the experience of the work that the communicative exchange has brought about provides evidence for the critic's judgement. This process is very far from infallible and there may be many ways of poking holes in critics' claims and modes of understanding and of showing them to be inappropriate to the artwork. It seems to me, nevertheless, that something like this process of sharing aesthetic understanding and sharing experiences of artworks is the fundamental form of "proof" for aesthetic judgements. This line of thought has important links with Sibley's notion of "perceptual proof" (and Isenberg's thoughts on the justification of aesthetic judgements). An interesting line of future research would be to update the notion of perceptual proof in light of the discussion of discerning aesthetic judgement and communication offered in this paper.

6.2 The (Epistemic) Value Question

We can better understand the epistemic value of aesthetic communication in light of this response to the testimonial question. In the foregoing my focus has been on what constitutes successful communication in relation to utterances that involve discerning property attributions. With this end in mind, I have sometimes talked as if the sharing of aesthetic understanding, and the recipient's employment of this aesthetic understanding to inform a sensitive experience of an artwork, was a mere means to the true goal and value of the communicative exchange: the comprehension of the meaning of a property attribution. This is, of course, misleading.

It is misleading partly because there is not a substantive gap between understanding the relevant kind of property attribution and aesthetically understanding the work (as the critic aesthetically understands it). It is also misleading because it is the development and sharing of aesthetic understanding, and the inculcation of the recipient's capacity to experience the work with sensitivity to its distinctive aesthetic character, that is the overriding value of aesthetic communication. We do not seek to aesthetically understand the work and experience its distinctive aesthetic character in the hope that we might understand a critic's property attribution about the work. The opposite is true. We attempt to share highly specific judgements in the hope that the process of doing so will enable us to share a richer aesthetic understanding of artworks and enable us to experience the distinctive aesthetic character of artworks with sensitivity. The epistemic value readers can hope to achieve from this form of communication consists in their gaining aesthetic understanding of an artwork for the first time or in their nuancing their antecedent aesthetic understanding of the work. We also hope that engaging in the communicative process described above will bring us closer together as we coordinate on a shared experience and understanding of works of significant aesthetic value.[31] In this way the value of discerning aesthetic communication is also bound up with the fact that it helps us as individuals and as a community to do what the discernment demand demands of us.

Conclusion

The account of the epistemic value of aesthetic communication that I have outlined is more optimistic than the classic account of Isenberg (1949; see also Sibley 1959; 1965; 1974), as I promised it would be at the outset. Both Isenberg

31. Isenberg (1949: 336) makes a similar claim about the communal value of aesthetic communication. He over-focuses on perception and feeling and underplays the epistemic dimensions of the "communion" aesthetic communication facilitates. Peter Goldie (2008; 2010) and Elisabeth Schellekens (2018) make proposals more in line with my own.

and Sibley hold that there is a point at which linguistic communication gives out and at which the only salient role for the words of critics is to instruct agents on how to direct their (aesthetic-)perceptual attention to the artwork. Both also seem to hold that this point is typically reached very quickly.

Isenberg takes great pains to show that we can learn how to perceive an artwork correctly through critical communication. This in turn enables us to learn about the particular features of the work that the critic helps us to perceive. Isenberg is therefore not completely pessimistic about the epistemic value of aesthetic communication. The particular epistemic value he associates with aesthetic communication is meagre in comparison with the epistemic value I have outlined, however. He envisages aesthetic communication proceeding in something like the way that the standard view does (as set out in §3). We learn about the particular "wavelike contour" of *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586), for example, through the critic directing our perceptual attention to the work in a particular way and through undergoing an experience that has the phenomenal character (or "way of appearing") distinctive of the "wavelike contour" the critic has in mind.

A speculative explanation of why Isenberg stops here and does not say anything more about the epistemic value of aesthetic communication could refer to implicit background assumptions about the nature of the aesthetic that he operates with, or perhaps simply with the example he selects. Isenberg deals with a formal property (the "wavelike contour") and associates the aesthetic apprehension of it with something very similar to a visual perception of it.[32] For a property of this kind that is perceptible in this way, there may well not be anything much that we can learn about it from a critic except how to "see" it, which is to say, how to experience its distinctive phenomenal character. This fact is a result of the example selected, however, and we should not conclude anything more general about the epistemic value of aesthetic communication from it. It is also, perhaps, the result of an implicit commitment to a kind of formalism about the nature of aesthetic properties and the result of a narrow-perceptualist understanding of the nature of aesthetic apprehension. The stranglehold of these doctrines on analytic aesthetics has loosened in recent decades. This loosening brings into relief forms of aesthetic communication that target aspects of the aesthetic character and value of artworks that are neither purely formal nor primarily apprehended or comprehended through something like visual perception. This paper has been an attempt to explore one such form of aesthetic communication.

Discerning aesthetic communication is not merely one form of aesthetic communication amongst others, however. Though I have not argued for it here, I take it to be the most important form of aesthetic communication and the form

32. A visual apprehension that is informed by the critic's instructions of how to direct one's perceptual attention over the relevant formal and figurative aspects of the painting in order to see the wavelike contour.

that philosophers should pay greatest attention to. This is because I advocate the view that for an object to be aesthetically valuable just is for that object to be such as to generate a reason for agents to make sense of and attend to it as the distinctive individual that it is. Discerning aesthetic communication is the central and paradigmatic form of aesthetic communication because it is communication through which we share and help each other to achieve the kind of understanding and attention to objects of aesthetic value that those objects demand from us.

Acknowledgements

For comments on earlier versions of this paper, thanks go to audiences at the Aresmur Seminar at the University of Murcia, the British Society of Aesthetics annual conference 2022, the American Society for Aesthetics Eastern Division conference 2022, the Auburn Aesthetics Forum Spring Workshop 2022, the Higher Seminar in Theoretical Philosophy at Uppsala University and the Higher Seminar in Aesthetics at Uppsala University. I am also very grateful to Erik Carlson, David Davies, Stacie Friend, Arata Hamawaki, Nils-Hennes Stear, Torfinn Huvenes, Paisley Livingston, Irene Martínez Marín, Aaron Meskin, Montaque Reynolds, Elisabeth Schellekens, Maarten Steenhagen, James Shelley, Andreas Stokke, Axel Rudolphi, Folke Tersman, and Nick Wiltsher, for their comments on the paper. Special thanks to Andrew Reisner for his detailed feedback on several versions of the paper.

References

Bräuer, Felix (2023). Aesthetic Testimony and Aesthetic Authenticity. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *63*(3), 395–416. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayac045

Briesen, Jochen (2020). *Ästhetische Urteile Und Ästhetische Eigenschaften ?? Sprachphilosophische Und Metaphysische Überlegungen (Textauszug)*. Klostermann.

Buchanan, Ray (2010). A Puzzle About Meaning and Communication. *Noûs*, *44*(2), 340–371. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2010.00743.x

Budd, Malcolm (2003). The Acquaintance Principle. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *43*(4), 386–392. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/43.4.386

Clark, Timothy J. (2006). *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*. Yale University Press.

Fricker, Elizabeth (2012). I–Stating and Insinuating. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, *86*(1), 61–94. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8349.2012.00208.x

Goldie, Peter (2008). Virtues of Art and Human Well-Being. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, *82*(1), 179–195. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8349.2008.00168.x

Goldie, Peter (2010). Virtues of Art. *Philosophy Compass*, *5*(10), 830–839. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2010.00334.x

Hampshire, Stuart (1979). Logic and Appreciation. In William E. Kennick (ed.), *Art and Philosophy: Readings in Aesthetics*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Hazlett, Allen (2025). Testimony, Understanding, and Art Criticism. In Alex King (ed.), *Art and Philosophy: Essays at the Intersection* (123–140). Oxford University Press.
Hills, A. (2022). Aesthetic Testimony, Understanding and Virtue. *Nous*, *56*(1), 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12344
Hopkins, Robert (2011). How to Be a Pessimist About Aesthetic Testimony. *Journal of Philosophy*, *108*(3), 138–157. https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil201110838
Isenberg, Arnold (1949). Critical Communication. *Philosophical Review*, *58*(4), 330–344. https://doi.org/10.2307/2182081
Johnson, William E. (1921). *Logic: Part I*. Cambridge University Press.
Levinson, Jerrold (2007). What are Aesthetic Properties? In Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics* (336–353). Oxford University Press.
Livingston, Paisley N. (2003). On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *43*(3), 260–278. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/43.3.260
Meskin, Aaron (2004). Aesthetic Testimony: What Can We Learn From Others About Beauty and Art? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *69*(1), 65–91. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2004.tb00384.x
Mothersill, Mary (1961). Critical Reasons. *Philosophical Quarterly*, *11*(42), 74–78. https://doi.org/10.2307/2216682
Page, Jeremy (2022). Aesthetic Understanding. *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics, 59*(1), 48–68. https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.269
Peet, Andrew (2016). Testimony and the Epistemic Uncertainty of Interpretation. *Philosophical Studies*, *173*(2), 395–416. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0498-x
Peet, Andrew (MS). Understanding Utterance Interpretation.
Ransom, Madeleine (2019). Frauds, Posers And Sheep: A Virtue Theoretic Solution To The Acquaintance Debate. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *98*(2), 417–434. https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12467
Ridley, Aaron (1996). The Philosophy of Medium-Grade Art. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *36*(4), 413–423. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/36.4.413
Riggle, Nick (2015). On the Aesthetic Ideal. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *55*(4), 433–447. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayv026
Robson, Jon (2015). Norms of Belief and Norms of Assertion in Aesthetics. *Philosophers' Imprint*, *15*(6).
Robson, Jon (2018). Is Perception the Canonical Route to Aesthetic Judgment? *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *96*(4), 657–668. https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2017.1389964
Sauchelli, A. (2024). Aesthetic Testimony and Aesthetic Concepts. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *61*(1), 59–72.
Schellekens Dammann, Elisabeth (2018). Seeing the Light: Aesthetic Experience and Understanding Pictures. In Jérôme Pelletier and Alberto Voltolini (Eds.), *The Pleasure of Pictures: Pictorial Experience and Aesthetic Appreciation* (21–35). Routledge.
Sibley, Frank (1959). Aesthetic Concepts. *Philosophical Review*, *68*(4), 421–450. https://doi.org/10.2307/2182490
Sibley, Frank (1965). Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic. *Philosophical Review*, *74*(2), 135–159. https://doi.org/10.2307/2183262
Sibley, Frank (1974). Particularity, Art and Evaluation. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, *48*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1093/aristoteliansupp/48.1.1
Tanner, Michael (2003). Ethics and Aesthetics Are –? In José Luis Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner (Eds.), *Art and Morality* (19–36). Routledge.
Wollheim, Richard (1980). *Art and Its Objects* (2nd edn). Cambridge University Press.