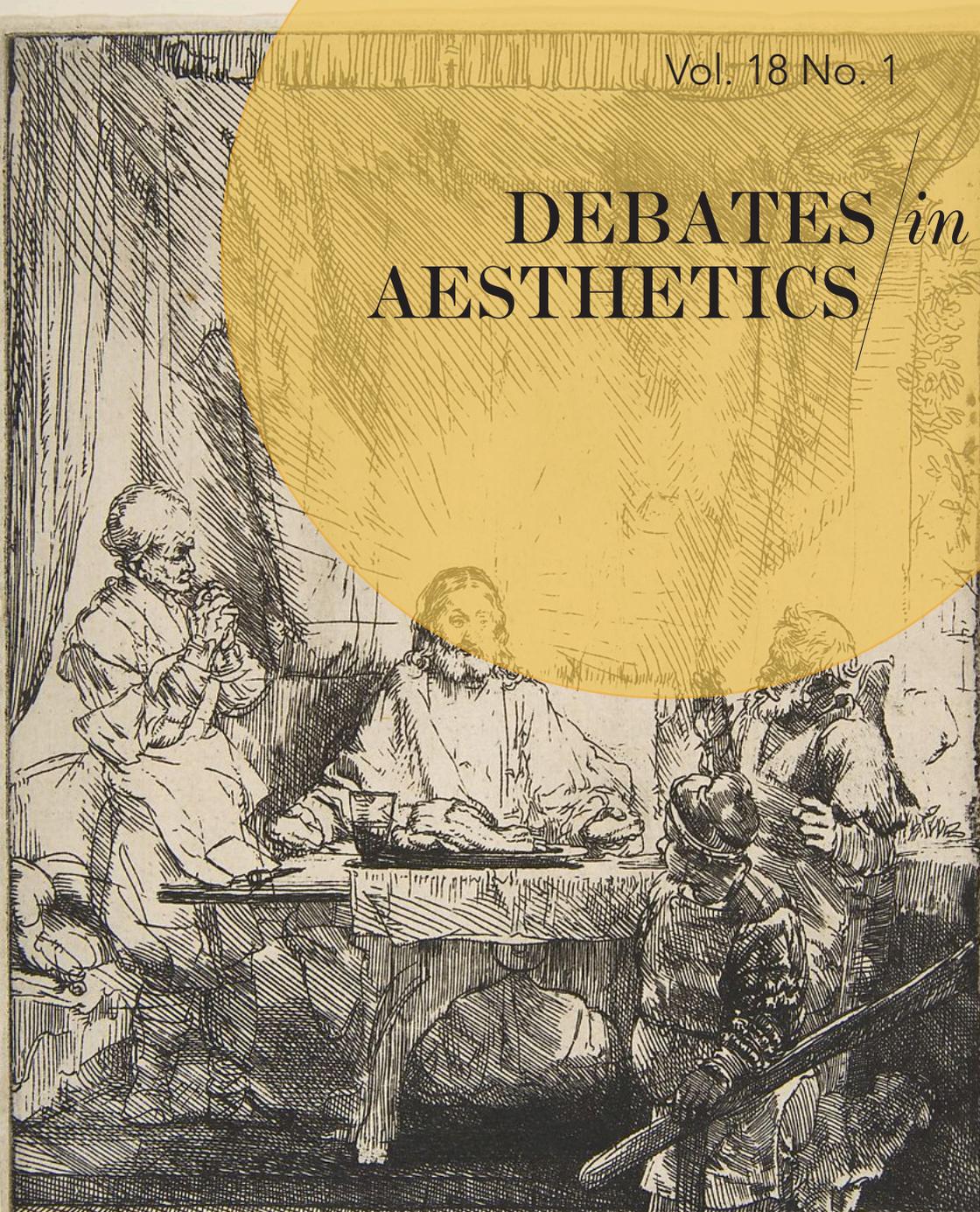


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# DEBATES *in* AESTHETICS



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# INTRODUCTION

Sarah Kiernan and Claire Anscomb

It is our great pleasure to introduce the 2022 general issue of *Debates in Aesthetics* (DiA). In this issue there are three original articles, two of which examine issues related to metaphor as understood by Donald Davidson (Cavazzana) and Conceptual Metaphor Theorists and Gestalt Psychologists (Verstegen), while another examines how appreciative behaviour comes to be associated with different categories of art (Sen). There is also an interview with poet Ralf Webb, where he discusses his debut collection *Rotten Days in Late Summer* and the relationship between authors and readers (Wallbank), and a review of the recently published *Looking Through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media* examining how Emanuel Alloa answers the question “what is an image?” (Charalabidou).

In ‘The Dreamwork of Language’, Alessandro Cavazzana offers a fresh approach to Donald Davidson’s 1978 paper *What Metaphors Mean*. Davidson’s rejection of metaphorical meaning is illuminated, Cavazzana suggests, by placing it within the broader theoretical framework of

Davidson's philosophy of language. He argues that Davidson's proposal that metaphors do not have any special cognitive content distinct from their literal meaning can be better understood by sufficiently considering Davidson's distinction between the semantic and pragmatic aspects of language (2022, 15). The central claim here is that the imaginative visions and associations that are stimulated by metaphors are solely the result or domain of the way in which language is used rather than any inherent meaning of language. This conclusion clearly rests on a particular definition of 'meaning' and, as Cavazzana explains, this definition originates from a linguistic theory in which meaning and truth are intimately connected. This, of course, is truth-conditional semantics - the position that the "conditions under which a sentence would be true is a way of indicating the meaning of that sentence" (2022, 17). This leads Cavazzana to note the influence of Alfred Tarski's theory of truth on Davidson's semantics and explain how Davidson believes that Tarski's equivocation of truth biconditionals with linguistic meaning can be applied to natural languages as well as formal languages if they are modified to include the context of utterance (2022, 19).

Metaphors seem to present the gravest challenge for the application of truth-conditional semantics to natural languages but, according to Cavazzana, Davidson addresses this challenge by appealing to the inclusion of the context of utterance and construing metaphors as the ultimate examples in which this context takes effect. In short, it is the truth *conditions* that give a sentence its meaning (not whether or not those conditions are met), and in the case of metaphors where truth conditions are certainly not met, the obvious falseness of the statement leads the listener to look for some other purpose for its utterance. Thus, the allegorical 'meaning' of metaphors is solely derived from the context in which they are used and metaphors cannot be said to possess any special cognitive content beyond the literal, according to this theory of language. Cavazzana writes that his assessment of Davidson's paper differs from analyses which fail to sufficiently consider Davidson's views

on semantics or align his treatment of metaphors with his wider work on the theory of meaning (2022, 14). Such a treatment shows that Davidson's views are in fact consistent and that his work on metaphors is in no way incongruent with his wider work on semantics.

Sen starts his article by recounting Kendall Walton's famous argument that there are correct categories for artworks and that the correct appreciation of artworks is based on such categories (2022, 32). As Sen outlines, while Walton offered some factors that count towards it being correct to perceive a work in a particular category, such as which category the artist intended or expected the work to be perceived in, none of these seem to provide necessary or sufficient conditions and nor is it clear how categories originate. Acknowledging the difficulties in addressing the membership question (what determines the correct category of a work?) Sen proposes a more fruitful line of enquiry is to focus on the behavioural question: how are the correct appreciative behaviours related to a category established? In doing so, "the correct category as status would be an incidental outcome of the behaviours in question" (2022, 36). To answer the behavioural question, Sen draws on Francesco Guala's characterization of institutions as rules-in-equilibrium. Guala's work explains the aspects of institutions that normatively guide behaviours and incentivize their being followed. To demonstrate that institutions are rules and equilibria, Guala employs the concept of 'correlated equilibrium', which is equilibrium, where no one would be better off by deviating alone, based on external signals observed by those involved.

To explain artwork categorization in these terms, Sen assumes that (1) each critic "has an incentive to categorize an artwork in a way that deepens one's understanding of the work" (2022, 38) and (2) each critic has an incentive to choose the same categorization as others "because working together to criticize a work based on a particular category helps discover meanings and values that one would not notice on their own" (2022, 38). As Sen highlights, while coordination can be easily achieved

with a new work that can be assigned to a salient, socially well-established category, this is not so easy with pioneering works, which call for pioneering ways of appreciation. To describe the origin of a category, Sen proposes two phases: the ‘institutionalizing phase’, where critics “attempt various appreciative behaviours” (2022, 39) and the ‘institutionalized phase’ where a certain “strategy is established as the correct appreciative behaviour for the artwork” (2022, 39). By conceiving of correct categories as institutional outputs, Sen proposes that we can account for the stability of categories in addition to the possibilities and difficulties of critical innovation: when institutions are revised this may have been prompted by unusual appreciative behaviours; appreciators need not rely on linguistic abilities to evaluate a work if they recognize what to do; and while the correct meaning and value of an artwork are relative to its history and community of reception, the correct categories are contingent.

Importantly, with this shift in focus, Sen’s work provides a useful framework for addressing questions about whether the appreciative behaviours related to a particular category are appropriate and even ethical. As history shows us, sometimes the ‘correct’ appreciative behaviours developed towards certain kinds of works are formed on the basis of widespread misunderstandings and biases about particular practices which ultimately fail to deepen understanding of the works. Take the case of a categorization like ‘primitive art’ that became popular in the early 20th century. As time has made clear, not only did the appreciative behaviours associated with this category fail to produce a deeper understanding of the works, but they also manifested and perpetuated unethical attitudes towards those who made and were associated with the cultures where the works originated from. So, by focusing on addressing the behavioural question, rather than the membership question Sen’s account offers a valuable new perspective on how categories originate and develop so that certain appreciative standards take hold. In particular, it helps to make sense of how works, which retain all their features,

may end up being categorized differently over time, as a result of the emergence of a new category.

In his article, Verstegen sets out to re-examine the relationship between theories of metaphor by Conceptual Metaphor Theorists (CMT), like George Lakoff, and Gestalt psychologists, such as Rudolf Arnheim. This is prompted by several CMT having appropriated Gestalt arguments from Arnheim. As Verstegen goes on to explain, this ‘translating’ is not easily sustained. While a Gestalt theory features bidirectionality of topic and vehicle of metaphors, CMT features unidirectionality from target to source. That is because for proponents of CMT, expressive language is based on bodily knowledge, which is formed by lived experience (2022, 46). The conceptual significance of expressions like ‘things are looking up’ is borrowed from some aspect of experience relating to space, time, or movement (2022, 47). Metaphors thus reference conceptual schemas, such as GOOD IS UP, based on experience, which, despite stylistic and semantic differences, they can share (2022, 47-48). Such schemas have been used to translate the work of Gestalt theorists. Lakoff, as Verstegen recounts, re-examined Arnheim’s analysis of Rembrandt’s painting *Christ at Emmaus*, which “in line with the interactive and creative nature of metaphor” kept “the uncertainty of the units of analysis to painting alive” (2022, 53).

Accordingly, in Rembrandt’s painting, for Arnheim the humility of the apostle and the aggrandizement of the servant is directly seen via the phenomenal tension of the two figures within the compositional framework, while for Lakoff, first we need to observe how the scene is structured by and schemas and infer via interpretation which cultural metaphors are being used (2022, 56). Verstegen highlights the lack of fit between these approaches, noting how Lakoff’s results in stock responses that could be prompted by any number of similarly configured compositions. Indeed, as he outlines, for Gestalt theorists, “meaning is embodied by forms in their chosen medium” while for proponents of

CMT, “meaning is embodied in sensorimotor experience” (2022, 54). In relation to visual media, for the former, vision is primary and dominates while the body is secondary, but for the latter, “the sensorimotor experiences passively (through inference) dominate over the visual” (2022, 55). As Versteegen concludes, for Arnheim concepts are perceptual, while for Lakoff, perception is more conceptual.

Versteegen’s article helpfully highlights the tensions between these different approaches and clarifies how, despite the attempts of theorists like Lakoff, the analysis of paintings by Gestalt psychologists like Arnheim cannot easily be accommodated by CMT without loss of appreciation for the metaphorical content as particular to the work, or as interactive and creative. As Versteegen indicates, such appropriations serve to provide further support for Arnheim’s more complex approach and his psychology of art. Nonetheless, from an appreciative perspective we might wonder whether there is some benefit to interpreting certain works through stable cultural metaphors. If, as Arnheim suggested, abstracted qualities from the topic and vehicle “continue to draw life blood from the reality contexts in which they are presented” (quoted in Versteegen 2022, 49) then might it not be the case that, if some reality contexts change over time (particularly if they pertain to cultural phenomena for example), works can take on metaphorical meanings not intended by their creators? If perception is penetrable in the way Arnheim’s account suggests, then viewers may not help but be able to see a work as having metaphorical content that its creator could not have. This might even simply depend on one’s cultural background. Depending upon how much one is sympathetic to actual intentionalism, this may somewhat detract from the attractiveness of Arnheim’s approach. It would thus be fascinating to see how these psychological approaches, or combined aspects of these approaches, work in relation to theories in philosophical aesthetics.

We then have an interview with Ralph Webb, whose collection of poetry

*Rotten Days in Late Summer* (2021) was a Book of the Year for both the Telegraph and the Irish Times, was shortlisted for the Forward Prize, and has received many glowing reviews. In an intimate and honest discussion with Rebecca Wallbank, Ralph Webb talks about what it means to be a writer and we are offered a privileged insight into the poet's personal process. Wallbank's well-considered questions lead Webb to reflect deeply on the relationships between a poem, its writer, and its readers; this stimulates the question of why and how poetry moves people, as well as touching on philosophical questions about authorial intention, ownership, and appropriation. In particular, the concept of poetic appropriation, in which a reader takes on the poet's words as they apply to their own experiences or emotions, is given insightful consideration in this interview and Wallbank remarks upon the surprising degree of interpretive freedom that Webb is happy to allow his readers (2022, 67). She concludes that while a poem or artwork "is not ours to take", the reader may still "bring something of themselves" to their appreciation of it (2022, 68).

Finally, this issue offers a review of Emmanuel Alloa's book *Looking Through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media* by Fotini Charalabidou. Charalabidou concisely and methodically summarises Alloa's insights on the human experience of images before offering some considered critique regarding Alloa's underlying assumptions - though she emphasises that, ultimately, this book makes an impressive and noteworthy contribution to the study of mediality (2022, 77).



# Notes on Contributors

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carries out his research activity at the chairs of Philosophy of Language and Aesthetics at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy). He holds a BA and a MA in History of Art, and a PhD in Philosophy. His doctoral research focused on pictorial metaphors, while his current work concerns the nature of depiction and the relationship between picture perception and imagination. He is working on a manuscript that examines and compares different approaches to the topic of pictorial representation. On these themes, he has published various peer-reviewed journal articles and co-edited the volume *Image/Images: A Debate Between Philosophy and Visual Studies*.

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**FOTINI CHARALABIDOU**

was born in Athens, Greece, in 1993. Her love for art and philosophy lead her to Uppsala, Sweden, where she completed her studies in philosophical aesthetics (2021). In Uppsala, under the supervision of Maarten Steenhagen, she conducted research on the intersection of aesthetics and philosophical psychology. More specifically, she applied phenomenal description to better define the kind of attention that is involved in the rise of aesthetic experiences. Currently, her academic interests have shifted to phenomenally describing psychological and social phenomena, to assist in generating exciting hypotheses both for philosophy and science to test. As she proposes, one of the areas of research that lay fertile ground for this approach opts for a better understanding of implicit bias.

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