



The role of psychological distancing in appreciation of art: Can native versus foreign language context affect responses to abstract and representational paintings?

Elena Stephan^{a,*}, Miriam Faust^{a,b}, Katy Borodkin^c

^a Department of Psychology, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel

^b The Leslie and Susan Gonda (Golschmied) Multidisciplinary Gonda Brain Research Center, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel

^c Department of Communication Disorders, Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Art appreciation
Psychological distance
Bilingualism

ABSTRACT

Our work examines the role of psychological distancing in responses to art. We argued that the context of a foreign (vs native) language may distance the individual away from the pragmatic everyday perception style and enhance appreciation of paintings. We established the distinction between the sets of abstract and representational paintings in terms of perceptual-cognitive features and affective responses (Study 1). Then, we examined the influence of language context on appreciation of paintings. When examined separately, abstract paintings were better appreciated within a foreign (than native) language context (Study 2a), whereas appreciation of representational paintings was not significantly enhanced by a foreign language (Study 2b). The combined analysis of Studies 2a and 2b suggests, however, that distance induced by the foreign language similarly enhances appreciation of abstract and representational art.

1. Introduction

The ability to create and appreciate art is a central tenet of culture. Art can be defined as “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power” (Oxforddictionaries.com). Art appreciation typically refers to cognitive and emotional responses to art (e.g., [Millis, 2001](#)). For example, lay viewers are guided by semantic features, such as content or themes ([Parsons, 1987](#); [Schmidt, McLaughlin, & Leighten, 1989](#)) and heavily rely on their gut response in evaluating artworks: they like what makes them feel good and what elicits positive emotions (e.g., [Augustin & Leder, 2006](#)). The processes involved in art appreciation attract attention of multiple academic fields, ranging from philosophy to empirical aesthetics and neuroscience. Theorizing and research in these fields suggest that contextual factors play a central role in art appreciation (e.g., [Gerger, Leder, & Kremer, 2014](#)). The present work addresses responses to paintings of distinct types (abstract and representational) and points to contextual factors that alter art appreciation.

In particular, we examine how psychological distance implied by the context of art viewing influences art appreciation. According to the theory of psychological distance (Construal Level Theory; [Trope & Liberman, 2010](#); [Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007](#)), contextual

distancing cues that pertain to four dimensions (time, space, social distance or hypotheticality) move an object (e.g., a painting) away from the individual's experience here and now. Such distancing results in more abstract construal of an object: considering a broader interpretation and going beyond the information given, at the expense of narrow focusing on specific details and situational concerns. Extensive research demonstrates that psychological distancing has important implications for evaluation and choice ([Liberman et al., 2007](#)), for example, assessment of creative ideas ([Mueller, Wakslak, & Krishnan, 2014](#)). Thus, we suggested that perception of psychological distance may play an important role in appreciation.

Psychological distance versus proximity may be induced by variety of contextual cues. For example, recent research suggests that context of a foreign versus native language implies a distancing mechanism ([Keysar, Hayakawa, & Gyu An, 2012](#)) that influences preferences. We reasoned that distanced ([Beardsley, 1958](#); [Cupchik, 2002](#)) or “disinterested” ([Kant, 1790/2001](#)) perception of a painting may be achieved by presenting the artworks in the context of a foreign as compared to native language. *We predicted that such psychological distancing may enhance art appreciation.*

We examine this prediction with abstract and representational paintings that may implicate distinct appreciation processes. Note that whereas representational art involves recognizable objects (usually

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: elena.stephan@biu.ac.il (E. Stephan), faustm@mail.biu.ac.il (M. Faust), katyborodkin@tauex.tau.ac.il (K. Borodkin).

something you can see in a real world), the designation “abstract art” ranges from distortions of familiar figures to entire canvases occupied by drips and color fields. Literature suggests that differences exist in appreciation of these distinct categories of artwork (e.g., Moore & West, 2012). It was shown that people without training in the arts typically prefer representational over abstract art (Konecni, 1984; McWhinnie, 1987; Millis, 2001; Tobacyk, Bailey, & Myers, 1979). Moreover, the most abstract paintings (e.g., Pollock) were least liked and the most representational (e.g., Renoir) were most liked (Cameron, 1970; Komar & Melamid, 1997). We reasoned that understanding regularities in responses to these distinct art categories may pave the way for identifying conditions that would alter art appreciation.

Specifically, we suggest that art appreciation may be hindered when everyday pragmatic perception style, typically oriented toward the identification of objects in visual scenes (e.g., Cupchik, Vartanian, Crawley, & Mikulis, 2009; Gerger et al., 2014), extends to evaluate art. It may especially be the case in appreciation of abstract paintings that require interpretation and generation of novel aesthetic meanings, rather than representational paintings that lead to immediate ascription of a familiar meaning. Thus, we reasoned that contextual factors that contribute to psychologically distancing the individual away from everyday pragmatic and goal oriented perception would facilitate art appreciation.

Therefore, we predicted that distancing would contribute to art appreciation and explored whether this effect of distancing may be more profound for abstract compared to representational paintings. To set the stage for our prediction we first refer to the distinction between everyday perception and aesthetic perception styles. Then, we review the literature on the role of psychological distancing in aesthetic perception and, more generally, in generation and assessment of creative ideas. Next, we explore how a foreign versus native language context that signifies psychological distancing can influence art appreciation.

1.1. Everyday perception and aesthetic perception

Everyday perception is highly pragmatic, goal-oriented and entails strong motivational and action tendencies: In order to secure well-being it is necessary that the individual effectively recognizes and adequately reacts to objects in the visual field (e.g., Gerger et al., 2014). Feeling that an *experience makes sense* provides adaptive information about the presence of reliable associations in the environment. When there is a pattern or coherence, the experience of meaning should be high (“feeling of meaning-as-information”; Clore, 1992; Heintzelman & King, 2014). For example, according to the Meaning Maintenance Model (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006) people are motivated to organize their thoughts and experiences into meaningful frameworks, which are their mental representations of expected associations. It has been suggested that the feeling of meaning is not a rarity but rather a potentially default experience, grounded in the world where events and experiences often make sense (King, 2012). Absence of meaning is associated with an unpleasant affective state that entails a sense of purposelessness or boredom (Van Tilburg, Igou, & Sedikides, 2013). Violations of meaning often result in aversive, general arousal state (see Proulx, Heine, & Vohs, 2010 for a review). Such uncanny arousal has been called feeling of absurd (Camus, 1955).

Importantly, earlier work shows that ascription of meaning is reflected in aesthetic preference (e.g., Martindale, Moore, & Anderson, 2005; Moore & West, 2012). Thus, it may be easier for the viewer of representational art to extract meaning (e.g., Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004) in the process of meaning-making that is commonly experienced as enjoyable (e.g., Millis, 2001). However, abstract paintings often pose unique challenges on interpretation, which may result in an adverse emotional response and cognitive disengagement. We reasoned that distancing the individual away from the everyday perception style and into a less pragmatic *aesthetic perception* style may enhance art appreciation in general and, possibly, confer special

benefits for appreciation of abstract art. Aesthetic perception seems to involve attention focused on the object and suppression of or distancing from everyday concerns (Cupchik & Winston, 1996). Relatedly, aesthetic emotions are less concerned with personal needs or goals, specific action tendencies or coping strategies (Hager, Hagemann, Danner, & Schankin, 2012). The aesthetic perception style provides the opportunity for integrating sensory and symbolic information, structure and sign, style and subject matter into a coherent experience without concern for its functional value (Cupchik, 2002). Moreover, adoption of such aesthetic perception style that allows consideration of formal, stylistic and relational properties of the artwork (Cupchik, 1992; Hekkert & Van Wieringen, 1996) may lead to a deeper understanding of the aesthetic meaning (Cupchik, 1983).

1.2. The role of psychological distancing in aesthetic perception

The idea that to appreciate art, *psychological distancing* is required was expressed by many scholars, who described such transcendence of reality as “a state of detachment that can be achieved in which aesthetic qualities can be contemplated” (Schopenhauer, 1969), or “a sense of freedom of concerns” (Beardsley, 1958, 1966). Two *inter-related* consequences of distancing received a more extensive consideration (e.g., Cupchik, 2002). First, distancing produces a response (on a cognitive, emotional or behavioral level) that is less grounded in gut (i.e., embodied) experience. Second, distancing enables more elaboration and re-appraisal of the experience on the new basis, i.e., adoption of a different perspective. Thus, typical responses to art stimuli evoked in the immersed perspective (e.g., negative affect associated with violations of meaning) may be altered in the context of distancing.

Interestingly, our notion that distancing would contribute to appreciation of art is also consistent with findings on generation and assessment of creative ideas more generally. Similar to artistic expression, art appreciation process involves interpretation, requires generation of ideas, and has been described as “resolving the artistic riddle” (Arnheim, 1969) or reconstruction of the percept in a way unique to the individual (Kandel, 2013). These processes closely remind creative generation or divergent thinking tasks (Guilford, 1967, 1986), i.e., *creativity of the art viewer*. Solving a creative problem requires the solver to process multiple and uncertain alternatives as well as unknown means-ends connections to integrate remotely associated cognitive material (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Campbell, 1988). That is, the more remote the elements of new combinations, the more creative the process or solution (Mednick, 1962). Being creative implies the attempt to avoid conventional routes of thinking, avoidance of typical associations (Sassenberg & Moskowitz, 2005). Although creativity as a very complex phenomenon can be multiply determined, the growing body of research on creativity suggests that psychological distancing influences the tendency to draw on familiar vs creative responses. It was shown that an increase in distance enhances creative insight and improves performance on a variety of creativity tasks both in children and adults (e.g., Jia, Hirt, & Karpen, 2009; Liberman, Polack, Hameiri, & Blumenfeld, 2012; Polman & Emich, 2011). Furthermore, research shows that distancing increases creativity assessments of an idea (Mueller et al., 2014). That is, psychological distancing may make a person more comfortable with creative ideas, whereas proximity will make one increasingly comfortable with familiar ideas. In particular, the researchers manipulated the spatial distance and found that individuals in greater distance condition assess the same idea as more creative. Moreover, the distancing manipulation changed the assessment of ideas high in creativity but not the assessment of mundane ideas. Thus, the effects of psychological distance on creativity and its assessment may be informative for understanding regularities in art appreciation. In particular, distancing may move individuals toward consideration of less familiar or typical solutions and identifying their merit.

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