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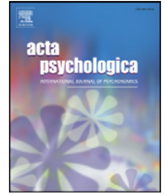

# All is beautiful? Generality vs. specificity of word usage in visual aesthetics

M. Dorothee Augustin [a,*], Johan Wagemans [a], Claus-Christian Carbon [b]

[a] Laboratory of Experimental Psychology, University of Leuven (K.U. Leuven), Tiensestraat 102, box 3711, 3000 Leuven, Belgium
[b] Department of General Psychology and Methodology, University of Bamberg, Markusplatz 3, 96047 Bamberg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

A central problem in the literature on psychological aesthetics is a lack of precision in terminology regarding the description and measurement of aesthetic impressions. The current research project approached the problem of terminology empirically, by studying people's word usage to describe aesthetic impressions. For eight different object classes that are relevant in visual aesthetics, including visual art, landscapes, faces and different design classes, we examined which words people use to describe their aesthetic impressions, and which general conceptual dimensions might underlie similarities and differences between the classes. The results show an interplay between generality and specificity in aesthetic word usage. In line with results by Jacobsen, Buchta, Kohler, and Schroger (2004) *beautiful* and *ugly* seem to be the words with most general relevance, but in addition each object class has its own distinct pattern of relevant terms. Multidimensional scaling and correspondence analysis suggest that the most extreme positions in aesthetic word usage for the classes studied are taken by landscapes and geometric shapes and patterns. This research aims to develop a *language of aesthetics* for the visual modality. Such a common vocabulary should facilitate the development of cross-disciplinary models of aesthetics and create a basis for the construction of standardised aesthetic measures.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Theoretical background

The field of aesthetics is a booming one — not only in traditionally related fields such as art history and philosophy, but also in psychology ("psychological/empirical aesthetics") and the neurosciences ("neuroaesthetics"). This can be witnessed in a significant number of aesthetics-related publications in the past few years (for overviews on different topics see, e.g., Chatterjee, 2011; Faerber, Leder, Gerger, & Carbon, 2010; Graham & Redies, 2010). Experimental psychology also literally started its systematic research actions in the 19th century with fundamental studies on aesthetics (Fechner, 1876), a fact which underlines the significance of aesthetics for psychology as a field (Wagemans, 2011). Despite this well-documented history of aesthetic research, its interdisciplinary relevance and the steadily growing interest in aesthetic phenomena, the scientific framework of psychological aesthetics still seems to be astonishingly ill-defined. On the one hand, there is a growing number of theoretical approaches to aesthetics and the question how aesthetic experiences can be explained (e.g., Berlyne, 1971; Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972; Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004; Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1999; Redies, 2007), but on the other hand, terminology is still rather vague when it comes to describing and assessing aesthetic impressions (Locher, Overbeeke, & Wensveen, 2010).

Let us first have a look at some of the existing definitions for aesthetics or aesthetic phenomena: Baumgarten (2007, originally published in 1750–58), one of the founding fathers of aesthetics as a scientific field (Allesch, 2006), defined *aesthetics* as the science of sensory experience. With respect to the question what makes the mere sensory experience an aesthetic one in our current day understanding, Allesch (2006, p. 8) pointed to "… a certain striking feeling [Betroffenheit] caused by the way in which an … object becomes detached from an everyday context and breaks through the routine of our perceptions and actions" (transl. from German by MDA). This can undoubtedly be the case for experiences of art, but certainly also for other candidate experiences, ranging from impressions of the sublime, e.g., with natural phenomena such as sunsets, to more simple aesthetic impressions of everyday consumer products, such as telephones or tea kettles (e.g., Blijlevens et al., in press; Hekkert, Snelders, & van Wieringen, 2003). The transferability to other domains was also pointed out by Leder et al. (2004), who defined an aesthetic experience as the entirety of cognitive and affective processes involved when examining an artwork, from mere sensory processes to aesthetic judgement and emotion.

For psychologists interested in phenomena of aesthetics, theoretical considerations are doubtlessly of high value, but in order to better understand and especially measure aesthetic experiences he or she

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 16 326143; fax: +32 16 326099.
*E-mail address:* MDorothee.Augustin@ppw.kuleuven.be (M.D. Augustin).

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also needs to know what characterises the aesthetic experience for the viewer. For this purpose, it seems useful to introduce the concept of *aesthetic impressions*. When we speak of aesthetic impressions in the following, we refer to the entirety of affective and cognitive results of an aesthetic experience that are object-related and that can at least theoretically be verbally expressed, i.e. be put into *aesthetic judgements* (see Leder et al., 2004). Object-related means that a general mood state would not be considered an impression, whereas being thrilled by a specific object or the opinion that this object is fascinating would. The idea that aesthetic impressions are verbalisable is a bit more complicated. There are, doubtlessly, a lot of tip-of-the-tongue phenomena in the realm of aesthetics (that is why we put "theoretically" in front of the "verbalisable") and situations where it seems extremely difficult to find what one considers the right expression, but nevertheless it should at least in principle be possible to put the impression into words. This differentiates the concept of aesthetic impressions from physiological symptoms or motor expressions accompanying an emotion and also from *aesthetic emotions* themselves (compare Scherer, 2005). Importantly, an aesthetic experience can comprise a variety of different aesthetic impressions. For example, an artwork like the Mona Lisa might be beautiful, fascinating and disappointing (given its actual size) at the same time.

Apart from the fact that the above-given definitions of aesthetics, aesthetic experiences and aesthetic impressions are only choices from a large body of approaches to the issue (see, e.g., Cupchik, Vartanian, Crawley, & Mikulis, 2009; Markovic, 2010; Scherer, 2005), problems of definition in psychological aesthetics arise especially if one looks for a detailed description and systematization of aesthetic impressions. What different kinds of impressions are there, and how can they be described? The literature on aesthetics seems to be characterised by a great amount of variety in terminology on the one hand and relatively little differentiation on the other hand, which led Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell (2008, p. 306) to speak of an "inflation of the term beauty". For visual art alone the terms used in the literature to describe aesthetic impressions range from *beauty* (Cela-Conde et al., 2004; Kawabata & Zeki, 2004) over *pleasure* or *pleasingness* (Cupchik & Gebotys, 1990; Locher, Krupinski, Mello-Thoms, & Nodine, 2007), *interest* or *interestingness* (Cupchik & Gebotys, 1990) to terms such as *liking* (Belke, Leder, & Augustin, 2006), *preference* (Vartanian & Goel, 2004), or *aesthetic affect* (Ishai, Fairhall, & Pepperell, 2007). In relatively few cases (e.g. Cupchik & Gebotys, 1990; Jacobsen, Schubotz, Hofel, & von Cramon, 2006) do researchers give explicit reasons why they choose certain variables (Faerber et al., 2010), what the definition of specific terms is, or how certain aesthetically relevant terms are linked with each other. What follows is a confusion of terms, an incommensurability of studies due to differences in word usage or in the worst case even a principled irreplicability of some studies due to a lack of clear definition of aesthetic terms.

To have a more systematic terminology with respect to aesthetic impressions, i.e., to know which different impressions are relevant, what characterises them and how they are interrelated, is yet important to empirical psychologists for at least three reasons: First, it generally helps to refine our understanding of aesthetic experiences, which, despite the great advances mentioned earlier, is still in a relatively early state. Second, knowledge of relevant aesthetic terms and the more abstracts concepts they might denote will also provide researchers with practical suggestions as to which verbal scales might be most relevant or best suitable to examine a particular research question. Very closely related to this second aspect is the third one: A careful choice of terminology and, in consequence, of empirical measures, is crucial to formulate hypotheses clearly and to be able to interpret results. This latter aspect was illustrated by a study by Russell and George (1990), who compared judgements on seven different aesthetic scales. They found that the scales differed not only in the amount of inter-subject agreement but also with respect to how sensitive they were to differences in stimulus material. The authors inferred that "…conclusions drawn from studies using aesthetic scales may depend crucially on the particular scale used" (Russell & George, 1990, p. 15) and that even though some scales, like *likeability*, *pleasingness* and *preferability*, are closely related, they cannot be used interchangeably.

But how to determine which terms are relevant? One, more philosophical, way, is to deduct from theoretical considerations and/or available literature. Although an important approach, it is relatively difficult to apply to the realm of psychological aesthetics, given the little degree of differentiation in terminology mentioned earlier. Moreover, the terms that might seem relevant in a theoretical sense do not always have to overlap with what people actually experience or how they might phrase their experience. This can be due to differences in background and approach between scientist and actual viewer, but also to the fact that language is a highly flexible tool that undergoes permanent change. Thus, an alternative approach to theoretical deduction is to ask people for associations with aesthetics or aesthetic impressions. This approach was taken by Jacobsen et al. (2004), who asked a group of 311 German students to write down adjectives that could be used to describe the aesthetics of objects. *Beautiful* (schön) was by far the most frequently produced word, mentioned by 91.6% of persons, followed by *ugly* (hässlich), which was listed by 42.1% of participants. Other frequently mentioned terms were related to aspects such as prettiness, size, form, grace, disgust, colour or attraction, but all their frequencies lay far below those of *beautiful* and *ugly*. The authors concluded that *beautiful–ugly* is the central dimension of aesthetic impressions.

The study by Jacobsen et al. (2004) represents an important first step towards an empirical exploration of the variety of aesthetic impressions. What it yet does not take into account is that the range of possible "objects" of interest in visual aesthetics — let alone other senses — is vast. For the realm of music, results by Istok et al. (2009) showed that people associated a specific range of words with musical aesthetics, which again pointed to a central importance of the concept of beauty, but, for example, not to a *beautiful–ugly* dimension. The notion of specific word usage for specific domains can also be applied within the field of visual aesthetics alone, where the variety of different object classes ranges from natural stimuli such as landscapes (Purcell & Lamb, 1998) or faces (Chatterjee, Thomas, Smith, & Aguirre, 2009; Olson & Marshuetz, 2005; Roye, Hofel, & Jacobsen, 2008) to visual art (Cupchik et al., 2009; Di Dio, Macaluso, & Rizzolatti, 2007; Hekkert & van Wieringen, 1996; Ishai et al., 2007; Kirk, Skov, Hulme, Christensen, & Zeki, 2009; Locher et al., 2007), design objects (Carbon, 2010; Crilly, Moultrie, & Clarkson, 2004) and other artefacts. Apart from being natural versus man-made, these different object classes vary also in other important aspects, such as their functionality, their social relevance and the frequency of encounter with objects of the class. With respect to criteria underlying aesthetic judgements of the object classes paintings, car interiors, office design and cutlery, Stich, Knauper, Eisermann, and Leder (2007) showed that aesthetic judgements for the different object classes could not be ascribed to the same criterion dimensions. If criteria for what is considered as aesthetic differ between objects, it is very likely to assume that this is also the case for the kinds of aesthetic impression such objects may evoke, even more if object classes span a wider range that also includes natural objects (see also Markovic, 2010).

The current study investigated the problem of generality versus specificity in aesthetic terminology. Following up on the general approach by Jacobsen et al. (2004), we explored people's aesthetic word usage for eight different object classes that are relevant to questions of visual aesthetics: visual art, landscapes, faces, geometric shapes and patterns, cars, clothing, interior design and buildings. Could we support the hypothesis of the general importance of beauty, or would we rather find object class specificity? The rationale to choose the object classes mentioned was to first of all have a broad range of categories that included both natural and man-made objects.

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