

The Aesthetics of Emotion

Gerald C. Cupchik builds a bridge between science and the humanities, arguing that interactions between mind and body in everyday life are analogous to relations between subject matter and style in art. According to Emotional Phase Theory, emotional reactions emerge in a “perfect storm” whereby meaningful situations evoke bodily memories that unconsciously shape and unify the experience. Similarly, in Expressionist or Impressionist painting, an evocative visual style can spontaneously colour the experience and interpretation of subject matter. Three basic situational themes encompass complementary pairs of primary emotions; attachment (happiness–sadness), assertion (fear–anger), and absorption (interest–disgust). Action episodes, in which a person adapts to challenges or seeks to realize goals, benefit from energizing bodily responses which focus attention on the situation while providing feedback, in the form of pleasure or pain, regarding success or failure. In high representational paintings, style is transparent, making it easier to fluently identify subject matter.

GERALD C. CUPCHIK is Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto, Scarborough. His research focuses on emotion and aesthetics using quantitative and qualitative methods in a complementary manner in order to analyse how people respond to paintings and the emotional experiences people have while reading literature or watching films. He also works closely with artists to better understand the processes underlying their creative acts.

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The Aesthetics of Emotion

Up the Down Staircase of the Mind–Body

Gerald C. Cupchik



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In memory of my parents
David Cupchik (1897–1986)
Chana Trifskin (1900–1994)
who brought a sense of humour,
imagination, and pragmatic wisdom
from the Old Country.

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Preface

Ithaka

As you set out for Ithaka
 hope the voyage is a long one,
 full of adventure, full of discovery.
 Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
 angry Poseidon – don't be afraid of them:
 you'll never find things like that on your way
 as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
 as long as a rare excitement
 stirs your spirit and your body . . .
 Hope the voyage is a long one.
 May there be many a summer morning when,
 with what pleasure, what joy,
 you come into harbors seen for the first time;
 and may you visit many Egyptian cities
 to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.
 Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
 Arriving there is what you are destined for.
 But do not hurry the journey at all.
 Better if it lasts for years,
 so you are old by the time you reach the island,
 wealthy with all you have gained on the way,
 not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

*From C. P. Cavafy, Collected Poems, translated from the Greek by Edmund Keeley
 and Philip Sherrard, edited by George Savidis (revised edition,
 Princeton University Press, 1992)*

The poem *Ithaka* metaphorically describes my experiences while visiting different islands of scholarship during the writing of this book. These encounters elevated my thoughts and provided an enduring sense of excitement. The voyage was not hurried, having lasted for years and, hopefully, I have gained some knowledge and wisdom en route. The distance between the “two cultures” of science and the humanities (Snow, 1959) has indeed been wide. For C. P. Snow, the gulf between literary intellectuals and physical scientists is founded on “sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding” (p. 4). Researchers, particularly in the laboratory driven hard-sciences, do not have much time to stand back and see underlying themes linking their work to that of others. I have tried to

weave a narrative bridging these sometimes isolated islands of scholarship sustained by the belief that “The clashing point of two subjects, two disciplines, two cultures – of two galaxies, so far as that goes – ought to produce creative chances” (Snow, 1959, p. 17). In a “second look” at the two cultures problem, Snow (1963) suggested that fields such as psychology, social history, and sociology, among many others, might foster a rapprochement.¹ Hopefully, my book will show how individual contributions from scholars in far-removed disciplines can help us better understand the relationship between aesthetics and emotion.

The central question addressed in this book concerns how mind and body interact to shape affects, feelings, and emotions. In psychology, one class of theories treats emotions as “real,” whereas another explains emotions as the by-product of non-emotional processes, usually synthesizing cognitive and autonomic reactions. Viewpoints that treat emotions as “real” focus on *reactions* to meaningful situations. For “natural kinds” theory, emotions such as happiness or sadness are universal and tied to situations that concern themes such as attachment (or loss) and threat (fight or flight). These fundamental processes reach down to the “old brain” and link us to our mammalian ancestors. According to William James’s “peripheralist” position, feedback from visceral and expressive reactions sustains emotional experiences which possess a holistic quality according to Gestalt and organismic psychology. From a psychodynamic perspective, emotional experiences are echoes of meaningful events that took place in our childhoods and are rich in bodily sensations. Phenomenology describes how distortions in the subjective experience of time, space, causality, or connection with others shape the form of emotional experiences. These various nuances fit with the early nineteenth-century idea, espoused by German Romantic philosophers, that struggling with unresolved emotions is a key to developing a unified sense of self and personal identity.

Theories that account for emotions in terms of non-emotional processes are fundamentally motivational. “Core affect” and “conceptual-act” theories separate mind from body, arguing that emotions occur when salient changes in bodily states of pleasure or arousal are attributed to situational causes and labelled in ways that may vary across cultures. “Appraisal” theories focus on pragmatic analyses of situations leading to *actions* that resolve challenges and realize goals.

¹ Charles Fantazzi (2003) has reviewed the debate in the 1960s between C. P. Snow and the literary critic F. R. Leavis which re-enacted a similar, but more civil, one in the late Victorian period between Thomas Henry Huxley, a Darwinian, and Matthew Arnold, the poet and literary critic. Following Arnold, we must learn to reconcile the instrumental knowledge gleaned through scientific studies with a need to understand its implications for living a meaningful life.

These approaches bear all the markings of twentieth-century purposive behaviourism and cognitive psychology. They can be traced back to the eighteenth-century British Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality and nineteenth-century "centralist" (i.e., brain-activity based) principles underlying mental processes.

Rather than focusing on differences between the "natural kinds" and "conceptual-act" perspectives, my preference is to provide an overarching framework within which both can fit. A key concept has to do with the role of *threshold* in shaping experience. Processes associated with the "natural kinds" and related theories emphasize the implicit and bottom-up effects of mental and bodily processes that shape unified emotional experiences *below* the threshold of awareness. Those associated with "conceptual-act" or "appraisal" type theories focus on the explicit, top-down effects of logical processes that foster adaptation. Accordingly, we consciously analyze situations so as to figure out how we feel and how best to respond.

I propose *Emotional Phase Theory* (EPT) which examines interrelations among affects, feelings, and emotions arranged in a hierarchy. At the foundation are highly concrete affects which lie at the interface between bodily states or appetites and mental experiences. Accordingly, states of loneliness are manifested in fantasied resolutions just as hunger may lead to imagined feasts. Feelings are intermediate and serve in two ways; as the *shadow of cognition* for action-oriented theories ("I have a feeling") and as an *awareness of the form* of emotional reactions ("I feel sad"). Emotions are found at the peak as *feelings filled with meaning related to the self in social contexts, real or imagined*. Emotions are therefore *emergent phenomena* that develop from the background of bodily states in evocative situations and are neutralized again with time (at least on the surface) or through efforts at self-regulation.

There is much to be gained by bringing together the "two cultures" of science and the humanities to create a deeper understanding of aesthetics and emotion. People find themselves having to cope with situations and sometimes describe these experiences to friends in a kind of story form. Authors, playwrights, and film makers do not simply relate facts about social episodes but do so in particular ways reflecting unique viewpoints that shape experiences and raise awareness. The same goes for portrait artists like Tony Scherman whose powerful painting of *Poseidon* appears on the cover of this book. While Poseidon may look "angry" at first glance, sadness and other emotions are embedded in the expression of this complex mythological character whose son was killed by Odysseus. Thus, exploring episodes of creation or reception can provide insight into the depth of emotional experiences. On the surface, authors and artists shape feelings of pleasure and excitement that attract and sustain our attention. At a deeper level, they embed layers of meaning in their works which require more interpretive effort on our

part and provide a basis for enduring attachment to works that “speak to us.”

The phrase “emotion in aesthetics” is easily understood because plays or films are supposed to make us emotional. But “aesthetics of emotion” is quite different and implies that understanding aesthetic processes may help us elucidate emotional experiences. This can be accomplished in two ways. First, aesthetic episodes are social occasions bringing together creative individuals and recipients who are separated by time and/or space. Second, an artwork is distinctive because it combines subject matter and style within a unified structure; symbol meets sensation. This defines the difference between everyday and aesthetic experiences. In everyday perception, we search for figures, such as friends or children, and discard the distracting background. But, in aesthetic creation and reception, the figure and background are always related and experienced holistically. For example, an Impressionist painting of haystacks at sunrise uses the background to create an atmosphere that brings unity to the experience. In more emotionally challenging works, discordance between subject matter and style makes it harder for viewers or audiences to pull it all together and demands greater reflection. Aesthetic experiences thus serve as the paradigm case for rich emotional experiences.

$$\frac{\text{PSYCHOLOGY}}{\text{COGNITION}} = \frac{\text{PHILOSOPHY}}{\text{MIND}} = \frac{\text{AESTHETICS}}{\text{SUBJECT MATTER}}$$

$$\frac{\text{EMOTION}}{\text{EMOTION}} = \frac{\text{BODY}}{\text{BODY}} = \frac{\text{STYLE}}{\text{STYLE}}$$

The “aesthetics of emotion” suggests that understanding how paintings work can help integrate the contrasting approaches to emotion theory. This is where the “up the down staircase of the mind–body” image can be helpful. An analogy can be made between the interactions of mind and body in everyday life and relations between subject matter and style in art. The critical shared dimension comprises concrete qualities at the base and abstract concepts at the peak. For emotion theory, this implies bodily sensations, images, and episodic memories at the bottom and articulated verbal meanings at the top. In the case of art, this involves the organized physical-sensory qualities of style at the base and subject matter or narrative at the peak.

There is a parallel between the structure of representational paintings and pragmatic perception in everyday life. Looking at highly representational art is a top-down process that is focused on identifying subject matter. In this case, style is transparent, providing visual cues that facilitate orienting in the visual space so that attention is directed to the subject matter without distraction by the colour or texture of the background. Similarly, everyday perception is pragmatic and top-down because we deliberately search for cues to inform our actions and

discount distracting background input. This “appraisal” process is facilitated by generalized arousal or activation derived from a dedicated structure in the brain, the reticular activating system. A feedback process helps regulate emotional states so that they do not interfere with adaptive action.

Emotionally charged aesthetic experiences are not all that different from powerful everyday emotional experiences. In Expressionist paintings, background style plays an important role creating an expressive context within which the subject matter is experienced. Whether we are watching a play or looking at an emotionally charged painting, the background frames our experience of the work in a bottom-up manner. Similarly, emotional reactions to meaningful situations in everyday life are based on interpretations that are grounded in past experiences and responses that literally give body to the mental experience. Emotional reactions have a bottom-up effect in the sense that episodic memories tied to the limbic system are rich in sensation and automatically feed forward to shape experience. Thus, we have a balance between *mimesis*, a realistic rendering of an identifiable scene, and *physiognomic space* that creates atmosphere which might *resonate* with how we feel in the moment.

A main idea of this book is that we have to be able to shift fluidly between pragmatic *actions* and emotional *reactions* in different situations. While these may be complementary modes of being-in-the-world (*Dasein*), some people are disposed to an action-oriented life style, continually analyzing and appraising situations while having difficulty shifting to a more experiential state of mind. Others may be trapped in unending subjective interpretations of situations that recall earlier life episodes. By reviewing the *action-* and *reaction-oriented* theories in relation to everyday and aesthetic episodes, my goal is to help readers become more mindful of processes that may have become automatic in daily life. In this way, we can move between the two modes of being-in-the-world; *acting* without getting lost in unending accomplishment and *reacting* but not getting trapped in interpretations of events.

This book is organized into two parts. The first uses the current controversy between “natural kinds” and “conceptual-act” theory as a pretext for developing a model of emotion that bridges the different perspectives. Thinking critically about different viewpoints is made easier when we ground psychological theory with concrete lived experiences. It also helps to address the evolution of psychological concepts within scholarly communities at different times in history. More generally, thinking in complementary ways makes it possible to transcend the boundaries between seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints by treating them as variations on common themes. It is also important to think in terms of hierarchies so that interrelations can be explored between

concrete and abstract levels of organization relevant to mind–body relations and aesthetics. I have benefited from discovering complementary models of neural circuitry that encompass emotional experiences and motivated actions. Emotional Phase Theory offers an open-ended account of relations between affects, feelings, and emotions in a socially evolving context.

The second part of the book addresses aesthetics in the contexts of creation and reception, and examines its potential for framing a unified emotion theory. Scholarly background is provided regarding top-down cognitive and bottom-up affective processes that determine the “fluency” and “depth” of aesthetic experiences, respectively. I also apply different kinds of scholarship to elucidate the dynamics underlying aesthetic and emotional processes. For example, the bottom-up structure of fresh literary and visual metaphors is analogous to the ways that bodily responses and unconscious meanings implicitly shape aesthetic and emotional experiences. I interview eight artists and a mixed-media composer about their creative processes in the light of a curator’s ideas about how museums work. Their accounts provide insight into how the *Thinking-eye*, which technically executes an artwork, is balanced by a *Being-I* for whom the project is fundamentally and spontaneously meaningful.

I then segue to proto-artists whom my respondents see as kindred spirits working in a remarkably modern manner more than 30,000 years ago. This provides an occasion to explore the origins of “cave art” as an extension of tool-usage and as a reflection of a changing society in which personal vision (of the “artist”) is matched by the emerging empathic receptivity of a viewing audience. In addition, the notion of *culturally mediated neural plasticity* is introduced to account for the integration of the left and right brain hemispheres through the mediation of the prefrontal cortex. Accordingly, the development of art reflects changes in both the brain and culture which are mutually constitutive.

Finally, I introduce an empirical narrative that surveys studies in visual and literary aesthetics which were conducted in my laboratory or through collaboration with scholars in different parts of the world. On the stimulus side, artworks (and other artefacts) combine sensory and symbolic layers of meaning according to the principle of “unity within diversity.” These works may represent a familiar world (*principle of mimesis*) and also evoke personal or social meanings (*principle of resonance*). On the response side, cognitive (“I think that was a well-done movie”) and affective (“But I didn’t like it”) judgments are shaped in accordance with the *principle of suggestion meets connection*. At a superficial level, *affective covariation* reveals the influence of art and literary works on experiences of pleasure and excitement. At a deeper level, *emotional elaboration* reflects a viewer’s or

reader's efforts to relate the work to personal experiences and this provides a basis for attachment. In essence, the dynamics underlying aesthetic processing parallel those that shape feelings and emotional experiences in daily life.

In supplement to reading the text

A dedicated website has been created at the University of Toronto at Scarborough which tries to accomplish a number of things in innovative ways. First, readers can use their smartphones and other devices to scan QR codes which appear below each image and immediately see the original colour version. Alternatively, they can visit the website and navigate to images by chapter. The web address is www.uts.utoronto.ca/publications/aestheticsofemotion. Second, a series of annotated supplementary lectures have been recorded to provide an overview of and expand upon the main ideas expressed in the book. Apart from the orienting first lecture, the lectures can then be viewed in any order in accordance with personal interest. Third, the research publications cited in Chapter 13 are made available on the website for more detailed examination.

Kinetic writing

The combination of text, illustration, and supplementary web material falls within the framework of "kinetic writing." Kinetic writing is a dynamic style of idea, language, and image composition which is based in the ongoing coordination of several contributing media and persons.² It implies a sculpted work that builds on one's own and others' writings and other art forms; kinetic writing, open until the very last, entails often on-the-spot feedback, ideas, images, emotions, and aesthetics. Accordingly, an author/writer, as if a kinetic artist of three-dimensional objects, orchestrates thoughts, mental and visual pictures, conversations, and writings in ongoing multidimensional dialogue with other scholars and their thoughts, poets and their poems, painters and their paintings – some created just for the treatise. It is a quintessentially active-in-the-world method of scholarship in which writers and artists contribute ideas, images, paintings, and paradigms as the book unfolds. New subject matter appears, new handiwork is created, until the very end of the project. Each chapter entails up to the minute research and engagement with research sometimes far afield. Although original

² The notion of "kinetic writing" was proposed by Dennis Gaffin, Professor of Anthropology at Buffalo State College, in conversation with me on June 7, 2014 and this is his account of the process.

xx *Preface*

work is written by the author, kinetic writing reflects a style of community, collective work responsible to the callings and epistemologies of other people and media. Kinetic writing is particularly suited to the digital age, as the reader/viewer also can interact with words and images on the book's internet site.

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Prologue



Gershon Iskowitz, *Market* (c. 1952–4), coloured ink, gouache, pen and black ink on illustration board, 20.4 × 23.9 in. Collection, National Gallery of Canada, gift of Joey, Toby, and Alan Tanenbaum, Toronto.

Schloime the Horse

Stop complaining Schloime ... after all, you're a horse ... it's your job ... that's why you were put on this earth ... to schlep ... we all schlep ... I know what you're thinking ... "You can schlep ... I need to rest ..." OK, it was a long day ... don't look at me like that ... are you sweating more than me?

"And for what?" you ask. "Why do you keep adding another thing and another thing? We can never sell any of this!"

The road between the villages was rough but the people were kind. We can rest the night. I know where we can stay ... and maybe get a meal ... and pray in the morning before we start out.

It's always the same. The days repeat ... The wagon gets heavier ... Maybe it's time to take all these things out ... "Who will want to buy this, this odd mix of things?" I don't know but let's try.

We picked them up in good faith ... knowing somehow that they were related ... they shared something ... it just felt right.

Maybe, if I unpack the wagon, you'll complain less ...

May 2014 (U)