Mental imagery in the perception of visual art

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A lot has been written about *imagination* and/or make-believe in aesthetics. Much less about *mental imagery*

**Aim:** To argue that *mental imagery* plays a crucial role in engaging with (not only visual) art.

*Mental imagery* plays a constitutive role in perception in general.

Also in perception of visual art.
Plan

1. Aesthetically relevant properties
2. Mental imagery
3. Aesthetically relevant properties represented in mental imagery
4. Mental imagery can cognitive penetration
5. Examples
Attention

- Facepalm!!
Enactivism: nothing 'Dynamic interaction' between perception and action 'Embodied coping' 'Sensorimotor loop'
Paul Klee: Green x above left, 1915, 52.
Watercolor on paper on cardboard, 16/15.4 x 18.7/18.8 cm, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, private loan.
Big picture

Enactivism: nothing' Dynamic interaction' between perception and action' Embodied coping' Sensorimotor loop
Goldfinger!
Goldfinger!
Aesthetically relevant properties

Attending to some properties of the artwork makes an aesthetic difference.
I call these properties ‘aesthetically relevant properties’.

Not the same as aesthetic properties (like beauty, etc).

This is what critics are supposed to talk about.
This is also a better tool for describing some contemporary art.
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Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception

Oxford University Press, January 2016
Aesthetic imagery

Many aesthetically relevant properties are perceptual. But not all.

Some of them are represented non-perceptually (artist’s intention, social context)
And some of them are represented in mental imagery.

**Aesthetic imagery**: aesthetically relevant properties represented by mental imagery
Mental imagery: “Visual mental imagery is ‘seeing’ in the absence of the appropriate immediate sensory input, auditory mental imagery is ‘hearing’ in the absence of the immediate sensory input, and so on. Imagery is distinct from perception, which is the registration of physically present stimuli.” (Kosslyn, Behrmann, and Jeannerod 1995, p. 1335).

Perceptual processing not triggered by corresponding sensory stimulation in the relevant sense modality

Mental imagery, just like perception, may be conscious or unconscious. Also, it may be voluntary or involuntary. Egocentric or non-egocentric.
Amodal completion: the representation of those parts of perceived objects that we get no sensory stimulation from. (misnomer: not at all amodal)

In the case of vision it is the representation of **occluded parts of objects we see**: cat behind a picket fence.

How do we represent occluded parts of objects we see?
- By a **belief** (or other post-perceptual state)
- By **perception** (not if perception entails sensory stimulation)
- By **mental imagery** – by perceptual processing in the absence of corresponding sensory stimulation
Amodal completion

Top-down vs. Bottom-up
Top-down influences on perception
Top-down influences on perception
Top-down influences on perception
Multimodal mental imagery

I hear footsteps downstairs. How do I represent the visual aspects of this *multisensory event*?

Again, candidates:

- By a **belief** (or other post-perceptual state)
- By **perception** (not if perception entails sensory stimulation)
- By **mental imagery** – that’s the way to go
Crossmodal mental imagery

Predates the fashionable multimodality studies.

**Conscious** experience in one sense modality triggered by activity in another sense modality

Top-down!!
Huge amount of empirical findings about very early activation of sensory cortices without modality-specific corresponding stimulus:


Attention and mental imagery

Normally, very determinable properties are attributed in mental imagery. But attention can increase the determinacy of these properties (assuming this is what attention does).

And this extra determinacy often (not always) comes from a top-down source.

This is true of the mental imagery involved in amodal completion and also of multimodal mental imagery.

Crossmodal mental imagery is a special case of multimodal mental imagery – where the imagery is conscious, determinate and especially salient.
Off screen
Acknowledgement: EU FP7 CIG grant PCIG09-GA-2011-293818 and the FWO Odysseus grant G.0020.12N.
Inside the frame
Pretense Action:

Explanations use the Belief-Desire Model

Pragmatic mental imagery

Two kinds:
- Attribution of action-properties to imaginary objects
- Attribution of imaginary action-properties to actual objects

Pragmatic mental imagery can also be the immediate mental antecedent of action
Pretense actions:

Standard accounts: Instead of belief, we have imagination. Maybe instead of desire, we have i-Desire (the imagery version of desire).

A more nuanced picture of pretense action: very often, instead of Pragmatic Representations, we have Pragmatic Mental Imagery.
Occlusion
I call these properties action-properties. Pragmatic Representations represents objects as having action-properties. Action-properties are properties the representation of which is necessary for the performance of the action. Pragmatic Representations are perceptual states.
Temporal
Multimodal

from *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia.*
Conceptual art

Robert Rauschenberg:

Erased de Kooning drawing
Conceptual art

L.H.O.O.Q.

and

Mona Lisa Rasee
Conceptual art

Man Ray
Take home messages

Some important aesthetically relevant properties are represented in mental imagery. They can be more or less determinate. Some of these are subject to top-down influences.

Cultural variations in mental imagery → History of mental imagery (straight Wolfflin)

Imagination has played a huge role in aesthetics and art history. But what is even more important is a much simpler concept: mental imagery.
Thank you!

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