The Feeling of Meaning

Review of The Aesthetics of Emotion: Up the down staircase of the mind-body

by Don M. Tucker

Understanding aesthetics is an essential aspect of a complete intellectual education. In the modern age of cognitive science and neuroscience, it would make sense that a scientific understanding of human emotion would be an integral preparation for serious aesthetic inquiry. In “The Aesthetics of Emotion: Up the down staircase of the mind’s body,” Gerald Cupchik brings a careful analysis of theories of emotion to a study of aesthetics.

In addition to considering the abstract principles of aesthetics, Cupchik provides interesting real world examples of the artistic process as it is described by a number of contemporary artists, and as it is actualized by their work. The result is a scholarly analysis of the nature of human emotion informing us about the evaluative processes that we bring to any aesthetic appreciation. This scientific analysis is found in the first part of the book, in the expert, scholarly, and yet highly readable account of theories of emotion that Cupchik provides. I particularly enjoyed the thorough historical background. This is a rich context of ideas about emotion that is often lost in modern treatments. The modern approaches are explained clearly as well, including psychological, cultural, and neuroscientific approaches.

Examples and materials are provided — in the book and in the accompanying website — to allow the reader to consider specific art works from the informed perspectives that the book provides (http://uoft.me/aestheticsofemotion). These perspectives are both nomothetic — illustrating the general theory of emotion and aesthetics — and idiographic — reflecting the specific perspective of the artist.

As might be appropriate study of aesthetics, there are several ways that Cupchik’s book can be interpreted. The most straightforward way is what you might expect, and what I have outlined above: to bring the scientific study of emotion to inform the study of aesthetics. Yet there is a second, more subtle, interpretation of Cupchik’s comparison of emotion theory and the aesthetics of art: the insight we gain from understanding the aesthetic process in art can inform the understanding of emotion theory itself.

Thus in representational art there is often a style that is recognized by both artists and observers as providing a framework to guide interpretation. In emotions, there may not be formal styles, but there are regular forms that can guide the interpretation of emotions. Cultural conventions allow members of the culture to interpret displays in consistent ways. At the biological level, the body’s arousal state provides a focus for interpretation that may be similar to the specific subject matter of art as the focus for the aesthetic experience.

In this light, the interplay between more sophisticated cultural and psychological interpretations and the more elementary bodily arousal states is highlighted in the book’s subtitle: Up the down staircase of the mind-body. The down staircase may be the top-down direction of emotional control in psychological theory, where psychological appraisal is assumed to be the determinant of emotional experience, giving form to the more elementary levels of bodily arousal and mood states. Yet particularly in reviewing modern theoretical approaches to neural mechanisms of emotion regulation, Cupchik emphasizes the importance of the bottom-up direction of control as well, where psychological appraisal itself is determined by the mind’s regulation by its mood states. In depression, for example, the evidence has been clear for many years that the typical negative cognitive bias in cognition may not be observed.
prior to the depressed mood state (Lewinsohn, Steinmetz et al. 1981, Gotlib, Lewinsohn et al. 1998), implying that it is the depressed mood that is causal for the negative bias in cognitive appraisal.

At the completion of the book, I found myself thinking that there may be a third way that a study of aesthetics informs the science of emotion. There is an aesthetic appreciation to be had by understanding human emotion itself, in the many manifestations we find in life. In this sense, artistic work is just one example, albeit an important one, for a careful study of aesthetics. For those who appreciate the phenomenology of experience, there may be an important aesthetic value in a deeper understanding of the nature of emotion.

Of course, many scientists, engineers, and others have emphasized that it is the intrinsic beauty of the ideas achieved in their work that is motivating. Certainly we often feel it is necessary to justify scientific work by the improvement in health, or the economy, or even technology in the abstract. But it is the aesthetic quality of work that often explains how people choose to devote major life commitments.

In this respect, the science of emotion has presented a particular challenge. Given the problems that academic psychologists have had in dealing with subjective experience, emotion has long been a squishy topic, derided by behaviorism and cognitive science alike. Many have questioned whether human emotion is a worthy or even possible topic for scientific study.

Fully aware of this unfortunate history, Cupchik begins his work with a very careful and extensive analysis of the scientific understanding of human emotion. This is one of the most thorough and clearly formulated studies of emotion theory I have encountered in many years of reading. Many important classical ideas are presented in detail, the major themes of the modern literature are presented clearly, and the more recent theoretical efforts are characterized in clear and engaging writing. This is an academic book, but it is approachable by anyone who spends the time for a interested, and enjoyable, study of the material.

Particularly in light of the excellent online materials, The Aesthetics of Emotion provides an exercise in the science of emotion and aesthetic appreciation that makes for an interesting educational experience for those who sort through it carefully. This experience is a treat for the serious reader and it forms a solid basis for an undergraduate or graduate course. This course could not only engage students to develop the discipline to study the philosophical, psychological, and neuroscience traditions of understanding emotion; it could also invite them to reflect on their own aesthetic process in examining the remarkable artists whose works are explored, through visual materials, personal reflections, and online interviews.
Don M. Tucker, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology, University of Oregon
CEO, Scientist, Electrical Geodesics, Inc.
500 East 4th Ave., Suite 200, Eugene, OR 97401
dtucker@egi.com

References
