

Aesthetics of Imagery. The Quixotic Dilemma

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I examine whether imagery has aesthetic value. In trying to answer this question, we face the Quixotic Dilemma, which claims that both possible answers are false. I suggest that this question may therefore be undecidable. A solution may involve rejecting the idea that sensory imagination must be defined in experiential terms. Instead, adopting a content-based theory of mental imagery might clarify the similarities and differences between perception and imagery, ultimately resolving the Quixotic Dilemma.

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1. The Quixotic Dilemma

Dulcinea del Toboso is a silent character in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (2015). Dulcinea does not exist; she is an imaginary figure who resides only in Don Quixote's mind. Yet Don Quixote's imagination, driven by his devotion to Dulcinea, profoundly alters his perception of reality. Even when Sancho Panza presents a peasant girl named Aldonza, Don Quixote refuses to accept reality. He transforms Aldonza into Dulcinea, the epitome of beauty, virtue, and nobility. Don Quixote's imagining of Dulcinea is not merely a subplot but the very lens through which he views the world. His devotion to an imaginary woman leads him to reinterpret reality, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary and the mundane into the heroic.

This literary introduction illustrates a broader psychological phenomenon. Imagination¹ is believed to influence our behaviour and perception. It highlights the aesthetic value of art and helps us view the world as a work of

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¹ This paper focuses solely on mental imagery. Therefore, when I discuss imagination, unless the context indicates otherwise, I mean sensory imagination. Similarly, when I use the terms "imagination", "imaginings", "mental imagery", and "sensory imagination", I refer to offline sensory representations.

art (e.g., Nanay 2016; Nanay 2023; Nanay 2025b; Savile 2006). Imagination guides our pursuit of meaning and beauty (e.g., Scruton 1973; Sheppard 1991; Vartanian 2020).

Nevertheless, there is another way to tell Don Quixote's story. Don Quixote's imagery leads him to misinterpret reality. The mental image of Dulcinea misleads him, making windmills appear as giants and a barber's basin seem like a legendary helmet. Don Quixote's devotion to his imagination leads to absurd and tragic outcomes. Dulcinea is a delusion. Sancho Panza knows this, and although he plays along with Don Quixote's fantasy, he is the one who says: Don't you see the king is naked?

Imagery does not guarantee that we are free from error. It can lead us to see something as aesthetically valuable, but it is not infallible. We might perceive something as having aesthetic value, yet it may lack those qualities. Imagery can deceive us and cause us to value something that is truly worthless. That is why, metaphorically speaking, every Don Quixote needs his Sancho Panza.

However, I will not be the first to ask: who is right, Don Quixote or Sancho Panza? To frame it as a research question:

The Quixotic Question: Does mental imagery possess aesthetic values?

At first glance, this question appears to be a simple yes-or-no question. Either you believe that mental imagery possesses aesthetic value, or you do not. However, I contend that this question may be undecidable.

The issue with the Quixotic Question is that it rests on the silent premise acknowledged by both Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. According to them, sensory imagination can influence the aesthetic appreciation of perceptual objects, enabling one to perceive them as having aesthetic value. For instance, imagining Dulcinea can affect how Don Quixote perceives Aldonza. Let us call this the Quixotic Claim.

The Quixotic Claim: Mental imagery can affect the aesthetic evaluation of perceptual objects.

How does the Quixotic Claim fit into the Quixotic Question? Suppose you follow Don Quixote and believe that imagery shapes how we perceive the world. Thanks to sensory imagination, you can see ordinary objects as aesthetically valuable. The simplest way to explain this influence is to suggest that mental imagery has aesthetic qualities. For example, the mental image of Dulcinea changes how Don Quixote perceives Aldonza because it is aesthetically valuable. I call this the Quixotean View.

According to Quixoteans, the Quixotic Claim has a straightforward explanation: Imaginings carry aesthetic values. Mental imagery has aesthetic

qualities, and these values can shape how we perceive reality. Even if a perceptual object appears to lack aesthetic qualities, imagination can transform it. Mental imagery adds an aesthetic dimension to the world because imagery is aesthetically valuable.

The Quixotean View is not an actual stance. Rather, it is a collection of aesthetic theories that differ in their philosophical backgrounds and goals. The Quixotean View appears in discussions of aesthetic internalism and externalism, aesthetic realism, the so-called Acquaintance Principle, and the nature of mental imagery. Schiller (1989), Nanay (2023, 2025a), and Savile (2006) can be seen as representatives of this view.

Conversely, if you follow Sancho Panza, you believe that imaginings lack aesthetic value. Even if mental imagery can influence perception, it is the qualities of perceptual objects that matter. If mental imagery leads you to see objects as aesthetically valuable, yet they are actually devoid of aesthetic value, you are mistaken. Just as hallucination causes you to perceive properties not present in the real world, mental imagery causes you to perceive aesthetic properties that are not genuinely present. Don Quixote might believe he aesthetically appreciates his mental image of Dulcinea, just as he might think that a windmill is a giant, but he is simply wrong. Let us call this position Sancho Panza's View.

According to Sancho Panzaeans, imaginings lack aesthetic value. Only perceptual objects are subject to aesthetic evaluation. If mental imagery influences perception so that a perceptual object seems aesthetically valuable, yet the object lacks aesthetic value, then imagery eludes you. Imagery can serve as a tool for highlighting the aesthetic values of perceptual objects, but it does not possess aesthetic value on its own.

Just as the Quixotean, Sancho Panza's View is not a position anyone has explicitly adopted. It can be attributed to Budd (2008), who criticises over-reliance on imaginative engagement, suggesting it can sometimes lead to aesthetic misjudgements or confusion. The most direct and recent defence of Sancho Panza's View appears in Hopkins's (2024) theory of sensory imagination. He argues that pleasure elicited by imaginings, say, of Dulcinea, cannot develop in the same way as in perception. Consequently, "sensory imagining does not allow for aesthetic engagement with its intentional object" (Hopkins 2024, 215).

However, whether you see yourself more as Don Quixote or Sancho Panza, if you want to answer the Quixotic Question, you must face a dilemma. According to its first horn, defending the Quixotean View offers a simple explanation of how imagery influences perception. However, it leaves you defenceless against the question of how to avoid being misled by imagery, that is, how to distinguish the aesthetic values of objects from those of men-

tal imagery. According to the second horn, defending Sancho Panza's View helps you recognise the problem of misperceiving aesthetic values. Yet it prevents a straightforward explanation of how imagery affects the aesthetic appreciation of perceptual objects. Let us call it the Quixotic Dilemma.

The Quixotic Dilemma

- (1) The Quixotean View explains the Quixotic Claim but does not effectively address the misperception of aesthetic values.
- (2) Sancho Panza's View recognises the issue of misperception of aesthetic values but does not effectively explain the Quixotic Claim.

If the Quixotic Dilemma is a real dilemma, the first horn indicates that the Quixotean View is false, while the second claims the same for Sancho Panza's View. However, there is no middle ground between these two views; therefore, the Quixotic Question remains undecidable.

The aim of the paper is, first, to establish the Quixotic Dilemma, i.e., to demonstrate that it is a genuine dilemma rather than merely a product of literary fiction. Second, it seeks to suggest a way out of it. To achieve the first aim, I present the so-called Internalistic Argument and the Interaction Argument. To reach the second, I show that both horns of the Quixotic Dilemma relate to experiential accounts of imagery. In other words, we face the Dilemma only if we define imagery in terms of experience rather than content.

Before I proceed, two caveats are necessary. The paper discusses imagination, but not *all* its forms. It is common to distinguish between propositional imagination and mental imagery (sensory imagination). Propositional imagination involves constructing counterfactual propositional scenarios. In contrast, mental imagery concerns offline sensory representations. While it is an interesting question whether propositional imaginings possess aesthetic value, it is more natural to focus on the aesthetic qualities of sensory representations. I will follow this more natural approach.

Next, the term "undecidability" requires precision. The Quixotic Question may be undecidable, given the shared background assumption that sensory imagination is to be analysed in experiential terms. The dilemma arises from mutually incompatible explanatory demands within the same theoretical framework. Within this framework, all admissible answers violate constraints that the framework itself imposes and cannot be coherently abandoned. Attributing aesthetic value to imagery collapses into aesthetic internalism and fails to account for misperception; denying such value undermines the explanation of imagery's influence on perceptual aesthetic expe-

rience. Since these two options exhaust the answer space within the experiential framework, the question cannot be decided.

Nevertheless, I argue that the Quixotic Dilemma arises only within an experiential view of sensory imagination. Adopting a content-based approach renders the Quixotic Question no longer inherently blocked. Therefore, I am not providing a direct answer to the Quixotic Question but rather suggesting how to remove the obstacle to answering it.

The paper's structure is outlined as follows. In the next section, I introduce the concept of aesthetic values to set the scene. Since this paper focuses not on aesthetic values themselves but on the aesthetics of imagery, I will remain neutral about the complexities of aesthetic values. The third section is also introductory, aiming to establish one of the premises for the main argument. The following two sections present the main arguments supporting the validity of the Quixotic Dilemma. In the fourth section, I explore the first horn of the dilemma, introducing the so-called Internalistic Argument to argue against the Quixotean View. The fifth section addresses the second horn, presenting the Interaction Argument against Sancho Panza's View. Finally, I propose a way to resolve the dilemma, suggesting that it applies only to experiential accounts of sensory imagination. It does not extend to content-based theories.

2. Aesthetic Value

Let me first set the stage for the argument. Since the paper concerns the aesthetics of imagery, it should address the nature of aesthetic values. However, as this paper is *not* primarily about aesthetic values, I will aim to be as neutral and brief as possible. Let me get down to work.

At its most basic, aesthetic value is the value an object or experience has when appreciated for its aesthetic qualities rather than for practical, moral, or economic reasons. Aesthetic values are the features of a work of art that contribute to its importance as a work of art. Aesthetic value is seen as a kind of final value, meaning something is valuable for its own sake, not as a means to something else. For example, someone might appreciate a beautiful poem aesthetically, not because it makes them richer, but simply because it is beautiful.

Most importantly, aesthetic value can ground aesthetic engagement and normative aesthetic judgement. We are justified in being aesthetically engaged with an object and in holding that it is aesthetically valuable because it possesses aesthetic value.

Developing the details of the nature of aesthetic values is a far more complex task. I am not undertaking it. Instead, let me note that any theory of aesthetic values should be able to address at least two interconnected ques-

tions. First, it should be able to answer whether aesthetic value is subjective or objective. Second, it should be able to answer what makes aesthetic value aesthetic value.

Luckily, for the purposes of this paper, we need not answer the first question. It is sufficient to assume that any comprehensive theory of aesthetic values must explain why the experience of aesthetic values varies among individuals and groups. Appreciation of aesthetic values can be relative. Just as colour perception depends on lighting conditions, the perception of aesthetic values can also vary with social or psychological factors. This does not mean aesthetic values are subjective. It merely indicates that the experience of aesthetic values can shift with context. Let us call this the Contextual Constraint.

The second question is more complex. There are two main approaches to addressing it. According to reductive theories (e.g., Lopes 2018; Matthen 2017; Peacocke 2021), it can be broken down into two logically independent questions: the Aesthetic Question and the Normative Question (cf. Shelley 2019). The Aesthetic Question asks what makes aesthetic value aesthetic. The Normative Question examines what makes aesthetic value valuable.

Answers to the Aesthetic Question vary, ranging from aesthetic formalism (e.g., Bell 1958; Danto 2003; Zangwill 1998), which holds that aesthetic value is aesthetic because objects possess it through their perceptual properties, including visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, and tactile features, to immediacy theories (e.g., Sibley 2001), which suggest that aesthetic value is perceptual because we perceive things as having it, not necessarily because of their perceptual properties (cf. Shelley 2022).

Answers to the Normative Question range from aesthetic hedonism (e.g., Budd 1995; Matthen 2017), which holds that aesthetic value is valuable because it brings pleasure when experienced, to network theories (e.g., Lopes 2018), which argue that non-hedonic properties can also contribute to the aesthetic value of objects.

For the purpose of this paper, it is unnecessary to address the Aesthetic and Normative Questions. It is sufficient to note that breaking down the question of aesthetic value into two logically independent questions follows from understanding the relation between value and aesthetic value in terms of the genus-species relation (cf. Shelley 2023), in which aesthetic value is a species of a broader kind of value.

In contrast, non-reductive theories, such as the Auburn View (cf. Van der Berg 2020), reject the idea that the relation between value and aesthetic value can be captured by the genus-species relation. Instead, aesthetic value is treated as the basic kind of value (e.g., Gorodeisky 2021a; Gorodeisky 2021b; Gorodeisky 2023; Kirby forthcoming; Shelley 2019; Shelley 2023; Shelley

2024; Watkins and Shelley 2012). The relation between value and aesthetic value is not the genus-species relation but the determinable-determinate relation. Aesthetic value is a specific aspect of value (Shelley 2023). It functions as a determining dimension of a value determinable. The relation between value and aesthetic value is not analogous to the relation between a right-angled triangle and a triangle. Instead, it is more like triangularity's relation to shape. Thus, just as an object is not a triangle because it has a shape, an object is not aesthetically valuable because it is valuable. Instead, the object has a shape because it is a triangle, and it has value because it has aesthetic value (cf. Shelley 2024, 38).

The non-reductive theories provide a straightforward answer to Aesthetic and Normative Questions: the feature that makes an object aesthetic also renders it valuable (Shelley 2024). Aesthetic value is an object's inherent capacity to give a reason to perceive it as possessing that very capacity. Consequently, when you admire an aesthetically valuable object, part of what you perceive is that it should be appreciated as you are appreciating it, because aesthetic values shape a dimension of perceptual objects.

In this paper, I do not attempt to settle the debate between reductive and non-reductive approaches. Instead, I recognise that any theory of aesthetic value is either reductive or non-reductive. Accordingly, any response to the Quixotic Question should align with either a reductive or a non-reductive theory of aesthetic value. In the following sections, I will apply this principle to analyse the Quixotic Dilemma.

3. Beardsley-Dickie Debate

Before developing the main argument, let me elaborate on one of its central premises. To do that, I will take a step back to the mid-twentieth century. In those days, analytic aesthetics was preoccupied with the debate about the nature of aesthetic experience, conducted between aesthetic internalists and externalists. Since it has been dominated by the exchange between Beardsley and Dickie, it is often called the Beardsley-Dickie Debate.

The Beardsley-Dickie Debate centres on which properties make experience aesthetic. According to aesthetic internalists, such as early Beardsley (1958), the phenomenological properties of experience are necessary and sufficient to evoke aesthetic engagement with works of art. Conversely, aesthetic externalists, such as Dickie (1988) and late Beardsley (1982), point to properties external to the experience, most often those of the experienced objects. Although internalist theories dominated in the fifties, externalist theories have gained ground since.

The purpose of this section is not to describe the details of the debate (cf. Iseminger 2003). Instead, it aims to analyse the reasons for the shift from aes-

thetic internalism to externalism. In the following sections, I demonstrate that the same reasons can be used to analyse the Quixotic Dilemma.

Let me start from the beginning. Beardsley's initial idea (1958) was that different examples of artworks, such as musical compositions, paintings, and literary works, share common characteristics. Although these objects cannot be categorised together by sufficient and necessary conditions, they can be unified by the common properties of the experience they evoke.

According to Beardsley, introspection shows that the properties of aesthetic experience are unique to works of art. Aesthetic experience is complex, intense, and unified, meaning coherent and complete. Without going into detail, these qualities distinguish aesthetic objects from ordinary ones. However, these qualities characterise the experience itself. The aesthetic value of objects depends on their ability to evoke such an experience.

Dickie's well-known critique (1965) addresses the transfer of aesthetic features from the objects of aesthetic experience to the experience itself. Dickie focuses on coherence and completeness. He argues that works of art can be coherent and complete, and that we can experience their coherence and completeness. However, he insists that confusing the properties of an experience with those of the objects of that experience is a sign of idealism. For aesthetic judgements, only the properties of aesthetic objects matter. Every attempt to base aesthetic value on an object's capacity to evoke aesthetic experience is ill-founded.

It is unnecessary to delve into the details of the debate. The most important part of the discussion is Beardsley's (1982) response to Dickie. Beardsley proposes defining the aesthetic attitude in terms of aesthetic values. Having an aesthetic attitude towards an object means showing interest in whatever aesthetic value that object might possess (Beardsley 1982, 19). Aesthetic values are understood as the capacity to evoke aesthetic experience under the *right* conditions.

In making such a move, Beardsley tries to distinguish aesthetic experience from other kinds of experience by reference to the properties of the experienced object. However, the suggestion that aesthetic experience is not merely a different kind of experience but one that results from the correct perception of an object implies that it is no longer possible to determine introspectively whether one's experience is aesthetically valuable. Introspection cannot assess whether one's experience of an object is correct or incorrect. External properties, however, can make this distinction. Therefore, the appeal to correctness conditions points towards aesthetic externalism.

Following the Beardsley-Dickie Debate, the main aim of internalism—defining aesthetic experience in terms of its own properties—has been abandoned. While internalism offers an intuitive way to describe the distinc-

tive phenomenology of aesthetic experience, it does not address the issue of the correctness conditions of this experience. In contrast, externalists can explain the correctness conditions for aesthetic experience. We accurately perceive an artwork's aesthetic values only if the artwork possesses them.

In sum, there are strong reasons to shift from internalism to aesthetic externalism. Externalism accommodates the initial intuitions of internalist theories and explains the correctness conditions of aesthetic experience. Therefore, we are justified in defining aesthetic experience as an experience with aesthetic content, i.e., the experience of an object possessing aesthetic properties.

4. The first horn of the Quixotic Dilemma

For the sake of the argument, let us accept that the outcome of the Beardsley-Dickie Debate points us towards aesthetic externalism. To phrase it more carefully, the outcome of the Beardsley-Dickie Debate compels proponents of aesthetic internalism to respond to their opponents' critique. I do not mean to imply that this critique cannot be addressed; however, aesthetic internalism cannot be regarded as the default position in discussions of aesthetic experience and aesthetic values.

In this section, I use this assumption to argue that the Quixotean View fails to address the issue of misperception of aesthetic values. My argument's structure is straightforward. According to the first premise, the Quixotean View claims that imaginings have aesthetic values. According to the second premise, the Quixotean View defines the aesthetic values of imagery in internalistic terms, that is, as properties of imaginistic experience. The third premise states that aesthetic internalism does not resolve the problem of misperception of aesthetic values. Lastly, the fourth premise acknowledges that our aesthetic judgements can be mistaken. Consequently, the Quixotean View does not effectively address the problem of misperception of aesthetic values and is therefore false. I will refer to this as the Internalistic Argument.

The Internalistic Argument

- (P1) According to the Quixotean View, imaginings possess aesthetic value (assumption).
- (P2) The Quixotean View defines the aesthetic value of imagery in terms of the properties of the experience.
- (P3) Defining aesthetic values in terms of the properties of the experience fails to address the issue of misperception of aesthetic values (from the Beardsley-Dickie Debate).

- (P4) The Quixotean View fails to address the issue of misperception of aesthetic values (*MP* from P2 and P3).
- (P5) We may misperceive aesthetic values (assumption).
- (C) The Quixotean View is invalid (*MT* from P4 and P5).

Since I have elaborated on the third premise in the last section and (P5) appears uncontroversial, the validity of the Internalistic Argument depends on whether there are good reasons to establish the second premise. Here, I argue that there are.

In the previous sections, I described Quixoteans as those who believe that imagery possesses aesthetic value. The Quixotean View appears to be intuitively acceptable. For example, it is common to describe mental images using aesthetic terms such as vividness, richness, complexity, and coherence. Additionally, it accounts for the Quixotic Claim and the connection between sensory imagination and perception in the clearest possible way. If imagery is regarded as having aesthetic value, it can lead us to perceive things as aesthetically valuable.

The clearest account of the Quixotean View appears in Nanay (2025a). Although Nanay does not address the Quixotic Dilemma or directly engage with the issue of aesthetic values, his argument can be seen as representative of the Quixoteans. Thus, his argument will be my chief stalking horse throughout this section.

Nanay's main aim (2025a) is a critical examination and revision of the so-called Acquaintance Principle, introduced to aesthetics by Wollheim (1980). According to the Acquaintance Principle, genuine aesthetic judgements must be based on first-hand perceptual experience of the object under judgement. If an aesthetic judgement is not based on first-hand perceptual experience, it does not count as valid.

Nanay examines whether aesthetic judgements can be legitimately made on the basis of second-hand experience, such as descriptions or testimony, rather than direct perception. He begins by noting that although much of our knowledge is derived from testimony, the Acquaintance Principle holds that aesthetic judgements cannot be justified in this way.

The crucial part of Nanay's analysis concerns whether imagination can serve as a legitimate basis for aesthetic judgement. Nanay suggests that imagination can provide valid testimony for aesthetic judgements. Suppose I imagine Malevich's *Black Square*. If we consider this an imaginative experience, it is not a second-hand experience. Instead, it can be viewed as a first-hand experience: after all, it is my imaginative experience of a black square. Therefore, we can weaken the Acquaintance Principle. A weaker

version of the principle states that an aesthetic judgement about X implies either perceiving or imagining X.

Some might argue that imagination and perception differ. Imagination, as a voluntary mental act, cannot generate truly new or surprising information about an object. It only provides what our intentions and beliefs put into it (e.g., Hopkins 2024; Sartre 2004). However, Nanay suggests that we can distinguish between mental imagery and imagination. Imagination is voluntary and entirely guided by our beliefs and intentions. In contrast, mental imagery, a perception-like experience not directly caused by sensory input (cf. Nanay 2023; Pearson et al. 2015), can be unexpected and surprising. Most importantly, mental imagery is not determined by our beliefs and intentions.

Nanay's central claim is that aesthetic judgements can be legitimately grounded in mental imagery, even when that imagery is prompted by descriptions or testimony rather than direct perception. He proposes a revised Acquaintance Principle: an aesthetic judgement about X implies either perceptual experience of X or mental imagery of X. This allows for the legitimacy of aesthetic judgements formed through mental imagery, which can be spontaneous and informative, much like judgements based on seeing a photographic reproduction of an artwork.

In summary, Nanay argues that although imagination alone cannot establish valid aesthetic judgements, mental imagery can. Mental imagery is subject to aesthetic assessment and can serve as a basis for justifying aesthetic judgements.

There are two key elements in Nanay's argument. First, he asserts that mental imagery can evoke aesthetic experiences, which can form the basis for aesthetic judgements. For example, if, based on a description, I imagine a black square, the mental image of the black square enables aesthetic evaluation. The imaginative experience of the black square can serve as a basis for the aesthetic judgement. However, this judgement is justified only if the imagery possesses aesthetic value that serves as a reason for the judgement. Therefore, mental imagery must possess aesthetic value.

Recognising that mental imagery has aesthetic value carries important implications. It allows us to remain neutral about the nature of aesthetic values. It also provides a straightforward explanation of the Quixotic Claim. Why is that the case?

If aesthetic values are non-reducible and constitute the aesthetic dimensions of imagined and perceived objects, imagining an object might allow you to recognise its aesthetic dimension. If aesthetic values are reducible, then whatever makes them valuable, say, pleasure, also makes imagining valuable. Suppose the mental image of Malevich's *Black Square* brings you

pleasure. It then makes the imagining aesthetically valuable. Thus, whether you support a reductive or non-reductive view of aesthetic values, Nanay's argument explains the aesthetic dimension of imaginings and the Quixotic Claim, and does so in the clearest possible terms.

Second, Nanay describes mental imagery as a perception-like *experience* that is not directly caused by sensory input. According to Nanay (2025a, 151), mental imagery is "a perception-like (or quasi-perceptual) experience that is not triggered directly by sensory input." Consequently, aesthetic values are regarded as properties of the imaginative experience. However, this shifts Nanay's argument in favour of adopting an aesthetic internalism. Why is that so?

To avoid the pitfalls of aesthetic internalism, Nanay might want to define mental imagery in terms of perceptual content. Moreover, he explicitly holds that the phenomenological similarity between imagistic and perceptual experiences can be explained by their sharing similar content (e.g., Nanay 2015; Nanay 2023). However, having a perception-like experience is not the same as possessing the same perception-like content. Let us return to Malevich's *Black Square*. Suppose you admire it in a museum, and, at that moment, you form a mental image of a black square that is exactly the same in terms of perception-like experience as the image of a black square drawn on a whiteboard during the geometry class. Suppose the properties of the experience of seeing a *Black square* in a museum and of the mental image of the geometric figure are identical. However, the content of these experiences differs.

Nanay might want to dodge the bullet and define imagistic content in terms of the perceptual properties of the perceived scene. According to Nanay (e.g., 2015, 1727), perceptual content is constituted by attributing various properties to parts of the perceptual space. Similarly, imagery attributes various perceptual properties to an imagined scene, which corresponds to the perceptual space.

Applying this explanation to the black square example shows that the perceptual properties of a black square in a museum and the one on a whiteboard are attributed in a similar way to the perceptual and imagined scene. Both objects are black rectangles. Furthermore, these properties relate in the same way within the perceptual and imagined scene: being black and a rectangle together determine the perceptual qualities of colour and shape of the perceptual and imagined object. The only difference is the nature of the represented object.

However, the success of this rebuttal depends on how we understand the nature of the objects to which we attribute properties. In perception, perceptual objects, interpreted as unified and stable groups of sensory features linked to particulars in perception (e.g., Green 2018; Jackson 1977), are

generally considered to be ordinary objects, such as chairs and tables (e.g., Armstrong 2004; Brewer 2007; Matthen 2005). For example, being black and rectangular can be jointly attributed to an object, such as a black square.

In imagery, such a link to the ordinary object is blocked, since, as Nanay explicitly defines it, imagery lacks a direct causal connection to perceptual input. Therefore, defining imagistic content by attributing properties to the imagined scene simply restates that the properties assigned to parts of space are qualities of the experience itself, not of the content of that experience. Why is that the case?

Let us accept that the perceptual qualities of a perceived black square and an imagined one are identical. They attribute the same properties to the same parts within an imagined or a perceptual space. Nevertheless, the two representations of a black square differ in their relational qualities. The perceptual qualities of the perceived black square identify the perceptual object, i.e., the *Black Square* in a museum. Meanwhile, the qualities of the imagined black square identify the object, the black square, on a whiteboard. Being phenomenologically indistinguishable does not mean that these experiences have the same content, just as seeing identical twins does not imply you have the same mental representation of them.

We cannot simply abandon the relational link to the represented objects, as doing so would reduce the content's properties to those of the experience. However, these properties are clearly distinct. The properties of the experience describe how things are represented, whereas the properties of the content describe what the represented things are. Thus, the results of analysing imagery experience do not directly apply to the imagery content.

Since mental imagery lacks a causal connection to the object it represents, the only way to establish a link to sensory objects is to argue that mental imagery must be supplemented by propositional attitudes, such as intentions and beliefs. However, Nanay explicitly rejects this solution, distinguishing between imagination and mental imagery. Therefore, mental imagery is a perception-like experience, and aesthetic values are properties of that experience.

Thus, although Nanay does not explicitly endorse aesthetic internalism, his account of mental imagery, when used to explain aesthetic value, points in that direction. Consequently, his account of imagery inherits internalist commitments when applied to aesthetic value and lacks the resources to establish correctness conditions independently of phenomenology.

Establishing that Nanay's argument implies aesthetic internalism raises the question of whether it is susceptible to externalists' objections. The externalists' objection holds that the internalists cannot explain the misperception of aesthetic properties. Does Nanay's theory have sufficient resources

to distinguish between correct and incorrect representations of something as aesthetically valuable?

According to Nanay, aesthetic judgements based on mental imagery can go wrong in the same way as a photographic reproduction of an artwork can deceive us if it omits relevant aesthetic features such as texture or size (Nanay 2025a, 155). Assuming that a mental image reproduces the relevant aesthetic features, the aesthetic judgement based on mental imagery is legitimate.

However, the analogy to photographic reproduction is misleading. Externalists have no trouble explaining how photographic reproductions can misrepresent aesthetic values. If a photograph, because of technical limitations, depicts something as worthless, while the actual object, such as a painted artwork, is aesthetically valuable, then it is an inaccurate representation. In contrast, the same reasoning does not apply to internalists. For internalists, if a photograph is valueless, then, well, that is all. The properties of the representation cannot be considered incorrect.

Let us return to the *Black Square* example. Suppose you are asked to form a mental image of Malevich's *Black Square* based on relevant testimony. Furthermore, let us assume that exact physical measures have been provided and that your mental imagery is sufficiently detailed to represent them. Honestly, there are not many things that could go wrong in this situation. After all, it is merely a black square. Therefore, let us assume that you form a mental image in which the phenomenology of your experience is indistinguishable from that of perception.

And yet, you can still be mistaken. Let us consider two alternative scenarios. Suppose your mental image of a black square, phenomenologically identical to Malevich's *Black Square*, actually refers to the ordinary black square drawn in a geometry class. If you are more like Sancho Panza, you might say: Well, that's just a black square. We usually do not aesthetically appreciate ordinary geometrical objects. Alternatively, you can imagine a black square representing Malevich's ingenious artwork. In this case, your positive evaluation of your mental image is justified.

However, these alternative scenarios can only be formulated from an externalistic perspective. From an internalistic standpoint, you cannot identify which scenario you are in. Therefore, if you are an internalist, you can never tell whether you are engaging with your imaginings correctly or not.

Nanay might argue that these two scenarios can be clearly distinguished by examining the context's properties. For the sake of argument, let us accept, in line with the Contextual Constraint, that aesthetic values depend on context. Depending on the situation, an object may or may not exhibit aesthetic values. Recognising the context's properties can help us determine whether we attribute aesthetic values correctly or incorrectly. For exam-

ple, imagining a black square in a classroom differs from imagining a *Black Square* in a museum.

However, there are two reasons why this response cannot be effective. First, it is relatively easy to reframe both scenarios and insert a black square into the perceptually indistinguishable contexts. We can imagine a classroom and a museum as white boxes. Second, we cannot argue that both scenarios can be distinguished by adding propositional context, i.e., that we believe the first imaginary scenario occurs in a classroom and the second in the museum. This would alter the content of imagery without changing the properties of the imaginative experience. Nevertheless, that would require sneaking propositional imagination into our picture and, therefore, blurring the line between mental imagery and imagination. However, introducing such a distinction is at the heart of Nanay's argument.

Thus, both scenarios are identical in terms of the properties of the experience. Consequently, you can never determine whether you are mistaken in believing that your mental image is aesthetically engaging. Assuming you are an aesthetic internalist, as the Quixoteans are, you cannot explain the problem of misperception of aesthetic values. Therefore, the Quixoteans are wrong, *QED*.

5. The second horn of the Quixotic Dilemma

Let me move on to the second horn of the Quixotic Dilemma. Proponents of Sancho Panza's View may challenge the conclusion of the Internalistic Argument. They may argue that the entire argument rests on a false premise. Suppose imagery is stripped of aesthetic value. If so, the question of whether we are correctly or incorrectly aesthetically engaged with imaginings does not arise. Since we cannot be aesthetically engaged with imagery, we cannot misjudge it.

The most recent and straightforward exposition of Sancho Panza's View on the aesthetic value of imagery appears in Hopkins (2024). He will be my stalking horse throughout this section.

Hopkins's aim is to argue that genuine aesthetic engagement is fundamentally connected to perception and cannot be achieved through mere sensory imagination. While it is intuitively tempting to believe that we can aesthetically engage with imaginings as we do with perception, Hopkins contends that this idea is mistaken.

Hopkins's argument has a clear structure. The first premise is grounded in the phenomenological description of aesthetic engagement. Hopkins claims that typical instances of aesthetic engagement are perceptual: we experience it when perceiving real objects. He explains that aesthetic engagement involves pleasure, which motivates us to expand and deepen our per-

ceptual awareness of the object. This encourages us to attend to and explore the object's non-aesthetic features, often yielding new insights. The process is dynamic and ongoing: as we observe, we might deepen our appreciation or abandon it if further investigation fails to satisfy. This fluctuation—the promise of refinement and the risk of collapse—is essential to aesthetic engagement.

According to the second premise, imaginings cannot replicate this experience. Although Hopkins defines imaginings as experiences of what it would be like to perceive certain things, they differ from perception. They lack the structure of reality that perception provides. In imagery, we control the object and its aspects, leaving nothing hidden to be discovered. While pleasure in imagining may motivate us to continue imagining, it does not motivate genuine exploration or discovery. There is nothing “out there” in imagery to be uncovered or to surprise us, since all aspects are already determined or can be arbitrarily altered by the imager. Even in cases where imagining seems to allow exploration, such as a composer elaborating a tune in her mind, any discoveries are either already implicit in what is imagined or are guided by external structures, such as a musical score or memory, rather than by the imaginative act itself.

Thus, if aesthetic engagement is the kind of experience that involves exploration, discovery, and the risk of refinement or collapse, and if, in turn, this requires a reality open to exploration (the first premise), and if sensory imagination cannot provide this (the second premise), then imagery does not evoke aesthetic engagement.

How can the idea of an inability to evoke aesthetic engagement be understood? According to Hopkins (2024, 221–223), imagery can *contribute* to aesthetic engagement with perceptual objects. For example, imagery can shift attention to an object's aesthetic features. However, imagery cannot be the *object* of aesthetic engagement. The corollary of this is that imagery cannot possess aesthetic value, since aesthetic value is taken to be the reason for aesthetic engagement with an object. Thus, imaginings lack aesthetic value.

How can we evaluate Hopkins's argument? For the purposes of this paper, it is unnecessary to analyse the premises of the argument, nor do I intend to undertake such an analysis. Instead, I will show that accepting the conclusion of the argument leads to undesirable consequences. Even if the logic of Hopkins's argument were sound, its conclusion would still leave us with the issue of the interaction between imagery and the aesthetic evaluation of perceptual objects.

The issue of how imagery interacts with the aesthetic evaluation of perceptual objects arises from the observation that, if imaginings are not aesthetically evaluable according to Sancho Panza's View, they cannot affect

the aesthetic evaluation of perceptual objects (contra Quixotic Claim). Yet imaginings do affect the aesthetic evaluation of perceptual objects. Therefore, imaginings should be aesthetically evaluable, which implies that Sancho Panza's View is false. I will call this the Interaction Argument.

The Interaction Argument

- (P1) According to Sancho Panza's View, imaginings lack aesthetic value (assumption).
- (P2) If imaginings lack aesthetic value, they cannot affect the aesthetic evaluation of perceptual objects (assumption).
- (P3) Imaginings can influence the aesthetic evaluation of perceptual objects (the Quixotic Claim).
- (C) Sancho Panza's View is false (*MT* from P2 and P3).

Since the Interaction Argument depends heavily on the second and third premises, I will establish them here.

The intuitive force of the third premise, supported by a longstanding tradition in aesthetics (e.g., Kant 2000), is the primary motivation for endorsing the Quixotic Claim. Both Quixoteans and Sancho Panzeans can argue that the reason for acknowledging (P3) is grounded in extensive research on the interaction between imagination and the aesthetic experience of perceptual objects (e.g., Nanay 2016; Nanay 2023; Nanay 2025b; Savile 2006; Scruton 1973; Sheppard 1991; Vartanian 2020). To keep the explanation brief, I will not explore these further. Instead, drawing on Nanay's analyses (2025b), I demonstrate the crucial role of sensory imagination in shaping aesthetic experience. Let me illustrate this with two examples.

First, one of the characteristics of Degas's paintings is his use of off-screen space. In the painting *Dancers Climbing the Stairs*, he places the central figures partially outside the frame. As depicted, they appear incomplete, and there is no point in trying to hide it, as this is impervious to aesthetic engagement. However, Degas's aim is to encourage viewers to use their imagination to complete the scene, envisioning the rest of the dancers' bodies that are not visible in the painting.

Second, in the installation *Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon)* by Katie Peterson, a piano performs a version of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. The sonata was encoded in Morse code, transmitted to the Moon, reflected off its surface, and then received back on Earth. Only part of the information was reflected. Some was absorbed in the shadows or lost in the Moon's surface. The returned transmission has been reinterpreted as a new score. The gaps and absences become

intervals and rests in the music. Listeners must use auditory mental imagery to fill in the gaps and reconstruct the familiar melody.

These examples show that sensory imagination, whether visual, auditory, or multimodal, is essential to how we interpret, complete, and find meaning in artworks, often extending beyond what is directly perceived by our senses. Imagery shapes our engagement with art and is a fundamental part of aesthetic experience. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that imagery shapes the aesthetic experience of perceptual objects and affects their aesthetic evaluation, which is the basis of the Quixotic Claim.

However, proponents of Sancho Panza's View have a counter. They acknowledge the first and third premises; they contest the second. It might be false that lacking aesthetic values implies an inability to affect the aesthetic evaluation of perceptual objects.

The Quixoteans offer a straightforward account of the relationship between imagery and perception. Imaginings can affect aesthetic evaluation, as they are aesthetically evaluable in themselves. By contrast, Sancho Panza's response suggests that imaginings alone cannot trigger aesthetic evaluation. Only direct perceptual experience can do so. However, imagery can play a preparatory role in aesthetic evaluation, readying individuals to engage aesthetically. For example, imaginings can direct viewers' attention to perceptual aspects of the artwork, emotionally prime viewers, and boost their willingness to engage aesthetically with it. Imagery need not possess aesthetic value to influence aesthetic evaluation. That is the view Hopkins explicitly endorses (2024, 221–223).

Nevertheless, Sancho Panza's response is ineffective. Let us reconsider Degas's *Dancers Climbing the Stairs*. The important part of the painting is not depicted on the canvas. The viewer must picture it. Imagery cannot simply be preparatory, meaning that it shifts attention to the perceptual features of the painting, because there are no elements on the canvas for the viewer to focus on.

Proponents of Sancho Panza's View may recognise the essential psychological role of imagery in completing Degas's painting. However, they might still argue that imaginings build only on what Degas has already depicted on the canvas. Imaginings can act as a lens through which we perceive the artwork. That seems accurate. Imaginatively completing Degas's painting is not unrestricted. The painting's properties guide it. Therefore, imagery only enhances the painting's aesthetic qualities.

However, given that imaginings lack aesthetic qualities, it is difficult to see how they could determine the painting's aesthetic features. Let me explain.

On the one hand, let us suppose that supporters of Sancho Panza's View adopt a non-reductive stance on aesthetic values and hold that imaginings lack an aesthetic dimension; only perceptual objects possess it. Hopkins seems to gesture in that direction.

However, that will not do. If imaginings lack an aesthetic dimension, they cannot affect the aesthetic aspect of a perceptual object, just as the length of a rectangle cannot affect its width. These are different dimensions.

Suppose aesthetic value is a determinant of a determinable. Granted that imaginings lack aesthetic value, they cannot serve as a determinant of a determinable. Consider the *Earth-Moon-Earth* sonata. As it stands, it fails to capture the aesthetic dimension of Beethoven's original. For instance, it lacks the characteristic tempo and dynamics. Mental imagery does not merely build on what is given in the installation, since what is given is aesthetically incomplete. Imagery adds aesthetic qualities to the installation, thereby determining its aesthetic value. However, if imagery lacked an aesthetic dimension, it could not determine the installation's aesthetic aspect.

This issue is even more evident if we recognise that imaginings can *alter* the aesthetic value of the perceptual object. Degas's painting shows only parts of its figures. As it stands, it lacks aesthetic qualities, such as harmony and composition. It is the mental imagery that completes it and makes it aesthetically valuable. However, if imaginings themselves lack aesthetic qualities, it would be difficult to see how they could change the painting's aesthetic value.

Thus, if we regard the imagery's role solely as preparatory or attentional, we underestimate cases in which imagistic content partially constitutes the aesthetic value of the perceived work, rather than merely facilitating detection. In these cases, imagery does not simply direct attention to pre-existing aesthetic features; it supplies missing, aesthetically relevant structure. Here, imagery plays a constitutive role in aesthetic experience rather than merely influencing it psychologically. The interaction problem, as described by the second premise, is metaphysical, not psychological, and preparatory-role accounts fail to address it.

On the other hand, let us suppose that supporters of Sancho Panza's View adopt a reductive stance towards aesthetic values, suggesting that something makes aesthetic value valuable and aesthetic. However, in that case, there is no fundamental reason to deny the aesthetic value of imagery.

Suppose you regard aesthetic hedonism or the network theory as valid responses to the Normative Question. There is no good reason to believe that imaginings cannot evoke aesthetic pleasure or be part of normative practices. They certainly can. My mental image of summer brings me much pleasure during the winter days. Similarly, the mental image of summer is

part of the general normative practices. We would not consider imagining a summer hurricane a proper mental image of summer days.

Similarly, if you consider aesthetic formalism or immediacy theories as valid answers to the Aesthetic Question, there is no fundamental reason to deny aesthetic properties to imagery. On the one hand, imaginings certainly have perceptual features; on the other, denying that we cannot directly recognise the aesthetic values of imagery is question-begging unless we offer additional reasons for such a claim. A lack of an aesthetic dimension could serve as such an additional reason, but that returns us to the issues surrounding non-reductive interpretations of aesthetic value.

Thus, supporters of Sancho Panza's View lack a convincing account of how imagery shapes the aesthetic evaluation of perceptual objects. If they adopt a non-reductive approach to aesthetic values, they cannot explain how a non-aesthetic dimension of imagery can influence an aesthetic aspect of perception. If they adopt a reductive approach to aesthetic values, there is no compelling reason to deny imagery aesthetic value. In contrast, the Quixoteans do possess such an explanation. Consequently, assuming the rest of the premises of the Interaction Argument are valid, Sancho Panza's View appears to be false.

However, according to the Internalistic Argument, the Quixotean View is also incorrect. Yet there is no middle ground between these two views. Either imaginings have aesthetic value, or they lack it; *tertium non datur*. Therefore, the Quixotic Dilemma is a genuine dilemma, and the Quixotic Question remains undecidable.

6. A Way Out of the Dilemma

In the previous sections, I have argued that any attempt to determine whether imagery possesses aesthetic value must confront the Quixotic Dilemma. Drawing on Nanay's and Hopkins's account of sensory imagination, which I took to represent Quixotean and Sancho Panza's views, I demonstrated that either you must address the correctness conditions of aesthetic judgements or explain the influence of imagery on the aesthetic appreciation of perceptual objects. In this section, I show a way out of this dilemma.

A prudent strategy for resolving any dilemma is to identify a shared assumption underlying opposing viewpoints and to examine its implications. If these implications are responsible for creating the dilemma, there is a good reason to reject this shared assumption. The common assumption of Nanay and Hopkins is that they both define sensory imagination in experiential terms.

Why do I argue that Nanay and Hopkins define mental imagery in experiential terms? I discussed Nanay's internalist commitments in a previous

section. I argued that if Nanay interprets his theory of imagistic experience in terms of perceptual content, then, depending on how one construes the content, his description of the content can either be equated with the description of experience, or the properties of imagistic content and the corresponding experience are distinct.

In the case of Hopkins's theory (2024), the situation may not be entirely clear. Firstly, some distinctions between perception and imagery, as described by Hopkins—such as differences in the accuracy conditions—concern content rather than experience. Secondly, he argues, in contrast to perceptual theories, that imaginings are akin to knowledge of how the imagined objects appear when perceived. This suggests that his theory concerns the content of mental imagery. However, he maintains that imaginings cannot be reduced to knowledge alone: “to imagine cannot simply be to exercise knowledge” (Hopkins 2024, 12). According to Hopkins, while in perception knowledge is employed to form expectations about perceptual objects, the knowledge manifests itself in undertaking commitments to the perspective-dependent properties of the experienced objects, known as sensory profiles.

It is not necessary to assume that sensory profiles are properties of experience. They can be explained in terms of the perspectival properties of the content. For example, they can be understood as the representation of an object according to the laws of optics. However, Hopkins is more specific. He argues that sensory profiles are the properties that the imaginer must be aware of (Hopkins 2024, 43n). According to Hopkins's phenomenological principle, No Unconscious Imaginings, everything imagined is imagined consciously and possesses distinctive phenomenology. Although experience need not be a conscious representation, every phenomenologically conscious representation is an experience of some kind. Thus, Hopkins's phenomenological account of imagery concerns imaginistic experience.

Defining mental imagery in experiential terms is not a bug but a feature, much like trying to define it in terms of its representational format. It has both benefits and drawbacks. For example, it enables us to identify and describe fascinating aspects of how imagery influences perception.

However, describing mental imagery in terms of experience is not the same as describing it in terms of content (cf. Arcangeli 2020; Dokic and Arcangeli 2016). Although these two descriptions are often confused, they are distinct. Mental imagery as experience resembles perception because it produces a perception-like experience of an object. Experiential theories of imagery explore what it is like to have the imagistic experience of X. Conversely, when focusing on content, the explanatory work is done by its representational content, not by the phenomenal character of the experience itself. Content-based theories (e.g., Langland-Hassan 2020) examine

what imagining *X* represents as being the case and under what conditions that representation is accurate or inaccurate. According to these theories, imagery is not primarily a kind of experience; it is a representational state that may (but need not) give rise to experience. This does not deny phenomenology. It denies that phenomenology is explanatorily basic and that it determines the nature and correctness conditions of imagery.

Why does the distinction between experiential and content-based theories of imagery matter? I hold that the Quixotic Dilemma arises because aesthetic value is applied to experience rather than to represented content. In other words, it is the experiential understanding of sensory imagination that leads to the Quixotic Dilemma. Once aesthetic value is linked to experience, you face either aesthetic internalism (the first horn) or the denial of evaluability altogether (the second horn). Attributing aesthetic qualities to imaginistic experience is the primary reason the Quixotean View is rejected. Conversely, adopting Sancho Panza's View results in an inability to clarify how imagery determines aesthetic value in perception.

In contrast, content-based theories of mental imagery offer a third option. Imagery can be aesthetically evaluated by what it represents, even if the experience itself lacks aesthetic value. This mirrors a similar approach in aesthetics. We do not judge perceptual experiences as beautiful or ugly; we assess what they represent. Thus, content-based theories are, in principle, resistant to externalistic objections and can explain how imagery affects perception. If the content of imagining is aesthetically evaluable, it can affect the aesthetic content of perception.

According to content-based theories, imagery may possess aesthetic value in virtue of the aesthetic properties attributed to its content. This avoids both horns of the Quixotic Dilemma. Aesthetic value is not a property of the imaginistic experience (contra Quixoteans), yet imagery is aesthetically evaluable (contra Sancho Panzaeans). Because imaginistic content has correctness conditions, one can misrepresent an object aesthetically in imagery. Significantly, the possibility of aesthetic error in imagery is explained by incorrect imaginistic content, not by defective phenomenology. Because imaginistic content can possess aesthetic value, it can interact with perceptual content. There is no need to say that imagery's role is merely preparatory.

Therefore, although the experiential understanding of mental imagery has significant merits, it cannot resolve the Quixotic Dilemma. Perhaps this is a cost we must accept. By contrast, if mental imagery is understood in terms of content rather than experience, the Quixotic Question may no longer be undecidable. In this case, we are invited to develop content-based theories of mental imagery that, importantly, can explain the similarities and differences between perceptual and imaginative experiences.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I address the Quixotic Question of whether imagery has aesthetic value. I argue that, under certain conditions, this question is undecidable.

I present two opposing perspectives on the aesthetic value of imagery: the Quixotean View and Sancho Panza's View. The Quixotean View holds that imagery can have aesthetic value, whereas Sancho Panza's View holds that it lacks such value. I examine the implications of these views and introduce the Quixotic Dilemma, which highlights the tension between how imagery shapes perception and the risk of misjudging aesthetic value. I maintain that both views fail to resolve the Quixotic Question and that this question remains undecidable within the traditional experiential framework.

The paper is not pessimistic, however. Appealing to the undecidability of the Quixotic Question is diagnostic, not nihilistic. It identifies the assumption that blocks progress and shows how abandoning it opens new explanatory possibilities. I suggest that resolving the dilemma may involve rejecting the assumption that sensory imagination can be defined solely in experiential terms. As long as we define mental imagery in experiential terms, we cannot coherently determine whether imagery is aesthetically evaluable. By contrast, in content-based theories, mental imagery is evaluated by what it represents rather than by the nature of the experience itself; therefore, it may be aesthetically evaluable. By highlighting the undecidability of the Quixotic Question within experiential accounts, the paper calls for developing content-based theories that focus on representational content, enabling a better understanding of the role of imagery in aesthetic experience. This paper is a warm invitation to develop such theories.

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