Reply to Myszkowski et al. (2020): Some matters of fact concerning aesthetic sensitivity

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We thank Myszkowski (2020) and colleagues for their critical comments on our recent work on aesthetic sensitivity (Corradi, Chuquichambi, Barrada, Clemente, & Nadal, 2020). We are also very grateful to the editors of the British Journal of Psychology for enabling this discussion. Too many ideas in empirical aesthetics have never been thoroughly examined and debated. We cannot address each of Myszkowski (2020) and colleagues' points in a short response. We will be selective, showing how their criticisms stem from factual inaccuracies.

First, Myszkowski (2020) and colleagues claim that "Since Thorndike (1916), it has been clearly admitted that the aesthetic value of a stimulus is actually only determined by expert consensus". This statement is wrong historically, psychologically, and neuroscientifically. Historically, because expert consensus changes: Impressionism was initially rejected by experts, only to be revered by the next generation of experts. Which experts determined the true aesthetic value of impressionism? Psychologically, because from Fechner to the present, hundreds of empirical studies have identified many other determinants of aesthetic value. Neuroscientifically, because aesthetic value is determined by the brain's reward system assessing sensory information according to current state, goals, and expectations (for a review see Skov, 2019).

Second, Myszkowski (2020) and colleagues claim that aesthetic sensitivity, "as the ability to identify (consensually/expertly defined) aesthetic value for over a century, is clearly conceptually defined". This is misleading. It is, in fact, unclear what this ability actually involves. It is even unclear who the purported experts are. In Child's (1965) work, the experts were only 14 judges: "mostly students in the School of Art at Yale, some were graduate students in history of art, and some were older people in the New Haven area with similar qualifications" (Child, 1965, p. 477). Only in 37% of the cases did all *or almost all* experts

agree. In Eysenck's VAST, the experts were only "eight well-known painters" (Götz, Borisy, Lynn, & Eysenck, 1979, p. 796), of whom no further information is given. Is aesthetic sensitivity the ability to make judgments in accordance with 14 art and art history students at Yale during the 1960s, who disagree 63% of the time, or in accordance with 8 unknown well-known artists in the 1970s? The fact of the matter is that the ability conception of aesthetic sensitivity rests on shaky conceptual definitions of *expertise* and *consensus*.

Finally, Myszkowski (2020) and colleagues claim we are attacking the ability approach of aesthetic sensitivity, but that it is Child's conception, not Eysenck's: "Child's (1964) definition of aesthetic sensitivity, which is currently the most used for the construct, clearly describes aesthetic sensitivity as the ability to 'judge in relation to external standards'". Myszkowski (2020) and colleagues are wrong. Child (1964) did not conceive aesthetic sensitivity as a specific ability, but as the expression of general cognitive style, personality, and experience, as "an outcome of a general cognitive approach to the world, an approach involving search for complex and novel experience which is then understood and evaluated through relatively autonomous interaction of the individual with objects providing such experience" (Child, 1965, p. 510).

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