Beauty requires thought

The experience of beauty is selectively impaired by a demanding cognitive task

NYU PSYCH CNS

DAAD

Aenne A. Brielmann & Denis G. Pelli

Testing Kant

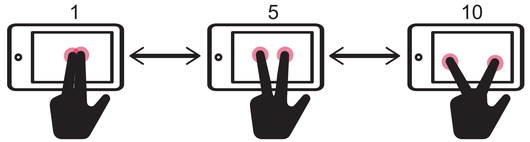
The experience of beauty is a special sort of pleasure [1,2,3]

Kant: "Beauty requires thought, and ordinary pleasures do not."

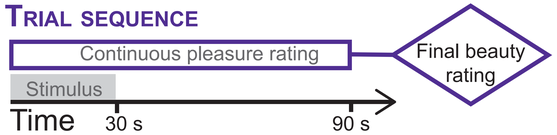
Test of Kant's hypothesis:
Can beauty be experienced without cognitive resources?
Is this requirement unique to the pleasure of beauty?

Continuous pleasure ratings

Custom touchscreen application emotiontracker.com

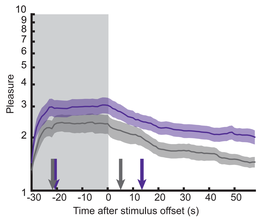


Trial sequence

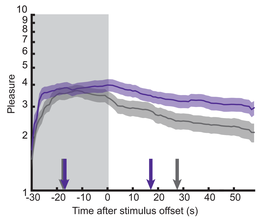


Beauty ratings

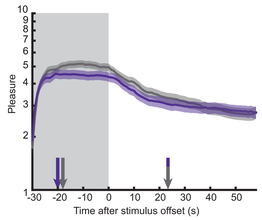
Only pleasure from beautiful stimuli is reduced while performing a secondary cognitive task.



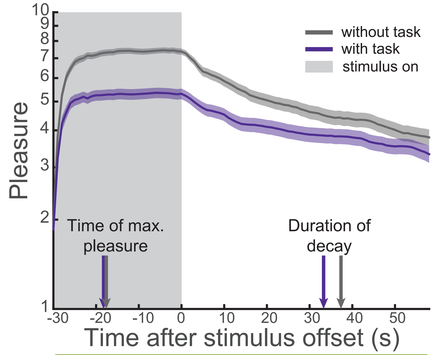
Definitely not beautiful (*N*=53)



Perhaps not beautiful (*N*=49)



Perhaps beautiful (*N*=97)



Definitely beautiful (*N*=131)

Experiment 1

2-back task (letters)

L S R S T T

Key press response for each target letter

Experiment 2

Verbal response for each target letter

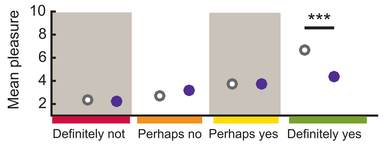
Experiment 3

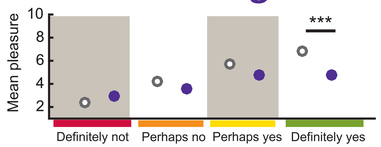
Digit span task

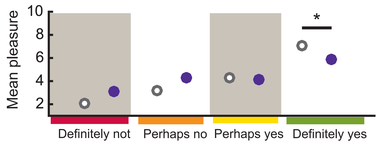
4 5 0 2 8 5 3 3 7 8

Verbal response once at the end of each trial

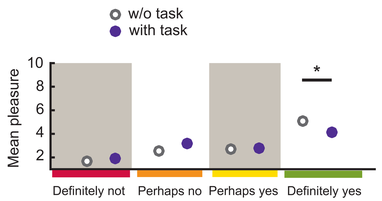
Cognitive load reduces pleasure of beautiful but not ordinary experiences, both during ...

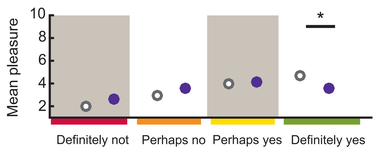


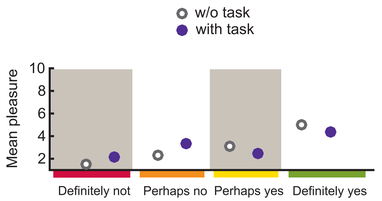




and after stimulus.







Discussion

The experience of beauty is characterized by high pleasure ratings during and after stimulus exposure, confirming earlier findings [7].

Surprisingly, people can experience beauty through touch and taste.

Kant was right: Beauty does require thought, while ordinary pleasures do not.

Future directions

Are there other obstacles to the beauty experience?
Does clinical depression block access?
What about drug addiction?

Is the integration of emotion and cognition crucial for other domains such as complex decision making?

References

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