Decoupling, situated cognition and immersion in art

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Abstract Situated cognition seems incompatible with strong decoupling, where representations are deployed in the absence of their targets and are not oriented toward physical action. Yet, in art consumption, the epitome of a strongly decoupled cognitive process, the artwork is a physical part of the environment and partly controls the perception of its target by the audience, leading to immersion. Hence, art consumption combines strong decoupling with situated cognition.

Keywords Strong decoupling · Situated cognition · Art consumption · Immersion

Introduction

The notions of decoupling and situated cognition are generally taken to be incompatible (i.e., a cognitive process cannot be both decoupled and situated). However, I will argue here that this incompatibility breaks down in the consumption of art.

Let’s begin with a few definitions. There are two versions of decoupling, decoupling weakly understood and decoupling strongly understood:

Decoupling weakly understood occurs when a representation is deployed in a cognitive process in the absence of its target.¹

Decoupling strongly understood occurs when a representation is weakly decoupled and when, in addition, the cognitive process is not oriented toward action (i.e., the representation is not entertained as a means to any physical action).

Regarding situated cognition, it is one among several “extensions” of the notion of cognition. Basically, the idea is that the cognitive process extends beyond the agent’s brain (and body) into the environment:

Situated cognition occurs when a cognitive process is triggered and controlled online by features that are present in the environment.

Though one can have a representational approach to situated cognition, taken to its extreme, the notion is compatible with the idea that representations are, in fact, unnecessary (see, e.g., Chemero 2009). This is not compatible with the possibility of strongly decoupled cognitive processes being situated.

Given the three definitions above, it makes sense to conclude that strongly decoupled cognitive processes are ipso facto not situated: They are dependent on the cognitive representations of absent targets, which, being absent from the environment, cannot either trigger or control them online. Thus, they are independent of the environment.

Yet, there are a few indications that this conclusion might be premature. The main one has to do with the (esthetic) notion of immersion. Immersion is a rather elusive notion, but the main idea seems to be that, during art consumption, the spectator feels herself to be somehow part of the environment created by the artwork (see

¹ The terms absence and presence have to be understood literally: An object (e.g., a representational target) is present if it is a part of the physical environment of the agent and absent otherwise.
Guelton 2014). Let me introduce some terminology: The actual environment is the environment in which the spectator is physically present and on which she can act; the alternative environment is the environment in which she is also immersed, though she is not physically present in it. Immersion linked to art consumption is thus, so to speak, an alternative experience, in the sense that it is not linked to the actual environment in which the spectator is a physically present agent. Its main interest here lies in the possibility of experiencing an alternative environment through the same perceptual systems through which the actual environment is perceived.

The argument will go as follows. On the face of it, art consumption is a strongly decoupled process: It relies on cognitive representations whose targets are absent and is not oriented toward physical action. However, immersion shows that, while it is a strongly decoupled process, art consumption is not thereby a non-situated process, in the sense that it would be independent of the actual environment. This is because immersion—as manifested in art consumption—depends on the artwork itself which is a physical part of the actual environment and which triggers and controls immersion online. If this is correct, then art consumption is not only a situated process; it is also a case where cognition is extended2 via an artifact in the actual environment. In other words, art consumption is a situated cognitive process in as much as it is an instance of extended cognition.

Art consumption as a strongly decoupled cognitive process

Art consumption is a strongly decoupled cognitive process because of the nature of artworks.3 Let us take the example of Titian’s Man with a glove. In this painting, the spectator is presented with a dark young man, dressed in black and white and holding in his left glove a glove, while his naked right hand points to something beyond the frame. But, of course, there is no young man or any of the other things the painting represents. In other words, the spectator looking at Man with a glove is not looking at any of the things represented on the canvas; she is looking at the canvas itself. This means that the cognitive process involved in her looking is weakly decoupled. Additionally, she cannot act on the represented target, as it is not physically present: She could only act on the canvas itself, e.g., pointing at it or at part of it, or taking it off the wall and going away with it, or even damaging it in one way or another; but she wouldn’t thereby act on the represented object. In other words, the decoupled representation she forms of the target (as part of the alternative universe) is not oriented toward action. Hence, it is a strongly decoupled cognitive process.

It should be noted that this is the case whether the events or objects represented are real (they existed at some point) or not; in other words, pictorial representations of fictional, nonexistent, objects or events (e.g., The Birth of Venus by Botticelli) have exactly the same characteristics and raise the same questions.

Immersion

As said above, immersion would seem to be a characteristic of situated cognitive processes. Given my interest here, I will take it that immersion is basically normal perception, as understood by the ecological theory of perception (Gibson 1986, loc. 4816):

“A perceiver is aware of her existence in a persisting environment and is also aware of her movements relative to the environment, along with the motions of objects and nonrigid surfaces relative to the environment. The term awareness is used to imply a direct pickup of the information, not necessarily to imply consciousness. (…) The ecological approach to (…) perception begins with the flowing array of the observer who walks from one vista to another, moves around an object of interest, and can approach it for scrutiny, extracting the invariants that underlie the changing perspective structure and seeing the connections between hidden and unhidden surfaces.”

This description is partly phenomenological, describing perception in terms of the experiences the perceiver undergoes: She is immersed into a complete array of sensory impressions, modified by her own actions (e.g., movements), which allows her to navigate her environment and act upon it. Perception is an active, rather than a passive experience. Clearly, on such a view, immersion can only be a situated cognitive process: It is dependent on the environment, even though the perceiver’s actions enter into her perceptual experience.

Immersion obviously occurs relative to the actual environment. But, as said before, the events or objects represented in an artwork are not part of the spectator’s actual environment. They are part of an alternative
environment. So the question is how the spectator can become immersed into that alternative environment.

**Art consumption is normal perception**

A first requirement for art consumption to be immersive in the sense given above is that it should use normal perceptual processes. How likely is that?

The answer to that question is directly linked to the answer to another question: How is it that, in art consumption, we both perceive the canvas and the objects or events the canvas represents (its representational target)? On the face of it, this seems contradictory: One would expect that the spectator would perceive either the canvas as a material object, or, transparently, its representational target (as if the canvas did not exist), but not both at once. This, as a matter of fact, was what Gombrich (1961) proposed: The artwork is perceived, as are ambiguous images, either materially or transparently, and the spectator alternates between the one and the other.

Yet, Wollheim (1980) notes that this is not a correct description of the phenomenology of art consumption: Looking at an artwork does not entail any alternation. One is simultaneously conscious of both the artwork in its materiality and its representational target. There is a difficulty here that Gombrich avoids: How can one perceive, at the same time, the canvas and its representative target? The representative target is perceived transparently (through what appears to be a willful neglect of the material canvas), so how can the canvas be perceived as such? Wollheim’s proposal is that one sees the object in the image in much the same way as one sees an object in a cloud or in a stain on a wall. One does not see the object; rather one sees the cloud or the stain as this or that object.

Though this is a reasonable way out of the difficulty, it does not seem to go well with the possibility of esthetic immersion. And the notion of seeing as is elusive: Is it an instance of normal visual perception, using the same mechanisms as in the regular visual perception of the actual environment? Or is it an alternative form of perception, using different mechanisms? Lopes (1996) has approached the problem from a different angle, noting that some images are not perceived as material objects at all, but offer only a transparent perception of their representational targets. This is the case with trompe-l’œil. In such cases, there is no doubt that the perceptual mechanisms involved are continuous, not to say identical, with the perceptual mechanisms involved in the perception of the actual environment. If this is the case, then there is no reason to think that there are perceptual processes specific to art perception. Rather what happens when artworks are perceived both materially and transparently happens at a conceptual level: In addition to the other objects or events present in the actual environment and to the representational target (in the alternative environment), the spectator also identifies the artwork in its materiality as an additional object in the actual environment.

So art perception is normal perception.

**Immersion in an alternative environment**

As said before, immersion accompanies the perception of the actual environment, basically because immersion is a natural result of the perceptive process. So a first answer to the question of how one can be immersed in an alternative environment is that this is only possible if the alternative environment is perceived through the same perceptual processes, as is the actual environment. As we have just seen, this is the case.

A second and potentially more important difficulty is that, in cases where there is dual perception (the artwork being perceived both materially and transparently), the artwork is not a seamless part of the actual environment: It is considered as a part of that actual environment, but its representational target is not. In other words, it introduces another, alternative environment. The question then is: How can one be immersed at once into two different environments?

If, however, immersion is basically the result of regular perceptual processes, not of conceptual processes, and if the distinction between the actual and the alternative environments is basically a conceptual distinction (as it is grounded in the identification of the artwork as such), this apparently pressing question turns out to be inappropriate and based on a category mistake. So let me now turn to art consumption as an extended cognitive process. Extended cognitive processes are basically cognitive processes using artifactual tools (pencils and notebooks, computers, etc.). In art consumption, the artwork plays that role. It actually determines what it is that the spectator will perceive when she looks at the artwork, through the fact that what she sees is determined by (some of) the qualities (lines, patches of color, etc.) that the artwork has, in a classical relation of supervenience:

4 Experimental work on the visual perception of art has reached the same conclusion (see the papers in Hecht, Schwartz and Atherton 2003).

5 The notion of category mistake was introduced by Ryle (1949) to refer to cases where confusion is introduced by the erroneous application of a category to an object for which it is inappropriate. My view here is that the distinction between environments occurs at the conceptual level, while immersion is a perceptual experiential phenomenon, and that it is thus inappropriate to question immersion on the basis of a distinction that occurs out of perception, at the conceptual level.
A set of properties A supervenes upon another set B just in case no two things can differ with respect to A-properties without also differing with respect to their B-properties. In slogan form, “there cannot be an A-difference without a B-difference” (McLaughlin and Bennett 2014).

In other words, there cannot be a difference in the perception of the representational target without a difference in the artwork itself. Or, to say it another way, what the spectator perceives in the artwork depends on the artwork itself, which means that it is a situated process (as the artwork is part of the spectator’s actual environment).

**Conclusion**

So, in conclusion, art consumption is a situated process in as much as it is an instance of an extended process.

**References**