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External Disruption and Creativity: When the West Looked Up to the East

Abstract: A key objective in explaining how creativity occurs and novelty is generated [may it be organized or not], is allowing for a mix of determinism and chance. One of the ways to create a disconnect between the creative act and the myriad factors bearing on it is by way of external jolts, disrupting not only routines and logics, but also structures of attention. The paper highlights the role of external disruption in novelty generation, and articulates a moderating mechanism of perceptual nature by drawing on the work of Foucault. As illustration, I discuss the “externalization” of artistic attention and the construction of counter-sites in late 19th century Western Europe by appropriating Japanese art to conceive of alternatives to academic art. I suggest that external disruptions are most consequential when they reinforce internal relational schisms.

In the social sciences there is increasing interest in how culture changes through the generation of novelty. Research on creativity is moving away from its psychological origins, connecting to other fields in the social sciences, such as sociology (for a review, see Godart et al. 2020). For sociologists creativity is not a feature of unusual personalities nor the ability to generate new and useful ideas (Amabile 1996), but a configuration of cultural and material elements that is unexpected for an audience (Godart, Seong, and Phillips 2020). This perspective assumes that creativity is the consequence of broader social factors, such as the constitution of “fields” (Bourdieu 1984), the system of attribution of rewards and recognition (Becker 2008) or the social networks in which individuals are embedded (Burt 2004; Cattani and Ferriani 2008). The generation of novelty derives from the density of cultural ecologies and from mechanisms of self-differentiation of actors (e.g. Abbott 2001), as they compete to accumulate various forms of capital (Bourdieu 1984). The position occupied in
networks of social relations shapes the individual proclivity to adopt or challenge
conventions in a field (e.g. Cattani and Ferriani 2008; Godart and Galunic 2019).

However, organizational and sociological scholarship understands much better
how individuals choose between alternatives that are available in their environment
than how these alternatives are generated in the first place (Padgett and Powell 2012).
We are better equipped to analyze the make-up of the institutional “box” of rules and
conventions around creative activity (e.g. Becker 2008; Bourdieu 1984), than how
individuals break out of this box to conceive of original ideas. The tendency to
explain novelty generation in terms of the recombination of pre-existing elements
(see Godart, Seong, and Phillips 2020) poses an important question: but where does
“genuine” novelty come from? Kronfeldner (2009) observes that the study of crea-
tivity is plagued by a paradox: either creativity is unexplainable (if it brings about
genuine novelty) or what is explained is not creativity (if it does not bring about
genuine novelty). If the creative act is reducible to a form of recombination of pre-
exisiting elements, originality becomes theoretically problematic. The creation of
something that can be labelled as “original” requires some degree of independence of
the act of creation from the causal influence of its premises (Cattani et al. 2022).

This independence presupposes the existence of a disconnect between the cre-
ative act and the systemic factors, such that the generation of novelty does not result
 inexorably from the operation of forces of competition or relational affiliation. One
of the ways in which we can reduce the risk of overdetermination and specify a
disconnect of this kind is by examining forms of disruption of the practices in a field
that originate outside that field: what can be de

1 Disruption is the interruption of the smooth running of a system or the taken-for-grantedness of a
principle. In its magnitude, it ranges from small to large, such as transformation of key principles.
External jolts have an intuitive appeal as a source of creative rewiring, but they also pose a theoretical problem identified by Negro et al. (2022: 84): as changes of this kind tend to apply generally, it is not clear how they can account for the observed dissimilar trajectories in the data. To explain the emergence of novelty requires specifying the mechanisms moderating the impact of external disruptions on ideas, practices or identities (Cattani, Deichmann, and Ferriani 2022: 17).

The contribution of this essay is in articulating a moderating mechanism of perceptual nature that generates dissimilar trajectories as a result of the individual perception of and response to external disruption of core principles that regulate the operation of a field of activity. It is well-recognized in organizational sociology that external disruptions of customs and logics in a field can be highly consequential for its constitution (i.e. Fligstein and McAdam 2012). I draw attention instead to the ways in which external disruption shapes the patterns of distribution of attention in social space (Corbo, Corrado, and Ferriani 2016). It has recently been proposed that a key precondition for creative activity is the disruption of “structures of attention”: the patterns of “seeing” and “not seeing” in a field (Sgourev 2021). Drawing on Foucault’s work (1986), I articulate how external disruption unsettles and recalibrates self-perception in ways conducive to the generation of novelty. My argument is illustrated with a discussion of one of the most famous cases of external disruption in the history of culture: the profound transformation of European art in the late 19th century as a result of exposure to its mirror image: Japanese art. I suggest that external disruption is most consequential when it reinforces pre-existing social schisms, formed around affinity with or opposition to a practice or a concept.

1 Disruption and Perception

In Lewis Carroll’s (1871) “Through the Looking Glass”, Alice climbs through a mirror to enter into a world where everything is reversed, as a mirror image of the real world. Time runs backwards, walking away from something brings one closer to it. The White Queen remembers best things that happened the week after next. This is a world characterized by reversals and contrasts, a social space governed by principles opposite to those we are accustomed to.

A century later, Foucault (1986) conceptualized this social space in a short, provocative essay that continues to captivate and frustrate scholars (e.g. Bonazzi 2002; Dehaene and De Cauter 2008, Kahn 1995). He proposed that such counter-sites (defined as “heterotopias”) have contingent features and permeable boundaries, acting as mirrors of other spaces. What makes them worthy of attention is that in such locations the social order is simultaneously contested and inverted; conventions
and stable relationships are undermined and straightforward categorization is disrupted (Foucault 1986, 2002).

I adopt the understanding of counter-sites as mirrors of conventional social spaces, featuring acute tensions between principles of evaluation or “orders of worth” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). They are theoretically important for two reasons. First, because they direct attention to mechanisms of disruption of the social order that facilitate generation of novelty. Second, because of the perceptual nature of the mechanisms, at the same time behavioral and cognitive in nature.

Counter-sites are familiar to us, subsumed within the social order, but also unfamiliar, as they contradict the principles by which this order is sustained. They display a “curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault 1986: 24). The word “curious” signifies the state of simultaneous connection and contradiction between reality and the counter-site.

The idea of simultaneous connection and contradiction militates against the notion of “social cohesion” (Coleman 1990). It is generally expected that social connection is based on affinity or some form of social homophily (Granovetter 1985). The counter-site, instead, simultaneously “represents, contests, and inverts” the logic governing social reality (Foucault 1986: 24). For reasons of analytical clarity we tend to separate these processes; it is convenient to categorize actions into those asserting the social order, contesting it and pursuing to invert it. Yet, the counter-site simultaneously disrupts and represents the social order, with the disruption creating preconditions for generation of novelty.

The generation of novelty in this perspective emanates from disruptions that arise naturally in the process of representation. It is not the result of a self-conscious act of rule-breaking or the capacity to generate new solutions (e.g. Amabile 1996), but of a chain of disruptions to customary practices of repetition that create momentum toward contestation or inversion of conventions. Disruptions may have disproportionately large consequences when reorganizing patterns of social interaction (e.g. Kuran 1995), or recalibrating perceptual processes.

Foucault (2002) gives an example of such disruption: a fictional Chinese encyclopedia using alphabetical ordering to reduce the distinction between fantastic creatures and those that exist in reality. This ordering system disrupts entrenched distinctions between categories, putting on an equal footing “fictional” and “real” characters. By undermining conventions of language or categorization, by disturbing sets of relations or dissolving areas of taken-for-grantedness, it creates possibilities for the reconfiguration of logics and for the emergence of new relations.

What is perhaps most distinctive about the disruption process specified by Foucault (2002) is its perceptual nature. Sociologists remain reluctant to explore
processes related to human vision, considering them as more appropriate to “natural” sciences (Onians 2007). However, attention to how meaning is generated and communicated through visual means is increasing (see Boxenbaum et al. 2018). In sociology, Zerubavel (1997) has developed a research agenda on “social optics”, asserting that vision is irreducible to its physical elements, proceeding in tunneling through “socialized” minds. Seeing is conditioned by the specific lens through which we perceive and the way others around us do so (Zerubavel 1997).

Foucault was an advocate of a theoretical perspective that combines cognitive and relational processes, treating vision as both a physical and social occurrence. Perception is “coded”, as cultural codes mediate experiences, structuring the ways in which concepts, practices and perceptions are articulated. This perspective arguably originated with Locke (1825),2 whose philosophy turned the problem of knowing into a matter of seeing: to know is to see. He explains cognition through visual metaphors, describing the human mind as a “camera obscura” – a darkened room into which the eye lets in images to be reflected upon and stored. Blurring the distinction between understanding and perceiving, he argues that thought processes and understanding originate in perceptual experience. Ideas are related to percepts, they are objects of cognitive processes.

Locke and Foucault have much in common: their insistence on the key role of perception in understanding, the liminal nature of concepts as simultaneously physical and social, ideal and real, and the theoretical importance of the refraction of the image – in the camera obscura (Locke 1825) or in the mirror (Foucault 2002). For Foucault, the mirror is of a “dual” nature. It is imaginary, as “in the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface” (Foucault 1986: 24). But the mirror also exists in reality “and exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there”. From the other side of the glass, “I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am”.

This paragraph conveys an understanding of the construction of the self as a sequence of exchanges between selves in different social locations, rather than the traditional concept of the self as constituted through exchanges with other actors (Mead 1934). The key function of the mirror is in facilitating the change of perspective, which, on its turn, creates the possibility for both disruption and contestation of the social order, and for inversion, as a consequence of that disruption. This theme also resonates Through the Looking Glass, highlighting the

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2 The general idea has been circulating for centuries before it was systematized. For example, Leonardo viewed art as a natural science grounded in optics. For him, knowledge derived from the direct observation of nature.
relative, tentative nature of the social order, and the possibility of its erosion upon
the adoption of a contrarian perspective. The juxtaposition of logics creates ambig-
uiy, conducive to the adoption of alternative perspectives on a subject, and as a
result, the recognition of justification principles contesting the social order (Bol-
tanski and Thévenot 2006). The adoption of alternative viewpoints and movement
between “here” and “there” allows for the emergence of a different “self” (“I come
back to myself and reconstitute myself there where I am”).

In this framework, creativity is perceptual in nature, as it derives from a shift in
perspective that disrupts the conventions of repetition and resemblance that
underlie the representation of the social order. This position is echoed in recent
accounts, where creative insight is defined as “optical” in nature (e.g. Sgourev 2021) –
a result of changes in “structures of attention” (Baxandall 1995), in the angles of
visibility and their refraction by personal experiences (Onians 2007), or as a
consequence of a Gestalt-switch between perceptions (Kuhn 1962). The assumption is
that creativity involves a modification of the way in which reality is “viewed”. Accordingly, Simonton (1999) articulates the perceptual nature of creativity, as an
embodiment of an iterative relationship between the creator and the social context.

The next section provides an illustration of external disruption in culture, drawing attention to the sudden rapprochement of aesthetic paradigms that had drifted apart for centuries.

2 External Disruption: Japanese Art

“Japanism” is one of the pre-eminent cases of external disruption in the history of
culture. The term captures the powerful influence of Japanese aesthetics on late
19th-century Western European art. Its magnitude is only comparable to Renais-
sance art, when the excitement of classical discoveries triggered a pan-European
wave of imitation and innovation (Weisberg 1975).

Japanism was an unexpected consequence of the abrupt, politically-mandated
opening of trade routes from Japan, putting an end to a state of relative isolation that
had lasted for two centuries. The first stage commenced in 1854, allowing for art-
works, along with other goods, to start being imported into the West. It continued up
to 1867, the year of the first Universal Exhibition in Paris, where Japanese artifacts
were prominently exhibited and acclaimed. In the second stage, from 1868 to 1883, a
taste for things Japanese swept through Europe (Chiba 1998). The third stage lasted
until the First World War, marked by the gradual decline of the public infatuation
with Japanese culture.

Paris was the epicenter of Japanism. A shop specializing in Japanese art was
opened in 1862 by Madame Desoye (“La Porte Chinoise”), whose customers included
Manet, Monet, Baudelaire, Zola, and Degas. What started with sporadic purchases, gave way to an insatiable appetite for objects from Japan by an ever-growing number of bourgeois amateurs. The merchant Hayashi Tadamasa brought 160,000 prints from Japan to France in the last decade of the nineteenth century (Sosnowski 2017: 9). By the time of the Universal Exhibition in 1867, Japanese prints were everywhere, while most forms of Japanese art were available by the early 1870s (Chiba 1998).

The woodblock print was the primary vehicle for the dissemination of Japanese aesthetics in Western Europe. Known as Ukiyo-e, meaning “the floating world”, these prints captured images of frivolous, pleasure-seeking activities from everyday life, as conveying the Buddhist preoccupation with the transience of human existence. The unfamiliar aesthetic that these prints encapsulated served to reinforce the quest for new reference points and representational principles that germinated on the margins of academic art (see Joyeux-Prunel 2015). Japanese art provided a response to a French art in representational crisis, in search for new solutions (Berger 1992).

Japanism is a complex, heterogeneous process, encompassing a broad array of artworks and practices. It refers to artists who integrate a Japanese object in a traditional (Western) composition, those who recombine or draw inspiration from forms or motifs from Japanese art, or those who incorporate Japanese rules of representation, by applying specific techniques (Houssais 2004). Artists responded to Japanese art in diverse ways, assimilating those elements or techniques that could be absorbed in the Western tradition and that they viewed as appropriate to their objectives, creating a “subjective code or private language” (Wichmann 1981: 397).

The products of Japanese arts and crafts disrupted the existing equilibrium and challenged the mental habits of the vast majority of artists, who were accustomed to the conventions of academic art. Japanese art appeared to artists as simultaneously distant and proximate. It was an art from elsewhere, distinctive and highly exotic, provoking the curiosity of both emerging artists and the members of the cultural elites. Proximate, because it was an exaggeration of ongoing searches and served to reinforce the rejection of academic principles by artists, such as Manet, Monet, Fantin-Latour, Degas, Whistler, Pissarro, Van Gogh and many others. They worked out new aesthetic concepts in relation to Japanese aesthetics, which were essential to the development of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist styles (Reed 2016). Starting from concrete objects, such as vases, flowers or garments, the artists strived to decipher the principles governing the representation of objects and composition of aesthetic space.

The fascination with the Eastern aesthetic was largely due to the fact that it offered a mirror image of “established” art. Many characteristics of Japanese art were antithetical to Western thought: asymmetry, irregularity of the composition, diagonal design, off-centered arrangement, empty space, lack of perspective, light with no shadows, and brilliant colors (Wichmann 1981: 10). Japanese art enabled
Western artists to peek *Through the Looking Glass*, surprised by the originality of pictorial effects, the displacement of the center of the painting, the abandonment of equilibrium and stability or the simplicity in the use of materials (Berger 1992).

These practices appeared perplexing from a Western perspective. Objects are not placed in the center, but may be positioned on the sides or be sliced, entering only partly into the frame. What is represented may only be a part of a bridge or a tree. An elevated viewpoint, according to the principle of “the viewpoint of a bird in flight”, was highly uncharacteristic of Western art (Bordenave 2009). The background is practically empty, not implicating action. The absence of a linear perspective and a sense of depth contradicted a central preoccupation of European artists since the Renaissance.

In the Japanese tradition figures are only sketched and left intentionally imprecise, to give the impression of an atmosphere, rather than represent the reality of human anatomy (Bordenave 2009). On the contrary, the careful reproduction of proportions on the canvas was taught in European art schools for centuries. In Japanese art proportions are not always maintained and faces are rendered with large traits. A penchant for bright colors (i.e. orange, green, red) contrasted with the restrained color palette in European art, where sophistication was equated with subtlety.

The contrast extended to the featured themes of everyday life that were relatively uncommon in French art (Bordenave 2009). Japanese artworks tell stories from daily life, mirroring practices in a distorting way through exaggeration or juxtaposition. *Ukiyo-e* prints in Japan were sold cheaply, like posters or advertisements for actors or courtesans. They were conceived and marketed as an antipode to “high” forms of aesthetics, representing common experiences in urban life or figures with dubious reputation. These prints are not about a state of quietude, but about activity and doing, resonating with artists increasingly preoccupied with representing movement – in nature or city streets (Joyeux-Prunel 2015).

### 3 The Optics of Japanism

The essence of Japanism was its awakening of the imagination and desire to interrogate reality. The discovery of Japanese art encouraged artists to pose themselves questions on the nature of the artistic practice, such as: should art copy Nature or how should art represent time? (Bordenave 2009). This art was full of possibilities, allowing for divergent, contradicting attitudes and ways of representing the world. It disrupted the core rules of artistic representation, but even more importantly, it provided an alternative to the optical tradition of the West.
Scholars tend to agree that a key reason for the admiration of European artists for Japanese art was the new way of perceiving and capturing reality (Wichmann 1981). It introduced a radically new vision (Colin 2015), as the sudden influx of unusual images prompted the recognition, adoption and reinterpretation of an “Eastern” way of seeing (Berger 1992). The first stage in this process was that of “unlearning” the visual habits conducive to imitation and repetition, by introducing deformations in the composition and the viewpoint (Colin 2015). The Eastern aesthetic did more than just reinforce artistic pursuits; it gave a reason for liberating oneself from conventionally stiff portrayals of human and natural forms, as evidenced in Degas’s famous scenes in the opera, where attention is focused on figures or actions, muting the surroundings (Napier 2007). It became customary for Western artists to adopt the Eastern perspective by directing the eye of the viewer toward distant or middle ground by the arrangement of foreground objects that are so close that they serve as a frame (Wichmann 1981). As they became more accustomed to images captured in ukiyo-e prints, artists such as Monet or Van Gogh, started observing the world “in the light of Japan”, where they had never been.3

This transformation or reversal of the viewing point is a key consequence of the visual play highlighted by Foucault (1986). European artists turned their attention to the East as a result of their increasing disenchantment with the restrictions of academic painting (Joyeux-Prunel 2015). As their relationship to Nature was changing, they allowed themselves to be seduced by the vision of Nature proposed by the East. The mechanism was based on the comparison of what was one’s own with what was foreign; the realization of the striking difference between these visions “revealed Europeans to themselves” (Sosnowski 2017: 16), and triggered intense search for new solutions.

The phenomenon of Japanism illustrates the process of “self-understanding” provoked by the clash of perspectives following disruption (Foucault 2002), as the gaze alternates between “here” and “there”. Western artists developed their personal vision of Japanese art that often lacked authenticity (Wichmann 1981), as they selected those features of that art that they considered most appropriate to their own pursuits. In the late nineteenth century, Western art and science were increasingly accommodating to the principle of contrast. The Japanese notion of harmony of opposites permeated French culture, as evidenced in the contrasting colors of Van Gogh or Gauguin, or in the growing scholarly interest in opposition as a social relation (e.g. Tarde 1897).

3 “I’d like you to spend some time here [in the South of France], you’d feel it—after some time your vision changes, you see with a more Japanese eye, you feel color differently.” Letter by Van Gogh, 5th June, 1888.
The ability of external jolts to disrupt and invert social relations through contrast (Foucault 1986) is illustrated by the “Société de Jing-lar”, a Japan-inspired social club set up by intellectuals in Paris in 1867. The taste for the Japanese aesthetic became a line of social division, as it distinguished “outsiders” from “insiders”, compelling choice in social affiliation. As Reed (2016: 45) points out, to appreciate Japanese aesthetics was to distinguish oneself from academics, from the dominant ideology of Imperial museums, and from social norms, more generally. The choice of exposure to the Japanese influence defined individual and collective identities. Groups of artists formed, their members united by a common use of a Japanese technique or sharing the same Japanese exemplars (Wichmann 1981). This illustrates how an external disruption may reinforce internal social differentiation; Japanese art was a powerful catalyst for the erosion of academic representational conventions, and bifurcation of the art world: between proponents and opponents of new representational methods (Sgourev 2021).

4 External Disruption and Perceptual Processes

The last two decades have witnessed the steep increase in scholarly interest in processes of creativity in sociological and organizational research (e.g. Burt 2004; Cattani and Ferriani 2008; Godart, Seong, and Phillips 2020), articulating an alternative, relational approach to the dominant psychological paradigm. Yet, the relational explanations have encountered predictable hiccups, running the risk of overreliance on path dependence and of overdetermination, where ideas emerge from past ideas (Cattani, Deichmann, and Ferriani 2022). This has led to renewed attention to sudden, unpredictable disruptions, trying to understand how these may account for individual differences (Negro, Kovács, and Carroll 2022).

This essay highlighted one way forward, by combining relational and perceptual mechanisms. This approach has methodological and theoretical implications. It recommends the identification of “structures of attention” in a field or an organization, before analyzing how an external factor disrupts these structures, and the particular forms of interaction of relational and perceptual mechanisms. For example, it is conceivable to use Tik-Tok or Instagram to gain insights into the proclivity of creative professionals to turn towards new, external sources of influence, and then explore the ways in which they reorient their attention and reposition themselves vis-à-vis disruptive external reference points.

The theoretical value of this approach is to allow for a disconnect between the act of creation and the many relational and institutional factors bearing on it. The
perceptual nature of the moderating mechanism helps explain how common external influence may lead to dissimilar individual outcomes (Negro, Kovács, and Carroll 2022). Perception is refracted through individual cognitive frames, and is dependent on the perception of those around us (Zerubavel 1997). Patterns of attention are socially structured and are an important source of motivation for creative activity (Sgourev 2021). By disrupting cognitive habits and presenting a contrasting perspective, a counter-site may recalibrate self-perception in ways conducive to the generation of novelty.

I illustrated the feasibility and potential value of the proposed approach by returning to the late nineteenth century, when a critical mass of European artists became willing to venture beyond well-trodden pathways and into exotic cultural landscapes. They turned their attention eastward in search of an alternative visual reality, as a counter-site that enlarges the field of possibilities and allows for the adoption of alternative viewpoints on prevailing technical and aesthetic problems. This involved a visual play, a dual process of an artist recognizing the pertinence of a counter-site and borrowing from it, but more importantly, positioning oneself in that space and examining oneself from the opposite angle or perspective. Imagining a space as the opposite to reality and representing reality from within that space is a cornerstone in the evolution of Modern art and a principal distinction from patterns of artistic creativity in past centuries. There is an alternative history of Modern art that is not about what artists painted or discussed but about what they paid attention to, as primary external reference points changed from the Orient in the early nineteenth century, to Japan in the second half of the century and Africa and Russia in the early twentieth century. Modern art can be conceptualized as a product of a sequence of external disruptions that interacted with developments intrinsic to the art world. The “externalization” of artistic attention in the late nineteenth century propelled the pursuit of original perspectives; this process featured counter-sites abroad, but also domestically, reimagining villages in Normandy, Brittany and Provence as sites of contestation, emphasizing their “mystic” cultural traits or heightened luminance.

The proposed framework highlights one mechanism of generation of alternatives, from which actors may choose (Padgett and Powell 2012). Disruption of attention by an external element or by an internal element perceived as external, can provide a powerful creative impetus. The extent to which external disruption affects perception and attention depends on a confluence of historical factors and the state of the dominant paradigm. As the crisis of artistic representation became tangible in the late nineteenth century, it encouraged shifts in the scope of search of artists and in the intensity of their pursuits.

Drawing on Foucault (1986), I highlighted the interpenetrating nature of social processes that we tend to analyze separately: representation, contestation and
inversion. The social order creates preconditions for its contestation and inversion through disruption, facilitating the emergence of new configurations of elements. From this angle, subversion and creation go hand-in-hand, similar to how the mirror-image simultaneously affirms and undermines the original. Creativity scholars tend to think of the creative act as disrupting an equilibrium of forces, but it may be more appropriate to think of the creative act as originating in that of disruption: of disrupting the rhythm (Shklovsky 1991) or the key principles of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). External disruption allows to visualize the mechanisms that ensure the taken-for-grantedness of the social order. It embodies the observation that the social order is an inherently unstable configuration of heterogeneous elements that can be modified without a strategic intent (Foucault 2002).

This essay advances the suggestion that external disruptions are most consequential when they reinforce internal schisms: when the external element responds to an internal relational dynamic that makes this element visible and noteworthy. On its turn, the external element allows for actors in a given field to reconsider their selves in new light. This dynamic of cognitive-relational interaction was only sketched in the case of Japanism, but it merits more systematic attention in future research.

Understanding how new developments emerge from pre-existing elements requires detailed attention to a set of factors, such as social relations, institutional routines, perceptual patterns and brain activity (Onians 2007). We are only at the outset of comprehending how “social optics” operate (Zerubavel 1997); how social relations orient individual perception, and how shifts in optical positioning lead to rearrangements of social networks (Sgourev 2021). This form of visual-relational play reminds of the key Enlightenment objective of reducing the divide between knowledge and perception (Locke 1825) and connects to main assumptions of quantum physics. Rovelli (2021) argues that the physical world is woven from the subtle interplay of images in mirrors reflected in mirrors. This applies just as well to the world that Alice observed Through the Looking Glass, as to the ways in which exotic Japanese images attracted and refracted the attention of outward-looking European artists.

References


