

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Aesthetic Perception¹

Harold Osborne

Many writers besides Bernhard Berenson have spoken about the enhancement of vital awareness—a more than usual energising of our perceptual grasp of things—which is, typically, attendant upon successful aesthetic engrossment with a work of fine art. In my own writings I have on various occasions put forward the suggestion that this expansion of awareness is as close as we can come to a key criterion for distinguishing aesthetic commerce from other kinds of preoccupation with the objective world. What I have in mind is a form of cognition characterised as direct apprehension or insight rather than analytical and discursive understanding, though sometimes it may follow from discursive analysis, and distinct from emotional response though sometimes it may be accompanied by or even excited by emotion. In this paper I try to elaborate in greater detail than before the nature of this aesthetic expansion of awareness and incidentally to suggest why I have proposed it as a criterion of aesthetic

activity. I shall begin with certain more general consideration and proceed towards the particular. Everyone, I believe, would accept that the rough and ready distinction between sleeping and waking is too crude to encompass the realities of experience. There are many stages between deepest sleep and full waking alertness. We may sleep profoundly or we may sleep superficially with the senses half triggered for response to any disturbance or interruption. There are intermediate states between sleeping and waking and sometimes, though awake, our actions are mechanical, our attention diffused rather than concentrated and we behave, as it is said, ‘as if in a dream’. At other times the senses are alert, the attention is fully focused either externally or internally, and we are keyed for action or keenly in control of a continuing activity. In addition there are rare moments—most people are familiar with them occasionally—when the faculties are raised to an unusual pitch of alertness, when we observe more keenly and rapidly, think more clearly, achieve

insights more penetrating than ever before or enjoy enhanced powers of will and decision. It is on occasions such as these that we seem most fully to be alive and life seems most worth-living. These peak experiences are the culmination of life's meaning.

Man is at his best when he is meeting a challenge or engrossed in an activity which has importance and value for him. It is then that his faculties are stimulated to the highest pitch, his energies come most competently into play and he is charged with the fullness of life. When challenge and purpose are lacking the mind is depleted and directionless, a man is disoriented and at odds with himself. Colin Wilson grasped this point when he said: The mind is a concentrating machine. That is the purpose for which it was built: to enable us to focus and concentrate on meanings, in order to be able to pursue them consciously and purposively instead of gropingly and blindly. Whenever we use it for this purpose, the effect is rather like clenching your fist; it gains in hardness and weight, and we experience a sense of reality. If it is left "unclenched", unconcentrated, for too long, the result is the feeling of "life failure", of unreality.² The human mind must be harnessed to a purpose in order to function. And purpose is tied up with the sense of value, importance, meaning, which cannot be artificially implanted or supplanted. In primitive societies the paramount needs of survival, material comfort, hunting and food gathering, protection of family and clan, defence of territorial claims, absorb available energies. The values of the individual are closely identified with those

of the clan and there is little or no incentive for the development of what civilised men call individual personality. Civilisation means the introduction of techniques and routines, including ever more elaborate techniques of collaborative effort, for satisfying the basic needs with less and less expenditure of energy so that energy is released for the pursuit of other purposes. And when this happens other values become necessary if society is to avoid deterioration. The compensatory values which emerge in advanced civilisations are the values of what we compendiously refer to as 'culture'. It is when these values are not taken seriously that civilised society falls ill. The sicknesses to which civilisation is prone result from boredom and purposelessness, the disorientation of individuals who are given the conditions but denied the impetus to develop personality. When living becomes routine and no longer demands the concentration of faculties harnessed to the pursuit of accepted values there ensues torpor and depression, a sense of unreality and frustration, what Kierkegaard and Camus called alienation, Sartre called nausea and the uncertainties of personal identity which the characters of Samuel Beckett display. The values of culture, a logically and practically necessary condition for the successful progress of civilisation, may be seen as emerging when faculties evolved in the interests of survival are diverted to other ends than the basic needs of survival and immediate sensory gratifications. As the urgencies of practical pressures diminish, these faculties are not allowed to fall into abeyance and atrophy but are cultivated deliberately, perfected into skills

and exercised for their own sake or rather for the sake of the higher-level satisfactions attendant upon their own perfection and exercise. It is only when these values, which belong to the development and enrichment of personality, are set above more elementary gratifications and needs that civilised society remains in a healthy state. When cultural values are no longer taken in earnest but are regarded as a secondary luxury or a supererogatory refinement then society is eroded by spiritual demoralisation. This affliction has perhaps never been a more serious danger than today when unprecedentedly rapid advances in material technology have effected enormous reductions in the necessary output of energy not only on the part of a favoured minority but for the vast majority of civilised people while at the same time eliminating the satisfactions and pride which used to be attendant on good craftsmanship and when the same technological civilisation has induced a materialistic outlook leading to the devaluation of non-material aims as a pleasant but unnecessary indulgence. There is greater necessity than ever before that educationalists should resolutely counter this attitude and inculcate from conviction the importance of cultural values. Cultural values, then, are values deriving from the satisfactions attendant on the cultivation and exercise of human faculties for their own sake rather than for ulterior ends of material comfort and gratification. They form one large category of intrinsic values. They may be classified, I think, into two main groups. In one group fall the manifold values which are

rooted in the cultivation of our reasoning powers and the exercise of thought for its own sake, culminating in logic, mathematics, theoretical physics, philosophy and metaphysics. Closely akin to these in the same group are values deriving from the cultivation of curiosity and exemplified in such disciplines as history, sociology and the taxonomic sciences. In the other main group are the values stemming from the cultivation of our perceptive powers and the exercise of percipience for its own sake. It is against this background that I now propose to elaborate on the idea of aesthetic expansion of awareness.

What we perceive and how we perceive it are determined by the nature of the interests which predominate at the time. Perception is a selective and organising process and the principles of selectivity and organisation which it imposes are ordinarily dependent upon habits of attention built up from childhood by the stringencies of practical life. In practical life our predominant habits are dictated by the need to utilise perception as the main source of information about a world of things which are subject to our manipulation and to which we respond. Therefore in everyday life perception is emasculated and jejune: it is an instrument for obtaining clues for action and it is allowed to impinge upon our awareness only to the extent of its serviceability for furnishing these cues. Although—or because—sensory perception is our only direct contact with a world outside ourselves, it is ordinarily channelled and born to practical needs. We are not ordinarily interested in dwelling upon and

savouring the unexpurgated content and quality of sensory experience. All this has, of course been said many times before. It is mentioned here only to point up the enormous revolution which occurs when perception is attended to, cultivated and enjoyed, not as a practical instrument, but for its own sake. Sometimes, on rare occasions, such a revolution of attitude occurs amid the routines of daily life. Sometimes when we see the clear starry firmament at night or a field of ripening corn blazing with poppies in the sun, when we hear the song of many birds at early morning or the blending of bells in a medieval town at evening, we rejoice. Our attitude changes abruptly. We attend to the experience for itself and not for the information it gives about something other than itself. We experience an upwelling of richer vitality in such perceptive activity and this, I am maintaining, is the paradigm and prototype of aesthetic activity, elementary though it still is. The joy which attends such vital enhancement must be distinguished from the titillation of sensory pleasure. There is a theory which finds the paradigm of aesthetic experience in sensory pleasure such as the pleasant smell of a rose.³ Following Kant, I have argued—I hope convincingly that this theory leads in a wrong direction and implants a fundamental error at the heart of aesthetic understanding. It is not the physical pleasantness of a smell, a taste or a touch which gives rise to what we call the aesthetic. It is the change of attitude which occurs when, instead of wallowing in the physical pleasure, we turn attention to the nature of the experience itself, savouring and discriminating its intrinsic

quale. We can do this as well with sensation, and when attention is so deflected the impact of its pleasantness or unpleasantness recedes. Our joy has its source in the exercise of perception for its own sake and this is the prototype and paradigm of aesthetic experience.⁴ This elementary aesthetic stance is capable of development along two distinct paths, which have not hitherto been systematically distinguished. I shall call them the refinement of discriminatory acuteness (what is sometimes more shortly called ‘sensibility’) and the enlargement of synoptic apprehension.

1. In his essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ David Hume uses the term ‘delicacy of taste’ with the meaning of discriminatory acuity, saying: ‘Where the organs are so fine as to allow nothing to escape them, and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition, this we call delicacy of taste, whether we employ these terms in the literal or metaphorical sense.’ He illustrates this with a story from Don Quixote about kinsmen of Sancho Panza with a hereditary judgment of wine so sensitive that they could detect the presence of an iron key on a leather thong at the bottom of a hogshead of wine. Such refinement of discriminatory acuteness may be cultivated in particular fields by such persons as professional wine-tasters, those who savour, pronounce on and invent a descriptive vocabulary for perfumes, gourmets and connoisseurs of food, and so on. Skilled craftsmen could often judge the qualities of their materials by touch and taste. When such refinements of sensibility are cultivated and exercised for

their own sake the attendant enjoyment is aesthetic, as with the delicate fingering of jade practised by Chinese connoisseurs. Finely discriminating sensitivity is a necessary contributory factor to cultivated appreciation in all the arts, for it is notorious that differences so minute as to be barely perceptible in themselves may have major effects on the balance and unity of complex works of art. Indeed it may often be the case that the defect or felicity in the organisation of the whole work first impinges on our awareness and through that awareness we come to detect the point of detail. Although he did not draw appropriate conclusions from it, Wittgenstein among many others liked to call attention to the surprisingly massive consequences of very small errors of proportion in architecture or wrong balance of volume in music. In painting and sculpture very small differences of colour, shape, size, texture, etc. can have consequences for the artistic organisation as a whole which far outweigh in importance the more massive changes caused by major accidental damage, the fading of colours through time, and all the injuries due to wear and tear. In music very small differences of pitch may ruin a performance, causing us to condemn it as 'out of tune', although certain folk melodies and some performances on stringed instruments gain emotional colour precisely by small departures from the scale of equal temperament. In the appreciation of literary art finely honed sensibility to the sound and rhythm of words, and to nice shades of meaning, is a *sine qua non* which the literary artist not only assumes but makes it his business to

galvanize and extend in his readers. Without the power to make exceptionally fine discriminations appreciation is crummiest and inhibited in any of the arts.

2. A work of art is a construct existing for the express purpose of exercising and extending perception when the faculty of perception is activated towards it without ulterior purpose. A work of art is judged to be successful aesthetically in the degree that it fulfils this function of extending and satisfying perception. The satisfaction and the joy which we experience is no recondite sensory pleasure but the satisfaction experienced in the exercise of a skilled faculty for its own sake. This is why we can properly speak of aesthetic satisfactions as cultural values. And this is why they carry an accrual of spiritual vitality.

The refinement of discriminative acuity is only a part, though a necessary part, of the expansion of perception brought into play in the appreciation of art objects. More important still is the massive increase in the volume and depth of content. In practical life we habitually operate with relatively small perceptual units, combining these intellectually in the manner of clues. But works of art, even those which seem superficially simple, are extremely complex organisational wholes, which must be apprehended directly in perception as wholes simultaneously with the apprehension of their parts. The elements of a work of art contribute to the composition of the whole as an organic unity⁵ in such a way that the whole is not constructed intellectually and analytically from its parts but is present no less directly to perception than the parts. There is, moreover, in most cases a

complex organisation of parts within parts at different hierarchical levels. Each whole at each level of containment manifests perceptual properties which are not present in the parts of which it is composed and which cannot be intellectually inferred from the properties of its parts and the relations in which they stand to each other. These are the properties which we call 'aesthetic'—elegance, gracefulness, and a thousand for which there are no names. Indeed the aesthetic properties of every work of art are original and unique to it, even when they can be brought roughly within some named category. The art of the critic consists in conveying an impression of these properties through the medium of language which lacks the means to describe them. It is in the apprehension of artistic wholes that high-level aesthetic perception departs most notably from the practical awareness which operates in everyday life and it is for this that the cultivation of a special perceptive skill is most necessary. The analogy of Gestalt perception is sometimes adduced in order to explain artistic apprehension, and provided that it is treated as an analogy only—and an imperfect one at that—there is nothing against it. We do indeed in ordinary life perceive certain fairly simple configurations as immediately as we perceive the elements from which they are composed. We see a triangle as directly as we see the three lines which compose it. We do not first notice three lines, then notice the relations in which they stand to each other and then make a rapid intellectual inference: 'This must be a triangle.' We see the triangle directly. Similarly we perceive an artistic

configuration directly and simultaneously with its constituent parts: we do not apprehend it by inference from the parts. An artistic configuration has (aesthetic) properties which are not present in and cannot be inferred from the parts and their relations. But the differences are still more important than the similarities. Not only are artistic configurations immeasurably more complex even in the simplest works of art than the Gestalten with which ordinary perception operates: artistic configurations have the uniqueness of particularity whereas the Gestalten of ordinary perception are essentially generalisations. We are confronted with a near-square and we see a square, with a near circle and we see a circle-Gestalt, and so on. To see a Gestalt is to reduce to generality. In perception the Gestalt is akin to the concept in thought processes. But a large part of the essential vitality of aesthetic perception derives from its avoidance of this generalising tendency. Moreover, as many psychologists have demonstrated, in ordinary practical perception there is an active tendency to complete open or imperfect Gestalten, perceiving what we do not see. In cultivating the perceptive skills required for the appreciation of the arts one of the most difficult tasks is to accustom oneself to perceive precisely and exactly what is there—without, of course, remaining blind to incomplete Gestalten when these are introduced as a feature of the total composition—as, for example, in music piquancy may result from a withheld resolution and in the work of Leon Polk Smith, Ellsworth Kelly and other Hard Edge painters a special feature was often

made of incomplete shapes suggesting completion outside the canvas.

It is the apprehension of richly and tensely organised perceptual material without practical implications that extends the perceptual faculties and brings about that expansion of awareness which, we have claimed, is the hallmark of aesthetic activity.

It is sometimes profitable to illustrate a point by contrast and with this in view it may be opportune to say a few words about so-called children's art. The drawings of young children generally reveal a fresh and lively delight in colours and shapes. They are spontaneous and uninhibited, often manifesting what in an adult would be called a too glib facility. Their colours are strong but crude, with little or no interest in subtle contrasts or blendings, without finer discriminations. Shapes too are vigorous but unsubtle. These drawings are concerned with representation, but with representation by means of standard configurations or Gestalten. They represent a world of things by means of visual conceptualisations with barely the most elementary attempts at individual discrimination. A house is a house; and a man is a man—walking or standing or speaking. In his drawings the child is repeating what he is learning in ordinary life, training and evolving practical habits of perception destined to facilitate finding his way about a world of things by the application of stock configurations. The child's picture may tell a rudimentary story—the man (papa) rides up to the house on a horse while the child (me!) shows joy and the woman (mama) stands watching. But beyond the needs of the story there is, except in the rarest

instances, no attempt to compose or organise forms in such a way as to invite or make possible unified perception of the picture as a composition. Up to the age of ten or twelve the child is discovering the rules and forming the habits of practical perception; there is lacking the powers of concentration as well as the deflection of practical interests which make possible an aesthetic approach. From this point of view—and what other point of view is there?—children's drawings are not art. In general it is not until puberty that they need artistic guidance. Until then their work is not bad or indifferent art. It is without even the rudiments of that aesthetic interest which could warrant a drawing being judged as good art or bad. This does not mean, of course, that children's drawings are without value or interest. But whatever value they have is not an aesthetic value.

References

¹This paper was written for delivery at the Institute of Education, London University in February 1978.

²*Order of Assassins* (1972), Ch. 8.

³For example, "What Makes a Situation Aesthetic?" by J. O. Urtmon. *Proc. Arist. Soc. Suppl.*, Vol. XXXI, 1957. Reprinted in J. Margolis (ed.) *Philosophy Looks at the Art* (1962).

⁴See "Odours and Appreciation", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 17 No.1. and *The Art of Appreciation* (1970), Ch. 3.

⁵See my paper "Organic Unity Again", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 criticised by Catherine Lord in 'Kinds and Degrees of Aesthetic Unity', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 18, No. 1.

London, UK

Editor, *British Journal of Aesthetics* (BJA)

(JCLA, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 1978)