

## **AESTHETIC COGNITION: A TRIBUTE TO RUDOLF ARNHEIM**

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It was quite a few years ago that I witnessed a little episode, which often recurs to me: It is sunset, and in the twilight, a mother is walking along the pavement of a small town in the Veneto region with her two small children on either side. The oldest, a girl, is perhaps 5 or 6 years old, and the other child is a little boy who looks about 3 or 4. The mother is holding her daughter's hand on her left; and they proceed serenely and quietly, looking straight ahead, with a slowed gait to let the little boy keep up. Though he is holding an open, upside-down comic book at arm's length, he scuttles along in the right direction, without lagging behind and constantly repeating in dialect – almost in singsong – the cry of “Che beo! Che beo!” (“How beautiful! How beautiful!”).

The scene had greatly amused me at the time, etching itself into my memory, but it later became material for thought. I had begun devoting myself to the Psychology of Art, to the study of the phenomenon of art from a psychological perspective. Naturally, I was spending a lot of time reflecting on the crucial issue of the pervasiveness and universality of aesthetic behaviour, as defined in the generic and broad sense of the term and not only with specific reference to the relationship originating between a user and a work qualified as artistic. As I shall attempt to demonstrate further on, I believe we can assert with a certain degree of confidence (and obviously, still in the psychological sense) that the behaviour arising out of the user-artistic work relationship is none other than one of the many possible expressions of a broader and more general behaviour, which is species-specific to human beings. It can be described as aesthetic.

I refer to “aesthetic behaviour”, not to signify, as I have elsewhere, “the sum of executive and cognitive processes that induce an user to sanction the artistry of a work and to ‘enjoy it’” (ARGENTON 1996, 178). My intention here, rather, is to denote the sum of cognitive processes – motivational, intellectual, and affective – that are involved when a human being evaluates something, anything, as beautiful or ugly, as appealing or disagreeable, as lovely or revolting, as interesting or boring, as amusing or sad, as delightful or depressing, as delicious or disgusting, etc. He or she will then respond and act in some way, on the strength of an evaluation, an aesthetic one, formulated more or less consciously.

As such, and like any other type of behaviour, aesthetic behaviour is the result of a process of knowing (and in a more general sense, of the relationship between cognition and reality), which is driven and regulated by a set of factors in dynamic interaction. These factors depend on the conditions and the functioning of our organism as well as on the elements of experience and knowledge the organism itself has acquired.

It is in this sense that I think the previously described scene represents an

excellent example of the genesis of aesthetic behaviour. Indeed, that little boy had already mastered – on a preverbal, perceptual, and experiential level – the concept of “beauty”, of “that which is beautiful”. In that particular moment he was endeavouring to transfer that type of learning to a different level of conceptualization (verbal, representational, cognitive) by practicing associating and integrating – through his own actions – the information that he had acquired through his bodily experience with what his mind was beginning to take in and organize. Not too many months previously, he had acquired and continued mastering undoubtedly some of the most meaningful, gratifying, vivid, and new experiential information – among a myriad of other data – of his brief but intense existence. It consisted, at first, of being able to stand upright, of maintaining his balance and, then, of moving his own body through the space around him. What pleasurable, new, interesting, powerful, and wonderful sensations of balance and of movement had that child experienced through perceptual activity and, especially, through kinesthetic activity! He had, of course, been initially frustrated by a few falls, but the praise and encouragement of his parents had reinforced him. With the mastery of balance, and therefore of walking skills, he had finally achieved the possibility of acting in space, of differentiating himself from the ‘reality’ that had previously immersed him and which kept him blocked in a condition of limited activity.

He had, of course, been able to see, to hear, to touch, to smell, to taste, and to ‘perceive kinesthetically’ from his first days of life, and he had fervently and progressively developed better and better perceptual abilities with more and more awareness, until he was able to crawl. Yet, his ‘taking an upright stand’ had represented a milestone in his relating to the world and with himself. It had given him – as I have already discussed in part – a sense of satisfaction, of novelty, of pleasure, and of excitement. He had continued, focusing his attention, intensifying his exploratory activities and his curiosity, increasing his awareness of himself and the world, and expanding his cognitive resources.

In other words, he had been experimenting with and fathoming the beauty of knowledge, through experience and through the conceptualization of certain basic perceptual categories, those of *balance*, *movement*, and *space*. In short, the child had been living an aesthetic experience, which – had he been able to think and speak perfectly well at the time – he might have expressed something like this: “It is ‘beautiful’ that I have learnt to stand and that in this position I can move and act in the space around me”.

In addition, this child had surely begun applying the above-mentioned categories in various and different situations, by relating them to the other categories he had already encountered, experienced, and conceptualized – and above all – to those of *shape* and *form*.

For example, while playing “building games” with the various objects that are more or less intended for that purpose, he must have observed and experienced how only certain structures, balanced ones, were destined to remain stable, could be carried through space without collapsing and, at the same time, how their shape coincided with a ‘right’, a ‘pleasing’, a ‘good’, a ‘nice’ form. Perhaps he had seen his older sister jumping rope, and, though he couldn’t have imitated her well at the

time, he must have perceived how the movement of her limbs assumed a precise and rhythmically symmetrical, a 'right', shape and form. He must have worked at improving the coordination of his arm and hand movements with those of his own eyes while holding a pencil and finally managing "to outline" his first closed shape – a circular pattern – "the primordial circle" (ARNHEIM 1974); thus had he achieved the representation of a figure against a ground, which "stood for" anything he might have wished to portray.

Once again, he might have seen his sister 'read' comic books with pleasure and expressions of delight: comics consisting of long strips of panels with drawings sketched out in a schematic, essential, and highly expressive style. These would have been richly and variously coloured as well, with anthropomorphic animals, children, and imaginary and fanciful characters, moving and acting in spaces, places, and scenes of the most different shapes and forms. Yes, comic books, one of which he later held at arm's length, upside-down, as he walked along briskly and confidently, chanting "Che beo! Che beo!"

But what was it that was beautiful? He couldn't read the words in the balloons of his comic, and he couldn't understand the meaning of the story the sequence of cartoons narrated. However, he was already able to appreciate the expressive qualities, the *expression*, which – through shape, colour, and the representation of movement and space – those cartoons, though upside-down, possessed and subjected to his perceptual experience. Moreover, he was able to apply a linguistic label, "beautiful", to qualify and to communicate to himself and to others all that comprised the object of his enjoyment, and that, too was beautiful! Our little boy was demonstrating he had reached an important moment of cognitive development: his knowledge of reality had become aesthetic.

From that moment forward, his relating to reality, his cognition – "the activity of knowing: the acquisition, organization and use of knowledge" (NEISSER 1976, 1), based on motivational, intellectual and emotive elements – had been guided with progressive mastery (if not always completely consciously), and by applying a criterion of interpretation, comprehension, and evaluation of the world, a criterion founded on the bipolar dimension of "beautiful" and "ugly". It represents an 'internal' dimension, bound and interlinked with the physical structure, the organization, and the functioning of our bodies. It is interconnected, in particular, with the perceptual and representational activities through which we experience and know or interact with reality.

As Rudolf ARNHEIM (1966; 1969; 1974; 1986; 1988; 1992) has so admirably and widely demonstrated, perception – predominantly visual and auditory perception, but kinesthetic perception as well – is governed by laws and tendencies, which are based on two fundamental principles: "simplicity" and "dynamics". Cognitive activity is grounded in perceptual functioning, though certainly not in the sense that sensory information comprises the raw material on which the brain, the intellect, or reason works at a higher level:

"Without information on what is going on in time and space the brain cannot work. However, if the purely sensory reflections of the things and events of the outer world occupied the mind in their raw state the information would be of little help. The endless spectacle of

ever new particulars might stimulate but would not instruct us. Nothing we can learn about an individual thing is of use unless we find generality in particular.

Evidently then the mind, in order to cope with the world, must fulfill two functions. It must gather information and it must process it. The two functions are neatly separate in theory, but are they in practice? Do they divide the sequence of the process into mutually exclusive domains, as do the functions of the woodcutter, the lumber yard, and the cabinetmaker, or those of the silkworm, the weaver, and the tailor? Such a sensible division of labor would make the workings of the mind easy to understand. Or so it seems.

Actually, [...] the collaboration of perceiving and thinking in cognition would be incomprehensible if such division existed. I shall suggest that only because perception gathers types of things, that is, concepts, can perceptual material be used for thought; and inversely, that unless the stuff of the senses remains present the mind has nothing to think with" (ARNHEIM 1969, 1).

The way perception functions, which is always through the perception of shapes (fields of psychological forces) and of forms (fields of psychological forces to which we attribute meaning), is typified qualitatively:

"Let me emphasize once more that in our particular civilization we have come to think of perception as the recording of shapes, distances, hues, motions. The awareness of these measurable characteristics is actually a fairly late accomplishment of the human mind. [...] But when I sit in front of a fireplace and watch the flames, I do not normally register certain shades of red, various degrees of brightness, geometrically defined shapes moving at such and such speed. I see the graceful play of aggressive tongues, flexible striving, lively color. The face of a person is more readily perceived and remembered as being alert, tense, and concentrated than it is as being triangularly shaped, having slanted eyebrows, straight lips, and so on. [...]"

The priority of physiognomic properties should not come as a surprise. Our senses are not self-contained recording devices operating for their own sake. They have been developed by the organism as an aid in reacting to the environment, and the organism is primarily interested in the forces active around it – their place, strength, direction. Hostility and friendliness are attributes of forces. And the perceived impact of forces makes for what we call expression" and, therefore, "[...] expression is the primary content of vision in daily life" (ARNHEIM 1974, 454-455).

I think the above-quoted passage, taken from the final Chapter of *Art and Visual Perception*, is of great consequence for two reasons.

The first reason is that this chapter, precisely because it summarizes ARNHEIM's seminal and pithy research on visual perception, amply and authoritatively supports the argument that human cognitive behaviour is oriented by a species-specific aesthetic criterion (ARGENTON 1993; 1996): the "hostility and friendliness" that our organism's perceptual activity senses in the "forces" to which it directs attention "in reacting to the environment", are transformed through experience, knowledge, and language – pervasively and unequivocally – into the categories of "ugly" and "beautiful". Nevertheless, for many reasons (some of which I shall discuss a little further on), such an argument has a hard time not only gaining acceptance, but even in receiving consideration!

The second reason the passage is important is that it concisely conveys the immense heuristic value of ARNHEIM's work, while simultaneously reflecting its important influence on psychological research. There is a widespread preconception within the scientific community that ARNHEIM is a unique personality who devotes

himself to the study of art. He has, in fact, dedicated his entire life to this topic, but in doing so he has never lost sight of his final research goal: that of contributing to a “comprehensive survey of mental functioning” (ARNHEIM 1966, 2), by investigating “the mind’s cognitive dealings with the world of reality” (ARNHEIM 1986, X).

The mind’s interactions with the world of reality lie in the relationship between two cognitive procedures: one which is specific to thinking – “the intellect”, “intellectual analysis”; and the other, which is characteristic of perception – “intuition”, “intuitive perception”. It is this last procedure to which ARNHEIM directs his foremost interest, not only because it is less studied by reason of its elusiveness, but also because it is almost completely ignored. Since arts “offer us the experience of watching intuition at work”, it is this domain where he chooses to carry out his studies (Ibid., 13-29). Such a choice, however, never stands in the way of his exhaustively investigating the functioning of thinking itself – nor, above all, its intrinsic relationship with perceptual activity – thereby making an outstanding contribution to psychological research on the whole.

“My earlier work had taught me that artistic activity is a form of reasoning, in which perceiving and thinking are indivisibly intertwined. A person who paints, writes, composes, dances, I felt compelled to say, thinks with his senses. This union of perception and thought turned out to be not merely a specialty of the arts. A review of what is known about perception, and especially about sight, made me realize that the remarkable mechanisms by which the senses understand the environment are all but identical with the operations described by the psychology of thinking. Inversely, there was much evidence that truly productive thinking in whatever area of cognition takes place in the realm of imagery. This similarity of what the mind does in the arts and what it does elsewhere suggested taking a new look at the long-standing complaint about the isolation and neglect of the arts in society and education. Perhaps the real problem was more fundamental: a split between sense and thought, which caused various deficiency diseases in modern man” (ARNHEIM 1969, V).

Thus ARNHEIM wrote in the Foreword of his book *Visual Thinking*, a work that is the result of “a broader concern with visual perception as a cognitive activity” (Ibid.) and which evinces his constant and profound interest for the ultimate concern of psychology: the mind’s functioning.

Conversely, the “deficiency diseases” to which ARNHEIM refers, and which strike modern man, also seem to infect many of the very same people who study human beings from a psychological perspective. With a few notable exceptions, such scholars recoil from the idea of rigorously investigating anything that has to do with productive thinking, imagination, fantasy, emotion, and with anything concerning the “world of quality and sense perception”. As Alexandre KOYRÉ argues, “modern science broke down the barriers that separated the heavens and the earth, and that united and unified the universe. [...] But it did this by substituting for our world of quality and sense perception, the world in which we live, and love, and die, another world – the world of quantity, of reified geometry, a world in which, though there is place for everything, there is no place for man” (KOYRÉ 1965, 23).

A clear symptom of deficiency disease is evident in those psychologists who hold that art is at best (as I have already mentioned) a ‘mysterious’ and therefore ‘elusive’ phenomenon and at worst, ‘emotional expression’, ‘a source of pleasure’, ‘sensory activity’. In short, it is the result of the *cognitio inferior* of Baumgartenian memory and thus, unworthy of their scientific attention. Furthermore, the same scholars find it

impossible – in the same stereotypical and reductive way – to conceive of associating the term “aesthetic” with anything other than the world of art itself and least of all, with cognition.

### **Summary**

This paper was written with the ideal purpose of carrying on in the tradition of Rudolf ARNHEIM's seminal research and, more generally, in the tradition of Gestalt theory. It argues that the aesthetic criterion (the bipolar dimension of “beautiful/ugly”), through which we evaluate any object or event in the phenomenal world, is a species-specific criterion, which is based on perceptual functioning and orients, drives, and regulates cognition. The author advances this thesis as a contribution to the theme of the relationship between perception and thought, affirming how important it is to study the artistic phenomenon if we are ever to grasp the functioning of the human mind in its entirety.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Betrag wurde in der Absicht verfaßt, die von Rudolf ARNHEIM grundgelegten Forschungen, und allgemeiner, die Tradition der Gestaltheorie weiterzuführen. Es wird die These aufgestellt, daß das ästhetische Kriterium (in der bipolaren Dimension „schön/häßlich“), nach dem alle Gegenstände und Ereignisse der phänomenalen Welt bewertet werden, ein artspezifisches Kriterium ist, das auf der Funktionsweise der Wahrnehmung beruht und die Kognition orientiert, antreibt und reguliert. Der Autor entfaltet diese These als Beitrag zur Verhältnisbestimmung von Wahrnehmung und Denken. Dabei betont er die Bedeutung des Studiums künstlerischer Phänomene für das Verstehen des menschlichen Geistes in seiner Ganzheit.

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