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ABSTRACT

The process of optimizing psychical distance to achieve the best possible aesthetic effect has been well-known among philosophers of art ever since Edward Bullough formulated the concept in 1912. Although it is typically analyzed as a one-way process, it nevertheless becomes a reciprocal or intersubjective process when the object of our aesthetic perception is our "other." This is equally true for animal "others" as for our fellow human "others." Anything animate can fix us in its gaze and thereby prompt or even force us toward self-confrontation as an object of someone or something else's perception. This reciprocity may be manifest as a sort of psychological *pas de deux* between the two confronting subjects, each confronting the other as object, each recognizing the other as subject, and each confronting its own self as recognizer of this relationship and recipient of this attention. The level of our awareness of our being an object for some "other" subject has a proportionately significant impact on our aesthetic perception of this "other," i.e., the fact that an "other" perceives us adds a dimension of "unnatural" intersubjectivity which changes our aesthetic appreciation of that "other."

KEYWORDS

aesthetic distance, phenomenology, intentionality, Edward Bullough,
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Bullough, Pepper, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenology of Perceiving Animals

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In 1912 Edward Bullough introduced a profound concept in the philosophy of art.¹ He pointed out that our perception of a fog at sea differs markedly according to whether or not we feel that our ship is in danger. His insight moved beyond even that of Edmund Burke, who wrote: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*."² Extrapolating from this extreme maritime case to experience in general, Bullough says that if we can create between subject and object an artificial "psychical distance" which allows us to ignore any present danger, utilitarian considerations, etc. – i.e., block out reality, as it were – then and only then can we gain aesthetic pleasure, the "intense relish and enjoyment" of the phenomenon *per se*.³ Such a perceived or invented distance is not so much between oneself and the fog as "between our own self and its affections."⁴ It is transformative and unnatural. The process of creating this distance is not relativism; it is intentionality. That is, it is

not a meaningless Protagorean choice of how to perceive things; nor is it a nearly automatic Burkean process which produces an “unnatural tension” between the perceiving subject and the dangerous object of perception and thus engenders an aesthetic feeling of the sublime; but rather it is the crucial choice which determines whether or not we can enhance our subjectivity by appreciating something in terms of sublimity, grace, or quality.⁵ In other words, Bullough’s intentional unnaturalism may be seen as a development of Burke’s “natural” unnaturalism.

Burke argues that what seems to our senses vast, overwhelming, strong, inescapable, dark, gloomy, terrifying, rough, or painful may appear “sublime,” while what seems relatively small, delicate, weak, ethereal, bright, cheery, harmless, smooth, or pleasurable may appear “beautiful.” He speaks of the “force” of objects producing “effects” on our “passions,” but his theory is nevertheless subjectivist because of its focus on human differences in perceptiveness, receptivity, and taste. Yet no subjectivity or individual difference could deny the power of imminent danger, e.g., shipwreck in fog, consumption by fire, or attack by a wild animal. Unlike Burke, Bullough realizes that the power of danger could be transformed or – pardon the pun – sublimated. Danger may be overcome, even if it is staring us in the face, by intentionally or creatively changing the very nature of the experience, and thus gaining aesthetic appreciation of a phenomenon. To ignore the danger would be foolhardy and perhaps even insane, but we can often, even while striving to keep ourselves safe, call upon our imagination to render the danger less “dangerous” and more “aesthetic,” i.e., we can turn ourselves toward an experience of sublimity, beauty, power, or grace, even when danger lurks within the very experience.

More philosophers since then have addressed this question of distance between perceiving subject and aesthetic object, most of them reacting from some kind of naturalistic point of view against Bullough’s unnaturalism while at the same time conceding his main point that distance matters. Naturalism holds that art is co-extensive and continuous with the rest of the world, that it is of essentially the same character as the rest of the world, and that, accordingly, it is and should be experienced in just the same way that everything else is experienced. Unnaturalism holds that art is epistemologically or even metaphysically distinct from the rest of the world and that, accordingly, the experience of art is in essence different from all other kinds of experience. Among the naturalists, Stephen Pepper writes of distance as purely physical, i.e., we enjoy a painting best when the lighting, viewpoint, and angle are just right; we enjoy music best when

the tone, volume, and acoustics are just right; etc.⁶ Hence physical distance feeds, informs, and to some extent determines psychical distance. For example, a distant fog at sea differs not only in degree of danger, but also in degree of sublimity and other aesthetic values, from an enveloping fog at sea. Pepper achieves such optimal distance for aesthetic appreciation not, as with Bullough, by psychological acrobatics inside our minds or by denying reality, but by trial and error in the normal physical realm, finding the best place to stand in the gallery or the best place to sit in the concert hall. We thus create a "consummatory field" which is entirely natural in both process and result. Yet this field becomes instantly psychical. Pepperian distance is thus central to and prerequisite for Bulloughian distance, i.e., Pepper's naturalism and Bullough's unnaturalism connect with, contrast to, complement, and illuminate each other.

When our object of immediate perception and potential aesthetic enjoyment is animate like ourselves, then Hegel's dialectic of the self and its "other" comes into play; i.e., hereby ensues the direct confrontation of two self-consciousnesses, which may become manifest as a life-and-death struggle. Even though such confrontations are often existential crises, they, being at least partially sensuous, are also not without their aesthetic dimension. Any animate "other," whether human or animal, can fix us in its gaze and thereby prompt or even force us toward self-confrontation as the object of the other subject's perception. In the particular subject/object duality of self and "other," a certain mutuality or reciprocity obtains. This reciprocity may appear as a sort of psychological *pas de deux* between two subjects, each confronting the "other" as object, but each at the same time recognizing the "other" as subject, and each confronting its own self as recognizer of this relationship and recipient of this attention. That is, we are not only subject each unto ourselves, but also potential object capable of becoming some "other's" experience; and likewise, our animate object is not only object but also subject for itself, for which we are its object. It is its self and we are its "other." This point is worth remembering in any of our dealings with animals. Nevertheless, for Hegel and many other philosophers, reciprocity or intersubjectivity is not possible between humans and animals.

German idealism originated the idea of intersubjectivity and Hegel brought the philosophical concept of the self and its "other" to a high level of sophistication, but neither Hegel nor any German idealist acknowledged any genuine "other" for a human except another human.⁷ For Hegel, animals were creatures of instinct and intuition, inclined only to find and consume food, with no capacity for intersubjectivity, and self-evidently

beneath the human ontological level of self-conscious introspection.⁸ But however much we may wish to go against Hegel on this point and anthropomorphize animals or attribute to them “human” characteristics such as intelligence, empathy, loyalty, love, etc., we must admit the likelihood that any intersubjective relationship between human and animal, even if mutually communicative and thus beyond a mere subject/object relationship, is not only asymmetrical but also probably approaches a master/servant relationship. In general, such a relationship would apply only between humans and domestic animals, since intersubjectivity does not usually exist between humans and wild animals except, in a limited way, in confrontational circumstances. Genuine reciprocity would be impossible in an asymmetrical relationship, i.e., in any relationship in which the two parties are not ontologically or socially equal.⁹ Surely Timmy and Lassie, the Lone Ranger and Silver, Koko and All Ball, and other famous pairs of loving interspecies friends would disagree.

We have no direct knowledge of any subjectivity except our own, and to know intersubjectivity is even more problematic. We do not experience the subjectivity of the “other”; rather, we infer it. The “other” is, first of all, an object, yet an object which we may creatively transform, to the mutual advantage of both self and “other,” subject and object, by inferring that the “other” possesses subjective traits of consciousness, self-consciousness, and sensitivity such as we already know to exist within ourselves as subject. As far as we can verify, such inferential transformation is a function of our imagination, and readily slips into anthropomorphism if our perceived object is an animal. With human “others,” our natural familiarity with our own humanity makes it easy for us to assume that they are like us as sentient, intelligent beings; but with animal “others,” this assumption is perhaps not quite so easy. Yet in order to transcend the merely sensual relationship between any two living bodies, at least one of them must move from experiencing the “other” as object to believing in this “other” as subject. This requires using the imagination to create a working belief in symmetrical intersubjectivity.

The phenomenological approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty toward intersubjectivity, subject/object perception, and interspecies relationships moves beyond Hegel and helps to elucidate these issues as well as whatever tension might exist between Pepperian naturalism and Bulloughian unnaturalism. Merleau-Ponty claims a fundamental difference between human and animal perception, i.e., humans intentionally perceive the whole world, or their particular chosen part of it, while animals instrumentally perceive only their own immediate environment.¹⁰

Moreover, following these two distinctive modes of perception, both humans and animals form associations within their own species and use linguistic and quasi-linguistic symbols toward this end, but humans “haunt” one another with a level of intimacy that animals do not achieve.¹¹

The phrase, “perceiving animals,” in the title is deliberately ambiguous, referring both to our directing our powers of perception toward animals as objects, and to animals themselves as perceivers, directing their powers of perception toward their own worlds, which include as objects of perception: us. Insofar as we know that animals are capable of perception, we, at least in our encounters with them, should give them the benefit of the doubt that they can also interpret, imagine, and think creatively, even if only instrumentally or in their own self-interest. Consider this true story:

[Isabel Stearns] was always calm in desperate situations, never flustered, never at a loss for what to do. ... [W]hen she was young, ... hiking alone in Yosemite National Park, she was suddenly confronted by a bear blocking the narrow path. She reached into her knapsack, unpacked her lunch, and threw a few sandwiches beyond the bear. When the beast went to retrieve the food, she continued along the path. Of course, in her natural modesty, she claimed that this was in fact only a small bear, and so that there had never really been any cause for fear.¹²

Here is a clear example of a Bulloughian creative transformation of a potentially dangerous experience. Burke’s book considers animals in some depth, discusses the sublimity or beauty of their various species, and analyzes the terror, pity, disgust, and other emotions that they might inspire in us; yet nowhere does he imagine anything like this. The encounter between Stearns and the bear is an exception to the general rule that intersubjectivity does not exist between humans and wild animals. The handling and result of the situation was entirely due to both Stearns’s and the bear’s perception and interpretation of it. They implicitly cooperated for a resolution. She did not control the bear, as she might control a pet dog, but influenced it, manipulated the situation, and was thus the dominant actor in this bilateral drama. Theirs was not a master/servant relationship, but was nevertheless asymmetrical and intersubjective. The distance between them was both Pepperian or physical and Bulloughian or psychical. In either case, it could be interpreted as optimal. While maintaining optimal Pepperian distance,

Stearns's intentionality created optimal Bulloughian distance which transformed the dangerous state of affairs into one which both she (through the sense of sight) and the bear (through the senses of smell and taste) could enjoy aesthetically. We might say that their encounter was more a dance than a confrontation. There was no winner and no loser, but both went away happy, perhaps even reconciled. We are reminded of Dewey, for whom the preserved integrity and individuality of confronting or dialectical opposites is at least as important pragmatically and psychologically as their reconciliation, and who writes that reconciliation is the immediate harmony that is felt when humans cooperate with their world rather than compete with it.¹³ Such felt harmony, *qua* reconciliation, is an aesthetic experience insofar as our sensitivity is heightened when we open ourselves to cooperation, i.e., when we see qualities in our object which are neither immediately obvious nor in fact "objective."

Merleau-Ponty's fellow phenomenologist and near disciple, Mikel Dufrenne, claims that some phenomena tempt us to perceive them as aesthetic objects, rather than as utilitarian instruments, practical helps or hindrances, uninteresting stuff, imminent dangers, or according to any of the rest of the subjective meanings that we typically assign to perceived objects.¹⁴ Similarly, albeit further removed from Merleau-Ponty, Arthur Danto writes that some objects, such as Andy Warhol's assemblage of Brillo boxes, can be "transfigured" into artworks that possess aesthetic or metaphorical properties, even as they remain everyday objects with commercial associations their and instrumental value, their everyday character, their crude appeal, or how we may prefer to perceive them.¹⁵ This is what he means by "transfiguring the commonplace," shifting our perception from the "vulgar" to the aesthetic, even though the perceived object does not change physically or fundamentally – *in itself* – but only situationally or psychologically *for us*.

Imagination is the key to aesthetic appreciation in all these cases. What we do with the phenomena of our perception is what makes them what they are. Imagination is the bridge, if we choose to travel it, from naturalism to unnaturalism. We can increase, decrease, or change the quality of the distance between subject and object, either physically *à la* Pepper or psychically *à la* Bullough, or both. The process is more complicated when our object is also a subject in its own right treating us as its phenomenological object, but it is still essentially the same process. It need not be weirdly unnatural or contrived, but only a wild flight of imagination such as the mercurial postmodernist William H. Gass depicts

in the various associations, connotations, perversions, and transformations of the word "blue."¹⁶

Our perception of an animal could – and perhaps should – be conditioned by what we imagine to be the animal's perception of us. Three examples: (1) the case of Stearns and the bear; (2) at the same physical distance between ourselves and a lion, the content of our imagination would be quite different in a zoo from what it would be in the middle of the Serengeti; and (3) Captain Ahab's various psychoses were the direct result of how he imagined Moby Dick to be not only evil, but also directing this evil specifically at Ahab. These three examples represent, respectively, differences in (1) pragmatic attitude, (2) environment, and (3) psychological pathology, all of which are imaginatively shaped aspects of the human subject's intentionality.

A fruitful exercise might be to imagine that we are looking at the world through the gaze of the "other," e.g., to imagine that we are the caged ape, lion, or rhino staring out at us from behind bars at the zoo. We need not anthropomorphize in order to do this. Animals have sensitivity already. Think of Harry Potter's reciprocal encounter with the boa constrictor in the chapter called "The Vanishing Glass," in which the two converse as equals because Harry, unlike most humans, not only speaks Parseltongue, the snake's language, but also has intuitive knowledge of the snake's thoughts and feelings.¹⁷ That is, Harry has created a symmetrical intersubjective relationship by being open to hearing the language of the "other," whom nearly all humans would regard as only an object. He did not expect the snake to come "up" to the human level of consciousness; rather, he was willing to go "down" to the snake's level, and thus to experience the snake in an entirely new way. Similarly, Stearns transformed her situation by seeing it from the bear's point of view. Again we are reminded of the Deweyan subject creating harmony and reconciliation with the world by cooperating with it rather than by trying to master it.

Phenomenology, for Merleau-Ponty, is not the Hegelian or idealistic account of the content of consciousness, but rather an existentialist approach which holds that the phenomena of experience are to be neither objectified nor idealized, but treated as elements of the "lived body" or "embodied consciousness" in the "life-world." All phenomenology is anti-dualistic, which means that phenomenologists reject the Cartesian view that mind and body are fundamentally and

irreconcilably different kinds of things. Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity is simply given.

Since, for Merleau-Ponty, the whole human is an organic unit, he is concerned to describe the metaphysics of the uniquely human process of "seeing," involving both mind and body together as an integrated perceiver. He gives a phenomenological account of "vision," whereby the human eye is literally "seen" as an essential element of the human body and thus of the whole human animal as a visible thing in the world among all visible things.¹⁸ Thus it is the natural situation of the artist as a lived body in the world which enables the conception and production of art works, just as it is our natural situation as lived bodies in the same world which enables us to enter into meaningful aesthetic relation with the artist's vision by being intelligent or sensitive beholders of the work. Art such as painting, for example, is a spontaneous derivative of a special kind of "vision" which only artists possess. Although such "vision" is part of the ontological constitution of all humans, and is accordingly "natural" in that sense, it remains latent in most of us, is refined to a proportionately sophisticated degree only in artists, and thus could be considered "unnatural" only in non-artists, who cannot actualize it.

We can apply Merleau-Ponty's analysis of human artistic vision to human-animal encounters as well, *mutatis mutandis*. The piercing or arresting gaze of the "other" is unique in its power to impel us toward immediate self-confrontation. The gaze of the animal is at least as powerful as the gaze of the human in this regard. Moreover, as we recognize, accept, and respect the power of this gaze, whether human or animal, we grow proportionately better able to appreciate the validity or even the sanctity of the "other," not only as an aesthetic object, but also as a "lived body" in its own right or an "embodied consciousness" in its own "life-world," like the bear *vis-à-vis* Stearns or the snake *vis-à-vis* Harry Potter.

In the end, even after phenomenological analysis, we are left with Bullough vs. various species of naturalism. From a pragmatist point of view, Richard Shusterman finds affinity between Dewey's "privileging of art over science" and Merleau-Ponty's focus on the "lived body."¹⁹ All three, as well as Pepper, could paraphrase Socrates to claim that the un-lived life is not worth examining.²⁰ That is, unless we creatively engage the world, and are willing to push beyond the relative shallowness of the typical subject/object relationship toward the deeper aesthetic and psychological experience of the subject/subject relationship – whether the

two subjects are equal or not, i.e., whether the newly imagined intersubjectivity is symmetrical or asymmetrical – then we are not really living, but merely existing. Such engagement may occur either naturally, as we like to think it does among humans, or unnaturally, as it seems to do between humans and non-humans, either animate like Harry's snake or even inanimate but quasi-personified objects like Bullough's fog. We may contrast the experiential naturalism of Dewey, the aesthetic naturalism of Pepper, the phenomenological naturalism of Merleau-Ponty, and the pragmatic naturalism of Shusterman to the intentional unnaturalism of Bullough and the simply awestruck unnaturalism of Burke. With the first four, aesthetic experience and its enjoyment are a natural aspect of the natural world; but with Bullough (and to a lesser extent Burke) we must selectively bracket reality – or even ignore it – in order to generate aesthetic experience or to enjoy anything aesthetically. However, even if we do not wish to go as far as Bullough and even if we wish to remain in the naturalist camp, we still should admit, with Mary Warnock, the foremost expositor of the concept of imagination in the Kantian, idealist, romantic, and phenomenological traditions, that in order to signify anything new, both the perceiver as artist and the perceiver as spectator have to detach themselves at least to some extent from the phenomenal world as given, so that they may set their imagination in motion.²¹

In conclusion, the several unresolved dichotomies in this paper – subject/object, symmetry/asymmetry, human/animal, naturalism/unnaturalism, master/servant, etc. – beg for resolution. In whichever way they may someday be resolved, that resolution in each case will have to involve the full depth of both parties involved, i.e., it will have to be reciprocal or mutual, without compromising the integrity of either side. The subject on each side will have to use their imagination to transform the object on the other side, inferring the subjectivity of the "other" that cannot be directly experienced, thus creating intersubjectivity and the opportunity for communication or constructive encounter. This program for resolution may sound like a mystical pipe dream, realizable only in fantasy fiction like the Harry Potter stories. Nevertheless, a good start would be to try – imaginatively and unnaturally – to experience animals as they experience themselves. By analogy, just as our aesthetic appreciation of, say, *Guernica* is qualitatively enhanced by seeing it "in person" at the Reina Sofia in Madrid and thus "hearing," as it were, Picasso "speak" to us through his work, rather than merely seeing a reproduction of it in an art book; so our aesthetic appreciation of an animal is qualitatively enhanced when we feel that we are somehow communicating

or cooperating with it, rather than merely looking at it in a zoo or cringing in terror of it in the wild.

• Notes •

¹ Edward Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology*, 5, 2 (June 1912): 87-118.

² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: George Bell, 1889), p. 26.

³ Edward Bullough, *Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1957), p. 94.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵ Burke, pp. 97-99.

⁶ Stephen Pepper, *The Work of Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), pp. 50-59.

⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *System of Science: First Part: Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard, accessed September 10, 2013, [https://dl.dropbox.com/u/21288399/Articles for Webpage/Phenomenology of Spirit in English and German.pdf](https://dl.dropbox.com/u/21288399/Articles%20for%20Webpage/Phenomenology%20of%20Spirit%20in%20English%20and%20German.pdf), passim, but especially section B.IV.A. on self-consciousness and the master/servant dialectic.

⁸ *Ibid.*, § 109, 205, 225, 246, 258, 560, 689-690; pp. 96-97, 185, 201, 221, 233, 510, 629-630.

⁹ Robert R. Williams, *Recognition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 289-290.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 25, 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161. Cf. Bryan E. Bannon, "Animals, Language, Life: Searching for Animal Attunement with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty." *Environmental Philosophy* 6, 1 (Spring 2009): 21-34.

¹² Eric v.d. Luft, "Editor's Introduction" in Isabel Scribner Stearns, *The Nature of the Individual* (North Syracuse, New York: Gegensatz Press, 2011), pp. 23-24.

¹³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam, 1934), pp. 185-186. Cf. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 313.

¹⁴ Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 93. Cf. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 256-257. Cf. Yin Hang, "On the Connotation of Inter-Subjectivity in Dufrenne's Aesthetic Thought" (PhD diss, Shandong University, 2010).

¹⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 44, 207-208. Despite Danto's denials, false rumors persist that Danto was Merleau-Ponty's student in Paris.

¹⁶ William H. Gass, *On Being Blue* (Boston: Godine, 1991).

¹⁷ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), pp. 33-36.

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" in *The Primacy of Perception*, pp. 159-190.

¹⁹ Richard M. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 6-7, 10-11, 53, 270-272.

²⁰ I am indebted to my ancient colleague John Morris for this twist on Plato's *Apology*, 38a.

²¹ Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 197.

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