

Your Name:

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Class Code:

Arnheim, R. (1954). *Art and visual perception: A psychology of the creative eye*.

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press

The following pages have scanned and cropped excerpts from the final chapter of Rudolf Arnheim's book, *Art and Visual Perception*. Whenever you see a [...] sign, it means I have omitted some parts in the middle. I have selected only the most relevant parts of the chapter for our reading. We will discuss ideas from this text in the next class, but for now, I would like you to read the text and answer the following prompts:

1. Based on your understanding of the text, describe in your own words what Arnheim means by "expression".
2. What are Arnheim's ideas about teaching art? What would your own views be on such a method?
3. Consider the kind of vocabulary used whenever examples of expressiveness are mentioned. What do you think is the connection between vocabulary and the appreciation of art?

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EXPRESSION

If the preceding chapters have done their work properly, not very much should remain to be said about visual expression. From the beginning it was evident that one could not do justice to what we see by describing it only with the measurements of size, shape, wavelength, or speed. The dynamic qualities of shapes, colors, and events have proved to be an inseparable aspect of all visual experience. In acknowledging the direct and universal presence of such dynamics we not only made our description of natural and man-made things more complete, we also gained access to what now remains to be discussed explicitly as "expression." As long as one talks about the mere measurements or practical earmarks of visual objects, it is possible to ignore their direct expression. One notes: this is a hexagon, a digit, a chair, a pileated woodpecker, a Byzantine ivory. But as soon as we open our eyes to the dynamic qualities conveyed by any such thing, inevitably we see them as carrying expressive meaning.

This can be observed, for example, when a writer chooses to limit himself strictly to the dynamic features of something he is describing. In his little essay "The Theory of Gaits," Balzac reports on a passerby: "He walked with his hands crossed behind his back, the shoulders effaced and intense, the shoulder blades close together; he looked like a roasted baby partridge on a piece of toast. He seemed to move forward only with his neck, and his whole body received its impulse from the chest." Vaguely but unavoidably, one senses the kind of character expressed in these movements. The same is true for pictorial shapes. In many of the examples referred to in earlier chapters of this book, expressive characteristics came to the fore explicitly or by implication, as soon as we focused on the dynamics of the image.

All perceptual qualities have generality. We see redness, roundness, smallness, remoteness, swiftness, embodied in individual examples, but conveying

a *kind* of experience, rather than a uniquely particular one. This is equally true for dynamics. We see compactness, striving, twisting, expanding, yielding —generalities again, but in this case not limited to what the eye sees. Dynamic qualities are structural; they are experienced in sound, in touch, in muscular sensations, as well as in vision. What is more, they also describe the nature and behavior of the human mind, and they do so quite compellingly. The aggressiveness of lightning comes with the swift zigzag of its descent, and sneakiness comes with the locomotions of a snake whenever these motions are seen as more than geometrically definable curves. Colors serve to symbolize human temperaments, as they have done in many cultures, only when these colors are perceived as dynamic. And the dynamic differences between Romanesque and Gothic architecture translate themselves automatically into states of mind characterizing the corresponding cultural periods.

Thus, *we define expression as modes of organic or inorganic behavior displayed in the dynamic appearance of perceptual objects or events.* The structural properties of these modes are not limited to what is grasped by the external senses; they are conspicuously active in the behavior of the human mind, and they are used metaphorically to characterize an infinity of non-sensory phenomena: low morale or the high cost of living, the spiraling of prices, the lucidity of argument, the compactness of resistance.

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Within the framework of associationist thinking, a step forward was made by Lipps, who pointed out that the perception of expression involves the activity of forces. His theory of "empathy" was designed to explain why we find expression even in inanimate objects, such as the columns of a temple. The reasoning went as follows. When I look at the columns I know from past experience the kind of mechanical pressure and counterpressure that occurs in them. Equally from past experience, I know how I should feel myself if I were in the place of the columns and if those physical forces acted upon and within my own body. I project my own kinesthetic feelings onto the columns. Furthermore, the pressures and pulls called up from the stores of memory by the sight tend also to provoke responses in other areas of the mind. "When I project my strivings and forces into nature I do so also as to the way my strivings and forces make me feel, that is, I project my pride, my courage, my stubbornness, my lightness, my playful assuredness, my tranquil complacency. Only thus my empathy with regard to nature becomes truly aesthetic empathy."

Common to all the varieties of traditional theorizing was the disavowal of any intrinsic kinship between perceived appearance and the expression it conveyed. How the two belonged together had to be learned, as a language is learned. The letters *PAIN* mean suffering in English and bread in French; nothing in the letters suggests the one rather than the other meaning. Similarly, one has to learn which expression goes with which state of mind because one could perhaps comprehend how the one was generated by the other, but one could not perceive expression as directly as one does colors and shapes.

Even according to empathy theory, the visual information served only to apprise the viewer of the situation, from which he had to draw his inferences. "The column is carrying a load"—this knowledge sufficed to endow the sight with all the feelings about load-bearing that the viewer could marshal from his own past experience. There was no explicit awareness of how much depended on the particular dynamic qualities of the percept. The art historian Max J. Friedländer has observed: "A bad column looks as though it had been drawn with the ruler. For a good architect, a column is an animated, suffering, victorious, supporting, and burdened being. The hardly measurable gentle swelling of the contour expresses strength, tension, pressure, and resistance." Depending on whether or not these dynamic qualities register with the viewer, he will or will not experience the architectural expression, regardless of how he interprets the statics of the building or what loads he himself has carried in former years.

I shall mention in passing that the theory of empathy has afflicted generations of aestheticians with a host of pseudoproblems. One asked: Are the feelings expressed in sights and sounds those of the artist who created them or those of the recipient? Does one have to be in a melancholy mood in order to produce, perform, or apprehend a melancholy composition? Can "emotions" be expressed in a Bach fugue or a painting by Mondrian? These and other similar questions become incomprehensible once one has understood that expression resides in perceptual qualities of the stimulus pattern.

Expression Embedded in Structure

William James was less certain that body and mind have nothing intrinsically in common. "I cannot help remarking that the disparity between motions and feelings, on which these authors lay so much stress, is somewhat less absolute than at first sight it seems. Not only temporal succession, but such attributes as intensity, volume, simplicity or complication, smooth or impeded change, rest or agitation, are habitually predicated of both physical facts and mental facts." Evidently James reasoned that although body and mind are different media—the one being material, the other not—they might still resemble each other in certain structural properties.

This point was insisted upon by gestalt psychologists. Max Wertheimer in particular asserted that the perception of expression is much too immediate and compelling to be explainable merely as a product of learning. When we watch a dancer, the sadness or happiness of the mood seems to be directly inherent in the movements themselves. Wertheimer concluded that this was true because formal factors in the dance reproduced identical factors in the mood. What he meant may be illustrated by reference to an experiment by Jane Binney. Members of a college dance group were asked individually to give improvisations of such subjects as sadness, strength, or flight. The dancers' performances showed much agreement. For example, in the representation of sadness the movement was slow and confined to a narrow range. It was mostly curved in shape and showed little tension. The direction was indefinite, changing, wavering; and the body seemed to yield passively to the force of gravity rather than being propelled by its own initiative. It will be admitted that the psychical mood of sadness has a similar pattern. In a depressed person the mental processes are slow and rarely go beyond matters closely related to immediate experiences and momentary interests. All his thinking and striving displays softness and lack of energy. He shows little determination, and activity is often controlled by outside forces.

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The Priority of Expression

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. Even in twentieth-century Western man, it presupposes special conditions. It is the attitude of the scientist and the engineer, or of the salesman who estimates the size of a customer's waist, the shade of a lipstick, the weight of a suitcase. But when I sit in front of a fireplace

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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 a 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. This priority of expression, although somewhat modified in adults by a scientifically oriented education, is striking in children and primitives, as has been shown by Werner and Köhler. The profile of a mountain is soft or threateningly harsh; a blanket thrown over a chair is twisted, sad, tired.

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.

If expression is the primary content of vision in daily life, the same should be all the more true of the way the artist looks at the world. The expressive qualities are his means of communication. They capture his attention, they enable him to understand and interpret his experiences, and they determine the form patterns he creates. Therefore the training of art students should be expected to consist basically in sharpening their sense of these qualities, and in teaching them to look to expression as the guiding criterion for every stroke of the pencil, brush, or chisel. In fact many good art teachers do precisely this. But in other cases the student's spontaneous sensitivity to expression not only is not developed further, it is even impaired and suppressed. There is, for example, an old-fashioned but not extinct way of teaching students to draw from the model by asking them to establish the exact length and direction of contour lines, the relative position of points, the shape of masses. In other words, students are to concentrate on the geometric-technical qualities of what they see. In its modern version this method consists in urging the young artist to think of the model or of a freely invented design as a configuration of masses, planes, direction. Again interest is focused on geometric technical qualities.

Such teaching follows principles of description often employed in mathematics or physical science rather than those of spontaneous vision. There are, however, teachers who will proceed differently. With a model sitting on the floor in a hunched-up position, such a teacher will not begin by making the students notice that the whole figure can be inscribed in a triangle. Instead he

will ask about the expression of the figure; he may be told that the person on the floor looks tense, tied together, full of potential energy. He will suggest, then, that the student try to render this quality. In doing so the student will watch proportions and directions, but not as static geometric properties, "correct" for correctness's sake. These formal features will be understood as means of making the primarily observed expression come across on paper, and the correctness and incorrectness of each stroke will be judged on the basis of whether or not it captures the dynamic "mood" of the subject.

Equally, in a lesson on design, it will be made clear that to the artist just as to any unspoiled human being, a circle is not a line of constant curvature whose points are all equidistant from a center, but first of all a compact, hard, stable thing. Once the student has understood that roundness is not identical with circularity, he may try for a design whose structural logic will be controlled by the primary concept of something to be expressed. An artificial concentration on mere shapes and colors as such will leave the student at a loss as to which pattern to select among innumerable and equally acceptable ones. An expressive theme will serve him as a natural guide to forms that fit his purpose.

It will be evident that what is advocated here is not so-called "self-expression." The method of self-expression plays down, or even annihilates, the theme to be represented. It recommends a passive, "projective" pouring-out of what is felt inside. On the contrary, the method discussed here requires active, disciplined concentration of all organizing powers upon the expression found in one's vision of the world.

It might be argued that an artist must practice the purely formal technique before he can hope to render expression successfully. But this notion reverses the natural order of the artistic process. In fact all good practicing is highly expressive. This first occurred to me many years ago when I watched the dancer Gret Palucca perform one of her most popular program pieces, which she called "Technical Improvisations." This number was nothing but the systematic exercise that the dancer practiced every day in her studio to loosen up the joints of her body. She would start out by doing turns of her head, then move her neck, then shrug her shoulders, ending up wriggling her toes. This purely technical practice succeeded with the audience because it was thoroughly expressive. Forcefully precise and rhythmical movements presented quite naturally the entire repertoire of human pantomime. They passed through all the moods from lazy happiness to impertinent satire.

In order to achieve technically precise movements, a capable dance teacher may ask students not to perform "geometrically" defined positions, but to

strive for the muscular experience of uplift, or attack, or yielding, that will be created by correctly executed movements. Comparable methods are nowadays applied in physical therapy. For example, the patient is asked to concentrate not on the meaningless, purely formal exercise of flexing and stretching his arm, but on a game or piece of work that involves suitable motions of the limbs as means to a sensible end.

Symbolism in Art

All perceptual qualities have generality. I mentioned this earlier, and I intended the statement to mean that to some extent we see redness in every red spot or speed in every fast movement. The same is true for expression. When Picasso conveys to us in a painting the gentle ways in which a mother guides the first steps of her unsteadily walking child, we see gentleness as a general quality exemplified in a particular case. In this sense it is valid to say that Picasso's picture symbolizes gentleness. In fact, for our purpose, the terms expression and symbolization can be used interchangeably. The example also suggests that the task of expressing or symbolizing a universal content through a particular image is carried out not only by the formal pattern, but by the subject matter as well, if there is one.

Only with regard to subject matter can the term symbolism be used in a more restricted sense. When Rembrandt depicts Aristotle contemplating the bust of Homer, it makes sense to ask whether the artist intended to narrate a scene that has taken place or might have taken place in a world of history or fable, or whether the scene is meant as purely "symbolic." In the latter case the subject matter and its arrangement are designed to embody an idea, and they may indicate this purpose by the unlikelihood of their occurrence in any real or imagined world. A clear instance of such symbolism is the painting by Titian commonly referred to as "Sacred and Profane Love"; it will hardly be taken by anyone as a genre scene, in which a clothed and a nude woman sit together on a well. The same is true for the engraving of Dürer's in which a winged woman with a goblet in her hand stands on a sphere moving through the clouds.

The correct reading of such a picture depends heavily on conventions. These conventions tend to standardize the way a certain idea is to be depicted, so that, for example, in Christian art a lily is known to symbolize the virginity of Mary, lambs are disciples, and two deer drinking from a pond show the recreation of the faithful.

