

Through the Eye of the Heart: in search of a “deep aesthetics”

Beth Carruthers

**A “working paper” presented at Thinking Through Nature: Philosophy for an Endangered World in June of 2008 at the University of Oregon, USA
Comments are welcomed. Please note that this document may not be cited or reproduced in whole or part without the author’s permission.
Contact: beth@bethcarruthers.com or bcarruthers@eciad.ca**

Within the field of environmental aesthetics, significant discussion has focused on whether or not one must have scientific knowledge of the other-than-human world in order to really appreciate it. Meantime, in the field of aesthetics that has come through recent usage to be associated with artistic practices and works, the discussion has traditionally focused on formal qualities or on a set of rules for appreciation. The two may seem different, but both presuppose an objective view, a standing back from, say, in the one case a wetland, in the other, a Picasso. In both cases, there is an assumed radical separation from, a standing outside of, a world. And not just any world, but *the* world, the world as environing, the world as ecological community – in short, the only real world we have.

It is not my intention here to engage in an assessment of the necessity of scientific knowledge, nor of appropriate formal qualities. My own interest, as may be somewhat apparent, is in aesthetic experience as locating us *within* an environing world – a world which includes both art and wetlands, human and non-human, as inextricably intertwined in a relationship so intimate as to be taken for granted. My hope is to reveal the aesthetic as a form of powerful and pragmatic engagement that provides opportunities for a reconfigured human/world relationship.

It is to Holmes Rolston that I owe the term “deep aesthetics”, since it was a comment in his essay *From Beauty to Duty* that caught my attention. He suggested that for aesthetics to be considered “an adequate foundation for an environmental ethics”, it would depend on “how deep your aesthetics goes”.

Without going into an in-depth explanation of Deep Ecology – which my term “deep aesthetics” must summon up – there *are* parallels with deep ecology’s view of the human as part of an ecosystem community, and the intertwining of interests and being that seem to follow.

A “deep aesthetics”, then, as I think it, must foreground the backgrounded relational aspects of human and world, re-situating us within a world of intertwined being, and, moreover, offer a revelatory or even transformative experience. There can be little doubt that we are in need of such experiences.

Is the aesthetic something we utilise, is it a set of rules, or is the aesthetic something more profound, intrinsic to our being in a world? I believe the latter, and also believe that to view the aesthetic as merely a tool, or as frivolous and trivial against the important and meaningful, is to undermine the profound role of, and possibilities for, the aesthetic in human/world relations.

Aesthesis is to perceive with the senses. And it is through the senses that we are in the world. There is no moment that we do not rely on the sensuous interplay of our bodied being within a world, no point at which we are disengaged.

Many people have reflected that our cultural beliefs shape our perceptions, or how we aesthetically engage.¹ It is noted among historians of cartography² that maps differ greatly from one another, depending on where the map-maker lives. We might think of accounts of aesthetic experience as fitting within a map of a territory determined by the boundaries of our beliefs and ideologies, defining the perceptual lay of the land as refined to fit particular kinds of cultural interest – a map of agreed upon reality, if you will. So while we are interested in what is on the map (the world as we think we know it) what is left off may be even more interesting. It is useful to think of this mapping process as “backgrounding” and “foregrounding”, terms used in psychology, in the study of learning, and in seeking to understand autism. Val Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, also uses the term “backgrounding” to describe relationships of hidden, or denied, dependency. I use these terms here in both the context of a necessary process of learning and being in the world, as explained through research on learning and autism, and in the sense of denial that Plumwood borrows from psychology.

In thinking about how such maps of belief might be drawn and earn the status of being right and “true”, it might be helpful to consider how we learn about the world. We might now recall the etymology of the word aesthetic as sensuous perception. In our very beginnings, from the moment we begin to sense, the world presents itself as so much general experience. We foreground what is important and background that which is not. This process is necessary, or we would be unable to manage, as in the case of autistic children, who appear to lack in varying degrees this ability to make

perceptual distinctions, and in consequence become confused or overwhelmed by sensory input.³

We also select which aspects of our immediate world require our focused attention and we begin this at a very early age.⁴ How and what we foreground and background, how we determine what is most important to us, is based in part on the requirements of our physical and emotional surroundings, while also conforming to cultural beliefs and values. It is easy to see the survival value of this process. The better adapted to the world we inhabit and those with whom we inhabit it, the better off we will be. This can be thought of as an internal reference map used to navigate the world.

In this sense then, we might be, as Heidegger tells us “world-makers”, in that we construct a map of a world that we in general agree upon – but to take for granted that our map of the world includes all that is, or that it is the *only* map, poses some significant problems.

To add another layer to this narrative of maps and perceptual framing, I will briefly mention Jakob von Uexküll, who proposed that different beings experience and live in different perceptual worlds. Rather than a hierarchical order of living beings, von Uexküll, in the words of Giorgio Agamben, “supposes an infinite variety of perceptual worlds”⁵.

While there may be overlap in the perceptual worlds of similar beings, the *entire* perceptual world of an other-than-human being, so far as *knowing* it, belongs to that being. For the most part the only way we can approach these worlds is through imagining ourselves into them. Other perceptual worlds

are mystery and strangeness, mystery that will not be revealed through objective examination and measurement, by a yardstick of the human-like.

The idea that aesthetic experience is embodied and situates us firmly within an enviroing world is not new. Arnold Berleant, for example, argues strongly for an embodied aesthetics, an aesthetics of engagement which holds that we are continuous with environment, rather than “the environment” being an objectified outside. He is critical of ideas of “disinterested contemplation” as distancing self from environment. Yet his comment that “a landscape is like a suit of clothes, empty and meaningless apart from its wearer. Without a human presence, it possesses only possibilities”⁶ presents problems for an engaged, embodied, aesthetics – for with what, or whom, is one to engage in such a situation?

The field of Cultural Geography likewise seeks to place humans in relationship with an enviroing world, but the idea here that *places are made by people* is again problematic. This must assume that the world without us is empty and devoid of meaning and agency, a kind of terra nullius, an empty space onto which humans project meaning and value. This scenario is also tricky because here not only are the world and other beings separate from, and outside of, the human, their *very existence* is called into question without a perceiving human subject. A real, living world is transformed into an ideation, an internal world, rather than an actual place alive and full of its own meanings and agencies, even if I, as a particularly cultured human, am unaware or perceptually blind to these.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold comments that when Western anthropologists come in contact with worldviews in contrast to their own, they reframe these to accord with their own cultural perceptions and beliefs. In his words:

Astonishingly, we find a complete inversion, such that meanings that the people claim to discover *in* the landscape are attributed to the minds of the people themselves, and are said to be *mapped* onto the landscape. And the latter, drained of all significance as a prelude to its cultural construction, is reduced to *space*, a vacuum to the plenum of culture.⁷

We place ourselves at the centre – the nexus of meaning and maker of world. But it seems clear that either we are embodied *within* a world of beings and agencies with which we interact and which inform and influence us, or the world is an idea we have, a world we make. And in the latter case, then it could then be construed that nothing really exists for us except as we think it – an impossible state of affairs, for we *are absolutely bodied and within* a world of diverse beings and agencies.

Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his essay *Eye and Mind*, speaks of the others with whom he is embodied and with whom he “haunts a single, present, and actual Being”.⁸ In speaking of the painter Cezanne and Mont St. Victoire, he tells us “*it is the mountain itself* which from out there makes itself seen by the painter ... it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze”.⁹ Surely this is a conversation, which in essence involves more than one.

Descartes told us that a thing is real if it can be proved so. If its existence is doubted, it must be deemed false until proved otherwise. It is through thinking that this is proved. It is through thinking that I know I exist. The legacy of Descartes still has us believing that we are internal beings and that the world, *the world that is most real to us*, is the world we think – a world of ideality. But where does this leave us as bodied beings dwelling within a world of others? Where does this place us in regard to even our own perceptual world?

From the same root source of the aesthetic as sensuous perception we may also arrive at its opposite – anaesthesia, or insensibility, which is to be cut off from perception. If our particular cultural maps of belief admit or allow only a percentage of our experience to be considered real, then potentially a great deal of our experience of being in the world is denied, or unacknowledged; we become insensible to particular engagements with world and other.

Psychologist James Hillman believes that we are culturally anaesthetised, trapped in a self-referencing cycle, a kind of cultural narcissism, where we gaze infatuated at ourselves as the primary focus of our engagement.¹⁰ And the self that so engages us is an internal self, a self believed to be the maker of world and the source of experience. So, when the world suffers, and we perceive terrible things happening, such as species annihilation, the death of the oceans, and our response is sorrow, through the legacy of Descartes this sorrow becomes personal, internalised, and so it becomes depression - an illness in an individual. So, rather than a responsive relationship within, and in support of, a world greater than ourselves, we treat symptoms within the

individual. This is a malady of separation – a separation that we insist upon and maintain at great cost.

The ideation of the world is for Hillman anaesthesia, which is also the denial of beauty, a quality inherent in the world. Anaesthesia is the denial of the world soul, the *anima mundi*. The remedy is to awaken the heart.

In the ancient world, the organ of perception was the heart and it is beauty that opens the heart, and so this forms a circle of being. This heart Hillman speaks about is the “imaginative, sensing heart”, “... which ...conforms to the ...heart of the world”.¹¹ We might recall that the only way we can come close to other perceptual worlds is to extend ourselves imaginatively. So the opening of the heart, the imaginative heart, is how we are open to the world, to the heart of the world.

And beauty is not the pretty, the frivolous, the pleasing, nor a high ideal. Criticizing the “lofty rhetoric” expressed in most discussion of aesthetics as “stupefying” and “narcoleptic”, Hillman claims beauty as “useful, functional and practical”.¹² Beauty is manifestation, the *appearance* of the world soul.

Rebecca Solnit, writing on art, beauty and the human/world relationship, tells us that beauty is so powerful and mysterious that we attempt to belittle, to devalue it. She describes it as so suppressed and so problematic, that it “seems like a fault line running through the culture, out of sight and ready to disrupt everything”.¹³ Rilke said beauty was the beginning of terror¹⁴, while Hillman tells us we need the courage to be afraid.¹⁵

One fine evening, while riding my bicycle, I am captured by a flash of brilliant ruby light in a clearing of lush green grass. I am drawn in and on approaching, find a doe on which two young eagles are feeding. Her neck is sinuous, her forelegs perfectly crossed. The sun slants through the forest illuminating the thin tissue of flesh across her rib cage. There is only this moment, this perfect presence, this being-with. Simultaneously comes the gasp, the sudden intake of my breath. The forest is not still, but my cognitive faculties are, as the eagles nearby regard me with some suspicion. We are held, together, in beauty; doe, eagles, forest, blood, bone, grass, root and stone.

The word for perception, or sensation in Greek was *aisthesis*, which means at root a breathing in, or taking in, of the world, the gasp, “aha”, the “uh’ of the breath in wonder, shock, amazement, an aesthetic response...¹⁶

The gasp, the “aha!” moment, might also be thought of as a clearing; the moment when we become simply present – when everything else falls away, when we fall off the edge of our map and into the world. Our preconceptions fall away for that moment and the world can shine forth in its own being. Merleau-Ponty tells us “the eye accomplishes the prodigious work of opening the soul”.¹⁷

For the Greeks, aesthesis, the gasp, the intake of breath is literally an inspiration, to in-spire, to take in – Merleau-Ponty again: “We speak of inspiration, and the word should be taken literally. There really is inspiration

and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernable that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen...”

Resonating with his ideas of “Flesh”, such a connecting, an intertwining of Being, would hold within it the intimate interrelations and presencing of beings in the world and of the world itself.

It is through the eye of the heart that we find ourselves within a world, that we come to *know* in the most intimate way. Information will not get us where we need to go, only this deep *knowing*.

In the face of such an offering by beauty, ideas of a disengaged and frivolous aesthetics seem foolish. Even in terms of the everyday, beauty as an opening to engagement offers the possibility of astonishment. As we may perceive what we previously did not, we may also perceive afresh what we thought we knew.

Recognising our part in the intertwined Being of the world is to welcome uncertainty, relinquishing illusions of absolute control. It is to meet and return the radiant gaze of the world.

In the words of James Hillman: “Let the heart be stirred!”

¹ Arnold Berleant, Suzi Gablik and others, including Berleant in *The Aesthetics of Environment*

² See, for example, Michael Livingston's article *Modern Medieval Map Myths: The Flat World, Ancient Sea-Kings, and Dragons*, which may be found here:

http://www.strangehorizons.com/2002/20020610/medieval_maps.shtml

³ Olga Bogdashina, *Different Sensory Experiences - Different Sensory Worlds*

⁴ Nash, in *Child Growth and Development*, 6th Edition, 1997

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, p.40

⁶ Berleant, *Living in the Landscape*, p.18

⁷ Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, p 54

⁸ MP, *Eye and Mind*, p 161

⁹ MP, *Eye and Mind*, p. 166

¹⁰ Hillman, *The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World*

¹¹ Hillman, *The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World* p. 16

¹² Hillman, "The Practice of Beauty" in *Uncontrollable Beauty*, p.261

¹³ Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent*, p.83

¹⁴ Rilke, First Duino Elegy

¹⁵ Hillman, "The Practice of Beauty" in *Uncontrollable Beauty*, p.272

¹⁶ Hillman, *The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World*, p.107

¹⁷ MP, *Eye and Mind* p. ?