

The Role of the Artist's Gesture in the Perception of Art and Artistic Style

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Abstract

The perception of art is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon. One obvious aspect in perceiving and appreciating a work of art is the recognition of its representational content, either figurative or non-figurative. A second and no less important aspect is the assessment of its graphic or plastic qualities. Assessing these qualities is part of our understanding of the process in which the work has been produced.

Many artists testify that this process is not primarily an activity carried out by the mind, but rather “[...] a bodily activity, one that is an expression of the lived-body’s way of being in the world.” (Wentworth, 2004: 15) The perception and appreciation of works of art therefore involves the understanding of its coming into being on the basis of the artist’s gestures.

In this contribution, these two related ideas are elaborated on the basis of a number of phenomenological insights. First, the Husserlian idea that in the perception of cultural objects their coming into being is *appresented*, and second the idea that in the art of drawing, this is a matter of *appresentation* of the draftsman bodily gestures.

Keywords: art, Husserl, *appresentation*, empathy, drawing, gesture

1. Empathy and the Purpose Form (*Zweckgestalt*) of a Work

Almost in passing, in a text dated 1930¹, Edmund Husserl draws our attention to the fact that empathy (*Einfühlung*) plays a constitutive role in the perception of works of art. For even when the work does not come into being before our eyes, it is on the basis of empathy that we grasp the work as something that was made in the past by someone who was acting². A work is realised on the basis of a goal, and this goal is reached once the work is completed and the goal-directed activity is finished. Although that seems an obvious statement, Husserl notices that the goal is only reached because the end point of the process still contains the acquisition (*Erwerb*) and it does so thanks to its form.

The end point, which is *presently* perceivable, is only meaningful because its ‘now’ contains its past phases in a retentive way, whereas its protentions are practically lost or (in certain cases) somehow stabilised. In Husserl’s phenomenology, ‘retention’ generally refers to a property of consciousness, namely to its ability to retain the immediately previous instants. The closely related term ‘protention’ is used to refer to consciousness’ ability to ‘protend’ or to stretch to immediately future instants.

¹ Text Nr. 37: „Grundmodi des Handelns und die zum Handeln gehörigen Horizonte: Momentanhorizont, eigentlich praktischer Horizont, Universalhorizont “Welt”. Die Welt der Werke und Güter.“, pp. 357-384 in *Edmund Husserl Gesammelte Werke, Husserliana XXXIX*. I got acquainted with this text and text Nr. 40 during a lecture by Christian Ferencz-Flatz at Ghent University, “The empathetic apprehension of artefacts. A Husserlian approach to non-figurative art”, October 15th, 2010.

² In the German original: “Das bleibende Werk, auch wo es nicht vor seinen Augen ersteht, wird durch Einfühlung ursprünglich verstanden als früher, als von irgendjemand etc. handelnd entsprungen.” (Husserl, 2008, p. 370)

Husserl uses the terms here to indicate properties of the perceived object rather than of the acts of perception themselves.

Whereas a work comes into being on the basis of phases that are protentional, i.e. looking ahead towards the completion of the work, these forward-reaching or protentional phases are practically lost once the work is finished. A dance performance, e.g., is over once the realisation of the work is finished and the dancers stop dancing. The dance is an acquisition now, but merely in the form of a (lively) retention. In contrast to works of art like paintings, the dance is performed in front of our eyes, and we witness its coming into being as a work. Furthermore, a dance performance does not belong to the kind of works that continue to exist once they are completed. The dance can continue to exist in memory or on tape, but as a work it does not exist any longer once the goal (to dance a dance) is reached.

To paint a painting, however, aims at providing an image that remains. When the painting is finished, it still has the forward-looking horizon of an unchanging continued existence. Yet the meaning of it as 'image', in which it continues to exist, lies in the retentive dimension that extends itself. And it is precisely in this extending retention that the acquisition of meaning of the painting is constituted. Concretely, the painter did not paint the painting for the momentary joy of painting and for the short moment of joy once the painting is finished. It is for the enduring possession of it, in order to enjoy it time and again, and also, of course, in order to be seen by a public.

Works thus have or receive an enduring purpose form (*Zweckgestalt*). Works, which exhibit this purpose form, must have been actively made, with the intention of continuously being ready to be enjoyed in their remaining form. A practical intention is realised in such a work, and the work has received its purpose form from a productive or creative activity. It is the form of the work that reminds us of the activity and the past immanent intention.

But how is it that we are able to perceive this dimension of the work? How exactly are we able to perceive on the basis of their form that works (and works of art in particular) have been made? We already know that empathy plays a constitutive role, but we need to look at this into more detail.

2. *Appresentation and Apperception of Cultural Objects*

In order to answer the above question, we turn more explicitly to perception and its connection with the perceived object. The focus is on Husserl's discussion of cultural objects in a text on perception and *apperception* dated 1932³. At first sight, perception is a form of direct presentation of the object in which what is present is directly given. Simply put, one could say that perception is about the direct perception of what is real.

A second form of perception, however, is not a matter of presentation but of *appresentation* (*Appräsentation*). In *appresentation* something (an object, a quality, a relation, ...) is not itself directly present, but only indirectly. *Appresentation* is the indirect presentation of something in perception. Husserl gives the example of perceiving something in front, the meaning of which is always co-determined by the *appresentation* of its backside, which we do not perceive directly. The *appresentation* of the backside is motivated by the perceptual presentation of its front, but vice versa

³ Nr. 40: „Zur Theorie der Apperzeption: Perzeption und Apperzeption. Verschiedene Arten der Apperzeption.“, pp. 409-437 in *Edmund Husserl Gesammelte Werke, Husserliana XXXIX*.

is the presentation of the front determined by the *appresentation* of its backside. Not only is every *appresentation* thus founded in a presentation; what is *appresented* also co-determines the meaning of what is presented. Every perception of a concrete, real something is therefore explicable in terms of presentation and *appresentation*, and these stand in a relation of mutual foundation. Perception is never pure in the sense of merely being directed to what is presented. Perception is always a perceptual synthesis of perception and *apperception*, i.e. of what is presented and what is *appresented*.

Cultural objects (such as books, houses, tools, works of art etc.) form a special case of *appresentation*. Cultural objects are a special case because we perceive them not only in their concrete, thingly and sensory properties and qualities, but at the same time we *apperceive* them with cultural properties and qualities. In this context of perception of cultural objects, Husserl comes back to both the role of empathy and the purpose form of works. According to Husserl, it is crucial to the perception of cultural objects that the people who have made these objects according to their intentions are *appresented*, and also *appresented* are people for whom these objects count as purposively made. In other words, we perceive cultural objects *as* cultural, i.e. as made by someone for someone who perceives them as made by and for someone. What is important for the present contribution is that not only people are *appresented*, but also the foregoing evolution or the causal processes in which the object was tied⁴. Cultural objects can only be *cultural* objects because they point back to their coming into being in purposeful human activity.

A possible objection to the Husserlian account of perception in terms of presentation and *appresentation* runs as follows. Nothing is really *perceived* in addition to the perception of what is concrete-real. What is *appresented* is only there on the basis of knowledge and is thus a matter of sedimentation of knowledge (*Wissensniederschläge*). I just take up a certain judgement and transfer it to what I perceive. Husserl gives the example of the perception of the moon and the fact that he has learnt that the darker areas are caused by the play of light and shadow of the mountains on the moon. From now on, when I perceive the moon, the moon has merely gained a verbal determination. This may be true for the moon, but Husserl denies that it is the case for all objects. Cultural objects are not perceived as cultural objects on the basis of intellectual judgements. We perceive them as such because of the presence (in the form of an *appresentation*) of an intention, which is *incorporated* into the intuitive (in the sense of visible or perceptible) meaning of the object under consideration. Husserl refers to written and spoken words, which we always perceive as words and never as meaningless marks, to tools, which we do not perceive as mere three-dimensional objects but as functional items, and also to works of art, e.g. a marble statue that has a physical form that fulfils a certain goal, namely to depict a certain image form and to make this manifest in the marble.

⁴ The original passage reads: „Kulturdinge werden als Dinge gesehen in ihren dinglichen Eigenschaften, aber sie sind zugleich als Kulturgebilde apperzipiert mit Kultureigenschaften. Appräsentiert sind Menschen, die dergleichen gebildet haben zu ihren Zwecken, und Menschen, denen dergleichen als zweckmäßig, als dienlich gilt für eventuelle Zwecktätigkeiten. Angezeigt sind also nicht nur mitdaseiende Dinge, sondern auch frühere Vorgänge, Kausalprozesse, in die Dinge verflochten waren, seiende menschliche Personen, die Zwecke haben, die in Verhaltensperioden kommen, in denen sie gewisse typische Bedürfnisse haben, die sie zu erfüllen wünschen etc.“ (Husserl, 2008, p. 411)

3. Apelles, Empathy and the Pointing Back to its Origin

From Husserl, we learn that a necessary condition for the perception of a *cultural* object is the *apperceptive*, empathic understanding of its coming into being. We now turn to this empathic understanding and to the way a cultural object points back to its genesis. We fix our attention on visual, two-dimensional works of art, more in particular on drawings. We choose for drawings because they exemplify and clarify Husserl's insight in a most impressive way.

Plinius the Elder, in his *Natural History*, published in the first century AD, distinguishes two lines (for an account, cf. Rosand, 2002): the line Parrhasios and the line of Apelles. Whereas the line of Parrhasios is the mimetic contour that creates the illusion of inflecting itself into space and disrupting the flatness of the surface, the line of Apelles is a sign of the presence of the artist himself. "The line [of Apelles] is the mark of the artist: at once a demonstration of his skill and testimony to his authorship, it is both work and signature, and thus a declaration of his professional self; as an index, a pure trace, it is without representational responsibility." (Rosand, 2002: 7) The line of Apelles is thus not the pictorial, representational line, but refers to itself and through itself – as a graphic reality – to its maker.

The qualities of the line of Apelles reveal or manifest the character of the drawing gesture that has produced the line. The line thins or thickens, e.g., according to the velocity and the weight of the drawing gesture. The dynamics of the line have followed the dynamics of the gesture and the latter is present in the former. The viewer does not have to infer intellectually or rationally the character of the drawing gestures from the qualities of the line. It is perception itself that *appresents* the drawing gesture in the visible line. Movement is *apperceived* in the drawing as a cultural object made or created intentionally by a fellow human being.

Our appreciation of a drawing is thus dependent not only on the representational capacity of the line and its illusionary potential, but also on the 'inner' movement it causes in us, beings equally capable of moving and gesturing⁵. The essence of the line of Apelles is to point back to its origin in the moving and gesturing body of the artist. Perception presents the line as a graphic reality, the qualities of which we appreciate on the basis of the *appresented* qualities of the creative, bodily gestures. "(...) the line is a direct record of the draftsman's gesture. On a fundamental level, it involves us, as viewers, in the kinesthetics of the act of drawing: its qualities of direction, velocity, weight, its rhythm, pace, and inflection stand as permanent trace of the movement of the artist's hand – and of the body of which that hand is an extension." (Rosand, 2002: 16) Rosand thus notices that to perceive a drawing is to become involved in the *act* of drawing, which is a projection of the embodied self of the draftsman. Clearly, this is – on a prereflective level – an empathic re-enactment of the way the line was produced and in a similarly Husserlian vein it shows an essential feature of any truly cultural product: an intersubjective dimension where viewer and maker can meet.

The line of Apelles is retrospective in nature because it points back to the hand of its maker. As Rosand writes, the line of Apelles is "the line as trace, an index of authorial presence – inviting the imaginative recognition of the viewer." (Rosand, 2002: 17) This line is like a handwriting or a signature, characterised by a particular and unique style, which can be recognized by the viewer. This recognition of a style is intimately connected with the recognition of the movement and its dynamics.

⁵ This does not mean that the relation of maker and viewer is a symmetrical one (for an account, cf. Wentworth, 2004).

4. Conclusion: Hand and Style

Drawing results into something static: a surface with still signs or inscriptions. These static forms, however, have a dynamic history, and it is this sedimented history that is *appresented* in perception. This presence, or ‘appresence’ of the dynamic in the static may be more common than we expect. Converging evidence suggests that handwriting recognition not only makes use of the distinctive features of letters, but also of information about how letters are formed (cf. Freyd, 1983). A similar underlying process may be possible in the recognition of an artist’s hand or style. It is no accident that the word ‘style’ is etymologically related to *stilus*, i.e. a pointed instrument, used in writing or drawing and thus referring to the gesture of the hand. In a metonymic way, ‘hand’ indicates ‘style’, and an artist is known by his line. “Individual style means individual hand; the work of the artist is the work of the hand.” (Rosand, 2002: 18) Of course, connoisseurship and the recognition of the style of an artist is a matter of skill, and like for any skill training and devotion are necessary for it in order to develop. However, even highly developed forms of connoisseurship are rooted in the underlying perceptual mechanism of cultural objects being perceived and *apperceived*. We have focused on the *apperceptive* dimension of drawings, in which the creative coming into being of the line and the gesture of the draftsman are *appresented*.

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