

**GUMBRECHT:**  
**BEAUTY / BELEZA**



# BEAUTY

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The now ubiquitous «selfie-stick,» in its embarrassing directness, has added a grotesque degree of evidence to a condition of experience with which we have long been familiar. Visitors at art museums stepping a few steps back and a few steps forward in order to find what will end up appearing to be the «right» distance in front of a painting; potential spectators making a value decision about price levels for different locations in a theater building, a stadium, or a concert hall; and a connoisseur getting his nose close to a glass of wine in order to appreciate what we call (in the most tautological of all metonymies) its «nose»—they all competently act within multiple parameters of the complex relation between distance, closeness, and aesthetic experience although they may never have explicitly thought about them. And despite that strange metonymy of a «nose» standing in the syntactical place reserved for the smells of wine, I should emphasize right from the start of my brief reflection about the triple relationship between distance, closeness, and aesthetic experience in its different modalities that, even in the most complex varieties, the dimensions of this relationship are all «real,» in the sense of being spatial, geometrical, and measurable in inches, feet, and yards.

What needs some serious inaugural effort of definition, by contrast, is the concept of «aesthet-

ic experience» with which I have tacitly replaced the word «beauty» from the title of my essay. For while «beauty» and «aesthetic experience» tend to be synonymous in contemporary everyday language (with «aesthetic experience» having a more sophisticated connotation), the Western philosophical tradition, stemming from Immanuel Kant's «Critique of the Power of Judgment,» subsumes under «aesthetic experience» two quite different modes: the «beautiful,» as the effect of an impression of «purposiveness without purpose,» and «the sublime» as a feeling of being overwhelmed by an object of perception. As these two modes have individually complex and, above all, different relations to spatial distance and closeness, I will pursue them separately, following thus Kant's conceptual distinction (which of course implies that my title uses the word «beauty» in an all-encompassing meaning, different from Kant's).

To Kant's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime and to his famous analysis of the specificity of aesthetic judgment as firstly «disinterested» (that is, at a distance from all practical interests and purposes), as secondly not being based on quantitative or stable qualitative criteria, and as thirdly being accompanied by the gesture of a «quest for consensus» (even if we know that such consensus has no objective ground), I want to add a description

of «aesthetic experience» in the style of the phenomenological tradition, a distinction that can establish a connection to the dimension of space and that will introduce a historical dimension capable of explaining why «aesthetic experience,» at least as a concept, did not exist before the eighteenth century. My premise for this description is that we cannot help having a double reaction to all intentional objects (i.e., to all bodily perceptions transformed into objects by and within human consciousness): we can firstly not help attributing a meaning to intentional objects although we normally only become aware of doing so when this reaction no longer proceeds smoothly; but we also and secondly establish a spatial relationship to all intentional objects, that is, we seem to know that they are farther away from our body or closer to it, tangible or intangible, smaller or larger in comparison to it. I will call the first of these inevitable relations to all intentional objects «interpretation» and the second «presence.»

Now my historical thesis is that our (spatially articulated) presence relationship to intentional objects has been increasingly bracketed in Western cultures (while it of course continued to exist) since the seventeenth century, i.e., since the time when the human self-image most compactly articulated in Descartes's formula of «I think, therefore I am» began to dominate. There have always been exceptions, however; that is, situations and intentional objects simultaneously experienced both in their dimensions of interpretation and of presence, in some cases for more or less random reasons, and in some others due to a deliberate attempt to undercut

the bracketing tendency. The latter were those, I believe, to which the emergence of the noun «aesthetics» and of a new kind of philosophical reflection under the same word as its name reacted since the early eighteenth century. Pointing to the two-dimensionality of the texts that we call «poems» is an easy way to show how artworks and literature could function as objects of aesthetic experience since early Modernity. We spontaneously attribute meanings to them (as to all other texts) but, due to specific structures of recurrence in their graphematic appearance or in their sound structure (both belonging to the level of the material level of the «signifier»), they make it impossible for us to bracket the very dimension of presence.

There is normally no stable relationship between the meaning dimension and the presence dimension in those intentional objects which trigger aesthetic experience and in our reaction to them; rather our mind tends to become engaged in an ongoing oscillation between the two sides. It is the exceptional potential of triggering this kind of oscillation that sets poetic texts (and all other kinds of artworks) apart from the modern everyday sphere (exclusively dominated by networks of meaning) and has thus produced the impression of their «autonomy» within the everyday world. I am of course not saying that oscillations between meaning and presence could not have occurred in pre-modern Western or non-Western cultures. But only if the meaning dimension is being generally bracketed do they have their specific and stable status (referred to as «aesthetic autonomy»).

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The very structure of experience triggered by intentional objects («artworks,» «poetic texts,» «symphonies,» etc.) that we call either «beautiful» or «sublime» sets into motion

a particular dynamic and tension that finds its articulation in space—and I think it is here, in this spatial articulation, that the potential of aesthetic experience becomes most alive and

palpable. On the one hand and very basically, we often want to touch, get closer to, and be in presence of those objects. On the other hand, we normally need a certain distance if we want to interpret (attribute meaning to) them. The relation between the desire for closeness (presence) and the need for distance (interpretation) is of course different for each individual object and, beyond that (and on a less individual level) also for each of the five human senses. To make things more complicated, there are also cases, quite frequently highlighted and elaborated in Japanese culture, where the desire to get spatially close to an object, from a certain degree of closeness on, turns into an opposite dynamics of resistance that keeps the object of desire far off.

As for visual relationships in particular, it is obvious that both great distance and extreme closeness make interpretation impossible. In the spirit of a «purposiveness with no purpose» (i.e., Kant's definition of the beautiful) we therefore mostly keep a middle distance allowing for interpretation when we are seeing the world (even if we do so without a specific intention or function in mind). By contrast, we only occasionally allow for a larger distance that can produce an effect of sublimity, whereas we hardly ever seek to get our eyes very close to objects of experience. For the eyes are vulnerable spots on the surface of our bodies, and no specific desire seems to find fulfillment in greater visual closeness.

However, our bodies are often wrapped by and into sound waves that quite literally touch our skin and, conversely, we like to immerse ourselves in them. Once again, the most extreme closeness to sounds and their sources is hardly ever bearable—and certainly not sublime, whereas sitting close to the sound body of an orchestra of classical music may well turn out to be overwhelming, in a positive and even sublime way. But there are also moments where the remoteness of sounds makes necessary an effort of concentration that turns out to become sublime in its own way. In general, we enjoy music as

the lightest touch of the material world on our body, that is, as particularly close without being oppressive. And yet, different from seeing and different from listening to language, no specific distance or closeness can be esteemed as appropriate for the interpretation of music because music, different from language, does not necessarily imply or «carry» meanings that needs to be deciphered.

As for taste, the objects of aesthetic experience must be in direct contact with the body (i.e., with its taste buds), paradoxically so if compared to all other senses where a minimal distance between the observer's body and its objects of observation is required for interpretation. In order for the relatively reduced repertoire of concepts referring to taste to be activated, such direct contact must exist. Particularly interesting is the case of Japanese cuisine where all appreciation depends on tactility registered in the mouth. Soy sauce is indeed meant to neutralize the different flavors of different foods to thus intensify impressions of tactility, both in terms of the form and surface and in terms of the different degrees of material consistency of the objects in question. In other words, Japanese food is judged according to haptic impressions which means, again and in general, that an immediate physical contact with the object of interpretation is necessary, without this immediacy being allowed to turn in to a firm (or even inseparable) contact or grasp (reading Braille may be the most obvious paradigm for this type of spatial relation). It seems to be similar, finally, to the distance and closeness relations with smells, scents, and fragrances. Our nose needs to be close to the sources of olfactory impressions in order to distinguish and to appreciate them. But while, on the other hand, to increase physical distance is a way of avoiding impressions of this kind when they are becoming too strong, a greater closeness (on the verge of direct contact) will also neutralize them.

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In general and using the distinction between two types of human attitudes towards the world that Martin Heidegger elaborated in *Being and Time*—that is the «present-at-hand»—and the «ready-to-hand,» we can say that the interpretation component in our dealing with intentional objects tends to produce situations of the «present-at-hand» type (similar to the classic Subject/Object paradigm and with a greater affinity to «beauty»), whereas the presence component rather associates itself with the «ready-to-hand» and the «sublime.» If the human self-reference in the «present-at-hand» can be called «Cartesian» because it is co-extensive with human consciousness, and the «ready-to-hand» implies Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* as human self-reference, which was supposed to recuperate, against a tendency that we have associated with Early Modernity, the body and space as dimensions of human existence, then body and space will ground a human relationship to the things of the world that Heidegger calls «being-the-world» and in which *Dasein* and the things of the world are no longer categorically separated because they both share and belong to materiality.

Relations between phenomena within the «ready-to-hand» and the «being-in-the world» are always relations of closeness (or at least of shared space) and of a primary mutual familiarity. On this basis, we can propose a typology of different degrees of physical closeness and intensity permeating the social relations among humans (and continuing to presuppose that their self-reference corresponds to that of *Dasein*). We can call «interaction» a relationship between humans who are physically «close» without letting this closeness have an impact on their behavior in its mutual conditioning. In «mysticism» the protagonists sharing a space and interacting imagine that they might have (had) a physical relationship (typically a relationship including physical penetration). «Sex» (or «sex-

uality») takes place as the physical and spatial reality of what «mysticism» only imagines. Finally, after «interaction» and «mysticism,» «anthropophagy» (with «theophagy as its religious or «transcendental» equivalent) obviously transcends sex both on the levels of physical closeness and of irreversibility. One might thus call anthropophagy the maximum and limit case in terms of the closeness of a relationship between humans, the case also where many interactive relationships can turn metabolic, i.e., they establish a mutual physical dependency turning into a condition of life.

Now if we acknowledge that aesthetic experience (in the post-seventeenth-century modality) always contains a component of presence and thus often, as a potential at least, a dimension of metabolic closeness, then we may conclude that it can always lead to consummation and consumption (in the literal sense of these words) as two endpoints where an initial desire is fulfilled and redeemed—with the object of desire disappearing. Within different historical and cultural contexts, this degree of maximum and irreversible closeness has either been ecstatically celebrated (as a form of existential fulfillment indeed) or harshly criticized, rejected, and surrounded with a taboo—as barbarism or as bad taste caused by the incapacity to control one's own desire. Needless to say, the second position, i.e., that of rejecting consummation or consumption, tends to argue in favor of an interpretative relationship to objects of experience and of desire, even if only as a means of avoiding the point of an irreversible implosion in how we relate to the material world.

Of course I am writing in the semantic proximity of what Nietzsche so famously distinguished as the «Apollinian» and the «Dionysian» type of world experience and of human relationships. Both these types of behavior, forms of experience, and concepts are the (polar

opposite and typologically pure) results of an attempt to disentangle the complex spatial dynamics towards the world that come together in most kinds of modern aesthetic experience. Personally (and as most intellectuals, I believe), I am much more fascinated, conceptually and aesthetically, by the second type, i.e. by the met-

abolic and Dionysian relation too the world and to other bodies. But this, as some colleagues or contemporaries with good taste might say, is but a symptom of impatience, incontinence, and bad taste, not worthy of a Western intellectual in the early twenty-first century.