Catching the Aesthetic Dimension: On Aesthetic Experience of Colour and Light

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ABSTRACT
This paper springs from a project about concept formation in the field of colour and light. It is based on own reflections and on scientific and scholarly references. It is an attempt to describe a conceptual approach to aesthetic experiences of colour and light relating them to different levels of experience: categorical perception, direct experience and indirect – cultural – experience. Art and design have a special and complex relation to the different levels of experience. Artistic works can serve as "models" or "examples" – indirect experiences – for how we may attend to light and colour in our direct approach to the world. They are also, as appearances, direct experiences. The emotional content we can experience in a piece of art or a designed object is symbolic in a special way; perceptual patterns of colour, light and form, abstracted from their normal context in life, can be used as symbols for felt life in pieces of art and in designed objects. What we are used to calling formal aesthetics belongs primarily to the categorical – basic – perception. Adopting a reflective attitude we consciously attend to this perceptual process of understanding and open up for reflection on experiences as such.

1. BACKGROUND
The overall spatial impression of colour and light is an intuitive summary of current perceptions in a context of all experiences we have through living contact with the world. The American philosopher Susanne K Langer calls attention to the fact that the word intuitive is often used in a confused way; intuition is supposed to be "without reasoning" and without "benefit of logic" which ends in "mysticism, mixed with every degree of philosophical irrationalism – and sheer sentimentality and romantic fancies" (Langer 1957: 60). Just the other way round and relating to John Locke she claims that there is "no possible conflict between intuition and discursive reason" (Ibid: 66). Intuition is the fundamental intellectual activity, which produces logical or semantic understanding. It comprises all acts of insight or recognition of formal properties, of relations, of significance, and of abstraction and exemplification. "Intuitions are neither ‘true’ nor ‘false’, but simply present” (Ibid).

The basic – categorical – perception of colour and light gives spatial and temporal structure to the surrounding reality. The experience of stability and coherence of the world is fundamental; there is a tight perceptual attunement between human beings and the world around. The experienced world is in ecological balance with the human environment, and the perceptual relation between the outer world and the human inner world is without hindrance (Noë 2004: 156).

By direct experience we gradually learn through living to understand the relations of colour and light to the world around. The direct experience is dynamic and simultaneous; perceptions, feelings and emotions form a coherent whole. Making use of natural perceptual abilities (the categorical perception) and interplaying with the physical world we develop
perceptual “skills”; we acquire abilities to catch the spatial significance of colour and light in space.

Figure 1: The graphic model shows levels of experience - from experiences based on categorical perception through direct experience of the world around to the indirect experience imbedded in cultural expressions (Klarén 2012).

Experiencing colour and light in a living context always implies an intuitive and emotional understanding: we experience spontaneously spatial relations, the atmosphere of a room or the tone of an object. And our experience of the world around is always influenced by indirect experience – cultural values and knowledge.

The three experience levels (figure 1) – The categorical – basic –perception, the direct experience and the indirect – cultural – experience are interdependent and implicitly present in all perceptions (Klarén 2012). This is how our overall perception normally works.

2. AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Art and design have a special and complex relation to direct and indirect experience. On the one hand artistic works can serve as “models” or “examples” for how we may attend to light and colour in our direct approach to the world. On the other hand they are also, as appearances, direct experiences. The aesthetic dimensions in art and design are, depending on aspect, both direct and indirect experiences. Langer says that “in one way, all good art is abstract, and in another way it is concrete” (Langer 1957: 69).

2.1 Aesthetic attention

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002: 355) discusses how we approach the surrounding world in different ways depending on situation. He makes a distinction between two modes of attention: living perception and the reflective attitude. In living perception colour and light are manifested to us in the totality of spatial relations; this is the everyday way of attending to colour and light.

Experience of the world makes it possible to think about it; we would not know what the world is like without experience. In living perception the perceptual qualities are mostly transparent; our attention is on the objects and spaces of the outer world. Adopting an re-
reflective attitude, however, we consciously attend to our spontaneous perceptual process of understanding; attending to aesthetic qualities in art and design – or in the world around – means that we open up for reflection on experiences as such; what we attend to is the perceptual qualities, not the physical thing. We “abstract its appearance from its material existence” (Langer 1953: 47).

2.2 The expressive symbol

Gottlieb Baumgarten, originator of Aesthetics as a specific academic discipline, describes knowledge that implies coherent intuitive understanding and is given directly by sense experiences (Baumgarten 1983, p 80). Aesthetics is not concerned exclusively with art. Aesthetics is an epistemology, and aesthetic experience is an aspect of our natural approach to the world.

Langer’s aesthetic philosophy is a part of the epistemological tradition from Baumgarten. Connecting to Wittgenstein she asks, how do we give symbolic form to the tacit dimension of our direct experience? She claims that the emotional content we can experience in a piece of art or a designed object is symbolic in a special way (Langer 1957: 60); perceptual patterns of colour, light and form, abstracted from their normal context in life, can be used as symbols for felt life in pieces of art and in designed objects. Langer calls them logical expressive – or articulated – symbols (Langer 1953: 31).

Wittgenstein says that feelings follow experience of a piece of music, just as they follow courses in life (Wittgenstein 1993: 19); a piece of music consists of a sequence of tones. It has a structural resemblance to courses in life – a rhythm, pauses and breaks, pitches, etc. – and thus they can be used as examples. The auditory structure in music is not a course of life, but felt life abstracted in a logical expressive symbol. The same is true for all sensory experiences.

The direct visual experiences of the surrounding world give emotional content to logical colour and light combinations in the real world. Thus a certain colour combination, a light arrangement or an articulated space can act as a logical expressive symbol. The logical expressive symbols are what we may call the artistic or aesthetic dimension in pictures, in utility goods, in architecture – in the surrounding world (Langer 1953: 31, 51-52).

The logical expressive symbols occur in the borderland between direct and indirect experience. What we are used to calling “expression” in an articulated object or space is perceived as a direct experience, but without being separated from its symbol. Encountering articulated patterns in pictorial art, object design, in interior design or architecture, our perceptual answer is first of all intuitive recognition, not interpretation of meaning.

Expressive symbols are not about abstract signs with associated or conventional meanings. According to Langer they are objectified feelings based on visual experience that can only be communicated by significant patterns of perceived qualities.

2.3 Formal aesthetics

Perceiving colour distinctions and colour similarities are basic to colour perception. If, for example, in a colour combination, the colours have the same whiteness, blackness, chromaticness, hue or lightness, we can sense that these colours have something in common. We are used to saying that colours in such colour combinations fit together or harmonize or that the colours of a painting or a room hold together. This experienced unity of colours, however, has nothing to do with preferences. It follows from the visual system itself: the ability to
recognize colour distinctions and colour similarities is part of the categorical perception and is therefore predetermined. It is natural in the same sense as recognition of characteristic colour scales in perceptive colour systems. This hidden perceptual order is implicit in all transformations we experience as we move around the environment. It serves in the business of survival and allows the organism to discover deviations. Used in the context of art and design this is what usually is referred to as formal aesthetics.

A conscious or unconscious infraction of given perceptual rules will always be related to them and be regarded as a deviation from normality. Thus it is quite possible to deviate from them, but not to question or avoid them. In artistic tradition there is great consciousness of such perceptual prerequisites.

These basic experiences can, however, never be perceptually isolated. They are always part of the coherent experience of the world and thus always related to the dynamic direct experience and the indirect cultural context.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The aesthetic experiences have their origin in a reflective attitude aroused by recognition of and attention to logical expressive symbols (direct and indirect experience) and basic perceptual order (categorical perception and indirect experience). The qualities and the meanings that make up aesthetic patterns and expressive symbols cannot be examined separately without something essential being lost. The relations of aesthetic experiences to different levels of experience could, however, be described with the aesthetic coherence intact and make possible a communication and an analysis of the aesthetic dimension of colour and light.

REFERENCES


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