Aesthetics of Presence

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Philosophical and Practical Reconsiderations

By

Willmar Sauter

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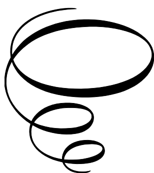

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Franz Geiselbrechtinger
in memoriam

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PROLOGUE

EXPERIENCES OF PRESENCE

In spring 1975, the Royal National Theatre was still performing at the Old Vic on the South Bank of London, waiting for the new premises to open only a few blocks away. I had, together with Sylvia, my new girlfriend and ever since my wife, bought tickets for the show that was scheduled during our stay in London. It happened to be Henrik Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*, one of his last and rarely performed plays. The story is sad, and in a way rather trivial. Borkman was in love with Ella, but he married her sister Gunhild due to her richer dowry. He wasted the fortune in his bank, cheated his customers, spent time in prison and has now retreated to the upper floor of his house. This is the situation when the play begins. During three acts we followed the well-acted intrigue with intense attention, but at the beginning of the fourth and last act, something extraordinary happened.

Standing in front of the house, Borkman, his wife Gunhild and her sister Ella witness the departure of young Erhart Borkman and his lover. Gunhild, his mother, is desperate and while the bells of the young couple's sledge disappear, the three of them remain in the yard. It had been snowing, which the set designer marked by a small white mound, in contrast to the black stage floor. All of a sudden there was a complete silence, there were only the three performers standing on the mound: Peggy Ashcroft as Gunhild, Wendy Hiller as Ella and Sir Ralph Richardson as John Gabriel. For some time, they were just staring at each other and while we were staring at them, a tangible tension emanated from the stage. During the short dialogue between husband, wife, sister, lover, swindler, mother, and despised mistress, the intensity grew. Every word that was uttered fell to the icy ground and evaporated with a silent gist. We both remember this moment that condensed three persons' misguided lives and their insight of irretrievable losses. The immense tautness between the actors also included us as spectators. This tightening tension was so strong that we almost leapt up from our seats, which were on the side of the first balcony, rather close to the stage – I remember this exactly. I do not know

how long this situation lasted on stage, but to us it seemed like an eternity. It was one of those rare moments in the theatre when the actors succeed in totally involving the spectator. The triangular relation that Ashcroft, Hiller and Richardson created on stage cast its spell over the auditorium. We understood that we shared this emotion with others. We had experienced the magic of presence.

We tumbled out of the Old Vic and ever since that evening I have been wondering what makes such experiences possible. Was it the extraordinary quality of the performers? True: Peggy Ashcroft and Wendy Hiller were among the leading British actresses at the time, with the experiences of a long career on stage and in film; Sir Ralph Richardson was by then over 70 years old and had performed Shakespeare and other classics with great stars such as Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud. Their excellence was beyond doubt, but still – the magic moment occurred only in the last act, lasted only some (long) minutes until Gunhild left the group and the talkative figure of Foldal appeared and brought the play to an end. It remained a mystery.

These moments of deep-felt involvement in theatrical situations are rare and nevertheless we are waiting for them in every performance we attend. Even when spectators are utterly pleased with what they see and hear on stage, there is no guarantee that such a remarkable moment will occur. At the same time one realizes that such moments, such notions of immediate presence, are far from limited to experiences in the theatre. A piece of music, a painted canvas, a photo in a newspaper, the sight of a city or even a view of 'pure' nature might all provoke the beholder's total engagement. And again there is the question: is it a particular quality of the object that facilitates these strong reactions? Moreover: would such a quality be an aesthetic quality?

Let me change perspective by describing a real, material object: Ötzi's coat. Ötzi, also called the Iceman, is the nickname of the mummy that was discovered high up in the Ötztal of the Alps in September 1991. After some dramatic guesswork, a C14 test confirmed that the corpse has been covered by snow and ice since the year 3350 BCE, approximately. In other words: this is a well-preserved, male person from the Stone Age. The place where Ötzi was found was first identified as Austria, so the mummy was brought to Innsbruck; in 1998 it was agreed that Ötzi was actually 'Italian' and he was moved to Bolzano. There Ötzi has been placed in an impressive museum. The corpse itself is preserved in a room with a temperature of minus eight degrees Celsius. Since the natural

mummification process had preserved not only bones but also muscles and skin, numerous analyses have been carried out, considerably expanding our knowledge about the living conditions of Stone Age people, from eating habits to worn-out joints. The fact that Ötzi was killed adds to the fascination of the discovery of a man in the snow on the crest of the Alps between Italy and Austria.

In the fall of 2018, some friends, my wife and I decided to visit Ötzi in Bolzano. We had prepared ourselves by hiking uphill towards the place where Ötzi was found. We did not go as high as Ötzi, but we nevertheless saw (or imagined) the area where his life ended. When we visited the museum in Bolzano, we were mentally ready for the encounter with a mummy that predated the pyramids of ancient Egypt. There was a moment of reverence when we saw Ötzi for the first time through the small glass window that separated him from us. But it was rather our knowledge than the sight of the mummy that produced this feeling: not the way he looked, but the mere fact that he was still there was impressive.

Although Ötzi is displayed as a naked corpse today, he was found fully dressed and with the necessary equipment of bow and arrows, backpack, knife, etc. These finds are also displayed, from the wolfskin cap to the bearskin shoes. What fascinated me the most was his coat. The knee-length coat was sewn from pieces of goatskin and pieces of lambskin. The skin from goats was dark, reddish to brown. The sheepskin remained bright grey and made up the basic material of the coat. However, the coat had a dark horizontal stripe at the top, following the shape of the breast, from shoulder to shoulder, and two vertical stripes from the breast to the knees. Each stripe is about 10-12 cm wide. They were sewn together with threads made of animal sinews. And it was so beautiful! So tastefully composed. Any fashion designer could use the pattern five thousand years later and would be applauded. I was standing there at the display of Ötzi's clothes and fell silent in amazement. I was stunned. In this moment Ötzi was completely present and something like a notion of eternity struck my mind: have human beings always had the desire to look beautiful – not just to keep warm? Did the design of the coat signify anything in particular? Was he a clan leader who was murdered in an ambush or was he only a shepherd who was robbed in the loneliness of the high Alps? We cannot know, but the question remains as to whether the creation and perception of that which is beautiful constitutes an organic part of all human behaviour, provided there are the means and the time to craft them. And obviously there have always been observing eyes to appreciate and interpret beautiful things.

Frames

These two moments of aesthetic experiences, 40 years apart in time, and 5000 years apart in relation to the objects that triggered these experiences, show some similarities. In both cases the observer remains in a state of admiration, not fully understanding what affects one's feelings. Something opens the mind to beauty in the sense of harmony and completeness, but there is also some unexpected tension. Beauty speaks emotionally, be it the actors on the mound or the Stone Age coat. There are these moments of presence when beauty is internalized and reflections and interpretations are momentarily suspended. Hannah Arendt understands beauty as part of the spiritual culture when she refers to Cicero and his sense of taste: "Even Cicero's *cultura animi* is suggestive of something like taste and, generally, sensitivity to beauty, not in those who fabricate beautiful things, that is, in the artists themselves, but in the spectators, in those who move among them."[1]

Beauty is rarely referred to in today's performance theories, but it was certainly a key term in the aesthetic discourses of the eighteenth century. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten wrote a Latin treatise, called *Aesthetica*, in 1750, in which he speaks about 'beautiful thinking'. Some years later, Moses Mendelssohn developed an intriguing outline of aesthetic experience. According to him, beauty could be experienced both in nature and in the arts and it was characterized by 'perfection' and 'completeness'. The important point was the attention and mental presence of the beholder, necessary to be able to sense beauty. In addition, Mendelssohn also developed ideas about the aesthetic pleasures of ugliness. These historical ideas of the eighteenth century are profound for an understanding of a concept of presence, since aesthetic discourses of the nineteenth century shifted their focus away from the beholder towards a normative aesthetics of the artwork. Only the phenomenological philosophy of the twentieth century made attempts to recapture the priority of the beholder.

Speaking of beauty seems to be at odds with a post-modern era. Aesthetics is not about formal beauty, as Theodor W. Adorno has taught us. But beauty remains a metaphor of aesthetics in the way in which the new philosophical discipline was originally discussed in the eighteenth century. Nor does it seem appropriate to speak of 'objects' that are observed by a 'subject' that observes. What is referred to as objects are things and events that exert a certain activity through which they appear to an observer. To underline this appearing, I will use the term 'Appearance' with a capital A, which includes both the actors of the Old Vic and Ötzi's coat. Whatever

the Appearance represents – music, art, drama, places, materials, filmstrips – it becomes alive when it is noticed by a listener, spectator, viewer or, more generally speaking, a 'Beholder' with a capital B. The many-layered relationship between A and B is at the heart of this book.

In the course of the discussion of historical and contemporary ideas about presence, I will extract four particular parameters that constitute basic aspects of the experience of presence. Obviously, the appearance A – someone or something – is 'performing' which allows the beholder B to be engaged. This engagement is characterized by a certain 'playing' which distinguishes the Appearance that is observed from the everyday. The 'placing' of A and B positions the encounter in a specific context that allows the 'perceiving' of the beholder of the event. These four aspects of presence – perceiving, playing, placing and performing – are presented as a rhombic model with dynamic edges that illustrate the varying effects of each of these parameters. I have chosen the gerundive form of these verbs to emphasize presence as an activity rather than a static state of mind.

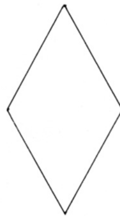

Fig. 1: The geometrical shape of a rhomb

Situations

While these parameters as well as the model as a whole are continuously extracted from the philosophical discourses of aesthetics, they will, at the same time, be demonstrated in four situations or locations. All of these cases are quite personal experiences – although others were involved – and

I have presented certain aspects of those events in previously published articles.[2] I will briefly describe the four situations here because some features of them will be referred to alongside the philosophical discussions in Part One. Part Three is entirely devoted to these cases and there each section will be introduced with a more elaborate presentation of the circumstances of each situation.

Antigone's Diary. This theatrical production can be described as a mobile, interactive radio drama. The plot refers closely to Sophocles' classical play, but the story has been moved to an immigrant-tight suburb of Stockholm. Antigone is a young local woman who has disappeared; only her mobile telephone with a recorded diary has been found. The audience can download her diary entries on their own phones and via a GPS device, each spectating participant will be guided to twelve stations. As soon as a participant comes close enough to the next location, a new entry of the diary can be heard in the earphones. Each diary section ends with a direct question to the participant: When are you afraid? When do you feel lonely? What does freedom mean to you? Etc. Each participant has the opportunity to immediately respond to these questions via text messages. As soon as one's own answer is sent, the responses of all other participants are displayed on the mobile screen. At the next location Antigone's story continues, until the walk ends in the central square of a suburb, in which 80% of the population is of foreign origin.

The production by Rebecca Örtman premiered in 2011 and was performed in the same suburb over several years. Audience surveys as well as analyses of the incoming text messages were carried out. These theatrical experiments were part of the research strategies of the Department of Computer and System Science at Stockholm University, within a project on democratic decision making. These aspects will be discussed in Part Three of the book.

Bloomsday. The term refers to James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, in which Leopold Bloom is one of the main protagonists. I participated in the 100th anniversary of the day that Joyce picked as the date on which all events of the book happened to occur. The anniversary took place on 16 June 2004 and I happened to be present in Dublin, together with my wife Sylvia and two of our friends who lived in the city. We spent the entire day visiting various places in and around Dublin which are mentioned in the novel and are therefore bestowed with a particular significance on this date. In all these places, special events could occur, although all these arrangements were not really organized: one had to find out where to go and what to

expect. But even just strolling along O'Connell Street in the centre of town could be rewarding, watching various scenes in historical outfits, which people executed just to enjoy themselves and those who were in place to see them.

Bloomsday is an annual event in Dublin. It started in 1954 as the 50th anniversary and has ever since increased and also given James Joyce a visible place in Irish culture. Only towards the end of the last century was he accepted at home as one of the world-famous Irish writers, alongside Shaw, Yeats, Synge, Beckett and Heaney. One of the fascinating aspects of Bloomsday for visitors coming from Sweden and Germany was the complete absence of a visible organisation. People, groups of people, some formal institutions and various sponsors all organized exactly the events they thought would please the participants of the anniversary.

Padjelanta. This is the Sami name of a national park in the very north of Sweden, meaning "the upper land". Our experiences during some summer weeks in 2014 confronted us with unusual sights and events. While the main task could be described as carrying our 15-kilo backpacks from one cabin to the next, we were all the time surrounded by marvellous views of mountains, discoveries of rare animals, meetings with Sami people, looking for all kinds of plants and flowers, and, not least, following the changes of the weather. There was plenty of beauty to be seen, but we also had to care for the necessities of everyday business. We were constantly on the move while the mountains, glaciers, and lakes expressed majestic eternity.

The experiences in Padjelanta had a strong physical side. We felt the changes of the landscape and of the weather with our own bodies. It gave beauty a concrete corporal appearance. It became the most convincing example that aesthetic experiences are not just there to be picked, but they have to be deserved. So much bigger, then, was the reward.

Anna O. Her full name is Anna Odell, but in my notes she has followed me ever since January 2009 in this abbreviated form. Anna Odell was at the time an art student who intended to create an installation that would express her critical view of psychiatric health care. For this purpose, she video-documented a re-enactment of a suicide attempt on a high bridge in Stockholm that she had carried out thirteen years earlier. Just like on this earlier occasion, she was again taken by the police and brought to the nearest psychiatric clinic. The chief physician of the hospital leaked this 'fake' suicide to a newspaper and a fierce debate over Anna O's behaviour

took off. When her installation, called *Unknown Woman*, was shown later in the spring, the public was no longer so interested. In the fall, she was sentenced for 'fraudulent' behaviour.

I am mainly concerned with two questions: what is an enactment in terms of performance? How can such actions be described? In the debate, Anna Odell was accused of 'pretending' 'cheating' and so forth, but the people who passed her saw her as authentic. This assumed authenticity created another problem: passers-by left this (obviously really) psychotic woman on her own on that freezing winter night in Stockholm. When she did not respond to their attempts to communicate with her, they simply continued on their way. This behaviour of the pedestrians shocked me more than any of Anna O's actions. In my mind, it took ages until one passing couple stopped and finally called an emergency number.

Although the focus of each of these cases will be on one of the four parameters, they will also demonstrate that all of these aspects are simultaneously needed to arouse strong feelings of presence. The four examples will be referred to and discussed within the philosophical trajectory and the explications of the model so that at the end of the three parts a new concept of presence as well as a workable methodology can be summarized.

About the book

The manner in which my text is written is slow and rather meandering, picking up on topics that might appear marginal in view of the overall aim of the book. Sometimes, there will be biographical extensions in order to locate the philosophers in their eighteenth-century contexts. I will also introduce *ad-hoc* examples, similar to the Old Vic and Ötzi, in order to concretize aesthetic discourses. The four situations that I briefly described represent personal experiences which I will refer to in various manners throughout the book. The previously published articles about these situations are available, but it is my ambition to be explicit enough in my presentation of those events so there is no need to have read these texts. From my short presentation of these situations it becomes obvious that none of them deals with traditional theatre performances such as the Old Vic's production of Ibsen's *Borkman*. As a theatre scholar I have always been tempted to explore marginal fields of the discipline, be it reception and audience research, Bronze Age rock carvings, the dramaturgy of computer games, the theatricality of landscapes, and so forth. Since my concept of presence exceeds the limitations of stage performances (which I

still love as a spectator), I wanted to present the *Aesthetics of Presence* in a broader cultural context.

Part One: *Histories of Presence*, begins with the historical establishment of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline and its basic principle of aesthetics as ‘sensory perception’. One of the central figures of this movement towards an independent aesthetic philosophy was Moses Mendelssohn. His aesthetic writings have recently been edited and allow for a more detailed analysis of the various arguments in the discourse. Other names that appear in this chapter are Baumgarten, Lessing, Rousseau and Schiller, whose work will be discussed to some extent, while many others will only be mentioned in relevant contexts. The four situations and my personal experiences are interfoliated with the philosophical arguments to maintain a relationship between the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries. This part ends with an introductory presentation of the four parameters of presence.

Part Two: *Parameters of Presence*, examines the four parameters one by one in the order of perceiving, performing, playing and placing. The aesthetic viewpoints of the eighteenth century are extended and completed by later philosophies and authors such as Gadamer, Huizinga, Lefebvre, Derrida and some recent contributors to aesthetic discourses. Thereby the aesthetics of presence appears as a complex web of these parameters. Social positions, cultural views and communicative mechanisms will be taken into consideration. In addition, questions of duration and immersion are discussed. In conclusion, the parameters will be presented as contingent corners of a rhombic model. To make this rhomb workable, a section on Empirical Methods has been added.

Part Three: *Variations of Presence*, focuses on the four situations presented above. Each section will begin with an elaborated description of the circumstances in question. Through the lens of an aesthetics of presence, the topics of these situations are widened and deepened beyond the limits of the earlier published articles. My comments and analyses are intended to penetrate aspects of special interest in the view of philosophies of presence, thereby illuminating possible effects of the concept of presence as it is presented in the foregoing chapters.

Epilogue: *Dynamics of Presence*, returns to the examples of this Prologue, i.e. the actors on the stage of the Old Vic and the coat of the Stone-Age Ötzi. An unsuccessful effort is made to label these experiences as sublime. Eventually, a last effort in answering the questions asked throughout this

book is made: How do we get involved in aesthetic experiences? Is it reasonable to speak of beauty in the twenty-first century? Last but not the least: has presence a time frame?

PART ONE

HISTORIES OF PRESENCE

The experience of presence is described in various ways in the history of aesthetics. A constant feature seems to be the relationship between an object and a subject or, as I have called it, between an A(ppearance) and a B(eholder). Is it the Appearance that invites or provokes the Beholder to an aesthetic experience or is it, in contrast, the Beholder who projects an aesthetic notion onto an Appearance? The question of the priority of A and B has followed the history of aesthetics and it has been answered in opposite ways.

I have observed a distinction between linear and circular concepts of aesthetics with regard to A's relation to B. The *linear* concept follows the production of A, be it things or events, from the initial intention to the finished artwork which eventually is presented for B. One could also call this a production aesthetics with a time line following the creative process. The *circular* concept focuses the actual experience of an artwork, the moment when A is perceived by B. One could speak of an aesthetic event that affects A and B simultaneously; their relation is circular. These distinctions disclose different ideas of aesthetics, namely an aesthetics of production and an aesthetics of perception.

Historically speaking, the caesura between linear, production-oriented and circular, perception-related aesthetic concepts occurs around the turn of the eighteenth century. At this point, the romanticists and the German idealists began to give privilege to the artwork, its production and not least its creator – the genius – over the beholder's actual experience. A was thought to dominate B. The spirit of the genius A achieved priority and it was up to B to learn to understand and appreciate it. Before this shift, during the second half of the eighteenth century, the relationship between Appearance and Beholder was rather the opposite. The sensitivity of B determined what and when an aesthetic experience occurred. This is of course a simplification, but it aroused my curiosity to find out what an aesthetics of perception could offer in the twenty-first century.

To get a better understanding of these aesthetic concepts it is rewarding to revisit the early discourses of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, which is the primary aim of this part of the book. The establishment of a philosophy of aesthetics can be seen as an effect of the broadening discourses of the Enlightenment. With enlightened rationality as the guiding principle, even aesthetic experiences could be illuminated. Of course, the ancient Greeks were already concerned about aesthetics – this is where the term *aisthesis* comes from, translatable as sensory or sensitive perception. The term was related to beauty, poetry and tragedy, despised by Plato and defended by Aristotle. Seven hundred years later, Church Father Augustine involved God, the creator of all beauty. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas got access to Aristotle's writings, which he combined with his own theological view of a world, established and regulated by God. The French classicists of the seventeenth century attempted to establish normative rules of taste and thus privileged what I call production aesthetics. Following the premiere of Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid* in December 1636, a fierce debate took place concerning the dramatic principles that an author had to apply to tragedy. Nicolas Boileau intensified these arguments in his *L'Art poétique*, published in 1674 and became the leading theoretician of a classicist normative poetics. Leaning heavily towards the Roman writer Horace's principles of artful poetry, Boileau advocated a traditional style of dramatic and poetic writing. The German Johann Christoph Gottsched still followed the French classicist rules as late as 1734 when his book *Erste Gründe einer gesamten Weltweisheit* (Primary principles of the entire world knowledge) appeared. He had studied the philosopher Christian von Wolff's world-ordering principles and applied these to a *Regelpoetik*, a rule-governed poetics, regarding poetry and especially dramatic writing.[1]

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten

A heavy German tradition awaited Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten when he decided to study philosophy, but he definitely contributed lasting new perspectives. Being the son of a Protestant pastor, he learned Latin early in his life and became proficient in this language. His older brother Siegmund Jakob Baumgarten became a famous theologian, whereas Alexander Gottlieb studied philosophy at the university in Halle, at the time a hub of rationalistic and logic thinking. One of the philosophers teaching in Halle was Christian von Wolff, who became an important source of inspiration for Baumgarten. Wolff was himself a disciple of the seventeenth-century philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz, most famous

for his idea of monads as the indispensable but immaterial building blocks of the world. Wolff continued Leibnitz's construction of philosophical systems. In the years between 1720 and 1725, Wolff published five books with titles that all began with "Vernünftige Gedanken von …", i.e. reasonable thoughts about … The topics of these volumes were theology, society, natural science, psychology, and finally biology. His intention seems to have been to create an overview of all these concepts; furthermore, he also invented the concept of concepts, in German the "Begriff" of a thing. When Baumgarten came to the university in Halle, Wolff had just left to become professor in Marburg. To begin with, Baumgarten met systematic philosophy through one of Wolff's collaborators, Johann Peter Reusch, in nearby Jena.

At the age of twenty-one, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten defended his doctoral dissertation, called *Meditationes*, devoted to Latin poetry and written in Latin. In this first book, traces of his ideas on aesthetics can be found.[2] Four years later, in 1739, Baumgarten published a book on *Metaphysica*, written in Latin like all serious scholarly publications at the time. This treatise on metaphysics was widely appreciated, translated into German in 1766 and used as a handbook at universities. Immanuel Kant's students read this text until the end of the century. This book was indebted to Wolff's systematic view of philosophy, but Baumgarten had the strong feeling that something was missing in Wolff's logic, in particular the experiences we make with our bodies and for which no exact concepts existed. Baumgarten felt that he had to complete Wolff's system and in 1750 he published the first part of his *Aesthetica* – again written in Latin.

For any scholar interested in aesthetics, Baumgarten's book seems to be a *sine qua non*. What does he say? One of today's leading experts, Dagmar Mirbach, points explicitly to the difficulties of accessing Baumgarten's writings, because the problem is

> to have knowledge of the entire text of Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* – which stretches over more than 600 pages in two octavo volumes, containing in sum 904 sections, entirely in Latin, written in a quite complicated, or rather, grammatically sophisticated, hypotactical style. The fate of the *Aesthetica*, which is rightly and deservedly famous for being the work by which Baumgarten established aesthetics as its own, ontologically and epistemologically founded philosophical discipline, seems already to have been in the 18th century what it still seems to be today: the *Aesthetica* is famous, it is recognized to be of great importance in the history of philosophy as well as in respect to historical and systematic questions central to the development of aesthetic theory, the *Aesthetica* is regularly

> named and mentioned – but it has hardly ever, at least until some years ago, been read and studied in its entirety.[3]

Since I am neither a Latinist nor a philosopher by trade, my understanding of Baumgarten's writings is limited by my own shortcomings. In the following I will lean heavily towards Dagmar Mirbach's explications as well as Sven Olov Wallenstein's investigation of the genesis of *Aesthetica* in Baumgarten's early writings. Wallenstein evaluates Baumgarten's contribution to philosophy like this:

> If many details in Baumgarten's work are heavily dependent on an unquestioned tradition, and some are admittedly obscure, this is because his work occupies a point of transition. This does however not prevent it from being both original and consistent, in fact, such a reading allows us to grasp it as a vantage point from which his rationalist predecessors as well as his Kantian successors appear in a different light. In Baumgarten's breakthrough nothing was yet decided, which perhaps is what makes him relevant to our present uncertainties.[4]

Baumgarten's § 1 of the *Aesthetica* reads: "Aesthetica (…) est sciencia cognitionis sensitivae," aesthetics is the science of sensory cognition.[5] This is a short and distinct statement, but it also indicates that there can be different kinds of cognition. Leibnitz had already referred to such a difference as, on the one hand, the distinct knowledge of logic, and, on the other hand, the confused or blurred knowledge of sensation. In this respect the traditional distinction between the higher (*superiores*) faculties of logic and rationality and the lower (*inferiores*) faculties of sensory perception, continued to have a strong influence. Now, in my understanding, Baumgarten attempted to establish equivalence between logic thinking and sensory cognition.[6] He divided these lower faculties of cognition into a number of sub-species such as sensory perception and sensations, sensory perspicacity, sensory memory, sensory judgement, the faculty of fiction, the sensory faculty to foresee, and the sensory knowledge of signs. The whole area of sensory cognition thus became the subject of an analysis through which the lower faculties can be rationally understood. When sensory experiences can be understood they are no longer excluded from philosophical thinking. In this way, Baumgarten lifts the lower faculties of sensory cognition to the same philosophic level as the rational logic disciplines. Still, there are some differences: logic requires necessary predicates, whereas sensory cognition in addition operates with contingent predicates. The aims of Baumgarten's aesthetics are summarized by Dagmar Mirbach in four points:

> All these determinations give us a clue to what Baumgarten conceives the new discipline of aesthetics to be: (1) Aesthetics shall be a theory of cognition, namely a theory concerning the lower, sensory faculties of cognition; (2) it shall be, as a science, an equivalent supplement to logic; (3) it shall contain an explication of the beautiful; and finally (4) it shall serve as a theory of the arts.[7]

Here, a new term enters the discourse: beauty (*pulcritudo*), a phenomenon of perfection. Human beings – and probably many other living creatures – have a "natural disposition of the entire mind to think beautifully."[8] The beautiful is in no way limited to the arts, but can be experienced in all strands of life. Especially the beauty of nature was of great importance in eighteenth-century thinking. In today's aesthetic discourses, the idea of the beautiful has almost been eliminated, but during the Age of Enlightenment beauty was tightly connected to truth and goodness – as moral aspects of the beholder rather than characteristics of an appearance. 'Beautiful thinking' depends on the sensory faculties of the beholders, which have to be developed through education and exercises. A person who has reached the perfection of sensory cognition Baumgarten calls a *felix aestheticus*, a happy aesthetician. The successful aesthetician needs to combine intellect and sensitivity as well as an "innate graceful and elegant spirit."[9] Baumgarten summarises his view of a *felix aestheticus* like this:

> Altogether it will be allowed to assign to aesthetic characters a certain innate greatness of the heart, an excellent instinct to strive for great things, especially in those characters who keep attention to how easy the transition is from here to the absolutely greatest things.[10]

To me it is important to underline that Baumgarten's aesthetic theory appears as a theory of cognition, of how things are perceived by the beholder. It is not predominantly a normative theory of art, although the perfection of the phenomenon is mentioned more than once. In the end it is the beholder's sensory cognition that creates the aesthetic experience. Suchlike experiences occur under certain circumstances and in certain moments. Baumgarten explicitly points to the necessary presence of the mind when he writes:

> If such a noble mind really wants to approach strenuously to things, which have to be thought as being greater, it must, as if it had forgotten itself and its ordinary state, be excited and so to speak be torn off to a higher theatre than the one on which it is playing its role day-to-day, it must in such a way be united with the Gods and the heroes, that it seems that it had found a certain heavenly acquaintance with them, not as if it had been expelled to

> a foreign country, but as if it had been at home in such a community already for a long time.[11]

The distinction that Baumgarten makes between the roles we play in everyday life and the (rare) moments when we are elevated to celestial heights, is an important point. Aesthetic experiences can of course occur in vernacular circumstances, but they are still characterized by the break with the quotidian, the break that allows for a lift into another sphere. At least, this is how Baumgarten sees it – or: this is how I understand him.

When Baumgarten uses the term 'sensory cognition', one should pay attention to both parts of this expression, the sensory and the cognition. The sensory refers to the five senses, namely seeing, hearing, and touching. But it is never enough just to feel the aesthetic sensation, it must also manifest itself as a cognitive act of knowing. But this knowing of physical sensations is not limited to the logic of pure reason. On the contrary, the sensitive 'logic' is open to contingent interpretations, to experiences that, according to Dagmar Mirbach

> can ultimately reveal aspects of the metaphysical truth which will always escape logical and scientific knowledge, but which nonetheless belong to the reality of things in the divine mind. Aesthetics, then, as the theory and science of sensory cognition, is rightly established as an *organon* or a philosophical instrument to broaden our cognition in regard to that which, in the eminent sense of the word, really is.[12]

Mirbach clarifies a number of points that are difficult to see in Baumgarten's own paragraphs. Nevertheless, her description remains rather abstract, so I tried to think in more concrete terms. I returned to one of my experiences that I have written about, the one about our hiking experience in Lapland.

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Did I experience "the metaphysical truth which will always escape logical and scientific knowledge" when I was standing at the shore of Lake Sårjåsjáurre in Padjelanta? In front of me I had in my view the small, pink flowers of Moss Campions and in the distance the majestic glaciers of Lina in Norway and Ålmåjiegna in Sweden. There was beauty to behold, no doubt about this. The contrast between the small insignificant flowers, the icy water of the huge lake and the immobile grandeur of the mountains made major imprints in my memory. There was astonishment, admiration, a feeling of experiencing an exceptional beauty. And I can very well remember this feeling. But the sensory perception, the aesthetic emotions

and the safety of friends around me also triggered some thoughts that Baumgarten might have allocated to the higher faculties, namely my reflections about the littleness of human beings when confronted with the power of nature. This is not a very original reaction, but at that moment in Lapland it became an absolutely personal insight. My own insignificance was similar to the pink Moss Campion, whose existence is limited in time and leaving no traces other than some seeds flying off at the end of the summer.

Ill. 1: The Moss Campions at Lake Sårjåsjáurre in Padjelanta

Outside of the picture, slightly to the right, there is Consul Persson's cabin close to the waterfall at the outlet of the lake. It takes only a slight turn of the body to get this alternative view, which contrasts sharply with the original position. Consul Persson's cabin caused no existential reflections other than a reminder of the futility of human enterprises – his dream of mining in the area never came true and the cabin is the only witness of his unsuccessful endeavours. The waterfall next to the cabin was noisy and dangerously sucking us near to the edge. This threatening roaring water, which jolted down in huge cascades of some 60 metres, destabilized my mood. The unruly bay of the lake became even more threatening when a huge, thick ice floe came closer and finally was pushed out into the waterfall, where the thick ice broke into small pieces.[13] The noise of the breaking ice was deafening. The power that broke the massive floe into pieces was scary and at the same time fascinating. There was a sense of beauty, for sure, and at the same time an unpleasant threat of the water masses. Not a real threat, we were quite safe, but an almost aesthetic

feeling of something repelling, something dangerous or haunting or whatever we call it: A sensory cognitive process that was ambiguous, mixed, even contradictory, some might say sublime, and still, in some sense, also aesthetic.

Moses Mendelssohn

In an article about our hike in Lapland, I mention another philosopher, contemporary with Baumgarten and in a way also his successor. His name is Moses Mendelssohn and he observed that certain objects provoke 'mixed emotions', similar to my experience of the waterfall of Lake Sårjåsjáurre. Mendelssohn's basic assumption was that aesthetic experiences are built on the principle of pleasure: "Every imagination that we want to have rather than not have, we call a *pleasing sensation* and on a higher level *pleasure*."[14] This simple statement has far-reaching consequences. In his *Letters on Sentiments*, first published anonymously in 1755 and reprinted under his name again and again during his lifetime, Mendelssohn identifies three sources of pleasure: impulses that are sensuous, beautiful or intellectual. He is still heavily indebted to Leibnitz's and Wolff's ideas of higher and lower faculties that were also the guiding lines of Baumgarten. But Mendelssohn's idea of pleasure as the basis of aesthetic perception opens up for other concepts of a philosophy of aesthetics.

The *Letters on Sentiments* consist of an epistolary exchange between the rational Palemon – namesake of one of the shepherds in Virgil's *Bucolica* as well as of the Duke of Shaftesbury's *Moralists, a philosophical rhapsody* from 1709 – and the less rationalist and dreamier Euphranor.[15] As in all well-written philosophical exchanges of letters, the correspondents have different and distinguishable opinions. In the beginning of Mendelssohn's *On Sentiments*, Euphranor complains about the absence of Palemon, so he attempts to think of beautiful things. "*Beauty depends*, according to the meaning of wise men, *on the unclear imagination of perfection*: lust and pleasure, yes, even peaceful contentment, affect our soul only vaguely, unless they are accompanied by a sweet agitation of the blood and the various movements of our limbs."[16] Palemon finds it difficult to accept such a romantic view of beauty, which echoes Leibnitz's categories of distinct/rational versus confused/intuitive knowledge. Here, Mendelssohn's alter ego claims: "The truth is that no distinct and no completely dark concepts harmonise with the feeling of beauty." And he continues: "the clearer our image of a beautiful thing, the livelier the emotions, the fierier the pleasure that emanates from it."[17] Mendelssohn

points here to a misunderstanding about beauty that one frequently meets still today: beauty is assumed to be perceived as pure emotion and when we start to think about it, it disappears. For Mendelssohn this is nonsense. He contends that the clarity of our perception of beauty, i.e. our consciousness of what makes an appearance beautiful, heightens rather than disturbs our immediate feelings.

In another letter, Mendelssohn lets Euphranor make a discovery. Euphranor agrees with Palemon that beauty gives pleasure to the beholder due to the perfection of an appearance. He also understands that perfection is not equal to unity, but rather a completion of the manifold. This is certainly true when we see stunning views of nature and in this case even some disorder or an ugly detail might heighten the perfection of a panorama. However, Euphranor exclaims, how could you, Palemon, appreciate the painting of a ship close to being wrecked against a rock that you saw many times in the entrance hall of my house? He describes the desperate figures of the painting who realize their own destruction – how could you take delight in such a piece of art?[18] Of course, Palemon has to respond to such a question, but the epistolary dialogue digresses and problems such as real destruction and even suicide are discussed. Only in the concluding remarks, 'written' by Palemon, does Mendelssohn return to the aspect of mixed emotions.[19] By introducing the concept of compassion, he distinguishes between two kinds of appreciation. In the gladiator games of the Romans, the tournaments of the Middle Ages and also the bearbaitings and other cruel English animal fights, compassion is eliminated and the spectators enjoy the skills of the fighters. In tragedies or the painting of the shipwreck in Euphranor's mansion, compassion is supposed to be aroused due to the skills of the dramatist and the painter. In these cases, the beholders find pleasure in the skills of the artists, while the content makes them shudder with disgust.

> This is the nature of sentiments. When some bitter drops mix with the honey-sweet cup of pleasure, they raise the taste of pleasure and double its sweetness. But only when the two kinds of emotions, of which the mixture consists, are not completely turned against each other.[20]

Palemon reminds his friend of the tears of happiness they shed when they remember past miseries: the concept of past incompleteness joins the feeling of present completeness and together they cause the pleasure of remembrance, even though the past itself might have been painful. Many people share this experience: An occurrence that made us angry and

distressed at the moment when it happened can be told as an entertaining story the next day. We can laugh at our own anger.

The principle of pleasure that Moses Mendelssohn emphasizes in his discourses about aesthetics meant a big step forward in the broadening of the concept. Aesthetics was liberated from the dictate of beauty. If ugliness could evoke aesthetic pleasure as well, then aesthetics was no longer a matter of defining beauty, although Mendelssohn spends many pages on explanations of the relationship between beauty and completeness and perfection. Beauty became just one aspect of aesthetics, but since it cannot be defined it cannot be the sole reason for aesthetic pleasure. The creation of beauty – be it a god in nature or the painter in a studio – takes a prominent place, but it was the beholder's recognition of the skills that remained in the foreground of Mendelssohn's writings.

According to Anne Pollok's introductory explications of the latest edition of his *Ästhetische Schriften*, Mendelssohn was not fully pleased with his own concept of mixed sentiments. The reference to the artist's 'skills' seemed too simple. Soon after the publication of *On Sentiments*, Mendelssohn engaged in a real correspondence with the dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and the publisher Friedrich Nicolai. One of the points they discussed frequently was mixed emotions. In a passage of a letter that Mendelssohn seemed to take to his heart, Lessing wrote:

> In this we can obviously agree, dearest friend, that all passions are either strong desires or strong disgust? Also in this: that we at every strong desire or disgust are aware of a higher degree of reality, and that this notion is nothing but pleasant? In consequence, all passions, even the most unpleasant, are pleasant as passions.[21]

In a text called *Rhapsody, or A Supplement to the Letters on Sentiments*, published in 1761, Mendelssohn proposed some corrections, which were further elaborated in the 1771 edition of his *Philosophische Schriften*. At this point Mendelssohn had arrived at the following description:

> Mixed sentiments have the special characteristics that they are not as soft as pure pleasure, but they penetrate deeper into the mind and they also seem to stay there longer. That which only is pleasant leads straight to satisfaction and eventually to disgust. Our desire stretches further than just delight and when it is not satisfied, then our mind yearns for change. The unpleasant, however, mixed with the pleasant, attracts our attention and prevents too swift satisfaction. Our sensory taste in everyday life shows that pure sweetness soon changes into repulsion when it is not mixed with

> something spicy. Although this remark remains general, experience confirms these sentiments of the mind.[22]

With quite simple references to daily life, Mendelssohn describes here the deeper meaning of mixed sentiments. He does not argue against the appreciation of artistic and technical skills that he mentions in the original text of *On Sentiments*, but expands the range of its significance. Mixed sentiments also trigger a certain confusion of the mind, just like the tongue enjoys a certain bitterness of sweet ale. The human mind is capable of experiencing several emotions at the same time and this opposition creates an uncertainty that attracts special attention.

The idea of double sensations that characterize aesthetic experiences occupied Mendelssohn throughout his life. He corrected his original concept of the 1750s, improved it and changed his mind again later on. In some way, the roots of this interest in the doubleness of aesthetic theory I found in the doublings of his personal life.[23] "The history of any given personality is far older than the individual as product of nature, begins long before the individual's life, and can foster or destroy the elements of nature in his heritage," as Hannah Arendt stated in her book about Rahel Varnhagen, a younger Jewish contemporary of Mendelssohn.[24] Every aspect of Mendelssohn's life was doubled by the circumstances of quotidian as well as intellectual activities, which mirrored his dialectical philosophy. He was born in 1729 as the son of a poor Jewish scribe in Dessau, a provincial town southwest of Berlin. His father, whose name was Mendel, earned his living by writing the Hebrew texts of Thora scrolls. In the family, the first language was Yiddish, but early on Moses learned Hebrew and composed his first poems in this language at the age of ten. His religious education was taken care of by the local Rabbi David Fränkel, who introduced his young pupil not only to the holy scriptures of Judaism, but also to such Jewish classics as Moses Maimonides, a twelfth-century philosopher, who had read Aristotle, the Thora and the Koran side by side. When David Fränkel became the chief rabbi of Berlin, the fourteen-year-old Moses joined him. Anecdotes claim that the Jewish boy was not allowed to enter the capital city of Prussia through the main gate, but had to step through a side entrance used for pigs and tramps. In Berlin, he began to call himself Moses Mendelssohn. He continued his education with Rabbi Fränkel and at the same time he acquired reading skills in Latin, Greek, French and English. And he learned German. Later, he was many times admired for his command of the German language in speaking and writing. He also studied mathematics and the philosophies of Leibnitz and Wolff.

At the age of twenty-one he was hired as private tutor to the children of the Jewish silk merchant Isaak Bernhard. Only due to such a work place could he stay on in Berlin. Soon, Mendelssohn was also engaged as a bookkeeper, and later he became a partner of Bernhard's silk business. He remained an active companion of the firm throughout his life, handling import and export, custom regulations, state subsidies, economic transactions and staff recruitment. He became an expert in the production and dyeing of silk textiles. The company owned five factories in and around Berlin and more than one and a half million mulberry trees. Mendelssohn was said to have been in the habit of getting up very early in the morning, making his own coffee and starting the day by studying and writing. At about eight o'clock he left for his work with the company. He stayed there for about six hours, rushed back to his studio at home and in the evening he met his friends. In 1762 he married Fromet Guggenheim from Hamburg and together they had three daughters and three sons. In time, they had more than a dozen grandchildren, but all of them were born after Moses' death in 1786. Many of the Mendelssohns became important and famous merchants, bankers, chemists, geographers, and maybe most well-known today, are the musicians Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. However, Moses Mendelssohn became not only a prominent member of the Prussian business world, he first and foremost excelled as a philosopher of the German Enlightenment, often referred to as 'the German Socrates' and 'the Jewish Luther.'[25]

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Life as a template of philosophy can easily be transferred to the arts, with equally confusing results. Mendelssohn's daily business gave him the economic as well as mental basis on which his enlightened philosophy could prosper. Anna Odell's lived experiences as a psychologically unstable youngster and as an ambitious art student became the stuff of which her art was made. However, the relationship between art and life was consciously blurred when she re-staged her suicide attempt on a high bridge in central Stockholm. I am saying 'staged' because it was the staging of an earlier – so to speak 'authentic' – suicide attempt that she had undertaken thirteen years earlier. When she performed this act, the people who saw her could not possibly understand that the pathological actions of this young woman were not 'real'. Even when it became known that the activities on the bridge were enacted and documented, the media had difficulties in finding words for Anna Odell's actions: pretence and fake were frequently used terms, cheating and lying were other descriptions, and the court sentenced her for a 'fraudulent' act. The fact