The question raised here is about the differences in perception between people due to different environmental backgrounds. The assumption is that we learn to perceive and that the environment is essential for this learning. This is discussed by taking a classical philosophical view on perception from Leibniz and Baumgarten's aesthetics, recently revived in the concept of atmosphere, as proposed by Gernot Böhme. The conclusion points to questions of the consequences of the environment for our perception as well as to the importance of aesthetic education in training perception.

The scope of the journal is an occasion to ask whether we perceive in the same way in the north and in the south. Is Nordic perception identical to Mediterranean, for example?

This question may at first seem puzzling: Should the computer I write on be perceived differently by two persons due to their geographic origin or location? Or the table it is on, the room it is in, and the street outside the window? If the question is only about identifying objects we perceive as something specific it may be puzzling or absurd to say we perceive differently; however, when it relates not merely to *what* but to *how* we perceive something, the matter may be different. Perceiving implies discriminating between impressions and such discrimination builds on an educational process. This process leads to the question I pursue: *what does it imply for our world-interpretation to say that perception is influenced by the environment we live in or originate from?*

Education teaches us to make sense of something. If one takes courses in art history, one will learn to pay attention to elements of importance for understanding the art piece by discriminating between impressions we did not pay attention to before. To illustrate: Confronted with a painting we find being similar to what we have often seen as Renaissance paintings we guess it is perhaps early 16th century. The art historian next to us now tells us it is late 19th century. What can she see that we do not? She tells us about the lack of symbolic elements by which we can identify the narrative of the painting and that they are left out on purpose as this is a painting meant for taking delight in the sensuous form alone. We are indeed looking at Frederic Leighton's, *Greek Girls Picking up Pebbles by the Sea* from 1871. We are now learning about art for art's sake i.e. about art that should be enjoyed for what we see and not to be read as a moral allegory or for other messages beyond the image itself.

This example is about learning to direct attention towards particular features of a thing, enabling us to perceive it as something and not something else. We carry such training of our perceptual habits in specific situations with us into other situations in our lives. The humanistically trained person will perceive the environment differently from the technically minded; the poet perceives the landscape differently from the farmer, "[a] human body is perceived by an anatomist differently from the way in which it is by the rest of us" (Gibson 1950, 205).

The training of perception I will call aesthetic education. My use of aesthetics diverges from the now dominant idea of aesthetics as philosophy of art and beauty and reaches back to classical understanding of sensorial knowledge or perception. Aesthetic education, in this earlier tradition, is important not for the purpose of appearing as a connoisseur and literate person, but for training the senses and the body to become a social being. When the young girl learns to play piano it is not for the pleasure of the music alone and to entertain guests; "the piano makes a girl sit upright and pay attention to details" (while the boy should learn Latin grammar which "strengthens a boy's memory, and teaches him to study the meaning of words") (Hawies 1900, 506). To the importance of grammar Hegel would consent and for the boy he recommends also military drills, which teach him to be present, exact and alert – means against a weak and diffuse mind (Hegel 1986, 330). These are exercises forming body and training perception in ways required for participating in the social life the child is destined for including the socialization of the child into culturally prescribed gender norms.

Aesthetics as sensorial knowledge is a matter of shifting focus from the epistemological question of *what* something we perceive *is* to *how* we perceive it. This is made apparent in the understanding of aesthetics as sensorial knowledge as defined by its founding father, A.G. Baumgarten, in the opening paragraph of his 18th century book *Aesthetica*. Aesthetics is the sensorial perspective of perception and, as philosophical aesthetics, about how perception, and consequently knowledge, is influenced and formed by sensorial elements.

Via perception, aesthetics and ambiance I will focus on the influence of the environment on our perception hence asking if aesthetic education – perhaps also named sensorial education – should be given particular attention for understanding our perception as site specific. I ask from a philosophical interest in the implications for acquiring knowledge, i.e. whether the different educational backgrounds result in different perceptions. Philosophy is

a non-empirical discipline asking for the legitimacy of knowledge and not for characterizing the concrete forms of perceptions; however, philosophy is motivated by concrete experiences such as finding cultural differences while also living in a globalized culture in which certain standards become dominant. Thus, I ask about implications for our world interpretations that arise from perception being formed by our environments.

1. *Combining education, aesthetics, and perception*

I return to the questions above, whether I, as a Dane, perceive an object like a computer differently from an Italian. We can reject it as a question of whether the object identification is any different between the Dane and the Italian. Any disagreement such as not recognising the object as a computer or disputing if a tablet is a computer is about something we can agree to within a defined context.

The matter becomes different when perceiving is not of a well-defined object but, for example, perceiving the computer as alienating or as an instrument offering opportunities. We then discuss different interpretations and understandings of it. We both perceive a computer, but if our relation to it or our practices with it differs do we perceive the same object then? Do I perceive the same building and its façade as the architect who also perceives the construction, which explains some particular features of the façade?

Questioning differences in perception points to how perception is an initiating interpretive act in acquiring knowledge (Dewey 1958, 317 ff.; Merleau-Ponty 2002, 18, 42 f.; Seel 2000, 50 ff.; Waldenfels 2000, 97 f.). This point will be touched upon in the next section, but I wish to emphasise the importance of this interpretative element in perception in considering how our different educational and environmental backgrounds provide the foundations of interpretation.

It is widely recognised that perception should not be confused with impressions or sense-data; perception is an interpretative identification of something (Arnheim 1997, 13; Gombrich 2002, 12 f., Heidegger 1980, 10). The consensus comprises such different approaches as found in contemporary psychology and ancient philosophy. From psychology one understanding is of a difference between the visual field, the individual impressions that when combined generate a vision of depth in the image following the linear geometric

perspective but are themselves only lines on a plane; and the visual world being an understanding of a comprehensive scenery forming a motive of the painting (Gibson 1950, 26 ff., 197 ff.). The visual world is a structured and comprehensive world of "depth and distance", where objects "tend to remain constant", the world "is stable and upright", "is unbound" and finally "has a characteristic … which, in a way, is the most important of all: it is composed of phenomenal things which have meaning" (Gibson 1950, 164). The visual world relates to what we understand about objects surrounding us while the visual field requires a separation of elements from the context. In philosophy Aristotle, in a similar fashion, states that what we perceive approaching us is not something white, a specific element, but the son of Diares because perception is judgement of what something is (*De an*. 418 a 20). The consensus may meet opponents, but I do not intend to engage in specific debates on the nature of perception. Starting from this common understanding provides a foundation for reflecting on what I call site-specific perception.

Perceiving something as something implies an element of judgement, hence also of education, as the faculty of judgement has to be trained. Education I take in a broad sense to include everything we have learned throughout our lives whether it specifically is about certain skills, like the art historian's approach to the art-work, or our most fundamental social skills. The act of perceiving is then to be understood as the outcome of education and training of our faculties of perception in which we learn to direct attention to something and become aware of that something (cf. Barry 1997, 38; Gibson 1950, viii, 199 f.; Gregory & Wallace 2001, 36). The notion of awareness involves some ambiguities that will be commented on below.

The training of perception as training of sensorial cognitive skills is where I suggest a common ground for education, aesthetics and perception. We should keep in mind that aesthetic objects were, traditionally, not merely for enjoyment. They were for communicating cultural ideas and inviting us to participate in a community, as the example above about the young girl playing piano indicates. Aesthetic products affect us and contribute to the formation of ideas through which we view people, situations and ourselves; thus they educate our senses and the way we perceive the world.

2. *Perception*

Before returning to the question of how educational background shapes perception a further step must be taken to clarify what is meant by perception.

To perceive something is to perceive it *as* something, following an Aristotelian characteristic that a "this" being present to us is also a "this-such" (*An. Post* 87; *Met*. 1033 b 23). To perceive is to move from the indeterminate presence of something as given by bare sense impressions to a basic determination of it. I perceive an object to be of a specific kind; for example, the object in front of me is determined to be a book. Hence, perception is the first step towards knowledge, in which we determine something particular. But it is a step only; perception can be mistaken.

Some discussions of perception move into the question of validity. Thus a discussion about perception in contemporary philosophy concerns "justifying our belief in the existence of the physical objects which it is commonly taken for granted that we perceive" (Ayer 1990, 84). A problem to deal with becomes how we can say we take a thing to have a certain characteristic and why we have evidence for claiming as much. What makes the thing appear to us in a way that makes us believe the thing is as it appears to us? (Chisholm 1957, 43 f.).

I will not touch upon this epistemological discussion but ask whether the idea that the Dane and the Italian must perceive the same object neglects important features of our perception beside the object identification. Object identification takes place when the perceived object, for example a black book, is interpreted primarily as a book and secondarily as black. This distinction is between what, in Aristotelian terms, is essential and not essential, meaning essential for determining something, the object, as something. The distinction between essential and non-essential features implies that we learn to make the distinction – that we learn to perceive. It is *in* the act of perceiving that we make distinctions, hence identifying "this" as "this-such".

A brief digression may here be necessary to clarify the cognitive element of perception and also to emphasise the philosophical interest in this question, i.e. the interest in the legitimacy of the cognitive outcome of perception when something is perceived as something.

One issue about perception is the construction of the visual world, to use the terminology of James J. Gibson (1950). We interpret lines and figures to be in front of or behind each other, to illustrate depth, and to have specific relations to each other (Gibson 1950, 39, 69 ff.). Well-known are illustrations like Rubin's vase and the Necker cube, in which our vision moves between two perspectives. An interpretation is made; do we see a vase or two faces? Likewise, the lines in the drawing creating the illusion of spatial depth are interpreted as elements constructing a coherent pictorial understanding.

These interpretations of lines are crucial for perceiving the visual picture, but the question of perception relates to interpretation of not only the elements but also the meaning of the picture. It becomes a matter of representation in the picture and of asking "why different ages and different nations have represented the visible world in … different ways?" (Gombrich 2002, 3). An example from art history is illustrative. For more than two centuries, a woodcut of a rhinoceros made by Albrecht Dürer in 1515 served as model for how the animal ought to be represented. Dürer himself did not ever see a rhinoceros, but much later drawings, as late as late 18th century, still reproduce the animal with characteristics with much more similarity to Dürer's woodcut than with the actual animal then serving as model for drawing (Gombrich 2002, 70 ff.). The rhinoceros of Dürer bears similarities to "the most famous of exotic beasts, the dragon with its armoured body" (Gombrich 2002, 71) and is thus an interpretation that also informs following generations' interpretations. It emphasises the importance of what we bring with us for the perception in which the "logic of recognition" (Bryson 1983, 53) must rely on a "definition of reality created within the culture by the contemporary consensus of recognition" (ibid., 55.), and where "recognition is through-written by social codes" (ibid., 62).

Again, do the Dane and the Italian then perceive the same object? Do they have to make the same discrimination between different elements present to them? Or could they, while confronted with the same object, discriminate differently, thus ending up with different perceptions — without saying that one is truer than the other?

The act of discrimination is a matter of making the perception meaningful to the perceiver, of making it correspond with social codes, memories and expectations. Perception, then, presupposes both structure and unity in what is perceived, otherwise we would only find a chaos of impressions and meaning in that which is perceived. Perceiving, to follow Plato,

implies our mind "*with* which we perceive all the objects or perception *through* the senses as instruments" (*Theat.* 184 d in Cornford 1989, 103, emphasis in original). Perceiving with the mind involves learning to grasp something based on intellectual skills; how we perceive, then, is a matter of training this faculty of grasping. Assuming that "training will refine the categories accessible to an individual" (Arnheim 1997, 29 ff.) we learn to distinguish book from black, i.e. what is considered primary and secondary in our knowledge of what something is. Consequently, our perceptions will differ due to different training. We experience this in using "a new kind of hand-operated tool encountered for the first time. After its use is understood the object looks different. The perception now has properties it did not have before" (Gibson 1950, 203).

3. *Learning to perceive*

We learn to perceive something as something by learning to distinguish between essential and non-essential elements. The non-essential is, undeniably, not essential for defining what is important for determining something within a specific frame of understanding. But that does not imply that the non-essential is of no importance to what we think of as essential.

Learning to perceive the painting as an art historian or the building as an architect requires a training of perception in which that which was previously taken to be non-essential becomes essential. An example can illustrate this. The anthropologist Michael Gilsenan asks himself in his book *Recognizing Islam* (2000) what "moments crystallize" his "experience of Islam in its more specifically religious dimension" and of the two examples he gives, this one is illustrative for my point about perception:

When I first came to Cairo and began, week in, week out, to go to mosques and to sit in self-conscious jacket-and-tie piety while members of the Hamidiya Shaziliya performed the zikr, there was one intruding element that fundamentally disturbed all my efforts at perception and a feeling for the real meaning of the event. It was not my inability to follow the hymns, or the enormous gaps in my knowledge of the language, or my incapacity to follow the chanting of the Quran. It was something far more subtle and far more disturbing, yet I could not locate it. One day I realized what the discordant phrase in the music was: Neon light. All around the interior of the mosque there were verses from the Quran in neon light. In green neon light, as it happens, but what matter the colour? […] For months neon light subverted

my every solemn ritual attendance. Each time I glanced up at the Quranic verses, reading the Arabic, »knowing the meaning« in a dictionary sort of way, the neon would interpose itself, the medium would dominate. Then, one day [… I] saw, not neon, but simply greenness. Greenness, and letters that did not »stand for« anything but simply were powerful icons in and of themselves. No gaps existed between color, shape, light, and form. From that unreflecting and unexpected moment I ceased to see neon at all (Gilsenan 2000, 265 f.).

His perception is not about a particular object but of the environment in which the awareness of the green light is crucial. It is not the perception of the colour as colour that matters, but the perception of the significance of the colour which creates the specific ambiance of the event. Of course the colour matters, Gilsenan's remark "what matter the colour" is not about neglecting its importance, as green is the colour of Islam. Rather, it relates to how the colour is seen as insignificant at first because the green light is perceived as green *neon* lights, and the neon is felt as an intrusion into the religious situation. Only when his perception adjusts to become a perception of greenness itself is the situation seen, so to speak, in a different light — where green neon light becomes greenness suitable for religious ambiance.

Perception is an act in which we learn to be aware of something without always being aware of each element present, such as the tube emitting light. In Gilsenan's example it is not the tube which is the object of the perception, though he sees it when it attracts attention by disturbing him. It is not even the colour green but the greenness – and the greenness itself will most likely disappear in turn. Where once it was identified, it will dissolve into the context, becoming one among many elements that create a perception of the religious situation. Our perception is a compound made up of many, if not simply countless, elements. We are, in the words of Leibniz, subject to "an infinity of minute perceptions without being aware of them" as we are only aware of perceptions that "stand out" (Leibniz 1996, II, xix, §4; cf. 53 f.). We could become aware of the minute perceptions "if we were not distracted by their multiplicity, which scatters the mind" (ibid., II, ix, § 4).

What Leibniz describes seems also to be in accordance with contemporary psychology, where it is accepted "that a great deal of perception can and does take place outside of conscious awareness" (Barry 1997, 22). What lies outside our consciousness awareness is

easily set at side as being of little or no interest for gaining knowledge. However these elements are present in our full perception of something, thus influencing our knowledge. Continuing with Leibniz we read:

Every impression has an effect, but the effects are not always noticeable. … All our undeliberated actions result from a conjunction of minute perceptions; and even our customs and passions, which have so much influence when we do deliberate, come from the same sources; for these tendencies come into being gradually, and so without the minute perceptions [petites perceptions] we would not have acquired these noticeable dispositions (Leibniz II, i, § 15; cf. xx, § 6).

Minute perceptions – or *petites perceptions* – relate us to the environment below the level of conceptual awareness by constituting how we relate to it. If we were to pay attention to every single element within our perceptual field we would be overwhelmed by the situation, hindering any attempt at understanding and acting within. We perceive and act by focusing on some and suppressing our attention to other impressions. Some are fully ignored as non-essential, while others are included in forming perceptions. Some minute perceptions exceed our awareness but are responsible for emotional states, such that "we begin to respond emotionally to situations *before* we can think them through" (Barry, 18, italics in original). If consciousness seems to come too late it is no sign that we are not in control; it is only a matter of responding in line with how we have learned to perceive. What we perceive is not first registered and secondarily computed but is a single act of which we will say there is a "cultural presence in perception" (Berleant 1992, 19; Berleant 2010, 44 f.).

If we again ask about the difference in the perceptions of the Dane and the Italian it should be clear there can be a difference depending on the experiential and educational backgrounds. It should not be confused with perceiving different objects of which we have different knowledge, like when we learn archaeology and art history, enabling us to perceive with certain professional skills. It is more similar to the difference between the perception of the academic and the farmer, whom we may say live in different worlds. Or similarly, we might ask about the consequences of adjusting our habits of perception to the global standards of corporate business and consumerism that are dominant in organising our current environment and teaching us what to be aware of. What this implies is also, then, that we should ask if differences in perception are also a question of power: who

defines the standards for perceiving the world?

What remains is to elaborate on this and subsequently to discuss consequences.

4. *Environment and atmosphere*

Perception is not only a perception *of* something; it is a perception *formed by* something. It is an outcome of the influence of the environment both through education, social as well as professional, and the way we are affected by the organisation of that environment. The green colour of light found in many places in the Arab world, and not only in explicit religious contexts, is a key element of many social environments that influences how such environments should be perceived. Likewise, in a Danish context, there are certain key ingredients for creating a culturally particular relaxing and intimate social environment that in Danish is called *hyggelig,* a "cozy tranquil togetherness" (Linnet 2012, 403). Such ingredients are easily perceived by Danes, though rather complicated for many others to determine, not least when *hyggelig* is not an adjective characterising a particular place or situation but also used as a reflexive verb: *at hygge sig*. One has to learn to perceive it. Like the confusion about green light for someone unaware of its significance in Islam and its integration into daily culture, a similar confusion can appear for many catholic southern Europeans to the widespread Danish use of candles to create the *hyggelige* ambiance, something associated with ceremony in church and not an intimate social relation. Our background forms a simple but profound part of how we perceive objects, thus giving us different perceptions.

Assuming we are affected by our environment, a question arises as to the significance and influence of this on our perception and our practices. It is not a question that has garnered much attention in philosophy, which could be interpreted to mean that the influence has been judged to be epistemologically insignificant. It is clearly acknowledged in other fields, as the examples from psychology and art-history above indicate, but they concern a particular form of understanding and not a philosophical quest for the legitimacy of understanding.

However, contemporaneously with Baumgarten and the foundation of aesthetics in 18th century, we find lengthy descriptions of the influence of climate on forming our characters

and societies. One example is found in Montesquieu's *De l'esprit de lois* from 1748 (part 3, book 14, ch. 2), another in Rousseau's *Du Contract social* (book 3, ch. 8) from 1762. Furthermore, it is not only an 18th century idea, as we find similar reflections in Jean Bodin's *Les six livres de la République* (book 5, ch. 1) from 1576. Montesquieu could explain how, due to physics, "men are more vigorous in cold climate", they have "more confidence in oneself, that is, more courage; better knowledge of one's superiority, that is, less desire for vengeance; a higher opinion of one's security, that is, more frankness and fewer suspicions, maneuvers, and tricks". In short "[t]he peoples in hot countries are timid like old men; those in cold countries are courageous like young men" (Montesquieu 2013, part 3, book 14, ch. 2).

For the modern reader this passage sounds like curiosities of a different age fully expressing the form of chauvinism often found in classical writing, where, in this case, the climate of the writer is judged to be optimal for moral and intellectual characters. However, it makes a point that we should acknowledge. We must take into account the influence of climate on how we organize our environments, as reflected in the built environments we create for ourselves and also in rhythms of activities that take place therein. The physical impact is present today as well, though in different forms than Montesquieu writes of. We can point at the importance of sun for production of vitamin D in the skin and as a cause skin cancer, or of exposure to cold winds and draught for rheumatism. The dependence of mental health on climate is also acknowledged, for example, the depression experienced by some due to lack of light in winter time. The influence of climate is no longer considered so directly responsible for moral character, as Montesquieu writes, but that it is without any influence would also be hard to argue.

Referring to Montesquieu demonstrates how awareness of environmental effects is not alien to the philosophical tradition. We may easily reject and even ridicule these elements in older philosophy but should pay attention to the problem rather than the answer. Awareness of sensorial influences may be more present in the philosophical tradition than more standard readings acknowledge; a reason for aesthetics becoming a philosophical discipline in the 18th century may very well be the need for a better explanation to the sensorial approach to the world than the dominant philosophies of the Enlightenment period could offer (Barilli, 1993; Scheer, 1997, 53 ff.; Gethmann-Siefert, 1995, 27 ff.).

The influence of climate and of the environment through cultural products has a meeting point in the concept of atmosphere, which has recently begin to form an independent topic within the field of philosophical aesthetics. Atmosphere is not a climate issue but a matter of the ambiance, the tuning of the environment or a "space of feeling" [Gefühlsraum] (Schmitz 2009, 57 ff.). Atmosphere is characterised by the German philosopher Gernot Böhme as a "theory of perception in the full sense of the term, in which perception is understood as the experience of the presence of persons, objects and environments" (Böhme 1993, 116). As such it relates to the aesthetics of Baumgarten (Böhme 2001, 11 ff.) and is announced as a new aesthetics (Böhme 1993).

The emergence of aesthetics as an independent discipline in 18th century drew attention to how we, through sensing and feeling, respond to our environments, including the question of how we should present ourselves in the correct way and be able to judge others. We judge the character of the other person on the basis of appearance and not by identifying objectified features we can subsume under general concepts to conclude this person's specific character.

Judgements of people come from a training of our sensorial faculties and have always been a matter of interest in relation to rhetoric and education. Inspired by the new sciences developed from Galileo to Newton, the emerging ideal of knowledge in Enlightenment becomes, if not exclusively then dominantly, object knowledge, a matter of observations of objects and rules applied on these to explain what is considered to be facts leading towards the construction of systematic knowledge. Object knowledge forms a starting point for theoretical knowledge, while practical knowledge suffers and becomes judged on premises alien to the field of practice and met with expectations of legitimacy that are not appropriate to the character of practice. Practical knowledge becomes a problem in the sense that it becomes insufficiently explained according to the new standards for explanation emerging. As a problem, it comes to require a philosophy. Similarly, perceptions concerned with the appearances as appearances, as in the arts and literature, in rhetoric and in social relations — which are not comprehensible as objects or seen to violate the ideals of rationality of the Enlightenment for their lack of being clear and well-defined — call for philosophical explanation if they should not be rejected as meaningless. Philosophical aesthetics emerged as an answer to this problem, as perceptions are, according to Baumgarten, with a rational content; they are sensorial knowledge in analogy

to reason (§§ 424 ff., see §§ 5-12).

The concept of atmosphere is no mere repetition of Baumgarten's aesthetics, but can be related to it in more ways. One is the rejection of an object-directedness, as atmosphere is characterised as a presence that precedes the perception of the object present. Atmosphere has an "ontological unlocalizability" and when approached requires to be liberated "from the subjective-objective dichotomy" (Böhme 1993, 120). "Atmospheres are something *between* subject and object. They are not something relational but the relation itself" (Böhme 2001, 54, my translation). We are usually interested in locating the perceiving subject and the perceived object establishing a perception determining what we are confronted with as a step towards knowledge. The idea of atmosphere is to step back from the usual idea of perception and ask if we ignore elements present affecting how we are confronted with the environment. One should think of atmosphere as a phenomenological approach to perception, i.e. an investigation of the conditions for and constitutive elements of perception. The philosophical point about atmosphere is to discuss how our perception is formed in contact with the multi sensorial character of the environment; it is not so much about our awareness of the environment as it is about an awareness of the awareness.

Böhme offers several characteristics of atmosphere, such as the ecstasies of a thing (Böhme 2001, 131 ff.). Rather than speaking of properties of something, we have to change focus and say something "radiates", that something comes towards us. The black book of which we usually say it is a book and it is black, giving priority to the book for the colour, could be viewed as if black radiates from the object and, in some situations, is what we are more aware of and affected by than knowing it is a book. In such a perspective atmosphere as a form of aesthetics relates to the exercise of our senses and to how the environment is organised to participate in setting up standards for this exercise, as the environment forms the background against which we learn to be aware of specific elements of what is present to us (Friberg 2014). Just as different codes of conduct educate us and give us a particular sensitivity in social relations, making it possible for us to act among people sharing the same educational standards, so different places and different physical elements do the same by leading to different modes of sensitivity to our environment and to different perceptions. This is something fundamental to any functional design that is intended for the user's intuitive use of it (see Norman 2000).

Atmosphere has formed a starting point for interests in a multi sensorial approach to our environment intended to enhance awareness of our presence and of the presence of phenomena around us – an awareness of the ambiance (Chelkoff 2004, Hasse 2008). Such awareness is, of course, of importance for investigating and developing qualities in architecture and urban planning. It may also contribute to awareness of how the environment affects us, adding to our sensitivity and understanding of the significance of elements in our environment, as well of the foundation of our own perception.

5. *Consequences*

Let us for the last time return to the question of the possible differences in the Nordic perception and the Mediterranean. The question raised was what it implies for our world interpretation to say that our perception is influenced by the environment where we live. As emphasised, perceptions become different due to our experiential and educational backgrounds giving us not only different factual knowledge but also different relations to the world. Further, we are, in our globalized culture, confronted with phenomena appearing out of context or alien to us, or so they could appear, but we often adjust to them and recognise them as something we now have to learn and acknowledge as belonging to our environment.

When travelling, one experiences urban areas subject to identical principles of organization, construction and materials. A significant example is the buildings of business and shopping areas, the often massive transformation of especially attractive addresses in central urban areas or old harbour fronts into anonymous quarters of large dimensioned concrete and glass. In a global culture it is of course very convenient that they are similar, as it makes us capable of understanding them despite the different locations, but another question arises: Do we understand because we learn to understand the same agendas of business and commerce? Is it only a matter of learning to identify some specific elements or is it a forming of our perception making us all submitting to the same ideology?

Take our built environment. It will very often adapt the lives of the people living there to the particular building style of the local traditions, like choice of materials, size of components, form of construction, arrangements of elements and so on, and also to the way it is meant to be or is normally used.

[A] village, after generations have lived in it, comes not only to fit its inhabitants' routine of work and recreation, but grows to reflect the oddities of its community, bricks and mortar growing into a living whole with harvest and planting, with weddings and funerals, with buying and selling, with craft, with trade, with the feelings of family for family and class for class (Fathy, 1973, 51).

The 'reading' of a particular place is difficult, Hassan Fathy's book is an excellent example of how difficult, as he, despite a highly sensitive approach the place, still errs in some important aspects (Panayiota 2007). What we encounter is a physical environment embodying a particular life-form, something easy to ignore because we perceive with our own life-form as determining what we become aware of. But how do we become sensitive to the environment and to the influence of the environment on our perception?

Efforts are required in establishing understanding across cultural differences. We are far from always prepared to acknowledge and recognize the richness and the diversity of the places and situations we encounter, as we usually perceive them with perceptual skills we have been provided with throughout our sensorial training, our aesthetic education. We have to be both aware of and prepared to approach places and situations as unfamiliar, demanding of us to 'bracket' our expectations and even perception. Even when prepared and making an effort in perceiving it may turn out difficult to actually become aware of what is in the situation, as in the case of Gilsenan's months of being disturbed by neon light before suddenly changing his perception.

When this effort is not made, or unsuccessful attempts are made, a consequence is that we ignore and perhaps misconstrue situations. We may force our own ideas upon them. I may, as a Dane, be confused about the social situation in a bar in Italy, perceiving with a Scandinavian understanding and judging social relations according to Scandinavian standards end up misjudging. My example is not of breakdown of social relations and interpretation, we manage by explaining and demonstrating, but anyone moving between Nordic and Mediterranean culture has probably experienced confusions about how to read people's facial and bodily language, whether we should greet by shaking hands, giving kiss (and how many?), or giving a hug. We may return with false ideas of the other place because we were never made aware of differences: Was it flirt or an insult? Why was the light so uncomfortable when we wished something more intimate in a Nordic way?

The heart of the problem is not *that* we perceive a difference in interpretation and in what there is to perceive. The problem is that we *perceive* differently! We find this debated in relation to a specific concept from aesthetics and education not often thought of as so potent: the concept of taste. The taste we have, share, and discuss bears witness to how taste is a product of a social background. Taste is a social sense; when we express an aesthetic judgement we also express an expectation of others to agree with us. Taste is not merely subjective, as we would not express and discuss taste if it was not for the expectation of a community in which we could share or disagree. However, an agreement does not come about based on concepts as taste is not a matter of an argumentation over facts, it is not a dispute as Kant points out with the antinomy of taste (§ 56) in his third critique (Kant 1974). Our agreement on aesthetic judgments is formed by sharing a common educational background teaching us how to perceive something including taking a possible pleasure in it. We would normally not express a judgement when we know everyone disagrees, as that would only demonstrate that we are not part of the community we express it in.

Taste forms an initial step in our knowledge of social environments and hence has an important cognitive side; this is, again, how aesthetics should be understood as sensorial knowledge. This also implies that taste and aesthetics as a matter of perception is in no way neutral to our relation to the environment, as if we through perception are provided with material for a cognitive computation expressed in judgements. We perceive the world in ways formed by the environment and we interpret our relation to it based on this influence. The implication of the environment for our world interpretation is profound though in no way an obstacle for providing understanding across differences as well as also learning to perceive differently. What follows from this is the need to look much more into aesthetic education as a starting point for our world-relations; to look into judgements of taste and cultural elements and formation as fundamental to any understanding we have. We are all undergoing aesthetic education to become socialised and members of our cultural environment before we specialise in other fields of knowledge.

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