

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## PERCEPTUAL RELATION

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It. *Relazione percettiva*; Fr. *Relation perceptuelle*; Germ. *Wahrnehmungsverhältnis*; Span. *Relación perceptiva*. The expression “perceptual relation” comes from the Latin words *perceptiva* (feminine form of *perceptivus*, Medieval adjective based on the verb *percipio*, “to receive” or “to perceive”) and *relatio* (feminine noun derived from *relatus*, past participle of *refero*, “to carry back”, “to report”, “to recall”). At the most general level, “perceptual relation” indicates a connection between what is involved in perceptual processes, including the perceiving subject(s), the perceived object(s), and other related elements.

First of all, the connection between the subject and the object of perception was historically investigated by the pluralists between the 5th and the 4th century B.C. (Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus), continued with other authors in ancient philosophy, especially Aristotle (*De anima*), Epicurus, and the Stoics, then encountered the interest of Renaissance thinkers (particularly Telesius and Campanella) and of philosophers involved in the debate between rationalism and empiricism (Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, and Berkeley). Perceptual relation, which was first revolutionized in a transcendental sense by Kant, then in an idealistic sense by classical German philosophy (Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel), received new interpretations between the end of the 19th and the 20th century, thanks to the development of new theoretical and experimental perspectives, especially the ones of phenomenology, Gestalt theory, analytic philosophy, and Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO).

## THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The concept of perceptual relation is characterized by a degree of unavoidable ambiguity, especially for what concerns what is involved in perceptual processes and the ways to conceive them. Perceptual relation thus needs to be problematized and, in contemporary philosophy, it is open to different interpretations. None of them can disregard the core of perceptual relation and its basic elements (though differently intended): the subject and the object of perception.

## CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

European thinkers show a first distinction about two possibilities of conceiving the connection between the above-mentioned terms: A. an extended meaning, which does not see the subject and the object as isolated terms, but includes in the perceptual process other elements, just as intersubjectivity and the surrounding environment; B. a specific one, according to which perceptual relation is applied to the various elements of the perceived object (the whole and its parts, each distinct part, the figure and the ground, the color and the surface, etc.), as they are configured by the perceiving subject. The first option is often chosen by some theoretical phenomenologists (i.e., Merleau-Ponty) and ecological theory (Gibson), whereas the second option is preferred, both theoretically and experimentally, by Gestalt psychology. It must be specified that this is just an indicative division, which is open to boundary crossing in both senses. Moreover, foundational phenomenological perspectives, like the Husserlian one, take both directions.

A. Following the first option, experience is extended since it is distinguished by a dynamic interaction with the *Umwelt* ("surrounding world"). This term has two different meanings, a. biological and b. socio-cultural.

a. In the biological sense, sustained by Merleau-Ponty's studies on von Uexküll (2001), perceptual processes are not caused by mere physical stimuli or brain structures, but consist in a combination of the two, which also involve the surrounding environment. In this sense, there is an exchange and a meaningful relation between the animal and the environment (Merleau-Ponty 2003), a relation which also applies to humans: we are living bodies, and our being-in-the-world implies an active connection and a familiarity with a space of involvement, in order to establish a meaningful relation (Merleau-Ponty 2012; Umbelino 2013).

b. The *Umwelt* is also considered in a socio-cultural sense by Husserl (1983; 1960) and Schutz (1967), sinking its roots in transcendental intersubjectivity. The other person, who is revealed to me through the operation of *Paarung* ("pairing"), stands out in my consciousness as "someone like me", as having a body that is "there", whereas my body is "here"; the other person perceives objects from a perspective which would be mine if I were in the same place where the other is (Husserl 1960). When this extends to all the others, by establishing a "We-relationship" (Schutz 1967), transcendental intersubjectivity arises, thus opening to the constitution of an objective world, nature itself, and the cultural world: in this way, perceptual relation does not involve us as mere individuals, as having a living body (*Leib*) affected by objects, but as social beings, since perception can be shared and communicated with other people.

It must be specified that extended relations do not lead to holism, to the omnipervasivity of the context: phenomenologically speaking, perceptual relations take place between the two poles of the subject and of the object, so that their extension refers to the perceptual field and the environment where they are situated (Ferro 2022). Such a position is also sustained by the ecological theory (Gibson 1979), which considers perception as the result of mutuality between organism and environment: living organisms are

bodies in direct epistemic contact with their environment through affordances (“tertiary qualities”), so that perception is the result of how they sense the environment and act in it.

B. The specific meaning of perceptual relation, which focuses on particular elements of perception, is present in both Husserl and Gestalt psychology. Husserl uses this strategy in his works on logic, especially *Logical Investigations* (Husserl 2001), where he adopts the static approach, and *Experience and Judgement* (Husserl 1975), in which he applies the genetic method. The perceptual relation between our conscience and its object is a relation aimed at the unity of what is grasped, a unity which is configured as a *Sinngebung*, a meaning-bestowal (Husserl 2001, Second Investigation). This unity is characterized by the relation between different elements or parts of the object: the whole and its parts, dependent and independent parts (Husserl 2001, Third Investigation), the substrate and its internal determinations (Husserl 1975), etc. In his *Logical Investigations*, Husserl explicitly quotes and criticizes Gestalt psychology, however, he shares with it a common interest for the relation between what composes the unity of a perceived object. The Gestaltist Koffka explicitly theorizes an “intrinsic relation” between the whole and the parts of a configuration (Koffka 1955). In this perspective, the configuration (*Gestalt*) is defined as a synthetic and dynamic process, where the whole is not a sum, but a balance between its parts. For this reason, the relation between the whole and its parts does not derive from a principle of association (Wertheimer 1922): it is not extrinsic, but intrinsic. This becomes clearer if one conceives perceptual processes as field processes, where shapes, colors, concavities, convexities, light, shade, etc. are configured in a certain way (Arnheim 1974), so that perceptual relations happen through forms, shaping our experience in a dynamic and adapting process.

The narrow and the broad sense of perceptual relation may be put together, by defining it as a dynamic relation between subjects and objects, a relation which is inseparable from its components and constitutes the *Zwischen* (“inbetween”) connecting subjects, objects, their specific parts, and the *Umwelt* (Ferro, 2022).

## ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

In the analytic tradition, philosophers ask how we may speak about perceptual relation. There is an ongoing debate about A. relational and B. representational views: A. whereas the former consider perceptual experience as a relation of the subject to the environment where objects are situated, B. the latter see it as a matter of the subject representing the environment (Schellenberg 2014).

A. According to relationalism, perception is seen as a genuine relation between the perceiver and the perceived object, without the mediation of the so-called “perceptual content”. In this way, two or more objects of the same kind (i.e., two cups) are perceived differently, because the single objects which are perceived are different (Martin 2004), whereas, if we perceived a presumed “content” of a certain type, we would not distinguish two very similar cups. Moreover, the relational view considers perceptual states as the basic ground on which other states are built, for instance demonstrative thoughts (Campbell 2002):

the fact that I am now seeing an empty cup, with some brown liquid traces in it, lets me think that someone in my house has recently drunk coffee.

B. This view is challenged by representationalists, who think that there is not any direct relation between the subject and the object of perception, but the latter is the result of a mediation. This mediation takes place through a certain "perceptual content", whose nature is still under debate (Hawley, Macpherson 2011): it may be either propositional, or pre- or non-conceptual. In any case, this content is subject to conditions of veridicality, accuracy, and correctness (Locatelli, Wilson 2017). According to Nanay (2015), representationalism gives an explanation for the inaccuracy of our beliefs and our perceptual states, since they can fail to represent correctly. Hallucinations and illusions are cases in which objects are misrepresented. Moreover, perceptual states help us justify our perceptual beliefs: a perceptual state with a certain content justifies a perceptual belief having a similar content.

Notwithstanding the differences between these perspectives, adopting a representational view does not necessarily exclude the possibility of perceptual relations. Schellenberg (2014) tries to mediate between "austere relationalists" and "austere representationalists", by saying that perceptual relations to the environment and the content of experience are not exclusive, but mutually dependent. On the other hand, Nanay (2015) states that the debate between representationalists and relationalists cannot be universally solved: in certain explanatory contexts, the one is better than the other and viceversa.

#### OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY:

Another view on perception comes from the OOO theory, which takes inspiration from phenomenology, but denies its fully relational perspective. Harman (2011) conceptualizes a separation between real objects (noumena) and sensual objects (phenomena): perceptual relations take place only among sensual objects, whereas the real ones are considered as "withdrawn", since not every aspect of an object can be potentially or actually known. Perceptual relation may be conceived in a twofold manner: as taking place between a sensual object (SO) and its qualities (SQ), or between two sensual objects. SO becomes perceivable by other objects – in OOO subjects are objects as well – through its SQ, according to a certain kind of tension between SO and SQ which is defined by Harman (2011) as "time". The relation between two different sensual objects, on the other hand, consists in the positing of a third object: if I put a mug on the floor, the new object mug-floor is formed, which may change its constituents or constrain further relations that constituents can enter (Howdyshell 2020). OOO shares with the relational views the possibility of a perceptual relation, but it also considers this relation as a partial connection with the object (its sensual and phenomenal dimension), whereas its deep core is seen as non-relational.

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