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Abstract

Berleant and Dufrenne were both simultaneously benchmarks in the IAA for many years. They knew each other and Berleant referred to Dufrenne occasionally. Starting from some quotations of Dufrenne by Berleant, I propose to show how both of them differ from Merleau-Ponty when thinking that perception is not only an act of vision but a somatic process. The originality of Berleant associating phenomenology and Anglo-Saxon way of thinking could lead to suggest that Environmental Aesthetics has a feedback effect opening a new reading of Dufrenne.

Keywords

Sensuous, Eye, Vision, Ear, Synesthesias, Somatic Engagement, Natural Environments.

Among all my encounters related to the IAA, Arnold's was one of the most important and recurrent. I was moved and intrigued, during a friendly dinner in Paris with Arnold and his wife, when he confessed that he had taken up French again to revive his knowledge of a language he particularly liked.

It is this link with France and French philosophers that I wish to reactivate by evoking several points of convergence between Arnold Berleant and Mikel Dufrenne. As much as Berleant's¹ readers have noted the reference to Merleau-Ponty, in whom he found a philosophy of perception essential to his work, the reference to Dufrenne has hardly been pointed out. It deserves however to be taken into consideration.

It is not surprising that Berleant sometimes quoted Dufrenne, for the two had frequented each other: they were both very present for many years within the IAA. Dufrenne was considered a phenomenologist in the same way as Merleau-Ponty and the aesthetic orientation that he gave to his research justified Berleant's invoking him when phenomenology renewed aesthetic reflection. It was in particular the case when he undertook to give an account of the musical performance and followed the example of Dufrenne: "in recognizing the wide range of sensuous perception and at the same time the originary capacity of aesthetic experience, Mikel Dufrenne has shown us the rich capabilities of phenomenology. It is in that spirit that this essay explores musical performance."² To admit as obvious a form of division between referring to Merleau-Ponty for the philosophy of the perception and referring to Dufrenne only regarding aesthetic questions would be nevertheless imprudent insofar as, for these two French philosophers, the aesthetic questions are inscribed within the framework of a global philosophical reflection: Merleau-Ponty produced numerous texts on the art and Dufrenne carried out a philosophical work within which the aesthetics constitutes only one aspect.³

Without trying to be exhaustive or to overestimate the proximity with French philosophy, even if it would give credence to the statement that Berleant is one of the few American aestheticians to have established a bridge between the Anglo-Saxon analytical and pragmatist tradition and phenomenology, I will first look at the way Berleant referred to Dufrenne and find the corresponding analyses in the texts of the French philosopher. We will see that, in spite of a global reference to Merleau-Ponty, both of them share some reservations against him concerning the senses and the sensuous, and the pre-eminent place given to the eye and the vision. This observation will lead me to suggest, despite certain philosophical incompatibilities, other possible convergences between Dufrenne and Berleant.

A shared criticism of the prevalence of vision

Let us start from Berleant's remark "vision is born from what is happening in the body" Dufrenne once remarked ". A note specifies that it was "in a lecture on Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind* at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, 13 October, 1979".⁴ I do not have Dufrenne's 1979 lecture, but a speech given at a Merleau-Ponty colloquium held at the State University of New York at Stony Brook in 1977, entitled "*L'œil et l'esprit*" ("*Eye and Mind*") and published in volume III of the collection *Esthétique et philosophie*⁵, at least allows us to find the spirit of his lecture. He centers his analysis on the title given by Merleau-Ponty to his essay by insisting on the fact that the thought "is always sustained by the perceptual faith that anchors us in the truth of the sensuous" and he notices that the philosopher "thinks of the savage in vision according to the Husserlian model of passive synthesis": the visible is given "and this act of giving is an event in the visual field". That leads him to raise the main themes of the Merleau-Pontian ontology that he goes through until the unfinished work, *The visible and the invisible*, published *post mortem* in 1964: "this originary being that the philosopher calls flesh (...) the bursting forth of originary being", "the upheaval of appearing, for this bursting forth produces a chiasm" and "the reversibility of the visible and the seer". The enigma of the vision explains the eye, and in order to think this unthinkable that is the bursting forth of originary, writes Dufrenne, Merleau-Ponty examines painting. If the eye, far from "designating a determine organ assigned to a precise function" designates "this strange power of opening of the flesh, (...) The eye, putting us into the world by opening a world to us, precedes the mind." At the end of his presentation, Dufrenne leaves room for a reservation through a question concerning the title: "eye, of course, but why not ear or hand, for that matter? (...) The flesh is polymorphous and polyvalent. The sensuous must also allow itself pluralization, for no matter how subtle the discourse of hyperreflection may be, it can only divulge originary being as having already burst forth." Should Merleau-Ponty have written: "the sensuous and mind?" he wonders, before ending with the regret that the philosopher privileges the eye, neglecting the sound and the tactile and "the synesthesias which are the lot of all perception". The disagreement relates to the radical privilege that Merleau-

Ponty wanted to confer to the visible, which leads him not to recognize that "the whole body is invoked" because there are equivalences which associate tactile values to the painting.

If, precisely, Berleant had retained in Dufrenne's talk his remark that it is the whole body that is involved in perception, he can only agree with the way the French philosopher develops this position in his last book published in Montreal in 1987: *L'œil et l'oreille*⁶ ("Eye and ear"). The ultimate essay, by its title, echoes Merleau-Ponty's *L'œil et l'esprit* ("Eye and Mind"), and expresses the same revolt against the pre-eminence of the eye in Western culture. With the ear, the music is also saved, "to which the reflection on the art does not always take account of, being inspired by the imperialism of the eye, obsessed by the fine arts."⁷ It is therefore first of all a question "of doing justice to the ear" as announced from the outset in the introduction: the ear alone "founds the relation to oneself which constitutes the subject", it is by it that the living individual feels alive, and it is undoubtedly also "that by which he feels himself thinking, creating between the body and the mind, between feeling and thinking, a continuity which makes place for thinking to emerge."⁸ The senses, claims Dufrenne, are interdependent and exchanges take place between them: "our purpose, he continues, is thus not only to rehabilitate the ear but also to reflect on the plurality of the senses, or more exactly of what is ordered to the senses."⁹ Dufrenne wonders at length about the synesthesias whose experience allows to feel the unity of the sensible, and which are ways of making, aimed or reached by the practice of arts.¹⁰ Passing from the association of the senses in the synesthesias to the association of the artistic practices, he concludes by these words: "Hence the destiny of arts: For lack of producing and giving to feel the transsensible, they play happily to associate ". Whereas Merleau-Ponty gives an account of synesthesias by a "seeing extended to non-visual qualities", Dufrenne imputes synesthesias to the imagination, defining the imaginary by the virtual: "we think we see them, we say we see them, but it is not so: the tactile or the audible were not converted into visible, they only passed to the state of virtualities."¹¹

Berleant, in a 1993 text, shares with Dufrenne the criticism of the fact that the theory of art "[...] has mostly been elaborated in reference to a single art form – the visual arts of painting and sculpture [...]"¹². It is no coincidence that he had been struck by Dufrenne's remark at Stony Brook: it is in the same spirit that he writes again, in this 1993 article, "perception [...] is not only a visual act but a somatic engagement with the realm of the aesthetic."¹³ What is formulated here in the criticism of the traditional theory of art implies a new conception of the aesthetic and more generally of the perceptive experience: the 1991 text commented the reference to Dufrenne by drawing the consequences of the idea that the perception is somatic before being visual: "the eye is but one factor in our perception of space, an awareness that we grasp through multiple sensory channels."¹⁴ The preface to the 2005 collection of articles *Re-thinking Aesthetics* points out again that these essays "insist on including the body and all its senses within the domain of aesthetic experience,"¹⁵ and the topics of engagement and environment at the heart of Berleant's thinking are linked to the critique

of the place given to vision. The reference to Dufrenne is therefore important in that it allows to complement the reference to Merleau-Ponty, and this dual reference leads to corroboration of the claim that Berleant bridges generally opposing traditions.

“Extending the range of aesthetic experience”¹⁶

To extend these reflections I will add some unexpected convergences between some other writings by Dufrenne and positions defended by Berleant, starting from a broader scope of aesthetics proposed by the two philosophers in their national contexts. As far as Dufrenne is concerned, I will refer less to *La phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique*, which takes as a model of aesthetic experience the reception of works of art and remains faithful to the Kantian heritage for which disinterestedness is essential to contemplation, than to texts that are not considered to be directly related to aesthetics in the traditional sense of the term, and I will give preference to his last publications. I do not believe that Berleant himself noted the echoes that he could find there and I was surprised by the silence relative to the French phenomenology in his article "esthétique de l'art et de la nature"¹⁷, whereas Merleau-Ponty's courses at Collège de France from 1956 to 1958 dealt with the concept of Nature¹⁸ and Dufrenne did not stop promoting a philosophy of Nature¹⁹. Despite notable differences related to the fact that the concept of Nature finds its roots in the ontology and metaphysics of the two French philosophers, some reasons for rapprochement are notable: let us open some windows.

The originality of environmental aesthetics, we read in the preface of the collection *Esthétique de l'environnement*, which presents Carlson and Berleant as "major authors of the current", "consisted first of all in putting natural environments at the center of attention [...]". While twentieth-century aesthetics, regardless of its origin, generally focused on art, environmental aesthetics recaptures the spirit of Ronald Hepburn's advocacy of an aesthetics of nature²⁰ that shows to which extent the viewer can be involved in what he or she is experiencing, and the feedback effect this has on them. Environmental aesthetics gradually broadened its scope to include anthropogenic environments, and then proposed an "aesthetics of ordinary life" by aesthetically evaluating common objects and environments, as well as a wide range of ordinary activities, opening the field to the study of "aesthetic appreciation of the world at large" that even includes works of art.²¹ In the first chapter of the collection of essays from 2005, which takes up the opening speech at the XIVth International Congress of Aesthetics in 1998, to account for the transformations of aesthetics, Berleant took the example of the renewal proposed by Wolfgang Iser in three directions: "expanding aesthetic perception to the full range of *aisthesis*, enlarging the range of art to include both the multiplicity of its inner aspects and the many ways in which art prevails the whole of culture, and finally, extending aesthetics beyond art to society and the life-world."²² Aesthetic experience within the framework of environmental aesthetics is a sensitive experience that is performed in different domains but whose

characteristics remain the same, whether it is nature or art. Our first relationship to the world is somatic and a continuity between nature and culture is re-established.

Dufrenne's philosophical path when he makes the hypothesis of Nature as a pre-human and pre-real originary, as the ground that gives birth, that we cannot think but that we can feel in aesthetic experiences which mobilize the sensitivity, is situated in the prolongation of a philosophical work whose extent exceeds a reflection on the nature of aesthetics as discipline. He remains nevertheless close to the concerns of the supporters of the environmental aesthetics when he discusses "The aesthetic experience of Nature"²³. In this text of 1955 Dufrenne reconciles the aesthetic preoccupations of the time and the personal philosophical path already made. Starting from the observation that the privileged aesthetic object is always the art, which gives place to the phenomenologically most enlightening experience, he shows what one can expect from a reflection on a natural aesthetic object: "the natural object exalts the sensuous in the world" and "in front of the natural spectacle, we'll get into it, integrated in the natural becoming of the world"²⁴. He uses the aesthetic categories discussed in the Anglo-Saxon or Western aesthetics, the sublime in the first place, but drifts towards a philosophical reflection which is proper to him, centered on the issues of the aestheticizable and expressiveness. He abandons the purity of the experience provoked by the work of art, yet phenomenologically more interesting, in favor of the one carried out in contact with the natural object, which comes closer to the ordinary perception "in that it mixes us more with the things and does not authorize a complete reduction. " The gain is consequent: the article concludes on the scope of an experience that brings "the assurance of a connaturality of man with nature", that makes feel the consubstantiality of man with nature, "effect of a pre-established harmony that does not need a God to pre-establish it because it is God: *Deus, sive Natura*." Environmental aesthetics is developed by philosophers closer to American pragmatism than to phenomenology, but it is interesting to note that Berleant is attracted by monism and himself refers to Spinoza²⁵. A parallel reading of the two authors shows, despite their fundamental differences, the proximity of certain analyses and descriptions. This is the case of a text by Dufrenne published in 1989.

It is an article in which Dufrenne answers the injunction of the number 16 of *La revue d'esthétique*²⁶, "speak about a beloved work", with a text entitled "Le Cap Ferrat": the philosopher defends the idea that the experience of Cap Ferrat is an aesthetic experience and that a cape, which is a natural object, can be considered as a work of art. It is less a question of defending an aesthetics of natural objects than of showing that a landscape questions the division nature–culture: "the Cape is a work. Of nature first of all [...] but the Cape is also the work of men, of all those who built the port, constructed the houses, planted the gardens, who build today the most sumptuous residences so it is called the paradise of millionaires. [...] Thus the Cape is a cultural object, as are most urban or rural landscapes today, at least in the West."²⁷ The Cape, a work of natural forces, is not the work of an artist but is its own work "as a cultural object, cultivated, shaped, managed by the people who

inhabit it": "Those who live the Cape, he specifies, [...] let themselves be guided by it [...]. They are the actors who play the Cape [...]. [...] The Cape is therefore naturating (*naturant*); and by naturating the people who are linked to it, it is naturing itself. Together with those who keep it, it is by right a work of art."²⁸ When man appreciates a natural object and transforms it, he responds to the solicitation of a naturating object with a naturating engagement, forever blurring what is natural and what is cultural, what is art and what is not.

As we see, this text describes a symbiotic and fusional experience of the Cape, the philosopher's immersion in the sensuous: "it is not its portrait that I like", he writes. "I can enjoy its presence, be his; abolish this distance that the gaze digs, feel it instead of seeing it." Nature gives rise to an aesthetic experience that "gives us a lesson in being in the world," wrote Dufrenne in 1955, an experience in which "man exists *with* things."²⁹ Berleant can be in harmony with Dufrenne on the level of an aesthetic experience expanded to include nature, when, as the latter concluded in 1955, "All that reduction can do here is to proclaim its own impossibility, to make belief in the world appear, not to suppress it."

Dufrenne's originality compared to the phenomenological aesthetics is to cease to limit the aesthetics to the art and to certain works of art, to cease to confine himself to a sectorial analysis, so he founds the aesthetic reflection on a philosophy of Nature whose developments are multiple. As he is elaborating a philosophy of the Nature, Dufrenne describes a type of lived experience which allows indisputably to operate certain connections, limited undoubtedly but notable, with the environmental aesthetics such as it developed across the Atlantic and notably in Berleant's work. One could go so far as to suggest that Berleant's writings have an effect on Dufrenne's reading and make one attentive to his last works.

¹ From now on, in order to treat Arnold and Dufrenne equally, I will use their last names. Berleant's critical confrontation with Merleau-Ponty is particularly interesting: cf « Environment and the body » in *Place and Embodiment*, proceedings of XIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics, Lahti, Finland, August 1-5, 1995 and *Living in the landscape: toward an Aesthetics of Environment*, University Press of Kansas, 1997.

² Arnold Berleant, "A Phenomenology of Musical Performance", in *Re-thinking Aesthetics. Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts*, Ashgate 2004, p. 176.

³ Cf. Maryvonne Saison, *La nature artiste. Mikel Dufrenne de l'esthétique au politique*, Editions de la Sorbonne, 2018.

⁴ Arnold Berleant, "Toward an Aesthetics of Environmental Design" in *Person-Environment Theory Series*, University of California, Berkeley, 1991.

⁵ Mikel Dufrenne, « *L'œil et l'esprit* » in *Esthétique et philosophie*, tome 3, Paris, Klincksieck 1981, p. 97-102. "Eye and Mind" translated by Dennis Gallagher: *In the presence of the sensuous: Essays in Aesthetics*, Mark S. Roberts and Dennis Gallagher, 1987, reprinted in paperback 1990 by Humanities Press International, Inc. Atlantic Highlands, p.69-74.

⁶ Mikel Dufrenne, *L'œil et l'oreille*, Montréal, L'Hexagone 1987. This essay was reprinted in France by Editions Jean-Michel Place in 1991 et has been reissued by Nouvelles éditions Place in 2020.

⁷ *Ibid.* Nouvelles éditions Place, p. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.* Nouvelles éditions Place, pp. 50-51 and 55-56.

⁹ *Ibid.* Nouvelles éditions Place, p. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Nouvelles éditions Place, p. 122.

¹¹ Mikel Dufrenne, *L'œil et l'oreille*, *op. cit.* p. 122.

¹² Arnold Berleant, « Esthétique de l'art et de la nature » in *Esthétique de l'environnement*, textes réunis et traduits par H.-S Afeissa et Y. Lafolie, Paris, Vrin, 2015.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

- ¹⁴ Arnold Berleant, "Toward an Aesthetics of Environmental Design" in *Person-Environment Theory Series*, University of California, Berkeley, 1991, p. 13.
- ¹⁵ Arnold Berleant *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, Ashgate 2005, p. vii.
- ¹⁶ Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, Imprint Academic 2010
- ¹⁷ Arnold Berleant, "L'esthétique de l'art et de la nature", text published in 1993 under the title "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature" in S. Kemal, I. Gaskell (dir.) *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, Cambridge University Press and translated by Y. Lafolie in *Esthétique de l'environnement*, Vrin 2015, p. 85-113.
- ¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Résumés de cours, Collège de France 1952-1960*, Gallimard 1968 and *La Nature, Notes, cours du collège de France*, Seuil, book series "Traces écrites", 1995.
- ¹⁹ A note in the last chapter of *La phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* commenting on the assertion that art is essential to nature already adds: "if art is thus a cosmological phenomenon, one may ask whether nature does not attempt to realize art even before the appearance of man. A reflection on the natural aesthetic object would have to approach this problem." (PUF, 1953, p. 671). All the later works of Dufrenne are confronted with the subject of nature, with the originary, notably *Le Poétique* (PUF, 1963) whose 3rd chapter discusses "The poetic in Nature" and the two works on the *a priori* (PUF 1959 and ed. C. Bourgeois 1981). It is in the book of 1981 that the nature takes a capital letter, designating the unthinkable that the feeling ("sentiment") presages throughout the world (p. 312).
- ²⁰ *Esthétique de l'environnement*, *op.cit.* p. 17 and Ronald Hepburn "L'esthétique contemporaine et la négligence de la beauté naturelle", *ibid.*, p. 41-54.
- ²¹ *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, *op.cit.* p. 11, quoted in the preface to the *Esthétique de l'environnement*, *op.cit.* p. 9 and p. 18.
- ²² Arnold Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, *op.cit.* p. 14.
- ²³ Mikel Dufrenne, "L'expérience esthétique de la nature", *Esthétique et philosophie* éd. Klincksieck T.1, 1967, p. 38-52.
- ²⁴ Mikel Dufrenne, *ibid.* p. 38-40.
- ²⁵ In *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, *op. cit.* p. 17, Berleant expresses his hope that philosophy, abandoning the dualism based on systems of binary oppositions, will highlight the interpenetrations, continuities, and even fusions between ideas "perhaps with the hope of achieving a kind of Spinozistic unity that seems them as aspects of a common substance."
- ²⁶ *Revue d'esthétique*, *œuvres* n° 16, 1989, Paris, Editions Jean-Michel Place, nouvelle série.
- ²⁷ Mikel Dufrenne, *ibid.* p. 59.
- ²⁸ Mikel Dufrenne, "Le Cap Ferrat", in *Revue d'esthétique*, n° 16, *op. cit.* p. 59.
- ²⁹ Mikel Dufrenne, "L'expérience esthétique de la nature", in *Esthétique et philosophie*, Paris, Editions Klincksieck T.1, 1967, p. 51.