

**Proceedings of the
European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 7, 2015

Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

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Proceedings of the European Society of Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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Empathy, Anthropomorphism and Embodiment in Vischer's Contribution to Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. Vischer's *Contribution to Aesthetics* attempts to explain the purpose of empathy and the significance of inherence in the world. In Vischer's analysis, the empathic impulse arises as the individual's psychological attempt to bridge the essential otherness of nature. This thereby exerts a pull against human subjectivity in that the human being wishes to merge with the universe and participate in its governing harmony. The following examines Vischer's theory of empathy in relation to aesthetics. I argue that Vischer's interpretation of this phenomenon is an anthropocentric one.

i. Introduction

Vischer's *Contribution to Aesthetics* attempts to explain the purpose of empathy and the significance of inherence in the world. In Vischer's analysis, the empathic impulse arises as the individual's psychological attempt to bridge the essential otherness of nature. This thereby exerts a pull against human subjectivity in that the human being who wishes to merge with the universe and participate in its governing harmony.

The following paper examines Vischer's theory of empathy in relation to aesthetics. First we will look at the significance of embodiment in his theory before examining what he means by 'empathic projection'. I argue that Vischer's interpretation of this phenomenon is an anthropocentric one. In order to clarify this theory in context, it is important to define the place of art and the artist in Vischer's thesis. Hence this will be discussed in the proceeding section. This includes elucidating the role of the imagination. Other concepts of note in this context are universal union

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and the concept of the 'other'. I will conclude by discussing some of the shortcomings of his argument whilst acknowledging its value.

2. Embodiment: The Physiology of Sensation

Vischer coined the term "einführung" to describe the problem of emotional projection in aesthetics, meaning 'in-feeling.' In English, 'empathy' is the closest translation. Vischer emphasized the body's physiology in conditioning sensory and emotive responses. His theoretical framework is a curious juxtaposition of science and spirituality.

Vischer begins by distinguishing between sensation and feeling. Sensation is simply the body's response to external stimuli but feeling involves mental and emotional activity. Sensation can also be divided into immediate sensation and responsive sensation. The former is a more superficial sensory response and the latter involves more extensive muscle and nerve activity, resulting in a more engaged response.

Sensation and sentient imagination have the same tendency in this context. Sensation is the most primitive impulse of life but out of it evolves acts of imagination, volition and cognition. With this general advance sensation turns into feeling, which is more objective than sensation and unlike sensation, vibrates in sympathy with another outside being.¹

Vischer differentiates between emphatic and unemphatic sensations. An example of the latter is a sensation that is vague and indifferent. Practical sensation is a case in point, whereby the stimulus serves as a means to another function. In this case, there is no deep engagement with the world. The artistic eye recognises no such sensation because to the artistic eye, nothing is indifferent - seeing is an end in itself.

The criterion of sensation, according to Vischer, lies in the concept of similarity.² This refers to harmony between subject and object - which arise because the object has a harmonious form corresponding to the subject.

His premise that empathy is a function of facilitating the person's oneness with the world is fundamental to his belief. His statement: "this sym-

¹ Ibid p 109

² Ibid p 95

bolizing activity can be based on nothing other than our pantheistic urge for union with the world,” is blatantly spiritual in nature.

According to Vischer, the reason we experience pleasure through the nervous system in conjunction with certain forms is due to a correspondence between our physiology and that form. For example a horizontal line may be pleasing because it reflects the horizontal positioning of our eyes. The vertical line, on the contrary, can be disturbing, when perceived in isolation because it contradicts the binocular structure of the perceiving eyes and the circle has an immediately pleasing effect due to the rounded shape of the eye.³

Vischer further suggests that certain aesthetic attributes may be pleasing because they are in sync with the regularity of our organs. An image can symbolically relate to ideas of our own bodies.

Synaesthesia is an important concept for Vischer. One sensation may elicit a chain reaction of bodily responses. In this way, we often observe in ourselves the fact that a visual stimulus is experienced not only with our eyes, but also with a different sense in another part of our body. The shrillness of loud colours induces an offensive sensation in the auditory nerves. Low ceilings perceived with the eyes produce a sensation of weight and pressure.⁴

Vischer’s underlying theme of belonging in the world seems to echo Merleau-Ponty’s notion of our pre-reflective engagement with the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, we are enmeshed with the world and the world enmeshed in us.⁵ However as we shall see, Vischer’s account is at variance with Merleau-Ponty’s in that the former is anthropocentric and the latter is one of interdependence.

³ Ibid p 97

⁴ Ibid p. 98

⁵ D. Seamon (2010) Merleau-Ponty, Perception & Environmental Embodiment: Implications for Architectural & Environmental Studies. Chapter prepared for R.McCann & P. M. Locke, Eds. *Carnal Echoes, Merleau-Ponty and the Flesh of Architecture*. Forthcoming 2014 online at http://www.academia.edu/948750/Merleau-Ponty_Perception_and_Environmental_Embodiment_Implications_for_Architectural_and_Environmental_Studies_2014_forthcoming_15/10/13.

3. An Anthropocentric Empathetic Projection

Vischer's theory of emotional and empathetic projection seems to rest on the human subject's need to find an ostensible harmony in objects and others when it ventures into the world. Vischer submits that we find regular forms pleasing because our organs and their forms are regular. Irregular forms bother us: "The eye is pained to find no trace of the laws that govern its organization and movement."⁶

The central feature of Vischer's theory is that we have the ability to project our own physical form into an objective form. The image symbolically relates to the idea of our own bodies and the imagination seeks to experience itself through the image, we project our own personalities into the form:

"Thus I project my own life into the lifeless form, just as I quite justifiably do with another living person. Only ostensibly do I keep my own identity although the object remains distinct. I seem merely to adapt and attach myself to it as one hand clasps another, and yet I am mysteriously transformed into this Other."⁷

This is an act of the imagination called inward sensation. When one views a stationary object one can place oneself at the inner structure, think oneself way into it. When the object of contemplation is small, like a pebble, our being is constricted and when the object is large like a body of water, our feeling is expanded. The former induces a weakening of the self and the latter a liberation of the self.

Vischer's concept of empathy in art, as in nature, encompasses a 'merging' of the person and the art. At first glance Vischer appears to be discussing something akin to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh of the world i.e. that the body is a thing and things of the world are encrusted in it.⁸

However Vischer should not be misunderstood here, the 'belonging' in the world of which he speaks is an anthropocentric one. Where he

⁶ R. Vischer p 97

⁷ Ibid p 104

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964) 'Eye & Mind' in Galen A. Johnson (1993) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, Trans Ed. Michael B. Smith, Evanston, Northwestern University Press 121-150

stated that the eye is pained to not to find a trace of itself, he expands, that a complete union can only take place where the subjective and objective imagination involves another human being. In the case of viewing inanimate nature, such as a rainbow or other ‘bloodless’ objects, it is as if we pretend to ourselves that we are contained in these things because we cannot bear to believe otherwise:

“Where there is no life – precisely there do I miss it...we miss red-blooded life, and precisely because we miss it, we imagine the dead forms as living.”⁹

As such the human individual projects his/her own life into the lifeless form because “He can tolerate no obstacle, he wants to roam the universe and feel himself at one with it.”¹⁰ In Vischer’s words, “empathy functions symbolically to animate a plant and to anthropomorphize an animal”¹¹ The subject animates the object with the subject’s own conscious existence. What is important is how the psychological perspective of the *subject* is projected onto the *object*.¹²

Wollheim has highlighted that here are two types of expressive perception, one whereby we project our emotional state onto what we see and the second occurs when what we see induces an emotional state in us.¹³ Apparently, Vischer is only interested in the former. His theory of projection is anthropocentric in that we see ourselves in everything as opposed to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, which is a reciprocal process.

Fundamental to Vischer’s stance is that we desire a unified position with the universe. However unlike the notion of ontological reciprocity expounded by Crowther where we are not separate, gazing out on an external world, Vischer would have us at the centre of the universe projecting

⁹ R. Vischer p 104

¹⁰ Ibid p 26

¹¹ Ibid p 106

¹² This aspect of Vischer’s theory has also been discussed by Timothy C. Vincent in ‘From Sympathy to Empathy, Baudelaire, Vischer & Early Modernism, *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature*, Volume 45, Number 1, March 2012, pp. 1-15

¹³ This is called correspondence and originated with the mystical philosopher, Swedenborg and was developed by Baudelaire. See R. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, for further discussion on this.

ourselves on all other things. Crowther's 'ontological reciprocity' acknowledges that our body's hold upon the world involves an interwoven in and inseparable unity.¹⁴

4. Art & The Artist

The role of the imagination is an essential part of this discussion. According to Vischer, the notion of sensation is vitally enlarged and deepened by the imagination. He goes on to say that imagination may lack the clarity of reality but also its illusions and this independence from the constraints of reality may have benefits. However as the imagination has a talent for exaggeration, it is a power of visualization, which has the advantage of being able to construct a self-generated, new image. Nonetheless these remain nebulous internal creations until "the hand of art – outward imagination – conducts them back to a state of tangible reality."¹⁵

Vischer's stance is that the artist does not imitate nature but reflects the universal "vital process" which may be described as emotional life. He states further: "Art thus strives to objectify the human condition in a sensuous and harmoniously refined form, it seeks to translate the instability of emotional life and the chaotic disorder of nature into a free, beautiful objectivity."¹⁶

For Vischer, the artist emancipates the idea, which is trapped in real life. The imagination must be exercised; hence it is a vital part of entering into artistic consciousness.

Vischer made inference to the imagination when he defended the content of form in the face of the formalism, under the supervision of Karl Kostlin, who also believed that the mind is stimulated by what the form evokes:

"Our mind is not so narrow, so small, so dull, so lethargic, so stupid, or so dead that it sees only form and none of the other things evoked together with form."¹⁷

¹⁴ P. Crowther (1993) *Art & Embodiment, Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* p. 2

¹⁵ *Ibid* p 102

¹⁶ R. Vischer p 20

¹⁷ K. Kostlin quoted in F. Mallgrave & E. Ikonomou (1994) in *Empathy, Form & Space, Problems in German Aesthetics*, Getty Centre Publication Programmes, p 20

With respect to visual sensation, Vischer distinguishes between 2 types of seeing. Simple seeing, firstly, is a relatively unconscious process. This type of seeing is a prerequisite to all artistic intuition, as the artist must have an eye. However this simple seeing is nothing more than nerve vibrations providing the first prescient flash of an inner conception.¹⁸ This is an example of an *immediate sensation*. A more advanced form of seeing involves muscular activity, moving the eye while looking at the object; this he terms scanning.¹⁹ Scanning is a more active and conscious process.

Vischer contends that the artist lives in a state of amazement and because he/she keeps his/her eyes open and is constantly surprised. Both inward and outward imagination require attention to the details of external phenomena. If the artist can remain conscious, he/she can reveal artistic consciousness to the viewer. In this respect, artist is facilitator:

“Only in artistic reaction is the private character – the subjectivity of the imagination truly overcome; for now the image has been changed into the shared universally valued human possession.”²⁰

He goes on to describe the artist thus:

“Contrary to the apathetic individual, who is always unable to detach himself from the elements of his environment, the artist lives in a state of amazement.” He describes the artist as a “silent, solitary stranger who has set out to espy the world.”²¹

5. Conclusion & Critical Evaluation

Vischer’s contribution to aesthetics has merits. His description of scanning as opposed to seeing offers valid insights into how art works. His emphasis on the ability to focus the eyes with the use of muscle action enlightens the discussion on the significance of art. I would say that it is this focused, attentive state which art induces, that is of primary importance in the evaluation of art. How art fosters empathy by heightening awareness is a direction Vischer could have taken his discussion.

¹⁸ Ibid p. 94

¹⁹ Ibid p. 94

²⁰ Ibid p. 115

²¹ Ibid p 116

Vischer justly highlights how formalism invalidates the imagination. He has pointed out that the mind cannot help but imagine the possibilities when presented with forms. This interpretation of the content of form presents a richer understanding of the human mind than formalism allows for.

The 'constant state of amazement', to which Vischer refers, is a reasonable description of the state of the artist. It can be justifiably argued that in order to paint artistically the artist must develop a visual awareness that is heightened along with an ability to focus. This is an intrinsic part of the artistic process, without which, in my opinion, there can be no art. Without this, the artist cannot approach the world with fresh eyes. If the world is mundane to the artist there is no inspiration to aide the creative process.

Although Vischer highlights important concepts in aesthetics, he does prevaricate on some of them. Consider his assertion that the artist is a solitary, detached stranger spying on the world. This appears to contradict his views on union, suddenly the artist is outside of everything rather than participant. He implied previously that aesthetic contemplation is a pervasive attitude, through which an openness is maintained with the world. On the one hand, the artist enjoys an openness with the world and on the other, the artist is spying on the world.

His use of the word 'espy' illustrates his anthropocentric attitude. This view of the artistic individual confirms that he sees the human being at the centre of the universe, watching and projecting from a detached place, rather than inhering in the phenomena of the world. Although I would agree that it is necessary for the artist to attend to his/her surroundings in a focused manner and this requires a type of solitary and meditative consciousness²², this is done in a spirit of communion, of penetrating the moment and the experience.

In contrast to Vischer, Klee expressed his position as an artist which encompassed reversibility, when he said: "In a forest ... I have felt that

²² See Dufrenne, M. (1973) *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston p. 51 on the communion between subject and object in the aesthetic experience, although in this case he is discussing the spectator but I contend that the same consciousness is entered into by the artist.

the trees were looking at me, speaking to me.”²³ Similarly, Cezanne stated: “The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness.”²⁴ These positions, in contrast to Vischer’s, reflect an *interactive engagement* between the artist and the world, which I believe facilitates the creation of art.

Vischer attempted to substantiate his argument for aesthetics with the use of biology, particularly how the nervous system works in relation to perception. His notion of empathy is explored in the context of physiological embodiment. This adds cogency to his argument at times but at other points he presents little evidence for his beliefs.

Consider Vischer’s notion of similarity. He contends that we are drawn to forms similar to our own. Although this is a compelling idea, Vischer presents no evidence as to why this should be the case.

One could equally argue that human beings are often drawn to asymmetrical, erratic forms that correspond to the organic, disorderly structures seen in a natural landscape. Indeed modern architecture has been criticized on the grounds that the clean lines and symmetrical shapes are incongruous with the human perspective, which has been conditioned to explore the random shapes of nature.

Merleau-Ponty also articulated the view that because the body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, the qualities of the world resonate with the lived body.²⁵ However, having appeal and resonating is not the same thing. Something can be familiar but not pleasant. Vischer seems to be suggesting that if we have a pre-reflective awareness of something, it will be pleasing.

This is not convincing because if we are one with the universe as Vischer postulates, and are one with all its aspects, everything in the universe should appeal and clearly this is not the case.

It may be true that the body and nature enjoy a certain regularity, which an individual may respond to. If, however, this is the case in relation to the body, one cannot say whether this can be extrapolated to the purely aesthetic. In this realm, it could equally be the case that one enjoys a release from the formula of the familiar, as in the case of some abstract

²³ Johnson, G.A. (1993) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, p. 44

²⁴ *Ibid* p. 44

²⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

art, which has enjoyed considerable success.

In any case, his example of the horizontal line being more pleasing than the vertical could be refuted if we consider that we ourselves are vertical so the vertical line may be more appealing, according to his logic. Furthermore, on the point of circular shapes having appeal due to the shape of our eyes, this is again ill-thought out. The eyes are not circular, they have corners and the further east we go the less circular people's eyes are. In this way, Vischer's account is not only anthropocentric but also ethnocentric.

Vischer's concept of synaesthesia is more convincing. It would be unreasonable to discount this, given that we perceive through the body and the examples he provides (low ceilings etc) are experiences with which anyone with a functional body can identify.

Vischer refers to an inherent unity in the universe. He speaks of "a universal coherence."²⁶ His anthropocentric position for empathetic projection clearly argues, on the other hand, that we see what we want to see: not that there is already an inherent unity, not that there is tacit ecological understanding between human beings and all other aspects of the world, rather there is almost the sense, instead, that what we have are insecure individuals who would like to believe that they are reflected in all things.

Consider the statement: "The whole person and all his vital feelings are lured into compassion." The use of the word 'lured', indicates that the individual unconsciously 'seeks and finds' that which makes him/her feel most whole, not that this 'wholeness' is actually a fact but possibly a soothing figment of the imagination.²⁷

This type of projection ignores what the subject may receive from the external object. If the projection is successful, the object is infused with the expressive realities of the subject.²⁸ This is not exactly unity. Unity qua unity implies an interactive, *mutual* merging. I contend that the notion of equality is inherent in the concept of unity. It is surprising, given that Vischer is discussing aesthetics, that he fails to acknowledge that art may have its own expressive life which reaches out to us as subjects.

²⁶ Ibid p 109

²⁷ Vischer does in fact use the words "I seek and I find" and the word "wholeness" as well as referring to "unconscious" processes when he discusses this idea of being lured into compassion p 107.

²⁸ See T.C Vincent (2012) for further discussion on this

Yet he equivocates on this as he also states: “As I think abstractly and learn to see myself as a subordinate part of an indivisible whole, my feeling expands into emotion.”²⁹ Is the subject, then, at the centre projecting out or is the subject a subordinate part? It is not clear.

Vischer makes the interesting observation that the artist achieves union between the intellect and the senses, which were originally one until the intellect placed itself in opposition.³⁰ This is a provocative statement, which Vischer does not qualify. When the intellect placed itself in opposition is not clear. However it is fair to say that the first part of this statement effectively summarises the work of the artist.

Having critically evaluated Vischer, it is worth noting that he provides a springboard for pertinent questions, including that of self-consciousness, how we relate to aspects of our environment and the place of aesthetics in all of this. There is room to expand his account of empathy with more clarity into a more reciprocal arena within a phenomenological framework.

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²⁹ R. Vischer p 109

³⁰ R. Vischer p. 116

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