

Sensuous Abstraction as Aesthetic Wonder: Reframing Lewis's Analysis of Studied Perception

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In each instance I read — or more aptly put, studied — Tyson Lewis's essay on "Studied Perception and a Phenomenon of Bodily Gesturality," I sought a comfortable environment with an accommodating chair, as well as a table that provided room for me to move about among my books, notepad, and computer. These physical needs were important components in my efforts to maintain a mental state that allowed for clarity of thought and insight. No "brown study" or "imaginative abstraction" was possible for me without those physical accommodations. While studying Lewis's words, I leaned forward and backward in my seat as my mental processes required. At times my hands supported my chin, while at others my hands were occupied with holding a pen or paper as I underlined key passages and my head nodded along with each of his central points.

I would argue alongside Lewis that each of those actions was essential to my thought process as I engaged in abstract thinking. His account of the gesturality that accompanies contemplation reminds me that I operate under the assumption that my students have developed and frequently tap into their own carefully cultivated habits of mind and body as they study even though I do not explicitly discuss or model such processes when we are in class together. This interests me since it means that I have fallen short of creating the kinds of spaces that Lewis calls for, even though I would agree that they are valuable and essential to the learning process. As Lewis notes, the task of the teacher is to: "open up a space and a time wherein students can *stumble upon/into their gestures, get lost in these gestures, and thus take pleasure in the delay of perceptual completion.*" He argues that we, as educators, are lacking in our efforts to fulfill this aspect of our responsibilities, and I am inclined to agree.

Underlying his claim concerning the important role of bodily gesturality is Lewis's phenomenological analysis of study based on Samuel Todes's work, *Body and World*. While I found Lewis's analysis of Todes to be sound and thought-provoking, I would like to address an aspect of the discussion of "sensuous abstraction" that I believe to be present in Lewis's thinking but is not sufficiently acknowledged by him. My argument is that in discussing the characteristics of "sensuous abstraction" both Todes and Lewis are talking about an aesthetic approach to experiencing and making-meaning of what is being studied and I shall explain why this is an important point to hold in dialogue with the rest of Lewis's claims.

To better understand Lewis's analysis of Todes's work, I visited *Body and World's* "Appendix II – Sensuous Abstraction and the Abstract Sense of Reality"¹ from which Lewis draws many of his examples of Todes's thinking on this matter. I found it interesting that Todes sets forth as the goal of perception a kind of "scientific facticity" that is concerned with the "'thisness' of things,"² which is why,

according to Todes, “sensual abstraction” is characterized as being immature or a form of perception in a state of suspended adolescence. The end goal of perception for Todes is a scientific kind of knowledge, one that grasps the object of study in terms of its factual detail, as opposed to a kind of knowing that is grounded in aesthetic understanding derived from impression, interpretation, and imagination. Therefore, Todes’s characterization of “sensual abstraction” as an incomplete stage in the process of perception only applies if we share his goal of definitively knowing and factually defining an object of study.

I would argue that Lewis’s emphasis on the significance of “sensual abstraction” suggests that he has a different goal in mind. Consider how Lewis describes “sensuous abstraction” as “embodied play that experiments with new possibilities” and as a “form of engagement” that “creates a new intimacy and familiarity” that would otherwise go unnoticed in the march toward reaching Todes’s completed process of perception. Lewis later states that Todes’s description of “sensuous abstraction” stops short of properly attending to the full potentiality, value, and meaningfulness of this state of dwelling *within* the process of perception. Both observations on Lewis’s part suggest that “sensuous abstraction” for him is an important end in itself, rather than an intriguing way station in the process of coming to understand an object of study. Furthermore, the examples he offers concerning his interactions with students as a museum educator reinforce the idea that the “sensuous abstraction” Lewis reframes as “studied perception” is in fact an aesthetic way of engaging with the world and its objects. In this respect, his goals of perception and those of Todes fundamentally differ.

Interestingly enough, Todes briefly describes the process of aesthetic perception and understanding in the same segment of *Body and World* in which he emphasizes “scientific facticity.” He states, “One remains before a work of art in a state of sustained receptivity that at its fullest is *wonder*. This state of rapt attention is achieved by looking-at or listening-to things seen or heard with the attitude of attentiveness that is normally reserved for looking-for and listening-for things not yet seen or heard.”³ According to Todes, this process of sustained receptivity and attentiveness results in an understanding of “*qualities* rather than things.”⁴ Despite those promising insights, Todes reverts back to a model of perception in which a state of wonder, attentiveness, and receptivity to qualities remains a mid-point in coming to understand or make meaning of an object of study.

Within the realm of aesthetic philosophy, the opposite is considered to be true. It views the ability to move beyond factual details and into a suspended state of wonder in which one lingers, savors, and dwells with an object of study as the *goal* of perception as opposed to an immature step along the way. In this respect, one’s knowledge of the “‘thisness’ of things” is simply seen as a starting point to genuine understanding and more complex thinking. Drawing upon the language of aesthetics, it is the play that exists in the liminal space of “sensuous abstraction” that allows for variety of interpretation, depth of insight, and a more complete attentiveness to both what is and is not being presented before us as the object of study. This playfulness allows certain elements to fall in and out of focus, resulting in a more

fluid and nuanced understanding than one that concerns itself with labeling the factual elements and claiming a state of completion when perceiving something outside of ourselves.

In my classes on the social and philosophical foundations of education, I frequently remind my students that our work together is more about questions than answers, and that the kind of wide-awakeness and awareness-raising that we practice are intended to unsettle their thinking about education rather than resolve their uncertainties. To simply know about the policies, standards, and curricular benchmarks they will be expected to meet as classroom teachers is not to claim knowledge of our educational system. That level of understanding requires us to engage in the same actions Lewis asks of his students in the museum: to figuratively “shift [our] bod[ies in relation to the object of study], [literally] turning [our] head[s], squinting, moving in closer then drawing back” as we frame and reframe questions about the nature, purposes, and practices of education. For these reasons, I would like to claim that Lewis’s characterization of studied perception and “sensuous abstraction” offers us a way of articulating the perceptual and embodied value of aesthetic wonder in classroom environments.

This observation brings me back to the implications of Lewis’s ideas. While I would argue that education is politicized prior to the moment we step across the threshold of our classrooms, I agree with Lewis in his analysis that the political implications of aesthetic studied perception are that they create a site for resisting and thinking beyond educational practices that uphold narrow conceptions of learning driven by the principles of efficiency and standardization. This “act of interruption” is essential and a valuable one for us to consider, and I encourage us all to reflect on how we might create more openings for such ruptures in our classroom environments.

1. Samuel Todes, *Body and World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 269–276.

2. *Ibid.*, 275.

3. *Ibid.*, 274 (emphasis added).

4. *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).