

Playful Perception: Choosing How to Experience Your World. Herbert L. Leff.
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When I.A. Richards recast metaphysical aesthetics in a psychological mode and produced his concept of synaesthesia, he made a noble attempt to explain the complex response humans exhibit to beauty. Richards was familiar with the history of affective theories of art, and he felt that the harmony and equilibrium of human impulses accounted for the "aesthetic experience." Richards was attacked, predictably enough, for an emphasis on the response that seemed to exclude the stimulating object. Yet Richards obviously felt that an aesthetic response was quite different from an hedonistic one, and while he chose to concentrate upon perception rather than object, he did engage the problem of choosing one's response to beauty. Herbert L. Leff admits no such difficulty in *Playful Perception* as his subtitle, *Choosing How to Experience Your World*, indicates.

Leff is undeniably straightforward. The reader never doubts his purpose: "to share a sampling of procedures that anyone can use to stimulate perceptual creativity and enjoyment." He clearly identifies his theme: "*we can all create far more interesting, beneficial experiences in everyday life than most of us normally do*" [Leff's emphasis]. He even puts his "underlying message" into a convenient single-sentence package for the reader: "at every moment in your life you have the power to consciously create and enrich your experience of the world." Leff's motive is lofty enough—an extension, one assumes, of his "central interest": "how psychology can contribute to human happiness."

Leff's procedures are also made absolutely clear. Indeed, the contents of the book's eight "sections" are set forth four times: on the contents page, in the Introduction, in the text itself, and in an "Overview" at the book's end. The section titles are apt; they accurately describe the contents and they undeniably capture *Playful Perception's* tone. Doubtless the discerning reader will perceive in them the debt to Ram Dass, Werner Erhard, Alan Watts and other "holistic, humanistic, and transpersonal thinkers" whose influence the author acknowledges: "Fun and Flexibility," "Aesthetic Awareness," "Tuning In," "Evaluating," "Imagining Improvements," "Basic Enlightenment," "Synergistic Consciousness," and "Inventing Your Own."

Leff provides numerous exercises in what he calls "perceptual creativity—experiencing the world in imaginative, enriching ways," and through them he intends to increase "mental playfulness" and "choice in how you experience the world." One assumes the exercises have worked to Leff's satisfaction; he has incorporated responses to them from students in his environmental psychology and creativity courses. Just here readers will certainly divide. Some will surely support any attempt to instill creativity into students; others will question the value of this book at the college level. To be sure Leff repeatedly reminds the reader that this book is intentionally playful; however, the

border between the playful and the puerile is often difficult to discern.

Most readers will recognize their border, and thus be gained or lost, at the end of the book's opening paragraph, in which Leff recounts overcoming his irritation at "grimy mounds of snow, sprinkled here and there with dog poop" which marred his trek "between home and office":

Then I devised the simple trick of seeing these surroundings as if I were viewing some weird, otherworldly terrain from an airplane or low-flying spacecraft. The mounds of grimy ice and snow now became strange mountains with intriguing ridges and gorges that I imagined would be exciting to climb. Even the dog poop became some unknown geological formation or perhaps alien architecture. And the trek became fun.

Thus the reader witnesses a Leff "awareness plan," a procedure to help the unimaginative discover new ways of experiencing "the world."

Nor is this plan atypical. In awareness plan I-1, the reader is invited to "See Everything Around You as Alive." The author declares that he had been intrigued for years with the popularity of this awareness plan with participants in his research and with his students. Yet as he must certainly be aware, people do talk to and name their automobiles; ships have traditionally been discussed and regarded as if they were living women; inanimate objects live in virtually all of the world's mythologies; and the living utensil, appliance, and automobile have been Disney staples from the beginning. Surely most educated, literate readers would be surprised if this exercise were not popular, given the motifs of folklore, mythology, fantasy literature, and even the literature of psychology. And what reader with even a passing knowledge of science fiction can escape irritation at the exclamation mark in this sentence: "or sometimes seeing things this way can add a little excitement in life, as when you start to guess that all lights or books are visitors (invaders?) from another world!" Such enthusiasm for an essentially trite notion would seem more proper to an elementary classroom rather than a university course.

Playful Perception underscores current educational issues. That such a book could be the central text in a course designed to increase creativity, sharpen awareness, and put one in control of one's perceptions illustrates the levelling De Tocqueville warned of over a century and a half ago, and certainly levelling has been apparent in American education; lower goals and expectations help to "democratically" reach some vague middle ground. For surely it would be reasonable to expect that any student with a solid foundation in the traditional humanities would have too much sophistication not to be cynical toward Leff's "awareness techniques."

Undeniably, Leff's recommendations for increasing creativity are usually quite sound. "Concentrating on each of your senses in turn" in order to become aware of surrounding beauty, for example, is a time-honored teaching technique. A reader of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for example, would recognize it as a technique Stephen Dedalus acquired from his Jesuit instructors. And when Leff suggests "treating your marriage as a continuing work of art that you and your spouse are creating together," the perceptive reader might hear echoes of William Butler Yeats's extension of the principles of art to behavior—as expressed in "Adam's Curse," say. Or the reader might recognize this as an old principle restated frequently with varying degrees of emphasis—by the *fin de siècle* aesthetes, for example. Good students could assimilate most of these "awareness plans" from solid core courses in the humanities, from a familiarity with mythology and religion, from broad reading; in short, from a traditional education.

I do not mean to imply that *Playful Perception* is worthless, only that its projected use

is distressing. This book is probably very valuable as a simple guide—in much the same way *Monarch Notes* are valuable when used as guides and not as substitutes for the originals. *Playful Perception* is simply democratic. It takes difficult aesthetic principles and popularizes them through oversimplification. "And remember, you are a *great* artist—so you can be unabashedly enthusiastic about your ideas, whatever they are," Leff advises in awareness plan II-7, and though it is easy enough to understand that such cheerleading is justifiable on the grounds that he is striving mightily to generate creativity, it is also arguable that such a statement crystallizes the separation of creativity and perception from values that is, unfortunately, typical of this book. Leff recognizes the problem, and he makes a nod in this direction with "A Cautious Send-Off," which warns of the risks of "over-aestheticizing" our experience."

A cautious send-off is hardly sufficient, for here is a problem central to art and central to the human condition. It is a problem over-simplified approaches to perception must invariably skirt, as this book does. The problem recurs, and it must be faced: can a survivor of Dachau ever hear a pure beauty in Wagner? And what of the 17th century notion of "prospect," which effectively taught viewers to discover beautiful vistas in nature, but which also taught the viewer to effectively overlook the human element, to see ruins as picturesque and thus divorced from cause and effect, from the sorrow of human destruction, and which taught that thatched cottages were charming by eliminating from "sight" the poverty and suffering they symbolized? Hear Leff: "When at the site of a Nazi concentration camp or even a smog-shrouded slum, use a different type of awareness plan! Or if you do wish to see beauty, you can look for signs of human courage or other things consistent with your values." Is this not the voice of Dr. Pangloss in the twentieth century?

Unfortunately, this is an easy book to criticize, but it will doubtless have its army of defenders. Indeed, even those who regard it as a poor substitute for what used to come from a good liberal education must admit that, properly applied, this could be a very useful book. It would make an interesting one- or two-week side street in a serious course on aesthetics or perception, for example. And it would probably be an excellent handbook for an introductory course in creative writing. It has numerous suggestions that might very well inspire the novice fiction writer. It might serve, too, as an interesting supplementary text in freshman composition. The book is filled with photographs by Leff, photographs which are generally more interesting and stimulating than the prose. And the book itself has been attractively put together by Water-front Books. After all is said, and all quibbles have been aired, it is probably a good book.

However, the purpose to which it is put must determine how good, for values cannot be divorced from perception. Witness the playful postcard from an era not long past: watermelon-eating sambo. Or recall the playful portrait of the simian Irishman on the British stage. Or the incompetent, materialistic housewife of early American television sitcoms. As the basis for a university-level course in creativity and perception, this book is too simple, too devoid of values. It too often reads like a collection of Junior High School Lesson Plan suggestions rather than a college text. Its success as a text will certainly depend not only upon the sophistication—or lack thereof—of one's students but also upon the general educational philosophy of the teacher. Those who long for a return to more traditional courses will doubtless reject *Playful Perception* out of hand. Those who prefer "Super-Meta Plans" to Plato will welcome it. To accept this book at its face value would seem to be a rejection of a belief in the usefulness of studying all that has gone before, and it would seem as well to be an admission that current students are incapable of even the simplest creative impulses. Leff may well be right; and one's response to *Playful Perception* is probably a reliable

barometer of one's convictions in the matter of "traditional" education and a return to basics.



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